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Gene Tucker, Consulting Editor

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The Apocalyptic Consciousness
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Homiletical Resources on First Thessalonians
Mark Trotter
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EDITORIAL

Questionable Pursuits

Yes, Virginia, we have to endure another presidential campaign. But look for the silver lining: out of all this banality some benison must fall. For instance, every election seems to revolve around an innocent question. When Ronald Reagan ran in 1980, he asked, “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” Then Gary Hart undermined Walter Mondale’s credibility by asking, “Where do you disagree with labor?” Mondale retorted with, “Where’s the beef?” In each case the answer, though not clear, helped the candidate asking the question. So far this year the question I’ve liked the best was the one asked of candidates who supported a Constitutional amendment to allow “vocal” prayers in the public schools: “Do you go to church?” The foot-shuffling brought on by that little query says worlds about political hypocrisy.

But of all the people I admire, the most admirable is the person who can ask the dumb question—asking the question that others have been thinking about but are too embarrassed to say out loud for fear of humiliation. A friend of mine, a book designer, was summoned to the office of the provost of the large university for which he worked. The lowly designer felt duly humble in the presence of the mighty. He waited to hear what the provost, a man renowned for his academic achievements and hailed as a humanitarian, would say. And the provost asked him, “How does a Xerox work?”

My friend and I laughed about this episode later. But on reflection I had to admit to myself that if my friend had not explained it to me, I myself would not have known how a photocopier worked. Dry photography and all that. This ignorance that we refuse to acknowledge to ourselves must be one reason for resorting to slogans. A slogan slurs over the
complications of a thing and makes us think we understand something when we do not. Today’s Chinese are fond of slogans, and their use of them makes us suspect they really do not understand realities very profoundly. When considering the evolution of the human species, for example, some Chinese do not resort to complicated biological and anthropological explanations. They quote Marx: “Labor makes man.” And this short sentence seems to satisfy many Chinese students.

But are we in the West any more sophisticated? How many times have we resorted to such shorthand phrases as “adaptation to environment” or “natural selection” to explain the reality of evolution? Or the other side, creationists also reduce such complicated matters to neat simplicities and say God created the world. We use these intellectual abbreviations because we think they are “answers,” but in reality they only provide us with an avenue of not-thinking. Believing, maybe, but not thinking. We can build up an entire vocabulary suited to our mental limitations in this way. For instance, any question about the divinity of Christ can be reduced to a formula—either that of Chalcedon or of one of our latter-day thinkers who seem to prefer hyphenated terms: Christ-event, for example. Similarly, any question about guilt may receive the coded response, “self-esteem” and so on. The most popular slogans and terms are those that can fit a large number of questions. Such are terms like narrative theology, redaction criticism, ministry of presence, spiritual formation, people of God, and deconstruction of texts. Once you are familiar with these terms, you can, like sloganers, handle questions of cosmological significance with a mere word or two.

But when we really “get serious,” we often ask ourselves what these terms mean, and this questioning and subsequent explanations make up most of what we call intellectual reasoning. Once we find ourselves in the middle of this more complicated discourse (entertaining and satisfying precisely because of its complication), we may forget that we ourselves began with dumb questions of our own. So we really ought to honor those who come to us with seemingly simple or beginner’s questions. For instance, pastors and other professional ministers are often approached by persons who ask about
the end of the world, meaning the conclusion of the earth as a physical and biological entity, not "end" as "purpose." If we, like the presidential candidates who are embarrassed by simple questions, can be humble enough for the occasion we may treat such questions with kindness. And such humility and kindness probably suits the occasion better than levity, disdain, or equivocation. (I am assuming that the person being questioned does not already believe the world is going to end soon, or other answers might seem appropriate, such as confirmation or the announcement of the exact date.)

Robert Jewett shows how, in his essay in this issue, the popular language about the end of the world reflects serious concerns. Jewett's essay as well as others in this edition of the journal connect apocalyptic concerns with this-worldly concerns. When people get excited about the impending arrival of doomsday, they really are anxious about what is happening in this world right now. So asking when the world is going to end is very close to asking, "What is going on here and now?"

Paul Hanson gets right to that point. We apply the ominous term "apocalypse" to this world because we have some fresh experiences in mind. Apocalypse surprises us, as if we were looking upward for a message and fell through a trapdoor. We thought apocalypse had to do with angels and strange beasts, and then we smelled burnt flesh, saw the bodies wrapped in their plastic bags. Now all this religious talk does not seem so nice anymore; it almost seems as if someone has got a little sadistic with us. We ask about God and are given terrorism.

But questions about God are not out of place, and to ask, "What is going on here?" can lead directly to "What is God doing?" That question concerns Adela Collins, who interprets the Book of Revelation in a way that you can use to help those who find it mystifying. Ms. Collins reminds me of the teacher who introduced us to algebra in the ninth grade. He began by debunking the myth that algebra was hard. "All you do when you see this little \( x \) or \( y \)," he said as he chalked a formula on the board, "is remember it stands for a number." What could be simpler? Ducksoup. He had conned us, and we zipped through algebra with no trouble at all. So it is with a fine interpreter like Collins, and after reading her essay we know that to ask what
God is doing is to ask a perfectly logical question and if anything we ought to ask it more boldly.

Our other writer on things homiletic, Mark Trotter, similarly links the real world of today to that other world of the apocalypse. Who could ever hope to find something rich to share with people on Sunday morning out of that supernatural writing, I Thessalonians? Yet Trotter, who lives in a real place called San Diego, clearly explains how he found something there. Trotter suggests that what God was doing on the main highway of Greece in the first century may be what God is doing today through the media. The likelihood of this comparison goads our thinking. What kind of transfer are we expected to make from the historical circumstances of the Thessalonians to our own time? If we took literally the idea that God was acting through a form of transportation, we would try to discern God’s action in jet planes and superhighways. But this is not a literal comparison. What then would it mean to say that God is acting through the media? Exploring this question sermonically and theologically could lead into some interesting areas.

But most of us know that no television camera could photograph the real apocalypse, even while it was occurring. The reason is that we are not conditioned to viewing apocalypses, which is what Theodore Jennings suggests when he writes that apocalypse is the parent of all theology. How could this be, given the specialized nature of apocalypse? As you will see if you read Jennings’ essay, our understanding of apocalypse itself has a history, and we need to recognize its roots. When you go back to Johannes Weiss, you practically have to get in a time capsule. Oh, I know, a mere hundred years or so. But we are talking about world views here, and on the other side of Weiss lies a landscape that you and I would not recognize. So as Jennings reminds us, theology that takes into account apocalypse must be humble. We are only continuing a discussion that began sometime back. And we can seem really contemporary by discussing phenomenology and God’s action and other such realities, but it seems a few other people knew about these changes before our zygotes were even hatched.

It is still a good question, what God is doing, and our attempts to answer it make us aware that we inevitably draw an inference
from it. Although theoretically to ask about God puts the weight on something objective, that ultimate reality “out there” we call divine being or the Other, in reality we become conscious of ourselves as the questioners. Why are we asking this question in just this way? we may say to ourselves. Because we are wondering what we should be, or who we should be, and how we ought to be acting. Thus to ask “What is God doing?” inevitably leads to this other question, “What ought we to be doing?”

Apocalyptic theology accomplishes this same result but in a more direct way. The apocalyptic approach does not lead us gently by the hand, so that we become dimly aware. Rather, it takes the sink-or-swim approach—it throws us in the water and reduces all questions to one sharp reality. Carol Newsom explains this shock-treatment of apocalyptic theology in her essay. If Newsom is right, then apocalyptic theology has an undeserved reputation of narrowness and rigidity. Her thesis intrigues us, the way when the Jehovah’s Witnesses come knocking at the door at dinnertime we would like to sit down and have a long talk with them but then we remember the family is waiting for dinner to begin. Once, just once, we probably ought to give the apocalyptic crowd a few minutes of our time.

What keeps us from having these conversations with millennialists and apocalypticists? Surely one reason is that many of us find their use of metaphors to be ingenuous. They talk about other worlds as if they were geographical locations and time as if it were on the clock. Yet whatever our dislike of such literalisms, we must concede that it is very hard to escape the use of metaphors of space and time when talking about—well, other dimensions.

Spatial metaphors, for example, seem natural when we ask questions and seek answers. One questioner, Plato, began almost all of his dialogues with sentences of location or movement: “I was going from the Academy straight to the Lyceum,” he wrote in the first sentence of Lysis. And the Phaedrus started out, “My dear Phaedrus, whence come you, and whither are you going?” But the most notable line in this category is the opening of the Republic, where Plato had Socrates leaving Athens to walk the five miles to Piraeus, the seaport: “I went down, yesterday, to the Piraeus, with Glaukon
the son of Ariston, to offer my prayers to the goddess, and also wanting to see the festival, in what manner they would arrange it, since it was conducted for the first time."

Socrates saw the festival and began the return trip home. He was stopped by some friends, however, and thus began the dialogue about justice. Eric Voegelin sees this "going down" and "returning back" as a trip with a double or even triple meaning. Athens had won a great victory at Marathon but then had declined as a seapower. Piraeus the seaport then stood as a symbol for the decline of Athens. And to return after noting this decline meant to go up to a different sort of Athens, one of the mind, nous, rather than power: "From the depth of the Piraeus, the way went, not back to the Athens of Marathon, but forward and upward to the polis built by Socrates with his friends in their souls." (Plato and Aristotle, LSU Press, 1957, p. 53.)

Asking questions then suggests movement, but once we have arrived at our destination and have an answer, it may open a new and different sort of question. When we retrace our steps to where we stood originally we see things in a different perspective, and we may begin to sense that pursuing questions gets us nowhere. But when we feel dispirited we can find strength in Voegelin's own summation of the wisdom to be found in the rising and falling of cultures and questioners alike: "The way up and the way down are the same way."

Prof. Gene Tucker, Candler School of Theology, served as consulting editor for this edition of our journal. A scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Professor Tucker has written and edited numerous works in his field. He wrote Form Criticism in the Old Testament (Fortress, 1971) and Joshua, with J. Maxwell Miller, in the Cambridge Commentary Series (1974). He is one of the authors in Preaching the New Common Lectionary, being published by Abingdon Press in several volumes, beginning this year. He is the co-editor of The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters (Scholars Press/Fortress Press, 1984). Readers who appreciate the style and substance of the writers in this edition of our journal can thank Professor Tucker for his help in suggesting the writers and their fields of expertise as well as providing many valuable suggestions along the way.

—Charles E. Cole
COMING TO TERMS WITH
THE DOOM BOOM

ROBERT JEWETT

"My conviction is that the theology of the doom boom is making a decisive contribution to the drift toward a self-imposed Armageddon that has manifested itself since 1980."

The popularity of doomsday thinking was confirmed in the fall of 1983 when President Reagan told the executive director of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee that recent events were leading him to think of Armageddon: "You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon and I find myself wondering if we're the generation that is going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of those prophecies lately, but, believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through" (Chicago Sun-Times, October 29, 1983). The idea was a little garbled in the president's mind, because in fact the ideas come from the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. But in this and other ways, Reagan seems uncannily close to the public pulse. And I am sure that he is aware that his own election in 1980 was aided by thousands of churches that entered the political process for the first time under the leadership of the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who is committed to these ideas. But when even a secular president begins to use this language to describe

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foreign policy developments, the triumph of a certain strand of popular apocalyptic is evident. We are in the midst of a doom boom.

My plan is to provide an introduction and critique of the popular strain of American apocalypticism. A common set of ideas underlies widely popular books such as Falwell’s *Listen, America!* (Bantam, 1981) or Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1977, 59th printing). For the sake of those to whom such books represent a theological and social *terra incognita*, I provide also a simplified sketch of the role these ideas have played in American history. A grasp of these ideas is not only the indispensable premise of ecumenical dialogue. It is also crucial for understanding the unique threat these ideas pose in a time of nuclear danger. My conviction is that some of the militant and imprudent aspects of current American behavior are directly related to the increasing predominance of this apocalyptic outlook, which correlates so closely with the secular apocalyptic of superheroic fantasy. In both systems a violent redeemer figure from the superhuman realm is expected to rescue the innocent from demonic adversaries just in the nick of time.

**SOME DEFINITIONS**

Although the dating scheme employed by Hal Lindsey and Jerry Falwell is oriented to twentieth-century events like the establishment of Israel and the threat of nuclear destruction, there is nothing new about apocalyptic itself. It is a type of writing that offers information about the end of the world. Biblical examples of apocalyptic literature are Daniel and Revelation. The features of this literature are well-known: historical dualism, i.e., a belief that history is a struggle between absolute good and evil; catastrophism, i.e., a belief that historical conflict will be resolved by great disasters and battles in which evil will be destroyed; and determinism, which assumes that the sequence of events leading to the final conflagration is pre-set in a heavenly clock. In the Book of Revelation, for example, angels open the seals of heavenly books, revealing exactly what is to come.
THE DOOM BOOM

Modern biblical scholarship has devoted considerable attention to ancient apocalypticism, which was quite different at points from the American system that coalesced after 1948. But it is clear that early Christianity was heavily engaged in

To say Jesus and Paul were apocalyptic thinkers does not mean they were millennialists.

apocalyptic thinking, that Jesus and Paul, for example, were themselves apocalyptic thinkers. Yet neither of them was involved in the specific type of apocalypticism that is most characteristic of our society: millennialism.

The millennium is a thousand-year kingdom, mentioned in only one place in the Bible, Revelation 20. The idea is that after a great battle Satan will be disabled for a thousand years while the saints rule the earth. Only at the end of this period, according to some schemes, will the New Jerusalem come to earth. (See Robert G. Clouse, ed., The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views, Intervarsity, 1977.)

Recent studies make it plain that early Americans were deeply involved in millennial speculations. Leonard I. Sweet in "Millennialism in America: Recent Studies" has surveyed the recovery of this material by anthropologists, social historians, social psychologists, and theologians (Theological Studies 40 [1979]: 510-531). Early colonists of the Puritan type were premillennialists. They believed that their revolt against the established church in England was a prelude to a millennial era. With the failure of the Puritan revolution in 1660 in Great Britain, many of them felt that the millennial destiny was transferred to the American colonies. In the next century, many interpreted the Great Awakening as the beginning of the millennium. In The Sacred Cause of Liberty, Nathan Hatch has shown how these ideas endowed the Revolutionary War with apocalyptic significance, ushering in a new order of the ages with Federalism (Yale University Press, 1978). James Moorhead has lifted up the significance of these millennial ideas in shaping the belief that the triumph of the North in the Civil War was a fulfillment of the
Book of Revelation, whose images are so powerfully employed in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (American Apocalypse, Yale University Press, 1978). These and many other studies make it plain that American national history belongs under the rubric of "postmillennialism." (See Robert Jewett, The Captain America Complex, Bear and Company, 2nd ed., 1984.)

The belief that the millennial age has already arrived is one of the distinctive features of the American mentality, producing a peculiar sense of national innocence, optimism, and superiority. Jonathan Edwards was one of the formative figures in shaping this conviction, according to C. C. Goen, whose study "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology" showed the millennium was thought to have commenced in the Great Awakening of the 1740s (Church History 27 [1959]: 25-40). Others saw the coming of the millennium in the successful conclusion of the American Revolution and the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is now clear that a fairly large group of American Protestants had become postmillennialist by the 1830s and 1840s, a belief that was sustained in the North by the victory in the Civil War. Americans with a more secular outlook expressed the postmillennial outlook with convictions concerning progress, expansion, and Manifest Destiny.

The impulse toward social reform in the nineteenth century was decisively shaped by this postmillennial outlook, as recent studies have shown. The Prohibition and suffrage movements were sustained by the idea that Protestant citizens were the saints called to reform the world. These causes were advocated in the optimistic hope that conflict and poverty could be eliminated. Insofar as liberals from Methodist and other mainline churches shared this optimistic orientation toward social reform, they were acting out of a postmillennial ethos, even though they were not always conscious of it. The willingness of the country to participate in great crusades "to make the world safe for democracy" by defeating Spain in 1898 and Germany in 1918 derived in part from this same postmillennial spirit. The continued impact of this popular millennialism has been demonstrated by Catherine L. Albanese in America: Religion and Religions (Wadsworth, 1981).

To understand the apocalyptic perspective that has reasserted
itself in the last several decades, we need to describe the viewpoint that rejected optimistic postmillennialism in the last century. A number of sectarian groups arose after the 1830s to repudiate the notion that life was improving because the millennium had come to America. William Miller, who founded the Seventh-day Adventist movement, taught that the millennium was still to come and set several dates for its arrival in the 1840s. Around the same time Joseph Smith founded the Mormons as the “Latter-day Saints” who would become the first fruits of a millennial kingdom shortly to be established in America. In the 1870s Charles T. Russell began the Jehovah’s Witness movement that proclaimed the invisible spiritual presence of Christ in a forty-year period that would culminate in 1914 with the dawning of a millennial kingdom. These groups said in effect, “We do not believe that America is already a millennial nation. A great catastrophe is yet to come. Our task is to awaken the nation to its premillennial situation.”

In his book, Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming (Zondervan, 2nd ed., 1984), Timothy P. Weber has shown that American Fundamentalism was dominated by this pessimistic, premillennial outlook in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The Niagara Bible conferences and the revival meetings that produced institutions such as the Moody Bible Institute, hundreds of Bible colleges, and the Billy Sunday Tabernacles shared this perspective. They were pessimistic about the moral and spiritual state of the world. And while this was a minority viewpoint, it provided the source from which the contemporary doom boom arose.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE RAPTURE

The term rapture comes from an old translation of I Thess. 4:17 where Paul is explaining that when Christ returns, believers who have already died will be rejoined with those still alive when they all are caught up together in the air. The Greek term for being caught up was translated with “rapture.” The odd thing is that this term never played a significant role in apocalyptic schemes prior to the 1830s and 1840s in Great Britain. It became crucial for the first time within the Plymouth
The doctrine of the rapture introduces a highly appealing element of escapism into apocalyptic theology because true believers are promised they will not have to experience the world-wide destruction of an atomic holocaust.

The idea of a pretribulation rapture is combined with a dispensational view of biblical history in one of the most widely used books in our churches today, the Scofield Reference Bible. That we are in the final dispensation of world history, and that contradictions within the Scripture reflect the divine will in
earlier dispensations, make this a highly appealing resource. Several hundred Bible colleges, led by the influential faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary, have promoted these ideas. Hal Lindsey's books are popularizations of the doomsday system he learned while studying at Dallas Seminary, but the lack of originality has done nothing to impair his sales which are now at the twenty-million mark, making him the best-selling author in American religious history.

A new scheme for dating the events of what Hal Lindsey calls *The Terminal Generation* (Fleming H. Revell, 1976) crystallized in the first decade after the Second World War. Its premise was that the re-establishment of Israel in 1948 marked the beginning of the final era of world history. Assuming that a generation in the biblical sense is no more than forty years, this meant that the final battle would occur no later than 1988. In Lindsey's version of this scheme, the rapture was expected to occur before the tribulation, which would begin seven years before 1988 at the latest. This dating scheme was presented by Lindsey and others in a cagey manner, leaving the arithmetic to the reader and never claiming exactly when in this forty-year period the end would actually occur. The saying of Jesus about no one knowing the hour was repeatedly intoned. Yet the claim was persistently made that this was indeed the final generation and that its anchor point was 1948. That the rapture should have occurred no later than 1980–81 is connected with some fascinating recent developments.

In 1979, just before the latest date on which the rapture should have happened, one of the most remarkable political movements in American history suddenly emerged. Under the leadership of Jerry Falwell and other rapture advocates, the Moral Majority movement attracted the political involvement of tens of thousands of fundamentalist pastors and churches that had never been involved in the political process before. Transcending almost a century of suspicion about the Godless arena of politics, they entered into a powerful alliance with conservative Catholics, Lutherans, and Mormons whom they had traditionally damned. In the conviction that the final crisis of world history was at hand, the Moral Majority movement promoted candidates and policies suited for Armageddon,
including a strong nuclear force, a resistance against any compromise with the Soviet Union, and a moral preparation for righteous victory. Despite the alliance with nonapocalyptic groups, the impetus and all of the state and national leaders of the Moral Majority reflected the conviction that the final conflagration was within sight.

A second development was the remarkable flurry of expectations reported in the news of the early 1980s. There is space here for only a few examples from a rather voluminous file that I kept during that period.

- Chicago Sun-Times of April 29, 1981: “Believers Standing By for Ascent into Heaven,” a story about a group in Arizona that took the Lindsey dating scheme seriously.
- Winston-Salem Journal of October 2, 1981: “A religious community, with branches in Kansas, Texas and Scotland, has set the date for the Battle of Armageddon. . . .”
- Sioux City Journal, May 7, 1980: “Due to analytical difficulties, the end of the world has been rescheduled for today, according to a religious sect. The world was supposed to have ended last week, according to Charles Gaines. . . .”
- Equally interesting is a story one of my students picked up from the Associated Press wire service in April, 1980. “According to Israeli news reports, three leading rabbis . . . had the same dream on the same night. They dreamed that the last great battle on earth would be waged during April of this year, ushering in the millennium. . . . Some reports say the rabbis dreamed the clash between the mythical monsters Gog and Magog would narrowly head off a nuclear holocaust between the superpowers.” While this story reflects the world-wide sense of nuclear threat rather than any direct influence from the rapture theologians, its conclusion is apropos. A skeptical rabbi was asked to comment on the dreams of his mystical colleagues. He replied with an ancient Jewish proverb: "Those who tell, don't know. Those who know, don't tell.""

Perhaps the most delightful comment on the flurry of expectations came in the “Peanuts” comics. In the summer of 1980 Charles Schulz created a series of stories having to do with setting the date for Armageddon. The children go to summer camp where they are told that the end of the terminal generation
is at hand. Peppermint Patty goes to the desk and says, “Yes, ma’am, I’d like to use the telephone. My Dad hasn’t heard about the end of the world.” But then her partner says, “Look at this, sir. . . . It’s a drawing of the new camp they’re trying to raise money for . . . it should be very beautiful . . . They’re asking everyone to help raise eight million dollars!” Patty turns back to the counter: “Forget the phone, Ma’am! Maybe the world will end tomorrow, but I wasn’t born yesterday!”

Armageddon has been strategically postponed so that the rapture need not occur until the year 2000.

A third development in scheduling Armageddon is what one might call a strategic postponement. An acquaintance who heard Hal Lindsey lecturing in Toronto in 1980 reported that he was reflecting on the possibility that the anchor for the terminal generation might be the recapturing of Jerusalem rather than the establishment of the Jewish state. Since that took place in 1967, it would bring the end of the terminal generation to 2007 and the beginning of the tribulation period to the round number of 2000. So far as I can tell, however, there has been very little public discussion of this embarrassing matter of rescheduling. It is interesting to observe that the media evangelist who first adopted the 1967 anchor, Pat Robertson, is clearly in the ascendancy compared with those whose reputation had been linked with the earlier schedule. When one surveys the wreckage of hundreds of apocalyptic schedules advanced through Jewish and Christian history, it seems unlikely that the new scheme will work out any differently than the last one—unless it encourages us to bring a human form of global Armageddon upon ourselves.

THE BIBLICAL LEGACY

Coming to terms with the doom boom involves rethinking our biblical legacy and its effect upon believers. In light of the contributions of scholars like Paul S. Minear, New Testament
Apocalyptic (Abingdon Press, 1981) and John J. Collins, “The Apocalyptic Context of Christian Origins” (Michigan Quarterly Review 22 [1983]: 250-64), there is no denying that apocalyptic thought exercised a formative influence on early Christian writers. But one of the contributions of the historical-critical work that has been done in the last century is to make plain the very great differences between these writings, shaped by different cultural and religious traditions. Responsible interpretation requires us to understand biblical materials in light of their unique historical circumstances rather than ruthlessly looting them for sentences and ideas that can be fitted into some modern apocalyptic scheme. The doom boom of the twentieth century is a modern construct, subject to all the vagaries of theological systems despite the claims of its adherents to be based on a literal reading of the Scripture. (See David Syme Russell, Apocalyptic, Ancient and Modern, SCM Press, 1978.) There are in fact very great differences in the apocalyptic outlook of New Testament writings, only one of which provides the key idea of a millennium, and none of which provide any real basis for dating the rapture. The exegetical method of the modern doom boom is essentially arbitrary, taking a few motifs from Revelation and Daniel, a couple of lines from Ezekiel, and combining these with a single sentence from 1 Thessalonians and a half-dozen sentences from the Synoptic Gospels. When details like this are taken out of context and matched up jigsaw fashion with current events, the conclusion is that we are in the final generation and that there is nothing we can do to avert an atomic holocaust. This is an all-too-human conclusion, drastically at variance with most of the biblical writings themselves.

An important insight of biblical research is that there are forms of apocalyptic thinking that encourage a sense of historical responsibility. For example, the Apostle Paul combined apocalyptic urgency with a peaceful ethic, as J. Christiaan Beker has shown in Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel (Fortress, 1982). Paul's ethical admonitions were in support of love and reconciliation, not apocalyptic violence. And while he clearly expected the end of the world to come shortly, he resisted any form of date-setting: “As for prophecies, they shall fail . . . but love endures.” We have here an example of responsible apocalyptic
thought, taking the possibility of world destruction seriously, but not giving up on the preservation of the world and its inhabitants. One could make a similar case about Mark, or Hebrews, or I Peter, all of which are apocalyptic writings that have responsible, ethical resources suited for the difficult final decades of the twentieth century. They offer an apocalyptic corrective to modern doom boom theology, taking demonic threats to humanity seriously but not despairing about the potential of love and co-existence between competing persons, races, or empires.

A particularly important resource, in my view, is the situation and message of the historical Jesus, which has been disentangled from the message of the early church by modern biblical scholarship. Jesus lived in a time similar to our own, with religious leaders setting dates for the final conflagration and encouraging violence and hatred toward enemies. (See Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity, Crossroad, 1982.) Many of Jesus’ contemporaries believed in one of the doom boom slogans “Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth.” They believed that the forces of evil were animating the Romans just as current Americans give credence to the dogma that Russia is the “focus of evil in the modern world.” In opposition to these beliefs that were impelling first-century Judaism into a fateful battle against Rome, Jesus opened his ministry with a daring reinterpretation of the kingdom of God. It would not come through violence, he taught, but rather through the loving inclusion of outsiders who responded to his invitation. Evil was to be transformed rather than destroyed in an apocalyptic battle, so the new ethic he taught involved loving enemies and co-existing with Romans.

It is especially crucial in this period of nuclear brinkmanship... to grasp Jesus’ firm commitment to the prophetic idea that humans are responsible for history.

These themes have been worked out in detail by John Riches in Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism (Seabury, 1982).
It is especially crucial in this period of nuclear brinksmanship, when so many religious leaders are teaching a fatalistic doctrine of Armageddon, to grasp Jesus' firm commitment to the prophetic idea that humans are responsible for history. The warnings that he gave about the destruction of Jerusalem countered the zealous conviction that the holy city and its temple were invulnerable, a belief very similar to the modern conviction that a righteous America will survive an atomic war. He wept over Jerusalem because he saw that it would not recognize its vulnerability and the truth about his prophetic message. His poignant words of warning to the women of Jerusalem reported in Luke 23:28-31 fit this pattern, calling the common citizens of his day to be realistic about the consequences of apocalyptic battles that they were soon to bring upon themselves. (See Robert Jewett, Jesus Against the Rapture: Seven Unexpected Prophecies, Westminster Press, 1979.)

CONTRIBUTIONS TO A SELF-IMPOSED ARMAGEDDON

The realistic resources of biblical faith suggest a series of theses about the effects of the doom boom. I conclude my reflections on these notes, hoping that genuine dialogue might be sparked. My conviction is that the theology of the doom boom is making a decisive contribution to the drift toward a self-imposed Armageddon that has manifested itself since 1980. When people are taught that right belief and membership in the proper sect will guarantee their escape from the tribulation and hence from the threats of nuclear annihilation, an unprecedented element of escapism is inserted into Christian eschatology. It is unprecedented because Christian apocalyptic schemes prior to the 1830s all taught that Christians would have to suffer for their faith. The realism of these earlier apocalyptic theologies is consistent with Jesus and the prophets, it seems to me, and greatly at variance with the modern teaching. While the appeal of this escapist doctrine in a time of threatened global destruction is obvious, its effect on a voting public is ominous. It tends to reinforce the escapism of mass entertainment in which innocent communities are rescued by superheroes who arrive in the nick of time to destroy the wicked. These escapist fantasies
of religion and entertainment have their political embodiment in the belief that a superpresident and the availability of super military power will provide final security in a threatening world. Even in a nuclear holocaust, the innocent will escape, survive, and prevail, according to this escapist doctrine. Even if life as we know it is destroyed, it will be restored by divine power, and a new millennium will be reborn out of the ashes.

The doom boom theology teaches that the apocalyptic end of world history is predetermined by God in our time. Consequently there is nothing we can do to avert it. In this view, peacemaking is both futile and sinful and all efforts to promote international cooperation are inspired by Satan. Every compromise with our adversaries is viewed as a betrayal of divine trust; every effort to achieve arms control and to reduce the danger of accidental atomic wars is a sellout to the demonic powers. While the advocates of this perspective do not wish to promote such a holocaust, they are convinced that God wills it in the end and thus that there is absolutely nothing humans can do to stop it. Hence the Moral Majority favors military preparedness and an uncompromising attitude toward our enemies, combined with unrelenting hostility to international agencies.

The political art of calculating dangers, avoiding conflicts, and seeking the lesser evil in complex situations is paralyzed by apocalyptic theology of the doom boom type. Careful study of the motivations of our adversaries is unnecessary because they are controlled by Satan whose aims are already manifest. Rash invasions and military interventions undertaken by our government are to be applauded particularly when international laws and world opinion are violated, because the demonstration of our faithful resolve has a religious function. Adverse consequences do not have to be taken into account because the countdown to Armageddon is already underway in the terminal generation.

The modern form of rapture theology divides the world into the true believers, who will be rescued from the tribulation, and the rest of the inhabitants of planet earth who will suffer because of their sins. This sustains the popular feeling that Americans are innocent while their adversaries are full of malice. Such
misperceptions lie at the base of international conflicts, creating the rationale for mass destruction of evil adversaries.

When a people become convinced that a holocaust is inevitable and even in the long run desirable because of the new heaven and new earth which will be brought in its stead, the will to resist destruction is eliminated. Leaders are encouraged to behave in irresponsible, threatening ways that lead to ever-greater dangers, yet everyone remains convinced of their innocence and rectitude. In a time of nuclear stalemate when the warning time of surprise attacks is diminishing, the mentality of the doom boom encourages a drift toward a humanly realized fulfillment of fiery expectations. While none of the doom boom theologians would advocate bringing such a fate upon ourselves by human means, their ethic in fact leads in precisely that direction. What is predicted and hoped for in terms of a divinely inaugurated day of reckoning could easily be pre-empted by human folly or computer glitches if present trends continue.

In view of the dangerous potential of doom boom theology, there is an urgent need for genuine dialogue between religious traditions that have scarcely been on speaking terms. This dialogue has already begun within the evangelical camp itself, with journals such as *Sojourners* exposing the militaristic implications of current trends in light of their inconsistency with the teachings of Jesus. Liberal theologians and mainline congregations need to enter this conversation, fully aware of the shortcomings of their own perspectives and respectful of the theological commitments of their conversation partners. There is a very real need for us to discover together what Jesus had in mind when he wept over his beloved Jerusalem, doomed by its apocalyptic blindness: “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!”
Madness may have tormented the apocalypticists, but what could be more relevant to our own age?

The bitter despair and cynicism which followed in the wake of the withdrawal of the United States forces from Vietnam in 1973 spawned a host of books and films. Some sought to salvage an element of self-respect and national pride from a disaster which involved incalculable human suffering and which continues to send out shock waves in the form of the tragedy of homeless boat people. The movie Deer Hunter is an example of such an attempt. More typical, however, are those novels, poems, and films which portray the entire conflict as unmitigated tragedy. Noteworthy among this latter group is Apocalypse Now, for it goes beyond the jungles of Vietnam, beyond the decade of a specific military operation, to a description of an entire age gone mad. A captain in a Saigon hotel room, slipping by stages into an unreal world of the grotesque and the macabre, becomes a symbol of humanity in a world being drawn towards the apocalypse. Why is the captain there, and why does he seize every agency within his reach—alcohol, narcotics, Russian roulette—to escape? Because the world around him has grown meaningless and insane. It makes no sense to see toddling babies burst into flame as they are turned into human torches by napalm. Eyes seeing a beautiful landscape of lush trees,
For many in our world today, the apocalypse seems frighteningly near.

For many in our world today, the apocalypse seems frighteningly near; Vietnam has become a symbol of an increasingly unstable world. And behind this, one can plot a
growing sense of doom as it has crept across our whole weary and embattled century. Contrast the optimism of the latter part of the nineteenth century, the age of progress, where human ingenuity seemed capable of conquering every problem. Conversely, the stage was set for our century not by an increased sense of human progress, but by an insane world war which with one cruel blow seemed to topple a conceited civilization which had deified the human as the standard of all good. And over the subsequent course of this century, the preoccupation with war has led to techniques of destruction which no previous generation would have dreamed possible.

In such a world individuals feel smaller and weaker, even as larger-than-human forces, seemingly out of control, take on draconic stature. Small wonder that increasing numbers are receptive to the apocalyptic message and to apocalyptic voices which now cry out.

Those turned bitter by the despoiling and polluting of our environment forecast a time when the elemental spirits will take their revenge. It will be an age witnessing a sun darkened by smog and unshielded by a healthy ionosphere, of brackish water, undrinkable and uninhabited by living creatures, and of air laden with pollutants and radioactivity. They foresee a fragile sphere knocked off balance by heedless exploitation and in its last gasps before extinction.

Others speak of world financial disaster, with many of the poorer nations of the world succumbing to bankruptcy. They point out that the current recession has added millions of humans to the lists of the undernourished and the starving in the world. Where human life is involved, economic crisis spells the loss of a viable existence, the obliteration of a dream for a decent living, and has ushered in hopelessness, despair, a deepening desperation, and often a desire to escape into the apocalyptic vision.

Not even the economic crisis, however, has evoked as powerful an apocalyptic response as the threat of nuclear war. This dread specter has reasserted itself emphatically since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the taking of the American hostages in Iran, and the ensuing acceleration in arms buildup and belligerent confrontation between the superpowers. And
ever since Hiroshima, the mood cast over discussions about war is—to put it mildly—decidedly more apocalyptic.

To the ecological, economic, and nuclear threats the apocalyptically minded contribute other factors to the growing sense of doom. Is a civilization amenable to rational interpretation which so recently witnessed the use of gigantic gas chambers to exterminate an ancient and noble race of people? The minds of many others are thrown into shock by a rate of cultural and scientific change which seems to erode systems of values and structures of life as fast as ocean waves washing away sand castles. In contrast to the optimism with which earlier generations greeted changes, for many today the change wrought by science has taken on a Frankensteinian mask. Robert Heilbroner describes the future science has set in motion in terms of starving masses, sprawling urban blight, revolution and war. Added to this is the statistical claim of some scientists of the likelihood that atomic weapons will find mass deployment before the year 2000.

Little wonder that many today have become receptive to this apocalyptic message: The order of this world has run its course. A new order is about to replace it. But only those tutored in the proper secrets will enjoy the rapture. Variations on this apocalyptic theme are many, but they have in common a negative attitude toward social reform. This intolerable world is no longer worthy of our reforming efforts. It hastens towards its end, and the signs of imminent demise are written all over nature, the economy, and international events.

The apocalyptic mentality which we have been describing is no longer the fringe phenomenon of a few marginalized people which we can ignore. Those viewing the world through its darkened glasses are not limited to a few fanatics selling their property and ascending a hill to await the Second Coming. People given to an apocalyptic worldview sit in seats of political and economic power. A former secretary of the Interior, James Watt, has expressed his belief that the world may not have many years left, an attitude which many discern at the basis of an official policy whose implementation is having devastating effects on our environment. Many business people in the meantime pursue a reckless course in a world which to them
What is the responsible attitude toward the apocalyptic consciousness?

This phenomenon presses upon us an urgent question. What is the responsible attitude toward the apocalyptic consciousness? Surely we resist the con artistry of those writing best sellers for Dell Publications. But how should we respond? One response was represented in a book I recently borrowed, Thomas Pynchon's *V*, a novel giving contemporary expression to the apocalyptic consciousness. On the inside cover of this book, a reader had pencilled in this response: "Sick book." This is an example of a clear response: Dismiss apocalypticists out-of-hand as not deserving of our closer scrutiny. We are too rational, too emotionally stable, to take their message seriously. But this facile response entails problems.

First, the out-of-hand dismissal of the apocalyptic consciousness usually is accompanied by a refusal to recognize and address the underlying causes which drive people to this bleak outlook. A well-known psychiatrist suggested recently that schizophrenia may be a more "normal" response within our crazy world than we so-called "normal" people care to admit. The apocalyptic response also may be a "normal" response under certain dire circumstances, and our refusal to treat it seriously may be based on our unwillingness to look honestly at the world around us. We insist on interpreting the world as normal, and those who see it otherwise as deviant. Are not we thereby living under the greater delusion?
Second, the out-of-hand dismissal of the apocalyptic consciousness often stems from an unhealthy repression of an apocalyptic side within our own souls. If we have not lost entirely the idealism of dreaming for a more perfect world, if we have not accommodated ourselves so thoroughly to the status quo as to abandon all thought of the world that ought to be, then on some level of our consciousness there exists the alarming contradiction between that which is and that which ought to be. Our repression of this sense should not be read as a sign of the resolution of this dichotomy by a civilized world; more often it results when the contradiction becomes so painful to our moral sense that we try to deny its reality. We banish the thought of nuclear holocaust. We convince ourselves that all is normal and well.

Attempts to persuade the closed mind to look more closely at the startling messages born of the apocalyptic consciousness are futile. But those with the courage to look realistically at the world and to hear the truth in the apocalyptic judgment will be interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the apocalyptic way of viewing things. Here biblical scholarship can be of help in showing that apocalypticism has deep roots within our own Judeo-Christian tradition, roots of which we are little aware partly because they have been so badly misused by popular prophets of the end time, partly because of our own response of out-of-hand dismissal and repression of that which disturbs us and calls our habits and life-styles into question. But we need to reclaim those roots, for they are essential in our preparation for entry into a precarious future. Let us therefore move back in time some 2,500 years to ancient Israel.

APOCALYPTICISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The apocalyptic consciousness dawned within the thought of our ancestors in the year 587 B.C.E. That year cast the Jews mercilessly into a new, harsh era. Temple burned to the ground, city destroyed, population exiled by a pagan nation, the followers of Yahweh gave expression to their grief: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion" (Psalms 137:1). Admirably they tried to keep
faith in the God who created this people and gave them a vocation in this world, but defeat at the hands of the Babylonians was followed for some by disgrace and rejection by their own leaders, leaders who had joined cause with the new world power, the Persians. The structures of this world no longer seemed to be open to their message and mission. Two options beckoned them: despair, or hope based on an apocalyptic vision. They chose the latter:

“For behold, the Lord will come in fire,
and his chariots like the stormwind,
to render his anger in fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire.
For by fire will the Lord execute judgment,
and by his sword, upon all flesh;
and those slain by the Lord shall be many” (Isa. 66:15-16).

This may seem inordinately harsh, even sadistically vindictive, until it is measured against the world within which it arose:

Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands afar off;
for truth has fallen in the public squares,
and uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking,
and he who departs from evil
makes himself a prey (Isa. 59:14-15).

This picture of social collapse explains the dread sense of ending in the apocalyptic version. The decay seemed so far advanced that human programs were deemed merely to detract from the inevitability of the end. Human optimism was declared a delusion. Realism was defined as hope in deliverance from outside the human realm. Here it is important to note that the courage to look squarely at the true condition of the world did not lead to despair, but to a brilliant picture of hope. The woes of the present era are the birth-pains of a new world:

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind” (Isa. 65:17).
Naturally, a string of associations are brought to mind by this passage: opiate of the people, religious escapism, apple-pie-in-the-sky, bye and bye. But is that the total picture?

First, we must note that the apocalyptic judgment on this world was not a product of a blind death-wish. It expresses rather a profound sense of moral discernment, which we can illustrate with this text from the late sixth century B.C.E.:

Behold, the Lord will lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. . . . The earth mourns and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth (Isa. 24:1, 4).

The apocalyptic vision in the Hebrew Bible is marked by courage and moral discernment in the face of social collapse.

Thus far, a picture of utter calamity. But then we come to the key which indicates that this is not a mere expression of misanthropy:

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt (Isa. 24:5-6a).

Portrayed is a delicate order, an earth pictured as an organism which has a moral center, expressed by laws and statutes, and conceived of in terms of an everlasting covenant. Violation of this moral order, when protracted and ingrained into the fiber of the people, threatened to sweep the entire universe over the brink of chaos. Hope resided alone in a return to the moral center of life.

The next major apocalyptic outpouring came in the second century B.C.E., as a powerful world movement, Hellenism, stood
poised to swallow up the little parochial cult of a few thousand Jews who refused to bow down to Zeus Olympus. How was it that they could endure persecution, ridicule by their own leaders, and martyrdom and still not submit to the mighty kingdoms of this world? Because they viewed all of the military might and cultural splendor of the Hellenists as ephemeral, and ultimately no threat to their true destiny as a people of God. They were able to describe the world with grim realism because their attention was directed toward another order of reality, in relation to which earthly kingdoms were a passing phenomenon.

I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him (Dan. 7:13-14).

Even amidst earthly happenings which seemed to indicate that reality had reverted to chaos, the faithful did not succumb to despair, for they looked beyond tragedy to the reign of God, a reign of peace and justice.

The lines of continuity connecting apocalyptic movements in biblical times, though separated by centuries, are seen again in the Book of Revelation. Here we know a good deal about the indescribable horrors through which Christians and Jews had to pass because of their refusal to denounce their faith. Once again the images of apocalyptic were evoked to describe those horrors. But here too faith refuses to yield to despair, but hears the divine imperative: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). And courage is fostered by a vision of the final triumph of truth and justice:

“We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign.
The nations raged, but thy wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear thy name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth" (Rev. 11:17-18).

All things could be endured by those who believed that their
final destiny rested not in the ruthless oppressors of this earth,
but in the gracious God of truth and justice, who would destroy
the destroyers of the earth, and establish a reign of universal
peace.

The apocalyptic consciousness did not disappear with the end
of the biblical period. It became a refuge and a wellspring for
hunted and persecuted groups down through the centuries. More
often than not the persecutors were leaders of church and
state, and the persecuted, small groups of dissidents. For
example, in 1414 the reformer Jan Huss was executed as a
heretic, leading to armed confrontation between Hussites and
Catholics. Under the leadership of the Taborite preacher, Martin
Huska, an apocalyptic movement grew, with a pessimistic
interpretation of society as woefully corrupt and ripe for
judgment. In a short time the movement was destroyed by the
armies of the church.

When the apocalyptic movement of Martin Huska is
contrasted with those which come to expression in the biblical
books of Isaiah, Daniel, and Revelation, one begins to see how
complex a phenomenon the apocalyptic consciousness is. The
biblical examples portray visionary groups whose vivid sense of
the righteous order intended for the human family by God
issues forth in a harsh judgment of the unjust structures of
society. It gives them courage to endure disappointment,
oppression, and martyrdom. But there is a noteworthy restraint
which also characterizes these groups. They do not take the
apocalypse into their own hands by suicidal strategems. Their
retreat from involvement in the structures of the world was
strategic and was used as a refuge within which to keep the
vision of God's order alive when all worldly powers seemed
bent on destroying that order. When the persecutions abated,
these same communities re-engaged themselves in the world as
ambassadors of reconciliation and as servants of God's righteous order.

Huska followed a different ancient model, namely, that of the Zealots. During the Roman period, the Zealots were an apocalyptic party within Judaism which felt called upon to inaugurate the blessed order by the sword. Huska, like the Zealots, took the apocalypse into his own hands, and added new episodes to the long history of revolutionary apocalyptic movements which ended in bloodbaths.

The most recent example of this extreme form of apocalypticism is Jim Jones's Peoples' Temple. When attempts to develop the blessed order in Indiana, California, and then Guyana failed amidst external investigations and inside defections, the final desperate attempt to force the eschaton was made, mass suicide.

RESPONDING TO CONTEMPORARY APOCALYPTICISM

The grizzly newswire photos of the final apocalyptic assize at Jonestown add powerful ammunition to the arsenal of those who would simply dismiss the apocalyptic consciousness as deviant and sick. The word apocalyptic becomes identified with the Weathermen and with the Manson Cult. Isaiah, Daniel, and Revelation are forgotten. Is it best simply to accept this attitude and join those who add the apocalyptic consciousness to their list of mental disorders?

Modern expressions of apocalypticism make this a very complicated question. Jim Jones was a mentally sick man, suffering from severe paranoia. And many, many other examples of paranoid apocalypticists can be cited by those who choose to handle the problem by identifying the apocalypticist's feeling of persecution with paranoia.

But there are some very important reasons why this easy recourse must be rejected. The first reason can be illustrated by reference to Jim Jones himself. Granted, Jones's "white night" emergency drills, his staging of mock CIA attacks on Jonestown, his brutal response to all internal criticism, and his use of drugs suggest deep-seated mental problems. But to focus exclusively on these, and to erase mental pictures of bodies rotting under the jungle sun of Guyana with the correction fluid of abnormal
psychology is to excuse the society which condones the injustice
and greed which produces not only Jim Joneses, but capacity
crowds for the apocalyptic asylums of this world. Paranoia and
brainwashing simply are insufficient explanations for letters like
the one written by a twenty-year-old Jonestown girl to her
mother in Evansville, Indiana, in which she reported that she
had finally found a home where she could "walk down the street
now without the fear of having little old white ladies call me
nigger."

Historical and sociological studies have proven that apocalyp­
tic movements arise within societies whose social structures and
systems of values exclude certain groups from their benefits and
sacrifice them to lives of hopelessness and futility. When
desperation reaches the point of violent protest or efforts to
construct alternative structures, the common response is to
marshal the law enforcement agencies of the society against the
dissidents. The resulting process is one of establishing and
fortifying barriers between the privileged and the disenfran­
chised, which process, if not arrested, leads to fascism. The first
lesson which all who enjoy lives free from social depriva­tion and
political oppression should derive from the study of apocalyp­
ticism is therefore this: We must accept the apocalyptic
judgment on the world as an indictment on unjust social
structures and values to which we implicitly give our assent. We
have grown accustomed to opulence which is sustainable only
through the impoverishment of the majority of humankind. We
accept cuts in social programs in order that we be enabled to
strengthen national defense. We fail to recognize any longer the
injustices that are systemically built into the style of life we deem
our natural right. But after having wreaked havoc in the
impoverished countries of the world, our inhumaneness and
greed return to plague our houses by implanting the apocalyptic
consciousness in the sensitive minds of our own children.

In order to take genuine apocalypticism seriously, however,
we must carefully distinguish it from the popular media
apocalypticism which applies the comfort and promise of the
apocalyptic vision not to the poor and oppressed of the earth,
but to people living in what against global standards can only be
deemed luxury. Though placing primary focus on the apocalyp­
tic writings of the Bible, this type of application does not deal honestly with the central message of those writings, for it evades the severe biblical indictment of those who repudiate God's righteous order even while claiming God's promises. The effect of this interpretation of apocalyptic is to direct our attention away from the victims of our injustice, to whom such promises rightly apply, as we bask in the pleasure of thinking that God is engineering history so as to glorify us in the clouds. All we need do is turn on our TVs, and the 700 Club will open up the heavens and reveal for us the bliss for which God is marshalling all of heaven's powers to prepare for us. Such a perverted use of apocalyptic imagery must be repudiated, for it directs attention away from those for whom the apocalyptic world of comfort is rightfully intended, those against whom the powers of this world have mounted the final assault, obliterating all hope of escape, save the vision of divine intervention. It is a perverse trifling with the gravity of the apocalyptic message which confuses the identity of the oppressors and the oppressed by insisting that our privileged status which has abetted so much evil in this world now be imposed on the heavenly kingdom as well.

If we refuse to take this cheap way out, we will take care to distinguish between two types of apocalyptic response: between those who simply titillate their selfish fantasy with apocalyptic images and those who are driven to the apocalyptic consciousness by extreme adversity. The latter we shall no longer dismiss as weird or deviant, but we will instead listen to their message. We will allow them to open up our eyes to our own hearts, and shall find the courage to see the world as they see it, as a world caught in an awesome struggle between good and evil.

The effect of this new awareness may be the reawakening of the apocalyptic vision which lies buried in our own subconsciousness. Rather than wasting our life-energy on repression of guilt and denial, we shall search for the humanity which we share with the apocalypticist. For those of us who derive our sense of identity and purpose from the drama which unfolds in the Bible, a compassionate openness to the apocalyptic outpour-
From our biblical heritage we learn that the well-spring of the genuine apocalyptic vision is not a death-wish but a birth-wish.

response to this disturbing literature. For from our biblical heritage we learn that the well-spring of the genuine apocalyptic vision ultimately is not a death-wish but a birth-wish. Its bleak and woeful picture of this world is intended not to drive people to madness or illusionary escape, but rather to comfort the oppressed with the assurance that the powers of this world which persecute them are passing, and to shock those living in comfort to distinguish between the illusory and the real. The latter it does by holding up before us an order which ultimately stands in judgment over every human structure and value. God’s order of universal peace and justice is given to us as the sole norm against which to evaluate and respond to the realities of this world. Nationalism, party affiliation, and institutional allegiance lose their co-optive powers over us. They are all unmasked, and in this unmasking we recognize our own complicity in injustice.

No longer can we make the facile response to the genuine apocalyptic vision, that of denouncing it as madness by insisting on the normality of our world. What madness is in that vision we trace back to the root madness in the systemic injustices of our society. We learn to stand in the company of the impoverished and the disenfranchised and to see the world through their eyes. And we are shocked into the realization that their perception is often more accurate than our own.

But here we must tread ever so cautiously. For many honest individuals who have stepped into the shabby shoes of the apocalypticist have experienced hell. They have been overwhelmed by the horror of seeing the world through untinted glasses, and lacking the toughness produced by a life of suffering, they succumb to panic. This can lead in two
directions, either to a completely other-worldly apocalypticism which takes refuge in a visionary cult, or to the nihilistic path of political terrorism, the path of the Weathermen or the Meinhof gang.

Escapism and life-destructive extremism can be avoided if we take care to distinguish between true and false apocalyptic responses. If we follow the example of biblical apocalypticism, we will not only look honestly at the true nature of the world around us, but we will have the faith to look beyond tragedy to the blessed order of peace and justice which alone will endure the woes of an apocalyptic age. Thus the effect that the apocalyptic side of our heritage can have on us seems to be this: It can sharpen our perceptiveness, so that we no longer view the world in grays which wash out all contrasts, and make gross injustice and greed indistinguishable from good and truth (Isa. 5:20). Instead our sight is restored to see the structures of our society and the motives of our hearts for what they are, and this because we judge them against the stringent standards of God's order of universal peace and justice. The result is a shocking contradiction which compels us to decisions and actions based on a clear vision. We have seen that the range of possible responses is broad, stretching from the temptation to escape into a pure vision of heavenly bliss unsullied by earthly trials to the temptation to try to force the kingdom's coming by our own efforts. The bland heaven of the former is no better than the violent hell of the latter.

Here the alternative response born within our biblical heritage commends itself to every individual of faith and every gathering of the faithful, for it reminds us that the blessed order for which all sensitive humans long cannot be produced by unaided human schemes or ideologies, but ultimately can be established only out of divine grace. But this biblical perspective does not abet the other extreme of escapism either, for it goes on to show that as the path to that order of peace and justice God has chosen the path of human partnership. As humans we cannot force the coming of lasting peace and universal justice. But in a threatening day when, as the popular bumper sticker reminds us, "ONE NUCLEAR BOMB MAY RUIN YOUR WHOLE DAY," we either hasten the coming of the hellish, human
We take the structures of this world seriously because the God of the Exodus and the cross took this world so very seriously.

spite of the apocalyptic doom which prevails today, and this hope becomes a source of empowerment to act for peace and justice with courage within the concrete realities of our society. For bread and bombs, jobs and jails are not matters of indifference to the Ultimate Reality we meet in our biblical tradition. Following the example of this involved God, we simply cannot dismiss the experience of those so hurt by our world as to long for its final ending. Nor can we remain sanguine when the Hal Lindseys and Pat Robertsons of our day capitalize on that longing by purveying cheap grace and a laissez faire social ideology.

While the mood of our times, interpreted against the background of a very long history of our tradition's dealing with the apocalyptic consciousness, does not constitute for us an invitation to join an apocalyptic movement, it does admonish us to recognize a basic truth in the apocalyptic vision, namely, that in a deep sense, our earth and its inhabitants are being torn between opposing worlds, and that the resulting conflict threatens to have very dire effects on the future of our planet. We are guilty of insensitivity if we do not realize that the apocalyptic consciousness poses a serious question for all of us, the question concerning what is real in an ultimate sense, the worldly or the spiritual. The bleak apocalyptic picture of justice fallen in the squares and God's anger toward the greedy and the unrighteous strikes us as powerfully correct. But once again, seeing through the eyes of the true apocalypticist, we recognize that a light has entered the darkness; that evil is deprived of its power; that earthly powers are relativized before one ultimate divine Power. Beyond wrath and judgment, which a fallen nuclear holocaust, or we become partners in a process of reconciliation which encompasses all humanity. The image of the kingdom of God which we find in the Bible preserves hope in
world has brought upon itself by refusing to be drawn into the blessed order, there is still hope for the righteous poor and innocent afflicted, and for all who heed their cry.

At the dread threshold to the year 2000 our vocation is illuminated by the darkness and the light of the apocalyptic vision. That vocation lies between two worlds, one which is vanishing, the other which is breaking in. With the vision of God's blessed order which our biblical heritage has given us, we are called to be witnesses to the truth of divine judgment and divine salvation. We are called on to confess that at the heart of all reality there is a moral center, a divinely ordained order of healing and righteousness, which cannot be violated by any individual or nation with impunity. And we are called on to locate ourselves in our world where God is present, at the side of the poor, the oppressed, the marginal, the friendless, and the homeless, for in sharing in their struggles we begin to see the world with the honest clarity of their eyes; and this enables us humbly to accept the invitation to participate in transforming the apocalyptic woes of our time from a human holocaust into birthpangs of a new earth, a blessed order where, as Psalm 85 describes it, "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss each other."

NOTES

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THE PAST AS REVELATION:
HISTORY IN APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

CAROL A. NEWSOM

We misread the apocalyptic texts if we think they put a straitjacket on history; instead, they can be linked to the openness of historical perspective found in the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

One of the features which makes apocalyptic literature so unappealing to many contemporary Christians is its apparent commitment to a deterministic view of history. In various apocalypses Enoch, Daniel, Baruch, and others watch in puzzled astonishment while Visionary Cinema, Inc., brings them preview showings of "The History of the World" (rated R for violence). Moreover, references to determined times and heavenly books of fate in the apocalyptic writings underscore the impression of a deterministic view of human history. The revival of a naive determinism in the sensationalistic neo-apocalyptic of Hal Lindsey and others is enough to convince many people that apocalyptic represents the lowest ebb of Judeo-Christian spirituality, that it is at best a "morphine theology" that drugs an anxious or suffering people with visions of hope based on divine predetermination.

I want to take issue with these views, because I think it is precisely in its understanding of history that apocalyptic literature reaches some of its most profound theological insights. To appreciate these insights, however, one has to be

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able to look past superficial similarities to see the differences between the heart of ancient apocalyptic and its contemporary imitators. While Hal Lindsey may think that he is being faithful to the view of human history presented in ancient apocalyptic, in fact he has missed the main point. For Lindsey the Bible is essentially a book of predictions, some of which were fulfilled in ancient times and some of which are soon to be fulfilled. In his view there is no intrinsic relationship between one event and another. Events can be predicted because God has “scripted” them, determined them, and then revealed them in advance. When Lindsey encounters a difficulty in coordinating predictions and fulfillments, as with his interpretation of the seventy weeks of years in Dan. 9:24-27 or the culmination of the battles of the king of the south and the king of the north in Daniel 11, Lindsey simply speaks of “God’s prophetic stopwatch” with which “God stopped the countdown seven years short of completion” by inserting a “parenthesis in time” of about two millennia in duration. This sleepwalking approach to history, in which many centuries of human existence can be bracketed as peripheral, has little in common with the understanding of ancient apocalyptic which sees all of human history as significant, even revelatory.

It will not do, of course, to oversimplify. Some ancient writers of apocalyptic could be as rigidly deterministic as Lindsey. The Qumran community, authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, believed that the ancient Hebrew prophets had foreseen and referred to the struggles and crises which were to occur in the life of the Qumran community. They implied, naively but arrogantly, that the prophet Habakkuk had received prophecies about them but had himself not understood the true meaning of the words. Careful readers of the Bible find the interpretations of the prophets by the Qumran community no more (and no less) convincing than those of Hal Lindsey. But while such simplistic views rather exhaust the understanding of human history offered by purveyors of contemporary apocalyptic, in the ancient writings there are also many passages that reflect richer perceptions of history, perceptions which do not presuppose a narrowly deterministic view of history at all.

What I am particularly referring to are the historical resumes
that one finds in Daniel 7, 8, 10–12, in the noncanonical I Enoch 83–90 and II Baruch 53–72, and elsewhere in ancient apocalyptic. These resumes trace the history of Israel or the rise and fall of the various ancient world empires over a long period of time, leading up to an expected eschatological conclusion. Ostensibly, such schematic narratives of historical events are announced or shown to the seer before the events take place. But one has to remember that the actual author of the apocalyptic work was writing after all but the last act, the eschaton, had taken place. It seems unlikely that these carefully written “prophecies after the event” were included just to persuade the reader of the proven track record of the seer. Quite unlike the simple prooftexting use that Lindsey makes of biblical prophecies, these historical summaries appear rather to be meditations on history, attempts to discern a pattern in events, a unity underlying the superficial diversity of history.

What I want to do in the following pages is first to describe more fully the understanding of history implicit in these resumes, then to look at some of the texts themselves, and finally to suggest that in the historical resumes of ancient apocalyptic one can find a way of being faithful to the apocalyptic hope of the New Testament that provides an alternative to the spiritual poverty of books like The Late Great Planet Earth.

There is a sense in which one could say that the apocalyptic sages who wrote these historical summaries were developing something like a philosophy of history. They did not believe that history was radically open in the sense that absolutely anything might happen or that the future might be completely discontinuous with the past. But neither did they seem to hold the simplistic belief that events happened just because of divine fiat. Instead, they tried to show through their lengthy retellings of history that the same pattern of events can be discerned over and over again in human history because the same dynamics (of human nature, divine faithfulness, and certain other features) remain the same. To talk about a pattern in human history is not to talk about a strict determinism but rather something more akin to an inner necessity or natural law which tends to shape free human actions into similar patterns.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of the apocalyptic
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seers as pipe-smoking university types, intent on discovering the universal laws of human history from pure intellectual curiosity. Many of these historical meditations in apocalyptic literature were produced in a time of acute crisis. Both Daniel 7–12 and 1 Enoch 83–90, for instance, were written during the height of the persecution of Palestinian Judaism by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes around 165 B.C.E. What motivated the writers of these historical resumes was their intense need to understand the meaning of that present crisis for Judaism and to know what could be expected in the immediate future. If an apocalyptic sage could demonstrate the existence of a repeated pattern in the history of Israel or in the rise and fall of world empires, then that sage could examine the events of the present for similar features. To the extent that the present resembled the past it seemed less out of control and so somewhat less terrifying. But more significantly, the discovery of a pattern in human history gave the apocalyptic seer an important predictive tool. If one could identify how present events were following the pattern, then one could also predict to some extent what the immediate future would hold. It was this predictive aspect that gave the historical resumes their sense of urgency.

So far, however, I have made the apocalyptic sages sound rather like contemporary economists, tracing the postwar cycles of recession and prosperity in a frantic attempt to predict when the current hard times will end. While there is a measure of truth in the comparison, it is anachronistic, of course. The apocalyptic writers did not take a purely materialistic or rationalistic approach to history. For the apocalyptic seer history always stands in the shadow of a great paradigmatic event, an event that transcends human history but which involves the entire cosmos.

For the apocalyptic seer history always stands in the shadow of a great paradigmatic event, an event that transcends human history but which involves the entire cosmos. This event might be the act of creation itself, as it was envisioned in ancient times, as the victory of Yahweh over the
powers of chaos. Or it might be the legendary fall of rebellious angels, the evil which they caused on earth, and their punishment. Whatever the paradigmatic event, human history recapitulates and in a sense participates in that event. The underlying shape of human history is an echo of a conflict that embraces the whole universe.

Why does the original paradigmatic event influence human history? According to the apocalyptic writers, it is because in some way the paradigmatic event is itself unfinished, the powers of chaos restricted but not vanquished, the rebellious angels bound but not destroyed. The seers believed that when the conflict on earth reached a certain intensity, then God would act to bring that paradigmatic event to its resolution; and with it the conflicts and contradictions which motivate human history would also be brought to an end. At that time humanity would begin to enjoy the wholeness and harmony for which God had intended it.

This was the understanding of history that the authors of Daniel and I Enoch brought to bear on the events of their era. The second quarter of the second century B.C.E. was a tragic time for Judaism. Jews in Jerusalem were sharply divided over the extent to which the attractive Greek culture of the ruling powers could be accommodated to faithfulness to God and to Torah. Many Jews, including the authors of Daniel and I Enoch, felt that the compromises which had been made were betrayals of traditional religion. When disputes between rival Jewish factions erupted into violence, King Antiochus IV Epiphanes responded with a prohibition of traditional Judaism and a harsh persecution of those who continued their observance of its practices. To some Jews, including those of the circle which produced I Enoch, it seemed that religious corruption and pagan violence threatened to put an end to all true righteousness on earth. It was an attempt to answer the question whether God would allow righteousness to perish completely that produced one of the most extraordinary apocalyptic reflections on history, the historical resume of I Enoch 83^-90.

The author of these chapters took as the paradigmatic event which overshadowed and interpreted all human history the tradition of the fall of the rebellious angels. This legend was grounded in an obscure reference in Gen. 6:1-4 to the effect that
once in antediluvian times the “sons of God” (i.e., angels) had had intercourse with human women who then gave birth to giants. The apocalyptic sage who developed the traditions about Enoch had long been fascinated by this account and as early as the third century B.C.E. had elaborated this tradition as an explanation for the origin of evil on the earth (I Enoch 6–19). Because the brief biblical notice about the angels and the women immediately preceded the account of the widespread human corruption which caused Yahweh to decide to destroy all life in a great flood, these sages concluded that the relationship between the angels and the women had been the direct cause of the epidemic of corruption and violence which had threatened the earth. Not only did the giants which the women bore upset the divinely ordained ecology so that the earth itself cried out in accusation against its oppression, but the angels taught women and men to make weapons, to use jewelry and cosmetics, and to practice magic—or, as we might say, taught them militarism, materialism, and the arts of manipulation!

The corruption of the world had proceeded so rapidly that when God responded to the outcry only a single righteous man, Noah, remained. Protecting Noah and his family in the ark, God commanded that the rebel angels be bound and imprisoned. The corrupted human race and the bestial giants were killed in the flood which followed, but because the giants were half angelic, their spirits did not perish at their death but were released into the world where they continued to attack and to corrupt the human race. The legend of the fallen angels may seem a rather bizarre one today, but its subtle combination of human victimization and culpability makes this myth a profound study of the nature of evil.5

When the circle of Jews who developed and preserved the traditions about Enoch were confronted by the crisis of persecution in the second century, they saw in the traditions about the ancient breach in the orders of heaven and earth the paradigmatic event whose effects had shaped all of human history. One of their members composed a long allegorical resume of the history of the world, through which he tried to display the pattern he saw repeated in events. The righteous, whom he depicted as white cattle and as sheep with wide-open
eyes, appear to be constantly threatened with extinction in this world, both from the hostility of those who are the enemies of righteousness (the wolves, lions, birds of prey, etc., of the allegory) but also from the inexplicable tendency for those who love righteousness to grow normally blind and corrupt (described in the allegory as blind sheep). Yet at every stage, though individuals may fall victim to evil, the faithfulness of God does not allow the plant of righteousness to perish but preserves some of its root as God preserved Noah in the time of the fallen angels. So, beginning with the earliest traditions, the author shows how Cain kills Abel, but how God preserves the line of the righteous through Seth. He repeats the story of the fallen angels, the flood, and the preservation of the righteous through Noah. Soon those who love God are threatened again when the Egyptians begin to kill the children of the Hebrew slaves; but God delivers from danger those who remain in the Exodus. In a similar manner many of the episodes of Israelite historical tradition are presented to confirm the model.

The author does not just tell the history of Israel as one of external oppression and deliverance, however. The episodes also speak of the inner moral corruption that threatens righteousness, using as examples the making of the golden calf, the persecution of Elijah and the later prophets, the failure of the redeemed postexilic community to reform itself, and so forth. As he approaches closer to his own time the author brings together the themes of victimization and moral culpability in a crescendo of violence and corruption that threatens the existence of righteousness in a way unprecedented since the time of Noah. Then when the blindness of the sheep has made them utterly vulnerable to the ravages of the predators, a single sheep (by whom the author intended Judah the Maccabee) begins to see and to call to other sheep. This time, however, it seems that the preservation of this fragile remnant will require extraordinary divine intervention, and the author looks forward with the hope and expectation that God’s deliverance of the faithful from extinction will also be the occasion for God’s bringing to an end the effects of the angels’ ancient rebellion. With the final judgment of the angels and those whom they had completely won over a new era begins on earth when the power of violence
Where the author of I Enoch had focused on the preservation of righteousness in times of persecution and corruption, the author of Daniel was concerned more with the nature of oppression. At almost exactly the same time as the composition of I Enoch 83–90, the author of Daniel 7–12 wrote of his own insights into the unifying patterns of historical events. Where the author of I Enoch had focused on the preservation of righteousness in times of persecution and corruption, however, the author of Daniel was concerned more with the nature of the power of oppression—its origins, its limitation by God, and the expectation of a political order based on a radically different source of power.

Each of the units, Daniel 7, 8, and 10–12, is a complementary study of the nature of political power and the pattern of expression that it seems inevitably to take in human history. The keystone of the chapters is Daniel 7, where Daniel is shown a vision of four beasts representing the four empires which in the view of the author had dominated the world one after the other—the Babylonian, the Median, the Persian, and the Greek. The paradigmatic event which governs the history of the rise and fall of these empires is not described in detail but is alluded to in a way which would have been unmistakable to a contemporary reader. In the vision the beasts which represent the empires are seen to rise up out of a turbulent sea. For Israelites thought (as in many of the ancient Near Eastern traditions) the sea was the symbol of the primordial chaos which the creator God had to defeat before the world could come into being. In Israel’s view at least, though the sea or sea monster had been defeated by Yahweh, it was not destroyed, but only confined to a limited sphere from which it continually threatened to burst forth (Job 7:12; 38:8–11; Ps. 114; Isa. 27:1). To
represent the world empires as emerging from the turbulent sea is then to identify their violence and greediness, their insatiable desire to grow larger and more powerful as eruptions of the force of chaos into history. It is a harsh vision because it suggests that supreme political power by its nature and origin inevitably becomes evil. In chapters 8 and 11, however, the author of Daniel illustrates how the power of the world empires is inevitably self-limiting. In these chapters the author tries to demonstrate a pattern which amounts almost to a natural law governing the rise and fall of nations. In chapter 8, just when the ram which represents the Persian Empire appears to be at the height of its strength ("no beasts could stand before it, no one could rescue from its power. It did what it liked, making a display of its strength," vs. 4, author's translation), it is destroyed by the he-goat of Greece, Alexander the Great. ("The ram had no strength to resist. The he-goat flung it to the ground and trampled on it, and there was no one to save the ram," vs. 7.) As before, when Alexander's power has become too great, he too perishes suddenly. ("Then the he-goat made a great display of its strength. Powerful as it was, its great horn snapped," vs. 8.) Just as Yahweh had set limits to the chaotic power of the sea, so too implicit limits are set on the prideful power of the human kingdoms. As the author of Daniel perceived it, the means by which Yahweh accomplished this restriction on the power of the kingdoms was not usually direct divine intervention but more often simply the natural outworking of the arrogance of power. The aggrandizing growth of one kingdom would arouse the envy of another which would challenge and defeat the nation or king that had grown excessively powerful. The most ambitious attempt of the author of Daniel to apply his perception of this historical pattern to his own times is the account in chapter 11 of the mutual containment of the two kingdoms which were heir to Alexander's empire, the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt and the Seleucid kingdom of Syria. This chapter is difficult to read because the author has not radically schematized history as in chapters 7 and 8 but has tried to show that even in the complex events of recent political struggles he
could still discern the working of the transcendent pattern which governed the power of nations.

As mentioned earlier, the apocalyptic sages were not simply theologically oriented political theorists but wrote from a deep sense of crisis. The purpose of discerning the pattern operative in the power of the kingdoms was to enable the seer to understand and foresee the outcome of what seemed to him the unprecedented hubris of Antiochus IV. According to the pattern, Antiochus should fall. And yet, there was something different about Antiochus’s career. In his attack on the temple in Jerusalem and his persecution of the Jews who followed the traditional practices of their religion, it seemed to the author of Daniel that Antiochus had claimed to challenge heaven itself.

“The king will do what he chooses; he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and against the God of gods he will utter monstrous blasphemies” (11:36). So when the author of Daniel turns to predict the future on the basis of the pattern, he describes in 11:40-45 how Antiochus will break through the limitation ordained for human power as he finally and decisively destroys the Egyptian kingdom which had formerly checked him. When he stands at the apex of his power, having flaunted God and destroyed his rivals, he will hear rumors of insurrection in the distant north and east. Turning back to confront them, Antiochus will encamp in Palestine between the sea and “the holy mountain,” Mount Zion, but there “he will meet his end with no one to help him.”

The apocalyptic author of Daniel did not expect that Antiochus’s death would be merely the end of another tyrant who had exceeded the proper limits of power. In a way that eludes rational analysis the extraordinary hubris which Antiochus exhibited appeared to have made his actions something more than another repetition of the pattern in human events. Though the other kingdoms had preserved an echo of the power of chaos from which they derived, it seemed that through Antiochus the ancient power of God’s primordial opponent was again directly present. As in I Enoch it appeared that the time had come for Yahweh to bring to an end the uncompleted conflict of the paradigmatic event which had been the shaping force in history.
The Book of Daniel does not return to the imagery of the sea in speaking of the eschatological resolution, however, though it well might have done so in the same terms as the early Christian author of Revelation who said in his vision of the new heaven and earth that “the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1). What seems to interest the author of Daniel more directly is the vision of a new constitution of political power based on a radically different source. At the climax of the vision of the four beasts in chapter 7, when the kingdoms have been judged and the power of chaos broken, then in imagery which derives from very ancient descriptions of Yahweh’s own epiphany in victory, an angelic figure appears. “With the clouds of heaven there came one like a human being, and he approached the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and royal authority, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (7:13-14a). Because the new political order derives from God’s own sovereignty, it does not repeat the old pattern of greed and violence, finally collapsing into impotence. Instead, “his sovereignty shall be an everlasting sovereignty, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (7:14b).

What should one say about the value of these apocalyptic visions of history? Certainly as predictive tools the historical resumes proved to be rather blunt instruments. The quite specific events predicted by the author of Dan. 11:40-45 did not occur, though to grant him his due, after Antiochus IV dynastic instability, local revolts, and the rising of a new world empire, Rome, quickly drained what remained of Seleucid power. It is also the case that the author’s belief that the bondage of history to particular cycles of conflict was about to end proved unfounded. In short, the deterministic and/or specifically predictive aspects of the apocalyptic resumes are the areas of
their failure. They remain theologically powerful, however, in their insights into the dynamics of history, its unity, and the basis for its ultimate transformation. The specific paradigms proposed by the ancient writers as keys to understanding still retain their power as interpretive metaphors for our time as well. But whether one accepts or rejects any specific paradigm from the ancient apocalypses, the historical resumes have to be taken seriously as a model for a particular way of experiencing history itself. Far from depleting human history of meaning as Hal Lindsey's version of apocalyptic does, these ancient apocalyptic resumes present an almost sacramental understanding of history. Without denying the uniqueness of particular events, this approach allows one to see that those events recollect a transcendent reality which shapes them and anticipates a transcendent hope that will transform them.

It is in reflecting on the way that the apocalyptic resumes approach history rather than on the content of any particular one of them that they suggest a means by which the apocalyptic hope of the New Testament can be appropriated today. In the early church, especially in the writings of Paul, the cross and Resurrection were understood as eschatological events. Through his Crucifixion Jesus Christ bore the judgment which rightfully belonged to sinful humanity. His Resurrection, through which newness of life is offered to all, is seen by Paul as the beginning, the "first fruits" of the eschatological transformation of the world. The delay of the consummation of the eschatological victory of God, however, has made it difficult for the church to hold on to the apocalyptic hope of the New Testament. Already in some of the New Testament writings there is a translation of future expectation into a realized eschatology in which the transformation takes place in the individual believer or in the life of the church, and similar notions characterize much of the contemporary church's view. I think, however, that the experience of history reflected in the apocalyptic resumes of 1 Enoch and Daniel offers a model for an appropriation of the future hope of the early church which neither spiritualizes it nor resorts to the crudities of the neo-apocalyptic of Lindsey and others.

The Crucifixion-Resurrection is the paradigmatic event of
Christian faith, the event that gives unity to human history, that
shapes and interprets that history. Without diminishing the
complexity of particular events, this paradigm offers a way of
understanding our past not as a mere "parenthesis in time" but
as translucent events shaped by and revelatory of the sorrow of
the cross and the joy of Resurrection. The paradigm of the cross
is not just paradigm of knowledge, however, but a summons to
a particular pattern of participation in the events of the present.
It reveals a God who suffers with and on behalf of the world and
who calls on persons to take up the cross themselves. Yet the
apocalyptic paradigm of the cross is not one of suffering only. It
is completely and wholly linked to the Resurrection. As God
acted in the Resurrection of Christ, so all who take up the cross
to bear the sorrows of others also take up the joy of newness of
life, the realization that they participate already in the kingdom
of life, where God overcomes the alienation of the world. As an
apocalyptic paradigm, however, the cross and Resurrection
cannot be limited to subjective experience alone. As a
transcendent event it stands over all creation, revealing the
nature of God's involvement with the world. As a yet
uncompleted event, the cross and Resurrection is the surety of
the Christian hope for the final redemption of the world. The
authentic appropriation of apocalyptic hope does not consist in
attempts to predict the eschaton but in experiencing the events
of human history as already participating in the paradigmatic
event and anticipating its final resolution.

NOTES

2. This kind of deterministic exegesis is most prominent in the "pesherim" or biblical
comentaries written by the Qumran community. Good translations are available in G.
Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 2d ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England:
3. It is unfortunate that noncanonical works like I Enoch are neglected in the Western
church. Not only were they influential in the early church (I Enoch is directly referred to
in the New Testament Book of Jude), but they are often theologically insightful in their
own right. Fortunately, a new publication has made these writings more accessible: J.H.
For I Enoch, however, the best translation continues to be that of R. H. Charles,
4. The narratives in Daniel 1-6, which were written perhaps a century earlier than the
visions of 7-12, express a more optimistic view of political power. Daniel 7-12, however,
reflects the imprints of the persecution.

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APOCALYPTIC AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

THEODORE W. JENNINGS, JR.

Although the claim that "apocalyptic is the mother of theology" may seem extravagant, it proves to have merit when one examines the roots of contemporary theology.

It has until recently been a piece of conventional theological and ecclesial wisdom that the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament derives from an outmoded and, to the modern mind, offensive worldview, which must therefore be discarded in order to provide a faith intelligible and relevant for contemporary humanity. Vivid pictures of a final resurrection, a last judgment, the return of Christ and the transfiguration of heaven and earth, we may suppose, have been left behind in the gothic nursery of the human imagination—save for those fringe factions of pentecostal and millenarian enthusiasm whose literalism and fanaticism may be best left to the ignorant and gullible among whose numbers they have their chief success. This view remains predominant in the mainline churches, especially of the English-speaking world. Yet in the sphere of theology and biblical studies a profound shift has occurred in the understanding of and attitude toward apocalyptic. It is, I think, accurate to say that the theology of the twentieth century is characterized by a fundamental re-orientation toward apocalyptic. In this essay I want to show how this has come about and what forms this appropriation of apocalyptic has taken. Ernst Käsemann has noted in respect of the New Testament that...

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"Apocalyptic is the mother of theology." I believe this to be true not only of the first century of Christian faith but also for our century as well. By this I do not mean that biblical texts such as Daniel or Mark 13 or the Apocalypse of John have assumed a dominant position for contemporary theology, but rather that many of the issues raised by an apocalyptic eschatology (e.g., the future transformation of the structures and conditions of history and existence) have become both central and fruitful for contemporary theology.

When Johannes Weiss published his book *The Kingdom of God in the Preaching of Jesus* (1892; still available in a 1971 edition edited by Leander Keck and published by Fortress Press) a fundamental turning point was reached in the history of modern theology. For this book signaled the end of the synthesis of post-Enlightenment theology made possible by the domestication of the theme of "the kingdom of God." This theme of the kingdom of God, so crucial to the preaching and teaching of Jesus, had been understood variously as designating an internal conversion to God (pietism), the extension of the influence of the church (ecclesiasticism), or as the gradual and progressive realization of Jesus' ideals of "the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of humanity" (liberalism). It was this liberal conception which dominated the theology of the time represented by such figures as Ritschl, Harnack, Rauschenbusch, and Weiss himself. It was a synthesis of the modern "faith in progress" and optimism concerning human nature with the biblical motif of the reign of God.

The work of Weiss, subsequently confirmed by such figures as Schweitzer, Werner, and Buri, demonstrated that the theme of the kingdom of God was inextricably bound up with an apocalyptic perspective which anticipated the imminent, radical, and global transformation of all human and cosmic structures. For Weiss, Schweitzer, and others this meant that this theme and the New Testament as a whole were simply unintelligible for modern thought. Christianity would have to give up any pretense to anchor itself in the New Testament or in the preaching of Jesus. Schweitzer renounced theology and took up medicine.

This work of biblical and historical scholarship produced a profound crisis for theology. Either theology must find a way to comprehend the apocalyptic character of early Christian faith or it must renounce its connection to and legitimation from earliest
Christianity in general and the figure and preaching of Jesus in particular. The theology of the twentieth century is characterized by an attempt to give a positive response to this crisis. It is in this sense that the work of Weiss marks the beginning of a fundamental transformation in the work and direction of modern theology.

Many times before in the life of the church, groups at the edge of Christianity had appropriated apocalyptic imagery to give expression to their sense of "marginalization." Already in the second century the Montanist movement made apocalyptic themes of the imminent end of the world central to their understanding of faith. As Norman Cohn (Pursuit of the Millennium; rev. ed. Oxford University Press, 1970) has shown, the Medieval and Reformation periods were also characterized by the emergence of popular albeit marginal movements, especially of the urban proletariat, which fastened upon apocalyptic imagery and themes as the core of their understanding of faith. Rosemary Ruether (The Radical Kingdom, Paulist Press, 1975) has shown the continuing influence of these movements in the English-speaking world, and Vittorio Lanternari (The Religions of the Oppressed, Knopf, 1963) has shown the importance of such groups among Third World peoples.

These successive waves of apocalypticism have always been located at the fringe or margin of society and of the church. They have never succeeded in effecting a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of faith at the center of Christianity. They have either remained at the periphery of Christian consciousness or have renounced their initial apocalyptic impetus in order to become domesticated into the household of faith.

What distinguishes the theology of the twentieth century from previous epochs is that for us the apocalyptic language and horizon of intertestamental Judaism and early Christianity has presented itself as a question addressed to the life and thought of the church as a whole.

This movement of the apocalyptic theme from the margin to the center of Christian thought has been made possible in two ways. First, theology has been increasingly tied to the work of biblical scholarship. The necessity of warranting theological
proposals by reference to biblical literature has been a consistent theme since the Reformation for Protestants and since Vatican II for Catholic theologians. The emergence of modern biblical scholarship has provided ways of attending more rigorously to the specific features of these ancient documents, making it less possible to evade the often alien characteristics of, for example, first-century forms of thought and expression. So long as theology retains this commitment to biblical foundations and to a scholarly investigation of these foundations it will not succeed in evading the apocalyptic thematic. (Theology in the English-speaking world is less tied to this biblical foundation and so is more free of concern for apocalyptic themes.)

But theology does not simply operate in a historical vacuum. There are external influences and impulses to be taken into account as well. The first attempts to deal positively with the crisis posed by the rediscovery of apocalyptic originated in the context of a crisis for European civilization, the collapse of the liberal synthesis and belief in progress occasioned by the First World War. (Again it is important to notice that North America experienced no such cultural shock and so has been less receptive to apocalyptic themes.)

CRISIS THEOLOGY

The first attempt to come to terms with the apocalyptic character of early Christian faith appears in the first works of theologians such as Barth, Gogarten, Bultmann, and Tillich. Each of these theologians attempts to respond both to the crisis of Western civilization posed initially by the First World War and to the crisis of theology posed by the recovery of apocalyptic. In this double sense their theology originates as a "crisis theology."

The journal which was for several years the rallying point for these theologians was called Between the Times (Zwischen den Zeiten) after an essay of the same name by Gogarten. The theme of the essay, the journal and the "movement" was borrowed from the apocalyptic image of the two eons. The old eon represented now by the project of liberal middle-class Western civilization was disintegrating before their very eyes. Whether
in the form of Enlightenment rationalism, post-Enlightenment romanticism, liberal ethicism, or general cultural self-confidence this world was manifestly coming to an end, collapsing on every side. The fundamental scope of this crisis was not simply cultural but theological in character. For the old age was, as its own propagandists had maintained, “the age of man.” But the new eon which the theologians glimpsed in the midst of this catastrophe was the new eon, the reign of God. When confronted by God, all human projects were faced with the final crisis. It is in this sense that we may understand Barth’s assertion in his epoch-making commentary on Romans: “If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology then there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ” (p. 314).

The image of two eons and the theme of fundamental and final crisis thus enters into the center of the most influential theology of our era. For the most part this theme was taken in the sense of a confirmation between God and humanity in which all that pertained to humanity was brought into question and an ultimate either-or was posed. The earlier work of Kierkegaard was thus pressed into service as a way of clarifying the meaning of this theme of crisis. For Bultmann and for Gogarten the existentialist philosophy of their contemporary, Martin Heidegger, would also be used to clarify this situation of crisis.

The early consensus of crisis theology quickly disintegrated into opposing factions and perspectives. Yet the common starting point and the theme which they continued in different ways to share was that of the crisis which confronts us when the eternal enters time, when we are confronted by the “eternal now,” the “kairos” interjected by the gospel. They are in agreement in stressing that the kingdom of God comes not at our initiative or as the function of our efforts but at the initiative of God, that God’s coming is sudden and unexpected, occasioning the fundamental crisis of meaning and history. With the notion of the “eternal now” they were able to appropriate important aspects of apocalyptic.

But much remained unappropriated. This was signaled by the use of a distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic in which the former signified all that was susceptible of an
existential (or transcendental) interpretation while the latter (apocalyptic) designated the crude images belonging to an ancient worldview. The difficulty with this distinction is that the biblical literature with which it was concerned is imbued with far more apocalyptic than eschatology.

The original problem was the discovery that Jesus as well as Paul expected the kingdom of God, the resurrection of the dead, and the new creation; in short, a historical and cosmic event which would leave nothing unchanged. In the place of this cosmic drama we may ask whether we are not here presented with the theater of the absurd, the inner drama of human decision, the invisible crisis of the individual will and heart. Have we not been turned from the message of a God-driven future hurtling down upon human history like a tidal wave to the steady drip, drip, drip of the “eternal now”?

Yet this only indicates that the theme of apocalyptic remains an open question for twentieth-century theology. The first attempts to respond to this question were astonishingly fruitful but they left the question open to further theological work.

That the question of apocalyptic was not settled but still open was indicated again within the field of New Testament scholarship by Ernst Käsemann, who insisted upon the place of apocalyptic as the origin of theological reflection in the New Testament and also for us. In this way the prior distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic is abandoned.

**THEOLOGY OF HISTORY**

One of the most significant features of an eschatology which includes apocalyptic is its orientation to the sphere of history. Whether in Daniel or in the Apocalypse of John or in the “Synoptic Apocalypse of Mark,” 13:5-37 (parallels, Luke 21:8-36, Matt. 24:4-36), there is a clear and unmistakable reference to what might be termed political and social history. The development of a set of “ages” of history in Daniel and in the Apocalypse (and in intertestamental literature) points in the direction of a theology of history which cannot be confined within the limits of an existential interpretation.

It is this apocalyptic orientation to universal human history
which is made the center of reflection in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg and his group of theological and biblical collaborators. The event of Jesus’ Resurrection, Pannenberg maintains, must be understood as disclosing the final meaning of universal human history “in advance.” This event then is not simply a crisis which calls for individual decision but the manifestation or epiphany of the end or goal of history. This theme of the disclosure in advance of a universal and final meaning is used by Pannenberg not only to develop a theology of history but also to suggest the basis for a dialogue between theology on the one hand and the human and natural sciences on the other.

While Pannenberg’s theology is certainly the most impressive intellectual achievement among contemporary theologians, it cannot claim to have appropriated fully the apocalyptic theme which grounds it. Precisely where the theology of the early Gogarten, Bultmann, and Barth was strongest, Pannenberg’s is weakest. For while the sphere of universal history is made central, the theme of crisis so crucial to apocalyptic appears muted. Does this openness to history entail an end to the sense of impending crisis?

POLITICAL THEOLOGY

The re-opening of theology in the direction of a consideration of universal history on the basis of a renewed appreciation of apocalyptic themes has also motivated the work of Jürgen Moltmann. Like Pannenberg, Moltmann intends to take seriously the challenge of Barth that theology must be eschatology and of Kasemann that apocalyptic is the origin of theology. But where Pannenberg develops from this basis a theology of history, Moltmann develops a theology of hope and liberating praxis. With respect to our issue we may summarize Moltmann’s contribution in three theses: (1) Eschatology is not one doctrine among others but is the necessary framework and motivating force of all theology. (2) Eschatology cannot be reduced to existential (Bultmann) or transcendental (Barth) terms but refers us to the drama of human history. (3) An eschatological perspective entails the transformation of concrete economic and political structures in the direction of freedom for the poor and oppressed.
The first thesis, which is the principal theme of the *Theology of Hope* (Harper & Row, 1967) summarizes the consensus of contemporary Protestant theology in Germany. It echoes the perspective of theology since Weiss and puts the issue in an especially forceful way. It should be said in this regard that a theology of hope is by no means a theology which deals with the question or doctrine of hope. To be a theology of hope means to be a theology which is grounded in hope and to be "hope's theology," a thinking about God which is oriented and motivated by hope.

The second thesis Moltmann shares with Pannenberg. But these two theologians part company with respect to the third. This is due in part to Moltmann's far more positive reading of Marx, a reading which, as a refugee from East Germany, Pannenberg finds less than persuasive.

Moltmann's concern for the political transformation entailed by a commitment to eschatological hope has significant antecedents in the crisis theology of the earlier Barth. Like others in that movement Barth was a socialist. He took socialism to be the appropriate political expression of the christological concentration of faith upon the one "who for our sakes became poor." This commitment to the poor and protest on their behalf against the structures of the world is a fundamental theme, not only of biblical apocalyptic, but also of those apocalyptic movements which have regularly accompanied Christianity at its periphery.

But with Barth and Moltmann we are no longer at the periphery. For Moltmann in particular the expectation of transformation entails a repudiation of all structures of privilege which absolutize themselves and so legitimate the dispossession of the poor. To hope means to act out the transformation of the world for which one hopes. The basis for this hope is the promise of God, a promise which is attested in apocalyptic imagery of the reign of justice and peace, the resurrection of the dead, and the messianic banquet. Those and similar images provide hope and so action with a clear and definite direction and goal.

Other "crisis theologians" had been concerned with the political significance of the reign of God. Reinhold Niebuhr, for
example, had used the theme of crisis to relativize political absolutism in all its forms. But Moltmann wants to insist that it is possible to discern the lines of a political commitment which is a nearer appropriation to the reign of God than others. In particular he sees in apocalyptic hope the mandate for a fundamental transformation of political, social, and economic life.

The politicization of theology in the direction of a call for the transformation of existing structures of human life characterizes the theology of Moltmann and of Johann Baptist Metz as "political theology." But this form of response to apocalyptic themes is by no means restricted to German theology. It characterizes an emergent and global ecumenical theological tradition to which we now turn.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The apocalyptic theme of the liberation of the oppressed from global structures of bondage has served as the driving force of liberation theology. The importance of this form of theology can scarcely be overestimated. It may be the first truly global and ecumenical theological movement. The seeds sown in Europe by the crisis theologians and subsequently by the theology of hope have produced an astonishing variety of fruit. Nowhere is this more evident than in Latin America.

The manifesto of liberation theology is Gustavo Gutiérrez's A Theology of Liberation (Orbis, 1973). While this book was preceded by a number of important contributions (among them those of Juan Luis Segundo and Dom Helder Camara) it has had a galvanizing effect not only on Latin American theology but on theology world-wide. Unlike the political theology of Moltmann and Metz, the liberation theology of Segundo, Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Elsa Tamez, and Miguez Bonino takes place in the midst of concrete struggles of liberation. It is set within the context of grinding poverty and of international economic exploitation. This social, economic, and political reality is comprehended within the categories of a Marxist analysis of society. This analysis, which emphasizes the structural and economic aspects of oppression, is then interpreted theologi-
CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

cally. This theological interpretation has the aim of exposing the church's complicity in exploitation and of providing the impetus toward a new and liberating "pastoral action" within society on behalf of the poor. The critical categories for this theory of liberating praxis are regularly derived from apocalyptic images of New Testament faith.

Since Latin America, is overwhelmingly Catholic it is scarcely surprising that many of the theologians of liberation are Catholic. Yet a significant contribution has been made by Protestant theologians as well. In this connection Methodist theologians have been particularly prominent. The best known of these to North Americans are Bonino (Argentina) and Mortimer Arias (Bolivia).

Theology of liberation has found a home not only in Latin America but in Africa as well. Theologians of the stature of Allan Boesak and church leaders like Desmond Tutu have found in the apocalyptic themes of liberation and the reign of God an impetus to creative theological reflection.

In North America, liberation theology has also found a voice both in the struggle for black liberation (e.g., James Cone's A Black Theology of Liberation, Harper & Row, 1970) and in the struggle for the liberation of women (e.g., Letty Russell's Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology, Westminster, 1974).

These are but the merest hints of the astonishing fruitfulness of the theme of liberation for theology. This theme is derived from those same apocalyptic images which once seemed so alien and disreputable. Yet today these images have revealed an astonishing power and pertinence. In a little over ten years this theme has emerged from theological obscurity to become the almost self-evident organizing principle of theological work. In the process a theological movement which unites Protestants and Catholics, Europeans and North Americans, Latin Americans and Africans, First and Third World Christians has emerged with astonishing rapidity. If apocalyptic entails a global or universal vision then it may be said that liberation theology is not only nourished by apocalyptic themes but is itself something of an apocalyptic phenomenon.

Yet despite the clear appropriation of apocalyptic themes and
images in liberation theology it must be said that apocalyptic is by no means reducible to the political-economic sphere any more than it is reducible to the existential and transcendental sphere represented by crisis theology. While liberation theology is distinguished from the older liberal theology of the kingdom of God by a stronger sense of discontinuity between existing structures and those structures anticipated as the reign of God, it is an open question whether it has yet taken the measure of apocalyptic thought. But it is a young movement and has yet to articulate itself fully.

COSMOGENESIS

A dimension of apocalyptic imagery which is conspicuously absent from the discussion of political and liberation theologies is that of cosmic transformation. This absence may be due to the way in which cosmology has so often seemed to be an intellectual preoccupation of ruling groups. The doctrine of creation, for example, tends to be most strongly emphasized by those who are most "at home" in the world and who use talk of creation to legitimate the existing situation. After all, if God is cause of "what is" it would be impious to seek to change or transform the way things are.

But it is clear that an apocalyptic expectation of total transformation comes to expression not only in images of political upheaval and millenarian expectation but also in images of cosmic transformation, the new heaven and earth. The theological imagination of the modern period has largely recoiled from the sphere of nature and cosmos, leaving this sphere to the natural sciences. However, there have been some theological attempts to appropriate the cosmic imagery of apocalyptic expectation. The most notable achievement in this regard is that of Teilhard de Chardin.

Teilhard was a Jesuit and a paleontologist. From these twin streams of faith and science he fashioned a vision of the direction of evolution toward an intensification and globalization of consciousness. This consciousness is by no means separate from but is the realization of matter and energy converging in life and becoming aware of itself in the human species. The global
catastrophes of the twentieth century were, for him, the sign of the emergence of a global consciousness, and as such, the creation of a conscious planetary organism (the noosphere). The direction of this emergence was, for Teilhard, no merely fortuitous chain of events but rather a process whose aim could only be the transfiguration of matter, life, and consciousness into the Omega which is God. This transfiguration entails the abolition of the factional limits and boundaries which divide human beings from one another, from nature, and thus from God as omega. The ultimate view of this cosmic (or planetary) transformation is already made manifest in Jesus the Christ, in his announcement of the reign of God, his call for love which overcomes enmity, his obedience to this vision even till death, and the Resurrection which anticipates the ultimate transfiguration of all into the life of God.

The breathtaking sweep of Teilhard's vision of cosmogenesis has indeniable foundation in some of the imagery of apocalyptic, especially in the New Testament. One is reminded of the closing vision of the Apocalypse of John as well as the cosmic Christ of Colossians. But this wedding of eschatology and cosmology has not yet produced a convincing theological articulation. Teilhard's work, especially in its theological dimensions, remains epigrammatic and prophetic. Yet it does suggest that the way may not be wholly closed for us to appropriate the cosmological dimension of an apocalyptic imagery. This remains an open question, but Teilhard has given hints of the possibility of a positive response.

RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

Another vision of christoform consciousness which arises in response to apocalypticism is to be found in the work of Thomas J. J. Altizer. Altizer's theology is one of the few original contributions to a theological appropriation of apocalyptic to have emerged within the context of North America.

Altizer's theology has distinctively North American roots. It grows out of two disciplines characteristic of our context: the history of religions and theological reflection upon works of the literary imagination. Despite this, his theology is regularly
ignored in our context, owing perhaps to the inflammatory effect of talk about “the death of God.” This theme of the death of God has been understood, or rather misunderstood, within the framework of Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with the being and existence of God. But in truth it has for Altizer a fundamentally apocalyptic significance. The theme of apocalyptic consciousness precedes as well as follows the “death of God” theme with which Altizer’s name has been associated.

The problem which Altizer has consistently set for himself is to speak of faith in a way which is both thoroughly biblical and thoroughly contemporary. To speak biblically is, he is persuaded, to speak apocalyptically. The heart and core of apocalyptic imagery, Altizer believes, is the overcoming of the distinction between God and humanity. This distinction can only be overcome, as Barth had also made clear, from the side of God. Using imagery derived from modern poets (especially William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche) and from biblical sources (e.g., the Philippians hymn) Altizer speaks of the abolition of the sphere of alien and alienating transcendence in Christ. It is this “emptying” which is the basis of Altizer’s talk of the death of God. This talk refers to the Incarnation as an irreversible movement of the divine into human flesh and history. Christendom however sought to reverse this movement and to continue to worship that form of transcendence which had been abolished in the Incarnation. As a consequence the history of this Incarnation of God comes to expression outside the church in the radical prophets of the nineteenth century (Blake, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard) and in the emergence of a new form of consciousness in contemporary “secular” experience.

From Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology (Westminster, 1961) to Total Presence (Seabury, 1980), Altizer has elaborated and refined the apocalyptic theme of the abolition of the distinction between God and humanity, between the sacred and the profane, between the sacred and human flesh. Throughout he has emphasized that the transformation of the identity of God entails the transformation of human identity as well. And like many apocalypticists before him he has discerned the signs of this transformation in the domain of culture outside the sacred precincts of church and temple.
Altizer's theology does show that it is possible for apocalyptic themes to take root even in the North American context, a context which until now has been remarkably resistant to a theological appropriation of apocalyptic.

CONCLUSION

Käsemann's oft-quoted assertion that apocalyptic is the mother of theology holds true not only for first-century Christianity but for us as well. This assertion does not mean that theology is itself simply apocalyptic. It means that the tension between apocalyptic expectation and the life of faith in the world opens up the critical space within which a new understanding of faith becomes necessary and possible. In this sense the most characteristic theological developments of our century have been generated by the necessity of coming to terms with the apocalyptic character of the preaching of Jesus and of early Christian faith. Precisely where theology holds itself accountable to the biblical sources of faith it is confronted with the necessity of coming to terms with apocalyptic. But the possibility of doing so appears to be opened up by history itself, by contemporary history as itself a form of crisis. Thus the combination of biblical images and of the "signs of the times" together generate theologies which reflect apocalyptic hope. Neither alone would be likely to produce such a theology. For where the present is a time of crisis but there are no images of apocalyptic expectation, the temptation is to flee into gnostic or pietist expression of faith as an escape from the world. Similarly where there are biblical images but no contemporary experiences to which to attach them, the temptation is to go either the way of an arbitrary literalism or to ignore the biblical foundation and to construct instead an ecclesiastical understanding of faith. Or like Schweitzer one may content oneself with a pious humanism. North American ecclesial and social and therefore the logical life is typically characterized by both a forgetfulness of biblical images and an unapocalyptic satisfaction with the way things are. As a consequence the apocalyptically inspired theologies of Europe and of the Third World tend to fall on deaf ears for us. However, there are signs that theological proposals
generated by biblical and historical crisis are not altogether alien to our experience as the examples of Cone and Russell and Altizer suggest.

Whether in North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, or Africa, the challenge of apocalyptic to theology has been an exceedingly fruitful one. Coming to terms with apocalyptic remains, nonetheless, an open agenda which will likely generate additional theological options. The question of apocalyptic is by no means "solved" for theology or by theology. The extravagance and radicality of the apocalyptic vision always resists assimilation into the discursive schemas of systematic theology. Yet in our era of cataclysmic dread (represented above all by the threat of thermonuclear annihilation) and of determined hope (present in the Third World) the message of apocalyptic is of undeniable pertinence. Perhaps nothing short of an apocalyptic hope can answer to the exigencies of our time. Theology, which has the burden of giving an account of our hope (I Pet. 3:15), will continue to be nourished and challenged by the question addressed to it by biblical apocalyptic.
"WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES": PREACHING THE APOCALYPSE

ADELA YARBRO COLLINS

"The purpose of this essay is to offer an alternative to the fundamentalist reading of the Apocalypse, to clarify how the book makes sense, to show how the historical-critical method can be complemented by other methods . . . and to reassess typical theological evaluations of the Apocalypse."

We have all heard one preacher or another exclaim, "I would not touch the Apocalypse with a ten-foot pole!" There are various reasons for this attitude. Perhaps the major one is ignorance. The Book of Revelation does not figure prominently in the curricula of many seminaries. Relative to other portions of the New Testament, especially the Gospels and Paul, the volume of interpretive literature is slim.

Another reason for the avoidance of the Apocalypse is the widespread feeling that fundamentalist Christians are the only ones who have a coherent interpretation of the book, an interpretation which has a long tradition behind it and considerable popularity in America today. For ministers who do not share the fundamentalist perspective, it is often easier simply to avoid the book than to find or develop an alternative.

The Apocalypse is not as accessible as the Gospels or Paul's letters. It is one of the few books of the Bible that a person can open, begin reading and have serious difficulty determining

what the text is referring to or talking about. For many, the book simply does not make sense. At first reading it may appear that it has no plot. The arrangement of episodes seems random. Some of the images are familiar from the Hebrew Bible, but it is not always apparent how they are functioning in their new context. Many of the images seem opaque and strange, even bizarre.

Another problem is that liberal theology, which has often been linked with the historical-critical approach to biblical texts, has generally evaluated the Book of Revelation as theologically inferior. Some critics have argued that the book is basically a Jewish work which has been only superficially Christianized. In such a judgment, "Jewish" often has a negative connotation, one which must be assessed critically today. Such an attitude also displays an exaggerated preference for a Pauline type of Christianity. Is the Gospel according to Matthew any less "Jewish" than Revelation? Liberal theology has also tended to denigrate apocalypticism as pessimistic, otherworldly, and derivative in contrast to prophecy, which is viewed positively. Further, the Book of Revelation is viewed as a step backward from Jesus' teaching that one should love one's enemies. It can easily be read as an expression of resentment on the part of the powerless and an impassioned cry for bloody vengeance upon their enemies.

Finally, the historical-critical method itself is limited in its ability to help the reader understand and appropriate the Apocalypse. The historical-critical mentality favors concepts, and the Book of Revelation consists of images, symbols, and metaphors. The images can be translated into concepts, but there always remains an elusive surplus of meaning. If the symbols and plot of Revelation are translated into logical propositions or timeless principles, they lose much of their power to evoke emotion and to persuade.

The purpose of this essay is to offer an alternative to the fundamentalist reading of the Apocalypse, to clarify how the book makes sense, to show how the historical-critical method can be complemented by other methods appropriate to the subject matter, and to reassess typical theological evaluations of the Apocalypse. These proximate purposes serve the ultimate
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intention of finding ways in which contemporary preaching can help people hear "what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7).

THE LITERARY DESIGN

The first key to the Apocalypse is an understanding of its composition as a literary whole. The opening of the book is accessible enough. The preface characterizes the work as divine revelation of heavenly origin (1:1-3). The content of the revelation is placed in the framework of a letter (1:4-6 and 22:21). John understood himself commissioned to share what he had received with seven particular congregations. In doing so, he used the letter form which was a typical form used by early Christians, possibly under the influence of Paul. The divine revelation begins to be communicated in the account of a vision of "one like a son of man," Christ, who gives John seven messages for the seven congregations (1:9-3:22).

It is relatively easy to move from texts in this section to a sermon. Analogies in the experience of American congregations in the twentieth century can be found to some of the pressing issues in these Christian communities of Asia Minor. It is always a danger that a congregation will fall away from the love they had at first (2:4). Behind the admonition to avoid food sacrificed to idols and idolatry (2:14) is a controversy over the relationship between faith and culture. That relationship needs to be examined anew today. Questions of lifestyle arise, questions about the distribution of wealth in this country and about American foreign policy. Many American religious traditions, beginning with the Puritans, have tended to identify faith and culture. Such a tendency leads easily to complacency and must be critically assessed. The messages to Sardis (3:1-6) and Laodicea (3:14-22) lead to reflection on themes such as commitment versus indifference, arrogance versus reliance on grace.

Chapters 4-22 have not usually been perceived as accessible. Problems of sequence and repetition have often led to confusion. It is not clear, for example, how chapter 12 relates to what has gone before. The end seems to be described at least twice (11:15-19 and 19:11-22:5). The salvation of the faithful is
described in detail more than once (7:9-17 and 21:3-8). In the nineteenth century, the repetition was explained as the result of the combination of various sources. Today that theory has been largely discredited because of the overall consistency of language and style in the book. An alternative view is that the repetition is purposeful, that it is part of the author's careful literary design.

The visions of chapters 4–22 do not provide a logical, chronological foretelling of future events in a historical sequence but express an impressionistic vision.

Some elements of that design are apparent at first glance. In chapters 4–22 are three explicitly numbered series of seven: the seven seals (6:1–8:5), the seven trumpets (8:2–11:19), and the seven bowls (15:1–16:21). A closer look reveals that there are two further series of seven visions each, although these are not numbered. The visions can be distinguished form-critically, by noting the introductory formula of each account. The first unnumbered series extends from 12:1–15:4; the second from 19:11–21:8. The remaining material is clearly organized into two great codas, each of which elaborates and concludes the series it follows. The seventh bowl (16:17–21) is associated with the fall of Babylon, which is described briefly. The seven bowls are followed by a stunning coda or appendix which elaborates on the character, significance, and fall of the great city Babylon. The last series of visions (19:11–21:8), which is the second of the two unnumbered sequences, climaxes with the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem (21:2). This last series is followed by a coda on Jerusalem (21:9–22:5). A number of parallel details indicates that the Babylon and Jerusalem codas are designed to contrast with one another. The book closes with an epilogue (22:6–21).

These five series of visions in chapters 4–22 are not intended to represent a linear sequence of future historical events. The repetition suggests this conclusion. It is supported by the observation that each series has a kind of plot and that it is the same in each series. On one level, the narrative in each series
moves from the persecution of the faithful, to divine vengeance, to the triumph of God and the faithful people. For example, in the seven seals, persecution is emphasized as the recent state of affairs in the vision of the souls under the altar (6:9-11). Divine vengeance is explicitly described in 6:12-17. Salvation of the faithful is depicted in chapter 7, especially verses 9-17. The first four seals portray the woes which mark the beginning of the end-time. This pattern of (1) persecution, (2) judgment, and (3) salvation is typical of the surface details of the narratives in all five series.

On a deeper level, this pattern reflects ancient stories and myths of conflict and combat, some of which are creation myths. The element of persecution relates to the deeper or more ancient element of the attack of a rebel god or chaos-monster on the ruling deity and his allies. The element of divine vengeance or judgment reflects the older element of the battle between the opposing forces and the victory of the original ruler or an ally. The element of salvation reflects the earlier notion of the re-establishment of the kingship of the ruling deity and the peace and fertility which follows.

This pattern with its two levels of meaning is repeated in each series. Such repetition is characteristic of apocalyptic literature. Daniel 7 and 8, for example, interpret the same sequence of historical events in analogous ways. The various sections of II Esdras 3–14 (IV Ezra) go over the same ground and resolve the central problem in basically the same way. In this characteristic, apocalyptic literature is similar to myths, that is, to stories which attempt to express something fundamental about reality.

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the purpose of a myth is to overcome a contradiction, for example, the tension between life and death.¹ When the contradiction is incapable of being fully mediated, a theoretically infinite number of versions of the myth is generated in the ongoing attempt to do the impossible. The Book of Revelation sets up an opposition between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. In John's circumstances, and given his theological perspective, this was an insurmountable opposition in the world as we know it. This great tension helps explain the repetition in the Apocalypse.

Besides the cyclical quality of the visions, there is also a
forward movement. The same basic story is told in different ways. The earlier series are less detailed; their narratives are fragmentary, their images veiled. The later series are more detailed, more complete in their narratives; their images are more focused. For example, the sixth trumpet (9:13-21) is associated with an obscure vision involving the Euphrates River, angels, many troops of cavalry, and the destruction of one-third of humanity. The sixth bowl (16:12-16) seems to describe the same event, giving a clearer picture. The Euphrates will dry up, the kings of the east will approach on the river bed (with their armies) and a world-wide battle (the day of God the Almighty) will ensue, centered on Armageddon. The narrative account of the battle here, however, ends abruptly. The narrative thread is taken up again in 19:11-20:3, where we find the actual description of the battle and its consequences.

It should be clear from this example that the vision of chapters 4-22 do not provide a logical, chronological foretelling of future events in a historical sequence. Rather, they express an impressionistic vision, in which the specific details are secondary. What forward movement there is, apart from the basic plot which is repeated, is there to build suspense and for dramatic effect.

THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SETTINGS

The second key to the Apocalypse is an understanding of its historical setting. A universal consensus on the authorship is lacking, but there is little evidence to connect the John who wrote the Book of Revelation with any other man named John whom we know through other historical sources. The traditional date of the composition of the work in its present form, A.D. 95-96, is based on the testimony of Irenaeus. This date has been challenged, but not successfully.

There is a growing sense of the importance of the social setting of the author and first hearers of the book for its interpretation. The author's role as an early Christian prophet has been studied intensely in recent years. Two historical events of the first century loom large in the Apocalypse and obviously were factors in the author's self-understanding and theological
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perspective. One is the persecution of Christians in Rome in about A.D. 64 under the Emperor Nero. It is likely that certain prominent early Christian leaders perished at that time, as tradition has it (Peter and Paul). The Book of Acts indirectly supports the tradition that Paul met his death during Nero’s reign. The brutality of the execution made Nero’s police action notorious, even though it was local. It is not surprising that such an event loomed large in the consciousness of some Christians thirty or so years later.

The image of Nero appears in Revelation 13. On one level of meaning, the beast from the sea is the Roman Empire. One of its heads (the emperors) seemed to have a mortal wound, but was healed. This is probably an allusion to the Nero legend. Nero committed suicide in 68; some believed he had fled alive to Egypt or Parthia and would return to regain his throne in Rome. This was a positive legend which circulated among Nero’s Gentile friends, especially in the East. In the Jewish Sibylline Oracles, this legend was adapted in a negative sense. Nero would return as an eschatological adversary. John was aware of these legends about Nero and adapted them to his own purposes. In Rev. 17:11 Nero appears implicitly as the beast who is identified with one of the historical emperors but who will ascend from the pit in the end-time as an Antichrist (the term is not used but the idea is there). Nero’s persecution was for John evidence of the total incompatibility of Roman rule and the kingdom of God.

The second crucial historical event was the Jewish War with Rome from A.D. 66 to 72, which climaxed in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70. This event is reflected in the code-name “Babylon” (14:8, 17:5 passim). The city of Rome in John’s time is called “Babylon” because Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem in the first century A.D. as the Babylonians had done in the sixth century B.C.E. The use of the name “Babylon” shows how traumatic the results of the Jewish War were for John and like-minded Christians. In spite of their alienation from local Jewish communities (2:9 and 3:9), they still identified strongly with Jewish tradition.

John had a variety of reasons to be anti-Roman. Perhaps for socio-economic reasons, he shared the widespread anti-
imperialist sentiment of the subject peoples of the Greco-Roman eastern Mediterranean world. Perhaps because of cultural, religious, and geographical links, he shared the anti-Roman attitude of Jewish communities associated with parts of the Sibyline Oracles. A further sore point was the ruler cult, worship of the emperor. For those who interpreted the first commandment strictly, as John obviously did, the ruler cult was as offensive as the neo-Nazis are to Jews or the Ku Klux Klan to people of color today.

In addition to these large cultural issues, there was a great deal of stress and strain on the local level as well. It has already been mentioned that Christians with whom John associated were no longer welcome in the synagogues of Asia Minor (2:9 and 3:9). This put Christians in an awkward position over against the local authorities. The Jews had been given permission to practice their religion without interference in areas under Roman control. If Jewish communities expelled Christians, it would appear that Christianity was a new religion. New religions were looked upon with disfavor by the Roman government.

By the second century, there is evidence that ordinary Gentiles in the cities of the empire disliked Christians intensely because they dishonored gods, seemed to be superstitious, and generally kept to themselves. It is likely that this antipathy was widespread already by John's time. So Christians of his day were marginal, neither fish nor fowl, and not yet numerous or confident enough to claim to be a third race.

The Book of Revelation was written primarily not to predict the future but to interpret a situation of marginality and alienation.

The Book of Revelation, therefore, was written primarily not to predict the future, but to interpret this situation of marginality and alienation. Its vision of a hidden but powerful and glorious heavenly world in the present and of a reversal of social roles in the future gave its hearers hope in a trying and discouraging situation.
Certain elements in the Book of Revelation make it look like a letter. It has an epistolary opening (1:4-6) and conclusion (22:21). Although the seven messages do not conform to the genre of the ancient letter, their presence makes the work as a whole seem like a heavenly letter. These elements are important clues to the author's understanding of his work and its intended function.

Most scholars, however, are agreed that the book does not belong primarily to the genre letter. Most would define it as an apocalypse. The English word *apocalypse* derives from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means "revelation." In ancient times, the word was used loosely, without a precise notion of a literary form or genre. In modern times, the word came to be used in a more precise sense. Scholars began with the appearance of the Greek word *apokalypsis* at the beginning of the Book of Revelation and noted that it was in some sense a self-designation. They then attempted to define a genre "apocalypse," which includes works similar in form and content to the Book of Revelation. The following definition was proposed in 1979 by a working group of the Society of Biblical Literature: "'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world."2

The spatial aspect of the revelation often involves the heavenly court, angelic beings and their duties, and heavenly geography, such as the location, appearance, and characteristics of Paradise, three to seven heavens, places of reward and punishment, and the like. The temporal aspect involves the destiny of the people of God, the destiny of human individuals, and the destiny of the world.

The definition quoted above defines the question of function, upon which there is less agreement. The function attributed to apocalyptic literature depends upon what kind of language it is thought to be. From the fundamentalist viewpoint, the language of the Book of Revelation is referential. It refers to things,
persons, ideas, and events which have an unproblematically objective existence and reality or will have at some future date. Apocalyptic language is thought to be primarily informational. It gives the reader information about the present and the future, information which pertains to the relations among nations, national and international leadership, political events and wars.

Those working within the liberal tradition of biblical scholarship are inclined to interpret apocalyptic language as expressive or depth language. It has an informational aspect; it does make some cognitive claims, but its primary function is to express a particular view of reality and to invite the hearers or readers to share that view. Such particular views of reality are not completely idiosyncratic or purely private. Nevertheless, they are rooted in particular, subjective experiences. Such experiences and the views grounded in them can never be demonstrated. They can only be shared, their power felt.

Depth language includes religious, poetic, and mythic utterances at their best. From the point of view that apocalyptic literature is depth language, its main elements are recognized as symbols and myths. Myth here is used in the positive sense expressed in Alan Watts's definition: "Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact, and some fantasy—which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life." Some symbols are rooted in experience of the natural world in which the sacred is encountered. Others are shorthand references to the myths from which they take their meaning.

The Book of Revelation presents itself as a myth of the end. It expresses the meaning of human life and of the universe in terms of an ending which is both catastrophe and fulfillment. A sense of the beginning is also evoked. In chapter 4 a vision of the Almighty is described, an account which climaxes with a reference to the creation of all things (verse 11). For John and his

The death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, taken as one event, was for John and his hearers both the beginning and the end.
intended hearers, the most significant beginning was the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is acclaimed, as slain Lamb, as worthy "‘to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!' " (5:12). Chapter 5 is an account of the Lamb's implied enthronement in the heavenly court. It is this event which allows the events of the end-time to begin to unfold. After his heavenly acclamation, the Lamb opens the seven seals (6:1–8:1). Thus in the Apocalypse as a whole, the inner meaning of the present is expressed by evoking myths of the beginning and the end, showing their relationship, and locating the present in the movement from origin to fulfillment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the Apocalypse is narrative, not exposition. It is more appropriately viewed as depth or expressive language than as referential or informational language. These characteristics suggest that the interpreter bring literary sensitivity to bear along with historical study. The images should be taken seriously as images. One should not rush to a commentary to decode the images and focus on their probable historical referents alone. Rather, one should take the time to feel the impact of the image and to adopt a receptive attitude in which feelings play as great a role as thinking.

Plot is as important an element as images or symbols. The interpreter should be sensitive to the movement of the plots of individual passages, of series of visions, and of the book as a whole. In some cases, the movement of plot overshadows the precise identity or referent of one or more characters. Lengthy debates, for example, have taken place on the identity of the two witnesses in chapter 11 and of the woman in chapter 12. Eventually one realizes that, whatever the origin of these characters was, their role in the Book of Revelation is to provide models for the hearers or readers. What is important is the plot in which they are involved: they are threatened, the witnesses even die, but they are sustained through all adversity by God's power.
There is great diversity among the various groups which resonate with the Book of Revelation today, and their ways of appreciating the book vary widely. The reasons for their different responses are many and complex. The tradition in which one was reared, personal temperament and perspective on reality, type of education, and socio-economic class probably all play a role.

In the early church some groups read the Book of Revelation literally, as history reported beforehand. Other groups, who could not accept such a reading, began to read it allegorically. Some allegorical readings focus on the question of spiritual meaning and guidance for the individual. We are all vulnerable to suffering and powerlessness. For example, we must all face the deaths of loved ones and ultimately our own deaths. Revelation shows that death, suffering, and powerlessness are necessary aspects of reality for reasons that cannot be expressed directly, in ordinary, logical language. Its symbols and plot show, however, that death is only a phase in the cosmic struggle, not the end. This impression is reinforced by the example of Jesus. The conviction that death is not the end can empower a person to die for a principle dearly held. There are places in the world today where such a death may be called for. Alternatively, the narrative, in another situation, can empower a person to “practice dying,” to let go of whatever needs to be relinquished: a destructive relationship, an inadequate understanding of a complex matter, or a less-than-helpful behavior pattern.

Other allegorical readings focus on the insights of Revelation into the corporate life of humanity and into the demonic aspects of institutions, such as the state, the nation, the city, corporations, bureaucracies, ideologies, and even the church as a corporate structure. William Stringfellow argued powerfully in the early 1970s that the United States was the current embodiment of Babylon. Jacques Ellul, later in the same decade, saw powerful analogies between the beasts and Babylon and corporate bodies in contemporary civilization.

Fundamentalist Christians tend to identify the beast and Babylon with institutions perceived as other rather than with the institutions in which they live. The beast and its allies are the
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Soviet Union, China, and other Communist states, and Babylon is identified with the Roman Catholic Church or the ecumenical movement. Insofar as the beast symbolizes the demonic side of any institution, these interpretations have some validity. But the ability to be self-critical is an important hermeneutical principle. If the demonic is seen only in the other, self-deception occurs.

If the demonic is seen only in the other, self-deception occurs.

In quite a different way from the fundamentalists, Christians who have a liberationist or feminist perspective see an analogy with current politics. John’s call for opposition to Rome is interpreted as validation of the struggles of the poor and of women against oppression. Such Christians resonate with the Apocalypse as a vision which arose in a situation of marginality and alienation.

ON THE WAY TO A SERMON

Let us look at Revelation 13 by way of an illustration. This chapter comprises two visions: of a beast from the sea (verses 1-10) and of a beast from the earth (verses 11-18). These two visions belong to the first unnumbered series of seven visions which extends from 12:1 to 15:4. The two visions of chapter 13, along with the vision of chapter 12, portray the persecution of the faithful, the first element in the basic plot shared by all the series.

Those in the seven cities of Asia Minor who first heard the Apocalypse read would have understood the vision of the beast from the sea on several different levels simultaneously. They would have been familiar with various myths of combat in the Bible (Yahweh and Leviathan), in apocryphal Jewish literature, and in the pagan myths, monuments, and festivals which surrounded them. They would have recognized the beast from the sea as the rebel monster who symbolizes chaos, infertility, and death. As in the myth, the beast in the vision attacks the high God, his dwelling and allies (13:5-6).
The vision of the beast from the sea is a narrative about counterfeit power, and the vision of the beast from the earth about counterfeit cult.

So these two visions of Revelation 13 were written to interpret the times for the first hearers of Revelation and to encourage and strengthen them in their difficulties (13:9-10). Since the visions
center on symbols and take the form of myth, they have significance beyond their own time. The symbols and plot fit other situations, other times and places, as well as their original situation. One way of expressing the significance of these visions for our own time is to say that the vision of the beast from the sea is a narrative about counterfeit power and the vision of the beast from the earth about counterfeit cult. Power is counterfeit when it is exploitative or manipulative rather than cooperative and nutritive. Cult is counterfeit when proximate goals are treated as ultimate goals, when creatures are worshiped, rather than the Creator.

Chapter 13 expresses in poetic narrative form the conflict between the faithful and those who exercise false power. Later in the same series of visions, another vision expresses in veiled and fragmentary form the conviction that such false power will be defeated (14:14-20). The series climaxes with a vision of the faithful in their glory (15:2-4). These last two visions of defeat of destructive powers and victory of the faithful do not encourage speculation about the specific course of future events. Rather, their effect is to point the reader back to the present, to move the reader to take a stand against counterfeit, domineering power in one's own environment.

The beast from the sea evokes in some of us a vision of the oppressive qualities of our own social structures when they systematically confine women and people of color to particular roles and the lower economic strata. The function of Revelation, in this line of interpretation, is very similar to classical prophecy. The vision of the beast from the sea implies that God takes the side of the oppressed, the disadvantaged. The language of Revelation, however, divides humanity dualistically into "Us" and "Them." The imagery is often violent, even bloody. In comparison with the teaching of Jesus, the perspective of Revelation does seem to be a step backward, ethically. But ethical sensitivity must be appropriate to the situation. There are circumstances in which love needs to be subordinated to justice. The challenge in interpreting Revelation is to discern when such is the case.
The Book of Revelation has an important message for Christians today. Its unmistakably political and social perspective on the kingdom of God reminds us that salvation cannot be limited to the salvation of individuals or even to the maintenance of a faithful church. The kingdom of God must transform our lives as social and political beings as well. Revelation reminds us to dream dreams and envision visions; it reminds us that we need a new heaven and a new earth.

NOTES

I have approached this assignment as if I were preparing my own preaching of these texts. I keep a journal of what happens Monday through Wednesday as I confront the texts for Sunday; ideas, questions, parallels, attempts at capturing the gist of the text, all get written down. What you will read is the progression of preparation in search of the sermon for my congregation. I have stopped short of the outline, the gathering of illustrative material, and the writing down of a manuscript; the agenda for Thursday and Friday. So what follows is a journal of the struggle to find the sermon for San Diego in a letter to Thessalonica.

I tried to follow the advice of master preachers to hold off going to the commentaries. Their counsel is to read the text, let it speak to you, outline the sermon, then go to the scholars for fine tuning. They warn that if you go to the scholars up front they will determine the shape of the sermon and it will lack creative power and fresh insight.

This is good advice, and I have used it profitably at other times, especially in preaching from the Gospels and the stories of the Old Testament. I am no biblical scholar, but I have had enough experience preaching those texts to approach them with some confidence. They are also, in the main, narrative texts, lively and absorbing stories about people and events, so
universal in appeal as to have an archetypal quality to them.

Preaching texts such as the Epistle lections for October and November, 1984, presented me with a greater challenge. I tried reading the lections without help from the commentaries, but nothing happened that I could preach. I confess that if I had not been given the assignment to write these resources but had approached the lections in the context of weekly sermon preparation, I would have turned elsewhere for a text, or looked to the calendar for "special days" to bail me out. For me, at least, the Thessalonian letters have been in the "esoteric canon," Scriptures that may be of interest to sectarians, or of value to historians of antiquity, but seem hopelessly parochial and anachronistic to preachers. As a matter of fact, I discovered I really did not know much about the letter, except that it is the oldest literature in the New Testament, and a favorite of those ubiquitous radio preachers who collect prooftexts on the Second Coming.

So feeling as if I were skipping to the back of the book for the answers, I turned to the commentaries. It helped. I found Thessalonica had something to do with San Diego. What I learned will give you the perspective I took back to the texts and used to find the sermon.

Thessalonica was located on the Via Egnatia, the main artery linking Rome with the east. Its presence on the highway made Thessalonica a cosmopolitan city. Its natural harbor so close to the Via Egnatia made it a center of trading. People were generally well off, their prosperity due not only to geographical accident but political fortune. They were wise enough to have sided with Antony and Octavia during the Roman civil wars, and received the reward of free-city status.

But the major factor shaping Thessalonian life in Paul's time was that highway. It must have influenced their life the way television has transformed American towns in our time. The Via Egnatia was not merely a road, it was a communications network, exposing Thessalonica to a variety of cultures, ideas, and religions. It brought Paul to them, along with other traveling preachers. The city was a bazaar of religions: state worship, pagan deities, mystery cults, Gnosticism, and Judaism. The presence of Jews in Thessalonica is disputed since no
archaeological evidence has been uncovered, but Jews were present in all cities along the Via Egnatia, and Acts says Paul preached in a synagogue in Thessalonica.

Paul found the same religious ferment in Thessalonica he encountered everywhere in the Greco-Roman world. Traditional worship of ancient deities was still observed but held little meaning. People were searching for new ways of making sense out of life. The Via Egnatia provided a constant flow of options for this search.

Most of the “new religions” were apocalyptic. The world of which the traditional Greek religions were a part was disintegrating, and the people looked to an uncertain future. Amos Wilder described such a situation as “anomie.” “Common to all true apocalyptic is a situation characterized by anomie, a loss of ‘world,’ or erosion of structures, psychic and cultural, with the consequent nakedness to being or immediacy to the dynamics of existence.” (Amos Wilder, Jesus’ Parables and the War of Myths [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982]; p. 157.) Anomie characterized the world out of which the church at Thessalonica was called. That means the questions these Christians would seek to have answered in the gospel would be shaped by that situation.

If the hermeneutical question is “What has Thessalonica to do with San Diego?” I think I found the connection. The parallels I saw after reading the commentaries fascinated me. The possibilities for letting the text speak to the situation of my congregation began to emerge.

The cultural and spiritual parallels were the most important, but there were others, geographical and political, that served to bring Thessalonica closer to home. My town is situated on a natural harbor, and though it is not a major commercial port, it is the site of the heaviest concentration of U.S. naval facilities in the world. One of the largest employers in San Diego, aside from the navy, is General Dynamics, whose principal client is the Department of Defense. San Diego is conscious of its dependence on Washington for its prosperity much the same way Thessalonica was beholden to Rome. The local memory is quick to recall a series of economic depressions that endured
because Washington pulled the purse strings. That memory has a way of shaping the way the citizens of this city view the world.

I wonder if the same military-industrial complex, while more visible in San Diego, is so insidious as to affect all the country, and that in varying degrees, in our time we are all, like Thessalonica, beholden to Rome?

More significantly, the twentieth century's Via Egnatia, instant communication, has slowly transformed culture, challenging old values, wrenching comfortably pious folk out of a homogeneous regional world, into another, cosmopolitan and secular, and exposing all of us, to a degree no other people have had to endure, to the news of impending doom.

It is commonplace to point out that Paul preached to people experiencing the end of an age and the death of the old gods, and that it was for this reason that the apostolic preaching of an eschatological kingdom of God found such fertile ground in the Greco-Roman world. There are prophets in our day, secular as well as religious, who confidently announce the end of Western civilization. One gains the impression that they will be terribly disappointed if it does not happen. They paint apocalyptic scenarios of the end of the world: biblical, ecological, and nuclear.

Contemporary fascination with doom puts us in the same situation Paul spoke to in Thessalonica. Whether you are living in the first century or the twentieth, whether the communication system is delivered through government couriers, merchants, and seers; or through newspapers, television, and the pronouncements of scientists, the message is the same: The old world is dying and the future is uncertain.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a

Where is the sermon in a greeting? The conventional form of epistolary greeting begins, as this does, with an address: "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God, the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
There are some distinctive characteristics of this address in comparison with other Pauline letters. (1) Silvanus is the Latin for the Semitic “Silas.” It must have been the name the Thessalonians used for Silas. Is this evidence that the congregation at Thessalonica was largely Gentile? Later Paul will remind them that they “turned to God from idols” (1:9), a clear reference to their Gentile origin. Jews would not have been described as worshiping idols. (2) Paul addressed the church “in God, the Father,” rather than the more common Pauline “in Christ.” Could this be another clue that the Thessalonians are not that far from their previous status of “God-fearers,” the designation given to Gentiles attracted to Jewish monotheism which stood in stark contrast to the debased pagan religions?

How well does Paul know the Thessalonians? Do the variations on what should be a formula address indicate a special situation in Thessalonica? Did Paul know them well enough to discover this? Evidently Paul was in Thessalonica only a short time; how briefly is debated in the commentaries. Luke’s record in Acts has Paul there for only three sabbaths but this account is generally discounted. Evidence within 1 Thessalonians indicates a longer stay. In 2:9 Paul says he had to work night and day to sustain himself. He seems to know the Thessalonians with some intimacy. And it must have taken longer than three weeks to establish a church.

But by any calculation it is a new church. Paul was there long enough to know the needs of these Christians but not long enough to impart anything more than an elementary understanding of Christian faith. Paul is compelled to send Timothy to them shortly after his abrupt and unplanned departure, not to quell any crisis that has arisen, but to inquire of their well-being, “like a father with his children” (2:11).

Not much stuff in the address for a sermon, unless we can make something of the rare use of “in God, the Father.” Assuming Paul chose this particular form intentionally, instead of “in Christ,” and for some reason peculiar to Thessalonica, was it because the Christian teaching of God as like a father brought them to the church in the first place? We know it was the Jewish revelation of God that led them to the synagogue. Was it
Jesus' focus on God as Father that led them from synagogue to church?

Perhaps I could use this text in conjunction with the Gospel lection and say something of the revelatory impact of the analogy of father in speaking of God, especially to Greeks for whom the idea of God as father would be heard as good news. The primary adjective used for divinity in Greek culture was apatheia, the absence of feeling. The primary characteristic of God in Jesus' teaching was love, the kind that gets involved.

But the issue of God-language is not without controversy in today's church. Can we still use male images? If not, what do we do with an authentic Pauline letter that defines church intentionally as being "in God, the Father"?

It is significant to note the instances of references in contemporary culture to the relationship between children and parents, particularly fathers. At least two recent films have focused on the estrangement-reconciliation theme of children and fathers. *I Never Sang for My Father* is about a forty-year-old man returning home to place his aged parents in a retirement home. The son is a successful writer in Hollywood but feels a failure because he has never received his father's blessing. His visit provides him with one last opportunity to get his father to recognize him as a person in his own right, an effort that fails. *On Golden Pond* has the same theme but focuses on a forty-year-old woman seeking a blessing from her father. Jane Fonda, who starred with her father, Henry, in the film, commented that the making of the film provided the opportunity to overcome a decades-long separation from her father and to experience reconciliation before his death. At about the same time, Peter Fonda experienced a similar reconciliation with his father and wrote of the freedom it gave him to live his own life. Aram Saroyan has published a book about his famous father, William Saroyan, and their reunion at the father's hospital bed, after years of separation. Barbra Streisand, in talking about her picture *Yentl*, speaks of the sense of emptiness in her life because of an absent father, a void she has never been able to fill, and which has created in her life an insatiable need for recognition.

Could all of this point to a human need for what the Bible calls "the father's blessing"? Could Isaac's blessing of Jacob be a
Jungian archetype story? Did Jesus speak of God as "Father," and teach his disciples to do the same, because the relation between children and parents is a paradigm of our need for God's blessing on us as individual persons? Is it that human need that sent Gentiles searching through mystery cults, gnostic sects, and Jewish synagogues? And is it the message of God the Father who blesses all his children, even prodigal sons and daughters, that brought them to the community of the church and gave them a sense of meaning, purpose, and dignity as persons?

If so, maybe Paul intentionally addressed the Thessalonians as "in God, the Father," because that message, more than any other, is what spoke to their deepest human need. If that is true, there is a sermon in an address after all.

There is more certainly a sermon in a thanksgiving. A greeting contains both an address and a thanksgiving. Thessalonians contains one of the shortest addresses of all Paul's letters, but it contains the longest thanksgiving. In 1 Thessalonians the thanksgiving begins with 1:2 and concludes with 3:13. In fact most of the letter, and three of the five lections, are in the thanksgiving section of the greeting. It is Paul's style, his model of Christian life, always, and in all things, to thank God. Philippians is the exemplary instance of this, but he is at it in this epistle as well, and counsels the church at Thessalonica, "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances" (5:16-18).

Although one could make something out of the long thanksgiving, it would be the right sermon with the wrong text. Better to use Philippians to preach on Paul and thanksgiving, since Paul uses the thanksgiving in Thessalonians to discuss other matters.

The opening lines of the thanksgiving (2-5a) offer several homiletical possibilities. The most promising for the situation I must preach to is the doctrine of election implied in 1:4, "For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you."

Election in the Calvinist sense is no longer an issue for my congregation. It arises for them in the issue of who is a Christian and who is not. Actually they are not that concerned about it,
but their neighbors are. According to the neighbors it's the only question that matters. So how do we know?

There are two warrants for the claim of election in this passage. The gospel hit fertile ground when preached to them (1:5), and then bore fruit through the familiar Pauline "triad" faith, hope, and love (1:3).

In this letter Paul links each of the triad with a qualifier which suggests action. Faith, hope, and love, are not things you have but things you do. The adjectives are worth looking at. (1) A "work of faith" seems to be self-contradictory in the Pauline faith-works schema. But "work" here is singular and refers to working out your salvation in daily life. (2) "Labor of love" refers to a "magnitude of effort" perhaps some singular, memorable deed. (See Ernest Best, A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians [Harper and Row, 1972].) (3) "Steadfastness of hope" means perseverance, hanging in there.

In Corinthians Paul counsels the church to seek faith, hope, and love. In Thessalonians he thanks God that they have lived the quality of life in which faith, hope, and love have been seen. Was there an incident to which he was referring? There does not seem to have been any direct attack against the church at Thessalonica. This is not an embattled community, but one that seems to live peacefully in the pluralistic and cosmopolitan environment of a tolerant culture. The "affliction" referred to in verse 6 can be translated "tribulation" and may be used in this context as an eschatological interpretation of the time, rather than as referring to any incident of persecution. The passage 2:1-16 suggests a hostile environment but most commentators consider this a later interpolation, anti-Semitic in nature. It is not typical of Paul (compare Romans 9:1-3) and seems out of place. In fact it is edited out of the lection. When Paul advises them to be good citizens and "to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody" (4:11-12), the impression is they live rather comfortably.

So why the thanks to God for faith, hope, and love? Could it be a reference to their willingness to risk this security for Paul's sake? Though the Thessalonians were noncontroversial, Paul
was not. They faced no danger, but Paul courted it wherever he went, including Thessalonica. According to Acts 17 the Thessalonians were willing to get involved and rescue Paul. This could have been the "labor of love" and would have been fresh in Paul's mind as he wrote the letter, his first contact with them since his escape.

Further background will help understand why Paul was so moved by the Thessalonians' courage. In A.D. 48 at the Jerusalem Council, Paul won legitimacy for the Gentile mission and the right to include them in the church without first making them Jews. The agreement was, in Paul's eyes, a contract between two equal partners: Jerusalem recognized the freedom of the Gentile mission from Jewish law, and the Gentile churches would recognize the special "eschatological" vocation of the Jerusalem "poor" with financial support and intercessory prayers.

Paul left for Antioch with the understanding that he had the support of the church's leadership, including Peter, the first disciple. He was soon disappointed. Using Galatians 2 as the reliable record, we learn that Peter visited Antioch and blessed the new concordat. Then the Judaizers arrived, those who insisted on Christians obeying the ritual laws, and Peter switched sides. In a scene in which Peter had to choose between Paul and his detractors, Peter forsook Paul. Paul attacked Peter as a hypocrite motivated by fear. The intensity with which the scene is described in Galatians indicates that Paul was deeply hurt. He had been let down. What he had worked hard to achieve was crushed by an act of betrayal.

The Antioch incident occurred in 48 or 49. Within approximately a year, Paul would be in Thessalonica. Leaving Antioch, Paul and Silas visited Paul's churches to bring them the news of the Jerusalem conference. They picked up Timothy at Lystra, went on to Galatia, then to Macedonia and to Philippi. When Paul freed a demented girl from exploitation by a syndicate of men there, the offended men had Paul and Silas arrested on fraudulent charges. On appeal to their Roman citizenship the two men were released and ordered out of town. Paul refers to this incident in 1 Thess. 2:2.

Traveling the Egnatian Way they came to Thessalonica, where they were received warmly and housed with one of the new
Christians, a man named Jason. Paul preached in the synagogue in Thessalonica about Jesus as messiah, and convinced some Jews, devout Greeks (God-fearers), and not a few of the leading women (Acts 17). Messiah, when translated in non-Jewish contexts, sounded like “emperor;” so it was easy to bring a charge against Paul of preaching sedition. A mob gathered and stormed Jason’s house looking for Paul. Unable to find him there, the crowd took Jason and others to the authorities, crying, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6). That night, in the secrecy of darkness, the Christians at Thessalonica escorted Paul and Silas to safety out of the city and set them for Beroea.

This must be the incident that prompts the thanksgiving. If so it has homiletical possibility. Being Christian, manifesting one’s election, is done by taking sides when the line is drawn between fidelity and hypocrisy. The Thessalonians’ risk was in direct contrast to the cowardice of Peter. When the line was drawn at Antioch, the first disciple chose expediency. When it was drawn in Thessalonica, the newest and least of all the Christians chose exposure to danger. No wonder Paul thanks God for their work of faith, their labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is in the very next verse (1:4) that he affirms that God has chosen the Thessalonians. The sequence of the text, listing warrants before the claim, lends itself to assert that election is not a boast, based on a personal religious experience, but a conclusion based on evidence in one’s life. You cannot predetermine who is elect (read “Christian”). Election is an act of grace, confounding human expectation. Whether it is a boast or not will become evident in deeds of faith, hope, and love.

Who could have imagined that an isolated Christian community, weeks, or at the most, months old, still learning to walk, would display such Christ-like courage in the face of danger? It is what you would expect of mature, knowledgeable, Christian communities. Thessalonica must really be special, as in “chosen”; authentic followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, as evidenced in their deeds.

The Hebrew Bible lection for this Sunday is Isa. 45:1-7, the record of the anointing of Cyrus to free the Jews from Babylon. It
provides a marvelous insight into the biblical understanding of the sovereignty of God.

I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I gird you, though you do not know me.

In the choosing of Cyrus it is revealed that God's sovereignty is expressed through absolutely unanticipated and unlikely acts.

The juxtaposition of Old and New Testament lessons on this Sunday provides an insight into the misunderstood doctrine of election. The example of Cyrus lends itself to further exposition. As seen here election means inclusion in the redemptive purpose of God. One is elected to perform a deed, in this case, freeing a people from bondage. God chooses unlikely persons, even those who "do not know me."

Perhaps one could move sermonically through this material beginning with a congregation, not unlike mine, whose concept of being Christian is summarized pretty accurately in 1 Thess. 4:11: "aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs." But to be the church in the world means that there will be times when the line is drawn and the church must choose one side or another. What would be the issues facing us that would parallel the Thessalonians' test of loyalty? To choose to do the work of faith, the labor of love, and be steadfast in hope, even if it means giving up living quietly and minding your own affairs, is to move from being an ordinary religious organization to become the eschatological community, chosen by God, for which Paul gives thanks.

TWO SUNDAYS, OCTOBER 28 AND NOVEMBER 4

1 Thessalonians 1:5b-2:8
1 Thessalonians 2:7-13, 17-20

These two lections are essentially one piece and seem to address the parochial concerns of Paul's relationship to
Thessalonica. How can the preacher make two meals out of such thin soup?

We begin with an attempt to discover what situation is being addressed, to see if the way Paul speaks to it has anything to say to us.

"You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake" (1:5b). It sounds as if he is saying, "For your sake we lived exemplary lives." The implication is that the Christian life is lived for the sake of others, and that it is communicated through deeds as well as words. The following verses suggest that the Thessalonians' exemplary life as a church is directly dependent on Paul's exemplary personal life. We lived exemplary lives, you became imitators of us, you have become an example to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, and from there, "Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere" (1:5c-8). It is a clear chain of dependence beginning with Paul.

Paul seems to say that the truth of the gospel he preached is linked to the integrity of the life he lived. If so, that explains his pains in countering questions about his behavior. Timothy, who had been sent by Paul to see how the Thessalonians were getting along, reported they were fine (3:6). But evidently there were rumblings that Paul was just another traveling charlatan in the mold of the Cynic philosophers who preyed on the Macedonian towns. The charge would have had some credibility, given Paul's brief stay and hasty departure, and his subsequent failure to return. Perhaps someone said to Timothy, "Paul is just like the other traveling preachers. You would think he would have come back after all we did for him. We saved his life."

So Paul, at some length, defends his character, which defense comprises most of the text for these two Sundays. First, rather than thinking of himself, Paul exhibited no little courage in facing danger to preach to them (2:2). Second, he spoke not from uncleanness (2:3), which has the meaning of "immorality," and means Paul did not speak out of impure motive such as greed or ambition. Nor, he continues, did he speak from guile, which means deception, a common charge against the Cynics. The remaining disclaimers dissociate Paul from other typically fraudulent Cynic tactics: speaking to please the crowd, saying what people want to hear in order to get to their wallets, or being
put on a pedestal and receiving special favors (2:4-6). To contradict the suspicion that he exploited them financially, he reminds them, “we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you” (2:9). Finally, he announces that he wanted to return, “but Satan hindered us” (2:18), which may or may not have provoked a ripple of laughter from the back of the church.

If I were to preach these texts I believe I would treat them in one sermon and focus on the reason for morality in Christian life.

Paul is attempting to justify himself to the Thessalonians but not to God, so the theological issue of grace and works does not seem to be involved here. Paul, more than any other, is the one who defined that issue and established the theological norm: We are saved not by our works, not even by being “holy and righteous and blameless” (2:10), the defense Paul makes to the Thessalonians.

Nor does the issue of the truth of the gospel seem to be involved. The truth of the gospel transcends the behavior of the messenger. We have seen that the truth can be spoken with power through lives that have proved to be less than exemplary, and utter nonsense has come from the lips of the righteous.

The medieval church recognized this with its doctrine *ex opere operato*, which was not merely an accommodation to lax clergy manners and morality, but a fundamental insight into the transcendence of grace. The doctrine affirmed that the efficacy of the sacrament was not dependent on the purity of the priest celebrating it. Graham Greene’s “whiskey priest” in *The Power and the Glory* is an exposition of this doctrine. The priest, a flawed and earthen vessel, nevertheless became the only means of grace in the situation, and in the end approached martyrdom in imitation of his Lord.

The Protestant doctrine, *simul iustus et peccator*, ought to guard against claiming to embody the truth of the gospel in an individual life. Our justification does not make us sinless, so even the most exemplary life is flawed, including Paul’s. He himself recognized this elsewhere, specifically in Romans 7 and Philippians 3, where he confesses his sinfulness and imperfection. Paul would seem to be the first to admit that if the truth of the gospel depended on perfect lives it would never be heard.
The issue lies elsewhere and has to do with the mission of the church. It is significant that Paul says we were moral “for your sake” (1:5). Our behavior does not determine the nature of grace nor the truth of the gospel, but it does affect the credibility of the church. Could it be that Paul feared the mission of the church in Thessalonica would be jeopardized if it were believed that its founder were a charlatan, no different from the hucksters who exploited the gullible? The church’s distinction in the ancient world lay in the quality of its life. Christians had renounced the practices of the world.

The Hebrew Bible and Gospel lessons give support to this understanding of the church. Matt. 22:34-36 reports a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees over the law, which gives Jesus the opportunity to present the Great Commandment. The passage underscores the fundamental difference between a morality that merely obeys laws and the more demanding Christian love of neighbor. The Exodus passage (22:21-27) reinforces this with laws revealing Israel’s God as defender of the poor and helpless.

The Matt. 23:1-12 lection is the beginning of the woes to the scribes and Pharisees who “preach, but do not practice,” and who do moral acts to be seen by the crowds. And the Malachi reading is a diatribe against the priests for the kind of misuse of office of which Paul was accused, which charge he vigorously denies. “You have caused many to stumble by your instruction” (Mal. 2:8).

In the tenth verse of the first chapter, Paul uses an early formula to characterize Thessalonian belief: “to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” Scholars believe this fragment, which uses uncharacteristically Pauline words, is a pre-Pauline confession, used by Paul because it had meaning for the Thessalonians. They see themselves as an eschatological community, called out of the world to wait for the Parousia. To join the church was to renounce the world and its lax morality. Indications are that the “God-fearers” who visited the Jewish synagogues, and from whom Paul recruited members of the church, were attracted initially to Judaism because its rigid moral code stood in stark contrast to the disintegration of moral
The church called them out of that world to wait for the dawning of a new age upon the return of Christ. To be in the church, therefore, was to be in an eschatological community, living a life in marked contrast to the standards of the world. Their very presence as a community of faith was a witness to the age that is to come. To be the church, in other words, was to be exemplary in morals, a lamp set upon a hill. In that context, moral behavior is not an incidental matter. I doubt if the church debated morality as we do, on the basis of what was tolerable or acceptable, waiting on the scientific community to speak before it made up its mind. For the eschatological community in the world there was only one question: is it exemplary? Does it conform to the ethics of the kingdom of God? Such a question was not academic. It was integral to their reason for being, or as it would probably be put in today's bureaucratic language: morality is missional. Their example of a better way was the best thing they had going for them. The church was offering to a cynical, demoralized and bored civilization a new life of discipline, sacrifice, and mutual trust. They waited for the new age by anticipating its rule in their own life.

Paul knew the gospel transcends the individual. That is why he could be honest about his own sinfulness and confess that he is not perfect (Phil. 3:12). He knew we are justified not by our keeping the moral law, but by God's grace. But Paul also knew that the church has a mission in this world to be exemplary. The Thessalonian church was known throughout Macedonia and beyond for the example of its life, and its life had been nurtured by his—"we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children" (2:7). Though the gospel would survive any unfaithfulness, the Thessalonians might not. So: "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 11

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Kurt Vonnegut said once:

Well, I'm screamingly funny, you know... and I talk about stuff Billy Graham won't talk about for instance, you know, is it wrong to kill?
And what is God like: And stuff like that because they can't get it from the minister, and I show what heaven is like, you know, which you can't get a minister to talk about. . . . And so they want to know. They want to know what happens after you die. . . . And I talk about it. That's a very popular subject. (From an interview with Harry Reasoner on "60 Minutes," quoted in Robert Short, Something to Believe In [New York: Harper & Row, 1975], p. 277.)

There is more than a little truth to Vonnegut's assessment of the preacher's reluctance to talk about ultimate things. There are undoubtedly several reasons for this timidity, but one reason, I am sure, is that the biblical discussion of resurrection is in mythical language, and we were taught in seminary that modern folk do not understand the world mythologically any more. We learned what passages were historical (precious few), and which were legend, story, or myth. Implicitly, or explicitly, we were taught to qualify myth as "merely" myth, as if it were not to be taken seriously, but seen as first-century superstition locked in the canon.

Hoping to be free of myth, many turned to more "scientific" studies of death and the afterlife, like those done by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, to find material for preaching, failing to notice that they were exchanging first-century myths for twentieth-century ones. More accurately, they were replacing first-century, distinctively biblical myths, with first-century Greek myths in modern dress.

More recently biblical studies have returned to literary criticism with freshly honed tools that have enabled the preacher to use materials a generation ago he or she would have considered totally anachronistic. One of the pioneers in the new literary criticism, Amos Wilder, has written that most interpretation of these materials has been done by scholars whose bias separated form from content and thus set the realm of imagination over against life.

It is not surprising that eschatology is heavily discounted by this kind of prepossession. But its symbols are not merely rhetoric and decoration. They are real media of power and life. Metaphor and trope constitute essential vehicles of the Gospel itself. They not only dramatize it, but they participate in it; they define world-view and
The lection for this Sunday challenges the preacher to take the
myth of the Parousia seriously as poetic language capturing the
Christian hope for history and individual life. Since 4:13-18 is the
source for much of the hokum that passes for Christian
preaching, there ought to be a ready and somewhat surprised
audience when the minister embarks on an honest investigation
of the lection.

Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica to find out how the
Christians were doing. Evidently they were just fine, except for
a few questions, the most pressing being, What happens to
those Christians who have died before the Lord comes? Will
they miss out on the glorious day? The question was not, will
they be resurrected? but when?

To answer the question Paul uses the early church’s graphic
and fantastic expression of Christian hope. The Lord himself
will descend from heaven with the sound of a trumpet. The dead
shall be raised first. That was what they had asked about and
there is the answer: the dead will not only not miss out, they will
be first. Paul then rounds out the vision, saying, “Then we who
are alive,” shall be taken up with the newly resurrected in the
clouds to meet the Lord.

The story is enriched by examining the details. It is a
theophany in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew
Bible clouds were used to hide God, and here they are
ingeniously employed to transport God’s Son, but the meaning
is that God is at work to keep the divine promise.

The idea of “meeting” is a tradition taken from the Hellenistic
world and was the practice of dignitaries going out to meet
visitors and ceremonially escort them back into the town. We
observe this practice even today at consecration of bishops and
at political conventions when a delegation leaves the assembly
to escort the new leader into the hall.

It is a glorious picture of the long awaited hope being fulfilled:
Christ the Lord of history returning to claim his own, greeted by
those who have worked and waited for his coming. It is an
answer to a particular question, “Will the dead be resurrected before this great day so they can be a part of the celebration?” The answer is yes. But by repeating the entire myth Paul allows us to view the fullness of early Christian hope.

The text affords the opportunity to make several affirmations. Christian eschatology is tied to the creation. Christ returning means that God has not given up on the creation. Rising to meet Christ in the skies is not an escape from the world, but a going forth to escort the exiled king back to his earthly realm. Rather than fostering other-worldliness, Christian eschatological vision of the return of Christ is an encouragement to join the battle with new resolve. Waiting for the Lord is to live the way underground resistance forces prepared for liberation, by struggling against the enslaving powers, refusing to accept the world the way it is now as the way it must always be, and looking toward that day when they will be able to escort their exiled leader to his rightful throne.

Second, the Christian doctrine of resurrection preserves an essential affirmation of the doctrine of creation, the importance of individual life. In contrast to the Greek immortality of the soul, which we know today in eastern religious and American funeral practices, the resurrection of the body affirms the sanctity of each individual life as a creation of God. What God creates, God will bring to fulfillment. Personhood is both body and soul, so the Bible cannot conceive of a person apart from body. Therefore in spite of its inefficiency and cumbersomeness (after all, what are you going to do with all those bodies at the resurrection?) the Bible insists that because God declared the creation good, and the church in baptism affirms each individual created as precious, the trumpet will sound, “and the dead will be raised imperishable” (I Cor. 15:52).

In I Corinthians 15 Paul answers the obvious question raised by such an absurd doctrine: What about this body which decays? I could add a few questions of my own: What about imperfect bodies? Mixed-up lives? Deformities and handicaps? Paul’s answer is adequate to answer all: We shall have a new body. It will not be the same body, but it will be a body, because that’s the only way you can conceive of person.

Finally the sermon should say something about mystery in all
I Thessalonians 5:1-11

The hermeneutical bridge between Thessalonica and the situation to which I am called to preach is the breakdown of the present world and the facing of an uncertain future. In such times people find meaning in apocalyptic myth. Last week's lection, and this one from the fifth chapter, are the

this, "Lo! I tell you a mystery" (I Cor. 15:51). That means all talk about the end of history and the resurrection of the dead is speculation. Christians are no different from anyone else in this regard. The Bible gives us not a blueprint of the future, but a hope based on what we know now. We know first and foremost the Resurrection of our Lord, "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (I Cor. 15:20). We know the creation and its goodness. We know the Incarnation of our Lord and believe that his Lordship is over all creation. Just as we must trust God for life itself, for "without our aid he did us make," so we trust that God can do it again. And we believe that in God's time, not ours, there will be a great celebration when the Son, like an exiled king, returns to his rightful throne.

The other two lections speak to this issue as well. Matt. 25:1-13 is the parable of the bridesmaids who must wait for the bridegroom to appear. Their responsibility is to escort him to the banquet. It is a clear parabolic version of the end-time Paul describes; the Parousia returning on a cloud and the faithful going to meet him as his escort into his kingdom. The message of the parable is: You know neither the day nor the hour, so keep watch. Get ready for a lengthy vigil.

The Hebrew Bible lesson rounds out the theme with a reading from Amos 5:18-24. Once again the theme of mystery is present with the warning that you do not know what the day of the Lord will bring. The faithful do not worry about such things but leave them to God. In the meantime, they are to be at work doing the will of God. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (5:24).

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 18

I Thessalonians 5:1-11
myths used by the Thessalonian church to make sense of their time. What is significant in them, and uniquely Christian in any age, is not that they anticipate the end of the age—all apocalyptic myths do that—but that they call for the Christian to live now a life that becomes the age that is coming. As a result, Christian life in times of despair is characterized by action empowered by faith, love, and hope, the Pauline triad which appears again in this passage (5:8). Here, and in the first chapter, Paul lists hope last in the sequence. In Corinthians, love concludes the list. Could Paul's style be to place the quality each church needs the most in last place for emphasis? It would seem to be true that Corinth, with its warring factions, needed love above all else. And given the questions sent to Paul from Thessalonica about the end—when will the dead be raised, when will the day come—hope is what they need most. The mood of apocalyptic times is despair. One should be able, in such times, to spot the Christian by her or his hope.

Paul uses the metaphors of night and day, sleep and wakefulness. They are common biblical figures and particularly apt for the message of the lections. The day of the Lord, of course, is a code term for the end of the age, a time of foreboding and dread for those who do not believe. But for the church it means the dawning of a new day for all history and therefore will be a time of light, ending the darkness of the present eon. Sleep is the body's response to the night. So in the darkness of the present time the temptation is to succumb to the weakness of the flesh and retreat into the arms of Morpheus (or his chemically constituted cousins). Is not excessive sleep one of the symptoms of depression? So drunkenness and sleep, the two sense-numbing alternatives to hopelessness, are to be avoided. The Christian reacts to the disintegration of the present age with renewed hope and vigorous anticipation of what is to come. "'Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near"' (Luke 21:28).

The passage opens with the answer to the question, "When will the day of the Lord come?" It is as if Paul drew upon the parables of Jesus for his answer, with the marvelously descriptive, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the
night” (5:2). Which means you do not know when it will come.

I am confident that I would use the analogy of the “thief in the night” to speak to the widespread assumption in our time that it is possible to date the Parousia. I used to ignore the TV broadcasters and paperback authors who so flagrantly distorted biblical prophecy, the way the NFL for years ignored the AFL, and for the same reason—establishment arrogance. But the persistent refusal of the seers to disappear indicates that they are answering questions great masses of people are asking. These are times of anomie. People sense something is happening beyond their control. Events seem to have apocalyptic significance. To ignore that is to give free rein to those who would interpret present historical events as having been anticipated in biblical prophecy. It may be an engaging way to get into this sermon, therefore, to speak to that issue with an interpretation of “Nobody knows the hour or the day.”

Then an exposition of what it means to be a Christian in the time of the breakdown of the present and the uncertainty of the future would be appropriate. This time of uncertainty was precisely the situation Thessalonians was in. Paul’s advice to them was: get to work. Let the world see what is coming by seeing the quality of your life: “Put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (5:8).

The tone of this passage, and of most of the letter, is one of tension: the church set against the world. The crucial question for preaching Thessalonians is this: Is that tension a contextual peculiarity of Thessalonica and the first-century church, or is it a definition of the nature of the church? If it is such a definition, then to be the church, my church must be in tension with its world.

It is easier to preach the Parousia. Most mainstream Protestant congregations have too substantial a stake in the present to feel kindly toward preaching that suggests to be Christian is to be set against the present. It will sound to them like Communism, or the next thing to it. In their minds, if the world is disintegrating, faith should work to shore it up. Their conclusion, therefore, would be that the advice to the Thessalonians is contextual and does not apply to us. After all, Paul was wrong. He preached the immediate return of the Parousia, and he was dead wrong. That
relativizes his teaching about the church being an eschatological community. The world as it is will be around a long time. The chance of Christ coming is remote, to say the least. So the Christian way of being in the world should be something like a Constantinian accommodation. I suspect all of us face congregations on Sunday morning who reason that way. If so, Thessalonians will be heard as an anachronism. They will believe Paul was wrong.

But maybe he was right. If error in predicting the coming of the kingdom discredits one aspect of the New Testament, the same argument could be used to get rid of any other uncomfortable teaching. So how do you preach this text to people who believe the New Testament eschatology is problematical at best?

I have found a helpful suggestion in a yet-unpublished manuscript on preaching written by a group of Process theologians. Using Whitehead’s suggestion about propositions, “that it is more important that they be interesting than that they be true,” the authors suggest that preaching should take the form of suggestion or proposal, rather than dogmatic announcement. The effect, they propose, will be a style of preaching that helps the Spirit to free the hearer “by offering biblical proposals for imaginative reflection.” In a particularly helpful passage, they suggest:

We should allow ourselves to be confronted by those suggestions in their full strangeness. It is not the task of the preacher to extract the acceptable kernel and discard the husk. The hearer of the sermon should not be protected from the offense of strange, and sometimes false, ideas. As proposals even they can be liberating. Sometimes it will be in the strangest and most disturbing of proposals that the Spirit will find the greatest opportunity. (William A. Beardslee et al., “Preaching in the Service of the Spirit,” in New Testament and Preaching, forthcoming from Westminster Press.)

With that as a theology of preaching one would be led to preach Thessalonians as it is, not in the style of dogmatic assertion, but as a proposal. What if Paul were right? What if being the church means living in the light of the new age, rather than in the shadows of the present? What would it look like?
The church saw itself existing in faith in relation to an event that had happened (the Resurrection), in hope in relation to an event that is coming (the Parousia), and witnessing to the meaning of both events through deeds of love in the present.

The Resurrection was the key to understanding history. The power of death is broken and the new age has already been inaugurated. To be the church is to be that community that has the eyes to see the signs of new life coming to a despairing world. They believed that Christ, while returning in the future to establish his kingdom in fullness, was present in the world now overcoming the power of death and meaninglessness. The preponderance of the theme of judgment directed toward the church in the literature of the canon discloses that the early church knew that to be the church is to have eyes to see him working in the present in the same way he worked in the past, and to follow him.

Therefore to be the church "between the times" is to be a community that sees the kingdom breaking into the present. The church knows that Christ will not only come at the end unexpectedly, but in the present the same way. He will just as surely surprise us now with where he appears and with whom he associates, as he did the people of the first century. So the church is to be alert, awake, and open to his coming incognito now, and in glory at the end.

This sense of a special mission was embodied in the word the Church used to describe itself, ekklēsia. It was a political term, referring to the assembly of free citizens in the Greek city-state. They were called together to make decisions and take action for the welfare of the community. They were stewards, in effect, of the world. It was of particular eschatological significance that slaves, women, and non-Greeks, those who were excluded from the Greek ekklēsia, were full and equal members of the church. It was as if this ekklēsia, in which "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), was a microcosm of the age that is coming. As representative humankind it is called to act in behalf of the whole world. (Theodore Jennings, "Worship and Life," The Christian Century, November 23, 1983, pp. 1080 ff.)
The Gospel lesson, Matt. 25:14-30, offers a parable on this theme. The parable of the talents is aimed at those who, anticipating the Parousia, play it safe. Those who are praised and rewarded at the return of the master are those who take risks in the present. It should also be noted that the lengthy absence of the master means the servants (the church) are given considerable responsibility to act in behalf of the master's interests in the interim. Every Christian has something to give in fulfilling this responsibility, and the opportunity to use it. When the church is loyal to its master investing deeds of faith, hope, and love in the present, it is an eschatological community, making visible the kingdom that is coming.

Nikolai Berdyaev put it this way. "If you feed the hungry or free the oppressed, you are committing an eschatological deed, and you are "ending" this world so full of hunger and oppression. Every truly creative act is a historical fulfillment, a coming of the End, a transcending and transforming of this spellbound, stricken world of ours." (Quoted in Arthur E. Walmsley, “Christians and Social Ministry: Witnesses to a New Age,” The Christian Century, April 14, 1976, p. 359.)

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