



Texts in Context

Preaching Apocalyptic Texts

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APOCALYPTIC THINKING AND APOCALYPTIC TEXTS

Apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology, according to Ernst Käsemann. Maybe Käsemann was reacting to Bultmann's attempts at demythologizing, namely, removing the husk of apocalyptic to get at "truth" expressed in a less embarrassing fashion. More than that, however, Käsemann was challenging preachers to confront the core Christian message of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Preaching, after all, is not simply speaking *about* the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, preaching is speaking a word that, in fact, saves—a word that delivers an authentic experience of the word of the cross. Therefore, if the cross is the apocalyptic event, then coming to grips with apocalyptic is at the core of theology.

Despite the appeal of Käsemann's claim, biblical texts that are considered apocalyptic and the worldview of biblical apocalypticism are a problem and challenge for preaching. The Apocalypse of John, for example, seems to attract some of the worst interpretations, including those that revel in a morbid fascination with predicting the end of all things. Others use apocalyptic portions of 1 Thessalonians or 1 Corinthians primarily as evidence for what is termed a pre-tribulation rapture of the faithful. Such uses of the texts, however, do not seem to be authentic expressions of the center of Christian theology. Apocalyptic literature uses vivid imagery

To preach an apocalyptic text is neither to decode it nor to explain it. To preach apocalyptic is to draw the hearer into a world where God and the Lamb finally defeat evil and vindicate the saints—to proclaim a future event that transforms the present.

to speak of the conflict between good and evil and of God's final judgment. But the popular mind wants more, and so interpreters of apocalyptic too often provide extremism and excess. At the end of *Left Behind*, the first volume in the series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the reader is effectively recruited to join the "Tribulation Force" to battle God's enemies. That means that in this series the reader is offered an experience of the apocalyptic power of an apocalyptic text. Whether that story and that experience is an authentic expression of biblical apocalyptic is another question.

How does one preach texts from Revelation or apocalyptic passages of Paul that are so open and vulnerable to distortion? The temptation is to avoid those texts altogether. The infrequent appearance of Revelation in the *Revised Common Lectionary* aids in that conspiracy of silence. If, however, there is something central to Christian theology in those apocalyptic texts, those texts need to be proclaimed. If the lectionary is not going to help, the preacher needs to do something intentional, such as a sermon series on apocalyptic texts. These texts cannot be left to the Christian fringe.

APOCALYPTIC VERSUS PROPHETIC

Occasionally on Sunday evenings, if I am up late, I turn on the TV and catch up on *Jack Van Impe Presents*. The program takes on the genre of newscast. Dr. Jack and his wife Rexella sit at a desk with a bare background and a video screen for graphics. Rexella reads recent news clippings from a variety of newspapers and magazines. Jack, in turn, picks up on one of the stories and proceeds to recite ten, twenty, or thirty biblical passages, which, when tethered together, are construed as a prophecy that is being fulfilled in the present. Revelation and Daniel are prominent among these passages, followed by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, some minor prophets, the words of Jesus, and snippets from the letters of Paul.

Van Impe is preaching apocalyptically, but he really is not preaching an apocalyptic text. He is preaching an apocalyptic scenario or scheme that has been construed, inductively, from a range of New Testament and Old Testament sources. In this matter, Van Impe represents a classic strain of American Protestantism. American Protestantism has been influenced by at least two variations on millennialist scenarios. Premillennialism proposes an end-time sequence of first rapture, then tribulation, and then Christ's return in judgment and the establishing of the kingdom. Postmillennialism, in the American tradition, has tended to see the kingdom of God coming not in violent upheaval but in progressive reform and as more of a human achievement.¹

The current popular readings of Revelation and the Parousia-oriented texts of Paul tend toward premillennialism, with its concern for a pre-tribulation rap-

¹An excellent introduction to Revelation including a discussion of the history of interpretation is found in Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Koester provides an insightful response to those who would read Revelation as an end-time script.

ture and the treatment of apocalyptic texts as prophetic literature. This dispensationalist scenario, which also undergirds the *Left Behind* series, probably owes more to the footnotes of the *Scofield Reference Bible* than to the Bible itself. The emphasis is not on the integrity of the textual voice but on the metanarrative of apocalyptic dogma.²

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It is easy to dismiss the preaching of end-time scenarios rather than the preaching of texts, so a word of caution is in order. The stringing together of scriptural passages to fit into some greater apocalyptic scheme is not entirely unlike passages in the letters of Paul. Romans 3:1–19 with its catenae of biblical references leading to a vision of end-time judgment is a case in point. Paul and other Christians have seen themselves as living in the end time. Augustine regarded his as the final age. Joachim of Fiore fired the medieval imagination with his construal of history’s dispensations leading up to the end. There was an apocalypticism rampant in the era of the Reformation. Luther and his heirs were not beyond being influenced by the apocalyptic fervor of the late medieval period. Luther’s naming of the Pope as the antichrist was not merely some hyperbolic invective.³

It is possible, however, to preach an apocalyptic text, to embrace the apocalyptic core of early Christianity, without having the agenda set by dispensationalism or using the texts as proof texts for an apocalyptic dogma. Sometimes it is easier to know what *not to do* with an apocalyptic text than what *to do* with it. When it comes to the book of Revelation or Paul’s anticipation of the Parousia, it is easier to be reactive rather than proactive. A proactive approach to such texts is another way of describing the conviction that there is an authentic way of experiencing the apocalyptic voice, and a way needs to be found for that voice to be heard.

RECLAIMING APOCALYPTIC TEXTS FOR PREACHING

The canonicity of apocalyptic texts

Apocalyptic material is part of the biblical canon. The Revelation to John or

²The same is true of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in the *Left Behind* series. The metanarrative is a pre-tribulation rapture scenario, followed by the tribulation, an antichrist figure, and in the final volume millennial reign.

³For the role of apocalypticism in the Reformation, see Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). Barnes contends that Luther, in the early days of the Reformation, developed an understanding of history informed by the book of Daniel, with the horns of the beast in Dan 7 predictive of Luther’s own time. Luther’s reading of Revelation tended to the allegorical rather than seeing it as precisely prophetic of historical events; nevertheless, he understood the Turkish siege of Vienna within the context of the Apocalypse.

the apocalyptic sections of the Pauline letters or the gospels are part of a canon that frames and shapes the reading and performance of those texts. As the early Christian communities sought to order the texts to guide their worship and life, they began to assess the relative merits of the writings being circulated among them. Early canon lists vary as to whether Revelation was to be included, recommended, or excluded. The Bible of Western Christianity, however, is evidence of the church's decision. Revelation became part of the canonical package. Distortions emerge and multiply when Revelation is not read within the canonical matrix. If the core of Christian theology is the apocalyptic proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, then Revelation—read from within the canon—is good news and not horror.

Revelation is good news because it helps give voice to the Old Testament within the New. John's Apocalypse is saturated with Old Testament allusion, images, language, and phrases. There are few horrors in Revelation—including the dragons, blasphemous beasts, and then wars in heaven—that do not show some literary dependence upon Ezekiel or Daniel. The references to God's heavenly temple and the ark of the covenant in Rev 11:19 require a readership that knows the meaning of temple and ark in Israel's history. Revelation, though talking about the end of history, affirms the history of the people of God. In Revelation the history of God's people continues in the church. The same God who delivered the suffering children of Israel from Pharaoh's hand is present with the church in Revelation. Through its symbolic connections with Old Testament imagery, Revelation affirms that although evil exists and suffering visits Christians, the Lord has a future and a hope for the suffering people.

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Genre sensitivity

When the heavens are torn apart, the trumpet sounds, and an angel descends, the audience of an apocalyptic text expects something big. The apocalyptic genre functions to mediate between two worlds, the realm of divine transcendence and justice and the realm of this world of sin and death. The apocalyptic genre also functions to change the way in which the audience sees itself in this struggle between two clashing realms. This genre is not spontaneously generated, but has a history—one in which certain conventions develop: angels and demons, heaven and hell, judgment and vindication.

Apocalyptic is not simply about prediction; it is about truth. As N. T. Wright notes, apocalyptic is about uncovering meaning and it is “used and reused to invest the space-time events of Israel's past, present and future with their full theological

significance.”⁴ Is not that what preaching is about—investing space and time, people and their lives with their full theological significance?

New Testament apocalyptic owes a debt to Israel’s history, but it takes yet another turn, being transformed by the experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus. To call Jesus Messiah is an apocalyptic claim about one kingdom, God’s, clashing with another kingdom, the world.

Liturgy, hymnody, and apocalyptic texts

If apocalyptic texts are rare in the lectionary, they are abundantly present in worship. Liturgical language, such as “Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,” is the language of Revelation. Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus with its coda, “and He shall reign forever and ever,” is apocalyptic language. Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic” borrows language from Rev 14 and 19 with its winepress of the wrath of God. Howe was writing in another apocalyptic time—the American Civil War. She saw the Lord’s armies realized in the Union army. Another variation on Revelation hymnody came with the Scandinavian immigrants. The faithful remnant in a country church singing “Den Støre Hvide Flok” (“Who Is This Host”) at yet another funeral invokes the language of a heavenly vision to provide a renewed and changed vision of their lives.

Apocalyptic language and references find their way into worship and liturgy because of the power of the language and the vividness of the images. Worship is not simply a noetic experience; it is affective. The worship experience is transformative, changing the situation of the participant. The sacramental meal is the first course of an eschatological banquet, and the worshiper is no longer victim but victor.

What if congregations actually started taking the words of these hymns seriously? When, for example, a congregation sings Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress,” they are singing that there are devils in this world and that these devils actually threaten. They are singing that there is a prince of this world in grim contention with God. Still, even as the community sings of those terrors, it announces that, however real the threat, God’s triumph is even more certain and that God acts now, through the Spirit of the risen Lord, in real space and real time, to win the victory. Taking the words of the hymn seriously begins by simply listening to what we are saying.

There is a reverse thinking to the apocalyptic vision in liturgy in that it works backwards. The liturgical vision of the great feast starts at the end and looks backward. Prophecy, in contrast, typically looks from the present to the future. The end-time worship, described in Rev 7:13–17, will include those whose robes are washed white with the blood of martyrdom. Only in the transposed and world-reversing logic of God’s final triumph can one make things white by washing them in blood. That end-time vision, however, reveals to the worshipping community that their present suffering is given new meaning in light of the death and

⁴N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 286.

resurrection of Jesus and that the present is already being claimed for God's sacred purpose.

Apocalyptic texts, however, speak not only to people who are being tortured and killed for the faith. Those texts must also speak to those whose suffering is not as evident or palpable or immediately life-threatening, those who suffer a crisis of meaning. The vision of Revelation will allow them to understand the present from the perspective of the future. Apocalyptic texts voiced in worship and hymnody can help the believing community discover and experience that their lives, in light of God's ultimate triumph, are more than they thought they were.

Explaining apocalyptic texts

In order to avoid some of the twisted interpretations of apocalyptic texts, it is sometimes easier to explain them than to proclaim them. Explaining is one of those early steps of exegesis where the apocalyptic text is understood within its original first-century setting. This can be a useful exercise; the problem is that the text stays a first-century text.

Take, for example, the number 666 of Rev 13:17–18, one of the most asked-about numbers in Revelation. Some years ago, as the story goes, Nancy Reagan, wife of late president Ronald Reagan, changed the number of their mailbox at San Clemente from 666 to 668.⁵ There was fear associated with the number because of its associations with the beast of Rev 13 and therefore with the antichrist. It is worth a brief note that the term antichrist appears in 1 and 2 John but not in Revelation.

An historical and explanatory approach would try to understand the reference to a 666 in a way that would make sense within the first century and within the context of Judaism and Christianity. We do know, for example, that sometimes in Judaism and early Christianity there is a type of numerology, called gematria, where letters of the alphabet are assigned numerical values. These numerical values can be manipulated and reapplied to the alphabet in order to uncover hidden meanings. It has been suggested, for example, that the numerical value 666 could be configured to have some correspondence with the name of the Roman emperor Nero.⁶ That is a good explanation. It is likely the original audience of the Apocalypse caught on to the code. The explanation works for understanding, but the next challenge has to do with preaching. Does an authentic experience of this text require finding other contemporaries who fit the 666 code? Performing a new act of numerology leads to distortion and not an authentic hearing.

The beast of Rev 13 is another image that can be explained in historical terms. Apocalyptic texts such as Daniel had used the images of a beast to describe the rem-

⁵This story appears on a variety of internet sites, such as <http://www.findadeath.com/Deceased/r/reagan/ronaldreagan.htm>. There are also sites that claim that Ronald Reagan's name adds up to 666, e.g., <http://pages.prodigy.net/lightoftheworld/omens.html>, and that Reagan therefore was the antichrist!

⁶David Barr makes a good case for the 666-Nero equation in his textual commentary on Revelation in *The Access Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 409.

nants of Alexander's empire. The first-century Christian audience would have understood the beast language to refer to imperial Rome and its ideology. The marks of Rome, or the beast, were found on coins, triumphal arches, and statuary of the empire and the imperial cult. The first-century audience would have known this when they experienced the text. We can explain their experience.

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The challenge, again, is hearing the authentic voice of that text. The suggestion that the mark of the beast would now be a reference to implantable microchips would seem to be missing the power of the text.⁷ Attention to the historical context of apocalyptic texts, by way of explanation, is an important corrective to distortions of interpretation. Such explanations in themselves, however, are not sufficient for an authentic experience of the apocalyptic voice of the text.

Letting the text speak: Moving from the whole to the part

Revelation, just as the author recommends in 1:3, should be read aloud (“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy and blessed are those who hear...”) and, we might add, preferably in one sitting. That way the reader or auditor knows that this vision is of a piece, beginning and ending with a benediction. Part of the current problem with preaching apocalyptic is that the texts are taken piecemeal to support larger dogmatic claims. In response to that trend, one way to preach Revelation is to preach the whole thing.

The language of apocalyptic is performative, that is to say it does things to the listener. The language of Revelation is performative in that it creates an audience and shapes the imagination of that audience as it progresses through a series of phases and changes of perspective. The text of the Apocalypse constructs a world and then draws the audience into the world. To preach Revelation is not simply to preach a piece of it. Preaching the whole book is really an attempt to reconstruct for the contemporary audience the world that the text creates. An approach to the whole might summarize each section and then bring the vision together.

Initially, in chapters 1–3, the author seems to be speaking to particular people in particular churches and advances a prophetic critique to communities in seven cities. In each case there are words of assurance, e.g., “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance” (Rev 2:2), combined with words of judgment, e.g., “I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (2:4). It becomes clear, however, that the text demands a wider audience: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev 3:22). This lan-

⁷Jack Van Impe at www.jvim.com suggests that the antichrist will use a computer system to implant microchips with the number 666 in every person on earth.

guage lays claim to any listener, drawing him or her into the intended audience of this word.

In Rev 4–11 the audience is transported to heaven. The focus now is the throne and the layer upon layer of description of thrones around thrones, gems upon gems, creatures surrounded by creatures, and the Lamb who is not literally a lamb, and the victim who, in the end, is anything but. Behind the voices that cry out, behind the seals, behind the book is the Lamb, Jesus.

In the concluding chapters, 12–22, war in heaven becomes war on earth. The assault is on those who “keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus” (12:17). The beast rises out of the sea, verbally constructed of absurd animal images, haughty and blasphemous, as the text reads. The audience experiencing this text, however, is haunted by the passive voice in which it is read. The beast was “allowed to exercise authority,” “allowed” (καὶ ἐδόθη) to make war on the saints. Who is hidden behind that mask? Is it the dragon? Satan? Is it a beast representing a darker and impenetrable aspect of God?

In the end, chapters 20–22, the author closes with a series of salvific visions. There is an initial resurrection of the righteous, with Satan cast into the bottomless pit; then a vision of the judgment of the dead, according to their works. This is followed by the vision of the new Jerusalem, descending from heaven with its gates that do not shut and bathed in a light that never ceases. Finally, there is a vision of a river, the water of life flowing before the throne, and a tree of life.

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When one experiences the book as a whole it becomes not so much a sequence of events—in code—that need to be figured out. Rather the visions are variations on a theme. Like Bach’s Goldberg Variations or Mozart’s variations on “Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman” (“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”), John’s variations are sometimes dissonant, sometimes euphonious, major, minor, spartan in harmony, or lush. But beneath it all lies the same tune, the song of the triumph of God and the Lamb, the vindication of the saints and the final defeat of evil.

After constructing a sermon of the whole it is possible to preach on the parts. If the triumph of the Lamb is the answer, what then are the questions? If God raises Jesus from the dead to defeat sin and death, what is the character of the world that needs such redemption? The point is no longer whether “666” has to do with the social security system and implantable microchips or whether tanks from the remnants of the former Soviet Union will converge on the Middle East near the weathered tell of Megiddo, that ancient garrison city of Solomon. If the text itself has its way, we are first forced to imagine a world where things like confessing one’s faith make a difference, where evil is real and terrifying and yet penultimate.

Talking about evil

If the triumph of God and the Lamb is so significant, then evil must be significant as well. The preacher needs to take the risk of talking about evil. As Richard Bauckham has noted, one purpose of Revelation is to “purge and refurbish the Christian imagination.”⁸ That would seem to be a good goal for preaching as well. Imagination is not fantasy, but the capacity to see oneself and one’s world from another perspective—in this case, God’s.

J. R. R. Tolkien likely owes much to John of Patmos when he creates the world of Middle Earth. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy constructs a world and invites the audience into that world. Viewers of the *Lord of the Rings* films, for example, did not have to parse out the nuances of J. R. R. Tolkien in order to experience some sense of thrill when Gandalf arrives with the rescuers for Helm’s Deep—just at dawn, just when he said he would come, just when hope was all but lost. Revelation is not “just a story,” but it does create a world. In that world wrath is to be feared, death is an enemy, and faithfulness, in the midst of evil, accounts for something. The author of Revelation is saying to the audience that God has not abandoned the world, despite appearances. The lives of believers, in this view, count and are counted as precious.

Transforming the audience

The primary focus of this essay has been on discovering a way to experience in an authentic way the voice of an apocalyptic text, and in particular the texts of Revelation. There are other apocalyptic passages which also might be used in the quest for an authentic experience of apocalyptic.

First Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, in whole or in part, slips into the lectionary near the end of the Pentecost season, in cycle A. There are traits of the apocalyptic genre here: a descent from heaven, the call of the archangel, the trumpet of God, a resurrection of the dead, being saved from the wrath to come. This text answers a question that is not often asked, at least these days: If we die before Jesus returns can we still make it into heaven? Jaded by a seemingly long-delayed Parousia, the contemporary Christian reader or auditor of this text might hear this problem as quaint. Paul answers this concern with the bold claim that not only will the dead in Christ be raised, but they will be raised first. Interestingly, he brings no scriptural proof to bear, nor does he claim to have this on good authority, like a word from the resurrected Lord. He just knows this to be true.

How can this text serve the quest for hearing the apocalyptic voice? One observation would be that apocalyptic texts are, in the end, theocentric and not anthropocentric. The question in Thessalonica, an eminently Gentile congregation, was a “what about us?” kind of question. God is going to judge the world, Christ will return in triumph, “but what about me?” Beneath the question of the Thessa-

⁸Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 159.

lonians is a failure of a theocentric imagination. The resurrection is not about who goes first or whether the dead in Christ lose out if Jesus arrives late. The resurrection is about God, “who raised Jesus from the dead,” a participial predication that Paul uses to identify and name God.

The language of 1 Thess 5:1–11 is a reminder that the authentic voice of apocalyptic is in the indicative. To the Thessalonian church Paul writes, “You are all children of the light”; “God has not destined us for wrath but for obtaining salvation.” Like the visions of Revelation this language speaks from a temporal future and from a space beyond; it speaks to the present and invests significance in the members of the community of believers.

Tragedy, comedy, and apocalyptic

There is nothing humorous about apocalyptic images or themes. Comedy, in the classical sense, however, isn’t necessarily funny. In contemporary pop culture, humor and satire have become the truth-tellers. John Stewart describes his program *The Daily Show* as fake news. And in a way it is. The reporters are not really news reporters and they are not really on location. Yet there is often an attempt to unmask presumption. That is what the apocalyptic genre is supposed to do, unmask and uncover the world and show it for what it really is. There is a dark humor to Dante as he takes the reader through the rings and levels of hell. When the apocalyptic text is proclaimed, the audience should experience the unmasking of the world and of themselves.

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Maybe there is irony in 1 Thess 4:16: “and the dead in Christ shall rise first.” Irony, it should be noted, can easily turn to tragedy. Oedipus flees a prophecy of patricide but finds his best intentions are perverted to the worst. The Thessalonians seem to be anxious about the timing of the Parousia, about who is going to make it into heaven or be with the Lord or have eternal life. Members of the Thessalonian congregation have an apocalyptic eschatology that anticipates Christ’s Parousia, but this expectation seems to have produced more anxiety than hope. They fear tragedy.

For the believer, however, the Parousia is not about irony or tragedy. Paul’s apocalyptic turn is about freedom and not about fate. The dead in Christ rise first. New Testament apocalyptic is not a joke, but in a deep sense, since it does not end in tragedy, there must be comedy. Darkness does not win, light does. In Christ, God shows himself not against but for the believers and their community. Experiencing apocalyptic as real, as authentic, and as gospel requires descending to the depths of hell as well as ascending to the heights of heaven. It demands that its

audience know about death in order to understand God's ultimate gift of life. The authentic experience of apocalyptic exposes the world for what it is, but it also exposes us for what we are.

The time seems right to reclaim the preaching of apocalyptic texts and themes. The opportunities in the lectionary are few. It is up to the preacher to create an occasion that the lectionary does not. Preach a series on Revelation, experience that apocalyptic voice to its transformative depth, and do not leave out a thing. ⊕

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