



The Dangers of Dualism and the Kerygma of Old Testament Apocalyptic

W. SIBLEY TOWNER

The message of biblical apocalyptic literature is important for both religious and political realms in 2005. At the heart, that message is a titanic and calamitous clash of good and evil. Stark face-offs between good and evil can be dangerous, especially if ordinary “in between” people are asked to choose up sides. Does a dualistic danger to sensible Christian faith and practice, as well as to enlightened public policy, lurk in our Bible?

We will get a running start at this discussion by looking quickly at an ancient thinker not mentioned in the canon of Scripture and never accepted by the church as a Father, yet one whose dualist doctrine attracted a large following in his own time and whose spiritual successors in our time are legion.

MANI AND MANICHAEANS

Mani was the founder of the Manichaean religion. He was born ca. 216 C.E. near Ctesiphon on the Tigris River. When Mani was twelve years old, the angel al-Tawm (“the Twin”) appeared to him and bade him live an austere and disciplined

With deep conviction that God is a saver and not a waster, Christians should reject the simplistic notion that reality is cleanly divided into good and evil—a notion based on false interpretations of biblical eschatology—and insist on reading the apocalyptic literature of the Bible as an incentive to engage now in the life-giving work of God in the world.

life. Twelve years later, on orders from the angel, he proclaimed himself “the apostle of light,” and soon thereafter he came under the patronage of the Sasanid king of Persia, Shapur I.

Mani regarded himself as the “seal of prophets,” the last to bring a universal message, and by committing his teachings to writing himself he hoped to preserve them uncorrupted. In the end, probably in 277 C.E., he was executed by one of Shapur’s Zoroastrian successors, Bahram I.

Manichaeism spread rapidly westward to Africa, Spain, France, Northern Italy, and the Balkans. In the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo was attracted to its doctrine for several years before he finally embraced the Catholic faith. It maintained its existence in North Africa at least until the eighth century, but grew mainly in the region where it was born—Babylonia, Iran, Turkistan—and further to the east, in Northern India, Western China, and Tibet. It died out there perhaps as late as the thirteenth century C.E.

Mani taught a strict dualism. Good and evil, light and darkness, are essentially opposed principles that existed separately in the first epoch of creation, but that became mixed in the world’s current second stage. Matter and the material world are damnable evil. Salvation lies in the release of the good light from its dark imprisoning matter, allowing it to return to its original state of separation. In the final stage of creation, matter will be forever locked away in a pit. This basic teaching is set out in an elaborate mythology, harmonized from many different elements of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Gnosticism, and astrology.¹

NO TWO REALMS: THE BIBLE TELLS US SO

The great religions all rejected Mani. The three great monotheistic faiths consider the “two realms” concept a heresy—that is why we are monotheists. The God of Scripture is not a dyad (both good and bad), but a monad (a God who is good only, though just and terrible against wrongdoing). Nor is the Evil One a god or even an anti-god; in fact, Satan is pretty much a bit player. Long ago our spiritual ancestors realized that the truth is more complicated than a stark choice of good or evil. We live in between, and the Bible tells us so. Here are some examples.

Genesis 3 acknowledges the advent of evil in the world, but evil does not come from God. Evil is a moral category; it is something we human beings do. As the Eastern patristic writer Irenaeus (ca. 120–202 C.E.) argued, it is a “fall upward.”² *Genesis 3* is the story of every person’s journey out of the garden of childish innocence into the messes and responsibilities of adulthood. True, as understood in

¹Much of the information on Mani is derived from *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1986) 9:158–171.

²W. Sibley Towner, “Interpretations and Reinterpretations of the Fall,” *Proceedings of the Theology Institute, Villanova University* 16 (1984) 53–85. See also Richard Hanson, *The Serpent Was Wiser: A New Look at Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972); Conrad L’Heureux, *In and Out of Paradise: The Book of Genesis from Adam and Eve to the Tower of Babel* (New York: Paulist, 1983).

Christian doctrine since ancient times, the fall sets up the great scheme of redemption (no sin, no Savior). But even that doctrine acknowledges that life is not lived at the absolute poles of good and evil, but that we encounter, participate in, and are set free from evil again and again along the way.

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Deuteronomy 30:19 says, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” This sounds at first like a stark, Manichaean choice. Certainly, Israel and the rest of humankind fail to make the decisive choice of life, but the offer remains open.³ Yes, the choice of life remains a possibility.

Job comes close to charging God with evil-doing; e.g., “The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?” (*Job* 9:24). The *Job* narrator, in the denouement of the story, remarks that, after his restoration, *Job*’s relatives and friends “comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him” (*Job* 42:11). However, “woe/evil” in this sense is not a moral category but rather disaster and suffering experienced as punitive activity of God.⁴ In the final analysis, the story of *Job* is about a man who maintains his integrity in the face of inexplicable suffering, neither curses God nor falsely accuses God, and finds resolution in living a life without clear-cut answers but with a God who cares.

Of *Jesus*’ attitude toward sinners we need to add little. He moved around in the “in between” world where we live. He supped with wine-bibbers and tax collectors. He approached us all with love, forgiveness, and the admonition to “go and sin no more.”

Old Testament proto-apocalyptic texts like the book of *Daniel* and its prophetic predecessors (as well as the New Testament *Apocalypse* and the “little apocalypses” of the gospels) portray the end of time as a cosmic struggle between good and evil. The huge, all-encompassing dimension of their vision makes them attractive to those who wish to cast the ongoing historical struggle between good and evil in dualistic terms, with no “in between.” To these texts we shall return.

³W. Sibley Towner, *How God Deals with Evil* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 44–45.

⁴This distinction between moral sin and divine punishment as “evils” may also explain the puzzling language of *Isa* 45:7. See W. Sibley Towner, “Evil, Demon,” in *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, ed. Donald E. Gowan (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 116–119.

NOTIONS OF TWO REALMS CONTINUE TO LIVE ON

We began this essay with Mani, not because Scripture agrees with him at all, but because dualistic doctrines like his are still with us! Absolutist dualist ideologies in fact abound, and with them go autocratic public polities. A recent book, *Occidentalism*, lists examples, some of which I elaborate here:⁵

- State Shinto in Japan was based on notions of divine sanction for the emperor and divine election of the Japanese race. Its adherents hated corrupt Tokyo and the effete West and sought an unadulterated and more spiritual culture. During World War II, educated young men were willing to perish as kamikaze pilots for the sake of the good as they saw it. Theirs was a dualistic war, a “war of the sons of light and the sons of darkness.”
- Fascism, especially in its Nazi form, was based on romantic notions of ethnic purity, the superiority of the Aryan race and its values, and the decadence of liberal democracy. As we all know, this form of absolutist dualism led in the end to national self-destruction.
- Communism, especially as manifested in Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot’s Cambodia and, to a lesser extent, Kim Jong Il’s North Korea, involved notions of pure doctrine and the elimination of diversity in the body politic. Its dualistic worldview, too, led to the slaughter of innocents.
- Islamism of the Osama bin Laden variety is a restoration movement that combines puritan attitudes with the political aim of ridding the realm of Islam (Dar al-Islam) of corrupting Western (i.e., Jewish, Christian, and secular) influences. Its dualistic teaching has led young men and women back to kamikaze zeal again.

WHAT OFFENDS THE MODERN MANICHAEANS THE MOST

Dualists are offended at that form of public polity in which religion retreats to the private sphere as a matter of individual conscience, and the public sphere becomes the domain of politics, devoid of collectively enforced morality. In such a polity, public life becomes an “in between” world of pluralism, negotiation, compromise, competition of ideas and wits, tolerance—the very kind of polity that we Americans advocate for church and state alike. It is known as democracy.

Dualistic purists are offended that liberal bourgeois democracy muddles, dithers, compromises, espouses inclusivity, and that it allows commercialism and sexuality wide license. German romantic idealists called all this *Komfortismus*. “In Nazi propaganda, Berlin department stores, corrupting German womanhood with decadent, ‘cosmopolitan’ products, such as cosmetics and cigarettes, were vilified as symbols of ‘Jewish materialism’ and depicted in Nazi publications as slimy octo-

⁵Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

puses strangling small German enterprises and honest German craftsmen. Artistic modernism and natural science were seen as a Jewish fraud. Jazz, or ‘nigger music,’ was denounced as depraved Americanism.”⁶

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Komfortismus is the polar opposite of the absolute loyalty, ethnic purity, and muscular approaches that modern dualists admire. Their view: if you are not with us, who are on the side of Good, you are infidels on the side of Evil. Islamist Sayyid Qutb, the spiritual father of al-Qaeda, was horrified at what he, as a international student in the United States from 1948–1950, found “not only in hedonistic New York, but even in quiet Greeley, Colorado, whose well-kept lawns disgusted him as symbols of mindless individualism. He found the spectacle of young women dancing to a current hit, ‘Baby, It’s Cold Outside,’ horrifying. And he was astounded by the frivolous manner in which local preachers tried to appeal to their flock, singing jazzy hymns and the like.”⁷ It is not too far from there to Osama’s justification for 9/11 as punishment for Western immorality and corruption. It is not even that far from Jerry Falwell’s remark that 9/11 was God’s punishment on us for tolerance of abortion, homosexuality, and the like.⁸

OUR VITAL ESCHATOLOGICAL FAITH UNDER FIRE

Let us now return to that important stratum of the Bible, often neglected in the mainstream churches, prophetic eschatology, and its successor, the apocalyptic literature.

Early prophetic eschatology

Quite early, the biblical writers became keenly interested in the future of the world (that is, eschatology) and its human community. The eighth-century B.C.E. prophet Amos warned the Israelites about the coming Day of the Lord. “Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD,” he said. “Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light” (Amos 5:18). Already in that prophet’s thinking, the Day of the Lord was the pivot between the present age of injustice, violence, and corruption and a future age of equity and peace. This tripartite scheme is

⁶Ibid., 29.

⁷Ibid., 118.

⁸Falwell made this statement on September 13, 2001, on the Christian Broadcasting Network’s *700 Club*, hosted by Pat Robertson: “The *abortionists* have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy forty million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the *gays* and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the *ACLU*, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say: you helped this happen.”

presented in a beloved version in Isa 11:1–9. There the present age of trouble is punctuated by the appearance of a “branch from the stump of Jesse,” that is, a member of the house and lineage of David (vv. 1–3a). Then this “messiah” figure enters into judgment (vv. 3b–5). For the poor and the meek, the wretched and the wronged, this day of reckoning is good news; for the oppressors it means smiting and death. Finally (vv. 6–9), God completes the divine work of blessing in the world. A bright new day dawns beyond the darkness of the purge. The imagination is quietly dualistic, indeed, for good and evil are pitted against each other and good prevails; however, in the last analysis the emphasis is on the primeval paradise of peace that is regained, and on the wolf that dwells with the lamb.

As this example shows, prophetic eschatology is relatively realistic and this-worldly. True, predation has ended and all creatures are vegetarians! Still, however, the world is our world, the wolves and cows and bears are recognizable—just perfected—and holy Jerusalem abides.⁹

Prophetic eschatology morphs into apocalyptic

Present age of trouble / turning point or pivot / future paradise—this three-part scenario of the future of God’s people and the world, with a decisive Day of the Lord at its heart and a purified and restored community beyond, is taken up time and again, for more than eight hundred years, by prophets, evangelists, perhaps by Jesus himself, and certainly by the seer of Patmos. In the course of this long literary history of biblical meditation on the end, the fairly realistic picture painted by prophetic eschatology of a reign of God on a perfected earth becomes highly elaborated. The steps along the way can be traced on this “lineage” schema.¹⁰ It will become evident that the aftermath of the Babylonian exile brought about the decisive turn from prophetic eschatology to apocalyptic.¹¹

⁹Examples of early “realistic” prophetic eschatology include:

Isa 11:1–9	ca. 701 B.C.E.
Mic 4:1–4	ca. 720 B.C.E.
Jer 31:31–34	ca. 600 B.C.E.
Ezek 34:25–31	ca. 587 B.C.E.
Ezek 47:1–12	ca. 570 B.C.E.
Isa 40–55	ca. 550 B.C.E.
Isa 65:17–25 and other passages in Isa 56–66	ca. 520 B.C.E.

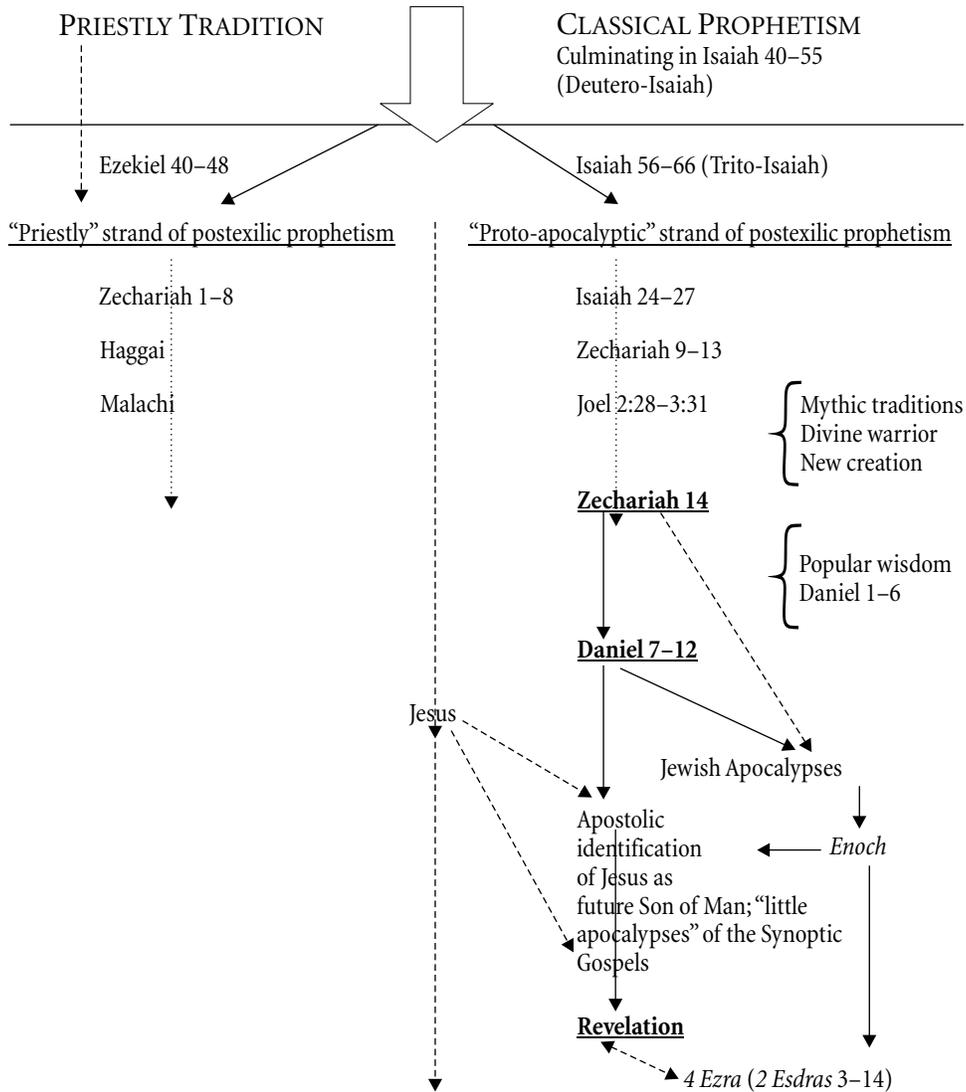
¹⁰Proto-apocalyptic texts of the Hebrew Bible include:

Isa 24–27	ca. 500 B.C.E.
Zech 9–12	550–420 B.C.E. (Paul Hanson)
Joel 2:28–3:21	ca. 400 B.C.E.
Daniel	164 B.C.E.

Apocalyptic texts of the New Testament include:

“Little apocalypses” in the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matt 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5–36)	ca. 65–90 C.E.
Various passages in the epistles (i.e., 1 Cor 15:20–57; 2 Thess 1–2; 2 Pet 3)	ca. 54–90 C.E.
Revelation	ca. 100 C.E.

¹¹This scheme and the ensuing discussion owe much to the insights of Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).



After the wondrous future vision of Isaiah of the exile, the realities of postexilic Judea must have been grim. Beginning with the restoration of 538 B.C.E., the priestly establishment reasserted itself and with the help of a small group of “temple” prophets (left column) got the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt and the sacrificial cultus reinstated. The longer and ultimately more significant succession to the prophetic eschatological vision of the preexilic and exilic prophets is to be found in the increasingly radical preaching of the visionaries (right column). Various influences were at work on them. In their intellectual world, wisdom teaching—dream interpretation, animal imagery, and calendrical speculation—was lively. Mythic thinking revived themes of chaos and cosmic conflict, new creation, and new Adam. Historical trauma was perhaps most decisive, for the dissident and ever

more apocalyptically inclined observant Jews (*hasidim*), who probably gave us this literature, were persecuted, above all in the pogrom launched against their kind by the Greco-Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 174 B.C.E. (Dan 11:29–35; 1 Macc 1:20–28, 54–64). All these factors played their parts as realistic eschatology morphed slowly into otherworldly apocalyptic eschatology, with its ever more terrible and cosmic vision of the future. Details differ vastly from vision to vision and text to text. There is no one unified biblical scenario of the end, except the same three-quarter tempo that pulses through it all: onset at the end of the present age of corruption, then crisis, then paradise. If the aim of these writers was to offer a detailed road map or timetable of the future, they failed. They were human beings, after all. God’s word to us is always mediated through human brains and mouths, and it therefore shares the inability of the flesh to foretell the future. The tyranny of the little horn on the fourth beast (Dan 7:8), surely intended to represent Antiochus IV, was not then and has never been supplanted by the rule of the “people of the holy ones of the Most High” (Dan 7:23–27). Yet the canonizers kept the book and the other apocalyptic texts, not because they give us history written in advance, but because of the far richer theological message they convey.

“there is no one unified biblical scenario of the end”

Before we explore that positive kerygma further, however, let us note that some religious leaders in our midst are using these futuristic texts to promote a dangerous dualistic worldview. It goes something like this. There are only two kinds of people in the world, the saved and the lost. True believers will be caught up to meet Jesus at the rapture (1 Thess 4:17). Those who are left behind have seven years to get right with God before the millennial kingdom begins. Muslims and all others who do not confess Christ as their personal savior are damned. Jews are ambiguous—144,000 will be converted but most will be lost in the last judgment. There is no “in between.” Read the *Left Behind* series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, as some 62,000,000 other Americans have done! It is all fictionally dramatized there in twelve volumes, in the last of which Jesus appears as the bloody leader of the angelic horde at Armageddon. One particularly troubling thing is that this contribution to end-time fervor is based on a discredited nineteenth-century scheme of misinterpretation of apocalyptic scripture that is literalistic, synthetic, and simplistic—namely, premillennial dispensationalism.¹² Futurist references in

¹²The nineteenth-century British founder of the Plymouth Brethren movement, John Nelson Darby, developed the dispensational scheme that divides all of history into epochs, each with its own covenant, and places us near the end of the final historical “dispensation.” The interpretation was promoted after 1909 in the notes of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. In more recent years it has been advocated at Dallas Theological Seminary, one of whose graduates, Hal Lindsey, was the best-selling American author of the 1970s (e.g., *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 1970). This “dispensationalist” interpretation of biblical apocalyptic literature was declared heretical by the Presbyterian Church U.S. in 1944. See the summary of that report and other statements on eschatology assembled by the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in their 2001 pamphlet, *Between Millennia: What Presbyterians Believe about the Coming of Christ*.

the Bible are harmonized into one scheme that no individual Bible writer ever adhered to, all history is put onto an inexorable predetermined timetable, human freedom is insignificant, ethical and political action to build a better world are abandoned in favor of personal piety aimed at assuring membership in the elect.

The other particularly troubling thing about this widespread reversion to the black-or-white, saved-or-damned, good-or-evil Manichaean outlook is the impact it is having on American policy toward Israel and the Middle East.

Growing out of a conviction that the timetable puts us near the end, with its vindication of the children of light and the destruction of the children of darkness, this exploitation of the very scriptures that most lend themselves to a dualistic interpretation is leading people to nudge God to get on with the Last Judgment and to clean out evil once and for all. The scenario expects that certain things must happen in the Middle East just before the end. These include the gathering of the Diaspora Jews to the Holy Land, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, the appearance and reign of the antichrist, and the final battle of good and evil at Armageddon. Can we human beings, especially we powerful Americans, help make these things happen? Would that thrill a modern Manichaean?¹³

THE KERYGMA OF BIBLICAL APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

There is another, non-dualistic way to understand the message of the futuristic texts of the Bible, ranging from the this-worldly vision of Isaiah to the grand otherworldly tableau of judgment and new creation in Daniel and the book of Revelation. This approach does not focus solely on the good-versus-evil, light-versus-darkness dimensions of these texts. The sandwich board worn by the street-corner evangelist gets at the heart of the message.

On the one side it says, THE END IS COMING. This is good news! It means that God is not mocked, that God's goodness will prevail. In the destruction of the little horn on the fourth beast (Dan 7:23–27), the seer gives us not only hope that God will overthrow the tyrant Antiochus but also, in this "apocalyptic 'eruption,' a harbinger and prefigurement"¹⁴ of tyrants yet to come who will suffer the same fate. Because of their testimony to God's ultimate victory, the apocalyptic texts rest secure in their confidence in the vindication of justice and faithfulness. Christians see in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the first eschatological events. The healing of the sick, the blessing of the poor, the affirmation of the worth of every individual, the triumph over death, all manifested in this first advent, are foretastes of what is to come, when God wins the age-old struggle with darkness.

The other side of the sandwich board says, BUT NOT YET! This is good news, too! What God will do on God's time cannot by any means be known. We still have

¹³See the investigations of Gershom Gorenberg, *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). In a Y2K context, I sought to address these themes in "Rapture, Red Heifer, and Other Millennial Misfortunes," *Theology Today* 56 (1999) 379–389.

¹⁴Stephen L. Cook, *The Apocalyptic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) 138.

time; maybe we always will. This aspect of the biblical eschatological faith contributes to the “pull of the future” about which the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann speaks.¹⁵ The vision of a new age is like a magnet that can draw us forward with courage, if we will let it do so. Moltmann underscores the historical responsibility of believers for the present and future good of the human community. He argues that theology has to be expressed in public life and social action and that such expression must be empathetic with the oppressed and vulnerable. He thus points to an *interim ethic* that is appropriate for living in this “in between” world of ours. We have work to do—good, demanding, life-giving work. It is work done in cooperation with people of other faiths or of no faith, people of other lands and languages, people of good will who seek the safety of the creatures. It is work given shape by the glimpses of peace and health and joy given us in the life of Jesus and in the Bible’s rendition of the age to come. We’re not left longing for a “great day comin’” without any clue about what to do between the times, between the poles of good and evil. We are to imitate Christ and give foretastes of the new age in our own communities of love and peace.

WHEN MUST WE SAY NO?

Guided by the kerygma of biblical apocalyptic literature as outlined above, and by the deep conviction that God, who is a savior and not a waster, will in the end bring in a world free of injustice, hatred, warfare, and death, we should cling firmly to four great refusals. We should:

- refuse to be pushed into a Manichaean outlook of reality as consisting only of good and evil, with no human space in between;
- refuse to give up on messy, compromising, turbulent democracy;
- refuse to agree that the twenty-first-century destiny of the Middle East or anywhere else is disclosed in biblical texts that have been recast into modern interpretive schemes;
- refuse to agree with a literalist interpretation of our precious eschatological texts, but insist on using them the way they are meant to be, namely, as incentives to positive action now. ⊕

W. SIBLEY TOWNER is professor emeritus of biblical interpretation at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. He is the author of a commentary on Daniel in the Interpretation series, now recently published in Japanese and Korean editions.

¹⁵Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).