



Understanding Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic

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DEFINING APOCALYPTIC

Francis Ford Coppola's disturbing film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), rereleased in 2001 under the title *Apocalypse Now Redux* (with previously cut footage restored), is a frightening, surrealistic epic enabling viewers to experience the obscene violence that characterized the war in Vietnam. Coppola's juxtaposition of the term "apocalypse" with the adverb "now" resembles what biblical scholars have called "realized eschatology," that is, events properly belonging to the *end* of the world are paradoxically experienced as *present*. "Apocalypse now" implies that the appalling and obscene horrors experienced by those caught up in the conflict in Vietnam were at least a partial realization of the even more cataclysmic and violent eschatological events narrated (for example) in the Apocalypse (or Revelation) of John. Recently, journalists have repeatedly characterized the tsunami disaster in the countries surrounding the Indian Ocean as "a catastrophe of *biblical* proportions." Here the adjective "biblical" (meaning awesome), is clearly a surrogate for "apocalyptic," alluding to the kind of massive destruction predicted by the Hebrew prophets and narrated in the eschatological visions of the Revelation of John.

The term "apocalyptic," an adjective functioning as a noun, is synonymous with the noun "apocalypticism," and both are transliterated forms of the Greek ad-

To understand and evaluate the current fascination with apocalyptic, pastors and congregations need an introduction to the biblical apocalyptic literature and its times. David Aune provides the definitions and background required for informed conversation in the present.

jective *apokalyptikos*, meaning “revelatory,” while “apocalypse” is a transliteration of the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, “unveiling, revelation.” The English words “reveal” and “revelation” are transliterations of the Latin verb *revelare* and noun *revelatio*. Apocalyptic or apocalypticism is a slippery term used in at least three different ways: (1) as a type of literature, (2) as a type of eschatology, and (3) as a type of collective behavior. Each of these categories needs some explanation.

Apocalyptic as Literature

The term “apocalypse” has become a common designation for a type of supernatural visionary literature depicting the imminent and catastrophic end of the world. “Apocalypse” was borrowed from the opening verse of the Revelation of John: “The revelation [the Greek term is ἀποκάλυψις or ‘apocalypse’] of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place.” This opening sentence, intended by the author to describe his work, was later shortened into the title found in modern Bibles: “The Revelation of John” or “The Apocalypse of John.” Even though John the apocalypticist used the term “apocalypse” to refer to the *content* of his book (what God had revealed to him), by the mid-nineteenth century, German scholars such as Friedrich Lücke (1832) used the term “apocalypse” as a designation for an ancient type or genre of early Jewish and early Christian literature similar to Daniel and the Revelation of John. The book of Daniel (actually, only Dan 7–12) is the only apocalypse found in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, but many apocalypses were written in early Judaism, including *1 Enoch* (really a composite of five separate apocalyptic works), *2 Enoch*, *2 Baruch*, the *Sibylline Oracles*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (to name a few of the more important ones).¹ In addition to the Revelation of John, early Christians wrote several other apocalypses, including the *Shepherd of Hermas* (early second century C.E.), the *Apocalypse of Peter* (before 150 C.E.), the *Ascension of Isaiah* (late second century C.E.) and the *Apocalypse of Paul* (mid-third century C.E.).²

How can we describe the literary form of the typical apocalypse? New Testament scholars have debated this question endlessly during the last generation. With David Hellholm, it is helpful to think in terms of a literary form or genre under three aspects: form, content, and function (e.g., form: a chair has four legs, a seat, and a back; content: it is typically made of wood or metal; function: it is used for sitting).³ In *form*, an apocalypse is a first-person recital of revelations, visions, or dreams, framed by a description of the circumstances of the revelatory experience

¹Convenient English translations of nearly all the extant Jewish apocalypses can be found in the first volume of James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–1985).

²Convenient English translations of many early Christian apocalypses can be found in J. K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), and in the second volume of Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Cambridge: James Clark; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991–1992).

³David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 36 (1986) 13–64.

and structured to emphasize the central revelatory message. In *content*, an apocalypse involves the communication of a transcendent, often eschatological perspective on human experience. Finally, apocalypses typically have a threefold *function*: they legitimate the message through the appeal to transcendent authority by the author (it is from God), they create a literary surrogate of the author's revelatory experience for readers or hearers (God speaks to the modern reader just as he spoke to John), and they motivate the recipients to modify their views and behaviors in conformity with transcendent perspectives (they demand changed behavior).⁴

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All extant Jewish apocalypses are pseudonymous, that is, they were written by unknown Jewish authors using the names of ancient Israelite or Jewish worthies as pen names, attributing them to such figures as Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Ezra, and Baruch. Only the two earliest Christian apocalypses, the Revelation of John and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, were written using the names of the actual authors. Later Christian apocalypses, such as the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, reverted to the earlier Jewish practice of pseudonymity. Why use pseudonyms? Some have suggested that the authors borrowed the credentials of ancient Israelite figures in order to insure that people would read their books at a time when there was stiff competition from the books that wound up in the Hebrew canon of Scripture (second century B.C.E. through the first century C.E.). Others have suggested that they identified themselves in an almost mystical way with the ancient Israelite whose identity they assumed.

Finally, apocalypses can be broadly characterized as *protest literature*. That is, they typically represent the perspective of an oppressed minority. It is difficult to reconstruct the social situations within which many apocalypses were produced, because the use of pseudonyms and symbolism masked the specific social and political setting within which they wrote. With the Revelation of John and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, however, interpreters have an easier task, since both were written by specific named authors addressing specific situations. The language of persecution pervades the Revelation of John, suggesting that it was written either in the late 60s (during the Neronian persecution), or during the late 90s (during the Domitianic persecution). Research carried out during the last thirty years, however, has suggested a radically different understanding of the persecution issue. The persecution under Nero, terrible as it was, was restricted to Rome during the aftermath of the great fire of 64 C.E., for which Christians were blamed (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44).

⁴David E. Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986) 65–96.

The persecution under Domitian, under closer historical scrutiny, turned out to have been a myth fanned much later by retrospective Christian imagination.⁵ Adela Yarbro Collins argued convincingly that the social situation in which the Revelation of John was written was that of a *perceived* (in contrast to a *real*) crisis.⁶ Pressure exerted against Christians in Roman Asia toward the end of the first and the beginning of the second century C.E. is now recognized as having been random, local, and sporadic (that is, they were victims of terrorism), but not an official persecution of the type that occurred much later under the emperor Decius (249–251 C.E.). However, Christians in Roman Asia can be forgiven if they thought that the roof was about to fall in on them. The Revelation of John reflects that fear, linked to powerful symbols of the past used as types of the imminent eschatological persecution (e.g., the figure of Antichrist was based in part on tyrants of the past such as Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid ruler responsible for the religious persecution of Jews in the 160s B.C.E.).

Apocalyptic Eschatology

“Apocalyptic eschatology” is the narrative theology characteristic of apocalypses, centering in the belief that (1) the present world order, regarded as both evil and oppressive, is under the temporary control of Satan and his human accomplices, and (2) that this present evil world order will shortly be destroyed by God and replaced by a new and perfect order corresponding to Eden before the fall. During the present evil age, the people of God are an oppressed minority who fervently expect God, or his specially chosen agent the Messiah, to rescue them. The transition between the old and the new ages will be introduced with a final series of battles fought by the people of God against the human allies of Satan. The outcome is never in question, however, for the enemies of God are predestined for defeat and destruction. The inauguration of the new age will begin with the arrival of God or his accredited agent to judge the wicked and reward the righteous and will be concluded by the re-creation or transformation of the earth and the heavens. This theological narrative characterized segments of early Judaism from ca. 200 B.C.E. to ca. 200 C.E., a period when they were oppressed by foreign occupations, including the Greek kingdom of the Seleucids and then by the Romans. Knowledge of cosmic secrets and the imminent eschatological plans of God was thought to be revealed to apocalypstists through dreams and visions—some real, some fictional, and some a combination of both. The apocalypses they wrote were primarily accounts of these visions, with the meaning made clear to the readers through use of the literary device of an “interpreting angel,” who explained everything to the seer through a question-and-answer dialogue.

“Eschatology” has frequently been distinguished from “apocalyptic,” and this

⁵Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 84–110.

distinction needs explanation. Eschatology is a term that began to be used in the nineteenth century as a label for the aspect of systematic theology that dealt both with the future of the individual (death, resurrection, judgment, eternal life, heaven and hell) and with topics relating to corporate or national eschatology, that is, the future of the Jewish people (the coming of the Messiah, the great tribulation, the resurrection, the final judgment, the temporary Messianic kingdom, the re-creation of the universe) or the Christian church (all of these topics were adopted, yet at the same time subordinated to the hope of the Parousia or second coming of Christ).

“Apocalyptic eschatology centers in the belief that (1) the present world order, regarded as both evil and oppressive, is under the temporary control of Satan and his human accomplices, and (2) that this present evil world order will shortly be destroyed by God and replaced by a new and perfect order”

A distinction has often been made between “prophetic eschatology” and “apocalyptic eschatology,” underscoring continuities as well as changes in Israelite-Jewish eschatological expectation. “Prophetic eschatology” is regarded as an optimistic perspective anticipating God’s eventual restoration of the original pristine conditions of human history by acting through historical processes. This view is well represented by Isa 2:4b: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Prophecy sees the future as arising from the present, while apocalyptic eschatology regards the future as breaking into the present; the former is essentially optimistic, while the latter is pessimistic. “Apocalyptic eschatology” is pessimistic about the fate of the righteous in the present world order, and anticipates a cataclysmic divine intervention into the human world bringing history to an end, but thereafter a renewal of the world in which Edenic conditions will be restored.

Apocalypticism or Millenarian Movements

“Apocalypticism” or “millennialism” (a term derived from the thousand-year reign of Christ described in Rev 20) is a form of collective religious behavior inspired by the belief that the world as we know it is about to end and that drastic steps must be taken by an oppressed minority to prepare for an imminent catastrophe. Millennial or millenarian movements in third-world societies have been studied extensively by anthropologists and sociologists, and the results of these studies have made it possible to understand the structure, function, and motivations of ancient millennial movements.⁷ Millenarian movements typically crystallize around a

⁷Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Movements of Protest among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

charismatic leader regarded as supernaturally endowed to lead his followers to accomplish group goals. The leaders of millenarian movements in ancient Palestine were typically labeled “prophets” and “messiahs,” because they were thought by their followers (and themselves) to have been chosen by God and endowed with supernatural powers—like the prophets of old—to pave the way for the full realization of God’s eschatological rule. Palestinian millenarian movements were “revitalistic movements,” whose purpose was the revival of ancient Israelite religious and nationalistic ideals within an eschatological framework. Millenarian movements within first-century Judaism were not uncommon, since the oppressive conditions of the Roman occupation provided a seedbed for religious revolt. Examples include the movement led by John the Baptist (who proclaimed the necessity of repentance in preparation for the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God), the revolt of Theudas (reported in Acts 5:36 and Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.5.1), and the revolt of the unnamed Egyptian (mentioned in Acts 21:38 and Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.169–172 and *Jewish War* 2.261–263). A showcase example of an early Jewish millenarian movement is the Qumran community, who lived in expectation of the near end of the world, and whose library, the Dead Sea Scrolls, contains many texts produced by the community that testify to their preoccupation with the end of days. Apocalypses themselves, however, which present themselves as esoteric wisdom, do not appear to have had any *direct* connection with the millenarian movements roughly contemporaneous with them (Dan 7–12 may be an exception). This view is strengthened by the fact that, although the Qumran community has an obvious apocalyptic orientation, no members of the community appear to have written an apocalypse.

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THE ORIGINS OF APOCALYPTIC

The origins of apocalypticism in Judaism are disputed. Many have argued for a continuity between prophecy and apocalyptic, suggesting that apocalyptic was a logical historical development of Old Testament prophecy, perhaps as a result of national disillusionment associated with the postexilic period (beginning ca. 538 B.C.E. with the return of some exiled Judahites from Babylon narrated in Ezra 1–2). In the postexilic period, the returned Judeans were subject to foreign nations (Persia, followed by the Greek Seleucid empire, and eventually by the Romans), and tensions existed also within the Jewish community, both in the eastern Diaspora (where a sizable Jewish community remained until the rise of Islam in the seventh century C.E.) and in Judah.

Toward the end of the last century it became increasingly evident that prophecy and apocalyptic exhibit elements of both continuity and discontinuity. The sharp contrast often thought to exist between them can be moderated by the recog-

nition that prophecy was not a stable phenomenon and exhibits development and change throughout the history of Israel and then in the postexilic period in Judah. Some sections of later prophetic books, such as Zach 1–6 (where an interpreting angel explains the meaning of visions to Zachariah); Isa 24–27, 56–66; Joel; and Zach 9–14 have been aptly described as “proto-apocalyptic” works. A description of how proto-apocalyptic sections of the Old Testament served as a transition to Jewish apocalypses is convincingly presented by Old Testament scholar Paul D. Hanson.⁸

Others have argued that there was a fundamental break between prophecy and apocalyptic. The German scholar Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971), for example, rejected the view that the primary roots of apocalypticism were to be found in Israelite prophecy.⁹ Describing apocalypticism as consisting in a belief in cosmic dualism, radical transcendence of God, esotericism, and gnosticism, he proposed that apocalypticism arose out of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Considerably less popular is the minority view that apocalypticism was essentially alien to Judaism and that it originated in Iran and had penetrated Jewish thought from the outside during the Hellenistic period (ca. 400–200 B.C.E.).

WAS JESUS AN APOCALYPTIST?

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, liberal Protestant biblical scholars in Europe and America tended to regard Jesus as a religious genius who taught such timeless truths as the universal fatherhood of God, the fact that all humankind were sisters and brothers, and the worth and potential of the individual. Wilhelm Hermann (1841–1905) and Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) regarded Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God as the rule of God in the hearts of humankind, while the great Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) and the social gospel movement he mentored saw it as the realization of an ideal society on earth. Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), in a critical review of scores of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century lives of Jesus, exposed the extent to which well-meaning liberal scholars had projected their own theological views back into their reconstructions of the historical Jesus.¹⁰ The liberal quest for the historical Jesus was carried out at a time when a negative attitude toward early Judaism as a legalistic and decadent religion was widely assumed, and Jewish apocalyptic literature was considered a particularly appalling development within Judaism. At the close of the nineteenth century, Johannes Weiss (1863–1914), a German Protestant New Testament scholar, took seriously the apocalyptic features of Jesus’ proclamation of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God and wrote an influential monograph arguing that Jesus himself held an apocalyptic worldview strikingly at odds with modern views.¹¹ In Schweitzer’s

⁸Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

⁹Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom and Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972).

¹⁰Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961; German original 1906).

¹¹Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; German original 1892).

critique of lives of Jesus, written a few years after the appearance of Weiss's book, he criticized the liberal quest for the historical Jesus as a bankrupt enterprise. However, he understood Jesus as a kind of wild-eyed apocalyptist who willingly died in a last-ditch attempt to force God to inaugurate his kingdom. "The historical Jesus," concluded Schweitzer, "will be to our time a stranger and an enigma."¹² Schweitzer's devastating critique, coupled with his depiction of Jesus as an apocalyptic fanatic, brought down the curtain on the writing of lives of Jesus on the Continent for nearly a generation.

Following the two world wars, interest in the historical Jesus picked up again in Germany, though interest had never really flagged in the United States and England. Scholars such as W. G. Kümmel argued convincingly that, unlike the typical apocalyptic emphasis on the future, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was present as well as future.¹³ Though some English scholars (notably C. H. Dodd) tended to emphasize the presence of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus to the virtual exclusion of the future,¹⁴ many, if not most, New Testament scholars in the 1960s and 1970s (some representative names include Joachim Jeremias, Norman Perrin, and George Ladd) understood that Jesus saw a tension between present realization and future fulfillment of the kingdom of God, making him far from a typical apocalyptist.

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By the 1980s, the so-called third quest of the historical Jesus began to pick up steam.¹⁵ This concern with the historical Jesus by a motley collection of scholars with widely different perspectives has tended to focus on the critical importance of understanding Jesus in light of his Jewish context, regarded much more positively than it had been during the nineteenth century. Scholars who are associated with the third quest, such as John Meier, a professor of New Testament at the University of Notre Dame, tend to take the Jewish setting of the eschatological message of Jesus very seriously, while at the same time recognizing that Jesus has his own very distinct message.¹⁶ At the same time that the third quest began to crystallize into a trend, the Jesus Seminar, a group of critical scholars led by Robert Funk, became active in a distinctive research program intended to recover the historical Jesus.

¹²Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 399.

¹³W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1957).

¹⁴C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961).

¹⁵The third quest is chronicled by Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

¹⁶John Paul Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols. to date (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2001).

Members of the Jesus Seminar (which includes such influential scholars as Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan) discounted the apocalyptic elements of the teachings of Jesus as a later development in early Christianity that obscured the earlier more historical character of Jesus as a non-eschatological teacher of wisdom. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, two very different approaches to understanding the mission and message of Jesus are in play: Jesus the apocalyptic prophet vs. Jesus the Jewish sage. Those who regard Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet tend to view his teachings from the standpoint of the eschatological material found in the gospels, while those who consider Jesus as a Jewish sage tend to make the ethical and proverbial teachings of Jesus the key to understanding his message.

PAUL THE APOCALYPTIST

One of the debated issues in the modern study of Paul is the extent to which it is appropriate to characterize Pauline thought as “apocalyptic.” While there is widespread agreement that Paul was influenced by apocalyptic eschatology, the extent to which he modified apocalypticism in light of his faith in Christ is still debated. Rudolf Bultmann eliminated apocalyptic features from Paul’s thought, using what he called “critical theological interpretation” (*Sachkritik*). He argued, for example, that in 1 Cor 15:1–15, where Paul proposes a historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus, he has violated his own theological standards by embracing a motif of apocalyptic myth that he elsewhere demythologizes.¹⁷ Following this same tack, Baumgarten suggested that Paul has demythologized apocalyptic traditions by consistently applying them to the present life of the community.¹⁸

The authors of Jewish apocalypses, though they typically concealed their identities behind pseudonyms, claimed to receive divine revelations through visions, and they therefore structured the apocalypses they wrote as a series of vision narratives. While there is no evidence that Paul himself wrote an apocalypse, he does claim to have received revelation visions and to have had ecstatic experiences.¹⁹ In Gal 1:12, in fact, he refers to his Damascus Road experience as an *apokalypsis* (“revelation”) from Jesus Christ, and in 2 Cor 12:1 he speaks of “visions and revelations of the Lord,” presumably describing his own experiences.

Again, though Paul probably did not write an apocalypse, he does include four relatively extensive apocalyptic scenarios (sequences of events that Paul expects to transpire in the eschaton) in his letters. Three of these scenarios center on the Parousia or second coming of Jesus (1 Thess 4:13–18; 2 Thess 1:5–12; 1 Cor 15:57–58). The fourth scenario, sometimes referred to as the “Pauline apocalypse,” is found in 2 Thess 2:1–12, centering on the coming of the eschatological antagonist or antichrist. Since 2 Thessalonians is widely considered to be pseudepigraphi-

¹⁷Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951–1955) 1:295–296, 305.

¹⁸Jörg Baumgarten, *Paulus und die Apokalypsik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975).

¹⁹Gal 1:11–17; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; see also Acts 9:1–9; 16:9; 18:9–10; 22:6–11, 17–21; 26:12–18; 27:23–24.

cal, the two passages mentioned above found in that letter may reflect the apocalyptic eschatology of the Pauline school or circle rather than of Paul himself.

Like the Jewish apocalyptists, Paul holds a form of temporal dualism that contrasts the present evil age with the coming age of salvation (Gal 1:4; Rom 8:18; 1 Cor 1:26). Yet it is also apparent that Paul has considerably modified the sharp distinction usually made in apocalyptic thought between the present evil age and the age to come. Paul understood the death and resurrection of Jesus in the past as the cosmic eschatological event that separated “this age” (Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6) or “this present evil age” (Gal 1:4) from “the age to come.” This means that, though Paul regards himself as living in the present age dominated by demonic powers, nevertheless, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, these evil powers have been defeated and are therefore doomed to pass away (1 Cor 2:6–7).

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Paul’s belief in the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah convinced him that eschatological events had begun to take place within history and that the resurrection of Jesus was part of the traditional Jewish expectation of the resurrection of the righteous (1 Cor 15:20–23). For Paul, the present time is just a temporary period between the death and resurrection of Christ on the one hand and his return in glory on the other, in which those who believe in the gospel will share in the salvific benefits of the age to come (Gal 1:4; 2 Cor 5:17). This temporary period is characterized by the eschatological gift of the Spirit of God, experienced as present within the Christian community as well as individual believers (Rom 8:9–11; 1 Cor 6:19; 12:4–11; 1 Thess 4:8). While Paul did not explicitly use the phrase “the age to come,” in 2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15 he uses the phrase “new creation,” which has apocalyptic associations (see Isa 65:17; 66:22; Rev 21:1). Though the final consummation is still future for Paul, the new age was present for Christians because the Messiah had come.

APOCALYPSE NOW AND THEN

The strange, even bizarre, world of apocalypses and apocalypticism seems light-years away from the world that most of us inhabit. The two biblical apocalypses, Daniel and Revelation, have been influential throughout the history of the church, particularly during periods of social unrest, dislocation, and war. The lavishly illuminated commentary on Revelation compiled by Beatus of Liebaná, Spain (eighth century C.E.), saw the Arab invasion of Spain anticipated in biblical prophecy, and Joachim of Fiore’s enormously influential philosophy of history (ca. 1132–1202 C.E.), based in part on the Revelation of John, was a response to con-

flicts between the poor and the rich, the worldly and the spiritual, that tested the church of his day. More recently, the Revelation of John has had renewed influence when read by liberation theologians, with their fundamental concern for social justice. The works by Pablo Richard, Catherine and Justo González, and Jean Pierre Ruiz, are just a few of many possible examples.²⁰ In the words of Catherine and Justo González:

We are also part of a worldwide church that in many areas is living under circumstances similar to those of the first century. Injustice and idolatry are still rampant both in our society and throughout the world. For these reasons, it is good that the book of Revelation, with its dire warnings against those who would rather be comfortable or successful than faithful, is part of our New Testament.²¹

The polyvalent symbolism of apocalypses has proven to be a two-edged sword, and the Revelation of John in particular (sometimes correlated with Daniel) has frequently been commandeered by sectarian movements that have perverted its message in support of destructive and pathological behavior. During the tragic Anabaptist rebellion in 1535, the rebels established a center at Münster, Germany, which they believed was chosen by God to be the site of the new Jerusalem, and tried to bring in the new age by force, only to be defeated by a coalition of Roman Catholic and Lutheran troops. More recently, apocalyptic expectation fueled by David Koresh's bizarre interpretation of Revelation ended in the fiery destruction of the Branch Davidian compound at Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993, resulting in eighty-six deaths, including that of Koresh himself. A few years later, in 1997, thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate community at Rancho Santa Fe, California, killed themselves, intending to board a hovering spaceship unencumbered by their human bodies, all this calculated to coordinate with the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet. The two leaders of the cult, Marshall Applewhite (who had predicted the imminent end of the world in 1992) and Bonnie Lu Nettles, known as "Bo" and "Peep," identified themselves as the two lampstands of Rev 11.

Daniel and Revelation have exerted a perennial fascination among Protestant fundamentalists, particularly premillennial dispensationalists (nurtured by the *Scofield Reference Bible*), who interpret these texts literally, regarding them as play-by-play coded descriptions of the historical events that were unfolding in the late twentieth (now the twenty-first) century. Examples of this kind of literalistic exegesis include Hal Lindsey's frequently revised bestseller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and the more recent dispensationalist commentary on Revelation by Tim LaHaye, both of whom have rejected conventional scholarly interpretations of Daniel and Revelation as liberal betrayals of the divinely inscribed message of those

²⁰Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); Catherine Gunsalus González and Justo L. González, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Jean Pierre Ruiz, "Biblical Interpretation from a US Hispanic American Perspective: A Reading of the Apocalypse," in *El Cuerpo de Cristo: The Hispanic Presence in the US Catholic Church*, ed. Peter J. Cassarella and Raul Gomez (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 78–105.

²¹González and González, *Revelation*, 3.

books.²² LaHaye and Jim Jenkins, of course, are coauthors of the enormously popular *Left Behind* series, a series of (thus far) twelve books of “apocalyptic fiction,” making lavish use of such symbols as the rapture (understood as imminent), the antichrist, and the mark of the beast (the latter has been understood by some as referring to the widespread use of universal product codes).

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Despite the ways in which the biblical apocalypses have been abused at various times throughout Christian history, Daniel and Revelation have important positive theological contributions to make to the modern church. Sermons on Revelation generally tend to focus on the sections of moral and spiritual exhortation found at the beginning and end of the book (Rev 1–3 and Rev 22), while the divine punishments narrated in the sequences of the opening of the seven seals, the blowing of the seven trumpets, and the pouring out of the seven vials are understandably given short shrift in pulpits (Rev 4–16). Yet these neglected chapters make an important contribution to the Christian knowledge of God. While elsewhere in the New Testament God is limited to a few lines in the gospels as a heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, in Revelation he is given two short but profound speeches. The shortest is found in Rev 1:8 and emphasizes God’s comprehensive and transcendent sovereignty as the book begins: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” The longer divine speech is situated at the core of the book and summarizes the basic theological message of the entire work: God sovereignly rewards the righteous and judges the wicked:

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” (Rev 21:5–8)

The divine self-predication “the Alpha and the Omega,” found in both of these passages, is also a self-predication of Christ in Rev. 22:13. Similarly, the title “the beginning and the end,” used of God in Rev 21:5–8, is also applied to Christ in Rev. 22:13.

²²Tim LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). A more scholarly dispensationalist approach to Revelation can be found in Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1995).

These two observations, confirmed by many other passages in Revelation, argue that God and Christ share divine sovereignty.²³

One of the more striking features of Revelation is the numerous throne scenes in the book, the most impressive of which is in Rev 4–5. There the author uses a kaleidoscope of imagery to convey the transcendent power and mystery of the God who rules over human history. For original readers, whose faith had been shaken—in large part because they were innocent victims of terrorist attacks by their “neighbors”—the author makes clear the fact that God remains in firm control of the events of history, despite appearances to the contrary, and that final victory is certain. Finally, the recurring waves of divine punishment inflicted on unbelieving humankind in Rev 4–16 present an aspect of the biblical conception of God that many would just as soon forget. Yet the fact that God ultimately punishes wickedness (and there is plenty of it in the modern world) was understood by the original readers as a demonstration that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus is a God of justice as well as a God of love. ⊕

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²³David E. Aune, “God and Time in the Apocalypse of John,” in *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology*, ed. A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 229–248.