



Dreams of the Future—Past and Ever Present

WENDELL FRERICHS

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The theme of this issue of *Word & World* derives not so much from the year of its publication as from a 1949 novel of that name written by George Orwell.¹ That book concerns us this year not because of its religious roots, flavor, or themes, but for the way its prognostication fits or does not fit our present predicament. As fiction it sought to forewarn us of the world which Orwell believed to be coming a generation hence.

Is it an apocalypse? If the biblical and ancient apocalyptic form and message determines what qualifies as an apocalypse, then 1984 is none. Above all, it lacks any religious message, let alone any hope in God for the future. Yet Orwell picks up themes and imagery with which Jewish and Christian apocalyptic was much at home. It is these that we need to examine.

Apocalypses are usually initiated via a vision of the future granted by God to the seer (Rev 1:1; Dan 7:1; 2 Esdr 3:1; 1 Enoch 1:2; 2 Enoch 1:2-3; 2 Bar. 10:3). Orwell claims no such visions; yet the whole of 1984 is what he envisioned and feared the world would be like over 30 years later.

Not only are apocalypses preoccupied with history; they are extraordinarily pessimistic regarding its flow and human outcome. So is 1984. The seer in the book of Daniel (our earliest apocalypse) seeks to give the impression that he is viewing hundreds of years of this unpromising human history in prospect rather than in retrospect (see especially Daniel 2, 7, and 11). This may account for the seeming determinism which pervades these visions' division of history into world ages, eternally decreed, and over which a fixed number of succeeding world empires rule. God has decreed that a given empire should begin and end at a prescribed time. In retrospect it may indeed seem so. Orwell's future world seems scarcely less predetermined, though by political forces rather than by God. Orwell expected us to regress inexorably toward a less humane and less free life, yes, into a totally structured horror. Daniel expected the immediate future to be grim indeed, but the ultimate outcome to be glorious.

The immediate future in ancient apocalypses is a time which has come to be labeled the "Great Tribulation" or more positively the "Birth Pangs of the New Age." 1984 portrays the future in fully as frightening detail as the great

¹George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949).

tribulation in apocalyptic. Big Brother, a kind of Anti-Christ, enforces absolute, uniformity over a police state where little brother's every move is scrutinized. The danger is that the individual citizen will become totally dehumanized. This is not too different from the danger portrayed in apocalypses, though we might there label it apostasy or unfaithfulness to God.

Apocalyptic is pastoral literature. It is intended as good news for its readers. True, a great testing of the faithful lies before them. Many will be martyred. God in wrath may even destroy the world to halt the assault on his rule by Anti-Christ and his forces. But eventually persecutions will cease, the enemies of God's kingdom will be defeated, and the millennium will dawn. Unlike Daniel or Revelation, 1984 limits itself to the human scene. A higher world and God play no role whatsoever. There is only an occasional glimpse of hope: the proles, who constitute the bulk of Oceania's population, may one day become aware of their potential and overthrow the Party. It is a big "if," however. The Party has taken every precaution to prevent its happening. 1984 is not good news; it is a desperate warning to Western humans of the direction their history is moving. Orwell sees no kingdom of bliss ahead, only an anti-Utopia.

The subject agreed upon for this article includes virtually anything from biblical times until today, that is, anything in which future hopes and dreams are expressed. To attempt such a broad purview is, of course, overwhelming and presumptuous. We dare promise only a sampling of the tremendous amounts of such materials preserved in literature. It is helpful not to be the first to attempt something of this sort.²

We begin by defining apocalypse. At the very end of the New Testament stands a book known as Revelation or The Apocalypse. We classify Jewish and Christian books as apocalypses if they conform in content and in form to Revelation. There are quite a few such apocalypses. The better known ones are Daniel, Ethiopic or 1 Enoch and 2 Esdras (also known as 4 Ezra). They appear to have been written to disclose God's ultimate future which he is about to give to beleaguered saints lest they lose faith during fierce persecutions. A major premise of apocalyptic is that the end of the present evil age is near. The era of bliss will soon dawn. Extraordinary imagery is used to disclose the identity of the protagonists on the stage of history and the course which the last days will take. Not every piece of literature which portrays this end of world history is an apocalypse. Gospels and epistles, for example, may use some of the language and deal with comparable themes without becoming apocalypses.

I. PRECURSORS OF APOCALYPTIC

In order to understand or appreciate the power of the message of apocalyptic, it is necessary to see how it is rooted in earlier traditions. We humans have apparently been concerned about the future from as long ago as the race developed

²Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (London: SCM, 1970); Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic In Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1982); D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); and Donald Sneen, *Visions of Hope* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978).

the ability to think. Neolithic age burials already often included articles presumed to be needed by the deceased in some kind of continuing or after-life. As soon as humans began recording their ideas in writing, their future hopes were included among the wide variety of things now preserved. Among these are guidelines and omens for forecasting the future such as surface patterns on the livers of sacrificial animals, positions and patterns of stars and planets in the skies, flight patterns of birds, paths taken by domestic animals, and the subject matter and events recalled from dreams. It was believed that the future could be read from these signs and omens

and perhaps even be influenced or manipulated by resorting to such things as incantations, spells, rituals, bribes, magic, or sorcery. Israel's powerful neighbors to the north and to the south were both preoccupied with future hopes. Mesopotamian wars of conquest were embarked upon when the omens forecast success. In Egypt a large portion of the gross national product went into funerary temples and pyramids intended to ensure the after-life of the Pharaoh.

Israel's earliest stories, which we take to be those of the patriarchal period,³ come to us via oral tradition from early to mid second millennium B.C.E. On the basis of Abraham's dreams of the future one could write something entitled *1984 B.C.E.* Long years childless, he dreamed of having a son, and even of becoming the ancestor of a numerous people. The imagery used to portray this is that his descendants shall be as many as "the dust of the earth" (Gen 13:16), or "the stars" (15:5), or "the sand which is upon the seashore" (22:17). A migratory semi-nomad, he dreamed of settling down in the farmland west of the Jordan, but it was then occupied by well-armed Canaanites. Illiterate and unimportant, he dreamed of having a name well known in the world. Unblessed yet himself in any of these ways, he dreamed of becoming a blessing to all the families of the earth (12:1-3 and subsequent passages). In some sense the rest of the Bible is the unfolding of Abraham's dream of the future in the various ways it came or did not come to fruition. But of decisive importance is an element not yet mentioned: all this was God's dream for Abraham, and Abraham received it as a promise. The rest of the Bible enlarges upon the promise or threatens its recipients with the withdrawal of the promised future. A few of the new elements added along the way include Jerusalem, David, and the temple. Prophets were sent to threaten this sometimes naively hopeful people by describing a nightmare they were about to experience, namely national destruction plus captivity in Mesopotamia. The prophets claimed to have seen in a vision this horrible fate which was unavoidable unless the nation turned around and became faithful to Yahweh, their God. But the threatened end, even when it came, was not the end. In the same prophetic books where we read of the threat there is also promise of a wonderful future of national restoration. For our purposes it does not matter that later anonymous prophets and redactors authored much of these. The entire prophetic imagery used to describe this future, whether glorious or ig-

³Claus Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962-65) 1.165-175; and Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972) 54-58.

nominious, became a veritable mine from which still later visionaries and seers dug for materials to mold their models of the future.

II. EXCURSUS REGARDING THE LAND

To illustrate this process let us look at one theme which runs through this hope literature, the land of Canaan.⁴ It figures prominently in God's promises to Abraham, as to all his subsequent heirs, and continues to be central to modern Israelis. Abraham was told that his homeland would be at some distance from Mesopotamia and that he would have to travel to reach it. Though he never owned more of it than a cave in which to bury his wife, it was the land in which he grazed his flocks as did his descendants after him. On this the three sources (J, E, and P) agree. In some sense, sojourning then became a fulfillment of the promise, though a later

one came when much of the land was conquered some centuries afterward. Deuteronomy loves the land and refers to it as “a good land” (1:25; 4:21-22), “a land flowing with milk and honey” (6:3), “a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper” (8:7-9). The Deuteronomic historian calls it “the land which I swore to their fathers to give them” (Josh 1:6), or “the land of your possession” (Josh 1:15). By contrast Amos describes it as a land about to be plundered from stronghold (3:11) to houses (3:15) and furniture (3:12), from temple (8:3; 3:14) to parched field (4:7) and hungry city (4:6), a decimated instead of a populated land (5:3; 6:9). The imagery is from everyday life, but frighteningly graphic: “fire shall devour the strongholds” (2:5), “an adversary shall...bring down your defenses” (3:11). What remains will be but “the corner of a couch and part of a bed” (3:12). “The houses of ivory shall perish” (3:15). God will give the people “cleanness of teeth in all your cities” (4:6). “In all the streets they shall say, alas! alas!” (5:16). “The great house shall be smitten into fragments” (6:11). “The Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land” (7:4). Other pre-exilic prophets used equally graphic, powerful imagery to describe the coming judgment of God on the land. But after it came, or perhaps even before that, God made promises of return and restoration.⁵ “The plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13). “I will plant them upon their land and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them” (Amos 9:15). Many who were captives in Babylon in the 6th century B.C.E. may have abandoned the dreams of the land of their ancestors, but prophets like Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel continued to revive their hopes for it. A new temple will stand in its center; all twelve tribes will dwell in equal portions of it; God’s glory will dwell there; abundance of everything will

⁴Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) has done a careful, helpful study of this theme.

⁵John Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

make life beautiful (Ezek 40-48). The land will produce the choicest of trees and plants; the return home from Babylon will be facilitated by major changes in the topography (lowering of heights, straightening of roads, smoothing of rough ground, providing shade, food, and water in desolate places). Cities devastated by war will be rebuilt and inhabited. The land will be overpopulated. Deserts will bloom. Wildernesses will sprout like gardens (Isa 40-55).

Bridging the gap between exilic prophecy and apocalyptic are post-exilic prophets. Their dreams also include the land, in spite of many exilic promises about it which are still lying unfulfilled. The land will be possessed by those who trust in the Lord. Ruins as yet unrestored will be rebuilt and inhabited. Pilgrims from far off places will come to Zion with rich gifts. Even gentiles will participate in worship at the temple. Israel will be left in peace, secure in all its borders. Aliens will do the hard work of farming, shepherding, and rebuilding. Vineyards and orchards will be planted and their fruits enjoyed. Even wild animals will lose their violent natures so that paradise peace will return (Isa 56-66). Zechariah repeats some of the same themes, adding

that the temple will be rebuilt and that the leaders of the national life will be two anointed ones (messiahs)—one cultic, one political (1-8). Second Zechariah (Zech 9-14) recalls the tribes who are still exiled in Assyria, promising them return. God will protect Jerusalem from its enemies. The Mount of Olives will be split by a new valley into which waters will flow down on the rest of the land (9-14). The Ezekiel apocalypse (38-39), if that is what it is, picks up the theme of the land, but as restored and rebuilt. Only then does an enemy Gog of Magog attack the peaceful, unprotected towns of Israel, the Lord's land, the center of the earth. But God will protect his land and destroy the invader. Then the land will remain free, inhabited by the people of God whose trust has been vindicated.

Daniel and subsequent apocalyptists use the imagery of these earlier sources but put it into their own contexts and idioms. Their more cosmic and universal purview still allows some preoccupation with the land. Antiochus IV will desecrate the temple of God there (Dan 11:31). Judah is called the "glorious land" (Dan 11:16, 41). It is toward Jerusalem that the faithful Daniel prays three times a day in his room in Persia (Dan 6:10). It was Jerusalem's fate which inspired Daniel's reinterpretation (from 70 years to 490; Dan 9:24) of Jeremiah's projection as to the length of the exile (Jer 25:12; 29:10).

III. APOCALYPTIC

Biblical and intertestamental apocalyptic is a unique phenomenon. It is a literature for the powerless and oppressed, written during times of persecution. Its origins and the influences upon its writers have been vigorously debated in recent years. Are its antecedents to be found in wisdom literature (G. von Rad), in Persian religion (G. Fohrer and W. O. E. Oesterley and T. H. Robinson), in prophetism (D. S. Russell), or in a visionary versus pragmatic power struggle in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. (P. Hanson)?⁶ No one answer seems wholly

⁶Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2.306; George Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 370; W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development* (London: S.P.C.K., 1930) 388ff.; D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic*, 92ff.; and Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1975) 21f.

adequate, but its dependence upon the prophets seems the greatest. What we now call Torah and Prophets in the canon are both presupposed as known and authoritative, but are reinterpreted in terms of the times when the author is on the scene. The apocalyptic dream might be called a late night dream, one experienced just before the dawn of a new day. Things have gone badly for the faithful. Though seeking to serve God, they have run afoul of political forces which render conditions fatal or at least dangerous. Is God then in charge of world history? The apocalyptists answer with a resounding "yes." In fact, each portion of history is ruled by an empire and an emperor of God's choosing. Though it may look as if things have just now gotten out of control, the truth is that God has permitted the forces of evil one last show of strength after which they will be forever defeated. The end of all the kingdoms of this world is near, and they are soon to be replaced by none other than the kingdom of God in full power and glory.

The imagery which the apocalyptists use to depict their present days of suffering and the final days of glory is colorful and even bizarre, but not without precedent. In Daniel 1-6 stories of the Babylonian periods are told in a way similar to the stories in the Pentateuch and the Prophets.

Israel's God is powerful and active in heathen kingdoms, but then so was God in the Exodus and the days of Cyrus. It is the confessions of faith in Israel's God by world rulers like Nebuchadnezzar and Darius (Dan 2:46ff.; 3:28ff.; 4:34ff.; 6:26ff.) which have no parallels in the Pentateuch or the Prophets. The dreams of the Pharaoh's butler and baker (Gen 40) in Joseph's times are similar to those of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2 and 7), but the role of Israel's God is clearer in the latter—both in the dream and in the events which it portends. The imagery of apocalyptic need not be more distinctive. Are seven lean cows who eat seven fat cows (Gen 41) less bizarre than four carnivorous beasts coming up out of the sea (Dan 7)? Is Daniel's view of four world empires which are destined to rule the world in successive eras reflective of a more deterministic view of history than Genesis' view that seven lean years will inevitably follow seven bountiful ones? Does it matter much that Daniel is portraying historical events, while Genesis depicts something taking place in nature? It seems that what is basically different is that the fourth empire of Daniel's world will, when it passes, mark the end of all world empires, while the seventh lean year in Genesis denotes nothing of the kind. The Elohist has no known eschatology, while Daniel is decisively eschatological. The imagery of Daniel may of necessity at places need to be stronger then, since it seeks to portray the very last days of this age and the coming of the kingdom of God. The prophets too needed to resort to powerful imagery when describing their inaugural visions or the coming messianic kingdom. One might, for example, contrast the imagery which Isaiah (9 and 11) uses to describe the messianic age with that he uses to portray the Assyrians (5:26-30). Comparing this with apocalyptic imagery, one is prone to ask whether lions who lie down with calves (11:6) are any less bizarre than a bear with three ribs in its mouth (Dan 7:5). The difference seems to lie in this, that for Isaiah the lion symbolizes the peace of the messianic kingdom, while Daniel's bear symbolizes the kingdom of Media itself. There may thus be a difference in the level or the role which the symbols play in apocalyptic as over against that in its

antecedents. Even more significant is the theological distinction: the prophets anticipated that empires and world history would continue alongside Israel's messianic kingdom, while the apocalyptists expected the kingdom of God permanently to replace all the kingdoms of this world. Daniel and other apocalyptists also knew that this world's empires would, near the end of time, be more monstrous than ever before in history. Thus his portrayal of the Greek Empire as a beast more horrible than any known on earth (7:7ff.) helps him to express what terrifying experiences the Jews would have with this power. Babylon, the destroyer of 587, finally becomes the symbol of this anti-godly state in bitter rebellion against God (Rev 18, but cf. Zech 5). The power of the state is seen as concentrated in the ruler who is symbolized by a horn (Dan 7:8ff.) much as the horn earlier symbolized strength in more general ways (Deut 33:17; Ezek 34:21; Zech 1:18-21). The present evil time, when the saints are being harassed by the enemy, is described in imagery drawn from the plagues against the Egyptians, from Holy War against the Canaanites, or from the judgments of God announced by the prophets. The bliss of the kingdom of God is portrayed in imagery drawn from paradise or the messianic era. Just as in the prophets, the future may be described in terms of either monarchy or theocracy.

IV. JESUS AND THE CHURCH

Jesus and the early church too were influenced by apocalyptic thought and described the future in terms of its imagery. Ever since Albert Schweitzer portrayed Jesus' life and teaching as oriented thoroughly toward eschatology,⁷ we have had to reckon with this apocalyptic element in the Gospels, however we may deal with it. More recent studies recognize the difficulty of separating out the original teachings and future hopes of Jesus from those of the early church and the writers of the Gospels. Yet it seems difficult to deny any eschatological hopes to Jesus. Only a strong aversion to apocalyptic eschatology, coupled with an attraction to Jesus, would seem to necessitate such a denial. The period from Daniel to the end of the first century C.E. was filled with strong expectations of the end of this present evil age. Jesus must have shared these hopes and then connected his own person and mission with them. One of the major differences between Jewish and Christian apocalyptic lies in the Jesus Christ centeredness of the latter. This is true of the Book of Revelation, in spite of Luther's inability to see it. The Gospels focus on Jesus, of course, but more specifically on his victory over the forces of evil, especially in his death and resurrection. This is communicated to us in language and imagery drawn from apocalyptic. Jesus is the "Son of Man," not just a "human being" like the prophet Ezekiel who is also called by that name (Ezek 2:1, etc.). This is the heavenly figure whom 1 Enoch (37-71) reinterpreted from Daniel 7 to refer to an individual rather than the saints of the Most High.

The importance of the theology of apocalyptic eschatology has long been denied by theologians who find it an embarrassment. Recently, in opposition to this, Ernst Käsemann has gone so far as to speak of apocalyptic as the beginning

⁷Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1961) 330ff.

or the mother of Christian theology.⁸ The early church and the synagogue were both alive to expecting the end, the church seeing this in relationship to the death, resurrection, and return of Jesus. Käsemann does not think Jesus preached that he would return in glory before the first generation of Christians had died. This, he contends, was the message of primitive enthusiastic prophets in the church, and it proved to be a deception. How much Jesus himself shared these apocalyptic, eschatological ideas Käsemann is reluctant to say inasmuch as he believes that the repeated quests for the historical Jesus have been unsuccessful. Jesus preached the coming kingdom of God, and this in itself is surely an eschatological reality.

J. Christiaan Beker asserts that St. Paul too proclaimed an apocalyptic gospel.⁹ This does not mean that Paul speculated about the date of the end of the world, but that his hopes were grounded in God's ultimate victory in history. The resurrection of Jesus already guarantees such a triumph. It is a first fruit of the resurrection of all the saints. The faithfulness of God already evidenced in Jesus Christ needs to be vindicated in the future consummation of God's rule. Presently the world is in the clutches of evil powers, but the new age has already broken in via Christ's death/resurrection and the gift of the Spirit in the church. Sin and death are already defeated. They will be forever removed when Christ returns.

Since it cannot be denied to be an apocalypse, the Book of Revelation has generally suffered from neglect in the so-called mainline churches. The powerful imagery of that book includes contrasting figures for good and evil, beautiful as opposed to ugly: the Lamb versus the dragon, a woman clothed with the sun contrasted with the great harlot, the tree of life and manna

contrasted with a cup of filth, a heavenly choir around a beautiful throne as opposed to a beast uttering blasphemies. The antecedents of the negative imagery are to be found in such places as descriptions of chaos, Sheol, Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon, Egypt, or the punishments of sinners by God. The positive derive from theophanies, Jerusalem, paradise, the temple, worship life, and God's blessings in everyday life.

The expectation of Christ's parousia, the millennial kingdom, the end of the world, the final judgment, and the coming of the kingdom of God was strong in primitive Christianity. The delay of these events did not immediately cause a major problem, but an explanation of their delay needed to be offered, as 2 Peter (3:8) does. The early Fathers such as Irenaeus continued to expect the end of the world history to come soon and with it an earthly, millennial reign of Christ.

V. AUGUSTINE

By the late fourth century it must have been clear that something was wrong

⁸Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology" and "On the Topic of Christian Apocalyptic," *Journal for Theology and Church 6: Apocalypticism*, ed. Robert Funk (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 40, 133.

⁹J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). Beker is most explicit on this in his third chapter.

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with this expectation of Christ's early return. Ten generations had come and gone without witnessing the parousia. Someone was needed who could prepare Christians for the long wait. That person was destined to be Aurelius Augustinus (St. Augustine, 354-430). The cataclysmic sack of Rome by the Goths (410) spurred this man, by then Bishop of Hippo, North Africa, to write his *The City of God*.¹⁰ As a response to his troubled times Augustine might have written an apocalypse. Instead *De Civitate Dei* began as an apologetic, defending the recently ascendant Christianity against the charge that neglect of the Roman gods had caused the city to fall to Alaric. Apocalyptic themes and expectations are everywhere in this work. For example, Augustine taught that God fixes the times and rule of every kingdom, that Christ will return to judge, that good and evil angels now struggle for supremacy in history, and that Anti-Christ will lead many astray before the end comes. But Augustine refuted those who tried to set the date of Christ's return. Christ rules now. The city of God is *now* as well as to come. Christ's millennial reign began already at his first advent. This would seem to make Augustine the first a-millennialist. He affirms the church as the place where Christ reigns. But Augustine does not simply equate the church with the city of God, nor Rome with the city of earth. Christians live as pilgrims in the latter, as citizens of the former. Their life may be difficult now, but it is bolstered by both the presence of and their future hope of the city of God. It is here but not yet in its fullness. So this great saint helped to anchor the people's hope in the same affirmations as John's Revelation. The *City of God* is also pastoral literature, intended to comfort and brace the people of North African congregations. But it is not an apocalypse.

VI. THE MIDDLE AGES

Augustine may have officially triumphed over adventism by identifying the millennium

with the present reign of Christ, but he could not stifle hopes among the masses for Christ's imminent return. The Bible was not in many private hands or in family homes, but bits and pieces of its message continued to reach the people via those who did have access to it. Oral transmission also kept alive some Biblical notions and hopes. Among these was the expectation of the return of Christ and the end of human history. Other literature too, such as the Sibylline *Tiburtina* from the mid fourth century or *Pseudo-Methodius* from the end of the seventh century, fed these hopes.¹¹ These and comparable supposed prophetic pieces were end-oriented literature, giving even more details than the Bible about the final days of the earth, the return of Christ, the final fate of the heathen and the righteous, and the appearance and deceptions of the Anti-Christ. Now there is the figure of the Emperor, one already dead but supposedly only sleeping and expected to return to rule over a golden age. Later leaders, whether legitimate ones or not, such as Pseudo-Baldwin (1224, Flanders) took advantage of this expectation, claiming to be the returned emperor or a pre-

¹⁰Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1947) IV, 33; V, 25; X, 7, 21; XI, 11; XII, 1; XV, 22; XVIII, 52, 53; XIX, 28; XX, 5, 7, 9, 13, 14, 16.

¹¹Ernst Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1898).

cursor to him. Norman Cohn has traced the rise and demise of many such, leaders and their followers from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries.¹² Some of them were or began as genuinely honest and pious people, but the adulation and blind following of the crowds usually led them to lust for power and to commit violence. Those leaders, whether pseudo-prophets or pseudo-emperors, claimed to be ushering in the millennium and promised everything from the good life here and now to eternal bliss to those who acclaimed them. By and large, the laity were ignorant of the central affirmations of the Christian faith and, to make them even more vulnerable to being led astray, the lower classes were desperate for life's barest essentials. Thus, the appearance of anyone promising them some respite caused them to become hangers-on. They would crusade against the Moslems, mob and murder their Jewish neighbors, rob the affluent clergy, burn down churches, riot and pillage the countryside in defiance of the secular authorities, or do almost anything their new leaders bade them to do. Catastrophic events such as the Black Death, famines, wars, economic collapses, or social upheavals easily set them off. During these centuries there was an almost continuous stream of these leaders and movements in Europe. Portentous dates such as the year 1000, which was widely believed to be the last year of this world era, or events such as the death or disappearance of a ruler were particularly prone to raise millennial hopes. Unfortunately for them, many rampaging enthusiasts reaped an early death at the hands of civil authorities for trying to usher in the millennium.

VII. THE MODERN ERA

The end of the crusades, the decline of feudalism and serfdom, and the coming of industrialization changed the outward manifestations but not the inner struggles of the desperately poor for a better world. E. J. Hobsbawm has demonstrated how European social movements during the last two centuries have provided outlet for the frustrations and hopes of the oppressed.¹³ Their leaders and heroes now may be political candidates, labor organizers, social bandits, the mafia, anarchists, communists or, less often in these secular times, religious

leaders. In three chapters (IV, V, VI) Hobsbawm describes European millenarianism since 1800. One example among many was the following of Davide Lazzaretti of southern Tuscany. A religious as well as social movement, the Lazzarettists looked for the Republic of God. They were simple sharecroppers and shepherds, yet were considered dangerous subversives by the monarchy of the time (1875). The coming of capitalism, building of modern roads, enacting of new laws governing forest management, and various social reforms combined to leave them worse off than they had been. Among their hopes for the changes their messiah would bring was relief from paying taxes. Lazzaretti was converted in 1868, a year after a bad harvest, tax revolts, and

¹²Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). The story of pseudo-Baldwin is related on pages 90ff. and 282ff.

¹³E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959). The discussion which follows is a condensation of materials found on pages 57-73.

riots. Years earlier he had had a vision, but it had not changed him into the preacher or holy man he now became. Now he promised that God would send a pastor from Sinai and a new king with a thousand young men to transform the state. Later he announced that he himself was that king who would reign over a kingdom of justice in the final age of the world. The result? The pope excommunicated him, and federal troops shot and killed him. But the movement was still alive at the end of World War II. The hopes of the people and the promises of their messiah were not forgotten, and the sad lot of the people has now become the platform for election of communist political candidates. This does not mean that the peasants are now atheists any more than that they were orthodox believers while following Lazzaretti a century ago. Their concrete needs, felt and addressed by someone whom they trust, are the central focus of their future hopes. Theirs are the kinds of hopes apocalyptic eschatology has always addressed, and their story is full of its imagery.

In the final throes of World War II and the resultant loss of hope in human progress, H. H. Rowley wrote a book claiming that biblical apocalyptic had a message for just such days.¹⁴ Not long thereafter S. B. Frost did the same thing.¹⁵ It had begun to be more embarrassing to believe that humans on their own could usher in an era of peace and justice than to believe that God would have to do it. Since then a whole spate of books has appeared, and some of the church's best known theologians have drawn inspiration and ideas from this hitherto unlikely source. The Christian hope normally has occupied only the last chapter of dogmatics, while apocalyptic eschatology has been even less prominent. Exceptions have usually been ultraconservative and dispensationalist works holding fast to what their authors believe is a literal interpretation of Scripture. Only recently have there again been some serious attempts by mainline theologians at reappropriating the realities to which apocalyptic imagery was pointing.

Noteworthy among these systematicians is Jürgen Moltmann.¹⁶ He has sought to insert some content into the current vacuum in the area of eschatology. To him the future hope is a most vital element in all Christian theology if it is to address the hopelessness of our human experiences of death, evil, and suffering. Our future is life in the risen Christ, sharing *his* future. In dialogue with a Marxist, Ernst Bloch, Moltmann maintains a lively interest in eschatology as a world-changing force. Christians willingly accept the pain and the task which hope in Christ

thrusts upon them. Their hopes are not private, world-fleeing expectations of waiting out the “Great Tribulation” from the safety of some high cloud. 60,000 feet does not provide much refuge in an age of rockets anyway! Christian hope does not guarantee immunity from bodily harm but rather opportunity for self-denial, for giving of oneself for the sake of the world as Christ did. Our future depends wholly upon the risen Lord, and we dare risk all because of our trust in him. It is not only that he promised us resurrection and a new creation. We have also a mission of working for change in this

¹⁴H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (London: Lutterworth, 1944).

¹⁵Stanley B. Frost, *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (London: Epworth, 1952).

¹⁶Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

present world. The problem is that the world is so far from perfect even though God promised that the age of the Messiah would not be so; Christians trust God who has made these promises and who is even now working to keep them.

Carl E. Braaten¹⁷ and Hans Schwarz¹⁸ are two other contemporary theologians whose work is strongly future oriented. Braaten includes concerns for the liberation of the oppressed and the rescue of nature from destruction as essential to the scope of Christian eschatology. Through misguided efforts to preserve an orthodox theology or the church’s preferential place in society theologians have found themselves opposing human freedom. There is neither a future for the church in this nor a viable eschatology. The central story of the Bible is God’s liberation of Israel and all humanity. Cries for freedom can really only find their answer in God who frees. To look in any other direction or to trust in anything else is ultimately to entrust the future to a counter-Christ to whom it does not belong and in whom no real future lies. Only in the living, resurrected Christ do we know our future in the face of death. Braaten certainly presses us to rethink either our outright rejection of apocalyptic eschatology or our using it to legitimate the status quo where injustices and poverty are inflicted upon the weak by the powerful.

Hans Schwarz also integrates eschatology into the mainstream of theology and life. He argues that our modern resources do not equip us to face the future. The world’s problems have become so gargantuan as to defy human resolution. To find the hope, the motivation, and the resources needed to shape the future requires more than any other than the Christian faith can supply. One is easily allured into some utopian scheme for solving the world’s ills, but none of such schemes has yet or will succeed. Only God can do that, and it is also his promise. What God has done and is doing in the resurrected Christ is the focal point of our hope for our own and the world’s future. Human history is viewed in many ways in our day. That history is the arena in which God is at work bringing humanity to a God-chosen goal, is the most satisfying and hopeful of them all. Braaten and Schwarz both do more than simply restate what the Bible says, having learned much from theologians who have wrestled with communicating meaningfully with people of this scientific age.

Such an article as this would be incomplete without reference to the nearly countless religious books which now seek to address those who are curious and anxious about the future. Just a list of some of the titles¹⁹ which stand on my shelf tells much of the story: *The Late Great Planet Earth*, *There’s a New World Com-*

¹⁷Carl E. Braaten, *Christ and Counter Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

¹⁸Hans Schwarz, *On The Way to the Future* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979).

¹⁹Books both conservative and liberal which I have found most helpful are: Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945); Dewey M. Beegle, *Prophecy and Prediction* (Ann Arbor: Pryor Pettengill, 1978); James M. Boice, *The Last and Future World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); Richard H. Hiers, *Jesus and the Future* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Philip E. Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Robert Jewett, *Jesus Against the Rapture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979); George E. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); William S. LaSor, *The Truth About Armageddon* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982); George C. Miladin, *Is This Really the End?* (Cherry Hill: Mack, 1972); John P. Milton, *Prophecy Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960); Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); and D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic, Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

ing, Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth, Re-entry: Striking Parallels Between Today's News Events and Christ's Second Coming, The Coming One, The Truth About Armageddon, The Jesus Hope, The Momentous Event: A Discussion of Scripture Teaching on the Second Advent, Is This Really the End?, Jesus Against The Rapture, The Future of the Great Planet Earth, The Last Things, Revelation: God and Satan in the Apocalypse. Some of these books were written to get readers to make a decision for Christ as an escape route from the "Great Tribulation" and an eternity in hell. These books employ scare tactics and sensationalist ways of correlating current events and biblical prophecies. Others are more evangelical or Gospel-oriented, seeking to comfort convicted sinners and harried saints. Still others seek to give a rebuttal and to counter sectarian inroads into mainline church membership. We have only ourselves to blame for much of the current interest of our members in sectarian end-times literature. By ignoring the Christian hope and by focusing so totally on the past or the here and now, the churches have virtually left eschatology to sectarians. We are discovering that our laity need more than continual admonitions to get involved in social action. They also need more than lectures on justification by grace. Especially their fears for the future in the face of possible nuclear holocaust cause them to ask what the Bible has to say about the future. Preachers and writers tend to answer these fears in one of two ways. Some use the Bible to map a clear, predicted sequence of events already underway heading toward a soon-to-arrive end of time. Others speak in more general ways of the way God's promises and God's past acts ought to give us confidence for the future, though we must walk by faith into it without a blueprint of how the goal will be reached.

At no place does the difference between sectarian and church exegesis appear greater than in the interpretation of pericopes about the end times. The outright rejection of the historical-critical method allows the dispensationalist to sort out passages for insertion into a preconceived timechart without regard for their contexts or their authors' intents. Refusal to entertain the results of the last two centuries of historical studies as relevant to the study of the Bible allows the fundamentalist to view prophecy as pre-written history. No distinction is made between prophecy and apocalyptic or between promise and prediction. God's sovereign freedom to fulfill promises in a creative and unexpected way is denied. The central message of the gospel is shifted from the kingdom of God to the rapture or to current events in the Middle East. People's fears and curiosity rather than their faith is fed. Involvement in solving this world's problems is discouraged. An escapist, fatalistic mentality is fostered: If the end is surely upon us, then nothing we can do will make any difference. Just be sure you are personally prepared to be

raptured out of the distresses of the final days of planet earth.

Bible believing pessimists and at least some scientists, philosophers, novelists, and environmentalists sound at points very much agreed and alike: we are headed for unavoidable destruction, they tell us. Utopian dreams, except for those of communists, seem to have faded out in the face of present-day world troubles. A mood of gloom and depression has settled over thinking people. The way they describe the coming end of things here is at points reminiscent of biblical apocalyptic. What they write may even receive the label of

apocalyptic. But a basic difference from Daniel and Revelation is often overlooked. Unlike modern predictors of doom, the apocalyptists knew that God was behind the scenes guiding history to his goal. Unlike the dispensationalists, they did not hate the world or the church. They knew that a glorious future was coming, and it would be God's gift.

We end on a novel as we began. My students urged me to read *The Clowns of God* by Morris West as an example of the way apocalyptic may function in recent fiction.²⁰ Unlike many modern novelists, West has what Frank Kermode²¹ would term the sense of an ending. West has our ear when he describes the way we seem bent on nuclear self-destruction. The pope's vision of it, his obedient response in announcing it, and the final outcome reveal a Christian orientation which renders *Clowns* a worthy example of the true apocalyptic tradition. That is the difference apocalyptic ought to make whenever it is properly applied²² to a Christian's fears for the future.

²⁰Morris West, *The Clowns of God* (New York: Bantam, 1981).

²¹Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

²²Mention at least should be made of the marvelous way in which C. S. Lewis has made use of apocalyptic themes in his Christian fantasy literature, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Books 1-7 (New York: MacMillan, 1950-1956). A recent graduate of our seminary has written a fine, serious piece which deserves to be read, too: David Anderson, *The Omega Prophecy* (unpublished manuscript).