

THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS?



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THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS?

THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN IN CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

edited by

William John Lyons and Jorunn Økland



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SETTING THE SCENE: THE END OF THE BIBLE, THE END OF THE WORLD¹

Jorunn Økland

1. *The Pretentious Text and its Historical Paradoxes*

In a way, this volume should not exist. Or rather, this volume is about a history that should not exist: the reception history of the Book of Revelation. The essays in this volume showcase effects, uses, and appropriations of Revelation in literature and poetry, film, music, philosophy, political theology, and religious ideology. In doing so as part of a rich and varied collection, they bring into sharp relief the ironic nature of the book's reception history. For it is indeed an ironic experience to publish a volume on the reception history of a book that has for two millennia predicted the imminent *end of the world*, and reassured its readers in the face of it: 'The Lord God of the spirits of the prophets sent his angel to show his servants the things that must happen very soon: Look, I am coming soon!' (Rev. 22.6-7). There is also something inherent in this text that over and over again leaves individual readers to believe that they, and perhaps even they alone, have the key to understand this book.² Multiply this experience by x, and you get one important strand of the history of this book's reception.

On its own terms, Revelation announces itself as *the final word* in two senses. It narrates the imminent end of the world as we know it; thus, according to it, not many further words will ever get the opportunity to be uttered. Also, whoever spreads this final (in a temporal sense) word must not add or deduct anything from it, thus no further words must be uttered anyway (see esp. Rev. 22.18-21). In this respect it also becomes the final word in a qualitative sense. Add to this that the words in Rev. 22.18-19 defining Revelation as the final word in a qualitative sense are put in the mouth of Jesus himself, who towards the end of Revelation 22 (Rev. 22.16-20a) re-enters the text and speaks in first person, endorsing

1. I would like to thank William John Lyons for valuable input into this introduction, especially for his suggestions about topics in need of coverage.

2. An example is David Koresh, discussed by Newport in this volume. Newport also presents an explanation of what this 'something' might be.

everything revealed previously in the book. The book opens in a similar way, by stating that this is 'the revelation of Jesus Christ, given him by God, in order to show his servants what must happen very soon' (Rev. 1.1). With such an introduction and conclusion, everything in-between is framed as words from Jesus himself via his angel. But how did Rev. 22.6-21 end up as somehow an interpretive lens through which to view the Bible as a whole?

The exact date of writing and dissemination of the book will not be of great importance in this volume. It is clear that the origin of Revelation, which we do not even know with any degree of certainty, has not controlled the interpretations of the book through the centuries. The emphasis here will be more on what the text has come to mean in contexts unknown to and either partly or totally alien to the original author of the work. Still, a reception-historical approach also implies that one at least considers how the earliest recipients perceived the book. We will therefore present a very brief sketch of the book's early history.

We have no traces of the reception and reaction of the very first readers for whom the book was originally written. It is a widely held assumption that the text originates from Asia Minor, since the seven churches addressed in the first chapter are all located in this region. As Steven Friesen points out, 'this feature sets it apart from nearly every other apocalyptic text of its era'.³ Another common assumption not objected to here is that it was written around the turn of the first century, either late in the reign of the emperor Domitian (81-96 CE) or early in the reign of Trajan (98-117 CE), and that it can be read as a counter-imperial, counter-cultural and subversive reaction to the increased tendency to worship the emperor in this period.⁴

3. Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 150.

4. Some interpreters hold that this was due to Domitian's own claims to divinity and that participation in the cult of the emperor became compulsory. Adela Yarbro Collins takes a more nuanced view pointing out that it is too tenuous to take literally the statements of persecution in the book, as 'the examples of Roman repression reflected in Revelation are the sorts of things that could and did happen at various times in the first two centuries CE. The origin of the Apocalypse, therefore, cannot be explained in terms of a response to that particular kind of social crisis' (*Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984], p. 104). In continuation with her book one could argue that the increase in imperial cult was rather the result of a large-scale patron-client relationship, in which new clients in the Roman East wanted to increase their visibility and sense of security vis-à-vis the Emperor by making him the object of worship. This interpretation also converges with those studies of imperial cult indicating that it was much greater in the Roman East in this period than it ever became in the West. For arguments concerning dating, see Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 104; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, pp. 147-50. For

Revelation belongs to the Jewish genre apocalypticism, which was used to reflect on cosmology and eschatology, and to utter political critique.⁵ It is a Christianized version of this genre, but even so Jesus' name is mentioned only on a few occasions. It was written by someone named 'John', clearly a Christian believer (cf. Rev. 1.4, 9; 22.8) who was familiar with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible (especially Ezekiel and Zechariah) and with the apocalyptic genre. The identification of this John with the apostle John of the Gospels was crucial to the book's canonization, but the dating favoured more recently effectively prohibits such an identification.

As mentioned, we know little about how Revelation was read during the very earliest years of its existence. But Dimitris Kyrtatas, who has analysed the reception history of Revelation in a more material sense than any of the contributions in this volume (i.e. through manuscript transmission, references and quotes; who cites it favourably, who dismisses it), points out that our first witness of the reception of Revelation is Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, who died around 130 CE. Kyrtatas has assembled sayings of Papias from Eusebius, Irenaeus and Jerome, and concludes that he must have been formed as a Christian in the circle of the author of Revelation. Kyrtatas uses the evidence on Papias to conclude that 'not more than a generation after its composition, *Revelation* was being taken seriously in some quarters in Asia Minor',⁶ noting also that these were the years of the second Jewish revolt (133–35 CE) and the period in which Christian apocalyptic literature flourished.

In spite of this early recognition, the status of Revelation remained uncertain for a long time. It is mentioned by early Christian authors among several other books that never made it into the canon. We know from Eusebius, among others, that it was disputed. The early church fathers who deliberated over whether to include it or not, were not impressed by its claim to be more or less directly the word of the Lord. Such pretensions were difficult to swallow when coupled with prophecy and descriptions of the end of the world. Kyrtatas points out that 'in the third century, pro-Montanist authors, such as Tertullian, were fervent supporters of Revelation while anti-Montanists, such as Gaius,

reading Revelation as a (counter-)cultural product of the Roman Empire, see Friesen, *Imperial Cults*; Christopher Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

5. See further e.g. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998); David Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983).

6. Dimitris Kyrtatas, 'The Transformations of the Text: The Reception of John's Revelation', in Averil Cameron (ed.), *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (London: Duckworth, 1989), pp. 146–62 (151).

its fervent opponents'.⁷ The anti-Montanists subjected Revelation to in-depth scrutiny and found that it was illogical and not an apostolic writing (a criterion of divine inspiration and thus of canonicity), but rather the product of a heretic. In Kyrtatas's formulation, they meant it could not be an apocalypse, an unveiling, 'since it was veiled by its own heavy, thick curtain of unintelligibility'.⁸ In the more tempered and analytical treatise *On Promises*, Dionysius of Alexandria (mid-3rd century CE) concluded on the basis of stylistic and theological considerations that the book could not have been written by the same author as the Gospel and Epistles of John. He left to others to draw the natural consequence that it could not be included in the canon. After Dionysius, the majority of Christian leaders in the East omitted Revelation from the canon, and in many corners of the East they continued to reproduce a canon exclusive of Revelation even into the tenth century.⁹ In the West, however, the book found much more favour, through an allegorical approach.¹⁰ Thus, its place at the end of the Christian Bible was a place given to it because it was included relatively late, it remained disputed, and it was difficult to fit into the New Testament canon, both genre- and content-wise. For a long time it remained the Christian canon's weakest link.

The history of canonization is important because it explains why the words at the end of Revelation ended up as the final words of the Christian Bible, and we can begin to appreciate that the book has not always enjoyed the strong position it enjoys today, especially in the Anglophone world. First, it is the ironic revenge of history that the precarious position given to the book among other reasons as a result of its late canonization ended up giving the book – in another period – added weight as the last book of the Christian Bible and handing over to it the Bible's final word and a key to its interpretation.

Second, the imagery of the book found so compelling today, was perhaps less compelling in a period when many apocalypses were circulated for readers' consumption – it was simply one among many. The early church further had a strong and probably healthy scepticism towards anyone claiming visions and revelations. The imagery was rather an argument *against* the book in a time more discerning and critical towards prophets. Similarly, Luther lists this among the arguments against the book in his

7. Kyrtatas, 'Transformations of the Text', p. 152.

8. Kyrtatas, 'Transformations of the Text', p. 154.

9. Kyrtatas, 'Transformations of the Text', pp. 154–56.

10. Revelation's destiny in the West is well covered in Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 15–17.

1522 introduction to it. The author should rather speak plainly with clear arguments, like the other biblical authors!¹¹

The history of its canonization finally makes us reflect on the period after its position in the New Testament was secured, i.e. the Middle Ages, in this volume covered by Holdenried's essay. It was in this period the foundation was laid for the much more authoritative position Revelation enjoys today, so well described in Kovacs and Rowland's commentary under the heading 'The Joachite revolution'.¹² It was Joachim of Fiore who in the 12th century introduced the notion that the Apocalypse should be seen as the hermeneutical key to the Bible as a whole and also to world history. Still, even in this period, Revelation's position remained very strong in some circles, but was unstable in others. Indeed in the periods preceding the appearance of the Bible in print and in vernacular languages, Revelation was not identifiable as a separate book. Most people could not read and only a few had access to biblical manuscripts. Thus people identified and merged its content with other biblical apocalypses such as Daniel, Ezekiel, and Matthew 24, as especially Holdenried and Harding show in this volume. With the emergence of the printed Bible, however, its inclusion in the canon quickly gave it an immense advantage over the other apocalypses with which it had competed for attention through the Middle Ages.

One could argue that Revelation's position remains unstable today, so long as significant parts of European continental culture and church life do not know quite what to make of it. Since Luther was sceptical towards the book,¹³ the book is less familiar within the tradition carrying his name.

The merging of Revelation with other apocalyptic texts was not just a passing mediaeval phenomenon, it can also be observed in the modern

11. Martin Luther, 'Vorrhede auff die offinbarung Sanct Johannis' [1522], in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Die Deutsche Bibel* (vol. 7: Episteln und Offenbarung 1522/46; ed. Otto Albrecht; Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus, 1931). Online: *Luthers Werke Full-Text Database* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2002), <http://luther.chadwyck.co.uk>, no pages.

12. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 17-19.

13. 'I miss in this book more than one thing, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it, namely that Christ is neither taught nor known in it.... Therefore I stick to the books that present Christ to me, clearly and purely' ('Myr mangelln an disem buch nit eynerley, das ichs wider Apostolisch noch prophetisch hallte.... Vnd ist myr die vrsach gnug, das ich seyn nicht hoch achte, das Christus, drynnen widder geletet noch erkandt wirt... Darumb bleyb ich bey den buchern, die myr Christum hell vnd reyn dar geben'; Luther, 'Vorrhede auff die offinbarung Sanct Johannis' [1522], my own translation).

period, since again fewer people relate to the Bible through reading it in its presentation as a printed book. In this volume, both Cash and Marx (discussed by Lyons and Økland) exemplify the modern merging of passages especially from Matthew 24 and Revelation.

That this particular apocalypse then, has gradually gained its place of prominence in our cultural memory over against other apocalypses is a result of forces and developments in many different areas, often external to the Book of Revelation itself.

2. Hermeneutical Paradoxes

It is another ironic experience to consider shining examples of the varied and rich, even voluptuous, reception history of a book that singularly promises utter gloom and God's punishment to anyone adding to or taking away from its contents. During the process of working on this volume, the contributors encountered deluges of re-interpretations, re-writings, and paraphrases of Revelation in spite of the very stern warning, that 'if someone adds to them [i.e. the words of prophecy in this book], God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if someone takes away anything from the words of this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life... described in this book' (Rev. 22.18-19). But then Revelation also contains a very strong encouragement to disseminate the contents very widely, and to do the opposite of sealing up its words – i.e. decoding them: 'do not seal off the words of prophecy in this book, for the right time is near' (Rev. 22.10). And: 'Blessed is the one reading and those hearing the words of this prophecy and holding on to what is written in it' (Rev. 1.3).

Thus all interpreters venturing out to spread the words in order to respond to the call of these latter encouragements (Rev. 1.3 and 22.10), are bound to break one of the two former prohibitions (Rev. 22.18-19). They have to spread the word, but how can one unseal, decode and spread the word in new contexts without adding anything or detracting anything from the original message? We know today that this is a hermeneutical impossibility.¹⁴

One would think that the double message and prescription of the text at this meta-level concerning how it should be received and passed on has kept interpreters in a sort of double bind. But in practice it seems to have had the opposite effect. Rather than closing interpretation down, this impossible yet urgent challenge has triggered and unleashed the

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Gesammelte Werke: Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), esp. pp. 336-43.

creativity of recipients in a uniquely productive way. The sheer variation, even at a basic level, among the interpretations, appropriations and paraphrases, is evidence to that. Revelation probably has a wider span of basic models of interpretation than any other NT book, except perhaps for the Gospel of John.¹⁵

Given this state of affairs, the book's long and variegated reception history could be read as a meditation on Revelation 22, trying to negotiate its inherent paradoxes and its prescriptions at a meta-level in relation to its content proper: the visions. The vivid and colourful imagery in the visions are perhaps an even more important reason why the book has engendered so many responses in painted and written form. Many essays in the current volume will address such responses.

In conclusion, in spite of the fact that a reception history of Revelation should not exist, the fact that it does exist is a testimony not just to its status as a canonized book, but above all a testimony to the inherent qualities and generative tensions in the text itself.

3. *Time and Space Paradoxes*

In Revelation's history of interpretation, it is clear that also its spatio-temporal orientation gives rise to another set of paradoxes. While biblical time is reproduced in churches throughout the liturgical year (e.g. the congregation are 'with' Christ at the cross, or 'with' the shepherds who come to adore baby Jesus just after his birth), and biblical space and place are similarly reproduced in liturgy (e.g. Golgotha and Bethlehem), the Book of Revelation has its own issues of space and time that make such ritual re-enactment very difficult.

Regarding space: Within an otherwise very un-iconic early Christian tradition, in this book sight gains the status as the primary sense instead of hearing. But the vision is communicated through a transformation into a hearing/reading experience—it is 'encoded in writing' as David Hellholm formulates it.¹⁶ Revelation has been very attractive for artists to decode back into visual expressions, not only because of this spatial-visual character of the book and its extremely vivid imagery. It may also have

15. We will not risk the statement that the two books are written by the same author, as tradition has it because Revelation's implicit author's name is John, and the same name was carried by the disciple believed to be the author of the Gospel. Still, the books do share this strange quality of lending themselves to almost any interpretive model and framework.

16. David Hellholm, 'The Visions He Saw or: To Encode the Future in Writing: An Analysis of the Prologue of John's Apocalyptic Letter', in *Text and Logos: The Humanistic Interpretation of the New Testament* (Festschrift Hendrikus W. Boers; ed. Theodore W. Jennings; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 109-46.

been a contributing factor that is difficult to make clear mental images out of its fragmentary landscape. The author jumps from heaven to earth and back again, and we do not always know whether the phenomena he describes are here or there. This paradox leaves artists, preachers, scholars and other readers alike with the exciting and challenging task of putting together the pieces of this spatial-visual jigsaw-puzzle, and many of the contributions in the current volume will go into more detail about how various recipients have dealt with this task. To map Jesus' wanderings up and down between Galilee and Jerusalem does not stimulate the artistic, religious and scholarly imagination to the same extent.

Regarding time: for hundreds of years people have taken Revelation to refer to their *now*, just for *their* time and *their* place. The constant recreation in ever new readers of the experience of having been the first one to discover the text undoubtedly has to do with the peculiar poetics of the book. Miraculously, it manages to divert the attention away from the fact that it cannot refer to everyone's 'now'.

Unlike the Gospel narratives that have inspired the liturgical examples mentioned above, the difficulty of determining exactly which space and which time is under discussion in Revelation means that its spatio-temporal taxonomy has given rise to very different trajectories of interpretation. In terms of time and chronology (still with strong spatial implications), four main trajectories are compared by Steve Gregg in his *Revelation: Four Views. A Parallel Commentary*.¹⁷ The first of the four is the 'preterist' view, which dominates historical-critical scholarship. According to this view, the book refers mainly to its own Roman imperial context, and, if not 'fulfilled' already by the time of writing, its prophecies were fulfilled shortly thereafter. The 'historicist' view, according to Gregg, holds that prophecies have been fulfilled throughout the process of history, a process that is not yet completed. The 'futurist' view holds that most prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. Finally, the 'spiritual' view pays attention to symbolism and ideas, and holds that the prophecies portray ongoing cosmic-spiritual or existential conflicts that reappear again and again in human history.

A related spatio-temporal taxonomy where notions both of time and space are made more explicit and brought into interaction involves millennialist, pre-millennialist, dispensationalist, postmillennialist, and amillennialist readings of Revelation. Since this taxonomy is more current among Christian believers today, these categories will return in many of the essays in this volume, especially in those of Northcott and Woodman. These distinctions concern the exact temporal sequence of a set of events, usually including the coming of the Antichrist, the great tribulation, Christ's

17. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002.

return, the millennium, the (possible) rapture and Christ's final victory, and various answers to certain spatial questions, including the location of the millennium and the whereabouts of the saints during the millennium. Millennialism is the older and more general term, often used generally for a range of end-time expectation including the return of Christ, and the rule of the saints for a thousand years (i.e. a millennium). In premillennialism, the great tribulation is followed by the second coming of Christ who then reigns for a millennium on Earth. In Dispensationalism, one particular form of pre-millennialism, the saints will be raptured to a better place before the tribulation. Post-millennialism sees the term 'millennium' as indicating a long period of peace and intensive mission, at the end of which Christ will return. Amillennialism sees the millennium as merely symbolizing the time of the Church.

4. *Background: The Bible through the Centuries*

This volume originates in early discussions about the then recently published Revelation commentary by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland. This was the first commentary to be published in a series on the effective history of the biblical books known as the *Blackwell Bible Commentaries* series, later renamed *The Bible through the Centuries*.¹⁸ Since the focus is on historical readings and the uses and effects of biblical texts, the series constitutes a radical departure from the norms of the biblical commentary tradition. Kovacs and Rowland's groundbreaking commentary offered a preliminary glimpse of the vast and often surprising world of Revelation and its many interpreters. Because much was inevitably left unmentioned, or mentioned, but largely unexplored, many significant avenues of investigation were immediately opened up for future researchers. Furthermore, the work itself introduced a range of taxonomies for ordering the reception history of Revelation that would now also form a part of that reception history and invite further critical interaction. Finally, reflection on the actual process of doing 'effective history' on Revelation is a new research task generated post-publication.

In order to engage with these fruitful opportunities, and acknowledging our gratitude to the authors of the commentary, an interdisciplinary colloquium was organized by the editors of this volume and held at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Bristol in September 2006. It is the essays that resulted from that meeting that make up this volume. Since the conference funding did not allow us to be global, the contributors were all from Europe, or found themselves there at the

18. General editors are in addition to Kovacs and Rowland (NT), also John Sawyer and David Gunn (HB). See more on the series at www.bbibcomm.net.

time. Such logistical factors also limited their number to fourteen in total. Inevitably this means that there are many, many gaps in our coverage of Revelation's reception history, but it is also our contention that since this a vast untapped area of investigation, it would have taken untold numbers of scholars and countless volumes of their essays to even begin to approach a complete coverage. Each of the participants was asked to interact with the Kovacs and Rowland commentary from the perspective of their own interests, and Christopher Rowland was invited to participate as a respondent.

By considering both the structures underpinning the commentary and some of the lacunae that it contains, this volume is itself both a response to and a pushing beyond the Blackwell commentary into other areas, especially perhaps in the aesthetic areas of film, literature, and music. But a number of these essays – perhaps most of them – also consider the theoretical and methodological issues that are currently emerging out of the relatively new field of reception history itself.

Many contributors will discuss the various ways of finding meaning in Revelation, such as decoding, actualization, appropriation (esp. Caruthers, Jack, Roberts and Holdenried). These categories refer back to Kovacs's and Rowland's volume on Revelation, which analyses the various interpretations using this taxonomy. It is recommended to have their commentary at hand when reading this volume, or at least to have familiarized oneself with the introduction and the presentation of terminology given there.¹⁹

In this volume we are perhaps in the end less interested in taxonomy, and more interested in highlighting the *range of real readers*, individuals or group representatives, who are receiving this text.²⁰ On the dust jacket of his book on Revelation,²¹ Steve Gregg quotes G.K. Chesterton, who once said, 'though St John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creatures so wild as one of his own commentators'. Even if the comment was probably meant as a criticism, one could see all the readings Revelation has given birth to as a sign of a truly inspiring text.

19. The introduction is also currently available online on <http://www.bbibcomm.net/samples/samples.html#intro>.

20. Cf. Gadamer, 'Daß in ihrer Erkenntnis das eigene Sein des Erkennenden mit ins Spiel kommt, bezeichnet zwar wirklich die Grenze der "Methode", aber nicht die der Wissenschaft. Was das Werkzeug der Methode nicht leistet, muß vielmehr und kann auch wirklich durch eine Disziplin des Fragens und des Forschens geleistet werden' (*Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 494).

21. Gregg, *Revelation*, dust jacket.

5. *Structure, Organization and Content of the Current Volume*

That the current volume is in some way a 'commentary on a commentary', has influenced its content. Though critical reflection on Revelation and its appropriations, on the work of Kovacs and Rowland, and on reception history more generally is evident throughout, it was nevertheless convenient to group the essays under generic headings:

a. *Revelation in Art and Literature*

Jonathan Roberts engages the poet Wordsworth in an assessment of various types of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, and the value of reception history as one such type. He discusses 'decoding' and historicist hermeneutics in addition to reception history proper. Comparing various 'decoding' techniques, Roberts points out that there are hermeneutical similarities between the historicist and eschatological paradigms, rooted in a shared notion of chronological time. Next, Roberts uses Hans Georg Gadamer to address such notions of time. Gadamer emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the alterity of the text/history, and suggests that the work of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) may dissolve an artificial subject/object divide and 'fusing the horizons'. But Roberts does not find that *Wirkungsgeschichte* solves all problems, since it utilizes the same (alienated) academic forms of understanding as other types of biblical scholarship. As a result, reception history may not be up to the task that it sets itself, which may require a more profoundly different form and method. Roberts then suggests that one way of dealing with the 'chronological demands' of Revelation is to use a poetic form, where time is not constructed chronologically. Wordsworth for example, appropriates the Revelation of John to depict a vision, which then becomes inseparable from the artistic form. It thus presents almost insurmountable problems for reception historians who to some extent have to comply with the standards of historical disciplines, such as chronological order. By subjecting Revelation and the poetic uses of it to such standards, reception-historians risk producing the poetic, allusive texts as alienated museum pieces.

Jo Carruthers considers the use of Revelation as self-authorization in Christina Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep*, published in 1892. This is a highly creative and original work, structured as a Revelation paraphrase or 'devotional commentary' interspersed with prayers, poems, hymns and dialogues. Carruthers argues that Rossetti's unique form is best understood as a meditation upon knowledge and interpretation, their status and limits. Thus it is no coincidence that Rossetti chose perhaps the most obscure book of the biblical canon. Rossetti was particularly trying to address the challenge of Rev. 22.18-19, the problem of interpreting and

thereby adding or detracting from the text that we have already discussed above. She universalized the problems of interpretation addressed in these verses, and probably saw prayer and poetry as a way of avoiding the curse they expressed. Put in Derridean terms, Carruthers points out, 'in the logic of iteration the dual forces of repetition and alterity are at play so that the doubling of commentary is always a departure from the biblical text'. In Rossetti's time, such a departure from the biblical text was also perceived as an act of emasculation of God's (male) word. Further, since devotion was associated with femininity and academic interpretation with masculinity, Rossetti's choice of genre and genre blurring aided her as a woman writer, but also betrayed her familiarity with the Tractarian movement. Rossetti repeatedly brings the opposing terms prayer and interpretation together, thus somehow undermining their separation. Carruthers shows the paradox inherent in the fact that as a woman's voice, Rossetti's authorial voice is strengthened by her imitation of the biblical voice and her prayer. Rossetti's prayerful response to exegesis was partly a way to overcome gender prejudice, but even more a way to overcome the dangers of interpretation in general.

Not every reader may have heard of Christina Rossetti. But in her essay Alison Jack discusses a widely known piece of world literature, the novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Jack excavates the complex relationship between this novel and Revelation, starting out by considering Stevenson's personal life and the troubled influence of the Bible on his writings more in general. His personal background means that the relationship between his novella and Revelation is thematic and allusive and not visible on the textual surface through quotes, references or terminology. For this reason the relationship has been overlooked by previous scholars surveying direct and explicit references to the biblical texts. Drawing on Tina Pippin's research on space in Revelation, Jack finds the same spatial dichotomization in the novella as in Revelation, namely between the bottomless pit and the new Jerusalem. Jack further finds similar issues around keys, doors and the control of openings and gateways between the two worlds; the beast, etc.. And just as in Revelation where the evil survives as a backdrop for the New Jerusalem into the last chapters of the book, so the evil is also inescapably a part of Jekyll. Jack does, however, more than excavate related themes. By reading Revelation and *Jekyll and Hyde* side by side, she can also explore more actively twin ideas that are expanded slightly differently in the two writings, such as the notions of the beast ascending from the bottomless pit (Revelation 11). One of Jack's conclusions concerns Revelation as a paradigm for Christian horror stories, over which *Jekyll and Hyde* is built: 'in *Jekyll and Hyde*, the nightmare potential of Revelation is writ large' (p. 71).

In Melanie Wright's essay we move into a different genre, that of film. Wright reflects on the dynamics behind the use of the Apocalypse in film, and especially its attraction for Hollywood filmmakers. She surveys a range of films drawing more or less explicitly on the Apocalypse, and discusses a few of them in more detail, such as *The Rapture*, and the films coming out of the *Left Behind* and *Omega Code* franchises more broadly. Wright identifies some major ways of drawing on the Apocalypse in film: some films make appeals to and for a Christian message; some find in Revelation a code or guide to interpret contemporary events and make it into a point of departure for a Christian horror genre, and finally in some films—Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, for example—the book functions more as a cultural reference point. When reflecting upon the relative lack of scholarly interest in analysing how film has featured and represented the Apocalypse, she notes that the book is not amenable to approaches in either film studies or in biblical film studies, and that part of the reason for this is that the book is rarely a film's sole inter-text, but part of 'a dizzying pastiche of scriptural and other references' (p. 76). Among the films drawing on the Apocalypse we also find the clearest examples of attempts made by some contemporary filmmakers 'to move from depicting religion to *doing it*' (p. 77). When evaluating the evidence, Wright observes that examining the Apocalypse contributes little to the mapping of meanings of most films drawing on it. But films can indeed offer something to the attempt to map what Revelation is. Especially the emphasis on the miraculous in many of the films supplements the cleansed and neutralized representation of the Apocalypse offered by many academic commentators. The films further explore the gaps in the Apocalypse's story, and precisely their presence is an important part of the attraction of the Apocalypse on film-makers and believers alike.

Popular music is the area of reception covered by William John Lyons' essay. Lyons demonstrates how packed with biblical references (especially to the Apocalypse) Johnny Cash's 'The Man Comes Around' really is. The song was published in 2002 only one year before Cash died. Taking as point of departure Räisänen's distinctions and discussions in his seminal 1992 article²² on the Bible's effective history, Lyons uses Cash's 'The Man comes around' as well as Cash's own retrospective descriptions of the process involved in writing it, to suggest a different 'effect type' than any of those covered by Räisänen. In Cash's case, his explicit acknowledgement of his 'readerly inadequacy' with regard to the Apocalypse 'is the visible marker of an encounter with his own Bible rather than evidence for his having simply adopted the standard

22. Heikki Räisänen, 'The "Effective History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1992), pp. 303-24.

expositions of the tradition(s) in which he stands' (p. 97). Taking this as a basis for seeing the subsequent impact of Cash's song as the indirect influence of the Bible, Lyons goes on to demonstrate some of the ironic twists and turns that occur in the afterlives of biblical texts. When Cash wrote 'The Man comes around', 'the Man' was clearly the first JC, Jesus himself, returning to earth. But such authorial intentions do not control the recipients' understanding. In the reception of this hugely popular song, 'the Man' has come to refer, not only to various bringers of apocalyptic doom, but also to a second JC, namely that increasingly mythical piece of Americana, Johnny Cash himself.

The final essay in this first part deals with another well-known novel by a well-known novelist and academic who has also published extensively on issues of reception, Umberto Eco. James Harding reads the interpreters of the Apocalypse through the lens of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, considering the novel as 'one node in the rhizomatic labyrinth' of intertextual interpretations. As in Wright's essay, also in Harding's novel of choice the Apocalypse's polyvalence is a main reason why it plays such an important role – another reason is its intertextuality, according to Harding. Harding argues that the novel 'refracts aspects of how the Apocalypse itself works as a text' (p. 123), i.e. it is a readerly expectation to find meaning in the Apocalypse, and they also want to find meaning in puzzling events. When these two quests for meaning become conflated, the Apocalypse becomes a code with which to discern the meaning of puzzling events and the events are perceived as requiring the Apocalypse to provide the key to their interpretation. Along the way, Harding addresses such issues as how interpreters seek to control the texts they are interpreting and to establish limits of interpretation. The Apocalypse like other literary work is a 'machine for generating interpretations', as Eco himself has stated. Thus the authorial intention is not the primary arbiter of textual meaning. Its canonical status, its post-Reformation accessibility to an infinite number of possible readers, the polyvalence of its language – all this renders the text open to an unlimited range of meanings, it becomes a Pandora's box of meanings that no professional interpreter can control and limit. Harding's reading of Eco's novel brings to the fore the extent to which the Apocalypse itself contains so many intertextual properties that are brought into play to respond to some kind of crisis. It is these properties that are brought into play in ever new applications of the Apocalypse as responses to ever new real or imagined crises. In the case of the Apocalypse, reception history is not a question of how a text B is derivative of an underlying authoritative text A. Rather, the interpretive practice of the Apocalypse can be seen as an 'extension of the interpreted text's own intertextual properties' (p. 134).

b. *Revelation in History and Ideology*

The essays just described in Part 1 demonstrate a largely 'positive' and empathetic reception of both the book of Revelation and of Kovacs and Rowland's commentary. They extend the reach of those commentators into areas that they had neither the time, the space, nor perhaps even the inclination, to investigate. Part 2, to which we will now turn, strikes a somewhat darker note, however. The effective history of Revelation is assessed more as a troubling history. The book has inspired some devastating historical events. To be sure, it has united people to fight against religious or political oppression, but it has also made groups commit collective suicide and individuals enter psychosis, it has made political leaders invade countries they perceive as 'Babylon' or annexe places they perceive as the 'New Jerusalem'.²³ Some of the essays in part 2 also implicitly raise critical questions of the usually 'positive' project of Kovacs and Rowland. Still, none of the essays in either part seem to want to determine the reception history of Revelation as only *either* constructive *or* destructive in its effects.

The first essay of Part 2 thus very appropriately carries the title 'Revelation, Violence, and War: Glimpses of a Dark Side'. The title of Heikki Räisänen's essay could have functioned as a title for this part of the volume, and it raises many of the issues that are further elaborated by the essays that follow it. Räisänen's own essay deals with the use of Revelation in recent US imperial politics, and especially the function of Rev. 19.11-21 within this context. This is the passage narrating how a rider on a white horse brings righteousness by making war, thus implying that justice and righteousness can only be properly secured through the use of violence, by destroying those who resist such values. Historical actualizations of the text include all sorts of apologies for invasions, occupations, and resistance movements. Perhaps the clearest and currently most relevant actualization is the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* composed by Julia Ward Howe early on in the American Civil War of 1861-65. It became a canonized expression of American national religion, and was selected for performance during the ritual of prayer and remembrance held in the Washington National Cathedral for the victims of the attacks on 11th September 2001. Building on the work of Jewett, Lawrence, and Tuveson, Räisänen goes through the hymn in detail, exploring its implicit or explicit references to Revelation. Räisänen points out that one of the very troubling aspects of Revelation in addition

23. Catherine Keller discusses the appropriation of Meso- and South America by Europeans who compared the place to the New Jerusalem—until they themselves suddenly had turned it into an 'Old Jerusalem'. See Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

to the fact that it can easily lend itself to war-waging, is that it can easily also lend itself to stereotyping of the Other. The enemy is demonic, and the friends and fighters for the good are themselves perfectly pure and good. Räisänen reflects on how the Book of Revelation is indeed a difficult heritage to pass on.

Like Jack and Harding, Anke Holdenried also reflects critically on how, within a diachronic study of the reception of Revelation, textual samples should be included that do not take the form of direct commentary and that draw less overtly on specific words, phrases or passages of the biblical text. Holdenried starts from the general agreement among historians that apocalyptic prophecy was a very popular genre in mediaeval times. Historians estimate the influence of biblical books in a given period according to criteria different from those used by reception-historically minded biblical scholars, and this leads them to consider other samples as the most exemplary and representative ones. More precisely, 'Observations on the Reception of Revelation, c. 1250–1700: Apocalyptic Prophecy as Refractory Lens' explores a mediaeval text that borrows elements from Revelation's narrative of history and future events and that would not exist in the form known to us had it not been moulded on the framework given in Revelation's narrative. The text in question is the *Sibilla erithea babilonica*. Written in Latin, its prophecy is laid in the mouth of the Sibyl and sketches three trajectories of world and church history from the Trojan War to the end of the world. Like Harding's essay, this essay uses its chosen text as a lens to study important aspects of Revelation's reception, and Holdenried reaches related conclusions on the basis of her material: that Revelation was not received and understood in isolation from other biblical books drawing on the apocalyptic genre, such as Daniel and Matthew 24. But Holdenried further follows this originally 13th-century text through the Reformation, and shows how its popularity was directly linked to new approaches to the Book of Revelation itself, and how it continued to be augmented and published as part of other works. Holdenried thus recovers at a concrete textual level and through several centuries this mental habit of 'regarding Revelation as a frame of reference which people used to make sense of their world' (p. 179). But she also raises questions about whether Revelation lost this role.

'The Plain and Literal Meaning of the Text: A Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist Perspective on Revelation 20.1–7' is Simon Woodman's analysis of the disputes over the plain meaning of the Bible in British Baptist movements of the 17th century. In these movements, there quickly emerged a notion that Revelation had a 'plain' meaning that it was important to hold on to. To recover this plain meaning of the text thus became a main principle of scriptural interpretation. Woodman sees the emergence of the principle and practice of plain reading as a result of

the increased availability of the Bible in this period—a period that also gave rise to a lot of millenarian expectations. The assertions regarding the plain meaning of the text had an additional function of justifying lay dissenter interpretations (i.e. interpretations made by others than Church of England clerics). Thus Woodman's study is in tune with Harding's point that the accessibility of the Bible after the Reformation combined with the multiple backgrounds of the readers produced an endless range of interpretations. Each interpreter therefore had to make some text-external assertions to control and limit the interpretations of others and bolster their own: 'plain-reading assertions became a refuge sought by those needing somewhere to hide from the interpretative uncertainty surrounding them' (p. 208). Revelation is a text that does not invite 'plain' readings, thus it represented a particular challenge to readers with such principles of biblical interpretation. The disputes between Maton and Petrie, or between Collier and his adversaries, were especially concentrated on which interpretation of Revelation, which understanding of the end of the world, could be represented as the plain reading of Revelation, especially of Rev. 20.1-7. This was an urgent question since many believed that they were living through the millennium or the last days.

Living up to the promises made in the introduction of Part 2 of the volume, Kenneth Newport certainly explores a darker side of Revelation's reception history in his "'Be thou faithful unto death" (cf. Rev. 2.10): The Book of Revelation, the Branch Davidians and Apocalyptic (Self-)Destruction'. His essay focuses on the final days of the Waco sect before their headquarters were put to the fire, killing over eighty people. Newport takes as point of departure a view of Revelation as an 'infinitely malleable text' (pp. 211-12) for the same reasons already pointed out by other contributors to this volume. But to its multivalent intertextuality and symbolic language, Newport also adds the 'shortly come to pass' attitude, which means that when predictions based on Revelation do not come to pass, these predictions and interpretations of Revelation very quickly become outdated, hence the constant need to produce new ones, and readers are 'constantly and confidently refreshed in the knowledge that others could not understand the book' (p. 211). Newport asks along the lines laid out previously by Räisänen, how much difference the text makes. Is the text a cause of effects, or just a retrospective excuse? Newport considers the Waco incident to be closer to being an effect of the biblical text. The incident would be unthinkable without the interaction between Revelation, particular readers, and particular contexts. Newport concludes soberly that 'texts can sometimes inspire actions that seemingly go very much against the grain' (p. 217). Thus he does not consider the event either as mass killing, since so many of those who died had ample opportunity to escape had they wished to, or as mass suicide, since they

thought their souls were going to survive even as a group after death: 'It was, rather, an act of almost unimaginable faith' (p. 223).

In 'Earth Left Behind? Ecological Readings of the Apocalypse of John in Contemporary America', Michael Northcott addresses various forms of American eschatologies that all legitimize themselves by claiming to be accurate readings of Revelation. Among them is the dispensationalism already mentioned above, a form of millenarianism developed in the 19th century by J.N. Darby and popularized by the Scofield Bible. In sharp contrast to the belief of the Waco sect, in dispensationalism individual believers play no part in the endtime drama, and they will be raptured from the earth before it is destroyed. Northcott points out that one only gets from Revelation to dispensationalism by way of a fragmented, literalistic and ahistorical hermeneutic. In times of ecological breakdown, the problem with the dispensationist view is that there is no rationale for caring for the earth since God will make a new one anyway. Global warming is a sign of the end times as predicted in Revelation and Christians should do nothing about it. Dispensationalism has become a popular doctrine among conservative evangelicals not just in America but also around the world, and has found its way into popular cultural expressions such as the *Left Behind* franchise (see more below). The first volume of the series, *Left Behind*, laid many heavy claims to Revelation, and in order to counter them Northcott surveys readings of liberation and other progressive interpreters, such as Rossing and Schüssler Fiorenza. They emphasize that Revelation is best understood as a critique of empire, and that it is the whore of Babylon that is destroyed, not the whole world as such (the implications of such a reading are problematic for other [gender] reasons and are addressed in Stenström's essay). In these readings it is America's domination of the global economy that must be brought to an end in order to free the world from ecological destruction.

In her 'Feminists in Search of a Usable Future: Feminist Reception of the Book of Revelation', Hanna Stenström deals with the profound ambiguity with which feminists have approached the Book of Revelation, from *The Woman's Bible* onwards, but especially during the formative years of feminist interpretation in the 1970s and 80s. The centre of feminist attention is the book's representation of women and of feminine characters and entities. Stenström finds examples of feminist scholars wishing to focus mainly on the 'positive' potential of the book and of those unable to overlook its 'negative' implications for women, for example the implications of the book's gross caricature of Babylon the prostitute. On the other hand, the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12 is not only a very positive figure in the plot as a whole, but in addition she is the one female biblical character who most closely resembles the ancient great goddesses. Stenström further points out how many of the most engaged

feminist interpreters of the Book of Revelation, such as Schüssler Fiorenza and Pippin, share an American cultural and political context for their work. For them, to participate in the struggle over the interpretation of a common textual heritage is closely linked to concrete policies with global consequences. On another level then, Stenström's essay is also about the ethics of biblical scholarship, and the importance of politically and ethically aware biblical scholars. But she makes a case for distinguishing this awareness from what they read into or out of Revelation itself. To make a consistent analysis of the text itself is important as part of a 'larger feminist effort to understand, and make known, how understandings of gender have developed, changed, but also resisted change'. For such an analysis more methods than just feminist ones are needed. Indeed non-feminist methods may help feminists to achieve their own goals of change.

In the final piece, Jorunn Økland explores the use of the Book of Revelation by the founding fathers of Marxism, namely Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. She points to a wide difference in the way that they made use of Revelation in their writings, a difference which may be indicative of the level of detailed knowledge that they had about the book. Engels, who as a theology student had followed lectures in historical-critical biblical scholarship, was interested in the historical movement to which Revelation was an important source, namely, early Christianity. He wanted his readers to understand how the communist movement could learn from the development of an early Christianity with which it shared some striking similarities: it was also a mass protest movement of the poorer classes, which became a world religion when it just translated itself into a world language (Greek) and into intellectual categories intelligible in the larger empire. In Marx' work, however, Revelation and a number of other apocalyptic texts re-appear in his language and rhetoric like spectres. Marx and Engels' initial interest in the book may stem from the fact that Revelation was an important book in their contemporary world. Their first writings on Revelation stem from the period around and immediately after 1844, the year when many people in the Christian world expected the return of Christ in glory.

The volume closes with a response by Christopher Rowland, one of the co-authors of Blackwell's *The Bible through the Centuries* commentary on Revelation, to which we have been referring throughout this introduction.

6. *Contributions to Scholarship*

In this volume, there are no studies focusing, for example, on Joachim of Fiore or Luther's interpretations from the perspective that 'since they

are authoritative interpreters, we had better properly understand what they meant' (although such reception historians definitely do exist). A perhaps more representative sampling of readings is given in Kovacs's and Rowland's commentary. Neither do we see this endeavour as a way of getting at what the biblical text's original intention was. The current volume is rather like a display room of everything that the reception history of the Bible might *also* be, but with a singular focus on the reception of one specific book, Revelation. The texts considered here might by some be written off as exotica, but we maintain that they can contribute to new syntheses. They represent in fact an un-tapped world that we believe biblical scholars should pay more attention to rather than continuing to inhabit only a small part of the 'museum' and interacting only with those interpreters usually considered authoritative. If much of Revelation is imaginative and visual, artists have often been better interpreters of such expressive forms than scholars.²⁴ Further, reading some essays in Steve Moyise's and David Rhoads's edited volumes²⁵ alongside the current one, will give an even broader picture of the various ways readers have engaged Revelation.

If we want to understand the meaning of Revelation (and not just assemble historical knowledge about it), how the apocalypse was and is used ought to be given much more attention. The more one sees how real audiences have responded, the better guesses scholars will be qualified to make concerning how original audiences may have responded.²⁶

This volume will, more insistently perhaps than previous volumes in this area, push questions of method. Some critical reflection on uses and effects of the Bible has already taken place, and has often centred on the distinctions between reception history, effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and history of interpretation.²⁷ In this volume, even such

24. Cf. Umberto Eco, who dedicated his book from 1964, *Apocalittici e integrati*, to the apocalyptic intellectuals, especially 'the vision of the outsider, or of the artist who makes us see by making things strange' (Umberto Eco with Robert Lumley, *Apocalypse Postponed* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994], p. 3).

25. Steve Moyise (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001); David Rhoads (ed.), *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). Some, but by no means all, of the essays in these volumes are reception-historical. A few more of them share an interest in the contemporary uses and effects of Revelation.

26. See Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus 1. Teilband: Mt. 1–7* (5th edn; EKK; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), pp. 106–108. For him, the histories of effects and interpretation contribute to his reconstruction of how original concrete readers in Matthew's congregation might have understood the text. He comes close to saying that this is the original meaning of the text 'auf dem Boden der Geschichte' (p. 107).

27. See e.g. Räisänen, 'The "Effective History"'; Luz, *Matthäus*, pp. 107–8.; John

basic terms are discussed and used by scholars with not only different preferences with regard to which term to use, but also with partly different views on their meaning. Rather than reinforcing a particular terminology, we wanted to point the questions about methodology into other directions. Why are we finding value in historical readings of Revelation? Are people from different disciplines doing reception history in different ways? What exactly is the nature of the relationship between the canonical text and the secondary text that refers to it?

Another trajectory of critical reflection has focused on how to gauge the effectiveness of the Bible. In his seminal article on effective history mentioned above, Heikki Räisänen starts in the now familiar way of asking what is meant exactly by *Wirkungsgeschichte*, and then asking why English publications keep using the German term rather than its English translation, 'effective history'. But he moves on to point out that if we really mean that the Bible has 'effects' we need better measures to pin down and demonstrate the extent to which something is an effect of the Bible rather than of a myriad of other factors. Without such measures, the term will be too slippery to be a useful analytical tool. Kyrtatas has been making similar kinds of pleas for a method or 'theory, which would allow for a long-term evaluation of the existing evidence'.²⁸ It is, however, my experience that this is a lot to ask for if one wants to *understand* the workings of authoritative texts in historical societies. Naturally, people who have used the Apocalypse as inspiration for poetry and visual arts will approach the book in a different way from exegetes or politicians who appropriate the Apocalypse's authoritative voice. To ensure methodical stringency, one would have to write separate and genre- or medium-specific histories of the reception of the Apocalypse—but thereby something else would be lost: the view of the abundance and multiplicity of expressions, how some genres and media make certain readings possible that the other genres do not, and how on this basis the preferred genres and media change over time.

Furthermore, in illiterate cultures, as well as in modern cultural expressions, biblical books are rarely experienced as discrete entities, as Melanie Wright points out concerning Revelation in film. An adequate reception history has to allow for this fact rather than continuing to beg for consistency and clarity in a messy material. For when we take seriously all the different things readers and recipients can do to Revelation, it becomes clear that it is not a closed, separate entity that has had separate and

Sawyer, 'The Role of Reception Theory, Reader-Response Criticism and/or Impact History in the Study of the Bible: Definition and Evaluation'. Online: Available from <http://www.bbibcomm.net/news/sawyer.html>, no pages. Posted 2004.

28. Kyrtatas, 'Transformations of the Text', p. 147.

identifiable effects, but rather it is a living text kept alive by the recipients' constant re-creation of it. The task for reception historians then includes, again to borrow words from Wright's conclusion, 'to map what Revelation is' (p. 90). For this purpose Wright, but also James Harding, find it useful in their essays to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari²⁹ the metaphor of the 'rhizome' to characterize the workings of Revelation in Western culture.

Readers looking for unanimity as to the theoretical and methodological frameworks involved will therefore not find it here. The full range of reflections by the contributors has been included with the hope that each will in some way contribute to the ongoing task of defining and refining what still remains a discipline in its early days.

Having briefly presented all the contributions and discussed some of the (missing) links between them, I want to emphasize that the chapters in this volume too are the results of real readers. They are more than describing or cataloguing the readings of others, but bring their own perspectives to the readings of Revelation as well as to the texts derived from it. Some contributions are more explicit about the authorial role than others, some reflect more on the transferable value of a reception history of Revelation than others, some reflect more on methodological and theoretical issues than others. But all contributors reflect on these issues when they provide a rationale for singling out a relatively narrow textual basis for in-depth study. The fact that the contributors are real readers who also happen to be involved in reception history, means, however, that what we intend to do is not necessarily what we are actually doing.

For example, the request from the editors to the authors was to contribute a piece on the reception history of Revelation in one particular area, perhaps even just one particular text, perhaps pushing beyond Kovacs's and Rowland's commentary into other areas such as the aesthetic ones. Thus, where their commentary provided a wide overview, this volume could suggest even more areas of reception, some more in-depth studies, and some further theoretical and methodological reflection on the process of doing reception history now when reception history is fast developing into a field of its own. Looking at the essays, however, it becomes clearer that the encouragement to reflect on the research process and address also methodological issues, has led most authors to be rather subversive of the reception-historical project somehow, to ask very incisive questions, even if they also want to contribute to reception history.

The contributors from outside Biblical Studies particularly make it clear that a study of history *as* a reception history of the Bible can easily develop into a rather reductionist or merely descriptive historical project.

29. See their *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Maybe reception history of the Bible as a separate field of study is left less simple, less clear-cut and more blurred after this volume. This was definitely not the volume's intention, still the editors are in agreement that some blurring and confusion can be an incentive to make reception historians think more critically and systematically of their project and its potential for further scholarly development. What we want to get away from is reception history as an exercise in cataloguing, as reductionist and mono-causal history-writing, or as a descriptive overview of the authoritative readings of particular biblical texts by pillars such as Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. These obviously deserve a place, but the picture is much, much larger than that.

We can also offer another example of outcomes that were not part of the initial request: The outcome of pushing a theoretical and methodological agenda may very well be that we have become even more radically historicist. Several of the contributors have (mostly on other occasions) criticized some historical-critical scholars for not being historicist and critical enough because they fail to historicize their own project. Reception history thus ironically becomes a methodological tool to historicize also the historical-critical project. Indeed some of us now see such historization as long overdue. Other contributors will take a more synchronic stance and see reception history as a field where historical questions about the original meanings of the text have been refuted and shown to be irrelevant, since the texts have obviously been read in so many different ways through the centuries anyway. It should be noted, though, that a synchronic stance is easier to maintain when dealing with contemporary materials.

There are surely other areas, too, where original ideas and final outcomes of this exercise in reception history diverge. Rather than seeing the divergence as a problem we want to highlight it because it shows that new insights have been gained.

7. The Popular Engagement with the Apocalypse in the Blair-Bush Era

As mentioned above, offered at the close of the 'Bush years', the current volume exposes and highlights the often deeply ironic resonances generated while studying the reception history of Revelation during a period when the book has had significant public currency, when Revelation quotes and references have interspersed the rhetoric coming from the imperial centre of our own times.

We have recently experienced the turn of a millennium. Such an event can in itself account for much of the millennial (religious) expectation and the interest in apocalypse in a broader, secular sense that we see in our times. The period since the millennium has, among other disasters, also

seen the destruction of the US twin towers, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the bombing of the London and Madrid transport systems.

Further, the climate changes and ecological breakdown that we now experience have brought home to us – or to at least some of us – the point that an end to our world, or at least an end to humanity's presence in it, is a real possibility in a not too distant future. The term 'apocalypse' itself as well as Revelation's symbolic universe has already been invoked to reflect on and talk about such a possibility.

The term thus has been used to make religious, existential or ecological sense of some of these events or to legitimize them (i.e. the invasions).³⁰ Both ways, the term 'apocalypse' today serves to charge a plain, natural or engineered, disaster with a larger symbolic meaning—for example lifted from 'the Apocalypse' proper. Thus, if you ask an average person in the street today what 'apocalypse' means, he or she will probably answer something along the lines of global disaster and destruction bringing the world to an end. It could happen, as mentioned above, as result of a supernatural impulse, nuclear war, computer breakdown, ecological breakdown, or just unravelling chaos. The last book of the Bible may come a bit further down their list of possible meanings.

Once we address contemporary issues, a clarification of the various titles of the biblical book becomes important. It is called variously 'The Apocalypse', 'The Apocalypse of John', 'Revelation of John', 'Book of Revelation' or even 'Book of Revelations'.³¹ Linguistically speaking, 'Apocalypse' is a transliteration of the Greek term ἀποκάλυψις, 'Revelation' is the translation of this Greek term into modern English. In this volume therefore, we will not take a strong view on whether the book should be mentioned using a transliteration of the first word of its original Greek text, or whether it should be mentioned using an English translation of this word. Different chapter authors will use different terms because different terms are appropriate when discussing different areas of reception. For example, 'the Apocalypse (of John)' is more frequently used in analyses of

30. For the Apocalypse as narrative framework to explain the September 11th 2001 events, see Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 1.

31. On the latter popular designation, 'Revelations', Stephen Moore has the following to say in his 'Revolting Revelations', in *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (ed. I.R. Kitzberger; London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 183-200 (184): 'The Book of Revelations, as it is most commonly called, at any rate in the English-speaking world. Even among Bible-reading Christians, surprisingly few refer to the book by its actual title, "Revelation", much preferring the plural. "Revelations" has a titillating ring to it, I suppose, that the more theological "Revelation" cannot match. "Revelations" doesn't conjure up the tablets of the law so much as the law of the tabloids. And what *is* the law of the tabloids—the tabloid press, and now tabloid TV as well, epitomized by the talk show? It is simply that secrets sell.'

contemporary popular culture, since in popular culture 'apocalypse' has taken on a wider meaning than just referring to the biblical book.

Among the examples and indications of Revelation's contemporary public currency, is first the *Left Behind* phenomenon: *Left Behind* started out as a series of 16 novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, published between 1995 and 2007. The series could be labelled 'Christian fantasy literature', not unlike Harry Potter – equally fantastic, equally bestselling (70 million copies so far), equally clear about who are the good and the bad guys, and equally prone to make the leap into other media such as film and franchise products. Revelation provides much of the imaginary for addressing phenomena such as global disaster, global politics, ethics, etc. in the series, and each novel contains quotes from Revelation and sermons upon particular passages. *Left Behind* is subject to analysis especially in Wright's and Northcott's essays. Outside of the Anglophone world, however, the *Left Behind* phenomenon may be less known, for linguistic reasons but also because the cultural basis for its popularity is missing. From a location within the Lutheran tradition, for example, where Revelation has been unofficially indexed, it is more difficult to grasp Revelation's appeal and ability to generate the type of apocalyptic scenarios that the *Left Behind* phenomenon represents.

In the Anglophone part of Europe, however, the public currency of Revelation is felt much more immediately. As we came together to finalize the current volume in February 2008, news appeared that the Anglican Bishop of Carlisle had labelled Prime Minister Gordon Brown's government a 'Revelation 13 Government'.³² Revelation 13 is where the seven headed Beast is described, whose name and number is 666, and who is speaking blasphemies, waging war against the Holy (13.6), and requiring a mark to be carried by all men (13.16-17). This is just a recent example of the image of the Beast being used to brand one's opponents. The technique only works because the Beast, the number and the mark are shared images in Western culture: Everyone understands that this is meant as a criticism of the government, although not everyone would know in advance that the text where the Beast is described is Revelation 13. In this respect, the Bishop slightly over-estimated his audience. Indeed, one religious affairs correspondent who covered the event where the Bishop made his statement, Riazat Butt, reported that she had to go back and read Revelation 13, whereupon she concluded that 'The Bible makes the Koran look benign by comparison'.

32. See Ruth Gledhill: 'Graham Dow: UK Government a "Revelation 13" Govt' (online: <http://timescolumns.typepad.com/gledhill/2008/02/graham-dow-uk-g.html#more>, no pages, published 13.02 2008, accessed on 13.02 2008). The statement was made at the General Synod, at the launch of the report *God, Gays and the Church*.

Although an interest in the Book of Revelation was there already,³³ the editors' interest in its reception history was spurred on by, among other things, such current political and cultural interest in the book, and by the way it has become commodified in the global cultural economy.³⁴ This interest is shared by most of the contributors. Thus, beyond the material foci of each contribution, the discussions and reflections in the book do in themselves provide a snapshot or a document of the Bush era seen from the 'old Jerusalem' (the 'old Europe' in Donald Rumsfeld's words), a 'city' which now, de-centred, stands in the shadows when compared with the 'shock and awe' of that 'new Jerusalem' which stands on the sunlit Potomac river. Some periods take this book more to their hearts than others. This period has certainly been one of them.

As a consequence of our particular location while working on this project (the United Kingdom, a European country co-responsible for the Iraq war), we cannot any longer hear Revelation's and the warlords of the modern world's calls for liberation and freedom without asking questions about the cost in terms of human lives, the often excessive use of violence, the copious bloodshed. Such questions had not yet surfaced as we started to plan the volume. The necessity of asking them has become clearer in hindsight, and serves to explain our intention—stronger than that of many previous commentators—to 'reveal' the more problematic aspects of Revelation and its potential to inspire ever more destructive behaviour (see esp. Part 2 of this volume).

The invasion of Iraq by the United States and the United Kingdom in 2003 represents a special case that is not dealt with by any of the papers in this volume. It represents the contemporary setting for the diachronic analyses offered here, rather than a closed chapter that can be submitted to reception-historical analysis. As a significant part of the contemporary setting that generated many of the questions asked in this volume, the apocalyptic overtones of the invasion deserve a few words here, and also further future exploration.

The invasion obviously also included the invasion of Babylon, situated approximately 80 kilometers south of Baghdad. 'Babylon' is a name full of negative connotations to Bible readers, since one of the central, negative characters in Revelation also carries this name. Even if many Bible readers

33. See e.g. Jorunn Økland, 'Sex, Gender and Ancient Greek: A Case-Study in Theoretical Misfit', in *Studia theologica* 57/2 (2003), pp. 124-142 and Jorunn Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly Miss Jerusalem Just Shut Up?', in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (eds.), *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), pp. 311-22.

34. For a book that covers the American situation, see Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

know that 'for "Babylon" in Revelation, read "ancient Rome"', the name still carries a heavy symbolic weight, a weight that can perhaps illuminate a few otherwise inexplicable choices made by the invading forces: What remained of ancient Babylon *in situ* before the invasion—after Germans around a hundred years earlier had brought many of the remains to Berlin and the Pergamon Museum, other remains were taken to Turkey, Sweden, the United States and elsewhere—was limited, but even less remains after the invasion. In a report published by the British Museum's Near Eastern Department, Dr John Curtis later described in detail the destruction of the archaeological site: parts of the ground were levelled in order to create a landing area for helicopters, and parking lots for heavy vehicles. Curtis pointed out among other things that the invading forces caused substantial damage to the Ishtar gate. US military vehicles crushed 2,600-year-old brick pavements, archaeological fragments were scattered across the site, more than 12 trenches were driven into ancient deposits, fuel was leaking from the vehicles and forever damaging the treasures underneath, and military earth-moving projects contaminated the site for future generations of scientists. Add to all that the damage caused to nine of the moulded brick figures of dragons in the Ishtar Gate by soldiers trying to remove the bricks from the wall. The report concluded: 'This is tantamount to establishing a military camp around the Great Pyramid in Egypt or around Stonehenge in Britain'.³⁵

That this ancient tell, a World Heritage site, was the only appropriate place in the vicinity where one could construct a landing area for helicopters and a parking lot for tanks is hard to believe. One cannot avoid wondering if 'crushing the whore of Babylon' was not at least a tiny element in the choice of site. On a more general level, the name 'Babylon' and its identification with Iraq may also have contributed to the inflation in apocalyptic rhetoric surrounding the invasion, a rhetoric aimed at charging the invasion with apocalyptic meaning.

The rhizomatic re-appearances of Revelation form a vast cultural phenomenon and correspondingly a vast research topic that this volume cannot cover in any responsible way. But we want to refer to our publisher, Sheffield Phoenix Press, which plans a new series on Revelation in popular culture. All we could do here was to provide some examples

35. See Rory McCarthy and Maev Kennedy, 'The Wrecking of Babylon: US-led Forces Leave a Trail of Destruction and Contamination in Archaeological Site of World Importance', in *The Guardian* Saturday January 15 2005, pp. 1, 4 and 20. The full 'Report on Meeting at Babylon 11–13 December 2004' can be downloaded from <http://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/BabylonReport04.pdf>. Dr Curtis and British Museum have since taken the initiative in a joint Babylon project with the British Army. The project includes a major exhibition in 2008–2009.

that illustrate the contemporary setting for the questions and historical perspectives offered; to direct the interested reader especially to the essays of Lyons, Northcott, Newport, Räisänen and Wright; and finally to make a clarification: Even if we want to address also the more problematic side of Revelation's reception in culture, history and ideology, it can only to a limited extent be held accountable for its re-appearances, uses and effects.³⁶ In order to hold it responsible for 'effects' it must be possible to identify it as a 'cause', something that is very difficult in most complex cultural situations such as the one just described.

8. *Not with a Bang but a Whimper*

What would end time scenarios look like without the Apocalypse? We only discover the paucity of alternative imagery in Western culture when we consider this question.³⁷ Descriptions of the end do exist where familiar developments such as food shortage and computer meltdown escalate out of control and things in general are just gradually getting worse until everything quietly dies out, but they are far rarer than narratives where the world ends with a bang. Then there is the collective behind the volume *Looking Back on the End of the World*, who deconstruct the whole idea of the one world as a nineteenth-century vision falling apart in the late twentieth century, and hence 'the obsession with the last moment, which everyone wants to experience' was just one part of this outdated vision.³⁸ But one alternative image is indeed expressed in the title of this volume, or more precisely in the poem from which the title is borrowed:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.³⁹

The title is a quote from 'Hollow Men', a poem by T.S. Eliot, with our own question mark added. The poem's view of the end is not apocalyptic, rather it is an expression of cultural scepticism and typical of the feeling of anti-climax after World War 1 that put an end to the optimistic faith in cultural progress that had dominated the period before the war. Eliot

36. Cf. Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, p. 213.

37. The question is of course irrelevant in relation to cultures that operate with non-linear notions of time.

38. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (eds.), *Looking Back on the End of the World* (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series; New York: Semiotexte, 1989), foreword.

39. T.S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', from *Poems: 1909–1925* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1926).

hinted that the world might end not with the climax of a global disaster, but rather die away with a whimper.

In stark contrast to the essays in this volume then, the title de-centers Revelation's imaginary, showing that its narrative of purposeful development towards a climax is not the only way of imagining end times. Other and perhaps even more frightening scenarios do exist.

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DECODING, RECEPTION HISTORY, POETRY: THREE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES TO THE APOCALYPSE

Jonathan Roberts

1. *Introduction*

Within literary studies it is not uncommon for scholarly articles to commence with an anecdote. It's rare, however, for that anecdote to be about a moment of political crisis and religious vision in the life of the author. In giving such an account of my own life, I recognize the risk I take of appearing 'unscholarly' and of raising eyebrows over my intellectual propriety. Nonetheless, the event was such an important one in terms of becoming who I now am (*inter alia* the university lecturer writing this chapter on the reception of Revelation) that I feel compelled to tell the story of my personal experience of apocalypse.

In my early twenties I was deeply involved in political action, and that action was inextricable from my religious beliefs. Without going into details, the political events that I was involved in went, to say the very least, awry, and this led not only to deep feelings of personal guilt on my own part, but also to total political disillusionment and (perhaps inevitably) to an accompanying crisis of religious faith. My reflex reaction was to distance myself in every way that I could from what had happened, and I embraced a profound scepticism (pertaining to all aspects of life) which lasted for many years. Looking back on my former idealism I regarded myself as an utter ideologue, and in an attempt to get away from the urban intellectual life that (I felt) had nurtured this foolishness I relocated to rural Cumbria for a period in order to get back into contact with 'real' life. As part of this process, I involved myself with the local community through voluntary work, and on one occasion was up in the mountains in the Lake District, helping to search for an old man who had been lost on the moors during a storm the previous night. We found the man eventually: he was alive, but completely disorientated, curled up under ferns and moss in the roofless remains of a small chapel. We needed to get him back to the village, so he was lifted gently from the ground and we began moving down the mountains through the dull mist. The descent was slow, grey, and gloomy at first, but this would change

in a moment, for in a sudden instant, the low clouds opened up before our feet, revealing—and I use that word carefully—the appearance of a mighty city with alabaster domes, silver spires, towers and battlements. The visionary effect had been wrought by light upon the dark materials of the storm, the clouds and vapours which had now pacified and were receding into the coves and mountain-steeps and summits. It was an unimaginable sight—clouds, mists, streams, watery rocks, emerald turf, and sapphire sky seemed molten together, each lost in each, they blended together as temple, palace and citadel. Right in the midst of it all a space appeared like an open court, and in the centre an object stood fixed like a throne under a shining canopy of state. The valley itself, the dwelling-place of men, lay low beneath my feet. It was visible, but I did not see it, I merely felt that it was there. What I ‘saw’ was the revealed abode of spirits in beatitude: my heart felt overwhelmed and I cried out ‘I have been dead—And now I live! But what do I live for?’ At that very moment of crisis, I prayed to be no more. I had utterly forgotten the old man, and stood and gazed at the apparition. It did not fade not away, but I descended.

In retrospect, I find it difficult to account for this experience, as any of the theorized formulations on offer—such as those of psychoanalysis—fail to communicate anything like the freight of feeling and thought that characterized the revelation itself. For this reason I have ceased to think of it as something to be understood, and have come to regard it instead as something through which to understand. In this way, I have used it over the years as a sort of litmus test with which different hermeneutical approaches might be measured, or at least compared. With this in mind I will return to my experience in the conclusion to this chapter as a means to assessing the value of reception history as a form of hermeneutical engagement with the Book of Revelation. Prior to that I will set out (Part 2) the hermeneutic of ‘decoding’ of the Apocalypse (in both its historical and eschatological forms); (Part 3) the critique of ‘historicist’ hermeneutics in the work of Hans Georg Gadamer and the hope of ‘reception history’; and (Part 4) a hermeneutical alternative approach to the Apocalypse offered by poetry (in this case, Wordsworth).

2. *Decoding*

The most recent major work on the reception history of the Apocalypse is Kovacs and Rowland’s *Blackwell Bible Commentary on Revelation*.¹ In the introduction to that work the authors set out the two ‘main

1. Judith L. Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

types of interpretation' of Revelation, which they term 'decoding' and 'actualization'.² 'Decoding', they write, 'involves presenting the meaning of the text in another, less allusive form, showing what the text *really* means, with great attention to the details.'³ Although '[t]he Apocalypse only occasionally prompts the reader to "decode" the meaning of the apocalyptic mysteries', they write, 'some have sought precise equivalence between every image in the book and figures and events in history, resulting in a long tradition of "decoding" interpretation'.⁴

Decoding of the Apocalypse in relation to historical events has been a prevalent hermeneutical approach to the book throughout its history. 'From the earliest references to the book in the second century CE, John's vision has been linked to the social and political realities of late first-century Asia Minor, with its imperial cult'.⁵ This hermeneutic – decoding the elements of John's narrative in terms of the world that he inhabited – is fundamental to modern biblical scholarship:

Since the Enlightenment, the rise of historical scholarship has led to a perspective on the Apocalypse that focuses more on past meaning than on present use, emphasizing detailed textual analysis and comparison with other ancient sources. Current scholars follow early modern interpreters like Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who argued that the book's meaning was almost entirely related to the circumstances of John's own day[.]⁶

The decoding is manifest in the sorts of interpretation in which Babylon *is* Rome, the beast from the sea *is* the Roman proconsul in Asia Minor, and so on.

Revelation can be a frightening book, and this method tames it, locking it up far away in an ancient past. Readers face a different prospect however, when the same hermeneutical strategy of decoding is rotated to co-ordinate the narratives of Revelation with future history. The visions of terrors to come which this unleashes are no hermeneutical aberration. Like its historical counterpart, decoding the future has constituted a major hermeneutical approach to the Apocalypse,⁷ and in some cases its advocates have been willing to accept or even initiate bloodshed as the fulfilment of eschatological prophecy. The method is typified by Hal Lindsey's best-selling apocalyptic novel *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1971) which decodes the Apocalypse in terms of impending global warfare. The images of Revelation have clear military correlatives for Lindsey as

2. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 7–8.

3. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 8.

4. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 8.

5. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 10.

6. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 25.

7. Cf. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 24–25.

Kovacs and Rowland show: '[t]he hail and fire mixed with blood (8.7), he claims, are missiles as they appeared to John's first-century eyes, and John's images of horses with lion-like heads and fire pouring from their mouths represent "some kind of mobilized ballistic missile launcher"''.⁸ In a similar vein, 'the woman menaced who sprouts "two wings of a great eagle and flies off into the wilderness" (12.14) indicates the US Air Force jets transporting Jews beyond the Antichrist's clutches'.⁹

The extraordinary (and disturbing) thing about Lindsey's decoding is not its hermeneutical innovation (nothing new there), but rather the audience that it managed to gain:

After touring extensively with the Campus Crusade for Christ, an evangelic ministry, Lindsey established Christian Associates, a prophetic ministry based in California. Deriving his authority from apocalyptic scripture alone, he has spoken on an impending third world war (as Armageddon) to U.S. military intelligence committees, the American Air War College (an Air Force strategic training center), the U.S. State Department, and the Pentagon itself.¹⁰

The Late Great Planet Earth has sold over 15 million copies.¹¹ The sense-making character of decoding is clearly attractive to a range of audiences (here, military strategists), presumably because it offers security about the future even if, paradoxically, that security lies in visions of violent destruction.

Lindsey's cinematic visions of fire-breathing ballistic missile launchers are worlds apart from the (generally) mild-mannered debates of biblical scholarship, but in their common strategy of decoding the Apocalypse there are hermeneutical similarities between the historicist and eschatological paradigms. The similarity is more than that of allegory (whereby *a*, *b*, *c* stand in for *a'*, *b'*, *c'*); it is in fact rooted in a shared hermeneutical relationship to chronological time. It is for this reason that reception history has something particular to offer to the study of Revelation because reception history is grounded in a philosophical hermeneutic (derived from the work of Hans Georg Gadamer) which explicitly addresses this question of our relationship to time as it is mediated through 'history'.

8. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 111.

9. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 144.

10. Online: http://www2.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/20century/topic_3/crystal.htm, no pages, accessed on 15 May, 2007.

11. Online: <http://www.zondervan.com/cultures/enus/Product/ProductDetail.htm?QueryString=Zondervan&ISBN=031027771X>, no pages, accessed on 24 January, 2008.

3. Reception History

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer reflects on the ways in which the Enlightenment privileging and valorization of reason impacts on our understanding of history. Gadamer argues that the post-Enlightenment aspiration of objectivity led to the establishment of a paradigm which, in Hans Robert Jauss's words, 'recognized the limitations of the interpreter's point of view and thereby established the qualitative difference between past and present as a hermeneutical problem'.¹² That is to say, the attempt to be objective about history established the sense of an ideological abyss between historian and history that could never be bridged. Gadamer refers to that sense as 'historical consciousness'.¹³ It is a consciousness of two discrete 'horizons of understanding'; the historical period under scrutiny has its own 'horizon of understanding', which does not interpenetrate with the historian's 'horizon of understanding': history is alien. Moreover, historians consider their task to be to describe the world in question, not their own world, and therefore they attempt to discount themselves in the name of disinterestedness and objectivity. As Jauss writes:

[The historicist paradigm] considered the problem of understanding the alien horizon as being resolved if only the interests or biases of the interpreter were excluded. Thus, the scope of historical understanding was radically diminished, being limited to the undifferentiated reconstruction of past life in the horizon of its historical distinctness.¹⁴

The problem is greater than this, however, as Jauss explains:

To believe that it is possible to gain access to the alien horizon of the past simply by leaving out one's own horizon of the present is to fail to recognize that subjective criteria, such as choice, perspective, and evaluation, have been introduced into a supposedly objective reconstruction of the past.¹⁵

Gadamer's critique is helpful in thinking about the function of time in the historical and eschatological decodings of the Apocalypse discussed earlier. Both the biblical scholar and the eschatological interpreter locate the allegorical referents of the text as being in another time, not present.

12. Hans Robert Jauss, 'The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding', in James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein (eds.), *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 7-28 (7).

13. For an accessible introduction to Gadamer's ideas on 'historical consciousness', see Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, *On Gadamer* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), particularly Chapter 4.

14. Jauss, 'Identity of the Poetic Text', p. 7.

15. Jauss, 'Identity of the Poetic Text', p. 8.

As such they present themselves as disinterested mediators of information regarding past or future events.

In response to the problem of historical consciousness Gadamer advocates what he calls 'historically effected consciousness' in which interpreters bear in mind their own prejudices and, not pretending that these don't exist, attempt to engage with the alterity of the text/history.¹⁶ Via the work of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) there is a hope of dissolving this artificial subject/object divide, and 'fusing the horizons' that were, in fact, always one.

Wirkungsgeschichte has been important to theology because it has provided the theoretical underpinning of reception history, the contemporary importance of which is embodied in the ongoing Blackwell commentary series, and the *Evangelische-Katholische Kommentar* series edited by Ulrich Luz, which has pioneered reception history in biblical studies. Luz is perhaps the best-known theologian to implement Gadamer's concepts in a theological context. Towards the end of his *Studies in Matthew*, Luz articulates his position as follows:

'Effective history' [*Wirkungsgeschichte*] draws attention to the problem of the contextuality of every interpretation. All interpretations and actualizations of biblical texts are contextual; their truth and power are valid only within those contexts. We often observe for example that biblical interpretations handed down to us may be 'true' in an exegetical or theological sense, i.e. they correspond to the original sense of the text or to the traditional rule of faith, and yet in a different sense they are not 'true.' They have become blunt swords, they no longer move or distinguish anything or have effect in the way biblical texts were originally intended to do. Preoccupation with history of interpretation in the narrower sense in particular shows that over the centuries exegetes have constantly repeated what their predecessors had to say. This may make them 'true' as far as ecclesial norms are concerned, but it also makes them very dull. Really effective interpretations of the Bible have often been innovative ones, suspected of heresy from the perspective of the traditional norm. A traditional norm tends to neglect the problem of contextuality and to be 'abstract' and thus contextless. In terms of 'effective history,' I am not disputing that truth can be recognized, but I do contest the reduction of truth to stated truths which can be established according to a correspondence criterion and regulated by means of a traditional norm.¹⁷

Luz's discussion of reception history is helpful here because of the attention he draws to ecclesial and traditional norms, and to context. The post-Enlightenment intellectual outlook that Gadamer calls 'historical consciousness' also has its own context. It has never been a disincarnate

16. See Johnson, *On Gadamer*, pp. 28ff.

17. Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 360-61.

consciousness, it has always been materially embodied, and this has happened above all in academic institutions. Universities have provided an environment within which a grammar of thought has evolved with which to articulate the concerns of historical consciousness. In other words, the historicist perspective, the distinction of observer from observed, is embodied as the actual forms of thinking and writing that constitute 'scholarship' itself. It is policed and continuously reinforced by, amongst other things, the standardizations of scholarly publishing which we inherit and expect of others. The use of footnoting, the third person, arguments from evidence that proceed by rational argument, and so on all embody an alienated observational mindset of the sort that Gadamer identifies. These forms are – like the consciousness that they embody – largely non-negotiable: you cannot write a scholarly history of the early church in the form of proverbs or limericks.

The question is where does reception history fit in here? Reception history may be grounded in Gadamer and it may be hermeneutically self-aware, but nevertheless it utilizes the same (alienated) academic forms of understanding as other types of biblical scholarship. As a result, it is not clear that reception history is up to the task that it sets itself, which may well require something more profound than simply accumulating and incorporating ever more 'reception' material into an existing scholarly framework, as that form may well be the body of historical consciousness. If engaging with Revelation in an *effective* way means having a malleable formal approach which does not attempt to alien its subject temporally – whether historically or eschatologically – then a different kind of writing is required. What form of writing could deal, on its own terms, with the chronological demands of Revelation, and not place its writer outside the time frame which he or she claims to be observing?

4. Poetry

In answer to this question I wish to consider the operation of time in a very different type of writing: poetry. Specifically, I want to consider the case of Wordsworth because he is (i) a post-Enlightenment poet writing at the time that Gadamer (presumably) considers historical consciousness to have been evolving; (ii) preoccupied with questions of memory, time, and consciousness; and (iii) a writer who reworked apocalyptic themes in some of his major poetry. I will not go into Wordsworth's response to the Apocalypse in any detail here,¹⁸ but will begin instead with some

18. For a detailed discussion of Wordsworth's engagement with apocalypse, see Jonathan Roberts, 'Wordsworth's Apocalypse', *Literature and Theology* 20.4 (2006), pp. 361-78.

comments on a Wordsworth poem made by the pre-eminent literary critic Paul de Man. Here de Man is discussing a short poem ('There was a Boy') in which Wordsworth describes a child whose delight was to 'stand alone, | Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake', but who 'was taken from his mates, and died | In childhood, ere he was full twelve years old'. In its language and in its narrative the writing is undecorative and unphilosophical. It is a characteristically Wordsworthian poem. De Man writes of it:

The structure of the poem, although it seems retrospective, is in fact proleptic. In the second part, Wordsworth is reflecting on his own death which lies, of course, in the future, and can only be anticipated. But to be able to imagine, to convey the experience, the consciousness of mortality, he can only represent death as something that happened to another person, in the past. [...] Wordsworth is thus anticipating a future event as if it existed in the past. Seeming to be remembering, to be moving to a past, he is in fact anticipating a future. The objectification of the past self, as that of a consciousness that unwittingly experiences an anticipation of its own death, allows him to reflect on an event that is, in fact, unimaginable.¹⁹

De Man brings attention to the fact that Wordsworth isn't communicating *knowledge* or *ideas* about time here: his questioning engagement with time is embodied in the form of the poetry itself.

This relationship between time and form isn't exclusive to poetry, it's just that Wordsworth has an unusual gift for working with that relationship. His work enables us to see that when it comes to the reception history of Revelation, the really interesting hermeneutical questions might not reduce to whether *w* or *x* believed *y* or *z* (variables that in many cases can be exchanged anyway), but might instead be more concerned with how those beliefs are formally embodied or expressed. I don't mean this in an analogous way by speculation on what Wordsworth *might* have done with the Apocalypse had he written on it; like many artists and poets he engaged with the Apocalypse through the medium of his art and we have specific examples of this on which to reflect.²⁰

The example of Wordsworth's poetic engagement with the Apocalypse that I wish to present, I have actually already discussed: it was the account of the new Jerusalem which I gave in a modified form at the beginning of this chapter, and which I claimed as my own experience. (Wordsworth's extraordinary original text is printed as an appendix to this chapter.) My

19. Paul De Man, 'Time and History in Wordsworth', *Diacritics* 17.4 (1987), pp. 4-17 (9).

20. Poetry isn't *necessarily* like this—it too can involve decoding. Coleridge's poem 'Religious Musings' (1794) is a platform for the interpretation of contemporary political events.

aim in adapting Wordsworth's text as my own, and presenting it in the first person was to draw attention to the function of form in reception history. I would suggest that—provided you did not recognize the lines when you read them—encountering those words as a personal anecdote provided a qualitatively different experience than encountering them within, say, a volume of the Blackwell commentary series. I was, in other words, providing a different kind of reception history, but rather than taking my cue from Gadamer or Luz, my method was effectively Wordsworth's own. Wordsworth appropriates the Revelation of John to depict a vision in the Lake District and claims it as his own.²¹ I appropriated Wordsworth's vision, redeployed it in this chapter, and claimed it as my own. Wordsworth's reworking was artistic, mine heuristic, but I think both attend to the issue of immediacy, and take responsibility for the present moment, rather than displacing their meanings into a constructed past or future. When I delivered this essay as a paper (in an appropriately tremulous fashion) to the reception history colloquium preceding the current volume, the effect was striking. No one, as I found out afterwards, had recognized the underlying Wordsworth material, all accepted it as autobiographical, and the reaction to that passage was palpably different (not better or worse, but different) from other papers in the colloquium.

There is much that can be drawn from Wordsworth's poetic engagement with the Bible. He does not attempt to decode the Apocalypse—Revelation is not a text ticking away until it explodes in Armageddon, but it is a mode of understanding, a way of seeing. He engages with it not as a list of events that have taken or will take place, but as a space in which present experience comes into dialogic relationship with the biblical text. As poetry, it is demanding of the reader, but it is simultaneously theologically un-coercive. Revelation provides a framework of understanding, and that understanding is personal, and inseparable from the art through which it is discussed. What Wordsworth says about (or rather *through*) Revelation cannot be adequately separated out from the way in which he says it, though criticism may help readers to participate in what it offers. The poetry offer us, as readers, a form of affective or aesthetic experience, formed, in part, from the text of Revelation, and this offers new perspectives on both the Apocalypse, and—from a hermeneutical perspective—on our allegiances to time and history. The passage typifies Wordsworth's naturalization of apocalypse and revelation: it makes no proprietary claims on past or future, it is the transitory revelation of a moment, which we may participate in—for a moment—as readers.²²

21. Strictly speaking it's the vision of a character within the poem, though there are strong autobiographical elements—if that matters.

22. It doesn't make sense to ask when this happened, it happens as we read it. The

All this presents major difficulties for reception history (and for essays like this one), because in its current scholarly forms reception history necessitates putting these reworkings of apocalypse into exactly the sort of chronologically-ordered narrative that both Wordsworth's poetry and the Book of Revelation eschew. Revelation may be a peculiarly awkward text in this respect, but it is not an anomaly – rather it is a paradigmatic text through which to think about the hermeneutics of reception history. Wordsworth is similarly helpful by demonstrating how different the Apocalypse looks in the context of life, compared to its usual place in a theological museum. If it is to live up to the hermeneutical self-consciousness promised by Gadamer and Luz, Reception history needs to think carefully about how it can adequately attend to the question of its own context. In its current scholarly form this may not be possible, as Reception History is forced into a self-regulating mode of textual curation, whereby its objects of study become just that: alien museum pieces behind a sheet of academic glass.

Appendix: *Extract from The Excursion*

The passage which follows is delivered by a character in a dramatic poem, but the actual description is very similar to a number of autobiographical accounts in Wordsworth, including the Snowdon ascent in Book XIII of the 1805 edition of *The Prelude*. The character himself – 'the Solitary' – had once been a Christian minister, but following the deaths of his wife and two children, became depressed, and eventually put aside his faith in God for faith in the French Revolution. Within the narrative the Revolution is depicted as a form of false Revelation (that had promised a new world). At the point this extract begins, the Solitary is returning from rescuing an old man, who had been presumed dead, and who had been on the mountain moorland, sheltered in the 'bleached remains/of a small chapel':

So was he lifted gently from the ground,
 And with their freight homeward the shepherds moved
 Through the dull mist, I following---when a step,
 A single step, that freed me from the skirts
 Of the blind vapour, opened to my view
 Glory beyond all glory ever seen
 By waking sense or by the dreaming soul!
 The appearance, instantaneously disclosed,
 Was of a mighty city---boldly say

past exists in the present only. Likewise the future, as something already attained (prolepsis). Art that deals with Revelation is art in which an aspect of that book is made into a present reality.

A wilderness of building, sinking far
And self-withdrawn into a boundless depth,
Far sinking into splendor---without end!
Fabric it seemed of diamond and of gold,
With alabaster domes, and silver spires,
And blazing terrace upon terrace, high
Uplifted; here, serene pavilions bright,
In avenues disposed; there, towers begirt
With battlements that on their restless fronts
Bore stars---illumination of all gems!
By earthly nature had the effect been wrought
Upon the dark materials of the storm
Now pacified; on them, and on the coves
And mountain-steeps and summits, whereunto
The vapours had receded, taking there
Their station under a cerulean sky.
Oh, 'twas an unimaginable sight!
Clouds, mists, streams, watery rocks and emerald turf,
Clouds of all tincture, rocks and sapphire sky,
Confused, commingled, mutually inflamed,
Molten together, and composing thus,
Each lost in each, that marvellous array
Of temple, palace, citadel, and huge
Fantastic pomp of structure without name,
In fleecy folds voluminous, enwrapped.
Right in the midst, where interspace appeared
Of open court, an object like a throne
Under a shining canopy of state
Stood fixed; and fixed resemblances were seen
To implements of ordinary use,
But vast in size, in substance glorified;
Such as by Hebrew Prophets were beheld
In vision---forms uncouth of mightiest power
For admiration and mysterious awe.
This little Vale, a dwelling-place of Man,
Lay low beneath my feet; 'twas visible---
I saw not, but I felt that it was there.
That which I *saw* was the revealed abode
Of Spirits in beatitude: my heart
Swelled in my breast.---'I have been dead', I cried,
'And now I live! Oh! wherefore *do* I live?'
And with that pang I prayed to be no more!---
---But I forget our Charge, as utterly
I then forgot him:---there I stood and gazed:
The apparition faded not away,
And I descended.

From Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1815) Book II, lines 827-81

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LAYING HOLD OF DIVINE RICHES: SELF-AUTHORIZATION IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *THE FACE OF THE DEEP* (1892)

Jo Carruthers

1. Introduction

The Book of Revelation's allegorical character and its notorious opacity have made it a biblical text that invites—and even provokes—interpretation: textual obscurity inevitably leads to textual supplement. Christina Rossetti, a Victorian poet renowned for her devotional works, known to many today through the carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*, writes in 1892 a commentary on the Book of Revelation, entitled *The Face of the Deep*.¹

The difficult task of making sense of this biblical book must have appeared even more onerous to Rossetti in an era in which women's writing was limited to devotional works. From 1843 Rossetti attended Christ Church, Albany Street, which was known as the leading London church of the Tractarian (or Oxford) Movement. A High Anglican group led by figures such as John Henry Newman and Isaac Williams, it was markedly patriarchal and it is widely accepted that Rossetti was 'directly and fully [its] product'.² As many critics have noted, the poetic style and meditative theology that characterized the movement strongly influenced Rossetti's writings and explains to some degree the 'surprising'³ and 'startlingly original'⁴ form of her commentary. This essay argues that her commentary focuses not on 'solving' the difficult Book of Revelation but is instead intrigued by this biblical book's highlighting of the problem

1. All citations are from Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on The Apocalypse* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 3rd edn, 1895).

2. G.B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 198.

3. Judith L. Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 88.

4. Robert Kachur, 'Repositioning the Female Christian Reader: Christina Rossetti as Tractarian Hermeneut in *The Face of the Deep*', *Victorian Poetry* 35.2 (Summer 1997), pp. 193-214 (193).

of interpretation itself and as such contains a sustained, although subtle, reflection on interpretation and a defence of her own exegetical activity. The Tractarian movement—called so because of its publication of its series the *Tracts for Times*—was, as Emma Mason contends, ‘as marked by elitism as it was by modesty’.⁵ Notably, Rossetti appropriates many assumptions and orthodoxies of the Tractarian movement, whilst concurrently re-evaluating its elitist elements. Whilst she explicitly couches her writing in terms that set it within boundaries of acceptable ‘feminine’ writing, it is its unusual form that performs the contradictory function of authorizing her ‘female’ work as viable exegesis. As can also be seen in the Tractarian writings that I discuss in this essay, what a text says and what it does are often entirely different things.

Rossetti calls her commentary ‘devotional’ and as such sets it within a genre that Robert Kachur notes is amongst the numerous ‘ecclesiastically sanctioned’ ‘devotional meditations’, available to women writers.⁶ As a group, women were commonly read through Eve, and like her they were considered lacking in discernment and susceptible to the satanic voice. Women interpreting the Bible were prone to Eve’s failings as manifest in the garden of Eden; their gullibility would lead them to embrace error and thereby engender destruction.⁷ To avoid such accusations women couched their work in terms of the devotional, just as Rossetti does, claiming little for it in terms of propositional content. Deliberately derivative, these devotional commentaries play on culturally resonant feminine strengths of fidelity and attachment to a person, Christ, a realm of piety in which women were conferred limited authority. By positioning herself within this frame Rossetti indeed side-steps potential accusation of venturing into a male realm of exegesis. Further, the ‘surprising’ and ‘startlingly original’ nature of her writing here—at least on the surface—evades definition as exegetical: her mosaic of prose, poetry, comment, prayer and frequent use of biblical and exegetical intertexts create a miasma or eddying whirlpool that defies stability. Devotional and unsettled in form, the commentary is set outside of male, scholarly exegesis, and is as such ‘safe’ writing for a woman.

5. Emma Mason, ‘Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7.2 (2002), pp. 196–219 (199).

6. Robert Kachur, ‘Envisioning Equality, Asserting Authority: Women’s Devotional Writings on the Apocalypse, 1845–1900’, in Julie Melryx (ed.), *Women’s Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of their Fathers* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 3–36 (4).

7. For a discussion of the gender politics surrounding Rossetti’s work see Lynda Palazzo, *Rossetti’s Feminist Theology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

2. *The Face of the Deep: Signifying the Hazards of Interpretation*

Rossetti chooses a suitably poetic phrase to name her work of exegesis. Kevin Mills, drawing on Rossetti's own use of the term in her commentary, suggests it signifies 'the ground of false hope', and reveals her pessimism in the face of acquirement of knowledge as expressed in her claim that she is engaged in 'a *surface* study of an unfathomable depth'.⁸ At once esoteric and lyrical, the phrase 'face of the deep' also draws upon two biblical texts that would be immediately familiar to many of Rossetti's readers. Found in the opening of Genesis and the book of Job, these verses highlight the problem of interpretation that for many the Book of Revelation epitomized.

Genesis 1.1-3 reads:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light (KJV).

The 'face of the deep' here refers to the cosmos before the divine creative touch, without form or order, a chaos pre-existing human reality. Because the 'deep' is a common biblical synonym for the oceans (as used in Job 41.31 in which the Leviathan 'maketh the deep to boil like a pot'), a parallel with the 'face of the waters' in the next line is suggestive and provides a more comprehensible image of the ocean as a material equivalent to the metaphysical unknown—a substantial yet unfathomed entity. The 'face of the deep' is also found in Job 38.29-30, in which it concurrently signifies the oceans and cognitive lack. Here, God challenges Job's knowledge:

Out of whose womb came the ice? and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it? The waters are hid as *with* a stone, and the face of the deep is frozen.

God's opening words in this section, 'Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?', stress the inadequacy of Job's earthly perspective and suggests that Rossetti allies herself here with a biblical figure associated with the limitations of human knowledge. Job infamously declares his ignorance: 'therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not [...] Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes' (42.3).

8. Kevin Mills, 'Pearl-Divers of the Apocalypse—Christina Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep*', *Literature and Theology* 15.1 (2001), 25-39 (26), citing Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep*, p. 365.

Both passages confer a sense of human inadequacy before a vast unknown: the very sensation that Rossetti invokes in her appropriation of the phrase 'face of the deep'. She communicates a sense of the vast chasm between the human and divine that a book like Revelation only made its readers too acutely aware of. The Hebrew 'deep', *t'hom*, like the English equivalent, signifies both literally and metaphorically. For example, Matthew Henry comments on Genesis 1 in his influential eighteenth-century commentary and reflects the association of the material 'deep' in Protestant thinking with both the cognitive and the spiritual. For Henry the deep is 'without form and void', '*Tohu and Bohu, confusion and emptiness*', and he meditates that this

chaos represents the state of an unregenerate graceless soul: *there is disorder, confusion, and every evil work; it is empty of all good, for it is without God; it is dark til almighty grace effects a blessed change.*⁹

Circulating in Protestant thinking was a sense of the deep as signifying mental disorder (confusion) and spiritual gloom (emptiness) that awaited divine plenitude.

Although Robert Kachur suggests that through the book's title 'the reader is promised an ever-widening glimpse into God's face',¹⁰ it is more likely, as Mills suggests and its biblical intertexts imply, that Rossetti is at the opening of her work gesturing towards the hazards of interpretation. The promise of exegetical revelation that Kachur intimates optimistically underplays the superficial nature of such a 'glimpse', and a biblically literate audience is just as, if not more, likely to pick up on its reference to the limitations of earthly knowledge that merely reiterates the difficult character of the Book of Revelation. Rossetti's choice of title for her 'devotional commentary' is therefore one intimately related to the problematic status of this biblical book. That the book named Revelation announces disclosure whilst it more generally signifies obscurity works as a figure that communicates to Rossetti's audience the difficult realities of exegesis that undermines any naive expectation of human acuity, male or female.

Rossetti's use of the title 'The Face of the Deep' undercuts assumptions that she is trying to distance herself from an exegetical tradition. By emphasizing the difficulty of her work, this phrase places it directly in the fray of accusation by highlighting her originality and striving. Instead of promoting the devotional in order to distance herself from (male) exegesis, she is instead here placing herself, albeit implicitly, within a

9. Leslie F. Church (ed.), *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible in One Volume, Genesis to Revelation* (repr. London: Marshall Pickering, 1960 [1708]), p. 2.

10. Kachur, 'Repositioning', p. 196.

tradition of spiritual giants. The impulse of the commentary appears, therefore, contradictory: she distances her writing from male, scholarly exegesis, whilst placing her endeavour in the difficult hermeneutical territory of a vast, unfathomed, sea. This becomes even more apparent in her prefatory remarks in which she continues the sea image of her title in her poetic injunction: 'If thou canst dive, bring up pearls. If thou canst not dive, collect amber'. The evocative image of treasure-diving (or treasure-hunting for the aquatically unskilled), situates her commentary firmly within the realm of hermeneutics. By likening the Bible (and especially the Book of Revelation) to the sea, she outlines the notoriously dangerous and difficult terrain in which she is working, where problem and promise go hand in hand, reminding her readers of the risk and reward of biblical treasure-diving. The commentary as a whole goes on, implicitly, to offer a complex and nuanced argument in defence of her own writing. Rather than submitting to gender restrictions, that circulated especially strongly in her own Tractarian Anglican denomination, she instead embraces devotion in order to undermine such arguments. And it is precisely in the 'surprising' and 'original' form of her commentary that Rossetti performs her attack.

3. *The Solemn Reminder of Rev. 22.18-19*

Rossetti's assault on the restrictive logic of orthodox Christian leaders is clear in her response to the warning about interpretation found in Rev. 22.18-19. These verses are a useful point of departure for discussion about interpretation more generally because they act as a conduit for many commentators to articulate their anxieties regarding the hazards of biblical exegesis. This section of her work also illustrates the unusual form of her writing. These two verses in Revelation's epilogue contain a warning against addition to, or subtraction from, the prophetic writing:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book. If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book. And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

It is likely that few commentators have read this verse without some pang of concern. Many modern commentaries soberly suggest that these verses form an 'oath formula', like that found in Deut. 4.2 (in which Moses warns the Israelites: 'Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish *ought* from it') or a warning against textual distortion in the light of how Jewish apocalyptic texts of the time were

prone to augmentation.¹¹ Writers at the turn of the century, like Rossetti, more openly express the anxiety these verses provoke. Joseph Seiss, in an English edition of his American writings in 1882 (a decade before Rossetti's commentary) states that:

it is a fearful thing to suppress or stultify the word of God [...] To put forth for truth what is not truth – to denounce as error, condemn, repudiate, or emasculate what God himself has set His seal to as His mind and purpose, is one of those high crimes, not only against God, but against the souls of men, which cannot go unpunished.¹²

That Seiss chooses to describe the stultifying of the divine word as an act of emasculation articulates the terror of false interpretation's disempowering of God's communicative act. Pertinent to Rossetti's own activity, his use of a male metaphor implicitly constructs God's, and by implication the effective, word as masculine.

These verses are commonly expanded upon to identify erroneous addition or subtraction. The Revd. M.F. Sadler in 1901 writes to vindicate his own tradition and to warn that 'men are in danger of adding to the words of Scripture [...] by unauthorized traditions', identified as 'Mariolatry', or the 'Swiss Reformation' and 'Calvin' because they teach that 'Christ died for a few'.¹³ Edgar Gibson, writing in 1910, soberly yet moderately cautions that the verses 'form a solemn reminder of the responsibility that rests on all those who in any way handle the book'.¹⁴ The apprehension that these verses incite is evident no less in those works that, like *The Pulpit Commentary*, published two years before Rossetti's, simply ignore these verses and offer no reaction at all.¹⁵ It is suggestive that some commentators are unwilling to engage with verses that, for any thoughtful reader, complicate the activity of authoritative commentary. James Ratton's response of 1912 implicates *The Pulpit Commentary's* silence as one of avoidance as he makes explicit the notorious nature of much interpretation of the Book of Revelation. He suggests that John 'foresaw the vast literature that would spring up in connection with the Book; and how it would be twisted and turned to suit the ends of

11. See, for example, David E. Aune, *Revelation*, III (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), p. 1232.

12. Joseph Augustus Seiss, *The Apocalypse; or, The Prophecies of Revelation. A Series of Special Lectures* (London: Christian Herald Office, c. 1882), p. 698.

13. M.F. Sadler, *The Revelation of St John the Divine: With Notes Critical and Practical* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1901), p. 297.

14. Edgar C.S. Gibson, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: Methuen, 1910), p. 257.

15. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (eds.), *Pulpit Commentary: Revelation* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1890).

polemic controversy'. He continues, somewhat defensively: 'The honest exegete, who reverently strives to bring out the meaning of the Book, may go astray, and yet incur no penalty.'¹⁶ This reference to penalty is a rare admittance that it is the commentator himself who is the subject of the warning.

The verses were evidently used to police interpretive activity as can be seen in the comments of the author of the *Orb of Light* (1860), who testifies that they are used against her specifically as a woman writer. She comments:

My mission is neither to take away from the words of this book, nor to add thereto [... Yet] I have been told I am calling down a curse upon my people.¹⁷

That the warning had been used as a threat to delineate the proper gender boundaries of interpretation makes it highly likely that Rossetti was fully aware of her precarious position as a female commentator. What is surprising is not that she, like many of her contemporaries, seems not only conscious of the 'responsibility that rests on all those who in any way handle the book', but that she engages with it so profoundly throughout her study.

4. *Prayer, Interpretation, Wisdom, Knowledge and Tractarian Devotion*

Ostensibly fitting within a 'safe', devotional sphere, Rossetti's unusual commentary on more profound inspection contains a structural response to the hermeneutical challenge of 22.18-19 that presents a sustained, although not systematized, argument about the nature and limitations of earthly knowledge and its cognate, interpretation of the divine Word. That the labyrinthine form of Rossetti's commentary is a formal response to the problem of interpretation is most explicit in her remarks on these two verses cited above. She responds obliquely, speaking of interpretation in her characteristically disjointed way, interweaving prayer, confession, poetics and proposition. After identifying Christ as the speaker of the verses, Rossetti responds in prayer, expressing penitence through the words of the Anglican confession, which she indicates with quotation marks: 'O Lord, if I myself have fallen into either deadly error against which Thou here testifieth: "I acknowledge my transgression [...] Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned[...]"'.¹⁸ It is worth noting that by applying

16. James R. Ratton, *The Apocalypse of St John: A Commentary on the Greek Version* (London: R. & T. Washbourne; New York: Benziger Brothers, 1912), pp. 398-99.

17. *The Orb of Light*, p. 222, cited in Kachur, 'Envisioning Equality', p. 17.

18. *The Face of the Deep*, p. 548.

this verse to herself she marks her endeavour as that of commentary not mere 'devotional meditation'.

Her initial move into prayer serves not only a devotional purpose. By citing the Anglican liturgy, she implicates the whole Church in her confession, indicating human sinfulness rather than an error specific to herself. Her prayer incriminates humanity, reminding the reader of the gulf between the divine and human. The prayer further distances Rossetti from accusation because of its qualification: 'if I have myself fallen' (my emphasis). She is not confessing an identifiable flaw, merely accepting her own inevitable human frailty. Her use of the specific formula, 'Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned', situates God—not her reader—as her audience. As such, it denies the reader any right of accusation against her. When the text moves into prayer, the reader is no longer the object of the commentary and as such may not be positioned as the injured party of her comments, a point that she makes explicitly: she insists (in prayer) that she sins against 'Thee only'. Rossetti's own position moves from that of sinner to that of one redeemed-through-confession.

The continual movement in her commentary from what may be deemed 'interpretation' into 'prayer' vindicates her writing as communication with God, absolving it of being an addition to the prophecy. Her movement into prayer here denies the reader a purchase with which to contest her writing because it is not an explicit or academic argument; as such its subtlety disarms the critical reader unawares. Not responding directly to the curses in verses 18 and 19, this prayerfulness nonetheless makes use of wider Christian logics and norms in order to bypass the problem of interpretation and changes the terms under which she writes and will be judged.

Rossetti then reflects on the dual activities of prayer and interpretation:

Some can meditate and interpret. All can meditate and pray.
To interpret should do good. To pray will do good.
Interpretation may err and darken knowledge. Prayer fetches down
wisdom from the Father of lights.
Prayer is the safeguard of interpretation, and without interpretation is
still profitable.¹⁹

Rossetti here sets up an intimate connection between prayer, interpretation, knowledge and wisdom in which interpretation and prayer are apparently at odds with one another as she locates interpretation as exclusive and prayer as inclusive: some interpret, whereas all can pray. Further,

19. *The Face of the Deep*, pp. 548–49.

interpretation warrants warning, whereas prayer is safe and even guards the individual against the dangers of exegesis.

In this nexus, Rossetti ascribes to the Tractarian promotion of devotional activity in which knowledge is a vulnerable, earth-bound activity set against a God-given, heavenly wisdom. Her taxonomy replicates closely the theology of Isaac Williams's Tract 87, Part 2 of *On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge*, published as part of the aforementioned *Tracts for the Times* series.²⁰ As Emma Mason outlines, in her work Rossetti appropriates recognized Tractarian tenets that elevate the devotional above the academic, that intentionally subverted traditional hierarchies, whilst inevitably unintentionally undermining others, including that of gender.²¹ Devotion is such a feminized activity in the mid-nineteenth century that Tractarianism itself, despite its explicit staunch patriarchal emphases, became subject to accusations of femininity, accusations that had the unforeseen consequence of endorsing female religious activity.²² Rossetti's commentary aligns her with Williams's devotional arguments, but a comparison of the two works illuminates her close negotiation of Tractarian principles that works to legitimize her own writing and also works to undermine certain hierarchies that are set up in the Tract.

Mason argues that Rossetti's work resonates with the Tractarian principle of reserve, a doctrine motivated by the desire to preserve a sense of God's mystery that led proponents to insist that the only path to divine revelation is sustained devotional effort.²³ Tract 87 speaks of the 'jewel of great price',²⁴ of the 'pearl' and 'hid treasure',²⁵ metaphors for a heavenly knowledge also used in Rossetti's prefatory remarks about diving for pearls. Her title strikingly echoes the Tract's assertion that 'the Divine Word should be in its secret range thus vast and comprehensive, as the shadows of the heavens in still and deep waters'.²⁶ Williams also uses the imagery of diving: 'In attempting to dive too far into it, to illustrate and apprehend its meanings, fallible men may of course greatly err from time to time'.²⁷ Devotion, according to Tract 87, is characterized by hard work and it appeals to its readers to 'improve in holiness' in

20. [Isaac Williams] 'No. 87', in *Tracts for the Times: On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge* (London: for J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 3rd edn, 1843).

21. For Rossetti's relation to reserve and Isaac Williams, see Mason, 'Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve'.

22. See Kachur, 'Repositioning', pp. 197-98, and Mason, 'Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve', p. 198.

23. See Mason, 'Christina Rossetti'.

24. 'No. 87', p. 46.

25. 'No. 87', p. 67.

26. 'No. 87', p. 22.

27. 'No. 87', p. 22.

order to receive revelation. The key of faith is not knowledge *per se* and certainly not cognitive knowledge, but is instead devotional knowledge, the emotional and spiritual knowing of Christ the person. The author asserts that the Christian, 'loving, becomes assimilated to the object of his love'²⁸ and that there is 'one living object of affection',²⁹ namely Christ. It is 'humiliation' that is the key to 'entrance into heaven',³⁰ knowledge of God available only through prayer.

Williams's Tract echoes throughout Rossetti's commentary and is clearly an inspiration for her, but it is the ways in which she departs from the Tract that are especially illuminating. As outlined above, the Tract appears to open up knowledge of God to a wide audience, especially because the 'feminine' qualities of prayer and devotion are privileged. Although promoting a devotional approach to religion, the Tract's use of untranslated Latin and its copious quotation of the Church, and other 'great', Fathers sets up an academic and patriarchal framework that colours the seemingly democratic privileging of personal devotion. Rossetti's commentary, on the other hand, is notably 'unscholarly' in its lack of religious references. It quotes frequently but without naming, emphasizing Rossetti's own voice whilst denying deference to individual (male) names or traditions. Whilst the Tract performs elitism despite its democratic message, Rossetti's performs what it claims.

5. *Incarnation and the Blurring of Divine and Earthly Realms*

Rossetti and the Tract crucially differ in their respective theological emphases. The Tract stresses the Atonement: 'What did the Gospel contain of good tidings, but the Atonement?'³¹ it asks. Such an emphasis promotes personal salvation for entry into heaven: 'The important thing needed consists in those preparations of the heart which may lead men to humiliation and contrition'.³² Cheryl Walsh explains the effect of this emphasis: 'The goal of the Christian, then, was to develop a conscience that would steer clear of sin in this world in order to attain eternal happiness in the next'.³³ The emphasis is the personal life and salvation. Rossetti's commentary is instead marked by a stress on Incarnation that fits in with the general theological move from Atonement to Incarnation

28. 'No. 87', p. 35.

29. 'No. 87', p. 123.

30. 'No. 87', p. 123.

31. 'No. 87', p. 43.

32. 'No. 87', p. 54.

33. Cheryl Walsh, 'The Incarnation and the Christian Socialist Conscience in the Victorian Church of England', *The Journal of British Studies* 34.3 (July 1995), pp. 351-74 (352).

in the nineteenth century itself, inspired by F.D. Maurice and the Christian Socialist movement, which focused on the expansion of God's kingdom on earth and on the Church as Christ's body, fulfilling his purposes. As such it was about bringing heaven to earth in the present, not deferring heaven to the afterlife. The shift of emphasis is significant because it is the Incarnation that brings to her meditations on prayer, interpretation, knowledge and wisdom the framework that enables Rossetti to lay hold of Christ's riches, namely that Christ's kingdom – and divine revelation – could be attained in the present life.³⁴

It is the Tractarian emphasis on devotional prayer and her own emphasis on the Incarnation that provides the purchase for Rossetti to tease out a theology that authorizes her activity. Her comments on prayer, above, also echo that of Tract 87 in which Williams cites Origen's letter to Gregory: 'the chief means to enter into the secret sense of Scripture is to knock at the door by prayer'.³⁵ It is a sentiment expanded upon in Williams's commentary on the Gospels that, like Rossetti's writing, links it to knowledge and wisdom:

There is a 'knowledge' that 'puffeth up', and that too even in the study of Divine things; and this is a knowledge which will profit us not towards the attainment of that wisdom which is revealed only unto babes. Sweet and engaging is the study of the Gospels, and apt to beguile and allure us by the very abundance of every thing suited to arrest the attention of the critic and the scholar [...] The struggle, therefore, may well be great [...] One way is there to understand the blessed Gospels, and that is to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, and to knock at the door by prayer.³⁶

Williams conveniently sums up here the Tractarian doctrine in which knowledge is bifurcated into the arrogant and the humble, the latter characterized by prayer and representing an elevated form of knowledge.

For Rossetti, prayer functions in an analogous way to the prophetic utterance, a form used frequently by radical female sectarians such as Joanna Southcott earlier in the nineteenth century, in which the speaker denies the contribution of self to the divine communication (often lack of education was claimed as proof that poetic or complex writings were inspired). Like the female prophetess, Rossetti is a praying woman beyond reproach as she continues writing on Revelation 22.18-19:

34. For a discussion of the doctrine of the Incarnation in Rossetti's work more generally, see Mary Arseneau, 'Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and *Goblin Market*', *Victorian Poetry* 31 (1993), pp. 79-93.

35. 'No. 87', p. 31.

36. *Thoughts on the Study of the Holy Gospels* (London, 1882), pp. v-vii, cited in Kachur, 'Repositioning', p. 206.

We seem to bring something of our own to interpretation, and if puffed up may destroy ourselves. Prayer disavows knowledge, and lays hold on the riches of him who made us. Interpretation is safe and seemly for some. Prayer is safe and seemly for all.³⁷

Her commentary is set up – formally at least – as *not* a commentary; its seamless movement from prose to poetry to prayer removes it from that writing potentially cursed in Revelation 22.

In her claim that prayer ‘avows destitution’,³⁸ she promotes the retreat of the self, removing herself from the process as she generates divine, not human, expression. Speaking divine, not human words, Rossetti presents prayer as an activity analogous to the Incarnation in its blurring of divine and earthly realms. The prayerful exegete ‘lays hold’ of divine ‘riches’: it is as though (prayerful) hands reach to heaven and retrieve its treasure to deposit on earth. It is an image echoed in her poem ‘Advent’ in which the night and day represent earth and heaven respectively. Those that dwell in the night are weeping because the ‘night is long’ and yet ‘laugh’ as they look towards the day when they will ‘knock at Paradise’. Although the poem here sets up the earthly and heavenly realms diachronically – as temporally separated – the poem also presents them as synchronic as the prayerful ‘lays hold’ of Christ:

Weeping we hold him fast, Who wept
For us, we hold him fast;
And will not let him go except
He bless us first or last.³⁹

This tangible, material imagery of holding powerfully communicates the emotive bond of the prayerful and the divine, appealing to the bodily presence of Christ in the Incarnation. Heaven and earth are revealed to be not temporally separated but co-existent, theologies of the Christian Incarnation blurring the two territories and making earthly knowledge less distanced from divine wisdom. The incarnational implications of Rossetti’s language are also present in her former meditation on prayer and knowledge: that ‘it fetches down wisdom from the Father of lights’, again, ‘fetching down’ an evocatively tangible metaphor.

In these few lines the two qualities, prayer and interpretation, seem to be at first opposed but Rossetti blurs the boundary between them by presenting a theology that invokes the Incarnation. Because divine wisdom can penetrate into the earthly realm, travelling through the vehicle of prayer, it can revive human knowledge. Williams’s Tract 87 and Rossetti’s

37. *The Face of the Deep*, p. 549.

38. *The Face of the Deep*, p. 549.

39. Christina Rossetti, ‘Advent’, in R.W. Crump (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 70.

commentary both express the Tractarian deprecation of academic knowledge in favour of godly wisdom, the former set in a flawed earthly existence, the latter located in the heavenly sphere. Rossetti's emphasis on the Incarnation challenges the geographical and temporal specificity of knowledge and wisdom. With an emphasis upon Atonement, in which earth and heaven are temporally distanced—the individual's devotional life is aimed towards salvation in the afterlife—understanding, right interpretation and enlightened knowledge are a future hope, to be gained only through access to heaven through death. Instead, by subtly yet persistently gesturing towards the Incarnation, Rossetti dissolves the boundaries between the two places, refusing to locate them as hermetically distinct. Instead, through prayer, heaven breaks through into earth. That knowledge and wisdom are attainable in the present is a possibility asserted in her title and prefatory remarks as she encourages her readers to dive, or search, for treasure. Even her title, 'face of the deep', although underlining the difficulties of interpretation, also contains the possibility of revelation. After all, light is brought to the surface of the waters and Job's disavowal of knowledge is as a result of divine communication. Rossetti succeeds in maintaining a tension throughout her commentary of what Barbara Garlick aptly calls the 'ambivalence of revelation', which is 'both light and dark at the same time'.⁴⁰ Rossetti promotes neither the plenitude of full revelation nor the emptiness of concealment; for her the Incarnation promises partial, yet fulfilling, knowledge of the divine.

6. *Finding Pearls and the Revival of Earthly Knowledge*

As Rossetti brings the ostensibly opposed terms, interpretation and prayer, together throughout her commentary, she does so to navigate a safe path through the perilous activity of commentating. She reaffirms knowledge and interpretation, resignifying knowledge so that the Tractarian privileging of devotion is merely worked through to its logical conclusion to reveal her close biblical exegesis to be superior to academic efforts. Beyond her own personal self-validation and its implications for the female exegete, it is a response to the hermeneutical problems of the Book of Revelation itself. After all, although sidestepping accusation by positioning her commentary as devotional, she needs to authorize her own over five hundred pages of writing. What is perhaps most striking about a very unusual commentary is the disjunction between Rossetti's authorial voice and the biblical passages. Although explicitly advocating

40. Barbara Garlick, 'Defacing the Self: Christina Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep* as Absolution', in Barbara Garlick (ed.), *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 155-75 (160).

and imitating reserve, she asserts the self, herself, throughout. Her voice is distinct *because* rather than *despite* of her movement between comment and prayer. As critics have noted, expressions of self-reticence pepper her work and her final comments are typically restrained: ‘*If I have been overbold in attempting such a work as this, I beg pardon*’.⁴¹ Her rhetoric here is conventional in its dual effect: promoting her effort as, perhaps, overbold, works to assert the enormity and significance of her undertaking. Throughout the commentary, Rossetti sets up a hierarchy of interpretive ability—that some may dive for pearls, whilst others may only collect amber, for example—into which she herself is implicitly positioned as a finder of pearls.

On the surface, then, Rossetti emphasizes her devotional qualities and her foundation in prayer, ‘which is safe’ and—perhaps more importantly for her—‘seemly for all’, apparently merely replicating Tractarian theology. Yet, rather than espousing interpretation and knowledge, she revitalizes them. She does not merely couch her argument in the framework of learning—as Tract 87 does with its Latin and academic referencing—she redeems earthly knowledge as God-given enlightenment, bringing to her own writing a spiritual sanctification and power. In her first chapter she insists that ‘Humility and prayer will guard us against culpable misunderstanding, but may not for the present confer understanding’.⁴² Prayer does guard against error even if it is not enough to guarantee revelation. She undermines here the binary of misunderstanding and understanding: she seems to create a neutral space between the two of a confessed, yet devotional, ignorance. Yet, the possibility of understanding is not deferred to a heavenly existence: ‘faith may consist with either ignorance or knowledge. We are bound to believe and obey: we may live, and haply we may die, before being called upon to recognize hidden meanings’.⁴³ Some may live and die before they receive special revelation, but what Rossetti’s near five hundred page commentary performs is that Rossetti saw and understood.

By paying attention to the verses in Revelation 22.18-19 she ensures that it is clear to her readers that the dangers of exegesis are incumbent upon all. Her choice of the Book of Revelation further highlights that the difficulty of commentary is a universal, not gender-based, predicament. Like Gibson, she draws attention to the ‘solemn reminder’ of ‘responsibility’ that this verse gives to all who ‘in any way handle this book’. As such, her prayerful response to exegesis is a complex response

41. *The Face of the Deep*, p. 551.

42. *The Face of the Deep*, p. 19.

43. *The Face of the Deep*, p. 19.

to the dangers of interpretation *per se* which also works to overcome gender prejudice: a pressing issue for Rossetti.

Rossetti's insistence on the dependence of earthly revelation on devotional effort leads her to insist that: 'A dear saint [...] once pointed out to me patience as our lesson in the Book of Revelation'.⁴⁴ Kachur expands upon the theme of patience with reference to her poem 'From House to Home', which reads: 'Therefore in patience I possess my soul'. He alludes to Christ's warning in Luke 21.19 that his disciples remain patient in the final days of persecution. For Kachur patience is forward-looking, denoting the deferral of knowledge to a heavenly location.⁴⁵ Yet the kind of patience that Rossetti writes of in the commentary is that of striving, an active rather than passive activity, and as such refers to Rossetti's own act of patiently wrestling with the Book of Revelation that results in over five hundred pages of response. The line that Kachur cites from 'From House to Home' is echoed in *The Face of the Deep* in her reflection that:

The patient soul, lord of itself sits imperturbable amid the jars of life and serene under its frets. 'Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.' Hence we infer that where patience is perfect, nought else will remain imperfect.⁴⁶

These verses reflect the logic of the commentary as a whole. Patience is a pathway to plenitude, something that 'work[s]' and is no resignation to a shadowy, deficient world. By alluding to James 1.4's advocacy of patience having its perfect work, she draws in an intertext that promotes action above hearing, the epistle of James insisting, 'Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves' (1.22). Kachur echoes Jerome McGann's contention that Rossetti is 'a "spiritual absolutist" waiting for the next world rather than a "social reformer"'.⁴⁷ To ignore the Incarnational in Rossetti's commentary may lead to such a conclusion. Although perhaps not a radical social reformer, as already suggested she does succeed in reforming the social construction of *who* has access to divine wisdom, performing her own diving for pearls in the commentary, enacting devotion through incessant prayers, redeeming female authority to write and undermining male and academic hierarchy.

Rossetti resignifies patience as an activity and it is in this striving, through devotional activity, that she fulfils, yet also transcends, the gender and spiritual ideologies of her age and tradition that privileged male, academic learning despite explicit arguments to the contrary. The previously-cited 'In patience I possess my soul', and 'The patient soul,

44. Prefatory Note, *The Face of the Deep*.

45. Kachur, 'Repositioning', p. 211.

46. *The Face of the Deep*, p. 26.

47. Kachur, 'Repositioning', p. 211.

lord of itself' are both assertions of self-autonomy, of control over the vicissitudes of life and as such assert a spiritual self-realization and self-authority, which Rossetti avows alongside a never-receding spiritual humility. In her poem 'Advent', cited above, the speaker holds fast to Christ in the guise of a Jacob, wrestling with God in order to demand a blessing (see Gen. 32.22-32). She asserts: 'we hold him fast;/ And will not let Him go except/ He bless us first or last'.⁴⁸ Her patience is that of the patriarch endeavouring to hold on to God, to demand a blessing, a revelation; of the prayerful who 'lays hold' of divine treasure, as manifest by Rossetti in her 'devotional commentary'.

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48. Rossetti, 'Advent', p. 70.

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REVELATION, DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE: R.L. STEVENSON'S STRANGE CASE

Alison Jack

1. Introduction

Ten years ago I submitted my PhD thesis on the relationship between the Book of Revelation and James Hogg's novel, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.¹ In this essay, I return to consider the intertextual influence of Revelation, this time on another text from the canon of 19th-century Scottish Literature, Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,² which was published in 1886. The phrase 'intertextual influence' is a slippery one in biblical and literary studies, but is here taken to mean not a direct, evidence-led relationship between one text and another in the mind of the author, but a literary relationship between two texts which informs a reader's experience of both texts in question. The historical context in which the later text was written is not an irrelevant aspect of this relationship, but it is not the only factor to be considered when this relationship is being explored: the 'influence' of the later text on a reading of the earlier text may also be of interest.

In the case of Hogg's *Confessions* and Revelation, I argued that doors, pits and keys held the key to the relationship between the two texts, which shared a nightmarish vision of the present and the future.³ Doors, keys and the presence of the pit are important aspects of Stevenson's text too, and once again I have found that Revelation's configuring of these elements of nightmare echoes strongly in *Jekyll and Hyde*.

In a note dated 2 January 1886 to his friend and illustrator Will H. Low, Stevenson writes:

1. James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824; ed. P. Garside, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

2. All quotations from the London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2002 edition.

3. In Alison Jack, *Texts Reading Texts, Sacred and Secular* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

I send you herewith a gothic gnome for your Greek nymph;⁴ but the gnome is interesting I think and he came out of a deep mine, where he guards the fountain of tears. It is not always the time to rejoice.⁵

That deep mine of tears echoes the bottomless pit that makes its presence felt throughout Revelation (9.1, 2, 11; 11.7; 17.8; 20.1, 3). A central theme in both texts, I will argue, is the control of access, or the lack of control of access, to this space of horror, punishment and desire.

First, however, we need to explore more generally the troubled yet inescapable influence of the Bible on Stevenson's writing. Stevenson's break with the organized religion of his parents is well-known, and the distress it caused him and them is undeniable. When, in 1873, he honestly answered his father's questions about his adherence to the beliefs of the Church of Scotland, the effect on his parents was cataclysmic. He wrote to his friend Charles Baxter:

If I had forseen the real Hell of everything since, I think I should have lied as I have done so often before [...]. They don't see either that my game is not the lighthearted scoffer; that I am not (as they call me) a careless infidel: I believe as much as they do, only generally in the inverse ratio: I am, I think, as honest as they can be in what I hold.⁶

Organized religion had lost its hold on him, and yet his continuing personal faith and acknowledged debt to the images and cadences of the Bible is evidenced throughout his work. In his very generous and gentle 1903 commentary on *The Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson*,⁷ Kelman writes of

[Stevenson's] close acquaintance with the language of the Bible which has most significance for us. He was literally steeped in its thought and sentiment, for his nurse read it through to him several times, and must have read parts of it until he knew them by heart [...]. Stevenson quotes and alludes to it [the Authorized Version] with a frequency, an aptness, and a sympathy, that bear witness to much first-hand knowledge.

In his comments, Kelman fails to take into account the terror such regular reading of the Bible (and other devotional works) could evoke in Stevenson, who recalls that as a child:

I would not only lie awake to weep for Jesus, which I have done many a time, but I would fear to trust myself to slumber lest I was not accepted

4. A reference to the edition of Keats's *Lamia* which Low illustrated and dedicated to Stevenson.

5. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (eds.), *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, (8 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994–95), V, p. 163.

6. Booth and Mehew, *Letters*, I, p. 273.

7. John Kelman, *The Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1903), p. 87.

and should slip, ere I awoke, into eternal ruin [...]. I piped and snivelled over the Bible, with an earnestness that had been talked into me.⁸

Kelman goes on to bemoan Stevenson's 'unscientific' dealings with the Bible, and to regret the fact that he had no exposure to newer and more critical ways of reading the Bible (presumably he was referring to movements such as Higher Criticism). According to Kelman, instead of the available scientific methods of his day, Stevenson demanded a rigid, flat and literal interpretation of the Bible from preachers. Kelman cites an example from Stevenson's *Lay Morals*, in which Stevenson describes hearing a minister explain the 'eye of a needle' reference in Matthew's Gospel (19.24) as a low gate, through which a camel could only pass if unloaded of its burdens:

All was plain. The Bible, as usual, meant nothing in particular; it was merely an obscure and figurative school-copybook; and if a man were only respectable, he was a man after God's own heart. Alas! I fear not.⁹

To our ears, Stevenson's criticism of the preacher, and his rejection of the faith of his parents, sounds like more of a rejection of respectability and convention than either a loss of faith in God in the widest sense, or a call to return to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Also in *Lay Morals*, Stevenson makes the following observations:

The Bible has [...] lost its message for the common run of hearers; it has become mere words of course; and the parson may bawl himself scarlet and beat the pulpit like a thing possessed, but his hearers will continue to nod; they are strangely at peace, they know all he has to say [...] [W]hile the spirit is true, the letter is eternally false.¹⁰

God, if there be any God, speaks daily in a new language by the tongues of men; the thoughts and habits of each fresh generation and each new-coined spirit throw another light upon the universe and contain another commentary on the printed Bibles; every scruple, every dissent, every glimpse of something new, is a letter of God's alphabet.¹¹

Here is not a man who has rejected the message of the Bible, or demands it is read only in its literal sense, or who has turned from the search for spiritual enlightenment, but who is taking the distinctly post-modern approach of recognizing that the text must be interpreted afresh by each reader. The preacher's task is not to explain away textual difficulties

8. Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Memoirs of Himself', in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Tusitala edition; London: Heinemann, 1923), XXXVI, pp. 203-24 (215-16).

9. From Robert Louis Stevenson, *Lay Morals and Other Papers* (1896; London: Chatto & Windus, 1918), p. 53; discussed in Kelman, *Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 90.

10. Stevenson, *Lay Morals*, pp. 10-11.

11. Stevenson, *Lay Morals*, p. 39.

or bolster the comfortable faith of the middle classes, but to imbue the message of the Bible with fresh surprise and meaning for the present.

By saying this, I am not suggesting that Stevenson saw himself as such a preacher. Nor do I claim that *Jekyll and Hyde* is a text which refers extensively to specific biblical texts, not even to Revelation. In her recent Norton Critical Edition of the text, Katherine Linehan cites a small number of direct biblical references, and only one to Revelation,¹² although I would argue there are more than she allows for. From my survey of Stevenson's writing about the Bible, I suggest that he believed that the Bible and its message were important, that the biblical text was open to radical, contemporary reinterpretation, but that traditional readings were of little interest to him.¹³ Furthermore, his terrifying childhood experiences of the Bible, through the lens of the beliefs of his parents and his nurse, should not be forgotten. The intertextual relationship between *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and the Book of Revelation, I will argue, reflects this background, and is based on allusion and theme rather than direct reference. In places, I will also argue that reading *Jekyll and Hyde* alongside Revelation leads to new understandings of the biblical text.

2. *The Bottomless Pit*

In both texts, the geography of the textual landscape is carefully laid out, although the information offered is sometimes difficult to map. Tina Pippin¹⁴ has sketched the geography of Revelation as two spheres, the earth with Jerusalem and the cities mentioned in the letters to the seven churches, and heaven with the New Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God and his faithful, outside of which there is a lake of fire and sulphur

12. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2003. Linehan finds an echo of Rev. 13.5, 7 in the description of the mysterious figure in Utterson's dream as 'a figure to whom power was given' (p. 15). I suggest that the allusion is more extensive than this, and would include the reference to this person opening the door of the room in which Jekyll is seen to sleep, plucking apart the curtains 'and lo! there would stand by his side a figure to whom power was given' (p. 13). The phrasing and the reference to doors opening surely alludes to Revelation 3.20, where Jesus asserts 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock'. Utterson's devilish figure of nightmare is portrayed as the opposite of the patient, gentle Christ.

13. In the same way, I argue that John's Gospel was an important influence on Stevenson's novel *The Master of Ballantrae* in 'The Death of the Master: The Gospel of John and R.L. Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59.3 (2006), pp. 297-306.

14. Tina Pippin, 'Peering into the Abyss: A Postmodern Reading of the Biblical Bottomless Pit', in Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (JSNTSup, 109; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 251-67 (251-53).

and the bottomless pit. Following the victory of good over evil, the New Jerusalem descends, the old earth is destroyed and death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire. Significantly, even in this new order, the abyss remains, an area outwith the controlled and measured city where evil dwells. Those who have 'washed their robes' are promised they will enter the city 'by the gates'; 'the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murders and idolators, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood' will remain 'outside' (22.14-15). What remains outside, as well as the lake of fire, is the 'bottomless pit' of 20.1-3.

In this text the bottomless pit is a place of imprisonment for evil monsters such as the dragon/serpent/devil/Satan, and a place emitting fire and smoke and torturing locusts (9.1-6). Out of this place in Revelation comes the beast who kills the two witnesses in chapter 11. The textual history of the term, abyss, ἄβυσσος in Greek, is long and complex.¹⁵ It can refer to notions of the deep, full of terrifying sea monsters, to a place of exile, the pre-existent flood waters under the earth, ideas of chaos, of the primordial goddess, the source of the universe and the underworld. In other texts it is mystical otherness, created out of nothing, with no beginning or end, a positive place in which to experience the pure reality of God. In post-biblical times, it develops connotations of a place of eternal and underworld punishment, with a mouth ready to engulf its victim. Taking into account the history of the word, and its use in Revelation, Pippin argues that

The otherness of the abyss in the Apocalypse represents the ultimate threat, the ultimate dangerous female [...]. There is a definite gaze on the female in the Apocalypse, and this gaze is controlling [...]. The abyss also receives this gaze. The abyss as female is Other, and the Other in the Apocalypse is feared and desired all at once. Demons enter the abyss, while only the purified people and spirits of God enter the Bride.¹⁶

Revelation's abyss, or the bottomless pit of the AV translation, is open to many interpretations. Its presence in the text, even in reassuring descriptions of the end of time, when the promise of a recreated world is offered to the faithful, destabilizes and threatens. In the notion of the bottomless pit, a multitude of possibilities co-exist, including horror, torture, nothingness and desire for the radical other.

The physical setting of Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is also carefully described in great detail. The scenes of action are often places which stand in marked contrast to their surroundings. The

15. See Pippin, 'Peering into the Abyss', pp. 254-57, and Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005), pp. 226-27, for further references to the term 'abyss'.

16. Pippin, 'Peering into the Abyss', p. 260.

scene is set with Mr Utterson and his relative Mr Enfield chancing upon a significant door while out for a Sunday walk. The door is in a street which 'shone out in contrast to its dingy neighbourhood...with its freshly painted shutters, well-polished brasses, and general cleanliness and gaiety of note, instantly caught and pleased the eye of the passenger'.¹⁷ In this place of contrast, the door and the building it allows access to are markedly different from their immediate surroundings:

The line was broken by the entry of a court; and just at that point, a certain sinister block of building thrust forward its gable on the street. It was two storeys high; showed no window, nothing but a door on the lower storey and a blind forehead of discoloured wall on the upper; and bore in every feature, the marks of prolonged and sordid negligence. The door which was equipped with neither bell nor knocker, was blistered and distained. Tramps slouched into the recess and struck matches on the panels; children kept shop upon the steps; the schoolboy had tried his knife on the mouldings; and for close on a generation, no one had appeared to drive away these random visitors to repair their ravages.¹⁸

As they stand in front of this door, Enfield tells Utterson about a crime he witnessed some time before. A repulsive figure (we come to know him as Mr Hyde) assaulted a young girl then disappeared into this door before reappearing with a compensatory cheque drawn on the account, the reader later discovers, of Dr Jekyll. Enfield admits to having examined the space thoroughly, but to be baffled:

It seems scarcely a house. There is no other door, and nobody goes in or out of that one but, once in a great while, the gentleman of my adventure. There are three windows looking onto the court on the first floor; none below; the windows are always shut but they're clean. And then there is a chimney which is generally smoking; so somebody must live there. And yet it's not so sure; for the buildings are so packed together about that court, that it's hard to say where one ends and another begins.¹⁹

Jekyll, he has discovered, lives elsewhere, 'in some square or other'.²⁰ Utterson says nothing at this point, but it later transpires that he is aware

17. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 6. In *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), Alan Sandison argues that the description of the façade of this street suggests it is less than respectable, with its references to 'rows of smiling saleswomen' and 'coquetry' (pp. 223-24). The suggestion that respectability is only skin-deep works well with the notion that in general things are not as they seem. Sandison's Freudian analysis of *Jekyll and Hyde*, in which he reads the beginnings of modern preoccupations with indeterminacy and inner struggle in the text, is compelling.

18. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 6.

19. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 8.

20. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 9.

that this is the 'other' entrance to Jekyll's house. Utterson is intrigued, and haunts the door for some time, and eventually encounters Hyde drawing 'a key from his pocket like one approaching home'.²¹ Utterson then goes to Jekyll's front door to confront him.

Here the scene is very different, but still a place of contrasts:

Round the corner from the bystreet, there was a square of ancient, handsome houses, now for the most part decayed from their high estate and let in flats and chambers to all sorts and conditions of men: map-engravers, architects, shady lawyers and the agents of obscure enterprises. One house, however, second from the corner, was still occupied entire; and at the door of this, which wore a great air of wealth and comfort, though it was now plunged in darkness except for the fan-light, Mr Utterson stopped and knocked.²²

Before entering the places in which the key action is set, the reader is presented with external settings which proclaim the otherness of the characters involved, and suggest that things are not as they seem. Hyde's entrance, set amid pleasing colourful and bustling cleanliness, is marked by neglect: it is 'blind', 'sordid', 'blistered' and 'ravaged'. The marginalized, children and tramps, brush up against its boundary. The space within defies delineation: 'it's hard to say where one [building] ends and another begins'. Specifically like Revelation's bottomless pit, threatening smoke bellows from within. Compare Jekyll's doorway, which sits as a beacon of light amid a scene of shady decay, wearing 'a great air of wealth and comfort'. Even it, however, is 'plunged in darkness', with only the 'fan light' relieving the gloom. A final comparison may be made with Hyde's actual residence, which is described in unambiguously subterranean terms. In a 'dismal quarter of Soho', 'like a district of some city in a nightmare', covered with a shifting 'great chocolate-coloured pall' of fog, 'the home of Henry Jekyll's favourite' is to be found. Its neighbours are a 'gin palace, [...] a low French eating house, [and] a shop for the retail of penny numbers and twopenny salads', 'blackguardly surroundings' indeed.²³ The landscape, whether it is of London as the novella claims, or of Edinburgh, is as clearly stratified as that of Revelation, but Jekyll's double-doored house sits ambiguously over the boundary between the rich and poor, respectable and suspect, comfort and neglect. The co-existence of the two doors, like the entrances to the holy city and the abyss in the closing chapters of Revelation, threatens the edifice of assured confidence which the New Jerusalem and Jekyll and Utterson's manly world of business and order represents.

21. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 14.

22. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 16.

23. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 23.

3. *The Key*

Utterson is a pivotal, even key character, the one through whom much of the action and information is transmitted, and yet, like John of Patmos, he is never the one with the key. As Jekyll's friend and lawyer, he has access to more information than many of the other characters, and he takes upon himself the role of the solver of the mystery. However, he is not the narrator of the novella and, like the reader, must wait for information to come to him from others, which he and the reader must then attempt to interpret. He is often puzzled and confused, lacking the vital piece of information which will unlock the mystery. In *Revelation*, John of Patmos's position as recipient of a divine message is asserted in the opening verse, and he explains his role in v. 9 of the same chapter, although this chapter is not without its narrative difficulties. John takes down what he is instructed to write, but at various points the reader is led to believe he does not comprehend what he is describing. For example, at 17.6 he describes himself as 'wonder[ing] with great admiration', and the angel who accompanies him has to provide an explanation, although the reader's understanding is scarcely enhanced by this, and John's reaction to it is not described. Both Utterson and John drive their narratives forward, but both are denied omniscience and complete understanding.

Specifically in *Revelation*, the key-holder is the one with power and access: Jesus tells John he has the keys of hell and of death (1.18); later John tells the members of the church at Philadelphia that Jesus has the 'key of David' (3.7). (Is this the key to the door in heaven, through which John is told to enter [4.1]?) Jesus controls access to the place of punishment and death, and to the messianic kingdom, to eternal life itself: he is the gatekeeper of the future of each individual. The keys are his by right. Another figure in the drama is given a key: the star or angel who falls from heaven is handed the key to the bottomless pit (9.1; 20.1). This apparent agent of divine judgment uses the key to release the torment of locusts on the earth (9.3), and to secure the dragon/devil figure within the pit until the time comes for him to be loosed on earth (20.3). The control of doors, and the maintenance of boundaries, is a divine function in the text: Jesus is the one 'that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth' (3.7); Jesus sets before the Philadelphians 'an open door, and no man can shut it' (3.8). Whether the open door is of evangelistic opportunity or the gateway to eternal life is unclear, but it is Jesus who stands guard over it and holds it open (and can presumably slam it shut). Only rarely is Jesus portrayed as not in control of a door (or choosing not to exercise his right to control). At 3.20, he famously tells the Laodicean Christians:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

This is a startling picture of reticence, patience and grace from a figure already established as powerful, dominant and inflexible. Its inclusion in the text unsettles the carefully drawn scene of rigid boundaries, patrolled by Jesus himself, or his delegate. Less graciously, when he describes himself as a 'thief' at 3.3 and 16.15, this uncertain and unsettled picture is again reinforced, suggesting there are areas in the text which resist even him.²⁴

Utterson, keyless, is the character who stands at doors, waiting to be invited in. As already mentioned, Utterson, intensely curious to see Hyde, whom Enfield has confirmed has a key, begins to 'haunt the door in the bystreet of shops'.²⁵ Eventually, Hyde appears, drawing 'a key from his pocket'.²⁶ Utterson asks Hyde to admit him, but is refused, as, Hyde tells him, Dr Jekyll 'is from home', then with 'extraordinary quickness', Hyde unlocks the door and disappears.²⁷ Utterson then knocks on the other door, Jekyll's door, and is admitted by a servant into 'a large, low-roofed, comfortable hall, paved with flags, warmed (after the fashion of a country house) by a bright, open fire, and furnished with costly cabinets of oak', a room Utterson 'was wont to speak of [...] as the pleasantest room in London'.²⁸ However, even in this opulent and comfortable space, after his encounter with Hyde, Utterson reads 'a menace in the flickering of the firelight on the polished cabinets and the uneasy starting of the shadow on the roof'.²⁹

After the murder of Sir Danvers Carew, Utterson again knocks on a door, this time of Hyde's address in Soho, as I have already described (although I might add to that description the detail that in the neighbourhood, 'many women of many different nationalities [were] passing out, key in hand, to have a morning glass':³⁰ even these women have the benefit of a key, the control of entry and exit, which Utterson lacks). Again the person he seeks is no longer there. This leads him back to Jekyll's house, and this time he is taken through the front part of the house, into the dissecting rooms behind, Hyde's domain. The description of the journey and its destination is telling:

24. For more on the relationship between Jesus and boundaries in Revelation, see my *Texts Reading Texts*, pp. 197-201.

25. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 14.

26. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 14.

27. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 15.

28. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, pp. 16-17.

29. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 17.

30. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 23.

[Utterson] was carried down by the kitchen offices and across a yard which had once been a garden, to the building which was indifferently known as the laboratory or the dissecting rooms [...]. He eyed the dingy windowless structure with curiosity, and gazed round with a distasteful sense of strangeness as he crossed the theatre, once crowded with eager students and now lying gaunt and silent, the tables laden with chemical apparatus, the floor strewn with crates and littered with packing straw, and the light falling dimly through the foggy cupola. At the far end, a flight of stairs mounted to a door covered with red baize; and through this, Mr Utterson was at last received into the doctor's cabinet. It was a large room, fitted round with glass presses, furnished, among other things, with a cheval-glass and a business table, and looking out upon the court by three dusty windows barred with iron. The fire burned in the grate; a lamp was set lighted on the chimney shelf [...]; and there, close up to the warmth, sat Dr Jekyll, looking deadly sick.³¹

In this description are many echoes of Revelation's bottomless pit. The 'garden', like the Garden of Eden and all it represents, has been lost. The mention of the 'dissecting rooms' introduces notions of terror, torture, blood and the grotesque. And yet, Utterson's gaze is drawn to the 'distasteful strangeness' of the scene. The public operating theatre (a place of spectacle and drama) is now a setting of chaos and confusion, where light can only dimly reach. The stairs connote the nightmarish scale of the place, and the red baize door, the fire in the grate and the warmth towards which Jekyll leans suggest, in the most respectable and restrained way, the furnace from which the deadly smoke belches from the opened pit. Here is the centre of the abyss from which the horror that is Mr Hyde emerges. As he gains in power, Jekyll's deadly sickness steadily worsens.

Hyde's growing power is signalled by Utterson's increasing loss of access to Jekyll: 'On the 12th, and again on the 14th, the door was shut against the lawyer'.³² In response to Utterson's letter asking for an explanation, Jekyll writes:

You must not be surprised, nor must you doubt my friendship, if my door is often shut even to you [...]. I have brought on myself a punishment and a danger that I cannot name. If I am the chief of sinners, I am the chief of sufferers also. I could not think that this earth contained a place for sufferings and terrors so unmanly.³³

Some time later, Utterson and Enfield again find themselves at the door which began the story. At Utterson's suggestion, they enter the courtyard

31. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 26.

32. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 31.

33. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 33.

behind, 'full of premature twilight',³⁴ and see Dr Jekyll at an open window, 'like some disconsolate prisoner'. After a brief conversation, the window is flung down, and Jekyll disappears: but the momentary sight of his 'expression of ... abject terror and despair' brings them both 'horror'.³⁵ For Jekyll, the dissecting room is both prison house and torture chamber; for Utterson and Enfield, it is the theatre of the Other which draws their gaze and to which they return, horrified, time after time.

Utterson's next visit inside this place of horror is even more disturbing. In response to the fears of the servant, Poole, Utterson agrees to break down the door into Jekyll's room. As the axe falls on the locked door:

A dismal screech, as of mere animal terror, rang from the cabinet...it was not until the fifth [blow] that the lock burst in sunder and the wreck of the door fell inwards on the carpet. The besiegers, appalled by their own riot and the stillness that had succeeded, stood back a little, and peered in. There lay the cabinet before their eyes in the quiet lamplight...the quietest room, you would have said [...] the most commonplace that night in London. Right in the midst there lay the body of a man sorely contorted and still twitching. They drew near on tiptoe, turned it on its back and beheld the face of Edward Hyde.³⁶

Still believing Jekyll to be alive (modern readers familiar with the story tend to forget that Utterson and Poole, like the first readers of the text, believe Jekyll and Hyde to be two different characters even at this point), they search the area, find the door to the street locked and 'lying nearby on the flags, they found the key, already stained with rust [...] It [was] broken, much as if a man had stamped on it...and the fractures, too, [were] rusty'.³⁷ As Utterson comments, 'This is beyond me'. The critic Alan Sandison remarks that in this text both keys and doors are 'clues pointing nowhere', and that a reference to 'the key' 'never unlocks any secrets for us. To the contrary, when it finally comes within Utterson's grasp it is [...] broken in two — thereby creating yet another secret'.³⁸

Only when, with Utterson, the reader follows 'Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case', is something of the mystery of the key solved. After the murder, believing himself to be free of Hyde, and promising to live a remorseful and dutiful life, Jekyll describes the 'sincere renunciation' with which he 'locked the door by which [he] had so often gone and come, and ground the key under [his] heel'.³⁹ However, the

34. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 35.

35. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 36.

36. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 44.

37. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 45.

38. Sandison, *Appearance of Modernism*, p. 220.

39. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 65.

locked door proves to be no barrier to the return of Hyde, now grown so powerful that he has no need of a key, whether the actual key to the door, or the symbolic key of the drug which had before brought about the change from Jekyll to Hyde. Jekyll, however, continues to need the drug to effect the reverse change, and in stronger quantities. The monster that is Hyde forces Jekyll more and more closely into the bottomless pit of his 'cabinet', and the loss of availability of the correct drug brings him closer and closer to a place of no escape and no return from the person of Hyde. Utterson may stand knocking at the door, may even break down the door, but there is no redemption possible for the monster that is Hyde. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, the nightmare potential of Revelation is writ large. The image of the key, and the role of the keyholder in Stevenson's novella adds a new and horrifying dimension to a reading of Revelation. Reflecting on these images of the keys and the doors they open or lock, which are common to both texts, leads a reader deeper into the ambivalent and unsettling aspects of the biblical text, in which Jesus is both key-holder, thief (lock-picker?) and guest who waits for the door to be opened for him, as discussed at the beginning of this section. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, the locked door is a boundary which ultimately cannot withstand the overwhelming power of evil which is Hyde. The unsettling aspect of the same set of images in Revelation is thus magnified in the novella and, I suggest, a new and disturbing reading of the biblical text is given potential.

4. *The Beast*

Just as the beast that kills the two witnesses in Revelation 11 ascends from the bottomless pit, so Hyde emerges from Jekyll's mysterious, chaotic dissecting room. But he also emerges from Jekyll's own body, and I turn now to explore the twin ideas of Hyde's relationship to Jekyll, and the bestial nature of the two characters, when read alongside Revelation.

Hyde is frequently described in monstrous terms. Utterson reflects upon his encounter with him:

[he] was pale and dwarfish, he gave the impression of deformity without any nameable malformation [...] he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself [...] with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness... but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr Utterson regarded him [...]. 'The man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic, shall we say? [...]. O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your old friend.'⁴⁰

40. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 16.

Their mutual friend Lanyon concurs:

There was something abnormal and misbegotten in the very essence of the creature [...] something seizing, surprising and revolting [...] [inviting] [...] a curiosity as to his origin, his life, his fortune and status in the world.⁴¹

Jekyll knows he is changing into Hyde when he notices ‘the hand that lay on my knee was corded and hairy’,⁴² and he writes in his ‘Full Statement of the Case’ that ‘that child of hell had nothing human; nothing lived in him but fear and hatred’.⁴³ Hyde is carefully and from all perspectives drawn as less than human, bestial and satanic. Like the beasts in Revelation, he is grotesque yet compelling, bloodthirsty and with a voracious appetite for inflicting harm. The various beasts in the biblical text are described as ‘having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy’ (13.1); ‘they shall make war with the Lamb’ (17.14); ‘these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire’ (17.16). What is significant about Hyde is that he is inescapably part of Jekyll, the extracted essence of the evil that is already within Jekyll, without the control or mask of respectability Jekyll maintains. Jekyll is the abyss from which Hyde emerges, and from which he gains power. Within Jekyll himself, Revelation’s heavenly warfare rages.

Something of the complicated relationship between beasts is hinted at in Revelation where, in 13.15, ‘another beast’ is mentioned who ‘had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed’. Jekyll is that ‘other beast’ who initially has the power to give life to the murderous Hyde. Like the beast who carries the whore of Babylon, Hyde might be described as ‘the beast that was, and is not, and yet is’, ascending out of the bottomless pit (17.8) that is Jekyll’s reverse side. In his ‘Statement’, Jekyll admits ‘I concealed

41. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 58.

42. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 66. In ‘The Hand of Hyde’, in William B. Jones (ed.), *Robert Louis Stevenson Reconsidered: New Critical Perspectives* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2003), pp. 101-16, Richard Dury reads this hand as a reference to the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27, in which Jacob deceives his blind father into giving him his blessing by putting a goatskin over his hand, to make it more like Esau’s. Although Isaac recognizes his son Jacob’s voice, he accepts the evidence of the hairiness of the hand he holds, and grants Jacob his blessing. Dury comments, ‘Psychologically, we could see this tale (*Jekyll and Hyde*) as the effective rejection by the individual of the hands, body, instinctive nature, and sexuality (the disinheritance of Esau and his “hairy hands” and the granting of pre-eminence of the mind and soul (Jacob, the “voice”), thanks to the collaboration of the super-Ego, Isaac’ (pp. 103-104).

43. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 67.

my pleasures [...] [and was] committed to a profound duplicity of life'.⁴⁴ Having discovered a cocktail of drugs which enables him to experience what he longs for without the need for pretence, as, to the world, it is no longer he who carries them out, Jekyll comments:

This familiar that I called out of my own soul, and sent forth alone to do his good pleasure, was a being inherently malign and villainous, his every act centred on self.⁴⁵

Hyde, when under the power of Jekyll, truly 'was and is not, and yet is'. Jekyll describes a time when he tries to prevent Hyde ever re-appearing, as if trying to re-cage him in the abyss (compare Rev. 20.1-3, where the dragon/Satan is sealed in the abyss, until 'loosed a little season'). The memory, or the power of Hyde, is too strong, however, and '[Jekyll] began to be tortured with throes and longings, as of Hyde struggling after freedom'.⁴⁶ When Jekyll gives in to temptation, he realizes 'My devil had been long caged, he came out roaring [...]. Instantly, the spirit of hell awoke in me and raged'.⁴⁷ It is on this occasion that the murder of Danvers Carew takes place, and after which Jekyll locks the door and destroys the key, determined that Hyde, having been 'loosed a season', will now be contained forever. Like Revelation's New Jerusalem, Jekyll describes himself as 'my city of refuge';⁴⁸ Hyde remembers Jekyll 'as the mountain bandit remembers the cavern in which he conceals himself from pursuit'.⁴⁹ However, like the New Jerusalem as Pippin describes it, the bottomless pit remains within Jekyll's psyche, destabilizing and threatening to disrupt the surface calm. Writing of himself in the third person, no longer sure of the identity of his own consciousness, Jekyll states:

This was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life. And this again, that that insurgent horror was knit to him closer than a wife, closer than an eye, lay caged in his flesh, where he heard it mutter and felt it struggle to be born; and at every hour of weakness, and in the confidence of slumber, prevailed against him, and deposed him of life.⁵⁰

Whether Jekyll's body is Hyde's abyss, or Hyde's is Jekyll's has become impossible to say, and both are destroyed when Hyde commits suicide.

44. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 55.

45. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 60.

46. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 63.

47. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 64.

48. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 65.

49. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 63.

50. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, p. 69.

5. Conclusion

The closed door is an arresting image in both Revelation and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, the first chapter of which is entitled 'The Story of the Door', the closed door becomes a permeable barrier, a boundary that breaks down, whether under Utterson's axe or the unstoppable force of Hyde's identity. In Revelation, the very presence of a door to the bottomless pit, and a key guarded by an angel, allows for the possibility that the door will be opened, and the horror of the abyss will erupt into the carefully ordered New Jerusalem. The door represents a possibility which Stevenson explores to the full in his disturbing and powerful novella.

6. Postscript

Two later works of Stevenson offer a commentary on this disturbing reflection on some of the issues raised by the book of Revelation. Published after his death, *Prayers Written at Vailima* is a collection of prayers written by Stevenson for daily worship at his home in Samoa. In one, he writes:

Help us to look back on the long way that Thou hast brought us, on the long days in which we have been served, not according to our deserts, but our desires; on the pit and miry clay, the blackness of despair, the horror of misconduct, from which our feet have been plucked out. For our sins forgiven or prevented, for our shame unpublicized, we bless and thank Thee, O God.⁵¹

For Jekyll and for Hyde, there is no plucking out of feet from the pit or black despair. Nor is there any sense of sins forgiven or prevented, and it is in the search for shame that may go unpublicized that Jekyll pursues a double life as Hyde, driven by his horror of his own misconduct. In this small section of a prayer, all of the issues raised by *The Strange Case* are woven together and a 'solution' sought. In this prayer, the reader and Stevenson himself have come a 'long way' from the apocalyptic vision/nightmare of *Jekyll and Hyde*.

Finally, from around the same time, and not long before his sudden death, Stevenson published a collection of poems called *Songs of Travel*. Poem number XXII ends with this stanza:

I have trod the upward and the downward slope;
I have endured and done in days before;

51. London: Chatto & Windus, 1910, p. 18.

I have longed for all, and bid farewell to hope;
And I have lived, and loved, and closed the door.⁵²

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52. *Songs of Travel and Other Verses* (London: Chatto & Windus, 6th edn, 1903), p. 32.

'EVERY EYE SHALL SEE HIM': REVELATION AND FILM

Melanie J. Wright

'... it deranges in and of itself, and sets the parameters, marshals the props, for all the excessive playlets to come [...].the text is a guignol of tedium, a portentous horror film' (Will Self).¹

1. Introduction

Biblical scholarship has of late been rushing to plant its flag on the terrain of cinema. Meanwhile, some of the most heavily theorized of film genres—amongst them horror and the Western—regularly invoke the bible, and the book of Revelation in particular. Yet few works have explored precisely how film has featured and re-presented the Apocalypse.² This reticence at once reflects the formative influence of Marxism and psychoanalysis (each of which regards secularity as a given) on film studies *and* the limitations of many current endeavours in bible and film, in which energies are too frequently consumed by a preoccupation with taxonomy and description, or are dissipated into allegory and typology.³ For the most part, films engaging Revelation are not amenable to these approaches. In the majority of instances, the book is not a film's sole inter-text, but part of a dizzying pastiche of scriptural and other references: in all the examples discussed here an appeal to Revelation stands alongside ideas about verses linked with belief in the future physical rapture⁴ of

1. Will Self, 'Introduction', *Revelation: Authorised King James Version* (London: Canongate Books, 1998), pp. xii-xiii.

2. I use 'Revelation' and 'Apocalypse' as synonyms, following Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

Conrad E. Ostwalt is currently the most prolific writer in this area, but his work offers a broad consideration of apocalyptic impulses in the cinema, rather than a specific study of the representation of Revelation.

3. Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 11-22.

4. Some beliefs about the rapture, including the 'proof-texts' with which it is most commonly associated, are described in this essay. See also Jeanne Halgren Kilde, 'How Did *Left Behind*'s Particular Vision of the End Times Develop? A Historical

the Christian faithful, the book of Daniel (itself widely understood to be influential on Revelation⁵) and/or other postbiblical religious phenomena such as a (generally ill-defined, in these contexts) 'kabbalah' or 'rabbinic tradition'. At the same time, the mobilization of Revelation in film transcends any one genre or single ideological position, frustrating the cataloguer's efforts. Yet the distinctive inflections of each of its usages reveal both the ubiquitousness of the bible in (western) cultures, and the particular concerns of specific cultural moments. Moreover, amongst these productions are some of the clearest examples of contemporary filmmakers' attempts to move from depicting religion to *doing* it. Many of those involved in the making of films like *The Rapture* (Charles O. Baptista, 1941), *The Omega Code* (Rob Marcarelli, 1999) or *Left Behind* (Victor Sarin, 2000) regard their task as standing in continuity with the religious experience and ministry of the first century seer. Analysis and comprehension of such works are then necessary tasks for those in the field of religion and film.

A short essay on Revelation and film can only be indicative. Since Hollywood is the dominant force in world cinema – other film cultures are impacted by the desire to emulate or repudiate its practices – and beliefs about the (A)apocalypse are 'even more than baseball, America's favourite pastime'⁶ the focus here is primarily on North American features. Ingmar Bergman's 1957 *The Seventh Seal* [*Det Sjunde Inseglet*], the only film to be noted in the Blackwell Bible Commentary on the reception history of the Apocalypse, is also discussed briefly.⁷ Finally, some suggestions will be offered as to what insights the study of Revelation and film might shed on the enterprise of reception studies and on the Apocalypse itself. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that this essay's reference to 'reception studies' or 'reception history' rather than 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is a deliberate one. Whilst complete neutrality in scholarship is not possible (nor, indeed is it necessarily always desirable) attempts to articulate effective history take us farther into the realms of individual subjectivities, which are at best viewable

Look at Millenarian Thought', in Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 51–55.

5. Scott M. Lewis, *What Are They Saying About New Testament Apocalyptic?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), pp. 56–57, and Christopher Rowland, 'Apocalyptic', in John Bowden (ed.), *Christianity: A Complete Guide* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 53–54, summarize Daniel's influence on New Testament imagery for the non-specialist.

6. Leonard Sweet, quoted in Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 6.

7. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 50, 108.

(albeit tantalizingly) only opaquely through written texts and visual media. Arguably, they are also *inescapably* ideological, insofar as they refract P(p)rotestant Christian ideas about the authority or sufficiency of the scriptural text. On occasion, attempts in this field also succumb too readily to the temptation to enthrone or legitimate as 'effects' those invocations of Revelation (or other biblical books) that the scholar finds attractive, and to de-legitimate as mere exploitative 'uses' of Revelation those invocations that she or he considers to be morally or politically abhorrent.

2. *The 'Dangerous' Reception of Revelation*

Typically, the cinema constructs Revelation as a text that describes, more or less cryptically, the end times: it is a blueprint both for those who wish to actualize the final cataclysm and for others who seek to avert it. A few films have resisted the notion that the book's potency is coterminous with its textual organization, preferring instead to emphasize readerly activity and the psychology of those whose worldview is dominated by the Apocalypse's eschatological interpretation. Thus the reception of Revelation is a core focus of interest in *The Rapture* (Michael Tolkin, 1991). The film's protagonist, Sharon, is a telephone operator who assuages boredom by cruising bars and picking up strangers for group sex. Depressed, she contemplates suicide but instead turns to a motel room bible, and undergoes a religious conversion. Convinced by a mysterious boy prophet that she has a role to play in the actualization of Rev. 12.6 ('the woman fled into the wilderness') Sharon goes to the desert with her daughter Mary, to wait for God. The pair's disappointment builds, as neither the rapture nor the food that they expect God to provide (compare Rev. 12.6) materializes: in a scene redolent of the *akedah* (the action is set at the top of a hill, at daybreak) Sharon kills her child. The film adopts a deliberately ambiguous stance, leaving open the question of whether Sharon's experience is a religious or a psychotic one. (Shaped by quite different production values, in this respect it prefigures π (Darren Aronofsky, 1998), in which it is unclear whether Max really has uncovered the numerical principle underpinning the universe, or is delusional.) After the murder, Sharon is arrested, but the events she has awaited soon begin to unfold on the prison's television screen: angelic trumpets herald the arrival of the four horsemen (Rev. 6.1-8) and the prison bars disintegrate. Sharon is raptured, and on the banks of a 'river that washes away all your sins' (an evocation of Rev. 22.1) meets Mary's spirit (Rev. 20.4), who reveals that God will allow the disillusioned Sharon the chance to reunite with her family in heaven in exchange for her unconditional love. She refuses, and is left alone in darkness. For the

purposes of this essay, it matters little whether this final scene depicts either the encounter with a cruel deity who will not help our unbelief, or the end-stages of Sharon's psychological disintegration (or both of these, as suggested by Greiner⁸). In *The Rapture* Revelation is, as Will Self has it, 'a sick text';⁹ its treatment here at once reflects and reinforces liberal fears about its associations with a murderous – possibly insanelly so – fundamentalism.¹⁰

3. *Revelation as Explanation of the End Times*

Whilst Tolkin's film is circumspect in its handling of a Revelation-oriented faith, it does not directly challenge either Sharon and her community's futurist interpretation of the Apocalypse, or its invocation as the basis for a belief in the rapture or 'snatching up' of the saints to heaven. Although texts like Rev. 3.10, ('I will keep you from the hour of trial') and the "'Come up here'" of Rev. 4.1-2 are regarded by adherents as evidencing the rapture (John, the addressee of Rev. 4, is here seen as a symbol of the church), other passages like 1 Thess. 4.17 ('we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds [...] to meet the Lord in the air') or Mt. 24.40-41 ('Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left') are more frequently invoked demonstrations of its truth. The assumption in *The Rapture* is, however, that these things are also clearly taught in Revelation, a position the film shares with the *Left Behind* franchise. Just as cinema requires a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of its audiences, so for the most part, film treatments of Revelation set aside hermeneutical challenges and invite viewers to accept the text as structuring and explaining the terrors of the end-time. They may do so on the basis of Christian faith, or from a secularizing position, which uses the Apocalypse as a convenient source for the grammar of the unfolding tribulations, but not their solution.

The rise of cinema has coincided with a growing trend towards the radically futurist (end-time) historical interpretation of the Apocalypse.¹¹ Understandably, then, a significant number of films reflects this approach, weaving together diverse New Testament texts that are regarded as relating the details of the last few years of history, including not just

8. Carl Greiner, 'The Rapture: A Challenging Vision of Horror', *Journal of Religion and Film* 1.1 (April 1997), paragraph 24, online: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/greiner.htm>, no pages, current on 1 September 2006.

9. Self, 'Introduction', p. xii.

10. Margaret Miles criticizes *The Rapture's* caricature of fundamentalism in *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 103-11.

11. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 24-25.

the rapture but the character of the antichrist (referred to in 1 Jn 2.18; popularly identified with the beast of Rev. 13) and his (in these films, always 'his') reign, and the ultimate battle associated with the glorious return of Christ (Rev. 16.16). In theological terms, they advocate a pre-tribulationist, pre-millennial dispensationalism.¹² Current events confirm both the nearness of the end as predicted by Revelation and the character of the world, which is regarded as inherently sinful and incapable of redemption by anything other than catastrophe and supernatural intervention. Before the catastrophe, faithful Christians will be raptured, and meet Jesus in heaven.

For scholars like Ostwalt, such imagining of the apocalypse is predominantly the preserve of groups on Christianity's margins,¹³ and it is relevant to note that many screen productions in this category – the *Left Behind* and *Omega Code* franchises, and their predecessors, *The Rapture* (Charles O. Baptista, 1941) and *A Thief in The Night* (Donald W. Thompson, 1972) – have been produced and distributed through Christian media companies, rather than by mainstream industrial channels.¹⁴ But a necessary association of apocalypticism and marginality is hard to sustain. Produced in 1941 for church and mission work in North America, Baptista's *The Rapture* perhaps unsurprisingly saw foreign military conflict as heralding the traumas (successively visualized on screen) of Revelation 16. Yet it also speaks to peculiarly middle class fears: 'housework will be left undone', the narrator advises viewers, 'because Christian maids have been promoted to higher realms.' More recently, surveys suggest that around 44% of American Christians believe in the rapture and a battle of Armageddon, slightly more than this (49%) in the Antichrist, and around 60% in a biblically predicted Judgment Day.¹⁵ The most widely known articulation of these beliefs, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, was the best-selling non-fiction title in the United States in the 1970s, and the *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (fictional narratives which imagine what life might be like when these events come to pass;

12. Pre-tribulationist, pre-millennial dispensationalism: Pre-millennialism is the belief in a literal reign of Christ at his second coming; dispensationalism is a form of pre-millennialism, which understands the *whole* of history as a series of dispensations or eras, each defined by a different covenant or revelation given by God. Pre-tribulationists believe that faithful Christians will be raptured (taken up bodily into heaven) before the period of suffering and chaos (tribulation) that will precede Christ's second coming and the end of the world. See further the introductory essay in this volume.

13. Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 158.

14. On the importance of distribution see Wright, *Religion and Film*, p. 79.

15. Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, pp. 8, 42.

the inspiration since 2000 of an ongoing series of films¹⁶) have sold over 60 million copies, regularly occupying the number one position in the fiction best-seller charts in the United States, even though these rankings exclude sales in specifically Christian outlets.¹⁷

Futurist interpretations of Biblical texts inspire much of the detail of the drama in the *Left Behind* films released to date – *Left Behind*, *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* (Bill Corcoran, 2002) and *Left Behind III: World at War* (Craig R. Baxley, 2005). Within these narrative-driven films, reading Revelation also provides the lead characters (journalist Buck Williams; pilot Rayford Steele and his daughter Chloe; pastor Bruce Barnes) with the ability to understand and respond to world events. The action of *Left Behind* opens against a context of international food shortages, inflation (Rev. 6.5-6) and conflict (Rev. 6.4) in the Middle East. Amidst the upheaval, the rapture occurs. Children and Christian adults are taken up, but few of those left behind appreciate what has occurred; most prefer the explanations offered by United Nations Secretary General Nicolae Carpathia, who promises a solution to the world's problems, heads a new ten-member (evoking the 'ten crowns' of Rev. 13.2) Security Council, and brokers a peace deal for Israel. Carpathia is hailed as a great leader and replaces the United Nations with a totalitarian Global Community, as nations seeking peace and security willingly surrender their sovereignty (Rev. 13). *Left Behind II* and *Left Behind III* chart the consolidation and extension of Carpathia's power, and his revengeful destruction of opponents. Like the beast of Rev. 13.3, Carpathia receives a 'mortal wound' in an assassination attempt, but revives, his body now possessed by Satan. He rebuilds Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, only to desecrate it immediately, by declaring himself divine (evoking futurist readings of Rev. 11.1-2 and 13.1-6, Mt. 24.15, Dan. 9.27¹⁸). Meanwhile, a small band of those who were left behind at the rapture, but who have come to faith through prayer and bible study, form an underground Tribulation Force opposed to Nicolae's project. Reading Revelation

16. The dynamics of adaptation and the distinctiveness of the cinema as a medium (on which see Wright, *Religion and Film*, pp. 21-22, 36) require that the *Left Behind* films are studied in their own right. Notable innovations in *Left Behind III: The World at War* include the Global Community's poisoning of the Tribulation Force's Bibles with anthrax, and the prominence accorded to previously minor characters (for example, President Fitzhugh) and plotlines. In 2000, La Haye sued the production company over its handling of the *Left Behind* project (Michael R. Smith, 'Author LaHaye Sues *Left Behind* Film Producers', *Christianity Today*, 45.6 [April, 2001], p. 20).

17. Wojcik, *The End of the World*, p. 8; Jeanne Halgren Kilde and Bruce David Forbes, 'Introduction', in *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times*, pp. 1, 10.

18. For example, for Hal Lindsey, Rev. 11.1-2 can only refer to 'a yet-to-be-built structure!'; *There's A New World Coming: A Prophetic Odyssey* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1973), p. 160.

allows them to recognize him as the antichrist and remain confident in God's ultimate victory.

For the makers and consumers of the *Left Behind* films these narrative details, reflecting the prophecies discerned in Revelation by pre-tribulationist theologians, are of primary import. But for the purposes of this essay, the cultural preoccupations that underpin them are of greater interest. Ostensibly about the future, the *Left Behind* films are firmly of the present moment. The sins that prevent Rayford and Chloe Steele from being raptured are personal-sexual, rather than structural-systemic: again, this seems to challenge an easy linkage of apocalyptic sensibility and radical social critique. Conversion impacts most clearly on the pair's private lives, as each enters into marriage with a fellow believer. For Chloe, the abandonment of alternative fashion is another, visual marker of her altered identity. At the macro level, the films are interventions in support of United States isolationism. The Steeles, Barnes and Williams are North Americans, whilst the antichrist, Carpathia, is a Romanian (one 'of Roman descent', according to LaHaye and Jenkins), a label evoking both the feared Otherness of the formerly Communist East in some popular apocalyptic prophecy¹⁹ and a longstanding association of the beast of Rev. 13 with Rome, whether ancient, ecclesiastical or eschatological.²⁰ Although the Global Community (the name here evokes a range of present-day organizations that advocate notions of the interconnectedness—of human societies and/or the natural world—including the Foundation for Global Community, Global Community Initiatives, and One Global Community) displaces the United Nations as Carpathia's tool, the blending of organizations actual and fictional has strong implications: the films construct images of future scenarios, but offer reasons to fear present-day participation in international partnerships and agencies, even (or especially) those which defuse conflict and feed the hungry.²¹

Intertwined with this attitude is a suggestion that Israel and the United States of America will play a special role in the end times. In relation to Israel (the films do not differentiate between Israel as land/people/modern state) the *Left Behind* films are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the post-rapture absence of the church on earth sees God's attentions refocussing on Israel and the preparation of Jews to receive the returning Christ. The final scenes of *Left Behind II* hint that this process is

19. Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, pp. 151-53.

20. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 148.

21. See further Amy Johnson Frykholm, 'What Social and Political Messages Appear in the Left Behind Books? A Literary Discussion of Millenarian Fiction', in Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation, and The End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 167-95.

underway; garment-rending *haredim* (carefully observant Jews) are the first to charge Carpathia with blasphemy. The two mysterious figures who appear on the Temple Mount (compare Rev. 11.3) are named Moshe and Eli, in recognition both of the roles that the biblical Moses and Elijah played (in fighting idolatry and, for [evangelical] Christians, as forerunners of the Messiah) and of the powers that the witnesses in Rev. 11.6 share with these *Tanakh* characters (1 Kgs 17.1; Exod. 7.17–15.25).

At the same time, Israel is, to borrow Hal Lindsey's terminology, *Left Behind's* 'fuse of Armageddon'²² and the attempt to broker peace with her neighbours, diabolic. Those Jews who fail to accept the gospel, like Chaim Rosenzweig, an Israeli scientist who unwittingly aids Carpathia's rise by handing him a formula enabling cereals to be grown in drought conditions, are clever but weak, at best the ineffectual opponents of evil. Whilst (in keeping with a dispensationist perspective) the *Left Behind* films are not straightforwardly supersessionist, their Jewish characters are valued not on their own terms but as characters in a Christian story. They reflect different dimensions of evangelical understandings of Jews – their merits as a witness people, and their failings.²³ In particular, the films struggle to comprehend secular Jewish identity. Although Rosenzweig is secular, he supports Carpathia because he wants to hasten the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple: what is primarily an evangelical Christian interest in a necessary step towards the messianic age becomes in *Left Behind* a cause that binds and blinds Jews, both secular and observant.

Conversely, the United States functions in these films as the centre of Christian faithfulness; it provides the Tribulation Force's key-workers, its bunker-home, and its values. In a departure from LaHaye and Jenkins's novels, *Left Behind III* underscores the message that North Americans are the world's natural leaders by heightening the role of President Gerald Fitzhugh. As in the novels, he concedes rapidly to Carpathia's demands, but in the film this error is a very temporary one, counterbalanced by his subsequent assassination attempt on the dictator. Crucially, this happens *after* Fitzhugh and the federal government have ceded their powers to the Global Community. In this way, *Left Behind III*, reflecting Conservative Christian disappointment at the separation of church from state, hints Western-style (on which, more later) at a lack of fit between the America represented by political leaders and institutions and the true American

22. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 34.

23. For a fuller study of this topic see Yaakov Ariel, 'How Are Jews and Israel Portrayed in the Left Behind Series? A Historical Discussion of Jewish-Christian Relations', in Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation, and The End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 131–66.

spirit, which is embodied in the principled individual's willingness to stand alone, unfettered by the institutions of mainstream society.

Although it does not focus on the rapture, similar concerns pervade the *The Omega Code* and *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 2001). Before the opening scene proper of the latter work, Hal Lindsey appears on screen to address audiences directly: he recommends the film because it communicates the fact that the antichrist is 'alive and well in the world today' and 'we're very, very near the return of Jesus Christ.' As in the *Left Behind* films, *The Omega Code* and *Megiddo* posit present day alliances as sites of cosmic danger: Stone Alexander, born in America but raised and educated in Italy, is the feted head of the European Union before his rise to the Chancellorship of the World Union. He rules from Rome (whereas Carpathia's seat is New Babylon), reflecting an assimilation of biblical types one to another that is common in pre-millennialism and begins in the Apocalypse itself (Rome is the Babylon of Rev. 17 and 14.8).²⁴ Also common to the *Left Behind* and *Omega Code* franchises are images of muscular, Christian America, and limited Israel. Stone's brother David becomes President of the United States and is Stone's chief human opponent, telling him, à la George W. Bush, 'the people of this nation will not be at the beck and call of foreign leaders'. Conversely, Jerusalem kabbalist Aaron Rostenberg discovers, but is powerless to protect, the key to a code that is embedded within the *Tanakh* and reveals events foretold in Revelation. Other Jews are ineffectual when Stone Alexander proclaims himself 'King and God' in a rebuilt Temple (Rev. 13.1-6).

The *Omega Code* films are, however, distinguished from the *Left Behind* franchise by their more explicit invocation of Revelation's text. *The Omega Code* opens with a title card bearing the words, 'it has been foretold in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation that he who controls Jerusalem in the last days will control the world...'. *Megiddo* puts a paraphrase of Revelation on screen: 'The beast shall ascent out of the bottomless pit and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder when they behold the beast that was [...] and is not [...] and is' (Rev. 17.8), and closes with the text of Rev. 11.15. Moreover, as the name of the franchise suggests, the Apocalypse is here understood as expressing cryptically a precise end-times scenario, and the ability to set it in motion. To echo Kovacs' and Rowland's terminology, Stone Alexander's actions might be regarded as the ultimate in Revelation's 'actualizing' interpretation.²⁵

24. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 182.

25. 'Actualizing means reading the Apocalypse in relation to new circumstances, seeking to convey the spirit of the text, rather than being preoccupied with the plethora of detail. Such interpretation tends to regard the text as multivalent' (Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 8).

Like the *Left Behind's* antichrist, he shares similarities with the beast of the Apocalypse. But he also deliberately seeks to act out details of the text, or rather, details of the text as they are interpreted in popular premillennialism. His theft of the Code, a (rather ill-defined) method of reading the bible three dimensionally, allows him to orchestrate world events, seize power, and hasten the arrival of Satan, who eventually possesses Stone on his revival from a mortal wound (Rev. 13.3).

Once Stone's power is confirmed, he bombs the El-Aksa Mosque to make way for a rebuilt Temple of Solomon. Interestingly, this does not reflect Lindsey's current reading of the Apocalypse (otherwise authoritative for the film), which interprets the phrase, 'the court outside the Temple' (Rev. 11.1-2) as an indication that the two structures will stand alongside one another on the Temple Mount. Seemingly paramount here are the opportunities the incident affords for visual effect, and/or its resonances for filmmakers and viewers who remember the burning of the Mosque by premillennialist Michael Rohan in 1969, or failed plots like that of Yehuda Cohen in 1984.²⁶

Megiddo: The Omega Code II's ending is indicative of the problems facing those who would seek to bring radically futurist interpretations to the screen. (To date, this is not a problem that the still growing *Left Behind* franchise has needed to address). The final images of a redeemed world are flat, banal: a blue rainbow-crossed sky, and a waterfall surrounded by flowering plants and songbirds. Unlike some of the differently motivated productions discussed later (for example, *The End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999) or *The Seventh Seal* (Carl Schultz, 1988)) conservative Christian films from the beginning reflect a sure knowledge about the identity of the one who will triumph over evil. At the start of *Megiddo*, producer Paul Crouch advises viewers that 'Jesus Christ returns and yes, he is victorious'. Even the film's title flags the expected conclusion; in Rev. 1.8, 11; 21.6 and 22.13 'omega' is Jesus's self-designation, the code that bears his name can only point towards one inexorable conclusion. At the same time, in contrast to screen presentations of the earthly ministry of Jesus, depicting the returned Christ has to date been considered either too difficult or blasphemous.

For those who seek to translate a conservative Christian reading of Revelation to the screen, then, what might otherwise be obvious avenues for creativity and narrative tension or intrigue—the question of whether the impending tragedy may be averted, and if so, by what means—are

26. Rohan was not a member of the Worldwide Church of God but claimed he was inspired by its newspaper, *The Plain Truth*. The interest of some Orthodox Jews in removing the El-Aksa mosque was depicted in the Israeli cinema in *Time of Favour [Iha-Hesder]* (Joseph Cedar, 2000).

a priori closed off. Ideological commitment to biblical inerrancy and/or literalism tends to lock such projects into a largely mimetic approach, creating features that (to those who do not share such a worldview) may seem dully predictable. More specifically, these parameters, coupled with the theological requirement to show human opposition to the antichrist as ineffectual, mean that ironically, the most compelling character in the *Omega Code* films (and the *Left Behind* films) is Stone Alexander (or Nicolae Carpathia) and the final chapters in his career constitute the dramatic climax of the action. In scenes utilizing computer generated imagery, a plague of locusts pours forth from his mouth, and later, as the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16.16) rages between Stone and his few remaining opponents beneath a blood red sun, he is finally and unambiguously revealed as a monstrous Satan. But just as Stone-Satan appears triumphant, a shaft of light from the skies halts the battle; he is thrown into a lake of fire (Rev. 19.20) and bound there, in chains (Rev. 20.1-3).

4. *Revelation as a Cultural Reference Point*

The *Left Behind* and *Omega Code* franchises make direct appeals to and for the message of Christian faith. However, whilst other films may similarly see Revelation as a code, or as a guide that has bearing on the understanding of contemporary persons and events, they are animated by quite different spirits, as made plain by the necessarily brief and suggestive survey that follows.

Positioned between Christian horror and the association of Apocalypse with 'sick' faith are diverse films in which the text is exploited as a cultural reference point. If the unfolding sequence of events prophesied in Revelation is paramount to the premillennialists, narrative is of little import for Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. Here, Rev. 8.1 and 6 ('When the lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for almost half an hour [...]. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.') form an *inclusio*²⁷ around the exploration of existential questions predicated on the efforts of Antonius Block, a fourteenth-century crusader recently returned to plague-ridden Sweden, to identify 'one meaningful act' in the face of imminent Death, who has come, chalky-faced and clothed in a black cape, to claim him. By exegetical consensus, the silence of Revelation 8 is not doom-laden, but a ritual prelude to prayer.²⁸ Bergman differs, and juxtaposes the text with

27. In the film's penultimate scene, Block's wife continues the scripture reading, to verses 7-11.

28. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 107-108. For the consensus in historical criticism see Richard Bauckham, 'Revelation', in John Barton and John Muddiman

an impressive piece of expressionist noir photography: a Johannic eagle hovers in otherwise empty morning skies, as below, waves break on the sea-shore, two horses taste the ocean and a squire lies exhausted on the rocky beach. The sound of the sea and the wind is cut, and the knight, who has tried to pray but cannot, looks up, to find himself confronted by Death. The technique is deceptively simple, but arresting. For Bergman, as for others in the second half of the twentieth century, the Apocalypse's sense of an ending speaks to Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation.²⁹ But this apart, *Seventh Seal* secured Bergman's reputation as a director and its images have assumed a near-iconographic status, bolstered in the film itself by the quotation from Revelation, but now breaking free of that text in popular cultural imagination. The characters and visual style of *Seventh Seal* have been variously parodied in later productions such as Woody Allen's *Love and Death* (1975), *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* (Peter Hewitt, 1991) in which the eponymous heroes play Death at Cluedo, Twister, and Battleships, and *Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, 1993) which sees a hit-man accidentally liberate the character of Death from Bergman's film into the real world, where he inadvertently begins killing people.

Pale Rider (Clint Eastwood, 1985) like Bergman's film, uses the Apocalypse to comment on character and setting. Most obviously, the title invokes the pale horse whose rider is Death in Rev. 6.8. Eastwood's rider is a man of unknown origin, known only as Preacher, who arrives on a grey horse as teenager Megan—who has previously prayed to God, asking him to defend her small community from the economic and environmental ravages inflicted by a big mining corporation—is reading aloud from Revelation 6. Seemingly, Preacher is a quasi-supernatural instrument of judgment: a ring of bullet-holes on his back indicates that he has previously been the victim of Sheriff Stockburn and his deputies, who now work for the mining corporation. Yet he has survived miraculously (or is a ghost) and his mission is to impose justice. At the end of the film, Stockburn and the corporation have been defeated, and Preacher once again rides off into the distance, having spurned the advances of both Megan and her mother, Sarah. In many respects *Pale Rider* is a remake of *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953³⁰) with elements of Eastwood's *High Plains*

(eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1294; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), pp. 507–508.

29. See Ingmar Bergman in Birgitta Steene (ed.), *Focus on The Seventh Seal* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 70, and more generally Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, pp. 97–132. Melvyn Bragg's *The Seventh Seal [Det Sjunde Inseglet]* (London: British Film Institute, 1993) offers a guide to Bergman's film which is personal, almost to the point of self-indulgence.

30. *Shane* has with some justification been interpreted as a Christ film, see, for

Drifter (Clint Eastwood, 1973; in this film, too, the words of Rev. 6.8 are juxtaposed with images of a pale horse-riding 'Stranger') thrown in for good measure. The tradition was continued in 1993 by Kevin Jarre's *Tombstone*, in which gunslinger Johnny Ringo recites Rev. 6.8 as a prelude to Wyatt Earp's arrival on the railroad (the 'iron horse' of the West) and in a visual complement to the allusion, Earp and his associates defeat a criminal gang while riding four horses side-by-side with matching saddles and bridles. With their images of men endowed with near-divine powers who briefly stand in the midst of and forever transform a beleaguered community, but are unable to belong or remain part of it, *Pale Rider* and *Tombstone* are firmly rooted in genre conventions. In particular, the invocation of Rev. 6 here adds to Preacher's Otherness, underscoring his identity as a hero who 'is of a different order and cannot remain with the righteous remnant'³¹ and perhaps offering comment also—Eastwood is a knowing, 'New Hollywood' director³²—on the mythical images of frontier and masculinity for which the Western film has so long served as a vehicle.³³

The Seventh Sign (Carl Schulz, 1988) differs immediately from *Pale Rider* in its handling both of (gender) politics and the biblical text.³⁴ In the context of this study, the film might be categorized as a return to futurist interpretation. Unlike both Eastwood's and Bergman's films, Schulz's presentation centres on efforts to avert a cataclysm that threatens the survival of the world. Once more the Apocalypse simultaneously provides the grammar for the unfolding end-times, and the clues that allow Abby Quinn and *yeshiva bucher* (student) Avi to discern the true import of the mysterious world events that they witness either directly or in Abby's case, on television: fish die in the waters off Haiti (Rev. 8.9 and 16.3); an Arab village on the site of the biblical Sodom is inexplicably destroyed; fire breaks out; freak extremes of weather are experienced around the globe (Rev. 8.5, 8); a boy who cited biblical justification for the murder of his incestuous biological parents is executed (possibly an evocation of Rev. 6.9); and the sun is eclipsed (Rev. 8.12).

example, Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Franklin: Sheed and Ward, 1997), pp. 57-171.

31. Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples*, p. 180.

32. Wright, *Religion and Film*, pp. 131-33.

33. For an excellent exploration of these themes, see Patrick McGee, *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

34. Mary Ann Beavis offers a brief discussion of this film in "'Angels Carrying Savage Weapons': Uses of the Bible in Contemporary Horror Films', *Journal of Religion and Film* 7.2 (October 2003), online: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol7No2/angels.htm>, no pages, current on 1st September 2006.

Interestingly, a range of approaches to the biblical text are addressed within the film's diegetic world. Naturalizing, rationalizing explanations of the unusual meteorological phenomena are explicitly rejected, being the obfuscations of Father Lucci, a priest who is ultimately revealed as the malign Cartaphilus—not the similarly named wandering Jew³⁵ of Christian folklore, but in this instance a Roman official condemned to eternal life for his role in the scourging of Jesus. In another scene, Avi discusses the New Testament with a Catholic priest who tells him that the events described in the Apocalypse are not, as pre-millennialists would have it, to be decoded and 'checked off like a list', but should be understood symbolically. This position is also refuted by the film's narrative, in which resolution is only achieved through individual characters' 'performance' of elements of the text.

However, in contrast to *Left Behind* and *Omega Code*, which are believed by their creators to be partly fictionalizing accounts of imminent actualities, *The Seventh Sign* does not claim to be other than a fictional narrative, and it is distinguished from the conservative Christian productions in two key respects. Firstly, it depicts the second coming of Christ, in the character of David Bannon, who does not arrive as a reconciling presence, but as a kind of frustrated drifter who successively initiates the signs of the end times, by breaking open a succession of sealed prophecies. Secondly, the film rejects the pessimism of pre-millennial dispensationalism and posits human will as sufficient to effect world redemption. In a *bricolage* of New Testament and Talmudic ideas, Abby, who is pregnant, learns from David and Avi that she is the 'seventh seal' of Rev. 8.1. Moreover, the repository of pre-existent souls, the *guf*,³⁶ is rapidly emptying (linked in the film to the biblical reference to 'silence in heaven'); the end of the world will be heralded by the birth of her child, the first to be born without a soul. During labour, Abby finally realizes that only she can prevent the final cataclysm and cause God to grant the earth another chance, by revealing her hope for the future through the commission of a selfless act: she brings about the replenishment of the *guf* and averts the apocalypse by sacrificing her own life for that of her newborn son.

35. Although the Wandering Jew's name is most commonly Ahasuerus, but the name Cartaphilus appears in the writings of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris. See also Melanie J. Wright, 'Wandering Jew', in Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (eds.), *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 443.

36. For Talmudic references to the *guf* ('body') as the repository of souls see *Avodah Zarah* 5a and *Yevamot* 62, which teach that the Messiah will come only after the *guf* has been emptied. The film develops the concept in a manner that departs significantly from Jewish religious tradition.

The Seventh Sign is unusual in its emphasis on a female character as effective agent. Arguably, however, it has strong conservative overtones; the film's resolution suggests to audiences that wonderful things can happen—even the healing of a fractured, traumatized world—if only woman is prepared to sacrifice herself. Persistent, too, in *Seventh Sign* are constructions of 'the Jew' as a mysterious Other. When Abby first discovers a Hebrew text in David Banner's apartment, she seeks help from the elderly Rabbi Ornstein, but he is *haredi* and cannot keep company with a woman who is not his wife—Judaism is the obstacle to his recognition of the solution to the world's fate. The young Avi is privy to a special kind of knowledge (Jewish folklore about the *guf*) but he, too, must rely on the arrival of a non-Jewish (in an early scene, Abby says she has no religious denomination; her name hints at Irish Catholic ethnicity) child to effect his redemption. In this way, *Seventh Sign*, perhaps unwittingly, inserts the narrative of Christian beginnings into its vision of the end.

5. Concluding Remarks

The diverse films considered in this essay provide cumulative evidence of what John Riches terms the bible's 'sheer fecundity'.³⁷ But they also proffer a challenge to the Commentary as a vehicle for the articulation of reception history. On the screen as elsewhere, biblical books—and perhaps this is especially true of Revelation—are rarely experienced as discrete entities, separated off from other texts and impulses. At the same time, as the discussion here has hinted, an examination of Revelation can reveal only a small part of the meanings of a film such as *Pale Rider* or even *Megiddo: Omega Code II*. This is not, however, to say that film offers nothing to the attempt to map what Revelation is.

The striking insistence on the miraculous that characterizes many of the films discussed in this essay directs attention back towards elements of the Apocalypse lost in some intellectualizing exegeses. The approach of films like *Seventh Seal*, *Left Behind* and *Omega Code*, each of which attempts in its own way to 'put the bible on screen', may appear unpalatable to some, but in many respects the visual economies of these films resonate with the scriptural emphasis on 'signs and wonders' (Deut. 34.11). In their very abundance lies a potential to capture something of religion's historic connection of seeing with belief—an association which is central to the Apocalypse, with its injunctions to 'come and see' (Rev. 6.1, 3, 5), to 'show his servants what must soon take place' (Rev. 1.1), and, after seeing, 'to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me' (Rev. 22.8).

37. John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 116.

Of equal import is the recognition that the cinema's engagement with the book of Revelation is always partial, characterized by *lacunae*, discrepancies, 'mis-readings'. For much of the twentieth century, mainstream biblical scholarship has seen in these qualities confirmation of the inconsequentiality of the film medium. Yet they might just as well be seen as shedding light on the nature of Apocalypse itself. Commenting on cult literature, Umberto Eco has suggested that a such a text's vulnerability to dismemberment and reassembly is a vital aspect of its extraordinary appeal: 'one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it, so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship to the whole'.³⁸ It must also provide excesses, superfluities, and inconsistencies, if it is to allow scope for fan creativity. Considered in this light, the perennially capricious invocation of Revelation in the cinema offers insight onto the character of the text itself. The Apocalypse is a living text not just because it (at times) appears to offer answers to the need for a sense of an ending, but precisely because of its gaps, its opacity.

Partial (in both sense/s of the word) screen engagements with Revelation also caution against any simplistic effort to describe how 'the paradigms of apocalypse [and of biblical themes and motifs more generally] continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world'.³⁹ Here, surely, are arguments against any view that readily positions the biblical text as either a root or mine to be tapped or plundered, or that regards its meanings and significance as being delineated by the activities of any single interpretive community. Revelation at the cinema is unstable and unpredictable, it operates and is operated upon in fashions too complex to be subjected to the pressures of binary logic, described as the 'effect' or 'influence' of one discrete phenomenon on another. Perhaps, then, Deleuze and Guattari's figure of the rhizome is a more helpful prompt for the activity of reception history: In botanical terms, a rhizome is a horizontal, usually subterranean, plant stem that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes. Used figuratively, it refers to,

an a-centred, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states [...] to be rhizomorphic is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses.⁴⁰

38. Quoted in Wright, *Religion and Film*, p. 102.

39. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction. With a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 28.

40. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 15, 21.

Thinking rhizomorphously helps conceptualize film and Revelation, separately and in relation: in the cinema, themes, symbols, motifs simultaneously depend upon and operate independently of the text of the Apocalypse. Thus in *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) a '666' birthmark on the scalp of Damien Thorn signified that he was the antichrist. 20th Century Fox highlighted this by releasing the film on 6th June 1976, a strategy it repeated when releasing the remake (*The Omen*, John Moore, 2006) at 6.06 am on 6th June 2006 (06.06.06). But the number '666' functions quite differently in *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999) when Christine York's dreams of '666' points towards the world's end in 1999 (explained by a theory that in dreams, numbers appear upside down or backwards). Relating each of these productions mechanically to Rev. 13.18 ultimately reveals little aside from the preoccupations of the scholar, whether s/he emphasizes the notion of the bible as culture's 'source' text, or strives to reverse the hermeneutical flow, projecting later concerns onto the first century text. The rhizome reminds us instead to attend to the vibrancy, movement, and heterogeneity of phenomena – their here-and-now-ness. It emphasizes that what was once periphery may at other times be centre, that the threads of connection are multiple and if broken at one point, may start up again along the old lines, or on a new one, that what Revelation is, remains to be seen.⁴¹

Filmography

- Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* (Peter Hewitt, 1991)
End of Days, The (Peter Hyams, 1999)
High Plains Drifter (Clint Eastwood, 1973)
Last Action Hero (John McTiernan, 1993)
Left Behind (Victor Sarin, 2000)
Left Behind II: Tribulation Force (Bill Corcoran, 2002)
Left Behind III: World at War (Craig R. Baxley, 2005)
Love and Death (Woody Allen, 1975)
Megiddo: The Omega Code 2 (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 2001)
Omega Code, The (Rob Marcarelli, 1999)
Omen, The (John Moore, 2006)
Pale Rider (Clint Eastwood, 1985)
 π (Darren Aronofsky, 1998)
Rapture, The (Charles O. Baptista, 1941)
Rapture, The (Michael Tolkin, 1991)

41. I should like to thank Jorunn Økland and William John Lyons for their invitation to present a version of this paper at 'The Book of Revelation and Effective History' colloquium at Bristol University's Instituted of Advanced Studies in September 2006, and Justin Meggitt, who helped me to get there by answering many questions about the New Testament, and letting me borrow his car.

- Seventh Seal, The [Det Sjunde Inseglet]* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957)
Seventh Sign, The (Carl Schultz, 1988)
Shane (George Stevens, 1953)
Thief in the Night, A (Donald W. Thompson, 1972)
Time of Favour [Ila-Hesder] (Joseph Cedar, 2000).
Tombstone (Kevin Jarre, 1993)

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THE APOCALYPSE ACCORDING TO JOHNNY CASH: EXAMINING THE 'EFFECT' OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION ON A CONTEMPORARY APOCALYPTIC WRITER

William John Lyons

1. *Introduction*

Most of my thinking about the Bible (or any of its components) as an object (or objects) moving through history has been predicated on a view of that material as being almost wholly passive. Readers have constructed 'it', used 'it', abused 'it', but, strangely, appeared to have been little changed by their interaction with 'it'. That this is in fact a fairly accurate depiction of what has happened in the examples that I have previously studied, however, should not have blinded me to the possibility that the Bible may also function as an active agent, influencing and altering those who encounter it.¹

Reading Heikki Räisänen's essay, "The "Effective History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship",² has set me to considering these things more rigorously, however. He begins by describing his embarrassment at being unable to answer the lay-person's 'very reasonable' question, 'what effect has the Bible had?' His basic problem is that the Bible's influence has been assumed rather than critically demonstrated.³ But compounding that problem has been our failure to adequately define our terms. Here I want to note three of his distinctions before building on them later.

1. Most of this work has centred on the reception of the Gamaliel the Elder portrayed in Acts 5.34-41, with an article ("The Words of Gamaliel [Acts 5.38-39] and the Irony of Indeterminacy", *JSNT* 68 [1997], pp. 23-49), and current essays discussing the way that the figure in the text has been seen in a number of different ways by modern exegetes and the early Church.

2. In Heikki Räisänen, *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991-2001* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 263-82 (originally published in *SJT* 45 [1992], pp 303-24).

3. Räisänen, 'Effective History', p. 263.

First, for Räsänen, 'effective history' is not the same as the 'history of interpretation'.⁴ Allegorical readings, for example, are not generally important for 'effective history' but are fundamental for the 'history of interpretation'.⁵ Allegory permits promiscuous 'use' of texts to back up pre-existing views, but for Räsänen, effective history's object of study can only be 'a (new) *consequence* of [a] reading; mere justification of something with the Bible will not qualify'.⁶ Effective history is thus being defined as 'an actual history of empirical effects',⁷ albeit with the caveat that the line between effect and use is 'hazardous and subjective'.⁸

Second, Räsänen argues that the 'Bible' of effective history cannot be restricted to the text as originally 'meant'.⁹ He suggests instead that '[t]he Bible is an effective factor when something results from a reading which is plausible in the circumstances'.¹⁰ This clarifies an earlier comment that 'it would be impossible to exclude the allegorically understood Bible when we consider the influence of the Bible on medieval and Renaissance art and literature'.¹¹ In that context allegorical readings *were* also plausible readings.¹² As a general rule, however, readings that appear contrived should be peripheral to the concerns of effective history.

Third, Räsänen notes the sheer complexity of effective history's object of study – the Bible's influence may be uneven, is always augmented and sometimes deeply compromised by other influences, and is often disturbingly widespread on both sides of any argument.¹³ Nevertheless, he is obviously of the opinion that its influence may be critically discussed, and offers a number of 'effect-types': (i) the impact of specific words or passages (e.g. Origen's self-mutilation); (ii) the impact of general religious and moral ideas; (iii) the impact on the emotions – both positive (e.g. hope) and negative (hell); (iv) the impact of exemplary figures as persons to be imitated; and (v) the impact of the idea of a 'holy book'.¹⁴ Significantly for our purposes here, he also notes 'the Bible has

4. Räsänen, 'Effective History', pp. 269-71.

5. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 270.

6. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 271.

7. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 265 n. 12.

8. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 270.

9. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 271.

10. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 271.

11. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 270.

12. Räsänen's distrust of allegory is further diluted by his statement that '[i]f it can be shown that a particular allegorical interpretation had actually brought about a new idea or a new practice, and not just legitimated an existing one, that would belong to effective history' ('Effective History', p. 270).

13. Räsänen, 'Effective History', pp. 267, 272.

14. Räsänen, 'Effective History', pp. 273-79.

often exerted its influence indirectly'.¹⁵ Materials affected by the Bible's influence may be said to propagate that influence, albeit indirectly.

With these distinctions in mind, I want to ask about the 'effect' of the book of Revelation on a specific 'interpreter', the American songwriter and vocalist, Johnny Cash. I want to suggest that his description of the process involved in writing his 2002 song, 'The Man Comes Around', is an illustration of a different 'effect-type', one in which the end-result of the Bible's impact upon the interpreter is the production of an explicit admission of what may be loosely termed, 'readerly inadequacy'.¹⁶ In other words, I am suggesting that Cash's explicit acknowledgement of his own interpretive limitations with regard to Revelation is the visible marker of an encounter with his own Bible rather than evidence for his having simply adopted the standard expositions of the tradition(s) in which he stands.¹⁷

If the Bible has influenced Cash's song, it also follows that subsequent impact of the latter must be considered part of the Bible's indirect influence. Whether any of this counts as something 'new' in Räisänen's sense, however, is something that we will return to later.

2. *The Early Years of Johnny Cash*

Johnny Cash was born J.R. Cash on 26 February, 1932, in Kingsland, Arkansas, the fourth of six children.¹⁸ Raised a Southern Baptist, his early years on the family cotton farm were physically hard and had their share of trauma. He had a strained relationship with his father, who shot his dog dead when the boy was five.¹⁹ In May 1944, his beloved older brother Jack took a week to die after a horrific saw accident, only months after Cash had been baptized.²⁰ Cash also remembered good times, however,

15. Räisänen, 'Effective History', p. 267.

16. Though this may perhaps be considered a sub-variant of Räisänen's third 'effect-type', the 'impact on the emotions', it obviously also possesses a significant intellectual aspect.

17. The idea of seeing a reader's lack of comprehension as evidence of interaction and effect arose from reading Christina G. Rossetti's comments on the Laodicean Church of Revelation 3 and seeing her explicitly acknowledge her failure to understand the text (*Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* [London: SPCK, 1892], p. 133). Such a move struck me as an unusual one for someone writing within the modern traditions that I am most familiar with, and indicative of someone who was being personally influenced by the Bible they were reading.

18. Johnny Cash, with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography of Johnny Cash* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 5-6.

19. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 257-58; cf. p. 55; cf. also Dave Urbanski, *The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003), pp. 9-11.

20. Johnny Cash, "Fork in the Road" from *Man in Black* (1975), in Michael

many involving music – his mother sang gospel songs and he sang them too, around the house and in the cotton fields.²¹

Following a period in the Army (1950–54),²² Cash married a catholic, Vivien Liberto,²³ started a family, and began his recording career alongside Elvis Presley at Sam Phillips's Sun Records.²⁴ He wrote hit after hit and his popularity and prosperity grew.²⁵ Following Phillips's refusal to allow him to record a gospel album, Cash signed with Columbia Records, and recorded the first of many such albums, *Hymns by Johnny Cash* (1959).²⁶ Alongside Gospel, however, Cash was also penning darker lyrics: 'I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die' (from *Folsom Prison Blues* [1956]).

Streissguth (ed.), *Ring of Fire: The Johnny Cash Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), pp. 25–34; Cash, *Cash*, pp. 25–32; Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash: The Authorised Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 29–33; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 13–21. On Cash's feelings about his early decision to undergo baptism, see Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 7–9.

21. Cash, *Cash*, p. 57; cf. also Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 23–29.

22. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 65–67; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 39–56; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 31–35.

23. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 156–57; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 36–37.

24. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 81–83; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 64–66; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 41–44.

25. Cash's enduring popularity as musician is described by Urbanski:

Johnny Cash's musical accomplishments are storied and staggering. He occupies spots in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Songwriter's Hall of Fame, and the Country Music Hall of Fame—he, in fact, was the first living person inducted into the latter. He sold 50 million albums, recorded more than 1500 songs, boasted fourteen number one hits, won scads of awards—including eleven Grammys—and is mentioned in the same breath as the Beatles when it comes to musical impact. (Indeed, Cash even outsold the Beatles—and everybody else—in 1969, ringing up 6.5 million album sales at the registers.) (*Man Comes Around*, pp. xiii–xiv).

26. Cash, *Cash*, p. 317. Cash, with Marshall Grant and Luther Perkins (who would be his backing group for many years to come) started out singing gospel (initially he tried to sell himself to Sam Phillips as a gospel singer):

We performed a mixture of material, most of it gospel oriented: 'Peace in the Valley,' some of Red Foley's songs, 'He'll Understand and Say Well Done,' sometimes black gospel blues songs like 'I've Got Jesus and That's Enough,' and always 'I Was There When It Happened,' the sacred song Jimmie Davis had made a hit [...]. Often I sang what was then my favourite among my own songs, 'Belshazzar' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 79).

Later gospel albums include *Hymns from the Heart* (1962), *The Holy Land* (1969), *Precious Moments* (1975), *A Believer Sings the Truth* (1979), and *My Mother's Hymnbook* (2004).

The three albums, 'Love', 'God', and 'Murder' released in 2000, showcase what would become the major elements of the Cash songbook,²⁷ each set against a background of southern working-class experience.²⁸

Touring life held many temptations for Cash. During the 60s, his behaviour became increasingly destructive; numerous car wrecks,²⁹ damage to hotels and venues,³⁰ addiction to amphetamines (from July 1957 onwards),³¹ and several one-off nights in jail followed.³² Already distanced from his wife and four daughters by his touring life-style, his long-term relationship with June Carter also contributed in part to the breakdown of his marriage.³³ In the divorce papers Cash was accused of 'extreme cruelty'.³⁴ Looking back from the perspective of the 1990s, Cash concluded that he was now 'about as far away from God as I had ever been'.³⁵ In late 1967, he tried to 'lose himself' in Nickajack Cave, near Chatanooga.³⁶ His deity, however, had different ideas.³⁷

Although Cash repeatedly said that he had always been a Christian,³⁸

27. On the eventual contents of Cash's songbook, see Frederick E. Danker, 'The World according to Johnny Cash: Lyrical Themes in his Music', in Melton. A. McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote my Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (Cultural Perspectives in the American South, 11; Yverdon, Switzerland: Gordon & Breach, 1992), pp. 131-54; and Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 291-92.

28. On the class background of Cash's music, see Richard A. Peterson, 'Class Unconsciousness in Country Music', in McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote my Life*, pp. 35-61; and Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church and Working Americans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 69-78.

29. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 161-66, 178-81.

30. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 103-105.

31. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 153-55; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 90-92; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 53-55.

32. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 60-61; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 151-53; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 63-64.

33. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 123, 129-31; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 45-46, 55, 64-65.

34. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 146; cf. Cash's own account of his marriage difficulties, *Cash*, pp. 157-61.

35. Cash, *Cash*, p. 184.

36. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 150-51; Cash, *Cash*, pp. 183-86; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 67-71; Nick Tosches, 'Chordless in Gaza: The Second Coming of John R. Cash', in Streissguth (ed.), *Ring of Fire*, pp. 221-46 (241-42).

37. In 1997 Cash was quite clear that God had not spoken to him directly – 'He never has, and I'll be very surprised if He ever does' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 185) – saying instead that he 'became conscious of a very clear, simple idea: I was not in charge of my own destiny. I was going to die at God's time, not mine' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 185).

38. Cf., for example, his comment in 1997 that 'I've been a Christian [...] all my life' (Cash, p. 256). Of himself and Carl Perkins during the early 60s, Cash said that '[n] either of us was walking the line as Christians, but both of us clung to our beliefs' (Cash, p. 107).

there is little doubt that his personal commitment was strengthened by the Nickajack experience, with Bible study becoming 'an important part of my life.'³⁹ His public persona was increasingly marked by an evangelical tinge. Following the critical success of his prison concert albums in 1968–69, Cash hosted his own TV show (*The Johnny Cash Show*) until, in response to audience questioning, he decided on the 18th November 1970 to declare his faith on national TV, a decision that, in part, led to the show being cut.⁴⁰ Following some persuading by Jimmy R. Snow, pastor at Evangel Temple in Nashville, Cash made a public profession in the church on 9th May, 1971.⁴¹ Such exposure meant that his ongoing struggles with temptation and his occasional fall back into 'bad behaviour' would all be played out in public.⁴² And, as the notorious picture of Cash raising his middle finger to the camera at the 1968 Folsom Prison concert shows, he was often far from being a 'safe' Christian.⁴³

3. *Cash and the Bible*

Cash was certainly aware of the Bible before his evangelical turn. Church attendance was sporadic on the road,⁴⁴ but both the Gospel songs he knew and a number of religiously-minded family members formed

39. *Cash*, p. 211. On p. 249, Cash describes this period as the time 'when I was most intensely involved in Bible Study'.

40. *Cash, Cash*, pp. 220–25; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 171–79; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 90–91.

41. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 184; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. 99.

42. In his earlier autobiographical writings, Cash did not mention the Nickajack cave experience, instead describing his night in jail in Lafayette, Georgia, on the 2nd November 1967, and the attitude of the Sheriff to his drug-taking as his 'crisis point'. As Turner points out, this suggests that Cash's resolve after Nickajack did not last very long (*Man Called Cash*, pp. 151–53). Cash also lapsed back into drug addiction in the late 1970s, a period culminating in course of treatment in the Betty Ford Clinic in 1983 (Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 208, 220–22; cf. *Cash, Cash*, pp. 189–99; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 122–25).

43. Cf. e.g. online: http://www.basementbar.net/uploaded_images/johnny%20cash%20finger-737393.bmp, no pages, accessed on 29 September, 2006). This gesture has become widely known in American slang as a 'Johnny Cash', and the image in some ways serves as a suitable symbol for the man once described by his daughter, Rosanne, as 'a profoundly spiritual man', who also 'readily admits to a continual attraction for all seven deadly sins' (on the televised *All-Star Tribute to Johnny Cash*, TNT, 1999; cf. Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. xx).

44. Urbanski notes some contact that Cash had in the early 60s with a non-denominational church, the Avenue Community Church in Ventura, California, and its pastor, Floyd Gressett. Though Cash and Gressett became friends, the singer did not stay with the church for long (Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. 59–60; cf. also Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 119–20).

important avenues of influence on him.⁴⁵ In the early 70s, however, Cash became increasingly involved with a Pentecostal church and befriended both his own pastors and some well-known evangelical preachers, notably Billy Graham.⁴⁶

According to biographer Steve Turner,

Cash admired Graham's resoluteness and quiet confidence in God. Graham had met and advised some of the most powerful men in the world, and yet the most striking thing about him was his humility and his integrity. Graham, in turn, was intrigued by Cash's ability to be candid about his faith and yet find acceptance with sections of society that traditionally were cynical about Christianity.⁴⁷

The two became friends, the singer appearing at a number of Graham's rallies, and the evangelist and his wife taking holidays with Cash and his family.⁴⁸ Though both agreed that Cash was no evangelist—he was unwilling to force his beliefs on anyone who did not wish to hear about them—the singer is remembered by some as an important element in their own conversion stories. One such is Larry Butler, who in the early 70s had worked in Israel on the Cash-funded, produced, and scored Jesus film, *The Gospel Road*, and then been baptized in the River Jordan.⁴⁹ The film was subsequently purchased and widely used by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.⁵⁰

45. For example, June Carter's parents, Maybelle and Ezra Carter, and Cash's sister, Joanne—who later gained a Master's Degree in Bible Studies—and her husband, the Rev. Harry Yates, are all described as influential figures in Cash's 1997 autobiography (*Cash*, pp. 145-51, 304).

46. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 226-29; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 181-85; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. xix-xx, 101-103.

47. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 180.

48. Graham published the following comments after Cash's death:

Johnny Cash was not only a legend, but was a close personal friend. Johnny was a good man who also struggled with many challenges in his life. Johnny was a deeply religious man. He and June came to a number of our Crusades over a period of many years. Ruth and I took a number of personal vacations with them at their home in Jamaica and in other places. They both were like a brother and sister to Ruth and me. We loved them. We are praying that God will comfort his family and staff at this critical time. I look forward to seeing Johnny and June in heaven one day (online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/136/52.0.html>, no pages, accessed on 29th September 2006).

49. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 290-91.

50. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 248-51; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 185-90; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp 109-17; cf. also Billy Graham, *Just as I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 436-37.

Cash's view of the Bible was deeply influenced by the evangelicalism and dispensationalism that Graham represented.⁵¹ In 1986 the man whose stage attire had gained him the name, 'The Man in Black', published a novel about St Paul entitled, *The Man in White*.⁵² In the introduction Cash wrote:

I believe the Bible, the whole Bible, to be the infallible, indisputable Word of God. I have been careful to take no liberties with the timeless Word. Where the Word is silent and for my story's sake, I have at times followed traditional views. Other things, some characters, some conversation, and some occurrences are products of my broad and at times strange imagination.⁵³

As Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have noted, however, for 'much of the American experience [...], it was the book of Revelation that placed its stamp upon the whole Bible'.⁵⁴ According to Frederick E. Danker, this

emerges most fully in [Cash's 1973 song] "Matthew Twenty-Four" [...]. Here is a full array of phraseology associated with premillennialist worldviews: rumours of war (Armageddon), earthquakes, signs of the times, 'one more day could be the last,' and even the image of the 'great bear from the northland.' That last phrase echoes the common view among radical evangelicals that the northland can be equated with Russia.⁵⁵

In a personal letter to Cash in 1975, Graham remarked about 'Matthew 24', that 'I have a feeling this could be a big hit'.⁵⁶ In 1983 he published his own book about the end-times, *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.⁵⁷

51. A classic account of this sub-culture's attitude to the Bible can be found in Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (3rd edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 31-47.

52. San Francisco: Harper & Row. The gestation of the book was a difficult one, however. On the one hand, Cash was struggling to write the book and deal with his addiction, while, on the other, Billy Graham was telling the crowds at his rallies about his great expectations for Cash's novel about Paul (Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 209).

53. Cash, *The Man in White*, p. 12. As Chris Rowland pointed out at the Colloquium, however, America's 'book of Revelation' was already itself being viewed through the 'Pauline' lenses supplied by Protestant and Puritan theology.

54. *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 53.

55. 'The World according to Johnny Cash', pp. 149-50.

56. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 197.

57. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983. Graham's dispensationalism can be seen in his own works, but is perhaps exemplified by his choice of 'researcher' for his autobiography, Jerry B. Jenkins, the co-writer (with Tim LaHaye) of the phenomenally successful 'Left Behind' series (cf. Graham, *Just as I Am*, p. 732). On Jenkins's web-site, his biography notes that he spent thirteen months working on Graham's autobiography, beginning

Cash was no mere 'reproducer' of dispensationalist exegesis, however. Over the years, he was to prove himself a keen student of the Bible, avidly reading not just that text, but also many books about it.⁵⁸ From 1975 to 1977 he took correspondence courses in Bible Studies at Bill Hamon's International Christian School of Theology in Texas, reading widely and gaining proficiency with technical aids before first graduating and then subsequently being ordained by Hamon at his own request.⁵⁹

He continued his reading while writing *The Man in White*, explicitly listing the following among his reading:

Everyday Life in Jesus' Time; Fox's Book of Martyrs; the History of the Earliest Church; the Twelve Apostles, the Twelve Caesars; the Jewish Encyclopaedia; and the writings of the Romanized Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus.⁶⁰

Many of these books were already in Cash's personal library, with a number of volumes being given to him in the late 60s by June's father, Ezra 'Pop' Carter, a man described by as Cash as a 'Bible scholar, a self-made theologian'.⁶¹ Cash writes:

They're in the spirituality section of my library, next to my history and Americana shelves: *The Life of Christ* by Fleetwood and the same title by Farrar; *The Life and Acts of Paul the Apostle* by Conebere and Howsom [sic]; Lang's whole set of Bible commentaries, about thirty volumes; various books on various aspects of the Holy Land—its history, its archaeology, its horticulture—and many others in a similar vein.⁶²

Notably, Cash had a particular penchant for classic nineteenth-century works, such as the oft-mentioned *The Life and Acts of Paul the Apostle*, first

in 1993 (online: <http://www.jerryjenkins.com/bio.html>, no pages, accessed on 20th September, 2006).

58. Cash, *Cash*, p. 247.

59. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 203-204.

60. Cash, *Man in White*, p. 2.

61. Cash, *Cash*, p. 149. Pop Carter's influence is clearly discernible from this more extended description of him by Cash.

Pop Carter was the one who really got me going on Bible study. I liked him a great deal, and learned a great deal from him in the days after I came out of Nickajack Cave. A self-taught theologian and dedicated scholar, he was also a warm and caring man with a lot of good common sense, and he made a great instructor and discussion partner, feeding and stimulating the hunger for spiritual truths that led me after a while into more formal Bible scholarship through correspondence courses (Cash, *Cash*, p. 245).

62. Cash, *Cash*, p. 244. Cash also read historical novels such as '*The Robe, Quo Vadis, The Silver Chalice, Pillar of Iron*' set in the period (Cash, *Cash*, p. 248).

published by W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson in 1852.⁶³ In a 1995 interview, the music journalist Nick Tosches thought Cash's reading material sufficiently antiquated to query him on his knowledge of a more modern work of biblical scholarship (Michael Grant's *Jesus: A Historian's Review of the Gospels* [1977] – Cash was unaware of it) before concluding that

his hunger for and love of the history of the period is impressively sincere, strong, and in his own self-schooled and rough-hewn way, erudite; and, in the end, I'm sure his grasp is no more unsure, perhaps less so, than my own.⁶⁴

In his 1997 autobiography, Cash described Bible study as something approaching a disciplined form of enquiry: 'I start most of my mornings with coffee, CNN, and then the Bible, and that sets me up for a good day'.⁶⁵ His methodology is clear.

What I really enjoy is the Bible. I love to set myself a test, give myself something to study. I find a passage I don't quite understand and chase it down in the concordance and the chain references until I learn what it means, or at least what the best-versed scholars have been able to interpret it as meaning.⁶⁶

This hint of limitation echoes again when Cash reminisced about his formal studies in the 1970s.

June and I enrolled in a study program and for three years we spent much of our time on airplanes, in hotels, and on the bus doing our lessons. We both graduated. I can't speak for June, but for me the experience was both

63. Cf. also Cash, *Man in White*, p. 5; and in his 1995 interview with N. Tosches ('Chordless in Gaza', p. 226). In *The Man in White* this work is closely linked to his final course – on St Paul – at Hamon's International Christian School of Theology, but in his 1997 autobiography *Cash* he lists the work as one that was given to him by Pop Carter (p. 244). If, as seems likely, both statements are true, then it suggests that Cash was happily using his own 'old' books during his correspondence courses in the mid-70s.

64. Tosches, 'Chordless in Gaza', p. 226.

65. Cash, *Cash*, p. 247. 'On the road', he continues, 'the habit is harder to keep, but usually I have a King James by my side on the bus, and wherever I am I have my Franklin Electronic Bible in my briefcase. That's a wonderful tool – just punch in what you are looking for, hit "Enter", and there's the scripture you want [...]. At home my most-used tool is the Thompson Chain Reference System' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 247).

66. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 204–205. From Cash's 1997 autobiography, it is obvious that certain individuals have also continued to provide him with stimulating discussion. The Reverend John Colbauth is mentioned as 'a close friend and anchor in the storm during the first years in Hendersonville', while Jack Shaw, a minister from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and Cash's sister Joanne's husband, Harry Yates are mentioned as present sources of 'advice and inspiration' on scripture (Cash, *Cash*, pp. 247–48).

exciting and humbling; I learned just enough to understand that I knew almost nothing.⁶⁷

It is perhaps no surprise that Cash's view of the Bible was also being expressed differently in 1997: 'Once I learned what the Bible is—the inspired word of God (*most of it anyway*)—the writing became precious to me, and endlessly intriguing'.⁶⁸ Those four bracketed words—'most of it anyway'—are highly significant when uttered by someone with Cash's background in evangelicalism and dispensationalism!⁶⁹

4. 'The Man Comes Around' (2002)

As the 80s ended, Columbia Records dropped Cash after twenty-eight years. Musical salvation came in the form of producer Rick Rubin and his 'American Recordings' label.⁷⁰ The first of six albums—each containing mostly covers of other writers' songs, sung with only a guitar for accompaniment—was released to critical acclaim in 1994. The Nashville establishment that had thought him finished were suitably rewarded when Cash and Rubin published a full-page 'thank you' for their support, with Cash's Folsom Prison 'middle digit' photograph as the backdrop.⁷¹

'The Man Comes Around' is the title track of the fourth album, released a year before Cash's death in September 2003.⁷² Recorded in the 'unplugged' style of the previous Rubin-produced albums, Cash is accompanied by a single guitar playing an up-beat tempo, with occasional appearances by a piano during the chorus. Turner comments

[t]his track could never have been as effective had he recorded it as a young man. Cash's cracked and sometimes breathless voice sounds both urgent and compassionate. It's not the voice of youthfulness zealotry or sheltered naiveté. It's the voice of the pilgrim at the end of his journey.⁷³

67. Cash, *Cash*, p. 245.

68. Cash, *Cash*, p. 247—emphasis added.

69. Cash demonstrates a number of other traits in his 1997 autobiography that seem to be—to an English academic anyway—difficult to reconcile with much of American Evangelical Christianity. For example, he discusses the presence of ghosts in his house in Jamaica (pp. 37–38), and his attempt to become a mason (pp. 241–42). He also describes his use of a Tibetan singing bowl (p. 205), and his possession of a Navajo dreamcatcher, used with a St Bridget's Cross, as a guard 'in the world I can't see' (p. 52).

70. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 274–77; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 137–43, 191.

71. Cf. online: <http://greenehouse.net/img/cash.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September 2006.

72. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 278–82.

73. Turner, *Man called Cash*, pp. 266–67.

Given Cash's own beliefs, the song is undoubtedly one of hopeful expectation.⁷⁴

The story of Cash's writing of the song is told in the liner notes and has been extensively repeated in reviews and in recent biographies.

The initial idea for the song came from a dream I had seven years ago. I was in Nottingham, England and had bought a book called "Dreaming of the Queen." The book talked about... people... who dream that they are with Queen Elizabeth II. I dreamed that I walked into Buckingham Palace, and there she sat [...]. As I approached, [she] looked up at me and said, "Johnny Cash! You're like a thorn tree in a whirlwind." Then, of course, I awoke. I realised that "Thorn tree in a whirlwind" sounded familiar to me. Eventually I decided that it was biblical, and I found it in the book of Job. From there it grew into a song, and I started lifting things from the book of Revelation. It became "The Man Comes Around".⁷⁵

According to Cash, the song is 'based, loosely, on the book of Revelation, with a couple of lines or a chorus, from other biblical sources'.⁷⁶

Some comment is first needed on the generative phrase 'thorn tree in a whirlwind'. Cash said that he found it in Job, and many have simply repeated this. But that phrase does not appear in Job, nor does the reversed version – 'the whirlwind is in the thorn tree' – that appears in the song. Instead of repeating the claim, Cash's 'spiritual' biographer, Dave Urbanski, instead sought an explanation in the imagery of the whirlwind, writing in brackets:

Interestingly, the Bible typically characterizes whirlwinds as a sweeping, destructive force that overtakes the wicked – and thorns are typically the emblem of the wicked.⁷⁷

Whatever the merits of this generalising move as an explanation for Cash's linking of the phrase with Job, it nevertheless confirms that the phrase is not itself biblical.

But much of the song undeniably is. It opens and closes with Cash reading Revelation 6.1-2 (the 'white horse') and 6.7-8a (the 'pale horse'). The texts in between mostly reflect eschatological judgment. Explicit in the man's coming is the division of humanity by 'name' (cf. Rev. 3.5; 13.8; 17.8; 20.15; 21.27) into two groups, those to free and those to blame (cf. Ezek. 9.2-10.7).⁷⁸ Freedom is for the righteousness (cf. Rev. 22.11),

74. Urbanski describes the song thus: 'Unabashedly fire and brimstone theologically speaking, Cash nevertheless conveys a convincingly happy tone via simple, major chords and an upbeat tempo' (*Man Comes Around*, p. 166).

75. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV* (2002).

76. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV* (2002).

77. Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. 167.

78. I am grateful to Chris Rowland to the pointer to 'the man' of Ezekiel 9.

those who drink of the 'last offered cup' (cf. Mt. 26.27-28). They are to be gathered by the 'father hen' and taken 'home' (cf. Mt. 23.37), and the golden ladder coming down is for them (cf. Gen. 28.12).⁷⁹ Blame, however, is for the unrighteous and the filthy (cf. Rev. 22.11) and they disappear into the 'potter's ground' (cf. Mt. 27.3-8). With this 'Armageddon' (cf. Rev. 16.16), true peace—shalom—appears, and the deity is acknowledged by the wise (cf. Rev. 4.4, 10). The 'whirlwind' and 'thorntree' are combined in the chorus with Matthew's parable of the virgins with their trimmed wicks, awaiting the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. e.g. Mt. 25.7), here called 'Alpha and Omega's kingdom' (cf. Rev. 1.8,11; 21.6; 22.13), and Jesus' comment to Paul on the Damascus Road, that 'it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks' (Acts 26.14 KJV). Completing the song are various phrases and ideas that could be either biblical or traditional.

Cash's account of the song's origin involves various stages: (i) the reading or possession of an originating text—Cash's 'dream' book—initiates the process, followed by (ii) a personal dream in which a 'word' is given. The 'word' is located in the Bible—to Cash's satisfaction at least—and (iii) developed, with other scriptures, over seven years. Finally, Cash says that he 'must have written three dozen pages of lyrics', before he (iv) 'painfully weeded it down' to (v) the final song.⁸⁰

At this point, I am tempted to wonder how comparable is this process to that employed by John of Patmos in producing the book of Revelation. Or, to put it in a different way, how comparable is Johnny Cash as an interpreter of Revelation to John of Patmos as an interpreter of texts such as Ezekiel and Daniel!

5. *Incomprehension as an Effect of the Bible – A New Thing?*

Cash's account continues:

'Revelation' by its mere interpretation says that something 'is revealed'. I wish it were. The more I dug into the book the more I came to realise why it's such a puzzle, even to many Theologians [sic]. Eventually I shuffled my papers, so to speak, drew out four or five pages, and wrote my lyrics.⁸¹

79. The ladder's composition and colour are not specified in Genesis itself, but the idea of it being 'golden' was certainly developed early on in the Christian tradition (cf. e.g. Perpetua's vision of a 'golden ladder' in Tertullian's *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*) and is standard fare today.

80. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV*.

81. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV*. This suggests that the development stage should be understood as also involving enquiries being made of other theological authorities.

These words could, of course, be a rhetorical move, an admission of 'interpretative inadequacy' without any real content. But the dispensationalist tradition itself is certainly not noted for such admissions of fallibility with regard to the book of Revelation. Even for Cash, it is 'many theologians' who are puzzled, not every single one of them.⁸²

It seems remarkable that the man who wrote 'Matthew 24' and counted Billy Graham as a personal friend could express what amounts to a vote of no confidence in the dispensationalist account of Revelation. Instead he seems to have been practicing the more open-ended—and more humble—type of Bible study that he described in 1997. In other words, his puzzlement seems genuine. That this result—partial incomprehension—did not lead him straight back to the total comprehension proffered by the tradition behind 'Matthew 24' is obviously intriguing. Whatever level of understanding he had gained, however, his admission of its incompleteness clearly shows that neither the original selection of material for his song nor its final editing were the results of Cash's fully coming to terms with the book of Revelation itself.⁸³ His incomplete view was encapsulated in the song and left to stand on its own merit.

Returning to Räisänen's 'hazardous' distinction between use and effect,⁸⁴ I suggest that Cash's admission of defeat precludes him from being simply regarded as a 'user' of Revelation. This is not to say that he could not have used the parts of his text to do an old thing. Nor is it to say that his understanding of those parts that he did use might not have been deeply informed by his own Christianity, dispensational or otherwise. But it is to say that there is a significant possibility that his partial understanding of Revelation has directly influenced his song. Using verses from the Apocalypse without a full appreciation of their potential implications, especially when loosened from their canonical moorings, may well have opened up a range of 'meanings' for the song that Cash could not have anticipated and, perhaps, would not have appreciated. While it is true that

82. This is certainly not to suggest that the dispensationalist tradition had been consistent in its interpretations of the text and the contemporary events in which it has found itself, but rather that the tradition usually shows a high degree of confidence in its interpretation at any given point in time (compare, e.g., the details of Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970) with those of Tim LaHaye's and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind* series (1996–present). Cognitive dissonance over time about the numerous changes in detail seems to have very little impact on the confidence held by dispensationalists in their overall schema, however.

83. In a private communication, John Carter Cash, Cash's son, has written that the verses not included in the recorded version of the song were in fact all written as additional verses, thus making the final song also the original song. This would suggest that the 'weeding' that Cash refers to was more akin to a exercise in pruning.

84. Räisänen, 'Effective History', p. 270.

even well understood texts are effectively 'orphaned' once published and may be interpreted against the original author's wishes, the production of a text which includes elements that are not fully understood would seem to make this process easier to carry out and hence more likely to happen. Maybe what is new here is that a culturally significant item now exists that gives the 'meaning' of Revelation according to Cash, and yet is tainted by unforeseen and potentially dangerous ambiguity.

6. *Indirect Biblical Influence through the Cash Apocalypse*

If we want to begin to consider recent appropriations of the song, we could do worse than begin with its impact on the on-line video site, YouTube (www.youtube.com). Founded in February 2005 and bought eighteen months later by Google for \$1.65 billion, the concept of YouTube is simple – private individuals simply create their own videos and upload them onto the site for the perusal and comments of others.

As of 16 September 2006, no fewer than sixteen of these 'videos' featured Cash's song as a musical soundtrack.⁸⁵ The oldest – dating from 28 November, 2005 – features what the originator, 'matt26', describes as 'a set of World War I clips set to the Johnny Cash classic, "The Man Comes Around"'.⁸⁶ This imagery of carnage in warfare sets the tone for a number of these videos: Rip1984incombat's nuclear explosions,⁸⁷ donaldp1939's 'September 11th 2001',⁸⁸ drumrun's 'the Kennedy assassination (with 9/11)',⁸⁹ Kakihara1988's murderous tale,⁹⁰ and HonkyTonkMan2's general scenes of anarchy and destruction.⁹¹ Others have created videos using images from films such as the Final Destination trilogy (W1LDCAT),⁹²

85. A year later, this number had more than doubled.

86. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEl2mC6DcOU>, no pages, accessed on 16th September, 2006.

87. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU0VMCPVL-s>, no pages, posted by on February 3rd, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

88. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra6eQ4pJaFY>, no pages, posted on August 25th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

89. Online, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTq6v2UFZC8>, no pages, posted on March 25th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

90. 'Because I Could Not Stop For Death' (online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwP6valVCrk>, no pages, posted on February 28th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006).

91. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtK-QCiD-FE>, no pages, posted on August 11th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

92. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0naNF86-IYc>, no pages, posted on August 7th, 2006 and accessed on 16th September, 2006. This video collects the many gory teen deaths in these three films and runs them one after another – its

the animated series, Scar (licketysnicket),⁹³ and even a promotional video for the 'Gamecock' soccer team (cfallow).⁹⁴

A comic streak runs through others: axel56's 'The cat comes around',⁹⁵ Jorge21789's 'Riders for Christ',⁹⁶ Lefaikone's 'In memoriam of friday with jore?',⁹⁷ HellSlayer23's 'Abspann von "tote Zombies sterben nicht"',⁹⁸ and chemical 32's 'Great moments in human history'.⁹⁹ Finally, an explicitly Christian eschatological scenario is also portrayed (e.g. seraphim1983's Left Behind films compilation¹⁰⁰ and smpfilms's somewhat philosophical 'what if' film, 'Until The End').¹⁰¹

The range of these videos clearly demonstrates a general and ongoing impact for the song, while also suggesting a certain versatility in its range of applications (though of course, not all would be judged as being of equal 'quality' in their appropriation of the song). Significantly, there is a noticeable divergence between those videos which continue to see hope for humanity and those which focus solely on the hopelessness of the destructive side of human nature and activity.

a. Hopelessness

The song had already made the jump to mainstream cinema soundtrack before YouTube was launched. The first half of the song, without Cash's opening recitation of Revelation 6.1-2 but ending with his reading of

message: 'The Grim Reaper can be anywhere, and when your turn is up and the man comes around, say your prayers cause it's all over.'

93. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqPPFqux7XI>, no pages, posted on April 18th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

94. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHc9banaQbA>, no pages, posted on August 1st, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

95. 'A tribute to Johnny Cash introducing my cat, Zorro' (vii) Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQ74n5Wrf84>, no pages, posted on June 19th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006).

96. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRR5y2A6pNc>, no pages, posted on April 10th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

97. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87tF2TuTNwY>, no pages, posted on July 30th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

98. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbodzzMrUAA>, no pages, posted on August 31st, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

99. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qT4OM-SkjE>, no pages, posted on August 30, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006. This video is a compilation of what might be termed human idiocy, often on motorized vehicles and with many seeming to involve injury to those involved.

100. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7taNKI9HbA0>, no pages, posted on August 19th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

101. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmAWxWhelIU>, no pages, posted on August 28th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

Revelation 6.7-8a, is played over the opening credits of Zack Snyder's 2004 zombie film, *The Dawn of the Dead*.¹⁰² '[A] better mating of music to subject matter I have never seen before in a horror movie' wrote one critic,¹⁰³ while another noted resonances with the imagery of 9/11.¹⁰⁴ There seems little doubt that *The Dawn of the Dead*'s use of the song has been an influence on at least some of YouTube's amateur video-makers – the film ends with everyone dead. There is no upside in Snyder's vision of the future, no morality, no salvation.¹⁰⁵ 'The man' is not Cash's Christ, but only an undefined bringer of doom. Though the dark side of the apocalypse remains, Cash's song has been effectively stripped of the hope that he himself would have seen in it.¹⁰⁶

Why is Cash's song so susceptible to this 'hopeless' interpretation? No doubt the equation between Revelation's apocalyptic imagery and death so evident in the popular imagination plays some role here. But a further possibility is that the lyrics of Cash's 'apocalypse' may actually *invite* such an interpretation. For the interpreter without Cash's strong personal convictions, the song may naturally appear hopeless.

The source of this invitation to hopelessness is flagged by the disagreement that exists between various web-sites about the actual lyrics of the song. Some render the lines that talk of a 'last offered cup' as a

102. The opening credits from Snyder's film are themselves now on YouTube as a 'video' (Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdPWtAMXGGo>, no pages, posted by toenee90 on 27 February 2006, and accessed on 20 September 2006). The song was also used in William Friedkin's *The Hunted* (2003), playing over the closing credits. Its significance here is hard to gauge because the film is a strangely uninvolved one in which a psychologically damaged rogue American serviceman (Benicio Del Toro) is hunted down by the instructor who had trained him (Tommy Lee Jones). Quite what Cash's version of 'the man comes around' signifies in such a context is difficult to understand, except in general terms of 'the man' once again being equated with a death.

103. Online: <http://www.tranquility.net/~benedict/dawnofthedeath2004.html>, no pages, accessed on 13th July, 2006.

104. Online: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?=/c/a/2004/03/19/DDG3F5MRTP1.DTL>, no pages, accessed on 13th July, 2006.

105. On the DVD of the film, however, a hint of salvation for some perhaps appears with the short feature 'The Lost Tape: Andy's Terrifying Last Days Revealed' being described as a videotape found at a store called Andy Gun Works by 'survivors travelling through Everett, Wisconsin'.

106. The genre of the horror film, of course, puts serious qualifiers on what such 'hopelessness' would mean to the audience of a film like *The Dawn of the Dead*. The film industry's over-arching desire is presumably to create and retain their paying audience for the long term, and not to convince them of the hopelessness of their existence *per se*. The YouTube videos that promote hopelessness as a response to the song may therefore provide a purer form of that particular strand of interpretation.

question, 'Will you partake of that last offered cup?',¹⁰⁷ whereas others make them a statement, 'For you partake of that last offered cup'.¹⁰⁸ The one contains an invitation to drink, the other merely states the situation and makes no call to 'partake of that last offered cup'. On Cash's *American IV* album, the song is difficult to make out at this point. In an e-mail exchange, Cash's son, John Carter Cash, has confirmed that the question form is the official version, but it is noteworthy that the band *Knife in the Water* performed the lines in the alternative statement form in their 2004 cover.¹⁰⁹ The 'unofficial' version now has a significant life of its own.¹¹⁰

The importance of these versions relates to the meanings of two verses that Cash has lifted directly from the New Testament. Acts 26.7 – 'It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks' – is a fairly obscure phrase, reportedly spoken by Jesus to Paul on the Damascus road. Its meaning appears to be something like 'it is impossible to oppose what God has planned'. Though Paul has a choice to make, there is already a hint of inevitability here.

Cash's inclusion of Revelation 22.11 with its exhortation to the unrighteous and filthy to continue in their evil ways suggests even more strongly that no choice needs to be made. This theologically difficult verse – the deity exhorting the wicked to carry on being wicked – is usually understood by Christian exegetes as being related to a future situation in which it is already too late to change one's mind. Perhaps Cash also thought something like this. As the song's audience has grown and become inevitably less biblically literate, however, the effect of the verse, especially in a version in which choice is already being sidelined, is simply to reinforce the hopelessness of the present. Wickedness is to go on in the here and now. Of course, even in this version there does remain some hope for 'the righteous', but it has increasingly become a meagre hope, offered to an unknown and distant few. It certainly cannot compete with the hopelessness now being offered to the many.

107. E.g. online: <http://www.geocities.com/wabasso/lyrics.html#The%20Man%20Comes%20Around>, no pages, accessed on 27th February, 2007, and http://www.lyricwiki.org/Johnny_Cash:When_The_Man_Comes_Around, accessed on 27th February, 2007.

108. E.g. online, <http://www.hit-country-music-lyrics.com/johnnycashlyrics-mancomesaround.html>, no pages, accessed on 27th February, 2007, and <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/dawnofthedeath/themancomesaround.htm>, accessed on 27th February, 2007.

109. *Cash Covered* (Mojo).

110. Two additional versions of the song by Cash were subsequently released on the Cash: Unearthed five CD set in 2004 (Mercury). On the version on disc 5, the wording is similarly obscure, but on the disc 3 recording Cash clearly use the question form. Such clarity clearly came too late for *Knife in the Water*, however.

b. *Christology*

The identification of 'the man who comes around' with an unspecified 'bringer of doom' seen above exemplifies another popular but no doubt unintended appropriation of 'The Man Comes Around' – the replacement of Cash's Christ with some other individual. Perhaps the most surprising 'replacement' can be seen in Dave Urbanski's 2003 'hagiography', *The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash*. Urbanski's title appears to implicitly identify Cash with 'the man who comes around', a move also made by one obituary writer.¹¹¹ For Cash, the 'man' who would come around was undoubtedly Jesus, but the name is not explicitly mentioned in his song. Perhaps Cash thought he did not need to do so. Perhaps he was wrong.

Since his death in 2003, the iconic status of the Man in Black has never been higher. A feature film, *Walk the Line*, was released to critical acclaim in 2005. Joaquim Phoenix, playing Cash, was nominated for an Oscar for best actor, and Reese Witherspoon won the best actress Oscar for her portrayal of June Carter. Online, the searcher can find all kinds of memorabilia, ranging from a seven inch tall Johnny Cash action figure¹¹² to photographs of the many Cash images that individuals have had tattooed on their bodies.¹¹³ Rubin's *American Recordings*, and the ongoing re-issuing of some of Cash's huge back catalogue, have effectively sealed Cash's place as a significant piece of Americana.

Perhaps most significantly, Cash is being increasingly depicted in mythical terms. In Turner's biography, U2's lead singer, Bono, is quoted as saying the following about Cash.¹¹⁴

Johnny Cash was a saint who preferred the company of sinners. It's an amazing thing. I've seen the Bible he read from. I've seen his life from various different quarters, and what I was left with was the feeling that I'd met someone with the dignity of an age we don't know. I feel as though I'm reading about Jacob or Moses. He was so not twentieth century. He was a

111. Steve Beard, 'The Man Came Around: Johnny Cash's Search for Heaven', online, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-beard091503.asp>, no pages, accessed on 5th July, 2006.

112. Online: <http://actionfiguresbygofigure.com/product4759.html>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006; and online: <http://www.starstore.com/acatalog/johnny-cash-figure-o.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006.

113. E.g. online: <http://www.tonsoftattoos.com/wp-content/images/gallery/cash/cash1.jpg>; <http://www.tonsoftattoos.com/wp-content/images/gallery/cash/cash5.jpg>; and <http://www.tonsoftattoos.com/wp-content/images/gallery/cash/cash6.jpg>, both no pages and accessed on 23rd September, 2006.

114. On Cash and U2, see Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 240-42; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 132-35.

mythical figure. I don't know how that happens. Elvis, Johnny Cash — they were mythical figures and they lived mythical lives.¹¹⁵

In his oft-quoted liner notes from Sony's *The Essential Cash* (2002), Bono also valorizes Cash's Christianity and his masculinity.

Not since John the Baptist has there been a voice like that crying in the wilderness. The most male voice in Christendom. Every man knows he is a cissy compared to Johnny Cash.¹¹⁶

Cash's decision not to identify 'the man' explicitly effectively leaves the song with such a weak christology that his own mythical persona as the 'Man in Black' can usurp his Christ.

c. *Secularization*

The primary effect of the removal of both hope and the person of Jesus has been an increasing 'secularization' of Cash's song. This was given vocal form when *Knife in the Water* omitted the opening and closing quotations from Revelation 6 from their cover of the song.¹¹⁷ Though much that is biblical obviously remains, the removal of such well-known elements of Revelation as the 'white horse' and the 'pale horse' tends towards rendering Cash's 'apocalypse' as a little less biblical, as a little more secular.

Inevitably perhaps, the song's apparent susceptibility to 'secular' readings has made it available to political interests. Despite meeting several presidents, Cash was not himself a political animal.¹¹⁸ He certainly loved America and, given his current status as an almost mythical American male, is seen as embodying significant aspects of Americana. Significantly, however, many also remember him for his interest in aspects of American

115. *Man Called Cash*, p. 241 (presumably in a private interview; cf. p. 333). Cash had earlier been compared with Moses by the music journalist Chris Dickinson (1994). She wrote about his performance during a show:

Throughout the show audience members gathered at the edge of the stage, shaking his hand, passing him flowers, getting closer. There was truth in Cash's image; gone was the carefully fashioned golden calf that graces the cover of American Recordings, replaced by an even more awesome image that was personal and nakedly human. Kinda like Moses carrying those tablets down from the mountain and dealing with the folks at the bottom who'd taken to worshipping a false god ('Cash Conquers', in Streissguth [ed.], *Ring of Fire*, pp. 251-54 [254]).

116. Cf. 'Tributes', in Urbanski, *The Man Comes Around*, pp. 187-92 (p. 192).

117. *Cash Covered* (Mojo, 2004).

118. Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush Snr, and Bill Clinton are all mentioned in Cash's 1997 autobiography (*Cash*, pp. 229-34).

culture that could be considered unfashionable, or even positively counter-cultural:¹¹⁹ his early interest in native American rights,¹²⁰ his 'opposition' to America's war in Vietnam,¹²¹ and, perhaps most of all, for his claim, immortalized in the 1971 song *The Man in Black*, that he wore black 'for the poor and the beaten down, livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town'; 'for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, but is there because he's a victim of the times'; 'for the sick and lonely old'; and for 'the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold.'¹²²

During the Republican National Congress of 30 August–2 September 2004, an exclusive 'celebration' of Cash was organized for the Tennessee delegates at Sotheby's¹²³ in New York City and sponsored by the American Gas Association.¹²⁴ This event drew protests under the rallying banner,

119. Cf. especially the political comments in Cash's 1975 interview with Larry Linderman in *Penthouse* ('Penthouse Interview: Johnny Cash', in Streissguth (ed.), *Ring of Fire*, pp. 143–60).

120. His 'protest' album, *Bitter Tears*, was released in 1964 (Cash, *Cash*, p. 214).

121. Cash was hardly a radical opponent of the war, but while playing at the Nixon Whitehouse he expressed publicly his opposition to war as such and his hope that Nixon would soon end the war in Vietnam (Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 195).

122. Like most of Cash's songs, these lyrics are available on-line (e.g. http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/27703/Johnny_Cash/Man_In_Black/, no pages, accessed on 29th September, 2006).

123. Sotheby's were due to auction some of the effects of Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash on the 14–16th September, and those items were already on display in their premises in New York.

124. In response to concerns about the political use of Cash's name at the upcoming event at Sotheby's, his daughter Roseanne issued the following statement on her weblog on the 27th August, 2004 (online: <http://www.rosanecash.com/monthly.html>):

The Cash family has NOT approved the usage of the name or likeness of Johnny Cash for the purposes of the Republican Party, or any political agenda or event [...]. The Republican Party and/or convention cannot and has not co-opted the name or likeness of Johnny Cash for their purposes. What HAS happened is that Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, an old family friend of Dad and June, has asked to have a private party at Sotheby's for some members of the Tennessee delegation. Sotheby's rents out space for parties to many, many diverse groups, and this was approved by both Sotheby's and the estate lawyers for my father, based on the personal relationship between our family and the Senator, NOT as a show of support for the Republican agenda. What was a little more murky was a second party, unrelated to the Senator, and whose intent was somewhat confusing, which seemed to play rather fast and loose with the image of my Dad on their invitations and party plan. As soon as we found out about this, it was stopped. With a resounding thud. There is no need to 'defend' my Dad against the Republicans, or against anyone, for that matter, as some

'defend Johnny Cash', from a group of opposition activists calling itself, 'The Man in Black Bloc'.¹²⁵ One poster advertising the protest had the title 'No Cash for the Rich', and read in part, 'Johnny, we won't let the greedy, war-hungry Republicans exploit [sic] your memory by throwing a party affiliated with your good name'.¹²⁶ Placards subsequently carried by the black-clad protesters included one stating that 'Johnny Cash opposed the right wing. So did Jesus. So did the American Revolutionaries.' Another placard read, 'Johnny Cash is coming from heaven to kick your ass!'¹²⁷ Not surprisingly, some of the republican attendees protested that they too liked Johnny Cash!¹²⁸

During the run-up to the presidential election held on 2 November 2004, 'The Man Comes Around' was also brought into the political arena. A George W. Bush supporter using the pseudonym, 'Bommer', created an on-line slide-show of Bush 'moments', sound-tracked with Cash's song.¹²⁹ 'The man' was now Bush himself. Though no longer available on-line, the following description from a critic ('Christian Libertarian Anti-War Conservative') gives an idea of its contents:

The [...] video repeatedly shows images of 9/11 and Islamic terrorists when the apocalypse [sic] is mentioned, and displays pictures of Bush when the scriptures referring to Christ and His return are referenced. The creator of the video also manages to vulgarize the words of Christ Himself to make a crude joke.¹³⁰

over-zealous types would have you believe. You can rest assured that if anyone needs to 'defend' my Dad against improper usage of his name or image, that we, the family and the estate lawyers, are on the case, usually long before the rest of the world finds out about it. It is our honor and our duty to protect the legacy of my father, and we all take this very seriously, and we are empowered to the nth degree to do so (no pages, accessed on 26th September 2006).

125. Online: <http://www.defendjohnnycash.org> (now defunct).

126. Online: <http://images.indymedia.org/imc/nyc/image/13/DefendJohnnyCash.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006.

127. Online: <http://www.lalutta.org/lilalee/cashprotest.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006. A larger image of the 'kick your ass' placard has unfortunately been removed from the web since I began researching this essay.

128. A radio report of the protest can be found online: <http://www.youneverknowradio.com/johnny-cash-protest-at-the-republican-national-convention-2003-2/14>, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

129. Online: http://pages.sbcglobal.net/bommer/When_The_Man_Comes_Around.html (now defunct).

130. Online: http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/mt/mt-comments.cgi?entry_id=5016, no pages, accessed on 26th September 2006.

Many appreciative comments for Bommer's movie remain on-line from Bush supporters,¹³¹ but the sentiments of this subsequent comment from 'Christian Libertarian Anti-War Conservative' were also echoed by a few Republicans.

Let me spell it out: when you take a song that was written about Jesus Christ and attach it to your pro-Bush video, you are either insulting Christ by equating Him with a sinful, mortal politician, or exalting your favorite politician to the level of the Son of God. Either way, it's called 'blasphemy'. Johnny Cash, a devout Christian, would not be pleased.¹³²

Bommer's video only lasted a month or so on-line. Its maker, now using the name IronBob2004, wrote the following on 12 November, 2004:

You've reached the former page of When The Man Comes Around. Unfortunately [sic] the lawyers for the Cash estate forced me to take the movie down. Rather a shame since it probably generated more sales and interest in the American IV CD, (which I highly highly [sic] recommend that you buy!) then [sic] when it was used in that garbage of a movie 'Dawn Of The Dead' Fantastic CD; one of his best and unfortunately [sic] his last CD. I appreciate all the support and the incredible outpouring of love for the movie. Thank you very much!¹³³

Legal muscle – at least in 2004 – achieved what charges of blasphemy apparently could not, but Bommer's removal of the song certainly did not signal a recognition that the equation drawn between Bush and 'the man' was beyond the pale.¹³⁴

With no explicit Christology and a tendency towards secular appropriations, the song's relative openness to politicization means that the creation of a link between the man and a politician was perhaps always going to be a possibility. But the actual wording of the song may also make such moves inevitable. Jewett and Lawrence's description of 'Zealous Nationalism' notes its dualism, good versus evil, and its ready willingness to use violence.¹³⁵ Certain ideological undercurrents in Cash's *Revelation*, especially in the material drawn from 22.11, means that his song also apparently legitimizes a dualism of righteous/unrighteous, a

131. For example, online: <http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=13209>, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

132. Online, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/mt/mt-comments.cgi?entry_id=5016, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

133. Online: http://www.perspectives.com/forums/view_topic.php?id=18128&forum_id=5, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

134. Cf. e.g. the Republican defenders of the piece against charges of blasphemy, online: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1250832/posts>, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

135. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, pp. 55-78, 245-72. On its use of extra-legal violence, see Seymour M. Hersh, *Chains of Command* (London: Penguin, 2005).

dualism that can be understood as offering no redemption for the wicked. It is deeply ironic that Cash should have produced a song in which 'the man' who comes around could be seen, not as Jesus Christ, but rather as a secular super-hero, George W. Bush as Jewett and Lawrence's 'Captain America'.

7. Conclusion

The cultural impact of 'The Man Comes Around' is really only just beginning. But what already seems apparent is that Cash's apocalyptic text is able to act as a conduit of influence for the Bible in a number of different ways. It may function as Cash probably intended it to—as a hopeful (at least for those who are already saved!) and potentially evangelistic text, focused on the figure of Jesus Christ. Releasing the already problematic Revelation 22.11 from its canonical home and inserting it into a text about 'the man' rather than a text explicitly about Jesus, however, has opened up the possibility of a text that can now be understood as promoting a radically different vision of an apocalyptic humanity. Though the 'righteous' do always remain, access to their ranks is either denied to most of the song's audience, resulting in a doom-laden existence, or else is appropriated by those for whom the term 'righteousness' really only serves as a label for their own ideological stance. Neither option seems particularly likely to have appealed to Cash himself. But his transformation of a partially understood Revelation now has a life of its own, a life that allows some of the biblical material to impact the wider culture, cut free from its textual, traditional, and ecclesial moorings. Indirectly, Cash's Bible did this. And it will go on doing it as long as the song is being played.

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THE JOHANNINE APOCALYPSE AND THE RISK OF KNOWLEDGE

James E. Harding

I do not wish in this matter to be presumptuous, but I know that if the Church should be willing to consider the sacred text and prophecies, also the prophecies of the Sibyl and of Merlin, Aquila, Seston, Joachim, and many others, moreover the histories and books of philosophers, and should order a study of the paths of astronomy, it would gain some idea of greater certainty regarding the time of Antichrist.

Roger Bacon (c. 1214–94)¹

He who reflects on the multitude of explanations which already exist of the ‘number of the beast,’ ‘the two witnesses,’ ‘the little horn,’ ‘the man of sin,’ who observes the manner in which these explanations have varied with the political movements of our own time, will be unwilling to devote himself to a method of inquiry in which there is so little appearance of certainty or progress.

Benjamin Jowett (1817–93)²

1. Introduction

This essay approaches the interpretation of the Johannine Apocalypse through the prism of Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose*,³ in which this puzzling and polyvalent early Christian text plays a key role. The aim is not to come to a definitive understanding of how and why the Apocalypse plays the role it does in the novel, but to use the novel as a prism that refracts aspects of how the Apocalypse itself works as a text,

1. Robert Belle Burke (trans. and ed.), *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*, I (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928), p. 290. This essay was completed before I had read John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), which provocatively sketches the influence of apocalyptic streams in the Christian tradition on utopianism in the post-Enlightenment West.

2. Benjamin Jowett, ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’, in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 7th edn, 1861), pp. 330–433 (341).

3. Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa* (Tascabili Bompiani, 33; Milan: Bompiani, 1980). English translation: *The Name of the Rose* (trans. W. Weaver; London: Secker & Warburg, 1983).

and how the processes of interpreting the Apocalypse work.⁴ While this emerges from a concern with the way the Apocalypse has been received by later interpreters (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*), and a concern with the different, though related phenomenon of the effect (*Wirkung*) the Apocalypse has had as a result of its reception, the use of the Apocalypse in *The Name of the Rose* here provides a basis for addressing a broader set of questions: how and why do interpreters of biblical texts seek to control the text they are interpreting, to establish limits for its interpretation? Given that this can result in mutually exclusive interpretive communities, how should responsible reading of biblical texts, but particularly the Apocalypse, proceed? I am not concerned with the intention of the author of the Apocalypse, nor with Eco's intentions in writing *The Name of the Rose*. As Eco himself has written, 'The author should die when he has finished writing. In order not to disturb the path of the text' (*L'autore dovrebbe morire dopo aver scritto. Per non disturbare il cammino del testo*).⁵ A novel—perhaps like the Apocalypse, if not at the level of authorial intention then certainly at the level of the effect of the work—is 'a machine for generating interpretations' (*una macchina per generare interpretazioni*).⁶ Since the author of *The Name of the Rose* himself rejects authorial intention as the primary arbiter of textual meaning, the approach taken here can thus claim some sort of validity, albeit of an absurdly paradoxical kind.

I am not going to focus on situating the Apocalypse or *The Name of the Rose* in the historical situation of the author, the world implied and assumed by the text, or the context of Eco's theoretical work, though each of these does bear, to a greater or lesser extent, on the discussion that follows. This essay belongs to the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and history of the effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*)⁷ of biblical texts in general and the Apocalypse in particular, not in the sense of describing the ways in which the

4. Lest this procedure be thought eccentric, A.J.P. Garrow approaches the Apocalypse through Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and *Doctor Who* in order to structure the text as a serialization for liturgical reading (*Revelation* [New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1997], pp. 35–38).

5. Eco, *Postille a "Il nome della rosa"*, in Eco, *Rosa*, p. 509; repr. from *Alfabeta* 49 (1983).

6. Eco, *Postille*, p. 507.

7. On which see esp. Heikki Räisänen, 'The Effective "History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship?', *SJT* 45 (1992), pp. 303–24. Christina Pettersson distinguishes between these terms thus: 'German [distinguishes] between *Wirkungsgeschichte* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte*: where the former is reserved for the influence of the text on a given society and its role in shaping values, prejudices, and preconceptions, the latter may be characterized as an active reproduction or conscious appropriation of a given biblical text', in her review of Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, in The Bible and Critical Theory* 2.1 (2006), pp. 7.1–7.4 (p. 7.2).

Apocalypse has been received by subsequent readers, but in the sense of ascertaining how and why the Apocalypse has functioned the way it has in subsequent interpretation. The basis for this is an evaluation of what the use of the Apocalypse in one intertext—an Italian novel published in 1980 but fictionally set in a Benedictine abbey in 1323—might suggest about the Apocalypse as a text, and about broader trends in its interpretation. The main concerns of this essay thus chime with those of works such as Kenneth Newport's *Apocalypse and Millennium*,⁸ and the Blackwell Bible Commentaries: 'how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant'.⁹ However, while this remark may be taken to imply that an original 'meaning' may still be isolated from subsequent construals, and that the study of the reception of the text is somehow different in kind from the study of its original meaning, my view is rather that the question of the 'meaning' of the text is inextricably bound up with the entire odyssey of its use, reception, and effect. In the words of David Steinmetz, referring to the works of Martin Luther, the 'meaning of historical texts cannot be separated from the complex problem of their reception and the notion that a text means only what its author intends is historically naive'.¹⁰

It is, after all, the transmission and reception of the Apocalypse that makes its interpretation possible and meaningful, and illustrates the limitations of 'what it originally meant' as an arbiter of interpretive validity. If the Apocalypse had not, through its peculiar post-Johannine process of transmission, been made the subject of open interpretation,¹¹

8. Kenneth G.C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

9. John F.A. Sawyer, Christopher Rowland and Judith L. Kovacs, 'Series Editors' Preface', in Judith L. Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. xi. A highly critical review of this commentary has been offered by Christina Petterson (n. 7 above), who challenges the authors for failing to distinguish adequately between *Wirkungsgeschichte* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, for failing to grapple with particularly disturbing aspects of the effect of the Apocalypse on the shaping of the Western Christian worldview (especially the effect of the text's portrayal of women), and for thus offering a commentary that is 'politically insipid' (p. 7.4).

10. D.C. Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', *TTod* 37 (1980), pp. 27-38 (37). Steinmetz is, in part, responding to Benjamin Jowett's advocacy of a focus on the intention of the author when interpreting Scripture (see n. 2 above). Ironically, Jowett suggests that a study of the history of the interpretation of Scripture would convince the student of the importance of his case ('On the Interpretation of Scripture', pp. 338-39).

11. Apposite here is Eco's comment that, 'A work of art [...] is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting

and thus 'open to any possible "aberrant" decoding',¹² neither Joachim of Fiore, nor Umberto Eco, nor David Koresh, nor Tim LaHaye, nor Barbara Rossing, nor I would have been able to derive meaning from it, nor would we have the desire either to derive meaning from the text, or to seek to control the text by limiting the meanings that might be derived from it. The concern here, then, is not with the *what* of the use, reception, interpretation, and effect of the Apocalypse, but with the *how* and the *why*. What makes particular readings possible, and on what basis should limits be drawn?

The interpretive processes underlying the reception of the Apocalypse are *intertextual*, but this term needs to be interrogated. In the modern academic study of the Bible,¹³ particularly in historical-critical modes of exegesis, the diachronic relationships of dependence between particular biblical and extra-biblical texts have been much studied, particularly in terms of identifying, understanding, and classifying echoes, allusions, or citations of earlier texts in later ones. Yet the term needs to be employed more broadly, since in order to interpret a text a reader must engage her intertextual encyclopaedia, which will differ, often in significant ways, from those of the author, hearers, readers, and tradents of the text.¹⁴ Each intertextual encyclopaedia differs from the next, and each is

an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself' (see Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* [Advances in Semiotics Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979], p. 49). The peculiarities of the transmission of scriptural works, and in particular unusually polyvalent and frequently interpreted scriptural works such as the Apocalypse, add nuance to their openness in ways that distinguish the process of interpreting them from the process of interpreting other works of 'art'. The development of the notion of four senses of Scripture made available 'a range of rigidly pre-established and ordained interpretive solutions' (Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 51), thus limiting the possible meanings or significances of scriptural texts, while at the same time engendering an openness to a plethora of possible construals. The biblical canon may also function in a similar way to the mystical senses of Scripture. As George Aichele has remarked, 'As a metalanguage, the biblical canon legitimizes certain interpretations of the Bible and delegitimizes others; it controls the way the Bible is read' (*The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001], p. 20).

12. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 8.

13. Or, rather, 'bibles' (see Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* [London: T. & T. Clark International, 2nd edn, 2004], pp. 12, 56-80, *et passim*).

14. I am using the term 'encyclopaedia' in Eco's sense of a rhizomatic labyrinth, in which every point is connected with every other point (see Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* [Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984], pp. 68-86, esp. pp. 80-84). Since a global description of this

polydimensional, which leads to an indeterminacy at the level of interpretation that may be allowed to play freely, or somehow tamed and brought under control.

This may be illustrated by using *The Name of the Rose* to interpret the Apocalypse and its interpreters, a novel that, while dependent on Eco's reading of mediaeval interpretations of the Apocalypse, apparently does not stand in a traceable relationship of literary dependence with modern authors emerging from either popular Christian circles, or from the hallowed halls of 'mainstream' biblical scholarship. The connections between *The Name of the Rose* and other readings of the Apocalypse exist because these readings belong with the novel in the intertextual encyclopaedia of the author of this essay. As will hopefully become clear, however, this does not negate the potential of *The Name of the Rose* to shed light on aspects of the interpretation of the Apocalypse with which the novel does not explicitly deal.

2. *The Name of the Rose*

Themes and motifs from the Apocalypse are woven into each of Eco's five novels, to a greater or lesser degree, but are particularly fundamental to *The Name of the Rose*, whose fictional setting reflects a world in which imaginations were moulded to a significant extent by art,¹⁵ preaching, and literature inspired by the Apocalypse.¹⁶ Set in a Benedictine abbey in northern Italy in the early fourteenth century, *The Name of the Rose* is, on

sort of encyclopaedia is impossible, it can only be described as, 'the potential sum of local descriptions' (Eco, *Semiotics*, p. 82). Transferred to the arena of intertextuality, the intertextual encyclopaedia in which the Johannine Apocalypse and its readers participate is multidimensionally complex, and its structure changes through time. Thus while it is possible to trace connections diachronically between the Johannine Apocalypse and Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel (which historical-critics might discuss in terms of the plausibility of the influence of these texts on John) in one area of the labyrinth, in another area connections appear between Ezek. 38-39, 1 Thess. 4.13-18, Dan. 9.25-27, and Rev. 6-19 (which dispensational premillennialists expound in terms of the inevitable fulfilment of divinely ordained prophecy).

15. The fictional abbey is renowned for its collection of illuminated apocalypses, especially apocalypses brought from Spain by Jorge of Burgos. See, for example, the edition by John Williams and Barbara A. Shailor of the tenth-century Morgan ms 644, a richly illustrated manuscript of the commentary on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana, with St Jerome's commentary on Daniel (*A Spanish Apocalypse: The Morgan Beatus Manuscript* [New York: George Braziller, 1991]).

16. On trends in the interpretation of the Apocalypse prior to the Reformation, see, for example, Irena Backus, *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. xi-xviii.

one level, a detective story. The clues in this detective story include the corpses of monks who have died in bizarre circumstances, verses from the Apocalypse (esp. Rev. 8.2–11.19), a strange code invisibly written on parchment, and traces of a mysterious, fatally seductive book written in Greek.¹⁷ The Franciscan William of Baskerville and his young ward, Adso of Melk, arrive at the abbey shortly after the violent death of a young illuminator, Adelmo of Otranto. Adelmo's is the first in the series of bizarre and mysterious deaths, whose cause and meaning William and Adso seek to discover.

For the aged monk Alinardo of Grottaferrata, the circumstances in which the first two dead bodies are found suggest that the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse are being fulfilled and that future deaths may be predicted based on the same prophecy.¹⁸ Thus Adelmo hurled himself to his death during a great snowstorm, in which fell flakes 'almost like hail' (*che quasi sembravano grandine*),¹⁹ suggesting to Alinardo the consequences of the blowing of the first trumpet, when *grando et ignis mixta in sanguine* are sent to the earth (Rev. 8.6).²⁰ Venantius of Salvemec's corpse is found plunged head first into a vat of pig's blood,²¹ recalling the second trumpet, after which a third of the sea was turned to blood (Rev. 8.8), 'a most bloody occurrence' (*un sanguinosissimo evento*).²²

Alinardo's ramblings suggest to William a less supernatural explanation, that a murderer is using the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse as a code. Further deaths follow, in such circumstances as to be comprehensible in light of either Alinardo's speculations or William's deductions. Berengar of Arundel is found drowned in a bath.²³ This spectacle is anticipated by the third trumpet, which leads to a great burning star falling on a third of rivers and fountains of water (Rev. 8.10). Severinus is discovered with

17. A book whose identity, nature and contents William comes to know, despite never having *read* the book but being acquainted with only *traces* of it. See further the illuminating discussion by P. Bayard, *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read* (trans. J. Mehlman; London: Granta, 2008), pp. 32–46. French original: *Comment parler des livres que l'on n'a pas lus?* (Paris: Minuit, 2007).

18. Eco, *Rosa*, pp. 164, 257–58; *Rose*, pp. 159, 255. On the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Rev. 8–11, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 1–38; Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 106–33. The seven trumpets follow, in the text, the opening of the seventh seal (Rev. 8.1), which had great significance in Joachimite exegesis (Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 108).

19. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 40; *Rose*, p. 32.

20. In the fictional world of the novel, it would have been through the *Vulgata*, and thus through the medium of Latin, that the Apocalypse would have shaped the imagination.

21. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 112; *Rose*, p. 104.

22. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 109; *Rose*, p. 101.

23. Eco, *Rosa*, pp. 258–59; *Rose*, p. 256.

his head bashed in with an armillary sphere. The use of this astronomical instrument suggests the third part of the sun, the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars being struck after the fourth trumpet (Rev. 8.12).²⁴ At matins on the sixth day, Malachi of Hildesheim slumps dead, his last words, 'He told me [...] truly [...] It had the power of a thousand scorpions ...' (*Me lo aveva detto [...] davvero [...] aveva il potere di mille scorpioni ...*),²⁵ suggesting the fulfilment of the fifth trumpet, which announces the advent of a hideous swarm of locusts with stings like scorpions (Rev. 9.5, 10). The sixth death is that of the abbot, who is trapped behind a wall while trying to gain access to the *finis Africae*, the secret inner sanctum of the abbey's labyrinthine library.

William's insight is ultimately incorrect: 'There was no plot', William said, 'And I discovered it by mistake' ('*Non v'era una trama*', disse Guglielmo, '*e io l'ho scoperta per sbaglio*').²⁶ The deaths only appear to follow the pattern of the seven trumpets to one who seeks meaning and order in the series of deaths. The explanatory structure William constructs is subverted by the fact that no such explanatory structure ever inhered in the series of events in the first place.²⁷ Each death could be explained separately, and in mundane terms. Yet William's appropriation of Alinardo's theory has ironic consequences.

It does lead William, through his imperfectly perceived connections between otherwise disconnected signs, to the one who is responsible for several of the deaths, Jorge of Burgos.²⁸ William is led to the library, where Jorge is hiding with the fatal book in the *finis Africae* (ironically, the fatal book is the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on comedy). A mirror conceals the entrance to the *finis Africae*, and over the mirror is carved a cryptic motif, *super thronos viginti quattuor* (Rev. 4.4), which must be deciphered before entrance can be gained. In order to decipher this cryptic, apocalyptic motif, a further code, written invisibly on a piece of parchment formerly possessed by the deceased Venantius, must also be deciphered. After much puzzling, William only deciphers this code by chance, yet the chance would not have occurred had William not mistakenly connected the deaths with an apocalyptic code in the first place.

24. Eco, *Rosa*, pp. 362, 368; *Rose*, pp. 358, 364.

25. Eco, *Rosa*, pp. 416, 419, 469; *Rose*, pp. 414, 417-18, 466.

26. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 494; *Rose*, p. 491.

27. Compare David Robey's comment that, 'One of the most interesting features of Eco's semiotic theory is [the] association of order and disorder, of a rationalist explanatory structure with the conviction that nothing, finally, can ever be explained' ('Introduction', in Eco, *The Open Work*, p. xxi).

28. William's discovery of Jorge's true role in the deaths is serendipity. See Eco's essays on the interesting side effects of errors in *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy* (trans. W. Weaver; London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1999).

After hearing Alinardo's theory and that William himself was drawn to the seven trumpets as the key to the mystery, Jorge had come to believe that the deaths were indeed part of a divine plan and that despite his conscious and willing involvement he bore no responsibility for them. Consequently he had warned Malachi that he would suffer the torments of the fifth trumpet if he continued to pursue the book. Jorge's use of the Apocalypse mirrors disturbing ethical implications in any deterministic reading of the book. Since Jorge sees himself as no more than an instrument in the inevitable unfolding of the divine plan, he bears no responsibility for the suffering, death, and destruction to which his involvement leads.²⁹ The divinely ordained τέλος justifies any means at Jorge's disposal to effect his role in the divine plan. Furthermore, Jorge uses his understanding of the unfolding of the divine plan as a tool of control. At Vespers on the evening before Malachi's death, Jorge preaches a sermon in defence of the preservation of knowledge received rather than the search for knowledge not yet discovered. He holds over the heads of those assembled the words of Rev. 22.18-19 as a commentary on the most bloody occurrences, the *sanguinosissimi eventi* at the abbey, and as a threat to prevent anyone further indulging his lust for knowledge and risking the indiscriminate dissemination of that knowledge Jorge is so desperate to guard.³⁰ Inasmuch as the Apocalypse inspires fear, it is a tool of management and control.

Regardless, then, of the 'original meaning' of the Apocalypse (or, for that matter, Eco's intentions in writing his novel), the fictional Jorge's appropriation and actualization of the Apocalypse reflect and serve to illustrate the effect of certain kinds of reading of the Apocalypse.³¹

29. Having been confronted by William, and having smeared the corners of the pages of the forbidden book with poison, Jorge himself eats the besmeared pages, sealing what the seven thunders have said and devouring it, so that it makes bitter his belly but is sweet as honey to his lips. Thus the open book (*liber apertus*, cf. Rev. 10.8) is accepted by the prophet but effectively closed by the one who received it.

30. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 403; Rose, p. 400.

31. Several authors, responding to modern historicist, and especially dispensational premillennialist readings of the Apocalypse, have highlighted the disturbing ethical consequences of such readings. See, for example, Craig C. Hill, *In God's Time: The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002) pp. 207-209, and Barbara Rossing's response to the escapist and individualistic ethics of the *Left Behind* novels of LaHaye and Jenkins (and related fiction and non-fiction works) in *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 4, 13. Rossing's comment that, 'An ethos of righteous Christian violence permeates all dispensationalist rhetoric today, fiction and nonfiction alike' (*The Rapture Exposed*, p. 40) constitutes a timely warning against the ethics of works manifesting dispensational premillennialist ideologies, and also illustrates the importance of scholars not simply

3. Troubling the Hermeneutical Flow

The use of the Apocalypse in the novel is made possible by the crucial importance of the work in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. One way of proceeding would be to examine the way Eco is dependent on mediaeval actualizations of the Apocalypse, but 'a catalogue of his allusions would be a poor guide'³² and would only account for one dimension of the intertextual matrix that enables the novel to generate interpretations. In certain respects, *The Name of the Rose* becomes increasingly meaningful the more the reader recognizes the extent of the novel's fictional embeddedness in a context in which the language of the Apocalypse shaped the way the world was constructed spatially and temporally, yet it would be difficult to say that the reader's actualization of the plot depends on such a recognition.³³ This is illustrated by the fact that Jean-Jacques Annaud's film, a transmutation or intersemiotic translation of the novel,³⁴ foregrounds the detective story rather than the intertextuality of the novel with readings of the Apocalypse.

It might be asked instead what the novel's intertextuality with the Apocalypse suggests about the Apocalypse as a text, and what the use of the Apocalypse in the novel suggests about trends in its interpretation. Three possibilities are suggested by the use of words from the Apocalypse as a code to navigate the library, and as a code to be deciphered in order to access the *finis Africae*: (1) Is the Johannine ἀποκάλυψις intended to conceal as much as to reveal?³⁵ That is, is the symbolic language of the

investigating the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of biblical texts, but interrogating the ethical effects and consequences of their reception, and engaging in metacommentary and ideological criticism. It is not simply the *Rezeption* of the text that needs to be studied, but its *Wirkung*, and the *Wirkung* of influential interpretations of the text in their turn.

32. R.P.H. Green on Augustine's borrowings from Cicero in Book 4 of *De doctrina christiana* ('Introduction', in *Augustine: De doctrina christiana* [Oxford Early Christian Texts; Oxford: Clarendon, 1995], p. xx; Green, *Saint Augustine: On Christian Teaching*, World's Classics [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], p. viii).

33. Relevant here is Eco's distinction between two model readers, the *semantic* reader and the *semiotic* or *aesthetic* reader. On this, and the related matters of double coding and intertextual irony, see Eco, 'Intertextual Irony and Levels of Reading', in *On Literature* (trans. M. McLaughlin; London: Vintage, 2005), pp. 212-35.

34. That is, a transposition from one system of signs (a novel) into another (a film) (see Roman Jakobson, 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', in Reuben A. Brower [ed.], *On Translation* [Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 23; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959], pp. 232-39 [233, 238]; Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003], p. 123).

35. In contrast with Dan. 7-12, for example, the Apocalypse, despite its title, gives very few clues as to the meaning of its symbols. This is one of the ironies of a book

Johannine Apocalypse meant to *prevent* certain readers (or even, conceivably, readers in general) from penetrating its secrets, keeping such secrets hidden behind a fog of opaque signs? If so, from whom is the 'revelation' to be concealed, and to whom unveiled? If the intention to conceal existed at the level of the (divine or human) author,³⁶ a level now almost entirely lost to the reader, then almost every reading of the text since then has contradicted that intention by claiming to expound the hidden meaning of the text.³⁷ If the interpreter imputes the intention to conceal to the author or the text during the reading process,³⁸ then that interpreter has no basis on which to say anything much about the meaning of the text, other than that whatever secrets the book was meant to conceal inevitably remain hidden behind the allusive and metaphorical

claiming explicitly to be an ἀποκάλυψις (cf. Hill, *In God's Time*, p. 112). This reticence, furthermore, contributes to the seductiveness of the book, on which see below and cf. Koester, *Revelation*, p. 1.

36. If by author we here infer the Divine Author, compare Roger Bacon's reading of Rev. 13.18: '[A]ccording to what Albumazar says in the eighth chapter of the second book, the law of Mahomet cannot last more than 693 years [...] It is now the six hundred and sixty-fifth year of the Arabs from the time of Mahomet, and therefore it will be quickly destroyed by the grace of God [...] With this view the Apocalypse agrees in chapter XIII. For it says that the number of the beast is 663 [*sic*], a number less than that predicted by thirty years. But Scripture in many places takes something from a complete number, for this is the custom of Scripture, as Bede says. Perhaps God willed that this matter should not be explained fully, but should be somewhat veiled, like other matters which are written in the Apocalypse' (*The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*, I, p. 287). Roger Bacon suggests here that the Divine Author willed that the meaning of at least part of the Apocalypse should remain concealed. Benjamin Jowett criticized the notion that such concealment might 'make the Scriptures more worthy of a Divine author', commenting that '[i]t is not for a Christian theologian to say that words were given to mankind to conceal their thoughts, neither was revelation given them to conceal the Divine' ('On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 382). So much for the Divine Author. A.J.P. Garrow notes the possibility that the human author deliberately created a text where the story is extremely difficult to follow, but he does not subject this idea to detailed discussion, and does not refer to any commentators who have (Garrow, *Revelation*, p. 13).

37. There is, however, a disjunction between the readership intended by the putative author, and the myriad actual readerships that have existed as a result of the transmission history and canonization of the Apocalypse. Irena Backus comments, 'The Apocalypse was not intended for general consumption. Its visions hide all sorts of allusions to the particular situation of particular Christian communities in the second half of the first century' (*Reformation Readings*, p. xii).

38. For this sense of 'intention', cf. Stanley E. Fish, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*', in Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 147-73 (158-67).

language of which the book is composed. The choice, at any rate, is the reader's.³⁹

Alternatively (2) Is the Apocalypse to be read as a code that, once deciphered, yields unreservedly the secrets it has been concealing?⁴⁰ The problem here is that it is the decipherment and the interpretive conventions used to effect that decipherment that are in conflict. (3) Is it a code whose decipherment occurs largely by chance (at this point the *intentio lectoris* threatens to obscure not only the *intentio auctoris*, but the *intentio operis* too)? Since, in this scenario, the reader effectively constructs the work out of what left the author's hands as little more than chaos, how can the manifold suggestions for its decipherment be effectively adjudicated? Who has the authority to adjudicate and on what basis?

The way the Apocalypse is used in the novel reflects the need to impose order on oppressive, disturbing, uncontrollable, or otherwise chaotic events. It reflects the imposition—or recognition—of an order shaped by familiar, religious language. It is, in fact, a kind of translation, in which the more familiar (familiar, not to say domesticated religious language) is put in place of the less familiar (the chaotic world perceived by the interpreter).⁴¹ In the novel, the deaths of the monks inspire terror and confusion. An interpretation such as Alinardo's draws on the familiar language of the Apocalypse to impose order on, or recognize order in that confusion. Even if the deaths cannot be controlled, they can be understood, and thus partially tamed. Jorge extends this by appropriating the order implied by such an interpretation so as to control the imaginations, and thus the behaviour of his hearers. Alinardo's interpretation refracts the intertextual properties of the Apocalypse itself, inasmuch as the Apocalypse responds to a crisis, real or perceived, by appropriating and actualizing language otherwise familiar from works such as Ezekiel, Zechariah, the Book of Watchers, Daniel, and 4 *Ezra*,⁴² texts whose own intertextual properties may be read as creative responses to crises such as the

39. An explicit concealment occurs in Rev. 10.3-4, where reference is made to seven thunders, whose message is heard by the seer but concealed from the reader, unlike the seven seals (Rev. 6.1-17; 8.1) and the seven trumpet judgments (Rev. 8.2-9.21; 11.15-19). This has not, however, prevented curious critics from speculating what the thunders might have contained, or what their function might have been (e.g. Garrow, *Revelation*, pp. 24-25).

40. Proponents of readings of the Apocalypse that seek to decipher its code with reference to the geopolitical realm, such as those influenced by Darbyite dispensationalism, would certainly answer this question in the affirmative.

41. Cf. Reuben Brower's comment that 'We translate the less familiar by putting the more familiar in its place' ('Introduction', in Brower, *On Translation*, pp. 3-7 [3]).

42. Although 4 *Ezra* probably slightly post-dates the Johannine Apocalypse, both works participate in the ancient Jewish genre of 'apocalypse' and largely share a common literary-theological heritage.

Babylonian Exile, the return from Exile, the persecution of the Jews under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the destruction of the Second Temple. In other words, inasmuch as Alinardo uses the familiar language of the Apocalypse to impose order on otherwise chaotic events, the Apocalypse itself drew on the familiar language of other works – without explicit citation – to construct its own response to chaotic, uncontrollable events. In their turn, works such as Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel had also responded to real or perceived crises by adopting and adapting familiar language and literary topoi.

The interrelationship between these texts is complex, and not wholly reducible to one-dimensional scenarios of literary borrowing in which text B derives its language and genre from an underlying authoritative text A. The subsequent canonical status of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and the Johannine Apocalypse, however, contributed decisively to their use as authoritative forecasts of future events, which implies a distinction between authoritative text and derivative interpretation, and is traceable, in the scriptural traditions of Judaism and Christianity, at least as far as the use of Jeremiah in Daniel and Chronicles, and the use of scriptural ‘prophecy’ in the Qumran *pescharim*. Such interpretation, practiced by Alinardo, Jorge, and their precursors, is an extension of the interpreted text’s own intertextual properties. These properties destabilize the process of constructing meaning from the text by forcing the reader to engage in the indeterminate, intertextual activity of inferring the connotations, and consequently the denotations of the textual signs. That is, the language of the Apocalypse does not stand alone but is determined, at least in part, by the freight already carried by earlier and contemporary texts that share this language, and by the interpretive conventions employed, consciously or unconsciously, by readers when they come to construct meaning out of the text of the Apocalypse and all the other texts in their intertextual encyclopaedia that share its language and authoritative status and that seem to participate in the same genre.

Thus the intertextuality of *The Name of the Rose* with the Apocalypse highlights the indeterminacy in the interpretation of the biblical book, which results from the interaction between the kaleidoscope of polyvalent signs of which it is composed, and the book’s readers, each of whom brings to the process of rendering the text meaningful their own desires, their own mental, intertextual encyclopaedias, and the effects, conscious or unconscious, of the historical, social, linguistic, literary, artistic, political, and religious contexts by which their interpretive imaginations have been shaped. In the novel, if the imaginations of Alinardo, William, and Jorge – none of whom existed in the mind of the author of the Apocalypse, nor, given the place and time in which they (fictionally) lived, were they in a

position to reduce the meaning of the Apocalypse to the *intentio auctoris*⁴³ — were not so strongly shaped by the language of the Apocalypse, and if they were not so keen to find order in the deaths at the abbey, it would have been impossible to connect the deaths with the Apocalypse at all. The connection results from the desire of readers both to find meaning in the Apocalypse and to find meaning in puzzling events. These two quests for meaning become conflated, the meaning of the Apocalypse being used to discern the meaning of puzzling events, and the puzzling events being perceived as requiring the Apocalypse to provide the key to their interpretation. This conflation is itself a consequence of interpretive conventions that have normalized these uses of the Apocalypse. This is further complicated by the fact that Alinardo, William, and Jorge are not just engaged in these quests for meaning individually. William and Jorge are also engaged in interpreting each other's, and Alinardo's interpretations. The desire of readers to close the circle of meaning, to control the meaning of the Apocalypse, relates to the indeterminacy of the interpretive process. As long as the text is left undisambiguated, and the interpretive process is allowed to remain indeterminate, the text cannot be controlled.

In *The Name of the Rose*, it is not the Apocalypse but the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* that seduces the monks and plays with their desire for forbidden knowledge. It is not the book itself but the fact that it is inaccessible that seduces the monks. Jorge's fear is that if the book were made freely available, there would be no control over its interpretation and its consequent effect: 'If this book were to become [...] had become an object for open interpretation, we would have crossed the last boundary' (*Se questo libro diventasse [...] fosse diventato materia di aperta interpretazione, avremmo varcato l'ultimo limite*).⁴⁴ Had the book been allowed to be an object for open interpretation, however, it may have lost its seductive fascination. It is because it is hidden that the monks are fascinated by what it contains. Paradoxically, it is the fact that the Apocalypse *is* available for open interpretation that perfectly illustrates Jorge's point, and means that the last boundary has been crossed. It is as seductive as the forbidden book of the novel not because it is forbidden, but because it is available and authoritative for the beliefs and worship of a number of faith communities, yet it is cryptic.⁴⁵ Because its language is ambiguous,

43. Unless, with Aquinas, the *auctor* is ultimately understood to be God (*Summa theologiæ* §Ia.1.10).

44. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 477; *Rose*, p. 473.

45. The belief that the authoritative biblical text is cryptic is the first of four assumptions that James Kugel suggests underpinned ancient Jewish and Christian exegesis, and separate ancient interpretive assumptions from those of modern interpreters. See

employing a vast arsenal of polyvalent metaphors and opaque symbols without providing the key to their interpretation, at the same time as claiming to represent a revelation of something otherwise hidden, the interpretation of the book, and, moreover, the right to interpret the book, are highly contested, among and between trained biblical exegetes belonging to the scholarly guild, and popular prophecy interpreters emerging from a thousand and one Christian churches. The Johannine Apocalypse claims to be a revelation from Christ to his slaves via the seer John (Rev. 1.1), yet what is revealed remains concealed behind a fog of signs (unless they *are* the revelation). The desire is to lay hold of the revelation, to claim to have discovered its 'true' meaning, which means controlling its meaning and attempting to close off other possibilities, effectively preventing other readers from gaining access to its secrets.⁴⁶

The Name of the Rose does not offer a precise analogy to broader trends in the interpretation of the Apocalypse, but one spectrum of interpretive conventions, in Christian circles, does approximate to Alinardo's reading. Such interpretive conventions, particularly those of a historicist bent, involve the fulfilment of elaborate eschatological scenarios that are set to unfold as an inevitable consequence of their ancient foretelling in inspired

James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), pp. 14-16.

46. The complexity of such 'true' meanings may contribute to their seductive quality: 'Eschatological systems can be bewilderingly complex. Ironically, that is part of their appeal. Who doesn't like to be in on a mystery?' See Hill, *In God's Time*, pp. 3-4 (cf. p. 62), and Grace Halsell, *Forcing God's Hand: Why Millions Pray for a Quick Rapture and Destruction of Planet Earth* (Washington, DC: Crossroad International Publishing, 1999), pp. 49, 114. The proliferation of conspiracy theories, not least that popularized by Dan Brown's bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), reflects a similar desire to be 'in on a mystery'. Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989; Italian orig. Milan: Bompiani, 1988) brilliantly illustrates the seductive appeal, preposterousness, and danger of conspiracy theories (and, ironically, of the intellectual arrogance that lampoons them), and is a considerably more edifying read than Dan Brown's offering, but is pitched at an intellectual level that is, I suspect, somewhat beyond the reach of the majority of those who devoured *The Da Vinci Code*. *Foucault's Pendulum* could equally have served as a foil – or, indeed, as an interpretant – for discussing either interpretations of the Apocalypse in particular or the recent efflorescence of apocalyptically-derived historicist eschatological scenarios in general, but since the Apocalypse has a more visible role in *The Name of the Rose*, the earlier novel seemed the more apposite. On the role of conspiracy theories in relation to post-1945 prophecy writing, see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (London: Belknap, 1992), pp. 265-67, and on popular fascination with conspiracy theories as they bear on modern manuscript discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, see Lawrence H. Schiffman, 'Inverting Reality: The Dead Sea Scrolls in the Popular Media', *DSD* 12 (2005), pp. 24-37 (29-30).

prophecy.⁴⁷ Just as the fictional Alinardo is influenced by the ideas of the Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135–1202 CE), Joachim's notion of three *status* (viz. 'dispensations'?) of history⁴⁸ anticipates not only subsequent developments in mediaeval apocalyptic writing, but also, at least in principle, the thinking of John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century, whose dispensational premillennialism acquired canonical status in the context of the Scofield Reference Bibles of 1909 and 1967, and spread like wildfire at a popular level through the preaching and writing of the likes of Hal Lindsey. Such readings, however, dissatisfy other readers who seek to establish their control over the meaning of the text by appeal to some form of historical criticism (which remains haunted by the ghost of the *intentio auctoris*).⁴⁹ These readers belong to the churches and the academy, and frequently to both. Their use of historical-critical method to some degree mirrors William of Baskerville's deductions based on the evidence available to him, while the desire to control the meaning of the Apocalypse, itself grounded in the language of the Apocalypse (Rev. 22.18-19), also to some degree mirrors the motives of Jorge of Burgos. Yet these attempts at controlling the text's meaning are ultimately futile, because while the text offers some limits that prescribe what it *cannot* mean, the combination of the availability of the text, the canonical authority imputed to it, the

47. Begging the reader's indulgence and selling my soul to the notion of *intentio auctoris*, by 'inspired' I intend the sense of θεόπνευστος ('divinely inspired') in 2 Tim. 3.16 (or, for that matter, the canon of Amphilochius of Iconium, though his attitude to the status of the Apocalypse was apparently not unambiguous). Cf. the note to 2 Tim. 3.16 in E. Schuyler English *et al.* (eds.), *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 1266, and, for a summary of the nature of prophecy implied in this kind of prophecy belief, see, e.g., Hal Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 9-16. Lindsey's summary is based on Deut. 18.21. Barbara Rossing's attempt to portray the understanding of prophecy in contemporary dispensational premillennialist writing as a betrayal of the nature of biblical prophecy (*The Rapture Exposed*, pp. 88-93) singularly fails because it bypasses the deuteronomic criterion of true prophecy and chooses Jonah as a characteristic illustration of a prophet. If anything, Jonah is a *parody* of a deuteronomic prophet, and thus decidedly atypical.

48. Joachim of Fiore, *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, f. 5r-v, in Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (Records of Western Civilization: Sources and Studies, 96; New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 133-34.

49. Compare, for example, the definition of historical criticism offered by Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg in *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2002), p. 1: 'To employ historical-critical method is to subject the putatively factual material and literary structure of the Bible to independent investigation in order to test their truthfulness and to discern *their original historical meaning*. This independent investigation assumes that the outcome of research will not be predetermined by a guarantee of the Bible's infallibility' (emphasis added).

polyvalence of its language, the interpretive conventions by which it is governed in particular interpretive communities,⁵⁰ and the infinite number of possible and actual readers of the book, who bring to its interpretation an infinite number of polydimensional, intertextual encyclopaedias, renders the text open to an unlimited range of construals.

4. *The Control of Apocalyptic Meaning*

There is no shortage of readings of the Apocalypse that try to pinpoint the relationship between its prophecies and external events in history.⁵¹ There are a bewildering variety of such readings, which often claim an extraordinary degree of certainty. Several scholars have developed strategies for reclaiming the Apocalypse, in order to establish a degree of control over its meaning. Such scholars have sought to reclaim the Apocalypse and other biblical apocalyptic texts, and to expose the limitations of what they perceive to be erroneous readings, by appeal to alternative codes, primarily of a historical-critical sort, that can be used to delimit the text's meaning. Recent examples include Craig Koester's commentary on the Apocalypse and books by Kenneth Newport, Craig Hill, Barbara Rossing,⁵² and Michael Northcott.⁵³ Such attempts to control the meaning of the text are merely the most recent examples, from within the scholarly guild, of a long history of attempts to limit the possible interpretations of biblical texts.

The canonization of a text as authoritative for a community of faith is a basic mechanism for attempting to control its meaning. However, because of the juxtaposition in a religious canon of set numbers of texts

50. On 'interpretive communities' see Fish, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*', pp. 167-73.

51. Kovacs, and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 24-25.

52. Rossing's *The Rapture Exposed* is an explicit attempt to reclaim the Johannine Apocalypse from the authors of the *Left Behind* novels and authors of a similar ideological bent, largely by appealing to the author's intentions and the historical context in which the text was written (see e.g. p. 34). This trend is not new. In 1918 Shirley Jackson Case criticized readers of the Apocalypse who, 'found themselves unable to grasp the exact meaning of the author' due to 'neglect of the actual historical conditions which called forth the book' (*The Millennial Hope: A Phase of War-Time Thinking* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1918] p. 6 [emphasis added]).

53. Koester, *Revelation*; Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*; Hill, *In God's Time*; Michael S. Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); cf. *idem*, 'Bringing on the Apocalypse', *Third Way* (November 2004), pp. 22-24. Duncan Forrester's book *Apocalypse Now? Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) is an attempt to reclaim the language of biblical apocalyptic texts to shape a Christian response to 11 September, 2001, and offers a reading of the Apocalypse not dissimilar to Northcott's.

that are supposed to be read intertextually, such a canon can have the reverse effect, leading to an infinite proliferation of possible meanings. The early controversies over the canonical status of the Apocalypse might imply awareness of its dangerous polyvalence,⁵⁴ especially when juxtaposed with other authoritative texts in the context of a canon. Indeed, questioning or rejecting the canonical status of the Apocalypse is one way of dealing with its dangerous allure, of controlling it.⁵⁵ Once a notion of authoritative Scripture (not the same thing as a fixed canon) was in place, rules were perceived necessary to establish the limits of interpretation. As Eco has remarked:

[B]oth Testaments spoke at the same time of their sender, their content, and their referent, and their meaning was a nebula of all possible archetypes. The scriptures were in the position of saying everything. Everything, though, was rather too much for interpreters interested in Truth. The symbolical nature of sacred scripture had therefore to be tamed. Potentially, the scriptures had every possible meaning; so the reading of them had to be governed by a code.⁵⁶

Several strategies emerged for limiting interpretation, the most important of which is that of the (three, and subsequently four) senses of Scripture. In *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine explored the question of how to distinguish the literal from the figurative in Scripture,⁵⁷ which is part of a broader attempt to limit scriptural interpretation, to demonstrate in what sense all scriptural texts bear the same message.⁵⁸ This awareness of levels of meaning beyond the literal is the seminal idea behind the notion of four senses of Scripture, which were defined and enumerated in various ways by various interpreters, and which functioned to circumscribe the meaning of biblical texts, though the allegorical, tropological or moral, and anagogical senses that together make up what Aquinas termed the 'spiritual sense' (*sensus spiritualis*) rather than 'historical or literal sense' (*sensus historicus vel literalis*), in fact opened the text to a plethora of possible construals.⁵⁹ This could be taken to reflect either the unquenchable

54. This suspicion is well known, and is partly connected with the popularity of apocalyptic ideas among 'heretical' groups such as the second-century CE Montanists (see Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 15).

55. On the problem of the canonical status of the Apocalypse during the Reformation period, see Backus, *Reformation Readings*, pp. 3-36.

56. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (trans. H. Bredin; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 145; trans. of *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan: Bompiani, 2nd edn, 1970); *idem*, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 11.

57. Eco, *Aesthetics*, pp. 146-47; 'Two Models', pp. 12-13.

58. Fish, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*', p. 170.

59. Aquinas responds to this risk in *Summa theologiae* §1a.1.10.

richness of possibility suggested by Scripture, or the dangerously anarchic importation of meaning by the interpreter. The latter possibility is at the root of criticisms of the four senses by Martin Luther and later Protestant expositors,⁶⁰ such criticisms themselves constituting attempts to establish limits to, or recognize the limits of biblical meaning.⁶¹

An effect of the emergence of the Protestant dogma of *sola scriptura* was the assertion of control over the process of defining correct belief, implying a need to control not only the process of defining correct belief, but also the meaning of Scripture, which lies at the root of that process. Due to a close historical relationship with both a rise in rates of literacy and the wide dispersal and availability of vernacular translations of Protestant bibles, the Protestant dogma of *sola scriptura*, and the related notion of the perspicuity of Scripture,⁶² rather than limiting biblical meaning, led to a massive proliferation of competing, and frequently contradictory construals. Also connected to the dogma of *sola scriptura* is the widespread Protestant notion that, 'In order to interpret correctly [...] scripture must be compared with scripture; the Bible is its own interpreter'.⁶³ Following on from this is the idea that the (Protestant) Bible must be free from contradiction.⁶⁴ A further consequence of the *sola scriptura* dogma, the perspicuity and self-interpreting qualities of Scripture and the perceived impossibility of contradictions between biblical books, is the non-

60. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, I (trans. M. Seban and E.M. Macierowski; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), p. 9.

61. A vigorous defence of the four senses of Scripture rather than the historical-critical method's focus on authorial intention has been offered by David Steinmetz ('Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', see n. 10 above).

62. That is, 'the doctrine that the ordinary believer has the ability to discern the Bible's meaning' (Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 45).

63. Newport, *Apocalypse*, p. 213. Cf. Hill, *In God's Time*, p. 25.

64. Noteworthy in this connection is the discussion of the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins: 'When the more than three hundred Bible references to the Second Coming are carefully examined, it becomes clear that there are two phases to His return. *There are far too many conflicting activities connected with His return to be merged into a single coming [...] Since we know there are no contradictions in the Word of God, our Lord must be telling us something here*' (*Are We Living in the End-Times?* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999] pp. 98, 100 [emphasis added]). This comment incorporates an acknowledgement of the diversity of biblical references to the Second Coming and the eschatological destiny of believers, together with a device for eliminating the potential of that diversity to cause cognitive dissonance. On cognitive dissonance in general, see Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956). On the evidence for reactions to cognitive dissonance within the biblical tradition, see e.g. Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions* (London: SCM, 1979).

canonical status of works such as Ethiopic Enoch and 4 Ezra in the context of Protestantism (and Western Christianity in general).⁶⁵ The endowing of Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Johannine Apocalypse with canonical status, and thus with an authority that other apocalypses cannot have, means that considerably more is at stake in the decoding of these works than in the decoding of the symbolic language of the Animal Apocalypse, for example, or in figuring out to what historical realities the Apocalypse of Weeks might refer. Religiously canonical works are, in the mind of the reader who acknowledges the divine inspiration of the works contained in the canon in question, 'endowed with a different charisma'.⁶⁶ By virtue of their imputed canonical status, they are read as essentially different from other works that nevertheless participate in the same genre or the same network of intertexts.

This perceived ontological distinction between Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Johannine Apocalypse on the one hand and extra-canonical apocalypses on the other was gradually challenged by the rise of historical criticism, which cannot be fully understood except in relation to the history of Christian (especially Protestant) attempts to control biblical meaning. Historical criticism offers strategies for establishing interpretive limits that focus on the historical and socio-cultural contexts of biblical texts, particular attention being paid to possible and probable reconstructions of the original meaning intended by the text's author.

There is a sense in which historical criticism pursued the Protestant suspicion of the four senses of Scripture to its logical conclusion.⁶⁷ It was the three allegorical (spiritual or mystical) senses, as construed by theologians rather than poets,⁶⁸ which enabled Scripture to be read as

65. Cf. Jowett's remark that 'this extreme variety of interpretation is found to exist in the case of no other book, but of the Scriptures only' ('On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 334). With respect to 4 Ezra, this work was preserved in Latin alongside the additions 5 Ezra (chs. 102) and 6 Ezra (chs. 15–16), and exercised a degree of influence in the Latin tradition, but was declared extracanonical at the Council of Trent. See R.T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985), pp. 13–14 n. 7; M.E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Fourth Book of Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), p. 43.

66. Cf. Eco, *Serendipities*, p. 79, referring not to our texts, nor to questions of canonicity, but to the reception of the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollus in fifteenth-century Italy.

67. Cf. Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 411.

68. Dante Alighieri distinguished between the allegorical sense as used by the poets and the allegorical sense as understood by the theologians ('The theologians really take this sense differently from the poets', *Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti*, *Il convivio* §2.1.4). See the Italian text and notes in Cesare Vasoli and Domenico De Robertis (eds.), *Opere minori/Dante Alighieri* (vol. 1/2; La letteratura italiana, 5; Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1988), pp. 114–15, and the English translation of the relevant section of *Il convivio* in Robert S. Haller (trans. and ed.),

essentially different from secular literature.⁶⁹ Eco summarizes Aquinas's position thus:

[T]he biblical authors were not aware that their historical accounts possessed the senses in question. Scripture had these senses in the mind of God, and would have them later for those readers who sought in the Old Testament for a prefiguring of the New. But the authors themselves wrote under divine inspiration; they did not know what they were really saying. Poets, by contrast, know what they want to say and what they are saying. Poets therefore speak literally, even when they use rhetorical figures.⁷⁰

Thus in the post-Reformation context, in which the authority of the four senses had, to all intents and purposes, been set aside, a focus on the literal sense that the author intends (to purloin words, ironically, from Aquinas)⁷¹ did not actually require God in order for the text to be rendered faithfully. There are therefore manifold ironies in the Christian use of historical criticism (which as a scientific method in no way requires an acknowledgement of the divine authorship of Scripture)⁷² without the additional acknowledgement of the spiritual senses of Scripture. There are likewise ironies in the non-confessional employment of historical criticism, which could not easily have emerged when and where it did without the Protestant rejection of the four senses of Scripture.⁷³ There are further

Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri (Regents Critics Series; Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), pp. 112-14. Aquinas likewise had drawn a distinction between the use of metaphor in 'poetry' (*poetica*) and in 'holy teaching' (*sacra doctrina*): *Summa theologiae* §1a.1.9. Dante illustrates his understanding of the four senses with reference to Ps. 113.1-2 (Vulg.) in *Epistula* XIII, 7. See the Latin text (with Italian translation and notes): Arsenio Frugoni and Giorgio Brugnoli (eds.), 'Epistole', in Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo *et al.* (eds.), *Opere minori/Dante Alighieri* (vol. 2; La letteratura italiana: Stori e testi, 5; Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1979), pp. 505-643 (610-11), and the English translation in Haller, *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri*, pp. 95-111 (99).

69. This should, however, be set alongside Steinmetz's response to Benjamin Jowett's exaltation of the intentions of the human authors of the biblical texts: 'I agree with Jowett that the Bible should be read like any other book. The question is: how does one read other books?' ('The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', p. 36; cf. Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 377).

70. Eco, *Aesthetics*, p. 154. Cf. n. 67 above.

71. For whom the author is God, a given that both distinguishes Scripture from secular literature and permits Scripture to contain many meanings under the form of the literal. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* §1a.1.10: 'The literal sense is that which the author intends, however the author of Holy Scripture is God, who comprehends everything at once by his understanding' (*sensus literalis est quem auctor intendit, auctor autem sacrae Scripturae Deus est qui omnia simul suo intellectu comprehendit*).

72. Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 42.

73. Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg trace this turn, that is, 'the "Protestantization" of biblical studies being turned on its head', to the work of Baruch Spinoza (*The*

ironies in the frequent claim of popular Protestant interpreters, opposed both to academic historical criticism and to Roman Catholic ecclesiastical dogmatism, that they trust entirely in the 'literal' sense of the Bible.⁷⁴

More recently, the postmodern troubling of interpretive limits has implicitly questioned attempts to control biblical meaning and it is here, in the contested territory between the modern and the postmodern, that the battle for control of apocalyptic meaning takes place. It worth recognizing, however, that modernist attempts to limit interpretation and postmodernist attempts to question those limits are interdependent. It is ironic that the battle for control of apocalyptic meaning should boil down to a dualistic opposition between reading and misreading, between interpretation and misinterpretation. Not only does this mirror the worldview of early Jewish and Christian apocalypses (which assume that there is an order to the world, it is dualistic, and it is hidden to all on earth but the reader, the reader's community – if such communities can be inferred from the texts – and the inspired mediator of the revelation, be he Enoch, Baruch, Ezra, Daniel, or John), but it belies both the unlimited interpretive possibility of the texts, and also the fact that at the root of both end-times readings and readings that appeal to historical-criticism is a common principle. What both historical-critical readings and readings that try to deduce an end-times script from the Apocalypse share is the implicit assumption that *something* is signified by the text.⁷⁵ It should not be assumed that all interpreters of the Apocalypse who indulge in historical-critical analysis, and who have all come out from under Eichhorn's overcoat, would claim that a single, unequivocal meaning is recoverable, still less that such a reading is wedded to the

Bible in Modern Culture, pp. 44-45). They comment, 'What helped to make historical criticism of the Bible acceptable, or at least debatable, was a fundamental feature of Protestant intellectual culture. From the time of the Reformation, Protestants held the conviction that Roman Catholic Christianity was a false development of primitive Christian faith that distorted the clarity of the gospel. This simple but revolutionary idea [...] was like the opening of Pandora's box. Once stated it could not be forgotten or repressed. When taken to heart as a formal principle, it could easily be turned on the Protestant ecclesiastical establishment itself and used to undermine Protestantism's own dogmatic heritage' (*The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 49).

74. On the 'highly selective literalism' of dispensational premillennialist interpreters, and on the general problem of reading the Johannine Apocalypse 'literally', see Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, pp. 94-98, 173, 183. The highly metaphorical language of the Apocalypse would itself, for Aquinas, belong to the *sensus literalis*, that is, that sense which the author intends. Most of the richness to which the *sensus literalis* points, however, has been lost for modern Protestant fundamentalisms.

75. Cf. the comparison between the 'decoding' interpretations of the Apocalypse of the Spiritual Franciscans, Hal Lindsey, Joseph Mede, and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn in Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 8-9.

intentio auctoris,⁷⁶ though for some this is the case. Yet this is the implicit focus of the interpretive process in which they engage, despite the fact that this focus may be no more than a convenient fiction, a side-effect of the temporal dimension of the reading process, acting as an invisible guide for the interpreter. The difference between historical-critical and dispensational premillennialist approaches is due not to the fact that one approach demonstrably indulges in misinterpretation, but to the fact that different interpretive conventions are in operation in the interpretive communities in question. Historical criticism cannot be successfully used to persuade historicist interpreters of the Apocalypse (such as dispensational premillennialists) that their readings are wrong, because a different set of interpretive conventions is in operation, and because anti-historical-critical rhetoric, and sometimes anti-intellectual rhetoric in general, is one mechanism by which the boundaries of historicist interpretive communities are established.⁷⁷ Similarly, historical-critics also indulge in lampooning as a way of shoring up their defences against a set of reading strategies that, on some levels, are dangerously similar.⁷⁸

76. Garrow, for example, tries to focus instead on reconstructing the meaning that may most plausibly be assigned to the earliest readers of the Apocalypse (*Revelation*, pp. 1-2), though he, too, assumes that the author's intention was to construct a text that, based on the meaning he intended his readers to construe, closed down the possibilities for aberrant decoding (*Revelation*, p. 2). Thus Garrow takes recovering the *intentio auctoris* as the proper goal of interpretation while at the same time claiming that this goal is ultimately out of reach. Garrow's concern for identifying the author, the context for which he wrote, and his probable intentions, is evident in *Revelation*, pp. 53-59, 66-79.

77. In his masterly study of prophecy belief in modern American culture, published in 1992, Paul Boyer notes a significant separation between 'academic' and 'popular' readings of biblical apocalyptic texts in the wake of the Enlightenment (*When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 45), though such prophecy belief, shaped by idiosyncratic readings of biblical works such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, nevertheless seems to pervade all educational and income levels (*When Time Shall Be No More*, pp. 13-14). Purveyors of prophecy belief often weave anti-intellectual rhetoric into their argument, which has the effect of delimiting the boundaries of the interpretive community that they are both addressing and helping to create (see, e.g. Hal Lindsey's criticism of 'some liberal professors' teaching 'courses called "The Bible as Literature," or something similar', who fraudulently claim that Daniel is to be dated to the Maccabean period [*The Late, Great Planet Earth*, p. 80]). Inasmuch as such 'liberal professors' represent a resented authority, this phenomenon is not dissimilar to the way that conspiracy theories may be encouraged, by populist authors and the news media, among those who are disenchanted with particular manifestations of authority (see George J. Brooke, 'The Scrolls in the British Media [1987-2002]', *DSD* 12 [2005], pp. 38-51 [39] and cf. n. 43 above).

78. In his generally sober and respectful study *Apocalypse and Millennium*, Ken Newport, for example, works with an implicit contrast between 'exegesis' (for which read responsible, historically plausible interpretation) and 'eisegesis' (for which read

If this is acknowledged, it becomes necessary to look elsewhere for establishing interpretive limits for the Apocalypse. Should the quest for interpretive limits be abandoned, so that we can revel in the openness of the text we have received? Should we acknowledge the potentially fatal consequences of certain readings of the text, and give the Apocalypse up as an irredeemable text of terror that indulges in deeply problematic portrayals of women and reinscribes the language of violence and empire at the same time as apparently trying to subvert it? Or should provisional interpretive limits be advocated, perhaps on ethical grounds ('Lamb Power' is still *power*, after all)? Who should control access to the text and its interpretation, and on what basis? This brings us back to *The Name of the Rose*. The control of access to knowledge, and thus of meaning, is the function of the abbey library and its librarian. The library exists to preserve knowledge, yet, Adso reflects, if the 'new understanding' (*nuovo sapere*)⁷⁹ produced or reproduced by its monks were to circulate freely beyond the abbey walls, nothing would then distinguish the abbey from a cathedral school or a city university, and there would be no means of limiting the influence or interpretation of that knowledge. This risk of knowledge (*rischio della conoscenza*)⁸⁰ is what Jorge fears so much, but this risk of knowledge is a fundamental aspect of the history of biblical, and especially apocalyptic interpretation. It is at the root of the contemporary conflict between secular and theological approaches to biblical hermeneutics due to the fact that the biblical texts and techniques for their interpretation are available outside confessional contexts, and is, above all, at the root of the conflict over the most adequate and responsible interpretation of the Apocalypse and other seductive texts of Scripture. Because this book has become an object for open interpretation, we have crossed the final boundary.⁸¹

irresponsible, sometimes borderline anarchic misinterpretation). In a particularly memorable example, Newport lampoons William Whiston thus: 'In fact, in Whiston's interpretation the actual text appears almost incidental and is certainly not the controlling factor. Had "Old Mother Hubbard" been in the canon in place of Revelation 13, it may be conjectured that Whiston might have concluded that the cupboard represents the Roman Catholic Church barren of any spiritual sustenance, the bone for which the dog longed is a symbol of righteousness and communion with God, and the dog itself a symbol of the hungry Christian soul which is starved as a result of papal error' (*Apocalypse and Millennium*, pp. 54-55).

79. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 187; *Rose*, p. 184.

80. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 189; *Rose*, p. 186.

81. Cf. Eco, *Rosa*, p. 477; *Rose*, p. 473.

5. *Concluding Reflections, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and
Hate Rapture Fiction Anyway*

Reading the interpreters of the Johannine Apocalypse through the lens of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, one node in the rhizomatic labyrinth that is the intertextual encyclopaedia of the Apocalypse and its readers, points to the fact that the combination of the writing, initial reception, canonization, subsequent effective and reception histories, and post-Reformation accessibility of the Apocalypse has opened a Pandora's box that no army of disaffected historical critics, whether Christian or not, can succeed in shutting. Equally, the combination of the post-Reformation accessibility of Scripture divorced from the dictates of ecclesiastical dogmatism, and the subsequent emergence of a historical criticism that has achieved canonical status in several interpretive communities, both confessional and non-confessional, has itself opened a Pandora's box that no army of disaffected dispensational premillennialists (or Tribulation Saints, should The Rapture have occurred between my writing and the publication of this essay) can succeed in shutting. We cannot wind back the clock to a point where we might prevent either of these Pandora's boxes from opening. Equally, the nature of the risk of knowledge is such that some of the same factors that allow confessional readers to use the Apocalypse to advocate a liberation theological agenda also allow learned academics to indulge (dis)passionately in the historical-critical exegesis of the text, and, at the same time, allow historicist interpreters of various hues and colours, such as Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, the late David Koresh, and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society to expound the Apocalypse from perspectives of contemporary prophecy belief. As a result, the Apocalypse cannot be reclaimed on epistemological grounds. Such grounds cannot establish that reading A is inherently better than reading B; there can be no universally 'true' apocalypse.⁸²

Yet to leave the matter there, in a world in which religious fundamentalisms of various kinds have begun to exercise an extraordinary effect on geopolitical events, would be an ethically bankrupt position to adopt. Far preferable would be to assert the primacy of ethics over epistemology, and to argue in favour of certain kinds of reading of the Apocalypse and against others on ethical grounds, rather than labelling the readings of opposing interpretive communities as 'misinterpretation' or 'eisegesis' as a means of asserting ownership of *the true meaning* of the text. But this has its limits, too, in that contrasting approaches to ethics as much characterize

82. Pace Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm*, pp. 103-33; 'Bringing on the Apocalypse', p. 24.

the positions adopted by interpretive communities as do contrasting approaches to textual interpretation. The alternative, however, is for any reader or group of readers to be allowed to get away with *any* reading of the text, which sets us on the road to legitimizing in fiction the murders and other events that led to the fiery demise of the abbey library in *The Name of the Rose*, and, much more to the point, legitimizing in fact the events that led to the horrific demise of the Branch Davidian sect at Waco in 1993⁸³ or, if our text is the Quran rather than the Johannine Apocalypse, the events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath.⁸⁴ The choice is the reader's, but the potential consequences make the burden of that choice immense.

What this essay has attempted to demonstrate is that the study of the reception and effective histories of the Johannine Apocalypse cannot simply be reduced to the diachronic study of the traceable influence and effect of texts on other texts, and the readers that produced them, through time. Rather, the multidimensional complexity of the interpretive process needs to be acknowledged. Moreover, the study of the reception and effective histories of the Johannine Apocalypse should not be reduced to a disinterested, academic exercise. Our choices as readers, as interpreters participating in interpretive communities, are not innocent. An ethically self-reflective dimension should be fundamental to all study of reception and effective histories, because who, in the end, will bear the cost of *our* interpretive decisions?

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83. On which see, e.g., Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, pp. 197–236; John R. Hall, Philip D. Schuyler and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 44–75.

84. This problem is sharpened if we accept that the Apocalypse can be read as a 'martyr charter', a text which positively encourages the seeking out of violent death as a means of both personal salvation and the hastening of the advent of God's kingdom (cf. esp. Rev. 6.9–11 and Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* [Library of New Testament Studies, 307; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2006], pp. 158–70). If the *intentio operis* can be construed thus, then there is a real sense in which confessional attempts to reclaim the Apocalypse by appeal to historical-critical method may, in fact, be reading against the grain of the text.

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REVELATION, VIOLENCE, AND WAR: GLIMPSES OF A DARK SIDE

Heikki Räisänen

1. Introduction

Throughout their seminal work, Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland paint a very attractive picture of Revelation in light of its reception history – one that a present-day reader can easily appreciate. They characterize Revelation as ‘the Bible’s prime visionary text’ whose message is ‘as inspirational as it is illuminating’,¹ and their evaluative postscript hails it as ‘the foundation text for “the principle of Hope”’. Those in particular who have experienced situations of tribulation can find in Revelation ‘a source of insight into situations of oppression and evil and also of a new hope for the working out of God’s gracious purposes for the whole world’.²

Clearly this is an important aspect of the reception history of Revelation. It is impossible to belittle the experiences of terror of oppressed people for whom Revelation has provided, and can provide, consolation and hope. Nevertheless, some scholars assess the book in light of its effective history in a rather different way. I find it important to call attention also to such reflections, examples of which occur in the essays that complete this volume. In this essay I want to focus especially on a book by two American scholars concerned with the military history of their country: *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil*, by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence,³ who in turn draw on the now classic work on ‘the

1. Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 246.

2. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 250.

3. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). This volume updates an earlier book by Jewett: Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Santa Fe: Bear & Company, 2nd edn, 1984). For the political themes in question see further John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), a work that won an award of the American Culture Association as the ‘Best Book of 2002’.

idea of America's millennial role' by Ernest Lee Tuveson.⁴ One may debate whether the role of Revelation is here at times exaggerated, or the character of the book too one-sidedly interpreted, but surely the case of these scholars deserves to be seriously considered.

It is claimed, also by others, that Revelation brings some of the problematic features in the biblical tradition to a head: it presents God and Christ as warriors, and it draws a black-and-white contrast between God's people and the rest of the world.⁵ As the book now stands at the end of the Christian canon, it appears to be its crowning culmination,⁶ rendering supreme force to these not-so-happy features. In the evaluation of Frederic Baumgartner, 'The God in Revelation [...] is not a merciful God but an avenger, one who does not blink at the enormous misery, carnage, and terror of the last days'.⁷ This apocalyptic view spills over directly into the lives of some readers: 'since God is our model and he solves his problems through violence, so can we'.⁸ Ironically, 'Jesus the atoning sacrificial Lamb of God [...] would return to wipe out most of humanity', thereby becoming 'God's murderous apocalyptic accomplice, who would violently judge and crush enemies and evildoers at the end of history'.⁹ Jewett and Lawrence find it tragic that Jesus' message 'came

4. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

5. Kovacs and Rowland do recognize this aspect, but they seem to suggest that it is in 'many of the actualizations of the Apocalypse', rather than in the book itself, that 'opponents are demonized'. In their assessment it is only 'very occasionally' the case that 'imagination is stirred to imitate the violence the book describes'. They also seem to hold that Revelation's 'catalogue of disaster and destruction', 'its cries for vengeance, and its terrible gloating over the fall of Babylon' which seem 'so contrary to the spirit of Jesus' is only 'apparently' sanctioned by God (*Revelation*, p. 248). It is only very occasionally that Kovacs and Rowland take up 'harmful' interpretations in their account of the reception history. This 'positive' way of reading Revelation is challenged by the current of interpretation represented by Jewett and company.

6. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 53.

7. Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), p. 29; cf. Michel Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament* (The Biblical Seminar, 46; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 84-85; further p. 90: 'The God of the New Testament is not a "nice God". In addition to his role as father and comforter, he is depicted as warrior, judge, vindicator and avenger [...] the New Testament texts speak of non-retaliation and love of enemies when it comes to human conduct, but this is understood in the context of divine violence and vengeance.'

8. Desjardins, *Peace*, p. 91; he points out that such world view 'is not particularly helpful in promoting a lasting peace, if such a peace presupposes the equal worth of each individual and the intention to build a better world'.

9. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003), pp. 68-69, citing Rev. 14.9-10.

to be placed in a collection of writings that obscured its essential thrust', being 'interpreted by posterity in the light of Deuteronomy,¹⁰ of Daniel,¹¹ and, worst of all, the Book of Revelation'.¹²

A key text for the effective historical trajectory under discussion is Rev. 19.11-21. There the rider on a white horse brings righteousness and embodies it by *making war* (v. 11). He is the 'Word of God', 'clothed in a robe dipped with blood' (v. 13), followed by the armies of heaven (v. 14). The scene is violent indeed: 'From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty' (v. 15). An angel calls all birds to 'the great supper of God' 'to eat the flesh of kings [...] the flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great' (vv. 17-18). After the beast and the false prophet have been thrown alive into the lake of fire (v. 20), 'the rest were killed by the sword [...] that came from his mouth ...' (v. 21). This massacre serves to introduce the millennium.

Kovacs and Rowland dwell on the patristic exegesis which understands the scene as a symbolic depiction of the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ, thus rendering the violent imagery harmless.¹³ From modern historical criticism which (no doubt correctly) thinks instead of Christ's second coming, they take up the suggestion that the white robe is 'dipped in blood *before* the final battle has taken place', which is interpreted as a sign that the triumph of the 'conquering' messiah 'comes through suffering and death'.¹⁴

The passage is based on traditional depictions on the victorious coming of the warrior Messiah;¹⁵ the prophetic image of treading the winepress

10. On the violent ethos of Deuteronomy, in which 'ethnic cleansing is the way to ensure cultic purity', see, e.g., John J. Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence', *JBL* 122 (2003), pp. 3-21 (7-12, quotation: p. 7).

11. Jewett and Lawrence admit that the author of Daniel has reservations regarding the violent policy of the Maccabees, but hold against him that he 'agreed with the zealous nationalists that the enemy was beastly and ought to be annihilated' and 'envisioned a permanent period of world domination' by the saints (*Captain America*, p. 51).

12. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 53. But Rowland surely has a point when he 'hazards the guess' that other New Testament passages may have provoked more violence in the last two millennia, e.g. Lk. 3.14 (acceptance of the occupation of a soldier without questions), Lk. 22.38 (the two swords) and especially Rom. 13 ('Apocalypse and Violence: The Evidence from the Reception History of the Book of Revelation', online: <http://research.yale.edu/ycias/database/files/MESV6-1.pdf>, no pages).

13. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 196.

14. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 197, emphasis added.

15. See David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22* (Word Biblical Commentary, 52c; Nashville: Nelson, 1998), pp. 1048-1050, 1057.

of God's wrath in particular suggests a blood-bath. It may well be the case, though, that the author of Revelation differs here from his tradition: he may think of Christ's own death, when he mentions the robe dipped with blood.¹⁶ But the opposite can also be argued: that it is not a question of Christ's own blood (although the blood is found on his clothes before the battle begins), because the author leans closely on the passage Isa. 63.1-6.¹⁷ Be that as it may, even if the author had the death of Christ (also) in mind, the violence of the text cannot be explained away.¹⁸ The rod of iron, the winepress of wrath and, not least, the invitation to the birds to eat the flesh of all and sundry, make it abundantly clear that a horrible event is in view: 'The Word of God is the Slayer...'.¹⁹

2. *Battle Hymn of the Republic*

Although Kovacs and Rowland also briefly call attention to such 'historical actualizations of the rider' in which he leads the flesh-and-blood armies of the saints to slay Christ's enemies,²⁰ their examples are mainly selected from post-Reformation England. However, this line of interpretation continued to flourish and became even more potent in the New World, in America, where many from these 'armies' had settled after the English Civil Wars. Jewett and Lawrence point out that the (American) reader will recognize Rev. 19.15 as the inspiration for *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, composed by Julia Ward Howe during an early phase of the American civil war in 1862.²¹ This poem, flooded with biblical reminiscences, 'has

16. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, p. 1069, finds here an allusion to Christ's redemptive death, assuming that the author reinterprets the traditional conception of the divine warrior. R.H. Charles (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920], II, p. 133) points out that when Christ's own death is in view, the author speaks of the lamb slaughtered (as in 19.6).

17. Cf. Heinrich Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT, 16; Tübingen: Mohr, 2nd edn, 1953), p. 249: the author simply shows in advance that Christ is the winner in this battle. Also Charles appeals to the use of Isa. 63 which means that the blood 'cannot be his own blood'; Charles's solution is that it is the blood 'of the Parthian kings and their armies, already destroyed by the Word of God' (*Revelation*, II, p. 133). Ernst Lohmeyer is content with noting that the robe dipped with blood already before the battle is just one of several incoherent images in the text (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [HNT, 16, 2nd edn, 1953], p. 157).

18. Kraft, *Offenbarung*, p. 253.

19. Charles, *Revelation 2*, p. 133.

20. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 198.

21. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 53; cf. Arthur W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 181. Tuveson gives a full interpretation of the hymn from this perspective (*Redeemer Nation*, pp. 197-202).

become perhaps the most popular hymn of wars and moral crusade of the English-speaking peoples';²² in particular it can be described as a musical monument to the civil religion of the United States. It 'has been performed to express the mission of the United States in terms of foreign conquest and domestic reform'.²³ Recently, on 14 September, 2001, it was the musical selection on the Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the victims of the 9/11 attacks at the National Cathedral in Washington. The music echoed President George W. Bush's declaration that America's responsibility to history was clear: 'To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil'.²⁴

Here follows the hymn in full.

(1) Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is *trampling out the vintage* where the *grapes of wrath* are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift *sword*:
His truth is marching on.

(2) I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.

(3) I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
As you deal with my contemnors, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.

(4) He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:
Oh, be swift my soul, to answer him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

(5) In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:

22. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 198. The song quickly became national since the opposite side in the civil war, the slave-holding Confederates, also believed that they fought in God's cause. Popular among conservative Americans, the song also appeals to such 'leftist' folk singers as Joan Baez and Judy Collins. Even Martin Luther King, Jr, repeatedly alluded to the 'Battle Hymn' in his speeches (David A. Bosworth, "'The Battle Hymn of the Republic': The Kingdom of God in American Politics' [a paper read at the SBL Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, November 18, 2006] – my thanks are due to Professor Bosworth for putting this paper at my disposal).

23. Bosworth, 'Battle Hymn'.

24. Harry O. Maier, 'The President's Revelation: The Apocalypse, American Providence, and the War on Terror', *Word and World* 25 (2005), pp. 294-307 – my thanks are due to Professor Maier for making this article available to me (as I have it in electronic form, I am not able to give page numbers).

As He died to make men holy, let us die²⁵ to make men free,
While God is marching on.

The hymn draws heavily on the biblical image of God as a warrior, but it stands out from that long Christian tradition which uses martial language metaphorically (e.g., the hymn 'Onwards, Christian soldiers'), for its language is definitely not metaphorical.²⁶ Tuveson points out that the author belonged to a group of 'advanced thinkers' not at all attuned to 'the old grim ideas of a cosmic war of good and evil'; on the face of it, then, she would have been an unlikely person to compose such a poem. The fact that she nevertheless became 'the poet of the American apocalyptic faith [...] shows how deeply such ideas must have penetrated the national mind'. What happened, Tuveson continues, 'seems to have been that, as she brooded over this darkest moment of American history and whatever it might mean', after visiting an encampment of the northern army (cf. stanzas two and three), 'childhood teachings rose out of deep memory, and the images of the Apocalypse presented themselves'.²⁷ Her experience may be taken as typical: 'When urgent and baffling questions about the right course for the nation have arisen, the apocalyptic view of its history has come to the front...'.²⁸

The influence of Revelation is most clearly seen in the first stanza with its references to the trampling of the vintage (Rev. 14.19 is an even closer model here than chapter 19)²⁹ and to the sword of the Lord. Tuveson sees in the 'coming of the glory of the Lord' the 'wonder and the terror of the beginning of the transition to the millennium'. The biblical phrase 'mine eyes have seen' suggests that 'the greatest event in the history of mankind is beginning'. Most clearly, the second line with the trampling of the wine press sets the Civil War 'in the sequence of predicted events'.³⁰ The armies now fighting are 'powers symbolized in the Revelation'.³¹ 'The soldiers in the Grand Army are actors in a drama, about which many of them had

25. Bosworth, 'Battle Hymn', informs us of a text variant 'Let us live [rather than "die"] to make men free', introduced in a 1960 recording performed by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The recording won a Grammy Award; since then, 'live' has been an accepted variant.

26. Observed by Bosworth, 'Battle Hymn'.

27. Tuveson adds: 'with their Protestant meanings', referring to 'millennial' interpretations current in Protestantism since the 17th century (*Redeemer Nation*, pp. 198f., emphasis added).

28. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 199.

29. The manuscript version is even closer to the language of Revelation than the published one, as it has 'wine press' instead of 'vintage' (Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 200).

30. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 199.

31. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 62.

long been told. How great the destiny, to be the generation called upon to perform this crowning work!³² God is 'sifting out the hearts of men' (fourth stanza, cf. Rev. 2.23) 'as the judgment preparatory for the Great Day of the Lord, when the millennial state will be inaugurated; how important it is "to answer Him", to share in that supreme blessing!'³³

Arthur Wainwright, who mentions the *Battle Hymn* in his work on the reception history of Revelation, seems to assess the hymn and its connection with Revelation quite positively. He states that its 'electrifying feature' is 'its exhortation to join the fight for the liberation of slaves'.³⁴ Consequently, Wainwright adduces the poem in his chapter on 'The Transformation of Society' which ends on an optimistic note: Revelation's 'diagnosis of the ills of society and its dreams of the future have stirred the imaginations of social reformers. They have been inspired by its affirmation of God's control of history, its confidence in God's ultimate victory, and its readiness to take a stand against the injustice of the ruling power.'³⁵

The assessment of the hymn by Jewett and Lawrence is more sombre: 'This ideology steeled the North for the long, bloody, and frustrating war',³⁶ and 'the North was not alone in developing a martial ideology with millennial overtones'. In the South too there was the conviction that one need not fear the battle, for 'the God of Israel will be on the side of his children'.³⁷ Some popular preachers asserted that God might use the Southern troops to inaugurate the millennium on earth.³⁸ Thus 'the stage was set for a war whose ferocity and duration challenged the illusions of both sides...'.³⁹

Now it is clear that the author of Revelation himself regards passive endurance as the only proper attitude on the part of the saints. They are not to take up arms, God and Christ will do the martial work for them. Therefore one could say that those who interpret Revelation in the vein of the *Battle Hymn* are misinterpreting it. But, apart from the insight that 'what people believe the Bible means is as interesting and important as what it

32. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 202; cf. James H. Moorhead, 'Apocalypticism in Mainstream Protestantism, 1800 to the Present', in Stephen J. Stein (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, III (New York/London: Continuum, 2000), p. 85.

33. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 202.

34. Wainwright, *Apocalypse*, p. 181.

35. Wainwright, *Apocalypse*, pp. 177-187 (187).

36. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 63; cf. pp. 69, 91.

37. Thus a New Orleans newspaper in 1855 (Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 63).'

38. Moorhead, 'Apocalypticism', p. 86.

39. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 64.

originally meant',⁴⁰ in the light of the Deuteronomic tradition of holy wars (and the Deuteronomic history is a significant part of the Christian Bible) the step from a passive stance to active participation, to enter the arena in order 'to nudge history toward its appointed cataclysm',⁴¹ was a short one to take.⁴² This was one way of reading Revelation in a broader 'pan-biblical' perspective.

Tuveson provides a sophisticated explanation for this shift from endurance to fighting within the compass of the effective history of Revelation. According to him, the shift is due to the rejection of Augustine's spiritual interpretation of the millennium in some Protestant circles. In the late sixteenth century some began to think that perhaps, after all, there would be a period in which Christ would literally rule with the saints on this earth. In the seventeenth century the conception took a new turn: 'Perhaps the millennium was to be an earthly *utopia*, an age at the end of all history, in which, not Christ in person, but Christians and Christian principles would really be triumphant.' War would cease, poverty would be largely eliminated, and knowledge would increase immensely.⁴³

Read in the light of such expectation, the Book of Revelation took on a new meaning. The course of history was seen as a series of struggles, in which the Prince of Darkness is *progressively* defeated. Tuveson points out that, unlike previous prophets, John the visionary

does not depict a long and dreary sequence of unrelieved calamities, increasing in intensity until, at the very end, the Messiah appears [...] The vivid descriptions of the sufferings and bloody conflicts are arranged in series, each leading up to a hymn of triumph and rejoicing. There is the sense of a rising movement, each victory being on a higher level than the one before. Thus [...] the movement of the Revelation is in its way progressive [...] history is something like the invasion of an enemy nation, in which the conquering army progresses inexorably ...

Satan 'is now really the defender, and his territory is shrinking'.⁴⁴

This whole drama was unfolding according to a predetermined plan. The plan prescribed that great battles still lay ahead before the millennium could be achieved. It did not take much exaggeration to conclude that history exists to accomplish prophecies. The next logical step was to assume that ends justify means. 'As the apocalyptic way of thinking

40. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. xiii.

41. Moorhead, 'Apocalypticism', p. 103.

42. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 54: '...with the attitudes engendered towards enemies and the precedent of the Deuteronomic tradition, it was a short step from passive to active zeal when the saints felt themselves called to participate in the final battle of Yahweh'.

43. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, pp. ix-x.

44. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 7.

becomes divorced from the underlying theology, the movement of history through wars, slaughters, implacable conflict, comes to appear simply as the iron law of nature'.⁴⁵

Now, 'in such a pattern of history it was inevitable that God would have to operate through certain nations. The old conception of a "chosen people", called to fight the battles of the Lord, was revived'.⁴⁶ The Deuteronomic tradition came to be combined with the visions of Revelation, with far-reaching consequences. There came a need to find a new chosen nation. If 'redemption is historical as well as individual, if evil is to be finally and decisively bound through great conflicts, God must operate through cohesive bodies of men; there must be children of light and children of darkness *geographically*...'.⁴⁷

The view, so prominent in Revelation, that the course of history is pre-determined, has led to 'foolhardy optimism' on the part of those who thought that God is on their side. 'No matter how destructive the battles become, it is the saints who will prevail both in this world and in the next'.⁴⁸ In his speeches, President George W. Bush regularly invokes divine guidance in setting aside America as the power to wage and win the decisive war. 'The road of Providence is uneven and unpredictable', he concluded a speech in February 2005, 'yet we know where it leads: It leads to freedom'.⁴⁹

3. *Revelation's Use of Stereotypes*

Another disastrous legacy of Revelation, according to its critics, is its operating with stark stereotypes. The black-and-white mentality is present (almost) everywhere in the New Testament, but Revelation brings it to a head, and there are implications in 'relegating most of humanity to the category of "outsider"'.⁵⁰ The saints are faultless: 'in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless' (Rev. 14.5). By contrast, the other side is 'utterly lacking in human qualities'.⁵¹ Even after the six trumpet plagues, 'the rest of humankind' who were still alive 'did not *repent of the works of their hands* or give up *worshipping demons and idols* [...] And

45. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, pp. 50-51.

46. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, pp. ix-x.

47. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 139.

48. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 54.

49. Maier, 'President's Revelation'. In his speeches Mr Bush regularly asserts that America has a divine mission to spread freedom around the world, following a long tradition of politics and foreign policy that has its origins in postmillennial readings of the Book of the Revelation.

50. Desjardins, *Peace*, p. 101.

51. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 197.

they did not repent of their *murders* or their sorceries or their *fornication* or their *thefts*' (Rev. 9.20-21).⁵² This description seems to apply even to all the oppressed of the world who do not belong to the small Christian groups – or to be more precise, to the seer's particular group.⁵³ 'Since they are irredeemable, their destruction is the single aim of God and his saints [...] That the entire world may be destroyed in this slaughter is a delightful prospect for the saints (Rev. 16:19-21).'⁵⁴ This dualist division of humanity seems 'destructive and dehumanizing': 'One's enemies, including large numbers of unknown people with whom one supposes oneself to be in disagreement, are given a simple label, associated with demonic beings, and thus denied their full humanity'.⁵⁵

Jewett and Lawrence claim: 'That the enemy is not human and therefore deserves annihilation has been one of the most frequently repeated legacies of Daniel and Revelation'.⁵⁶ This attitude came to expression in both world wars. An important preacher proclaimed that God had summoned the Americans to the crusade of World War I, 'a Holy War' 'in the profoundest and truest sense'; it is Christ who 'calls us to grapple in deadly strife with this unholy and blasphemous power'.⁵⁷ Former President Theodore Roosevelt likewise proclaimed in 1917 that 'if ever there was a holy war, it is this war'.⁵⁸ An advertisement in an American magazine pictured some American troops in World War II praying with

52. These verses are not commented on in Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*.

53. It is becoming clear that the author's anger is, to a remarkable degree, even in the bulk of the book (chapters 4-22) aimed at fellow Christians who had adopted a more conciliatory attitude to the surrounding culture. See, e.g., Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

54. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 197.

55. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), p. 170; cf. p. 172: 'Revelation works against the values of humanization and love insofar as the achievement of personal dignity involves the degradation of others'.

56. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 221.

57. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 73.

58. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 73. For a British analogy see the reflections of R.H. Charles in his 'critical exegetical' (!) commentary immediately after the war. The year of the publication of the commentary (1920) is, he claims, 'the fittest year in which it could see the light—that is, the year that has witnessed the overthrow of the greatest conspiracy of might against right that has occurred in the history of the world, and at the same time the greatest fulfilment of the prophecy of the Apocalypse. But even though the powers of darkness have been vanquished in the open field, there remains a still more grievous strife to wage [...] all governments should model their policies by the same Christian norm [...] the warfare against sin and darkness must go on...' (*Revelation*, I, p. xv).

their chaplain 'that the people back home will understand that here in this green hell the enemy is not a man but a devil'.⁵⁹ The stereotypes are obvious: 'the enemy is demonic, and the saints are perfectly pure, no matter what they may do in the battle'.⁶⁰ This categorization of 'nations and actions as wholly bad or wholly good'⁶¹ nurtures a 'crusading logic' which can today be studied both in the statements of President Bush and his staff and also in those of their Islamist adversaries. 'Each side conceives of its opponents as members of a malevolent conspiracy, originating from the realm of absolute evil, and thus sees any compromise as immoral'.⁶² Bush has stated on the war on terrorism that the enemy 'recognize no barrier of morality. They have no conscience. The terrorists cannot be reasoned with'.⁶³ Jewett and Lawrence point out that 'the mythic perspective' has 'eliminated the possibility of compromise and coexistence'.⁶⁴ From its own Qur'anic premises the other side comes to corresponding conclusions about *its* enemy.

Back to the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Jewett and Lawrence comment that 'this martial God who leads the Northern troops into battle' is 'none other than the loving Christ seen through the lens of the Book of Revelation', and they continue:

The contradictory redemptive images of the peaceful suffering servant⁶⁵ and the marching Lord of battle are joined in the final stanza. The redemptive task of the Northern soldiers is neatly shifted from annihilating the enemy to altruistically setting people free. The unselfish mission of the suffering, dying servant is incorporated into that of the warrior. The soldier dies – not killing others, but suffering for others. This sets the stage for the next 140 years of altruistic, martial zeal in America.⁶⁶

59. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 221.

60. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 222.

61. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 133.

62. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 24.

63. Quoted in Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 235. Cf. Maier, 'President's Revelation': It is no accident that Bush's millennial rhetoric portrays the world in accordance with Revelation's dualism: America is 'a nation filled with courageous, kind-hearted, tolerant, innocent, God-fearing and God-pleasing people, a nation on its knees in prayer, a city shining on a hill. These are in contrast to the evildoers, whom the President repeatedly represents, as indeed the Apocalypse itself does, as dwelling in caves and darkness (Rev. 6:15-17) hiding from the light, without any religion or conscience, absent of all humanity and mercy.'

64. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 54.

65. To be sure, Jewett's and Lawrence's picture of Jesus, reduced to that of a loving and suffering servant, seems a little too idealistic. To some extent this may be true of their whole trajectory of 'prophetic realism' in the Bible which they set against the harmful tradition of 'zealous nationalism'.

66. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, pp. 62-63. On p. 72 they quote President

Jewett and Lawrence connect the ideology of *The Battle Hymn* with a tradition of 'cool zeal' which they trace back to the Bible. Cool zeal is passive; 'it prefers to let others dispatch the victim and is concerned that the saint not be defiled in the regrettable course of battle'. Daniel and Revelation provide biblical inspiration for this attitude. 'The author of Daniel suggests that the saint must keep himself aloof from the battle, pure and blameless while other agencies wipe out the evil-doers [...]. Evil derives from the behavior of certain persons who must be destroyed before God's kingdom can be restored.' In Revelation, likewise, 'the saints keep their robes white by allowing divine agencies to massacre the wicked. They repose in contemplation of the wicked burning in angelic sulfur pits. Their Roman persecutors and religious rivals will be destroyed, they are assured – but not by their own saintly hands'.⁶⁷

If Jewett and Lawrence are right (I am more hesitant on this point than on the previous ones) one can find this concept of cool zeal in a subtle move in *The Battle Hymn*.

Here the Lord himself is seen executing judgment through the agency of his Northern marching legions. But in order to fit into Revelation's fastidious tradition, the hymn sidesteps the fact that Union soldiers actually kill their enemies. If death comes to the Union soldier, he is 'transfigured' by his Christ-like unselfishness; if death comes to the Confederate soldier, he has been cut down by the 'terrible, swift sword' of God. Thus a traditional battle-song theme – the joy of killing the enemy – is completely sublimated in cool zeal. It is as if the Lord alone pulls the triggers while the soldiers serve as faithful and guiltless channels of remote-controlled wrath.⁶⁸

Jewett and Lawrence find in these Bible-based 'conventions of cool zeal' the explanation for 'several curious aspects of the American character', such as 'the compatibility of the widespread pacifist sentiment with warlike behavior'. 'A pacifist public with a penchant for total war', seemingly a contradiction in terms, remains ostensibly free from base motives (such as hatred or avarice), for it allows 'the violent process of presumably divine retribution take its course'. Such a public 'could rapidly shift from a predominantly pacifist sentiment to martial crusade' in World Wars I and II; it could 'regret and condemn the Vietnam War and yet tolerate the most intensive bombing in history for the sake of peace'.⁶⁹

Woodrow Wilson's demand that the United States enter World War I as 'a crusade for millennial goals', for the sake of democracy and world peace, claiming that 'it was the Book of Revelation's spirit that animated the whole' (cf. p. 256).

67. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, pp. 176-77.

68. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 177.

69. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, p. 177.

All this does not mean, of course, that the Book of Revelation should be seen as directly responsible for American militarism. Tuveson writes that

millennialist ideas probably did *not* inspire the greatest decisions of our [American] history simply by their own power. The expansion of the nation, the Civil War, the entry into the Second World War—all would have happened in the course of things. But millennialist ideas did influence national expectations about their outcome and results.⁷⁰

The Bible-based expectation of terror and desolation preceding the consummation 'created what might be called a psychological readiness for the Civil War and the First World War'.⁷¹

The great wars of our history have all to a considerable extent been regarded as Armageddon—which surely was near. After the war had been won, and evil conquered, a permanent era of peace and prosperity would begin [...]. Americans are inclined to expect each crisis to be final, to think each must be solved by a permanently decisive conflict. Nothing could be more characteristic of an apocalyptic attitude.⁷²

And nowhere is this apocalyptic attitude more clearly expressed than in the Book of Revelation.

4. Conclusion

No account of the effective history of biblical texts can avoid being selective—in fact, extremely selective. The amount of material is vast; it is difficult to decide what to include and what to omit and any decision can always be challenged. Scholars can do no more than highlight some aspects that seem important or representative to them, inviting others to add other features to the picture. Kovacs and Rowland have done a great job in providing us with a wealth of illuminating material. Their selection emphasizes the inspiring and encouraging effects of Revelation.

However, the reception history has also a dark side which should not be underestimated. Ulrich Luz, the author of pioneering work on the influence of the Gospel of Matthew, underlines in a programmatic article that it is the task of reception history to present both 'good and bad receptions'. 'Biblical texts effected love and hatred, peace and wars, segregation and tolerance...'. There are 'texts that deserve criticism' in light of the fruits they have produced; along with the woes of Matt 23

70. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 213.

71. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 78, commenting on an article in a Presbyterian journal in 1853.

72. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 214.

and the insulting words of 2 Pet. 2:22, Luz refers to 'texts full of God-produced cruelties like in the Apocalypse'.⁷³ I think that even the small amount of material discussed in this essay confirms his point. It does seem that 'imagination is stirred to imitate the violence the book describes' more often than only 'very occasionally'.⁷⁴ Like so many other biblical writings Revelation, too, appears to be an ambiguous book which has both the potential of enhancing life and of destroying it. It depends on the interpreter which side he or she chooses to emphasize.

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73. Ulrich Luz, 'The Contribution of Reception History to a Theology of the New Testament', in Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (eds.), *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 123–34 (132). Unfortunately Luz attributes to me the proposal that the term 'effective history' should be reserved for 'the legitimate and good effects of biblical texts' (a proposal which he justifiably rejects). In the essay to which he refers I actually make the opposite point: 'One must not succumb to the temptation of omitting *harmful* effects...'. See Heikki Räisänen, 'The "Effective History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship?', in Heikki Räisänen, *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991–2000* (BINS, 59; Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 263–82 (271).

74. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 248; cf. above, note 5.

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE RECEPTION OF REVELATION, c. 1250–1700: APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY AS REFRACTORY LENS

Anke Holdenried

1. *Preliminaries*

The Blackwell Commentary on Revelation provided the inspiration for bringing together scholars from a range of disciplines to discuss and reflect further on its content and on broader issues it raised.

Such broader issues arise, for example, from the tension between ‘reception’ on the one hand and the commentary genre on the other. When used without further qualifications (such as those applied by different schools of literary theory), the term ‘reception’ can cover a very broad range of ways in which a text influenced subsequent generations, and it can embrace a multitude of visual and textual forms in which the text was appropriated.¹ By contrast, traditionally biblical commentaries are confined more narrowly to hermeneutics and the exegesis of a text, that is, commentaries are concerned with explaining the meaning of specific words, phrases and passages. This, as will be shown here, has imposed limits on the type of material they include, because their emphasis on hermeneutics and exegesis naturally privileged material which overtly draws on specific words, images and symbols from the text of Revelation. Not all appropriations of Revelation take such a form, however. Some, like the material discussed here, operate at a remove from the actual biblical text. Some appropriations are informed by Revelation without making direct reference to it. In particular, some appropriations are implicitly constructed around its narrative of future events and cannot be understood outside this context. In other words, Revelation underlies and informs other texts which do not directly quote it, paraphrase it or

1. The Commentary on Revelation shares the intent behind the Blackwell Bible Commentary series as a whole, namely to consider ‘how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible’ (see the series editors’ preface in Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004], p. xi). Here reception is clearly understood in very broad terms which can potentially cover all manner of manifestations of the influence of the Bible on western culture.

use its symbolism or imagery, but which, without it, however, could not exist in the form known to us. An example of such a text will be the focus of this essay.

My decision to concentrate on this type of appropriation is informed by my experiences in the field of mediaeval history. Against this background, what stood out about the Blackwell Commentary on Revelation, was the broad range of material it embraces as part of the study of Revelation's 'meaning'. For instance, the Introduction expressly acknowledges that the works of visionaries, poets and artists, although they often enjoy a more oblique relationship with the biblical text, also provide insights into what Revelation can mean and what it can do.²

Over the last fifty years or so there has been a veritable vogue amongst historians to study all manner of material with just such an 'oblique' relationship with Revelation. In particular, there has been much interest in free-floating texts, often by anonymous authors, concerning the End of the World – in short, in apocalyptic prophecy.³

An earlier generation of positivist scholars showed scant regard for apocalyptic prophecy because it could supply little by way of hard historical 'facts' about the events of mediaeval history. Today's prevailing historical orthodoxy regarding the function of prophecy in mediaeval and early modern culture is radically different. According to this orthodoxy, both the production and further dissemination of prophetic texts functioned as a vehicle to express anxieties triggered by social, political and religious crises in society. Apocalyptic prophecies in particular are viewed by historians as evidence that such crises were felt especially acutely, heralding the End of the World. In short, today historians accept apocalyptic prophecies as the products of a world in which the Book of Revelation functioned as a creative frame of reference which people used to make sense of their world. This implies that historians regard the influence of Revelation as all-pervasive and part of the underlying mentality of the pre-modern period.⁴

Certainly apocalyptic prophecies circulated widely in the pre-modern period. Yet, while the Blackwell Commentary on Revelation contains occasional references to prophets, as well as to 'visionary appropriations'

2. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 12.

3. Useful starting points for obtaining an overview of issues, sources and further literature on the study of such mediaeval prophetic material are Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End. Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), Robert E. Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy: The Cedar of Lebanon Vision from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), his 'Mediaeval Prophecy and Religious Dissent', *Past and Present* 72 (1976), pp. 3–24.

4. See, for example, Lerner, *Powers of Prophecy*, pp. 192–93.

of Revelation, the genre of apocalyptic prophecy itself is not represented. Naturally, 'given the immense influence of the Apocalypse on literature, art, theology, politics and popular culture'⁵ there were practical constraints on what could be included. In the interest of cohesion, therefore, it made sense to focus on major figures, on material illustrative of the hermeneutic options available and on dominant types of interpretation of Revelation down the centuries.⁶ The dominant types of interpretation which concerned the Commentary's editors are 'decoding', which need not detain us further here, and 'actualization'⁷, which we need to look at in more detail as it has implications for how apocalyptic prophecy is viewed.

'Actualization' is defined as 'a reading [of the Apocalypse] in relationship to new circumstance which *uses the apocalyptic images* to address the specific circumstances in which [a person finds themselves]' (emphasis added). Later, 'actualization' is further defined as an interpretation 'where the words of the Apocalypse either offer the opportunity to "see again" things similar to what had appeared to John or prompt new visions related to it. So in the visions of Hildegard, *many details of John's text reappear*.'⁸

This indicates that for a text to be considered as evidence that an actualizing reading of Revelation had taken place it must draw directly on the text of Revelation by incorporating and re-using the 'images' or 'details from John's text'. This in turn implies that when the editors speak of material which enjoys 'a more oblique relationship with the biblical text'⁹, they mean material which is not self-consciously a piece of exegesis of Revelation but nevertheless retains recognizable links with the text in the form of verbal parallels which have been creatively re-deployed in a new context. By contrast, the relationship of apocalyptic prophecy with the text of Revelation is often so 'oblique' that it includes little or nothing by way of concrete phrases, images or symbols from Revelation.

According to the particular criteria of the Revelation Commentary, then, such apocalyptic prophecy would not constitute evidence of an 'actualizing' reading of Revelation, that is, a reading of Revelation in relation to a person's specific circumstances. This sits uneasily with the prevailing orthodoxy among historians that apocalyptic prophecies place contemporary social, political and religious crises in a context provided by Revelation. Clearly then, especially from a historian's perspective, apocalyptic prophecy, too, can be used to capture aspects of Revelation's

5. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. xiv.

6. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. xv.

7. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 7-11.

8. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 7 and 9, emphasis added.

9. See above, n. 2.

appropriation and reception, in particular those which arise from its role as a supplier of a specific framework for making sense of contemporary events.

a. *Apocalyptic Prophecy and the Reception of Revelation*

My contribution to the present volume focuses on a thirteenth-century Latin prophecy known as *Sibilla erithea babilonica*, which culminates in a prediction of the End of the World. This text enjoyed a successful literary career in the Middle Ages and beyond, up until the seventeenth century. Although clearly apocalyptic in outlook, it is, as will be seen, a text which operates at a remove from the text of Revelation itself. Little can be gleaned from it, therefore, about the hermeneutic traditions that attach to specific words, images and symbols of Revelation. Nevertheless, the *Sibilla erithea* is valuable evidence of the diverse ways in which Revelation had an influence on western culture and of the many contexts in which it operated.

This essay will harness the *Erithea's* trajectory from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century as a refractory lens to capture several important aspects of Revelation's reception through the centuries.¹⁰ The following discussion of the different stages of the *Erithea's* literary life illuminates the mechanism by which it was appropriated. For instance, it shows that the reception of Revelation is often inextricably entwined with that of other texts that support or compete with it. It also reveals the importance of the social and intellectual context in shaping the interpretation of a text such as Revelation.

In particular, the discussion will highlight that there is a wider context to the reception of the Book of Revelation, namely that of the development of western apocalypticism. Apocalypticism has been defined as a cluster of ideas corresponding to the contents of the Apocalypse (catastrophe, hope for a new world, and a stark contrast between good and evil)¹¹, but it does not depend solely on the Book of Revelation. Rather, western apocalypticism represents a fusion of biblical and non-biblical sources and ideas.¹² What is more, as a specific way of interpreting the unfolding of actual events as part of the sequence of trials and tribulations thought

10. As the focus here is on the reception of Revelation, individual stations along the *Erithea's* trajectory will only be discussed in broad outlines. A fuller treatment of the same stations forms part of a study of the *Erithea's* reception over the centuries (especially in the seventeenth century) which is planned to appear in Julia Wannenmacher (ed.), *The Influence of Inspiration: Joachim of Fiore in Past and Present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).

11. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 252.

12. See, for example, the introduction in McGinn, *Visions*, pp. 1-36.

to mark the Last Days, apocalypticism is considered to be a feature of pre-modern, rather than modern, mentalities. Ultimately, this raises questions about the ebbing and flowing popularity of an 'actualizing' reading of Revelation over the centuries.

2. *Revelation's Reception as Refracted by the Sibilla erithea*

Any detailed examination of the relationship of the text of the *Sibilla erithea* with that of Revelation first requires a brief outline of the prophecy's content and authorship. The *Erithea* is a Latin text of some 2300 words which interlaces a general prophecy concerning the End of the World with predictions about the fate of the Empire.¹³ It is typical of the genre of apocalyptic prophecy in that it is pseudonymous and rich in obscure allusions intended to enhance the credibility of the predictions:¹⁴ the *Sibilla erithea* purports to be the prophecy that the most celebrated prophetess of pagan antiquity, the Sibyl of Erythraea, had given to the Greeks after the conquest of Troy.¹⁵ It is further typical in that it uses animal names (the goat, the lion, the bull, the lamb, the eagle, the rooster) to encode her predictions.

Specifically, the *Sibilla erithea* presents a sketch of world history in three books each with distinct themes.¹⁶ The first book begins with the history of Greece and Rome and sketches world history from the Trojan War to the Fourth Crusade as one of continuous conflict between Greeks and Latins. The Sibyl predicts that the descendants of the Trojans who found Rome will maintain their power until Constantine the Great, when

13. See McGinn, *Visions*, pp. 122-23.

14. For a basic taxonomy of apocalyptic prophecy and its genre conventions, see, for example, Lerner, *Powers of Prophecy*, p. 186, and Lerner, 'Medieval Prophecy', p. 8.

15. The passage which proclaims theses ancient origins runs as follows: 'This book is taken from the book called Basilographia, that is the "Imperial Writing" the Erythraean Sibyl of Babylon made at the request of the Greeks in the time of Priam the king of Troy. Doxopater, a father of extraordinary skill, translated it from Syriac into Greek, then it was taken from the treasury of Manuel, emperor of the Greeks, and translated from Greek into Latin by Eugenius, admiral of the king of Sicily'; see Oswald Holder-Egger, 'Italienische Prophetieen des 13. Jahrhunderts I', *Neues Archiv* 15 (1890), pp. 143-78 (155) [henceforth HE 1]: *Hic liber est extractus ... de Greco transtulit in Latinum*; English translation cited above from McGinn, *Visions*, pp. 123-24.

16. See Christian Jostmann, *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica. Papsttum und Prophetie im 13. Jahrhundert* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica Schriften, 54; Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2006) [henceforth SEB], pp. 338-40. The *Erithea* is extant in two versions. The longer version (L) dating from 1249 blurs the clear distinction between the three books. It was edited by Oswald Holder-Egger (cited above) and has been partly translated in McGinn, *Visions*, pp. 123-25. For further comments on the relationship between these two versions, see below, n.19.

glory will return to the Greeks up until the time of Emperor Manuel I. Komnenos. After his death there will be much trouble in Byzantium culminating in the Fourth Crusade, the partial destruction of the city and the expulsion of the emperor and the patriarch. This book concludes with the prediction that Constantinople will eventually be restored to the Greeks. In the second book the Sibyl predicts Church History from the incarnation to the End of the World, sketching the life of Christ and the lives of two apostles, Peter and Paul; it also portrays the Church militant in its fight against Islam, heretics, and the Antichrist. The book contains much fighting between a beast and a lion from the West. The lion will not prevail. Instead the beast will triumph, the Antichrist will follow, and, finally, the world will be unified under one faith prior to the Last Judgment. The third book concerns the kingdom of Sicily under the Hohenstaufen dynasty and focuses on emperor Frederick II (symbolized as an eagle) and his wars in Italy. The *Erithea* repeats her prophecy of the restoration of Constantinople and predicts that Frederick II will 'fly' to the Greeks. She then goes on to predict his death and continues with predictions about Frederick's successors. Finally, the concluding or properly apocalyptic section describes the combat with the Antichrist and the End of the World. Much emphasis is placed here on the signs that precede the coming of Antichrist, as well as those preceding the coming of the Last Judgment, at which Christ [the Lamb] 'pays back all men upon his throne of terror. No discrimination of wealthy or poor will take place there, but only the weighing of merits [...]. He will judge the good and the evil to lift the former on high and allow hell to swallow the latter to the fate of the demons. This is the end of the Book of the Erythraean Sibyl of Babylon.'¹⁷

For a long time scholars placed the author of this pseudonymous text among the Sicilian Joachites, but recently Christian Jostmann has presented a credible alternative. He argues that the text (with its focus on Latin-Greek relations, its interest in the fate of the Latin Empire of Constantinople founded in the wake of the city's sack by Crusaders in 1204, and its hatred of the Hohenstaufen, especially the emperor Frederick II) perfectly reflects the anxieties of the papal curia under pope Gregory IX when the papacy was threatened by the marriage alliance in 1241 between the Greek emperor John III Vatatzes and Constance Lucia, daughter of the vilified Frederick II.¹⁸ A 'second enlarged edition' of the prophecy was brought into circulation a couple of years later in 1249

17. See McGinn, *Visions*, p. 125, and HE 1, p. 173.

18. See *SEB*, especially p. 297, and Christian Jostmann, 'Die Sibilla Erithea: Eine historiographische Skizze', *Florentia* 15 (2001), pp. 109–41.

on the occasion of the *legatio* to John III. Vatatzes led by the Franciscan General John of Parma at the behest of pope Innocent IV. This longer version, which is discussed in this essay, embellishes certain details of the 1241 text (such as its prediction of the Last Judgment) but does not change the prophecy's overall outlook and conception, which is to portray the conflict between Latins and Greeks, the Italian fight against the Hohenstaufen, and the fight against the Saracens as all being aspects of a conflict which was part of the final act of salvation history and at whose centre stood the Latin Church headed by the papacy.¹⁹

Having thus considered the details of the *Erithea's* predictions and the circumstances of the text's production, its relationship with the Book of Revelation will be discussed next. In line with what has been said above, this will entail an exploration of what this can tell us about how the biblical text is situated within the wider context of western apocalypticism and its many tributaries.

a. *Revelation, Daniel and the Sibylline Oracles: Tributaries of the Western Apocalyptic Tradition in the Thirteenth-Century Sibilla erithea*

The symbolic language and obscure allusions of the *Erithea* have recently been the subject of close and detailed study for the purpose of gaining insight into both the origins and the readership of the prophecy. This study has revealed that the *Erithea* rarely appropriates symbols and images directly from the text of Revelation. Excluding the final apocalyptic section of the text, which concludes Book Three, verbal echoes of Revelation (some of which are faint) occur less than ten times.²⁰ Even within the lengthy final section concerning the end of the world, Revelation by no means dominates. Its influence is most prominent in the detailed account

19. See *SEB*, pp. 339-40. It must be noted that Jostmann's view overturns Holder-Egger's view (cf. *HE* 1, cited above) that the longer version represents the first, 'original' text.

20. (1) On the four beasts, cf. *HE* 1, p. 162: *Hinc quatuor animata animalia surgent* and *Rev.* 4.6-9, see *SEB*, p. 182; (2) the use of *sponsa* to denote the Roman Church, cf. *HE* 1, pp. 164, 165, 167, 169, 170, 171 and *Rev.* 21.2-3; 22.17, see *SEB*, pp. 188-90; (3) On the parallels between the length of Andronikos's reign of terror in the *Erithea* and *Rev.* 13.5, see *SEB*, p. 203; (4) on the dragon, cf. *HE* 1, p. 162 and *Rev.* 13.1, see below, n. 22; (5) on the two stars, cf. *HE* 1, p. 162: *Stelleque due consimiles prime insurgent contra ipsam* ... and *HE* 1, 165: *Venient in postremis diebus due stelle lucidissime* ..., and *Rev.* 12.1, see *SEB*, pp. 261-262; (6) on the morphology of the eagle, cf. *HE* 1, p. 165 *Et veniet aquila habens capud unum* ... and *Rev.* 13.2, see *SEB*, p. 276; (7) on the doubts about Frederick II's death, cf. *HE* 1, p. 168: *Vivit, non vivit* and *Rev.* 13.3, see *SEB*, p. 300; (8) on the negative attributes of the wife of the ruler of the Last Days, cf. *HE* 1, p. 169: *habens capud unum et pedes LXXII leenamque* and *Rev.* 13.1; 17.3, see *SEB*, pp. 317-18.

of the severe justice of the Last Judgment which concludes the *Erithea*.²¹ However, it is clearly the signs and natural portents that precede the coming of the End (including the signs of the Antichrist) that are the central concerns of the eschatological section as a whole. Here Revelation's direct influence on the eschatological account is dwarfed by the fusion of other sources. These sources have been identified as Mt. 24–25, Dan. 7, Augustine's *De civitate Dei* (bk. 20), a popular free-floating text known as *The Fifteen Signs before Doomsday* and, last but not least, the description of the Last Judgment in the form of an acrostic poem attributed to one of the pagan Sibyls.²² This Sibylline poem will be considered further below.

One of the rare appropriations of Revelation which occur outside the *Erithea*'s final eschatological section can be found in Book Two, where it can be read that

There will be a horrible beast coming in from the East. His roaring will be heard as far as the nations of Africa; he will have seven heads, uncounted sceptres, and six hundred and sixty-three feet. He will oppose the Lamb so that he may blaspheme his covenant, enhancing the waters of the dragons.²³

This image is clearly derived from Rev. 13.1–4, which depicts the seven-headed beast as the henchman of the dragon:

Then out of the sea I saw a beast rising. It had ten horns and seven heads. On its horns were ten diadems, and on each head a blasphemous name [...]. The dragon conferred upon it his power and rule, and great authority [...]. Men worshipped the dragon because he had conferred his authority upon the beast.

It seems highly probable that the *Erithea* appropriates this image to express concerns about the rise of Islam. Jostmann considers this interpretation of Rev. 13.1–4 in relation to Islam uncommon at the time of the *Erithea*'s composition (that is, in the 1240s).²⁴ It has, however, parallels in the works of the Franciscan Peter Olivi (c. 1248–98) whose exegesis of the number 666 mentioned in Rev. 13.18 also led him to connect the beast with Islam.²⁵

21. Cf. Rev. 20.11–15 and HE 1, pp. 172–73: *Porro in proximo erit examen ... hos autem in sortem demonum voret avernus* (trans. McGinn, *Visions*, p. 125: 'The Last Judgement will be imminent ... and allow hell to swallow the latter to the fate of the demons.').

22. See *SEB*, pp. 325–37.

23. HE 1, p. 162 *Erit autem bestia horribilis ab oriente veniens, cuius rugitus usque ad gentes Punicas audietur, cuius capita VIIem, scepra innumera, pedes sexcenti sexaginta tres. Hic erit contradicens agno, ut blasphemet testamentum eius, augens draconis aquas.* The English translation cited above is by McGinn, *Visions*, p. 124.

24. *SEB*, pp. 71, 247–74.

25. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 158.

The *Erithea's* appropriation of Revelation 13 thus provides insights into the hermeneutic tradition of Revelation. It should not be forgotten, though, that the Beast from the Sea of Rev. 13.1 draws on the image of the four beasts rising from the sea in the Old Testament book of Daniel (Dan. 7.1-8). In Daniel this image encrypts the belief that God had pre-ordained a succession of four world empires: the Babylonian Empire, followed by the Empire of the Medes, followed by that of the Greeks and finally by the Roman Empire.

As Jostmann has shown, it is in fact Daniel's concern with the fate and succession of Empires which reverberates much more strongly in the *Erithea* than themes from Revelation. On the most general level, Daniel legitimizes the choice of narrative framework for the prophecy as one which weaves the conflict between at least two of the four world empires, that of the Greeks and Romans, into a sketch the history of the world, as well as that of the Church, from beginning to end. The *Erithea* was written after the Fourth Crusade and the sack of Constantinople by Latin Christians in 1204, an event that the text 'predicts'. Not surprisingly, therefore, the *Erithea* adapts Daniel's scheme to problematize the conflict between the empire of Byzantine Christians (Greeks) in the East and the empire of Latin Christians (Romans) in the West.²⁶ Focusing on a more specific example of the appropriation of Daniel in the *Erithea*, we may cite the repeated reference to 'he-goats' as symbols for past and present Greek (Byzantine) rulers in the text of the prophecy. The 'he-goat' (*hyrcus*) as a symbol for Greek rulers appears already in Daniel where it was used to refer to Macedonian rulers.²⁷

Therefore, to use the terms discussed above, an actualizing interpretation of Daniel rather than of Revelation lies behind the depiction of the thirteenth-century Latin-Greek conflict in the *Erithea*. While Revelation is not entirely absent from the overall picture, its main direct contribution concerns a subsidiary theme which was only enhanced at the time of the second edition of the text in 1249, namely that of the handing out of just rewards and punishments at the end of time. Revelation's contribution to the overall *message* of the *Erithea* takes a much more diffuse form, furnishing the prophecy simply with the broad basic framework for linking up the present to a certain End as outlined in Revelation, namely that of trials, followed by respite, followed by the End.²⁸ Consideration of the

26. *SEB*, pp. 196-246 (especially p. 198 n. 647).

27. For example, HE 1, p. 160: *hinc aquila despecta ursum devoret, aquilam hyrcus obtenebret, ...*; 163: *Hic mittet ex lateribus suis, irruentque in hyrcos, ...*; 169: *Hic irruet in aquilam associantem sibi alium hyrcum*. Cf. Dan. 8.5; 8.21.

28. In so doing, the *Erithea* follows a route adopted by many other apocalyptic prophecies; see Lerner, *Powers of Prophecy*, p. 192.

Erithea's use of animal imagery has further highlighted that Revelation often worked side by side with an important tributary of the western apocalyptic tradition, the book of Daniel. As will be shown below, both fed, for example, into the tradition of imperial apocalyptic of which the *Erithea*, too, is a part.

Revelation's contribution to the tradition of imperial apocalyptic is diffuse. As stated above, imperial apocalyptic comprises texts in which a general prophecy concerning the End of the World is interlaced with predictions about the fate of the Empire. Ultimately, such material drew its legitimacy from Daniel's prophecy of the four world empires, as well as from Revelation's representation of evil Rome's imperial might (Rev. 13; 17). But there is also an important strand to imperial apocalyptic which depicts an apocalyptic scenario for which, as Bernard McGinn has put it, 'there was absolutely no warrant in either the Scriptures or patristic tradition'.²⁹ That strand concerns texts that feature the figure of the 'Last Emperor' with the positive role of a saviour figure who will temporarily halt the progress of evil. The *Erithea*, while not presenting this myth in the full form outlined here, contains at least recognizable echoes of it.³⁰

The formation of this new and significant apocalyptic figure of a Last Emperor was a gradual process and drew inspiration from a range of biblical and non-biblical textual material.³¹ The precise origins of the myth of the Last Emperor need not concern us here. It is far more important to draw attention to the fact that the emergence of the myth teaches us that Revelation's reception was not solely a function of hermeneutic rules and evolving exegetical traditions but also, albeit in a far more oblique way, the product of

major changes in the structure of society [which] needed apocalyptic validation to show that they were part of God's plan and not ephemeral accidents. Thus the revolution effected by Constantine's conversion and the history of the Christian Roman Empire between the fourth and the seventh century produced the myth of the Last World Emperor, the ruler

29. Bernard McGinn, 'Angel Pope and Papal Antichrist', *Church History* 47 (1978), pp. 155-73 (157).

30. See McGinn, *Visions*, p. 124 n. 18, and *SEB*, pp. 317-18. The *Erithea's* reluctance to treat the western Emperor as an apocalyptic saviour figure has to be understood from its hostility to the current holders of the imperial office in the West, that is, to the Hohenstaufen dynasty.

31. Including, for instance, the reference to a restraining force in 2 Thess. 2.7 and the image of the returning hero embodied in the legends about Alexander the Great, see McGinn, *Visions*, p. 44. For an extensive study of material featuring the Last Emperor, see Hannes Möhring, *Der Weltkaiser der Endzeit. Wesen, Wandel und Wirkung einer tausendjährigen Weissagung* (Mittelalter-Forschungen, 3; Tübingen: Thorbecke, 2000).

who would defeat all the worldly enemies of Christianity and voluntarily surrender his powers to God before the onslaught of the Antichrist.³²

A text like the *Erithea* therefore makes it possible to capture an aspect of Revelation's reception through the centuries that can easily become obscured if an approach is adopted which privileges the narrow appropriation or interpretation of specific images, words, and symbols. By contrast, the *Erithea's* debt to the tradition of imperial apocalyptic serves as a reminder that interpretation is framed by the broader concerns of communities which prescribe the intellectual space within which an individual's reading takes place; in other words, interpretation has a social context, too.

Furthermore, the *Erithea* draws attention to the fact that the reception of Revelation intersected with other tributaries of the western apocalyptic tradition. Revelation's interplay with its Old Testament antecedent, the book of Daniel was discussed above. Given that the first-century author of Revelation consciously drew on the Old Testament book, it comes as little surprise to find that the *Erithea* responded to the close connection between Daniel and Revelation by marshalling animal imagery from both biblical texts. But the western apocalyptic tradition was not only fed by Scripture, but also by non-biblical material which could be used in preference to Revelation.

A prominent non-biblical apocalyptic source in the Middle Ages was an acrostic poem depicting Judgment Day excerpted from the *Oracula sibyllina*³³, a collection of prophecies written in Greek hexameters which were believed to be genuine predictions by the Sibyls, the prophetesses of ancient Greece and Rome. However, although a few pagan predictions are included, the *Oracula sibyllina* were mostly produced by various Jewish and Christian authors between c. 150 BCE and 300 CE. Aware of the esteem in which the Sibyls were held in the pagan world and of the role as propaganda tools for monotheism which they had already served in Judaism, Christian authors penned prophecies about Christ and placed them into the mouth of the Sibyls as supposedly independent, non-Christian evidence of the truth of the Incarnation. One such pious fake was the acrostic poem about Judgment Day, whose popularity in the Christian community was such that even Augustine cited it in a Latin translation in his *De civitate Dei* (Book 18, ch. 23), naming the Sibyl of Erythraea as its author and celebrating her as a member of the City of God. This acrostic was very well known in the mediaeval period, as was

32. McGinn, 'Angel Pope and Papal Antichrist', pp. 155-73 (157).

33. The acrostic was taken from Book 8 (vv. 217-43), see Jörg-Dieter Gauger, *Sibyllinische Weissagungen. Griechisch-Deutsch. Oracula Sibyllina* (Sammlung Tusculum; Düsseldorf, Zürich: Artemis & Winkler, 1998).

its supposed source, the Erythraean Sibyl: Isidore of Seville (c. 570–636 CE) said in his widely read *Etymologiae* (Book 8) that she was the fifth Sibyl, came from Babylon, had predicted the fall of Troy and was nobler and more celebrated than the other Sibyls.³⁴

In its concluding part the thirteenth-century *Sibilla erithea* draws liberally on the acrostic poem to enrich its description of the signs of Judgment Day.³⁵ The choice of the acrostic was of course particularly apt, since the attribution to the Erythraean Sibyl provided the cloak of pseudonymity for the author of our thirteenth-century prophecy.³⁶ As we shall see below, this self-proclaimed connection with the oracles of the Sibyls was later to impinge profoundly on the reception of our thirteenth-century prophecy. Ultimately, therefore, it was also to impinge on the reception of Revelation, which, although it contributed little to the *Erithea's* specific political message, supplied at least its basic and timeless message, namely that the trials and tribulation of the righteous would ultimately give way to world-wide Christian triumph. For now it suffices to note that the choice of the acrostic testifies to the fact that besides Revelation there existed other, non-biblical tributaries to the western apocalyptic tradition, such as the *Sibylline Oracles*.

b. Revelation's Reception as Refracted by the Erithea in the Reformation Period

Thus far, discussion has centred around the *Erithea* at the moment of its original creation in the thirteenth-century. This has provided some limited scope to discuss instances of direct appropriation of Revelation's text by the author of the *Erithea*. Mostly, though, this has revealed the broader and more diffuse aspects of the history of Revelation's reception connected to Revelation's role as one of the tributaries of the western apocalyptic tradition. Next to be considered is the *Erithea's* fate in the Reformation period in order to shine the spotlight onto a specific interpretative scheme of Revelation which had been developed some four hundred years earlier by Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202).

34. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, in J.P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Series latina, 221 vols., (Paris 1844–64), vol. 82, pp. 309–10. For further literature on the Sibyls (ancient and mediaeval), see Bernard McGinn, 'Teste David cum Sibylla: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages', in J. Kirshner and S.F. Wemple (eds.), *Women of the Medieval World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1985), pp. 7–35 (reprinted in B. McGinn [ed.], *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* [Variorum Collected Studies Series; Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994]).

35. See *SEB*, pp. 145–47.

36. Cf. above, n. 13.

Joachim's exegesis of Revelation is universally acknowledged by scholars as a key moment in the history of Revelation's reception because it 'opened up new possibilities for readers of the Apocalypse to discern their place in God's saving purposes as set out in Scripture.'³⁷ The reception of the *Erithea* in the sixteenth century reflects the vitality which Joachim's take on Revelation enjoyed centuries later in the time of confessional conflict. In so doing, the *Erithea* refracts the continued vitality of the mental habit of viewing Revelation itself as a frame of reference for making sense of the world.

In 1524 the *Erithea* was published anonymously in a work entitled *Onus ecclesiae*.³⁸ This book was the work of Berthold Pürstinger, the respected Catholic Bishop of Chiemsee, and a man profoundly influenced by Joachim of Fiore's scheme for the unfolding of history. Joachim derived this scheme from his groundbreaking exegesis of Revelation. This exegesis led Joachim to posit that history had three ages, that of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This last age, or *status*, would be the age of spiritual perfection and was, so Joachim had believed, already dawning.³⁹

Prompted by the threat posed to the unity of the Church by reformers and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, Pürstinger reflected on the development of the Church. He assembled the fruits of his reflection in the *Onus ecclesiae*. In it, history is structured on the pattern of the seven ages of the Church. Following a leading Franciscan Spiritual, Ubertino of Casale (c. 1259–c. 1330), the sixth and seventh age of the Church are identified with Joachim's third *status*. Pürstinger placed himself at the end of the fifth, or at the beginning of the sixth, age, that is, at the dawn of Joachim's final age (or *status*) of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

However, Pürstinger did not only favour the teachings of Joachim but also looked upon all manner of prophetic material, including the thirteenth-century *Erithea*, as sources of valuable information about the past, present and future of the Church.⁴¹ Given his attachment to Joachim's

37. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 18

38. The Augsburg 1531 edition of the *Onus ecclesiae* has been digitized by the Johannes a Lasco Bibliothek, Emden (Sammlung Albert Ritzaeus Hardenberg) and is available on-line (cf. <http://hardenberg.jalb.de/>). The *Erithea* appears in chapter 65 and chapter 45, §4.

39. For a brief introduction to Joachim's thought, see Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (London: SPCK, Sutton Mill Publishing, 1999), pp. 1–28.

40. Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore*, 125. On Pürstinger, see also Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; repr. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1993), pp. 362, 368, 390, and especially pp. 467–68.

41. See Heinrich Werner, *Die Flugschrift 'Onus Ecclesiae' (1519)* (Giessen: J. Ricker'sche

thought, it comes as little surprise to find that Pürstinger rearranged the *Erithea*'s text and incorporated his very own outline of the ages of the Church into the text of the *Erithea*. In this new guise the *Erithea* now echoed the expectation of the *Onus ecclesiae* as a whole, namely that now, at the transition of the Church from the fifth to the sixth age, there will be a first climax of evil. In short, the *Erithea* now reflected Revelation's basic framework of 'trials, respite, end' as it had been understood by Joachim of Fiore. The early sixteenth-century *Erithea* thus refracts the enormous significance of the specific exegetical approach to Revelation developed by Joachim in subsequent centuries.

The same is true for the *Erithea* at the end of the sixteenth century. In the year 1600 Pürstinger's *Erithea* was included in the *Lectionum memorabilium*, a work by the Protestant scholar Johannes Wolf.⁴² This was a substantial collection of ammunition from history which could be used against the Roman Church and to support the Reformation position.⁴³ There can be little doubt that Wolf recognized the Joachimist philosophy of history that the *Erithea* expressed, because he included large amounts of other Joachimist material elsewhere in his *Lectionum* which he understood to refer to the eventual triumph of the Protestant Reformers. Ultimately, Wolf's interest in Joachim's scheme of historical development stemmed from the confessional conflict of his time. Therefore, we have here, as in the earlier case of Pürstinger, a further reinforcement of the prevailing orthodoxy which links prophecy with people's experience of crisis. As discussed above, this orthodoxy presupposes the existence of the mental habit (or mentality) of regarding Revelation as a frame of reference which people used to make sense of their world. At the time Wolf wrote his *Lectionum memorabilium* this mentality still appears to have been intact.

c. A New Mentality? Revelation's Reception as Refracted by the *Erithea* in the Seventeenth Century

In the seventeenth-century the trajectory taken by the *Erithea* intersected with the work of another Protestant scholar. In 1673 Daniel Clasen, Professor of Jurisprudence at the Lutheran University of Helmstedt, published a lengthy work entitled *De oraculis gentilium* which included

Verlagsbuchhandlung (Alfred Töpelmann), 1901) and Josef Schmuck, *Die Prophetie 'Onus Ecclesiae' des Bischofs Berthold Pürstinger: Religiöse Kritik der Zustände in Kirche und Welt aus den ersten Jahren der Reformationszeit* (Vienna: Verband der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Österreichs, 1973).

42. See J. Wolfi, *Lectionum memorabilium et reconditarum centarii XVI*, I (Lauingen 1600), pp. 69-71.

43. See Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, pp. 487-88.

the *Erithea*.⁴⁴ This raises an aspect of Revelation's reception which, given the abundance of available evidence, seems so self-evident that it is easy to overlook the issues and questions it raises. This is Revelation's apparently timeless role as a frame of reference to make sense of the world and a means of interpreting contemporary events in relation to a God-given plan involving trials and tribulation for the righteous followed by respite and the eventual triumph of the righteous at the End of the World. As pointed out above, free-floating apocalyptic prophecies such as the *Erithea* which express anxieties about disturbing crises in contemporary society are the very embodiment of this role of Revelation. However, as the following discussion highlights, while prophecies functioned this way in pre-modern society, they can no longer be claimed with the same degree of certainty after the advent of modernity. The implications of this for how we conceptualize and perceive Revelation's reception will be the concern of the Coda below.

The *Erithea* resurfaces at precisely that moment (namely in the second half of the seventeenth century) which scholars credit with marking a period of profound transformation in European intellectual life, changing the very framework of thought within which Europeans understood themselves and their world:

it was [...] in these years that faith in special divine providence and the direct operations of God's will in the temporal world began to be replaced by a secularized view that placed the divine presence outside of the immediate sphere of human and natural activity.⁴⁵

Robert Lerner offers a pithy outline of the implications of this transformation for apocalyptic prophecy. Having considered the credence which apocalyptic prophecy could still command from educated men in the sixteenth century, Lerner then observes that

Only around 1700 did learned antiquarians stop gathering and poring over 'ancient prophecies' [...]. This abandonment of prophecy was part of a general demystification of the world and 'emancipation of the past' that scholars are only now beginning to appreciate in full measure. [...] it appears that the triumph of 'mechanistic' assumptions among men of learning made miracles seem less and less credible. Concurrently, a new sense of historical perspective made it clear that old documents had to be

44. See *De oraculis gentilium et in specie de vaticiniis sibyllinis libri tres ... in fine adiuncta sunt: Carmina sibyllina e versione Sebastiani Castalionis ut et Onuphrii Panvinii tractatus de sibyllis* (Helmstedt 1673), pp. 577-81.

45. Andrew C. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 4. As Fix himself acknowledges, this transformation took place over an extended period of time and its causes are naturally complex; see Fix, *Prophecy*, pp. 3-22 and pp. 247-56.

read as products of their times: details in old prophecies no longer could be applied anachronistically to current situations. Finally, a new faith in progress replaced the medieval conviction that the world was in its old age, with the result that upheavals and disasters were no longer viewed as preludes to the End.⁴⁶

These comments on the demise of the mediaeval prophetic tradition which form part of Lerner's study of an apocalyptic prophecy known as the Cedar of Lebanon prophecy are fully borne out by Daniel Clasen's treatment of the *Erithea* in 1673. Clasen tells us that the text which he cites in his *De oraculis gentilium* is the one that can be found both in Pürstinger's *Onus ecclesiae* and in Wolf's *Lectio-num*, that is, he cites the *Erithea* in the form which expresses the Joachimist expectation of a first climax of evil, to be followed by a time of peace. However, Clasen neither comments further on the text nor does he alter it in any way.

Pürstinger's and Wolf's works were embodiments of confessional conflict. By contrast, Clasen's book considers a specific body of material, namely the Greek *Oracula sibyllina*. This collection of prophecies sparked an international controversy about their authenticity which lasted some 200 years. It had its origins in textual criticism by humanist scholars engaged in editing and publishing this text. Their philological skills enabled these scholars to detect anachronism in style and content, which led them to realise that supposedly ancient Sibylline predictions about Christ, hallowed by both patristic and mediaeval tradition, were in fact not authentically pagan, but later, pious Jewish or Christian fakes. In the wake of this realization, the prophecies of the Sibyls became part of the armoury of those involved in confessional conflict, depending on whether the aim was to damage or salvage this longstanding tradition of the mediaeval Church.⁴⁷

However, although confessional conflict had provided the context for some of the early discussion of the *Oracula sibyllina*, this is not the case

46. Lerner, *Powers of Prophecy*, p. 181.

47. See Anthony Grafton, 'The Strange Death of Hermes and the Sibyls', in Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text. The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 162–77. The sixteenth-century phase of the controversy about the *Oracula sibyllina* has received attention from Grafton and there has been some discussion of Isaac Vossius, a seventeenth-century contributor to the debate; see David S. Katz, 'Isaac Vossius and the English Biblical Critics 1650–1689', in Richard H. Popkin and Ario Vanderjagt (eds.), *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 142–84. However, a thorough study covering the development of the debate up to the early eighteenth century and of the many issues involved in the debate is still pending. I am indebted to the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel for providing me with the opportunity to study Clasen's place in the controversy.

with Clasen. By the time he published his work in 1673 the study of the languages and cultures of the biblical Near East had become a vogue pursuit for many, including Daniel Clasen. This fed into the burgeoning discipline of comparative religion in which, again, Clasen himself took an interest⁴⁸ and included engagement with pagan cults. Pagan cults often involved the consultation of oracles. It was therefore natural for Clasen to turn his attention to the Sibyls, who were known to have formed a part of such pagan cults.

Clasen's work on the Sibyls did not approach the topic from the angle of confessional conflict, that is, with the intent to make further claims about the authority of certain Christian beliefs. Instead, his *De oraculis gentilium* provides a compendium of ancient textual traditions, mediaeval authorities and theological issues already familiar from earlier works on the subject. The elaborate indices which Clasen provided suggest that his overarching aim was to present an erudite scholar's digest of sources on the ancient pagan Sibyls and their prophecies. There are no signs that his concern was to contribute independent novel insights. The only way in which Clasen can be said to have been original is that his work on the *Oracula sibyllina* includes two specific Sibylline prophecies which no other scholar working on this ancient Greek collection had included. One of these additional prophecies cited by Clasen is the *Erithea*.⁴⁹

Here one needs to recall that the thirteenth-century *Erithea* purports to be of very ancient origins. Not only does the text claim to be the prophecy of the ancient Erythraean Sibyl (that is, the Sibyl which had already been singled out in antiquity by respected authorities as nobler and more celebrated than all the other Sibyls), but also that it was 'taken from the book called Basilographia, that is the "Imperial Writing" [...] of Babylon made at the request of the Greeks in the time of Priam the king of Troy'⁵⁰. These claims remained (albeit in altered form) in the text which Clasen had found in the sixteenth-century works of Pürstinger and Wolf. The lines proclaiming the prophecy's origins in antiquity thus appear to have

48. For instance, Clasen's own writings include a work belonging to this field, namely his *Theologia gentilis* published posthumously in Frankfurt in 1684. On the emergence of the discipline of comparative religion, see Jan Assman *et al.*, *Das 17. Jahrhundert und die Ursprünge der Religionsgeschichte* (Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, 3; München, Leipzig: K.G. Saur Verlag, 2001). For a further appraisal of Clasen's intellectual profile, see Martin Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund. Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680–1720* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002), pp. 215–23.

49. The other prophecy is that attributed to the Tiburtine Sibyl. On the manuscript tradition of this text see Anke Holdenried, *The Sibyl and her Scribes: Manuscripts and Interpretation of the Latin Sibylla Tiburtina* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

50. See above, n. 13.

become the most salient feature of the text, enticing Clasen to discuss it in his own tract on the *Oracula sibyllina*.

In sum, the intellectual context for Clasen and the *Erithea* makes it unlikely that it was the *Erithea's* apocalyptic message that resonated with Clasen and prompted him to include the text. Rather, the *Erithea* was of interest to him because it claimed to be by a pagan Sibyl, and what is more, it claimed to have roots stretching back into ancient Greece. Its actual (apocalyptic) message was at best a secondary concern. It would thus appear that Clasen does not merely mark the chronological end point of the *Erithea's* trajectory. With the seventeenth century we also seem to have reached the end point of a long tradition of reading the apocalyptic message of the *Erithea* as relevant to the reader's own time and circumstances. In the case of Clasen, an antiquarian reading of the *Erithea* prevails.

3. Coda: Revelation, Individual Interpretation and Collective Mentality

The Blackwell Commentary assembles a plethora of material for the relevance of Revelation as a frame of reference for making sense of the world. As discussed at the beginning, its selection privileges material that testifies to direct appropriations of the text of Revelation. However, as we have seen, material such as the *Erithea* which operates at a remove from the actual text, can also contribute to our understanding of Revelation's reception, especially in its role as one of the contributors to the western apocalyptic tradition.

Furthermore, following the *Erithea* across the centuries raises the question whether, in broader cultural terms, Revelation's role as a frame of reference for understanding contemporary crisis is indeed timeless or whether, from a certain point onwards, Revelation lost this role. Daniel Clasen had lived through the horrors of the Thirty Years' War and the *Erithea* which he encountered towards the end of the seventeenth century unmistakably offered an interpretation (in the Joachimite mould) of Revelation's prediction of future trial, respite, and End. Yet, there is no indication that Clasen read the *Erithea* as relevant to contemporary crises in society. What is more, there is no need to consider his reaction merely as a personal lack of apocalyptic sensibilities; instead, it can legitimately be argued that it is typical of seventeenth-century intellectual culture.

The material assembled in the Blackwell Commentary somewhat obscures the issue of the timelessness of Revelation's role as a frame of reference because it covers a broad chronological range, right up to the present day. This illustrates the continuing validity of the chief modes of

interpretation of Revelation, namely 'decoding' and 'actualization' and shows that *individuals* have continued to respond to the text of Revelation right into the twenty first century.⁵¹ However, the question remains: at what point in time does anyone who makes such a connection no longer express a *collective* mentality? The case of the *Erithea* in the seventeenth century reminds us that, eventually, there comes a point in time after which the interpretation of Revelation in relation to contemporary crisis (be it in the form of a response to particular words, images or symbols, or, in a more oblique way, by responding to Revelation's basic formula of trial, respite and End) can be considered an atypical response in relation to dominant cultural norms. But then, it might be argued that the notion of an 'atypical' response only arises because historians are too preoccupied with establishing chronological timeframes for cultural norms in a given society. Quite possibly, historians are too preoccupied with privileging the collective aspect of Revelation's reception over the personal response to the text.

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THE PLAIN AND LITERAL MEANING OF THE TEXT: A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PARTICULAR BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE ON REVELATION 20.1-7

Simon Woodman

1. *Introduction*¹

The seventeenth century saw the emergence of the two main strands of the British Baptist movement: The General (Arminian) Baptists and the Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists.² Both these strands were interested in the right of Baptists to read and interpret scripture for themselves. As Barrie White says:

Basically, it was assumed that the Bible was not only the final authority on earth for matters such as Christology and Atonement but also that it provided the final and authoritative teaching for all necessary matters concerned with the true nature and constitution of the Church.³

While there was a general agreement amongst Baptists that the Bible was the final authority on earth, there was however disagreement surrounding the interpretation of the text itself. Some advocated a literal

1. The author would like to express particular gratitude to the editors, Dr W. John Lyons and Dr Jorunn Økland, for their diligence, care and encouragement expended in the preparation of this text. Thanks are also due to Dr Karen Smith for her helpful comments, and to Mrs Helen Dare for her meticulous proof-reading. Any errors which remain were almost certainly introduced by the author during the final stages of editing.

2. There was a sharp distinction between those who followed the teaching of French theologian John Calvin (1509–1564) and those who adhered to Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1560–1609). Calvinism and Arminianism became the theological schools which advanced and developed the teaching of their founders. In short, Calvinists believed in predestination, whereas Arminians believed that Christ died for all. Two separate streams of Baptist life emerged during the seventeenth century, functionally and theologically similar apart from the Calvinist-Arminian divide.

3. B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (ed. Roger Hayden; A History of the English Baptists, 1; Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 2nd edn, 1996), p. 12.

reading, while others preferred a metaphorical reading.⁴ This paper will look at the interpretation of the millennium passage from Revelation in the writings of the Particular Baptists Robert Maton and Thomas Collier, tracing their readings in the light of their prevailing context, with the aim of exploring the relationship between context and interpretation.

The London Particular Baptist Confession of 1644, written in the emergent years of the British Calvinistic Baptist movement, states:

In this written Word God hath plainly revealed whatsoever he hath thought needful for us to know, beleeve and acknowledge, touching the Nature and Office of Christ.⁵

The key word here is *plainly*, and this early Confession provides a glimpse into a principle of scriptural interpretation adopted by Maton, Collier, and their respective Calvinistic Baptist communities. In distinction to the complex interpretative processes employed by the priests of the established church, it seems that for the Baptists, the true meaning of the Bible was synonymous with what they perceived to be the plain meaning of the Bible.

This understanding of the plain meaning of the text has an interesting parallel in the thinking of the continental Anabaptists of the preceding century. For example, Menno Simons, the founder of the Mennonites, wrote in 1539: 'You say, we are inexpert, unlearned, and know not the Scriptures. I reply: The Word is plain and needs no interpretation.'⁶ Whilst it is not thought that the British concern for plain reading came directly from the Mennonites, what is indicated in this parallel is a similarity of process, whereby the practice plain reading arose as a result of the increased availability of the vernacular Bible.⁷ It was during the early

4. The terms 'plain' and 'literal' are key terms here. The writers under examination are all seeking the 'plain' (i.e. 'self-evident') meaning of the text. This 'plain' meaning may either be 'figurative' (i.e. 'metaphorical') or 'literal' (i.e. 'non-metaphorical'). However, as will be seen, the equating of 'plain' with 'literal' becomes a powerful statement about the theology of biblical interpretation, as it implies a rejection of second-order interpretative processes such as an engagement with metaphor and imagery.

5. Article VIII, quoted in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), p. 158. Lumpkin writes: 'Perhaps no Confession of Faith has had so formative an influence on Baptist life as this one [...]. Though issued in the name of London Baptists, it served Baptists all over the country at a time when the Particular Baptist stream was becoming the major stream of Baptist life' (*Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 152).

6. Menno Simons, *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, 1539. Quoted in Walter Klaassen (ed.), *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1981), p. 151.

7. William Tyndale, who produced the first English-language Bible, demonstrated a similar concern for literal reading: 'Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the

decades of the seventeenth century that English translations of the Bible began to circulate with relative ease,⁸ with the advent of the printing press enabling not only the production of the English Bible, but also the dissemination of pamphlets discussing its interpretation. The book of Revelation, with all its complexity and imagery, naturally provided rich pickings for these early interpreters.

During the English Civil War of the seventeenth century, the turmoil of conflict provided the catalyst for various competing interpretations of the Bible. In addition to this, the political climate of revolution and insurrection meant that throughout the period of the English Civil War, many Baptists faced fighting, persecution and death on a regular basis on account of their political and/or religious persuasions. A natural result of this was that many Baptists came to regard the Parliamentary cause as being that which God would have them support against the Royalist forces of the Antichrist.⁹ It was only a small step from this position to the adoption of the millennialist belief that God would shortly intervene directly in history to achieve his ends by supernatural means. This, combined with the growing accessibility of the vernacular Bible and the ease with which tracts could be circulated, led to an increase of popular millennial expectation.

The harsh conditions which prevailed in England during the Civil War meant that those who offered a radical solution to the current situation often met with a favourable popular response. Certain separatist movements of the period developed a clear millennial expectation which called

scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Neverthelater, the scripture useth proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently' (*The Obedience of a Christen Man, and How Christen Rulers Ought to Govern, Wherein Also [If Thou Mark Diligently] Thou Shalt Find Eyes to Percieve the Crafty Conivence of All Iugglers.* [1528]; online: <http://www.godrules.net/library/tyndale/19tyndale7.htm>, no pages, accessed on 14th August 2007).

8. Tyndale's New Testament was originally published in 1525/6, with Coverdale publishing the first complete English Bible in 1535. The King James Bible was published in 1611.

9. The English Civil War (1642–51) was an armed power struggle between the supporters of the British monarchy and those who backed the forces of Parliament. Charles I (1600–1649) and the Parliament had been in worsening dispute for some years, with many factors feeding the discontent; the armed conflict, when it arose, divided the country along social, political and religious lines. The Baptists, along with other sectarian groups, flourished during this period and were typically allied to the Parliamentary forces.

for a radical regeneration of society in order to bring the blessings of God upon the English nation. A number of these millennial sectarian groups had close links with the Baptists, with the Ranters and Diggers focussing their millennialism around a doctrine of intense nationalism, speculating as to where God would establish the new Jerusalem after the final judgment.¹⁰ Much as the Anabaptists in Münster had believed that they were seeing the establishment of the new Jerusalem on earth, so these English groups believed that the new Jerusalem would be established in a renewed England. Christopher Hill comments:

Once the Bible was available in English for ordinary people to read, they sought there for light on events in their own country. England should follow the example of the Hebrew people under godly rulers.¹¹

This identification of a renewed England with God's chosen nation, and as the place of the establishment of the new Jerusalem, lent force to those who were calling for moral and social reform. This impetus to change the existing structures and replace them with new, holy, ones thus gave further momentum to the Civil War, which was popularly seen to be ushering in the new millennial age. In this way, the mid-17th century became a period of intense conflict combined with intense millennial expectation, and it is to the history of the interpretation of the millennium passage from Revelation 20.1-7 that we will turn our attention as we explore the Baptist concern for the plain meaning of the text. As the following examples show, the issue of how to interpret the millennium passage throws into stark relief the question of 'literal meaning' versus 'allegorical or metaphorical meaning'.

Not all Baptists of the seventeenth century espoused millennialism, with many going out of their way to distance themselves from such ideas. As Brian G. Cooper writes, 'the spread of millenary ideas was embarrassing to the Baptists of the 1640s because they were, quite wrongly, regarded as responsible for their dissemination'.¹² However, while many sought to disassociate themselves from extremist movements such as the Fifth Monarchists,¹³ nevertheless there were others who sought to interpret the millennium passage for their congregations.

10. The Ranters and Diggers, along with other groups such as the Levellers, were radical nonconformist sects which prospered during the time of the Civil War, drawing support from the working classes for their agenda of sweeping social and religious reform. A number of Baptists had contact with these groups.

11. Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1993), p. 266.

12. Brian G. Cooper, 'The Academic Re-Discovery of Apocalyptic Ideas in the 17th Century', *Baptist Quarterly* 18-19 (1960), p. 33.

13. The Fifth Monarchists were a radical sect, active during and after the Civil

2. Robert Maton (1607–53)

Robert Maton was a Calvinistic Baptist preacher,¹⁴ who was born in Wiltshire in 1607, and educated at Wadham College, Oxford.¹⁵ He published two books: *Israel's Redemption* in 1642 (which was actually two separate tracts bound together), and then the catchily titled *Israel's Redemption Redeemed* in 1646. This second work was a reply to an attack on his earlier book by the Scottish Presbyterian Alexander Petrie, who was the first minister of the Presbyterian church in Rotterdam from 1643 to 1662.¹⁶ They both favoured a belief in the second coming of Christ, and thought that the present age would shortly come to an end and be replaced by the kingdom of Christ's rule. Where they disagreed, apart from the obvious ecclesiological differences, was on the subject of millennialism.¹⁷ Petrie interpreted the millennium as a spiritual rather than earthly kingdom, where the saints would receive their heavenly reward, whereas Maton adopted a more explicit and earthly millennialism.¹⁸ Maton believed the millennium would be a literal kingdom, during which time the Saints would reign on earth from Judea. To this end he advocated the return of the Jews to Israel, and combined his beliefs concerning the importance of the Jewish return with his millennial expectation.¹⁹ When Maton wrote his second book in defence of his earlier work, he reasserted his premillennial position.

Israel's Redemption Redeemed went through several re-issues. In 1652 it was called *Christ's Personall Reigne on Earth One Thousand Yeares with*

War period. They interpreted Daniel's vision of four earthly kingdoms followed by a fifth eternal kingdom (Dan. 2.31–45) as being fulfilled in their own time. They equated the first four kingdoms to the Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires, and saw their role as fighting to establish the fifth, millennial kingdom on the earth. They were not opposed to using violence as a means to this end, and this meant that many more peaceable radicals distanced themselves from them.

14. Bryan W. Ball, *A Great Expectation, Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Studies in the History of Christian Thought, 12; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 75, 231; cf. also Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints, the Separate Churches of London 1616–1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 62.

15. Mark R. Bell, 'The Revolutionary Roots of Anglo-American Millenarianism: Robert Maton's *Israel's Redemption* and *Christ's Personall Reign on Earth*', *Journal of Millennial Studies* 2 (2000), pp. 1–8 (2).

16. Ball, *A Great Expectation*, pp. 39, 94.

17. Ball, *A Great Expectation*, p. 30. Bell says that 'Petrie had become concerned by the growth of millenarianism in his community' (cf. Bell, 'Revolutionary Roots of Anglo-American Millenarianism', p. 6).

18. Ball, *A Great Expectation*, p. 39.

19. Christopher Hill, *Religion and Politics in 17th Century England* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 275, 284.

His Saints, and in 1655 it was re-titled again, to *A Treatise of the Fifth Monarchy*.²⁰ This demonstrates an instance of the Fifth Monarchists appropriating a work which they could use to justify their cause, rather than indicating that Maton was himself a Fifth Monarchist; the book itself does not contain Fifth Monarchist teachings, beyond Maton identifying Daniel's fifth kingdom as the last of the earthly kingdoms, which is not in substance different from the typical premillennial interpretation of the period.²¹ What this does demonstrate is that, Fifth Monarchist or not, Maton's work lent itself to political radicalization sufficiently for it to go on to become significant for those of that persuasion.

a. *Israel's Redemption*, 1642 – Robert Maton

In his 1642 book *Israel's Redemption*, published in the early years of the Civil War, Maton outlined the exegetical principle he was following. This is significant to this study because it provides an insight into the prevailing attitude towards the division of literal versus metaphorical interpretation in the mid-seventeenth century Baptist millennial debate. Maton frequently spoke of his concern for 'plain' and 'literal' readings, as opposed to the allegorical interpretations offered by the established church in the tradition of the four-fold sense of scripture (literal, typological, tropological, anagogical). It will be seen that Maton's understanding of 'literal' differs considerably from the 'literal-allegorical' sense of the Middle Ages.

Now how can wee forsake the literall interpretation of these prophecies [...] wherein the events of things is so plainly and distinctly attributed.²²

20. Maton's entry in Wood's *Athenae oxonienses* reads: 'Robert Maton, son of Will. Maton of Tudworth in Wilts, was born in that county, became a Commoner of Wadh. Coll. in Mick. term an. 1623, aged 16 years or thereabouts, took the degrees in Arts, and afterwards holy Orders, but where beneficed, unless in his own Country, I cannot tell, nor any thing else of him, but that, as to opinion, he was always in his heart a Millinary, which he never discovered in public, till the Rebellion broke out, and then the Press being open for all Opinions, he published these things following...' There then follows a list of Maton's publications; see Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses, An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had their Education in The Most Ancient and Famous University of Oxford from 1500 to 1690* (London: Tho. Bennet, 1692), col. 123 (Early English Books, online: <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>, no pages, accessed 14th August 2007). A hand-written summary of this entry is bound in the front of the 1646 edition of *Israel's Redemption Redeemed* examined in the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. Cf. Bell, 'Revolutionary Roots of Anglo-American Millenarianism', p. 2.

21. Bell, *A Great Expectation*, p. 167. Bell notes that 'while several historians have identified Maton as a Fifth Monarchist, his exact relationship with this radical movement remains unknown' (Bell, 'Revolutionary Roots of Anglo-American Millenarianism', p. 7).

22. Robert Maton, *Israel's Redemption or the Propheticall History of Our Saviours*

You see here that the Prophet speakes plainly.²³

In his assertion of literal reading, Maton can also be seen to be implicitly rejecting the authority of pope, priest and church as mediators of the meaning of scripture.

I know these words are taken by interpreters, for a metaphoricall expression [...] but it is a currant axiom in our Schooles [...] that wee must not forsake the littall and proper sense of scripture, unlesse an evident necessity doth require it, or the truth thereof would be endangered by it: and I am sure, here is no such cause for which we should leave the naturall interpretation of the place.²⁴

In this way, it can be seen that Maton's default position was a kind of 'read it and believe it' argument, and that he required special convincing that any other, non-literal, reading was justifiable.²⁵ He would accept certain parts of Revelation as so obviously non-literal that a figurative interpretation was the only way of reconciling them, either with reality or with the rest of scripture. However, something he considered to be less obviously metaphorical, like the millennium passage, would automatically be taken at what he regarded as its literal meaning.

It was in *Israel's Redemption* that Maton first set out his detailed interpretation of the eschatological events which he expected to unfold in the near future, all the while seeking to justify his plain reading of the text. The basic order of events in Maton's scheme was as follows: The Jews will return to Israel and become a single nation once more. Then, the nations of the world will rise up against the Jews and oppose their return to Israel. This he believed would be the first battle of Gog and Magog (Ezek. 38.2-9). Those faithful believers who die during this battle will be spared any future suffering when Satan is released at the end of the thousand years:

[I]t is point blank against the text, to hold, that any of them which shall be slaine by Antichrist, are to suffer after Christ's thousand yeares reigne [...] and so it is plaine, that these Antimillinarian consequences doe all crosse the text.²⁶

Kingdome on Earth; That Is, of the Church Catholicke, and Triumphant. With a Discourse of Gog and Magog, or the Battle of the Great Day of God Almighty (London: 1642), p. 14.

23. Maton, *Israel's Redemption*, p. 16.

24. Maton, *Israel's Redemption*, pp. 47-48. This is an oft-quoted passage; see Ball, *A Great Expectation*, p. 67, and Bell, 'Revolutionary Roots of Anglo-American Millenarianism', p. 3.

25. As Bell says, 'Maton [...] maintained that there was no logical reason for such figurative readings of Scripture. The text was plain and clear; there was no reason to complicate the prophecies with metaphorical readings' ('Revolutionary Roots of Anglo-American Millenarianism', p. 3).

26. Maton, *Israel's Redemption*, p. 126. The term 'Antimillinarian' here is distinctive

This battle would end when Christ returned to earth, to bind Satan, raise up the dead saints, and rule the earth with his saints for a thousand years. This reign would be based in Israel, with Jesus sitting on the throne of his ancestor David.²⁷ At the end of the millennium, Satan would be released, and the nations would attack the camp of the Saints at the holy city Jerusalem.

[T]hat which doth confirm the 1000 yeares reigne of the Saints in *Judea*, is the expresse mention of the beloved City [...] either these words must be taken mystically and improperly, for the Militant Church: or literally and properly for some particular City [...]. I hope wee may the more boldly embrace the literall sense of the words, which, for ought I perceive, doth draw after it no such harsh and uncouth doctrines. And in this sense, we may upon good grounds affirme, that by the *Beloved City*, no other City but *Jerusalem*, can be meant.²⁸

This would be the second battle of Gog and Magog (Rev. 20.8-9), and would in turn be followed by the destruction of Satan and the judgment of the wicked, who would be raised at this point.²⁹

Within the description of his millennial scheme, Maton made several points very clearly. The first of these was his expectation that Christ would reign with the saints personally on earth during the millennium. He wrote that Christ's corporeal presence with the saints was evident from the statement from Revelation 20.4, 'the Saints shall reigne with

to Maton, and he uses it to denote those who doubt his millennial reading of the text. The phrases 'millenarian(ism)' and 'millennial(ism)' are functionally interchangeable, denoting a belief in the coming millennium. Millennial beliefs are typically divided into pre- post- and a- millennial, with pre-millennialists believing that Jesus will return before the millennium; post-millennialists that Jesus will return at the end of the millennium; and a-millennialists that the millennium either is non-historical, or is being worked out in the course of current church history. It can be seen that Maton holds a form of pre-millennialism, with Jesus returning to the earth to establish the millennial kingdom.

27. '[T]he time of the Saints thousand yeares reigne is to succeed their body resurrection: for how else can they reigne so long on earth? or how else can Christ be amongst them here in his humane nature? And [...] the place of the Saints residence all that while, is to be in no other land but *Judea*. For how else can Christ (whith whom the saints must be) sit on the Throne of his Father *David* and reigne over the house of *Jacob*?' (Maton, *Israel's Redemption*, p. 114)

28. *Israel's Redemption*, p. 115.

29. Maton clarifies: 'And whereas the Antimillinarians would have this *Gog* and *Magog* to contemporate with the battell in *Armageddon*, it cannot be [...]. And that which doth confirme this, and which I would have all Antimillinarians to lay to heart, is because the destruction of this *Gog* and *Magog* doth follow after that battell, which is to be in *Armageddon*, as well as in the order of its execution, as in the order of its Revelation' (*Israel's Redemption*, pp. 126-27).

Christ a thousand years'.³⁰ For Maton, the biblical prophecy was plain, and he could see no sense in the arguments of those who said that Christ would not be present personally throughout the millennium.

Maton argued for the physical presence of Christ on earth during the millennium, and this led him into strenuous opposition with the amillennialists.³¹ He wrote that they were not consistent among themselves as to when the millennium would begin, as they fixed various starting points ranging from the incarnation to the time of Luther.³² Maton looked around him, at the struggles being faced by those he regarded as the faithful, and argued that he could see no evidence that the current age afforded any respite for the saints in their struggle against Satan.³³ He concluded therefore, against the amillennialists, that he could not be living in the millennium, because Satan was clearly not yet bound, and the saints were still facing persecution. So when the amillennialists claimed that the current age is the millennium, Maton accused them of confusing the reign of the Antichrist with the reign of Christ.

[I]t is quite beside, if not against the text, to say that but a part of those, which shall suffer under Antichrist, are to be with Christ in the time of his thousand yeares reigne [...]. The whole time, I say, of the Martyrs temptation and persecution [is] to precede the whole time of the thousand yeares reign; and not in part to precede it, in part to succeed it, and in part to accompany it, as our adversaries doctrine doth make it doe.³⁴

Maton's insistence on the eschatological importance of the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem gives his interpretation an unusual twist. He was convinced that the Bible plainly pointed to a time when Israel would be restored to the land, and he tied this in with his millennial expectation. He saw the fact that the holy city is mentioned in Rev. 20.9 as being proof that the saints would reign from Jerusalem, and he asserted that if Christ was going to be reigning on the earth during the millennium, the Bible made it plain that he would do so from the throne of David in Jerusalem.³⁵

30. *Israel's Redemption*, p. 114.

31. For a more detailed analysis of Maton's precise brand of millennialism see Bell, 'Revolutionary Roots of Anglo-American Millenarianism', p. 4.

32. He identified two kinds of amillennialist, dismissing both equally: '[A]s the former sort of Antimillinarians doe grossely erre in placing Christs reign before Antichrists [...] so doe these other Antimillinarians erre as much, in confounding the time of Christs reign, with the time of Antichrists reigne' (*Israel's Redemption*, p. 122).

33. He complained, 'for when had the best of men, even the Saints themselves, any rest on earth, not onely from wrestling against flesh and bloud, but against principalities, against powers, against rulers of the darkness of this world, against spirituall wickednesses in high places?' (*Israel's Redemption*, p. 124).

34. *Israel's Redemption*, p. 125.

35. *Israel's Redemption*, pp. 114-15.

For Maton, his literal interpretation was synonymous with what he regarded as the plain meaning of the text. He could not see how the events he was witnessing around him could correspond to the outplaying of Christ's millennial reign, and hence for him the plain meaning of scripture was that the millennium must lie in the future. He repeatedly said of the amillennialists that their arguments were, 'either beside, or flat against the text',³⁶ demonstrating how certain he was that he was reading the text correctly, and that he had reached the right and proper interpretation of it. Indeed, he claimed that the text itself supported no other interpretation. His ultimate point of appeal for justification of his arguments was found within the pages of the Bible itself, so when Petrie wrote against him, arguing that Maton's interpretations were wrong, he reasserted himself once again, as we shall see, by appeal to *plain* scripture.

b. *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, 1646 – Robert Maton

Maton's second book takes the form of a dialogue with Alexander Petrie, whose critique of Maton had been published in 1644 under the title *Chiliasto mastix*. Petrie had said that when right-minded people came across literal millennial viewpoints such as those espoused by Maton, they found that,

the argumentes are so sillie and ridiculous, that every understanding persone reading them, findes not only the weaknesse of the groundes, but even out of them doe gather pregnant argumentes in the contrarie.³⁷

Maton's published response to Petrie's attack follows the pattern of an excerpt from *Israel's Redemption*, followed by a quote from Petrie's work, followed by a response from Maton. Interestingly, Petrie also claimed that he had the 'literal' interpretation, and it seems that what he had in mind was something akin to the Middle Ages' definition of 'literal-allegorical' which also encompasses figurative meanings. However Maton misunderstood, thinking Petrie was denying any form of millennial doctrine, even figurative. So Maton immediately disagreed with Petrie, and claimed that *he* was actually putting forward the only truly 'literal' or 'plain' interpretation.

[Petrie] We forsake not the literal interpretation of these prophecies: for that is the literall interpretation, which is principally intended, whether it be proper or figurative

36. *Israel's Redemption*, p. 122.

37. Alexander Petrie, *Chiliasto-Mastix, or, the Prophecies in the Old and New Testament Concerning the Kingdome of Our Saviour Jesus Christ* (Rotterdam: Isaak VVaesbergen, 1644), p. 5.

[Maton] You do not onely forsake the literal sense, which as it is opposed to a figurative is alwayes meant of a proper sense [...] but in forsaking this sense, you forsake also the sense principally intended in these prophecies.³⁸

Both can be seen to be claiming their interpretation as the literal meaning of the text, yet each disagreed with the other in the interpretation they put forward. What is interesting in this discussion is the fact that while both Maton and Petrie argued that they alone understood the true meaning of the text, it is in actual fact their perception of what is plain that shaped their approaches. What seemed plainly literal to one, was plainly figurative to the other.

The preceding example demonstrates how the same text can have two contradictory plain meanings when two different interpreters are at work on it. The analysis of 'interpretive communities' by Stanley Fish provides a helpful way to understand this phenomenon. Fish views the common context of two interpreters as a shared system which provides the common ground for communication:

[T]he understanding achieved by two or more persons is specific to that system and determinate only within its confines.³⁹

Fish thus suggests that meaning is always contextually determined, and calls the element of commonality between the contexts of individual readers the 'interpretive community'.⁴⁰ If a person attempts an act of communication beyond their community, the possibilities for failed or skewed communication grow. Once a text is written and released upon the world, it is possible, and indeed inevitable, that different people will draw different meanings from it, as is demonstrably the case between Maton and Petrie.

Fish argues that meanings are not the property of 'fixed and stable texts', and that therefore one cannot appeal to the text itself to provide a normative meaning.⁴¹ Yet this is precisely what Maton and Petrie are both attempting to do, and thus why their attempts to communicate with each other are so unsuccessful. Fish suggests that interpretations

38. Robert Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1646), p. 39.

39. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). p. 304.

40. R. Barry Matlock summarizes Fish as follows: 'Fish's account of interpretation circles round and round the deceptively simple point that "the text itself," the uninterpreted or brute fact text, is unavailable to adjudicate between competing interpretations of "it"' ('Biblical Criticism and the Rhetoric of Inquiry', *Biblical Interpretation* 5 [1997], pp. 133-59 [150]).

41. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 322.

are always the product of a person's existence within their interpretive community, and that the reader is therefore totally constrained by their community:

Insofar as the system [...] constrains us, it also fashions us, furnishing us with categories of understanding, with which we in turn fashion the entities to which we can then point.⁴²

This being the case, the plain meaning of a text will be obvious to a given reader when they are functioning within their interpretive community, even if that interpretation is different to the plain meaning arrived at by another person, operating within a different interpretive community.

In an attempt to find a way forward from his *impasse* with Petrie, Maton upped the interpretive stakes. In addition to claiming his interpretation of the millennium as the plain meaning of the text, he also claimed that this was God's intended meaning. Maton opened *Israel's Redemption Redeemed* with a preface to the reader, in which he dealt with this issue of the instability of interpretation. His basic point was that if the Bible were taken in any way other than the way in which God intended it to be taken, it would cease to be the word of God and would become the words of humans instead.

There are two main obstacles which debarred men from the apprehension of Gods word: the one, a strange language; the other, a strange interpretation. The first is proper to Papists; the other is common to Protestants and Papists: and is indeed the more dangerous, seeing an unknowne tongue doeth only hide the truth from the unlearned, and so may somewhat easily be avoided: but a false interpretation doth equally deprive both the wise and the simple of it: and so causeth the blind the lead the blinde. For whatsoever text of scripture is expounded any otherwise than God meant by it, it is according to its interpretation, the word of man, and not of God.⁴³

Since the Bible was already available in the vernacular, Maton regarded the problems of interpretation as the more serious. However, his solution to these interpretative issues, that a biblical text should be taken to mean only what 'God meant by it', became for him an unconsciously self-justifying mechanism, whereby his own plain interpretation was synonymous with that which he believed to be God's intended meaning for the text.

Maton did recognize that there are some passages which are difficult to interpret with any certainty, and of these he commented that it is hard to know God's original plain meaning.⁴⁴ However, Maton asserted that

42. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 332.

43. Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, p. A.

44. He says: 'Now of scriptures that are misunderstood, some are so difficult, that

there are other passages where he judged the meaning to be so plain that they could not be taken as anything other than a literal reading. Maton placed the millennial texts in this category.

Others againe are so plaine, that every common and ordinary understanding, if left to it selfe, cannot choose but take them in their true sense; and not in that which is thrust upon them by a false glosse [...] among which are the many prophecies which God hath reveal'd touching the future restauration of the Jewes, and the personall reigne of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth.⁴⁵

In this way, it can be seen that Maton placed his final referent for the authority to decide on interpretations within his reading of the text of the Bible itself. It was therefore possible for him to claim that his plain reading of the text was in actual fact the one which God originally intended, with all other interpretations being mere human invention.⁴⁶ This was indeed what Maton proceeded to do throughout his second volume as he disputed the nature of the eschaton with Petrie.

Maton asserted again that the millennium would come after the Saviour's appearing, and that the second resurrection and the last judgment would come at the end of the millennium. However, for Maton, the millennium also functioned as part of the judgment, in that it allowed for the vindication of the righteous in the sight of their enemies.⁴⁷ This interpretation was particularly appropriate for those amongst his readership who had faced persecution for following what they believed to be the true Christian path. He looked forwards to a future when the current situation of persecution would be reversed, and power would be in the hands of the righteous while the wicked would have their power removed. This is close to Fifth Monarchist doctrine, although Maton did

it is not possible to give a peremptory interpretation of them, of which sort are some passages in Daniel, in the Revelation, and here and there in other parts of scripture) [sic] and in these we should either confesse our ignorance, or deliver our thoughts as evidences solely of our desire to attaine to the perfect knowledge of God's word' (Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, pp. A-A1).

45. Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, p. A1.

46. Maton was insistent that there was only one true meaning of any passage of scripture. He asserted that, 'as truth is but one, so doubtless there can be but one true sense of any place in the Scripture, but one sense intended by God; and therefore to make the Scripture *Janus*-like to looke two wayes, is from man and not from God' (*Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, pp. 126-27).

47. He eagerly anticipated the time of judgment: 'In that Day? in what day, if not in the day spoken of [...] in Scripture, the Day of judgement, but yet it is not of so short continuance, as you take it to be: for it containes the 1000 yeares and little season, mentioned in Rev. 20. all which time is to follow our Saviours appearing, and to foregoe the last act of his reigne, the judgement of the dead at the last resurrection' (Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, p. E6).

not go so far as to recommend that the saints should take matters into their own hands and try to bring about this reversal of power themselves. However, it can be seen why his teaching proved popular with the politically radical Fifth Monarchists, who found in his writing a theological basis for their political and military activism.

A further example of the disagreement between Petrie and Maton occurred when Petrie claimed that the millennium would be a heavenly kingdom, and not one which would be played out on earth. Petrie is quoted by Maton as saying that:

[Petrie] The Father will not say, their reward is not in heaven, but on earth: therefore let them goe againe to the earth, and inherit glory there for a 1000 yeares: but [he] receives them into the inheritance reserved for them in the heavens.⁴⁸

Maton, in his reply, misunderstood Petrie, and answered him as if he were making a case for amillennialism.⁴⁹ In fact, Petrie was agreeing with Maton that a future transformation was to be expected, but in Petrie's view the coming kingdom of Christ would be established in spiritual terms. Although Petrie was simply disagreeing with Maton as to the nature of the coming kingdom, Maton responded as if Petrie had denied that there would be a coming kingdom, and had instead asserted that the millennial kingdom was already being played out on the earth.

Maton and Petrie consistently failed to communicate effectively throughout their dialogue, as they each sought to establish the plain and literal meaning of the text, with Petrie convinced that Maton was wrong in his literal millennialism, and Maton convinced that Petrie was an amillennialist. What they were disputing was in essence the ownership of the label 'literal', with each claiming their reading as literal; Petrie offered a literal-figurative approach, while Maton asserted a plain-literal interpretation. Maton called Petrie an amillennialist because he held to a different kind of millennialism to his own, and for precisely the same reason Petrie doubted Maton's interpretative credentials. In the midst of their discussions as to what God's intended plain meaning was for the Bible, they were in the end not even able to agree upon what each other meant. Indeed, the disagreements between the two reached comic proportions on occasion, with Maton exclaiming at one point, 'Unlesse you had made a covenant with

48. Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, p. 214.

49. 'This answer is as much besides the question as the other: for the argument is, that if Christ doth now reigne, and shall reigne onely till his comming, then those Saints which shall be found alive at his comming shall be exempted from his Kingdome, shall not reigne with him, as the Saints departed did reigne with him' (Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, p. 214).

your tongue to deny every thing that we prove, you could not have said [that]'.⁵⁰

What this demonstrates is that their own interpretations became, for each of them, the plain meaning of the text, and they simply could not conceive how the other could fail to see it their way. For both of them, it seems, the Bible really did mean what they thought it meant. Each of them was so constrained by their 'interpretive communities' – Maton amongst the Calvinistic Baptists of revolutionary England, and Petrie amongst the Scottish Presbyterians of Rotterdam – that the plain meaning of the text became, for each of them, inescapable. The dialogue between Maton and Petrie thus demonstrates how different 'interpretive communities' not only generate alternative readings, but also how they can produce disagreement where people fight over language and labels.

3. *Thomas Collier*

Thomas Collier was a particular Baptist minister,⁵¹ who from 1646 worked almost exclusively in the West Country, having previously been expelled from Guernsey.⁵² Like Maton, his community's desire for plain meaning drove his exegesis. Two of his works will be examined here. The first, *The Glory of Christ*, was published in 1647, whilst the second, *The Personal Appearing*, was published a decade later in 1657. These two works demonstrate the way in which Collier's thinking on the nature of the millennium developed over the intervening period. In a fascinating about-turn he moved from an initial spiritualized and allegorical interpretation of the millennium in the earlier work to a more literalistic reading in the later one. By the time of the composition of *The Personal Appearing*, he was serving as leader of the Western Association of the Particular Baptists,⁵³ and the doctrine he put forward in it is considerably more in keeping

50. Maton, *Israel's Redemption Redeemed*, p. 256.

51. Tolmie, *Triumph of the Saints*, p. 181.

52. Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists: Containing Biographical Sketches and Notices of above Three Hundred Ministers, and Historical Accounts, Alphabetically Arranged, of One Hundred and Thirty Churches, in the Different Counties in England: From About the Year 1610 Till 1700*, II (London: Button and Son, Baynes, Gale, Curtis, and Fenner, 1814), p. 141. David Underdown highlights the significant impact had by Collier as an evangelist in the west of England in his *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 247.

53. Richard Dale Land, 'Doctrinal Controversies of the English Particular Baptists as Illustrated by the Career and Writings of Thomas Collier' (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1979), p. 250.

with the prevailing Particular Baptist view of literal reading than is to be found in his earlier work.⁵⁴ The dramatic shift in the political context that occurred between the early 1640s to the early 1650s had apparently convinced Collier that the millennial hope was being fulfilled in his own time with significant consequences for his exegesis.⁵⁵

a. *The Glory of Christ, 1647 – Thomas Collier*

Collier cast *The Glory of Christ* as a rhetorical diatribe, a conversation between a 'minister of the gospel' and an enquiring Christian. In the opening section, the enquirer rejects historical interpretations of the book of Revelation, and instead asks to have its meaning explained in an allegorical and spiritualized manner.

[Christian] the most [...] rest satisfied in a humane and historicall interpretation, therefore I desire you to goe on, for I much long to understand the mistery held forth in it.⁵⁶

Collier accordingly advised the enquiring Christian that Heaven and Hell were to be understood as being spiritual states rather than places,⁵⁷ with the imagery of Revelation similarly relating to aspects of Christian discipleship in a figurative fashion.⁵⁸ For Collier, numbers within the

54. Land, 'Doctrinal Controversies', Abstract.

55. The terminology under discussion is significant. There are a number of terms used by the seventeenth century writers which may cause confusion. These can be thought of as a scale:

Literal – Figurative – Allegorical – Spiritual.

Maton was firmly in the *literal* fold. Petrie claimed a *literal* reading, but actually offered a more *figurative* understanding. Collier initially adopts an *allegorical/spiritual* approach, before moving to a *literal* reading. In each case, the writer can claim that their interpretation is the 'plain' meaning of the text required by their respective communities' expectations.

56. Thomas Collier, *The Glory of Christ and the Ruine of Antichrist, Unvaild, as They Are Held Forth in Revelation, by the Seales, Trumpets, and Vials, Dialogue-Wise, between a Minister of the Gospell and an Inquiring Christian, for the Information and Consolation of All Those Who Love the Truth in the Mystery and Power of It* (Unknown: 1647), p. 6.

57. He says: '[W]e are to looke upon *John* as representing the Saints [...] By *Heaven* and the dore opened in *Heaven*, is meant the first discovery and unfolding of Gospel light [...]. By *heaven* is meant the Saints in life spirituall and heavenly enjoyment of God' (Collier, *Glory of Christ*, pp. 14, 31; cf. also Land, 'Doctrinal Controversies', p. 324).

58. The discussion between Christian and Minister is as follows: '*Chr.* What is meant by the Sea of glasse before the Throne, cleare as Cristall? *Min.* The cleare and spirituall discovery of the glorious excellency of the spirituall righteousness of God which believers are made partakers of' (Collier, *Glory of Christ*, p. 21).

book carried a symbolic representation,⁵⁹ a view which was important for his spiritualized understanding of the thousand year reign of Christ.

During the 1640s, when Collier was writing *The Glory of Christ*, it looked unlikely that the cause of the 'righteous saints' would prevail in any real political sense, and therefore a spiritual interpretation of the millennium allowed him to apply this passage to the lives of those for whom he was writing. His interpretation in *The Glory of Christ* drew heavily on his context, as he addressed the issue of persecution.⁶⁰

Chr. What may we learn from hence?

Min. First, that it is no new or strange thing for the Saints of Jesus to be persecuted, and banished to Isles [...] for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 2. That God oft-times in his Saints persecution, makes forth himself in the most glorious revelation to their soules spirituall comfort and satisfaction...

Chr. Then it seemes the Saints have no cause to fear persecution?

Min. No, for first it is the will of their father they should suffer [...] and it should be the Saints joy, to live in the will of God.⁶¹

For Collier at this time, persecution was seen as a mark of the current, earthly age, and it presented a pastoral problem for his congregations. To this end, he wrote that the experience of persecution provided proof of the righteousness of the saints. He also thought that persecution brought blessing, believing that where the body faces hardship God strengthens the soul with blessings and revelations of glory. Having thus given these reasons as to why the life of the saints would of necessity be one of hardship and trial, Collier put this into an eschatological context by making a comparison between the current earthly life, and the spiritual life to come. In effect, he held up the hope of a future spiritual kingdom as compensation for the present unavoidable troubles.

Chr. What is that first Resurrection mentioned, *Rev.* 20.?

Min. It is a Resurrection not onely with Christ in the Spirit to more

59. For example, the discussion on the significance of the number seven: '*Chr.* Why is the number of seven so often used in Scripture, is there not some mistery included in it, as the seven candlesticks the seven spirits the seven seales &c. *Min.* Doubtles there is a mistery in it, and it usually presents us with perfection. Seven churches, that is to all the churches and Saints to the worlds end; seven spirits, a perfection of light and power, as several operations by the same spirit' (Collier, *Glory of Christ*, pp. 11-12).

60. Underdown comments that: 'Before 1681 only the Baptists and the Quakers suffered anything more than intermittent persecution' (David Underdown, *Fire from Heaven: Life in an English Town in the Seventeenth Century* [London: Fontana Press, 1993], p. 242).

61. Collier, *Glory of Christ*, pp. 7-8.

spirituall and heavenly injoyments, but it is a Resurrection likewise from affliction and persecution.⁶²

It was his emphasis on the coming kingdom, in contrast with the present earthly life of suffering, that gave Collier his spiritual interpretation of the millennium. For him the first resurrection, which would inaugurate the millennium, would be spiritual rather than earthly because its function would be to provide a place of escape from the persecutions of the earthly age. It is during this spiritual millennium that the saints would receive the freedom denied them in the present order. Collier claimed that following the first resurrection, conflict would end, with the saints rescued from their afflictions: '...a time is coming when the wicked shall live peaceably with the saints and be subject to them...' ⁶³ Collier accordingly envisaged the second resurrection occurring at the end of the millennium, and he saw it predicted in the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21. ⁶⁴ This he interpreted as referring to the ultimate glory of the true church, to be contrasted with the present earthly glory of the false church of Rome. The end of the thousand years would be marked by the raising up of the wicked men who had been living peacefully alongside the saints during the millennium. The wicked would once again fall under the sway of the recently released Satan, and this would show their characters for what they were, so that they could be judged and punished before the new, purified and glorious church was finally established.

[W]hen the thousand yeares are finished, Satan againe being loosed, they will to their old work again, encompasse the Saints about, but fire come downe from heaven and destroyed them, and they were all judged, &c. ⁶⁵

Collier's future, spiritual millennium was particularly relevant to the context in which he was writing. The Baptists of the 1640s were facing sporadic persecution through the opening years of the Civil War, and there was little prospect that things were going to change. Collier identified the suffering Particular Baptists of his own time with the true church of Christian history, and found within the pages of the Bible ample justification for his belief that the righteous would always suffer in the earthly age. His hope for the future therefore focussed on the ending of the present era, and the establishment of Christ's spiritual millennial kingdom, when things would be different.

62. Collier, *Glory of Christ*, p. 101.

63. Collier, *Glory of Christ*, p. 104.

64. '...all the glory mentioned in Rev.21:22: is the glory of the Church after the second resurrection; that is, the resurrection of truth, life and liberty to the Saints through the nations' (Collier, *Glory of Christ*, p. 104).

65. Collier, *Glory of Christ*, pp. 104-105.

Chr: What doth *John* intend when he saith chap:22, last, *Come Lord Jesus come quickly?*

Min: 1 The coming of Christ in the spirit, to raise up the Saints more to himselfe in the knowledge and injoyment of him. 2: The coming of Christ in his power, in freeing his Saints from persecution, and from men of the earth: in a word, he desires that glorious Kingdom of Christ to come which he had then in a vision by way of revelation seen. And let this be the desire of all spirituall Christians...⁶⁶

However, as Collier's context changed dramatically in the course of the next decade, so his interpretation was to do so as well, as he moved from an expectation that the millennium would be a future spiritual age, to a belief that it was happening on earth before his very eyes.

Collier closed his analysis of the nature of the millennium by giving a valuable insight into the interpretative method he was using. He claimed that the Bible often used language which was unclear in order to exercise the minds of interpreters so that they would fully explore all the possible meanings. He stressed that it was only with the help and guidance of God that truth was revealed through the text as the true meaning became clear. As Collier affirmed, when answering the question of why the Bible was not clearer in its meaning:

That I suppose is but to exercise the mind of him that hath wisdome, it being the way of God to deliver things darkly and mystically, and so to involve and intermingle truth, that without that wisdome which is from above we can never come to the understanding of it [...] so likewise throughout the whole book of the Apocalypse.⁶⁷

One of the implications of his interpretative method is that, as God reveals more, so it is possible to change one's mind about the meaning or truth of a text. This is exactly what Collier was to do as he moved from a spiritual to a literal interpretation of the millennium over the next decade.

b. The Personal Appearing, 1657 – Thomas Collier

Collier gave three reasons for writing *The Personal Appearing*.⁶⁸ In the first instance, he wanted to prove from the Bible the truth of Christ's personal

66. Collier, *Glory of Christ*, pp. 107-108.

67. Collier, *Glory of Christ*, p. 105.

68. He listed them thus: 'I have with as much brevity and cleerness as God hath given me understanding endeavoured to cleer three things in this ensuing Treatise; 1. The Personal reign of Christ upon the Earth. 2. That the state of Saints of Sion will be a suffering state until that time. 3. To answer such grounds [...] as I have met withal, for the introducing of the Kingdome of Christ by the material sword in the hands of Saints' (Thomas Collier, *The Personal Appearing and Reign of Christ's Kingdom Upon the Earth, Stated and Proved from the Scripture of Truth, and the State of the Saints Till Then*,

return and reign on earth. Secondly, he wanted to demonstrate that in the intervening period before Christ's return, it was to be expected that the saints would face trial and difficulty. Thirdly, he wanted to argue, in contrast to the more violently inclined Fifth Monarchists, that it was not the place of the saints to inaugurate the new kingdom by virtue of the sword.

Many Baptists in the mid 1650s experienced a growing sense of disillusionment with the activities of the Protectorate. Issues such as tithing to the state church were problematic, and the Protectorate did not seem to be interested in reversing these laws. The initial hope which the Nominated Parliament had generated, drawn as it was from the gathered churches, was rapidly being replaced by the sense that, after its dismissal and replacement with the Protectorate, the early progress made was being eroded.⁶⁹ It was into this situation that Collier wrote *The Personal Appearing* in 1657. By this time he had moved from a spiritual to a literal reading, arguing that he was living in the last days before the personal return of Christ to earth and the establishment of the millennium.⁷⁰

As was seen when looking at *The Glory of Christ*, Collier believed that the allegorical meaning of the text became plain with the Holy Spirit's assistance.⁷¹ In *The Personal Appearing* he contended of his earlier work that:

[I]t may be Objected... that the Personal reign of Christ is that which you have sometime disowned and written against... it seems you are unstable and fleeting in your apprehension [...] Answer: [...] Its true, I have so written, and it is true that I writ that which I then so understood [...] it was at such a time when I was led aside by the enemy and tempted [...] I was for a season deceived by him [...] giving such dexterity in Allegorizing of the Scriptures [...] that [...] very much of the precious truth of Scripture, was turned out of doors.⁷²

Proved to Be a State of Suffering, and Not of Reigning and Conquering with a Materiall Sword as Some Imagine [London: T.C., 1657], p. ii; cf. also Land, 'Doctrinal Controversies', pp. 250-51).

69. It is generally held by historians that, 'the experience of the Assembly shattered Cromwell's own millenarian outlook, so that his subsequent policies represent a rejection of and a retreat from his earlier eschatological world-view' (Francis William Bridger, 'Theology and Politics in the English Revolution' [PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 1980], p. 271). However, Bridger suggests that although Cromwell distanced himself from the more radical elements of millennialism, he continued to allow eschatological beliefs to influence both domestic and foreign policy (pp. 271-82).

70. Collier has become convinced that the plain meaning of the text was no longer *allegorical/spiritual*, but was rather *literal*.

71. '...without that wisdom which is from above we can never come to the understanding of it...' (Collier, *Glory of Christ*, p. 105).

72. Collier, *Personal Appearing*, pp. ii-iii.

It is interesting to compare *The Personal Appearing* with *The Glory of Christ*, as there are some areas of obvious similarity, and other areas where Collier has undergone an almost complete reversal in his interpretation. In 1647, Collier asserted that the Bible was written 'darkly and mystically' in order to allow God to exercise the minds of the interpreter. However, by 1657 he was claiming that his earlier allegorical interpretations arose not from God but from Satan's deception. He still viewed suffering as being part of the experience of the truly righteous saints, and that this would only be alleviated at the establishment of the millennial kingdom.⁷³ However, what changed was his understanding of how the new millennial age was to be constituted. Collier no longer regarded the millennium as being a spiritual age in opposition to the current earthly age. Rather, by 1657 he thought of it as an imminent transformation of the earth which would be in direct continuity with current events. Jesus would rule on the earth as the king of the saints, who would in turn rule the rest of the world's population. As Collier affirmed: 'All Dominions, all Rulers shall serve and obey him; and that must be when the Kingdome is the Saints'.⁷⁴ In this way, Collier came to envisage Christ ruling the earth personally, and literally, for a thousand years.

One of the potential outworkings of a belief that the millennium is to be earthly rather than spiritual is the development of a theology which claims that it is possible to inaugurate the coming kingdom using earthly means. Collier repeatedly repudiated this way of thinking, and thus disagreed with those Fifth Monarchists who argued that it was the Christian duty to establish Christ's kingdom by force of arms. Collier is unambiguous: 'I do not believe, that the Kingdome of Christ shall be introduced by a material sword in the hand of the Saints before the comming of Christ'.⁷⁵ Collier thus provided a voice at the moderate end of millennialism in this period.

Collier gave a fair amount of attention to justifying his change of mind from his earlier, allegorical, interpretation of the millennium. He says:

That our Lord Jesus is the King of Saints [...] is...a great and precious truth [...] owned by all prophecyng Christianity [...]. But that he is Head over all, and shall be so visibly made manifest on Earth in his glorious Reign, hath not been so seen in some Ages past, as God hath now been pleased to make it manifest by his Spirit through the Scriptures of truth.⁷⁶

73. Collier, *Personal Appearing*, Title Page.

74. Collier, *Personal Appearing*, p. 2.

75. Collier, *Personal Appearing*, p. 8.

76. Collier, *Personal Appearing*, p. 1.

What is interesting here is that as Collier's changing context created the environment for him to switch to a literal interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ, so he then found that the Bible appeared to agree exactly with his new point of view. His previous interpretation, of a spiritual millennium, was no longer seen to be biblically defensible, and what he now perceived to be the plain meaning of the text became, for him, the only permissible meaning. He emphasized: 'That Christ shall Reign on Earth, this truth is abundantly declared in the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testament'.⁷⁷

To this end, Collier quoted the Bible frequently in defence of his new position, seeking to prove from many places in scripture that the millennium was to be earthly not spiritual. He stated that, 'it abundantly appears, that the Kingdom and Reign of Christ shall be upon the earth'.⁷⁸ For Collier, the literal meaning of the text had become the only way the text could be read. The dramatic change in his context from 1647 to 1657 meant that his understanding of the meaning of the millennium passage changed just as dramatically over this same period.

It is apparent therefore that Collier read and interpreted the millennium passage in accordance with his context. Given the prevailing political situation, he initially interpreted in an allegorical manner. However, as the political situation changed, so his interpretation altered also. This raises the interesting question of, on the one hand, how much the interpretation dictates the political opinions and actions of the interpreter, and on the other hand how much the situation they find themselves in drives their interpretation.

By the mid 1650s, Collier had changed his mind about the nature of the millennium, preferring to interpret it in terms of a real event in the imminent future, rather than in a spiritualized manner. The failed experiment of the Nominated Parliament in 1653 had presented Baptists such as Collier with the genuine possibility of the Saints reigning on earth, in England, in a real and concrete sense. Its dissolution opened for Collier the hope that what had not been achieved through Cromwell would shortly be achieved through other means. No longer was it necessary for even a naturally cautious man like Collier to interpret the millennium figuratively—rather, the way had been opened for him to leapfrog the mid-position of Petrie, and follow more radical thinkers such as Robert Maton down the path of literal reading. As he did so, he found that this new plain meaning of the text came to dominate and obliterate all other possible meanings.

77. Collier, *Personal Appearing*, p. 1.

78. Collier, *Personal Appearing*, p. 3.

The dialogue between Maton and Petrie provided an example of two commentators from different interpretive communities who argued over one label, the 'literal' interpretation of the text. Collier, on the other hand, provides an example of how an interpretive community can shift in such a way as to allow the adoption of a viewpoint which had previously been rejected. The driving force behind Collier's shifting theology was the changing context in which he was living. As his interpretive community moved, so his plain reading of scripture moved with it.

4. *Final Reflections*

The book of Revelation has generally been recognized as one of the more difficult books of the Bible to interpret. Its symbolism and use of metaphor are frequently highly specific to the time of its writing, making it hard to make sense of them beyond that period. Our enquiry into the interpretive process adopted by these two 17th-century Baptist writers demonstrates a particular perspective on Rev. 20.1-7, namely the practice of plain reading. For these interpreters, the plain meaning of the text was all-important.

This concept of 'plain reading' became, in the hands of the 17th-century Baptists, something of an ironic statement. With hindsight, we can see that it simply became an assertion that the text *really* meant whatever an interpreter *thought* it meant. As was seen in the debate between Maton and Petrie, it was quite possible for two people to hold that the same passage 'plainly' meant two opposing things. In this way the plain-meaning mantra became an excuse for the dogmatic assertion of an interpreter's viewpoint in such a way as to close-down open debate.

The Baptist concern for the plain reading of scripture emerged in the context of the increased availability of the vernacular Bible, and it functioned for these two Baptist dissenters as a mechanism for self-justification in the face of growing instability of interpretation. As various readers of scripture arrived at diverse interpretations, those seeking stability and validation of their own perspective made assertions regarding the plain meaning of the text in order to justify their own interpretation. Thus, plain-reading assertions effectively became a refuge sought by those needing somewhere to hide from the interpretative uncertainty surrounding them.

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‘BE THOU FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH’ (CF. REV. 2.10):
THE BOOK OF REVELATION, THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS
AND APOCALYPTIC (SELF-)DESTRUCTION

Kenneth Newport

1. *Introduction*

Among the biblical books it is probably the last, the Apocalypse of St John, that stands out as being the subject of most of the truly imaginative interpretations. It is not difficult to understand why. The book itself is called a ‘revelation’, ‘the revelation of Jesus Christ’, in fact, which was given by God to show to his servants the things that must ‘shortly come to pass’ (Rev. 1.1). Since just who God’s servants are and the starting point from which to measure the time period suggested by the ‘shortly’ are both very much a matter of individual and ever-changing perspective, readings may be constantly and confidently refreshed in the knowledge that others could not understand the book. This is so since new readers could always argue that they had a privileged perspective on this text and that those who had read it before were either *not* God’s servants (and this was a book for those who were) and/or the time to understand it (i.e. the point from which to measure the ‘shortly’) had not previously come. Add to this the highly symbolic language of the book, replete as it is with accounts of horned beasts, trumpet-blowing angels, scarlet-clad women, earthquakes, vials and rainbows (to name but a few), and one has an almost infinite range of possible readings as readers in new social contexts and historical settings read and re-read the text. Others have outlined some of the results.¹

It is not the purpose here to enter again into a general survey of the history of the interpretation of the Apocalypse. Rather in this paper the eisegetical history of one particular aspect of that apparently infinitely

1. See for example Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers* (4 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1946–54); E.B. Elliott, *Horae apocalypticae*; or, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical* (4 vols.; London: Seeley, 4th edn, 1851), IV, pp. 275–633; Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

malleable text is singled out for more detailed consideration.² Central is the issue of the way in which the Book of Revelation may, in some cases at least, be seen to have been instrumental in inspiring, or at least being conducive to, acts of Apocalyptic self-destruction. The case in focus is that of the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas, whose headquarters 'Mt Carmel' burnt to the ground on 19 April, 1993 with the loss of over eighty lives. The passing of years has seen little letting up of the debate of how that fire started and who was responsible for it. As I have argued at considerable length elsewhere,³ the evidence is that the Branch Davidians themselves set fire to their home. I have argued further that they did so for particular theological reasons (rather than, for example, as an act of desperation).⁴ Here I outline some of that larger argument as it relates specifically to the Book of Revelation. Before getting into that specific study, however, a few further very general remarks by way of introduction are needed.

2. *Texts and Interpreters*

A number of years ago Heikki Räisänen raised with great clarity the question of whether biblical texts can truly be said to have had an actual impact.⁵ Despite the passing of those years, however, few have sought to deal with the 'challenge' to biblical scholarship that Räisänen identified. The question still remains: do texts ever really make a difference? Or is it always the case that texts are used only retrospectively to explain or justify actions that have already been taken, or beliefs that have already come to be held, for other reasons? As Räisänen himself notes, this is not an area in which there is likely to be great clarity, for it is often extremely difficult to disentangle the two.

However, that some biblical texts do have an actual influence over their readers seems to be reasonably clear, at least in some instances. Consider for example the snake-handling Pentecostals, who take very seriously indeed the words of Mk 16.17-18 (cf. Lk. 10.19):

2. The term 'eisegetical' is used here to refer to the act of reading 'into' rather than 'out of' (exegetical) texts. It is of course almost a given that in the act of reading texts and interpreters interact. However, the attempt systematically to trace the ways in which texts have, in effect, acted as a mirror for those who have read them is not one that has attracted huge attention though of course less reader-centred 'histories of interpretation' abound.

3. Kenneth G.C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

4. Newport, *The Branch Davidians*, Chapter 15.

5. Heikki Räisänen, 'The Effective "History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1992), pp. 303-24.

And these signs shall follow them that believe; [...] *They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them ...*

As a direct result of acting upon the words of the biblical text some snake handlers (including the founder of the movement) die.⁶ Similarly, every year many Jehovah's Witnesses, in consideration of such texts as Gen. 9.4 and Deut. 12.23, put their lives (or even more surprisingly those of their children) on the line rather than take a blood transfusion; again some die. The present dominance in biblical studies of reader-centred approaches notwithstanding, one suspects that in such cases the biblical text has indeed exerted a direct influence upon the reader of it. Had the words 'they shall pick up serpents' not been there in Mark, would the snake handlers still engage in so precarious an activity? Would Jehovah's Witnesses risk death rather than take blood had the Bible been silent on the matter? It seems very doubtful that they would.⁷

The cases of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the snake-handling Pentecostals are relatively clear-cut. But, as Räisänen pointed out, it is seldom that simple. In this essay, however, I do want to suggest that at Waco the text of the Bible, and the Book of Revelation in particular, was an important factor in the context of the dynamics of the group. Even if in the end it is difficult to say with certainty that the text itself has been influential and driven a group to act in ways that it would not otherwise have done, what does seem reasonably clear is that somewhere in that quagmire of the interaction between readers, texts and contexts is to be found the explanation of the Waco tragedy. The text was at the very least an important factor (perhaps among others) in the decision of the Branch Davidians to self-destruct (or 'act out their biblical destiny' as they would more probably have seen it). The community read the Book of Revelation (together with numerous other parts of the Bible, especially the Psalms) and what they read there, I suggest, together with the context in which they read it, led to the group's planned for and well executed apocalyptic self-destruction. In the text they saw their destiny and it was one that involved being faithful even unto death.

6. One estimate suggests that there are about 2,500 Pentecostals worldwide that actively handle snakes. The movement is autonomous and was started by George W. ('Little George') Hensley when on one Sunday in 1910 he concluded his sermon on Mk 16.18 by taking a large rattlesnake and handling it for several minutes. After an eventful life, Hensley died of a snake bite on 25 July, 1955. See further Thomas Burton, *Snake Handling Believers* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); David L. Kimbrough, *Taking up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002).

7. This is not of course to ignore the issue of just why it is that such groups select for particular attention one set of texts over another, an important wider issue that is outside of the scope of this particular essay.

What is important to note here is that contrary to what some have argued, the decision of the Branch Davidians to go out with an Apocalyptic bang rather than a resigned whimper was not a decision taken only in the last few days of the siege. Rather it seems that one can fairly easily trace an interpretative trajectory back through the tradition, indeed right to its inception, which included the entry of the group into the Davidian Kingdom (i.e. the end-time anti-typical Kingdom of the Latter-Day David) by means of a cleansing fire. The details of this changed somewhat over the course of the sixty years here in focus, but the centrality of fire in the traditions of apocalyptic expectations was a constant.⁸

3. The Book of Revelation and the Branch Davidians

David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians, was nothing if not self assured. From his rather unpromizing start in life, by the age of thirty-three (an age that is almost certainly significant as is the fact that he died around Passover time and that he was the step-son of a carpenter born to a fifteen year-old unmarried girl) he had somehow managed to become the undisputed leader of a highly motivated and eschatologically confident community. What had brought about Koresh's change in fortunes was theology and in particular his knowledge of the biblical text. For although Koresh could not write very well, he had a knowledge of the Bible that few could match and his ability to stitch together passages from that sacred text was nothing short of awe-inspiring. Indeed as one listens to almost any of the numerous tapes of Koresh's teaching that have survived, one is struck by the sense that he seemed to have most of the Bible in his head. Texts are linked together and quoted at length (always from the KJV) with remarkable fluency.⁹ Koresh's putting together of his violent apocalyptic textual mosaic may have been misguided, but it was impressive and it is not at all surprising that some were attracted to it. And Seventh-Day Adventists in particular (from which community almost all Branch Davidians had come) could be expected to hear Koresh's voice rather more open-mindedly than many for here, potentially, was another example of what the tradition had, in the person of Ellen White,¹⁰ experienced before:

8. See Newport, *The Branch Davidians*, pp. 307-24.

9. The most substantial collection of these tapes is in my own personal possession. They are due to be transferred and catalogued as part of the Panacea Society funded Millennial Studies Archive project at Liverpool Hope University.

10. Ellen G. White (1827-1915) was central to the rise of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and is still considered by the movement to have been a prophetess raised up by God to give direction to God's remnant people. Among Seventh-Day Adventists she is often referred to as 'the Spirit of Prophecy', a term taken from Rev. 19.10. She

an inspired interpreter of the inspired text. As Seventh-Day Adventists listened to Koresh and his most able evangelist Steve Schneider,¹¹ many no doubt rejected what they had to say. But some did not.

In all this the Book of Revelation was central. Indeed, speaking of that text Koresh once stated that 'All the books of the Bible end and meet there' (a statement once made also by Ellen White, from whom Koresh may have been borrowing at this point).¹² What Koresh meant by this is that for him the Book of Revelation was really a kind of coded panorama of the rest of biblical prophecy.

In this context we may note that Koresh placed great emphasis upon the words of Rev. 10.7: 'But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets'. Koresh's thinking here is quite complex, but in sum what he argued was that the person here prophetically described by the 'seventh angel' was none other than himself.¹³ He was a messenger, an angel, from God, the last in a sequence of seven and the final one who was to come at the end of days. However, Koresh said repeatedly that what he had to say as Revelation's Seventh Angel was not brand new (though he did claim that he had received visions). Rather, it was the interpretation of what 'he [God] hath revealed to his servants the prophets' that was the heart of Koresh's message, and 'his servants the prophets', for Koresh, meant the Old Testament prophets. The Seventh Angel, then, had come in the last days to explain to the people of God what books like Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel and many other texts *really* mean. And part of what they *really* meant was that the community would have to die.

It was from this starting point that Koresh set about interpreting the whole of the Book of Revelation. Much of this, he said, was about himself, the community and the days leading up to the coming of the literal end-time Kingdom in Israel. Initially this Kingdom will be ruled over not by Christ, but by a latter-day (anti-typical) King David and will be the place from which the 'loud cry' of Rev. 14.18 goes out as the nations are gathered ahead of the coming of Christ himself. This expectation was central to the

is also sometimes referred to in the tradition as 'a lesser light to lead to the greater light [i.e. the Bible]', that is, an inspired interpreter of the inspired text.

11. Central here is a set of nine further audio tapes that record a series of meetings held by Schneider in Manchester during the latter part of 1990 and beginning of 1991. Copies of these tapes are also in my personal possession.

12. The remark is found near the beginning of the tape 'Judge What I Say' (1985), a copy of which is in my possession; the Ellen White quotation is from *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 585.

13. See Newport, *The Branch Davidians*, p. 224.

group and had been so since the inception of the Davidians right back in 1929; indeed it was from it that the 'Davidians' took their name.¹⁴

The interpretation of the Book of Revelation at Waco was not a simple matter. Neither was it one that was without significance or consequence. Before getting into a discussion of what one of those consequences might well have been, however, a few further general remarks on aspects of Davidian interpretation of Revelation will be outlined. These will help both set the general context of the way in which the text functioned in this particular community and how it was at least 'received' and 'appropriated' by them. It will also provide some very specific examples of aspects of this particular group's interpretation of the text that relate directly to the issue of the presumed nearness of the coming of the Kingdom (and hence the need that the Davidians saw to be watchful for that moment when they would be called upon to fulfil the prophecies that had been written of this community).

4. *The Twenty-Four Elders*

One of the more widely discussed aspects of the life in Koresh's Branch Davidian community is the extent to which Koresh may have engaged in sex with under-age girls.¹⁵ Some have argued that the evidence that Koresh did engage in such activity is not compelling, though, as I have argued elsewhere at length, it seems reasonably clear that he did.¹⁶ It is also very obvious that he engaged in sexual activity with a large number of other women ranging from his own legal wife (Rachel Jones) to his prophetic predecessor, the elderly Lois Roden.

The end result of Koresh's sexual activity is difficult to ascertain, since for obvious reasons the paternity of the children born at Mt Carmel was not always made clear in the registration documentation. However, Branch Davidian David Thibodeau's summary seems about right (if

14. The details of the group's history is not important here. It is noted only that the when the movement began it was known as 'The Shepherd's Rod' (cf. Mic. 6.9) and later became 'The Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists'. Following the death in 1955 of Victor Houteff, the founder of the movement, the group went through a difficult leadership battle and began to fragment. One of the fragments became 'The Branch Association' of the Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists. It was this faction, originally led by Ben Roden and then his wife Lois Roden, which was later to be led by Vernon Howell, otherwise known as David Koresh.

15. See for example Christopher G. Ellison and John P. Bartkowski, 'Babies Were Being Beaten: Exploring Child Abuse Allegations at Ranch Apocalypse', in Stuart A. Wright (ed.), *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 111-49, esp. pp. 126-31.

16. See Newport, *The Branch Davidians*, pp. 199-202, for some of the evidence.

anything, perhaps, a little conservative): 'By April 1993, David had had sexual relations with a total of fifteen women [...] and had fathered seventeen children with eleven of them'.¹⁷ The count includes two fetuses that perished *in utero* in the Waco fire.¹⁸

Now it could be of course that Koresh was just a sexual predator. One cannot rule that out. However, among the members of the community the view was taken that Koresh's sexual activity was not simply the outworking of his own depraved personality, but very much a part of God's plan, a plan that was clearly outlined in the Bible. In essence the children that were to come from Koresh's sexual unions were thought to be none other than the twenty-four elders of Rev. 4, etc. By a sleight of inter-textual hand they were thought also to be the 'children' of the king in Ps. 45.5 'whom thou mayest make princes in all the earth'.¹⁹ In the new kingdom Koresh would rule as the anti-typical King David, while his literal children would rule as princes. As Koresh is heard to say on an audio tape: 'Only the Lamb is to be given the job to raise up the seed of the house of David isn't he? Isn't he? You know that in the prophecies, Psalms 45.'²⁰ Koresh (who as this quotation makes clear considered himself to be 'the Lamb' of Revelation 5, etc.) set about getting those twenty-four elders brought into this world.

The text *is* surely important here. Even if one is not prepared to give Koresh the benefit of the doubt but would rather go for the 'sexual predator' explanation of things, it is surely at least a powerful reminder of the way in which the perceived implications of texts can sometimes inspire actions that seemingly go very much against the grain, at least on the part of

17. David Thibodeau and Leon Whiteson, *A Place Called Waco* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), pp. 110-11. Thibodeau has probably omitted Lois Roden from the count. One of these children pre-dated Koresh's conversion to Branch Davidianism and hence is not of direct relevance to the argument here advanced.

18. Namely Baby Gyarfas and Baby Gent, children of Aisha Gyarfas and Nicole Gent and almost certainly fathered by Koresh.

19. See further James D. Tabor and Eugene Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 72-75.

20. This is on the audio tape entitled 'Foundation', a copy of which is in my possession. In this context it is hardly surprising that Koresh had such direct things to say to the FBI about his children and the important role they were yet to play in the plans of God. Little wonder either that none of those in Mt Carmel when the raid took place came out. Koresh was determined to keep them with him. They were 'different' from the others. They were special and different of course because they were his own flesh and blood; any father could be expected to hold his own offspring apart from children in general. However, Koresh's paternal instinct, like every other instinct he had, was channelled into a theological formulation (Negotiation Tape 57 [a copy of the tape is in my personal possession]).

the ones who are looking to the charismatic leader for authoritative interpretation of the community's scriptures. The announcement that Koresh was to have sexual access to all the women of the community, including the married ones, the so-called 'new light' doctrine, was extremely difficult for some husbands and wives to accept and even caused one major defection.²¹ Nevertheless, for the majority of those at Waco the task of preparing for the coming of the Kingdom, including making sure that the twenty-four elders were ready to take their seats, was seen as paramount. The Kingdom was coming. The prophecies must be fulfilled. Even the most intimate of personal relationships must be sacrificed in pursuit of the common millennial goal.

5. *The Lamb-Like Beast (Revelation 13.11-18)*

Another important aspect of the interpretation of the Book of Revelation found at Waco was that of the lamb-like beast of Rev. 13.11-18. In my view not having an understanding of how this text was understood by the Branch Davidians was a major obstacle in the way of the FBI's ultimately unsuccessful negotiation tactics.

The 'Branch' Davidians arose in c. 1963, from the 'Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists'. These 'Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists' came, as their name suggests, from the Seventh-Day Adventists. The split was in 1929. The Seventh-Day Adventists themselves arose in 1844 when they were one of a large number of groups that formed following the failed prophecy of William Miller, who predicted that Jesus would return on 22 October of that year.²²

Among nineteenth-century American prophecy interpreters America was generally seen to have a particularly important place in God's eschatological plans. It was in America, so many argued, that the millennial Kingdom was to be rooted. The Seventh-Day Adventists, however, took another view. America was not a instrument of God, but an instrument of Satan. America was in fact the Lamb-like Beast of Revelation 13, an entity had 'horns like a lamb, but spake like a dragon'.

This may seem a rather unimportant detail, but in fact it is far from that. What it means is that the Branch Davidians looked upon the US Government, including the law-enforcement agencies, with great

21. This was of Marc Breault, whose story is told in Martin King and Marc Breault, *Preacher of Death: The Shocking Inside Story of David Koresh and the Waco Siege* (Ringwood, Victoria, Australia: Signet Books, 1993).

22. On the details of Miller's prediction see further Kenneth G.C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 150-71.

suspicion. To Branch Davidian eyes the FBI were not good-hearted or well-intentioned negotiators who were determined to do all they could to bring this crisis to a bloodless close, but instruments of Satan in a rebellious world whose role during the end-times had been set out in scripture. The Davidians themselves, however, were God's faithful remnant, the ones who had heeded the call to 'come out of Babylon and not be a partaker of her sins' (cf. Rev. 18.4). To the Branch Davidians, then, the arrival of the ATF and then the FBI on the morning of 28 February, 1993 was highly significant and prophetically charged. Here was Revelation's Lamb-like Beast coming to destroy them in fulfilment of the biblical text and their interpretation thereof that had been part of the tradition since its inception. Such an understanding of the way in which the Branch Davidians would have interpreted the arrival of the ATF (i.e. as the coming against them of Revelation's Lamb-like Beast) can easily be deduced from the literature of Seventh-Day Adventism/Davidianism and Branch Davidianism.²³ However, a perhaps even more powerful confirmation that those inside Mt Carmel did indeed view the situation precisely in these apocalyptic terms comes from Derek Lovelock, a survivor of the fire. When asked what he had thought when he saw the ATF arrive at the start of the siege his view was clear: 'we thought the Lamb-like beast had come against us', he said.²⁴

6. *The Fifth and Sixth Seals*

By the start of the events in early 1993, then, there were clear expectations at Mt Carmel that the biblical prophecies were about to come to fruition — after all Koresh was the angel in Rev. 10 and what does it say (in the KJV)? 'But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, *the mystery of God should be finished*, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets' (Rev. 10.7; this is an emphasis easily discernible in Koresh's teaching). This was a community confident that the end was near to the point collectively seeking to bring into existence the twenty-four elders (either, in the case of the women, by submitting to Koresh's sexual demands or, in the case of the men, embracing celibacy, and, if married, giving up their own conjugal rights). It is in this context that we ought to read the statement made by Waco fire survivor David Thibodeau. Thibodeau is speaking of the thoughts that were in his mind on 27 February, that is the day *before* the ATF raid on Mt Carmel took place. The day was a Saturday (the Sabbath for the Branch Davidians)

23. On which see further Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, pp. 172-96.

24. This record is based upon a personal conversation between Kenneth Newport, Derek Lovelock and another unnamed Branch Davidian, in October 2002.

and expectation was running high since on that day part one of the 'Sinful Messiah' series was run in the *Waco Tribune-Herald*. Might this be it?²⁵ Might this be the beginning of the end? Thibodeau writes:

That Saturday seemed to go on forever [...] I watched the rainy Texas sunset that evening and felt I was living in a highly symbolic moment – the end of our world, if not the end of the whole world. I was simultaneously exhilarated and terrified. I didn't want to die, but I was now so identified with the community that the prospect of sharing its biblical destiny made my heart thump with excitement.²⁶

It should be remembered that nothing had actually happened at this point. The ATF 'dynamic entry' squad are still 60 miles away at Fort Hood. Yet even now Thibodeau can refer to his anticipation of 'sharing [...] the biblical destiny of the community' which seems to involve communal death.

So what was that 'biblical destiny' that Thibodeau (and indeed the others) appear to have been anticipating even prior to the arrival of the Lamb-like Beast on their doorstep?

The answer to this question is quite complex. That is not to say that it is unclear, just that it is very well developed and not easy to summarize. In very broad outline, however, the Branch Davidians took the view that they were the remnant people of God. They were the last few faithful people who had remained true to the prophetic witness. That said, there was a major problem. It was the Branch Davidian view (as it had been the Davidian view before that) that Revelation's 144,000 (Rev. 7.4) was a literal number. These 144,000 were the 'first fruits' of the eschatological harvest. The chief task of the community was to call the 144,000 together and they were all to come from one source: the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. After this group had been gathered there would be a cleansing (i.e. a literal slaughter) of the rest of the Seventh-Day Adventists and the setting up of the Kingdom; and then the 'loud cry' of Rev. 14.18 would go out to all others.

It seems fairly certain, however, that at some point prior to 1993 this basic pattern underwent significant alteration. In particular it is very clear

25. The 'Sinful Messiah' series was a sequence of reports published in the *Waco Tribune-Herald* beginning on 27 February, 1993. The title 'sinful messiah' was in fact one that Koresh himself took to himself and it had theological importance for the group. According to Koresh, Jesus had been a 'sinless messiah'; however, in order fully to identify with humanity, God had also to experience sin. Hence Koresh, who appears to have believed that he was a second incarnation of the Christ-spirit (see Newport, *The Branch Davidians*, pp. 225-26, for some of the evidence), was the 'sinful' messiah come in these end times.

26. Thibodeau, *Place Called Waco*, p. 158.

indeed from the sources that have survived that Koresh taught that the community at Waco would have to die before the Kingdom was set up.²⁷ This death would be a cleansing death and would involve the community going through fire. Even before Koresh, the Branch Davidians had begun talking of their home, Mt Carmel, as 'Jerusalem' and were saying that this Jerusalem must be 'cleansed' and cleansed by fire.²⁸ Under Koresh there was also talk of Mt Carmel being an 'Ark'. As with the Ark built by Noah, this 'Ark' in Waco was a place of safety to which the faithful were being called ahead of the apocalyptic storm that was about to be unleashed on the world.²⁹

There is, however, a major difference. When Noah and the others got into the boat, they remained there unscathed and simply (and literally) rode out the storm that had come upon the world while all others were destroyed. They themselves played no part in the destruction of the wicked, but remained safe while God carried out his work. In these end-times, however, so the Branch Davidians under Koresh believed, God would first cleanse the people in Mt Carmel and then they themselves, the cleansed Davidians, would become central to the destruction of the wicked. The cleansing would mean going through fire, but out of the fire they would come as angels of light to destroy the unfaithful.

While it is not easy to piece this together from the tapes and other surviving materials, a detailed study does provide a fairly clear picture. In particular the 'fulfilment' of the fifth and sixth seals was central to the group and it is with this particular part of the overall interpretation of the Book or Revelation discernible at Waco that the remainder of this paper is concerned.

A reconstruction of the interpretation of Revelation's fifth and sixth seals given by Branch Davidian evangelist Steven Schneider is fairly secure. Schneider is talking to a group in Manchester and has the interpretation of the seals of Revelation in view.

The relevant sections of the text read:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held [...] And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo,

27. The clearest example of this is actually from Schneider, on which see below.

28. See further Newport, *The Branch Davidians*, Chapter 8.

29. Schneider makes a great play on this when he is talking to his potential converts in Manchester where time and again he refers to the story of Noah and the remnant of the obedient that responded to God's call to get into the boat. So too the present-day remnant must respond to the warning and get into the end-time Ark, Mt Carmel. Only there will they be safe from what was about to come upon the world. Schneider is very clear on this.

there was a great earthquake [...] the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand? (Rev. 6.9, 12)

For the Branch Davidians at Waco this was a prophecy of their own destiny. First they must die, and their souls go under the altar. They must rest a while and this will fulfil the fifth seal. (It is worth noting that this interpretation is being promoted over three years before the actual Waco siege). But soon after the fifth seal comes the sixth seal – the wrath of the Lamb. For the Branch Davidians the ‘Lamb’ spoken of under the sixth seal from whose wrath the people of the earth seek to flee is not Christ, but Koresh. There is a further prophecy of him in Rev. 19.16 where he appears as ‘King of Kings and Lord of Lords’ ahead of an army.

The Branch Davidians picked up on the resonances here. The souls under the altar are given ‘white robes’ (Rev. 6.11) and those in the armies of heaven in Rev. 19 are ‘clothed in fine linen, white and clean’ (Rev. 19.14). The violent imagery of this vision of the One Faithful and True is similarly linked to the violence that takes place under the sixth seal when a great slaughter takes place. The conclusion is that the sixth seal and this account of the coming of the One Faithful and True in fact relate to the same event. Hence the souls that go under the altar are to be resurrected to join the ‘armies of heaven’ and take part in the slaughter of the wicked. The same event is mentioned at the end of Revelation 14 when the winepress of God’s wrath is trodden and ‘the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs’ (Rev. 14.20). Even the number of the army is known: it is 200 million, or Revelation’s ‘two hundred thousand thousand’ (Rev. 9.16).

Let us make no mistake; this is an exceptionally violent vision of things and Schneider at least looked forward to the time when he, in resurrected form, could slay the wicked with some pleasure. On the Manchester tapes one can hear him give voice to this several times. For example, on more than one occasion he speaks with some evident glee of the time when those who see the army of the eschatological Lord will ‘crap their pants’ in fear (this he links to the reference of the ‘stink coming up’ in Joel 2.2). And on the Bug Tapes (that is the tapes picked up by FBI listening devices that had been smuggled into Mt Carmel during the siege) we can hear the following exchange. Schneider has just come downstairs after talking to Koresh:

Unidentified Female: What’s going on? Anything good?

Steve Schneider: Oh my G[od] [...] It may be scary.

Unidentified Male: Oh yeah baby.

Steve Schneider: God – what you’ve been hearing... we’ve been

talking about that everyday. Now we're making efforts—I think—he didn't say yet. We're making efforts to go back en masse.

Unidentified Male: I said...

Steve Schneider: You always wanted to be a charcoal briquette.

And a few sentences later (speaking of the FBI) Schneider says

Wait till I get my scrawny hands on your scrawny neck[s]. I'm coming back and when I do you aren't gonna know where you're gonna be able to hide.

This looks very much as though it is dependent upon Rev. 6.15-17:

Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

Death, cleansing, resurrection, return—these are all very much a part of the Branch Davidian vocabulary in the years (not days) before the events of 19 April, 1993. And while to the outsider much of this may seem to sit only very loosely with the biblical text, in fact when one looks into it, one is constantly struck by the way in which the biblical text and the Branch Davidian reader of it interact. There is a constant concern on the part of the sectarians to link their expectations to 'what the Bible says' and while some may wonder at the imaginative exegesis, one is struck too by the extent to which the Branch Davidians, including Koresh, were not prepared to cut free altogether from scriptural moorings.

Space does not permit further discussion of the interpretation of the Book of Revelation that was operative at Waco. We return briefly to the recorded events. Just after noon on 19 April a fire broke out and ripped through the timber buildings that made up the complex. Some Branch Davidians escaped the flames, though others did not, even though some of those who in the end lost their lives had ample opportunity to escape had they wished to do so. Huge controversy surrounds the cause of the fire by the time of the passing of which some eighty members of the community were dead, some from the effects of the fire itself, but many, including Koresh and Schneider, from gunshot wounds. The community had self destructed. But this was not a simple case of mass suicide. It was, rather, an act of almost unimaginable faith. Death was embraced as the gateway to new life in the new kingdom. The remnant were going home. But they would be back.

Such expectation, sometimes intense, fervent and sharply focused, is seen throughout the post-1993 Branch Davidian tradition. For example, in conversation with two Branch Davidians in Manchester, UK, the topic of where precisely the surviving Branch Davidians consider the world to

be on the prophetic timetable came up.³⁰ It was clear that this was an issue of great importance to them, and the conversation became excited. It was clear also that they had a very precise view, based upon the belief that events at Waco could be seen in scripture and that what was now soon to take place could also be seen there. Particular attention was yet again drawn to the fifth and sixth seals, which were read out from a heavily-marked Bible. The fifth seal, they said, described what had happened on 19 April (though we should remember that Schneider had already linked the fifth seal with the anticipated deaths of community members over three years before). Their fellow Branch Davidian believers, they said, were currently resting under the altar in their white robes. But the conversation moved on quickly. The next event was the sixth seal. That text was read out.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood [...] etc. (Rev. 6.12)

This is the event for which some in the tradition are waiting. It is also of course anticipated by literally millions of other prophecy believers in the world today, especially, perhaps, in the United States. But there is a big difference. Outside the Branch Davidian tradition the Lamb here spoken of is Christ, who will one day return to destroy evil and take the faithful to himself. According to the two Branch Davidians in Manchester, however, the Lamb is David Koresh and the event here spoken of is the same as that in Rev. 9.16-21. This is a picture, so they argue, of the return of those they lost at Waco, and indeed all who have been slain for the Word of God. They are led by Koresh on a white horse – the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.³¹

7. Conclusion

And so to conclude: in this chapter we have looked briefly at one aspect of the interaction between the text and reader as it relates principally to the Book of Revelation. It is in that interaction, the use of the text, the

30. This record is based upon a personal conversation between Kenneth Newport, Derek Lovelock and another unnamed Branch Davidian, in October 2002.

31. Such thinking sustains other Branch Davidians too, including a post-1993 convert Branch Davidian in Nottingham, UK. He too verbally tripped over himself with excitement in an effort to explain what was about to happen (interview with Kenneth G.C. Newport, July 2002). In this part of the Branch Davidian community, then, (though not in all) there is still a real sense of eschatological expectation. The biblical text is interpreted in ways that give an explanation of what has gone before, an account of where we are now and, of course, real hope for the future.

reception of the text and perhaps even the influence of the text, that in my view the explanation of the act of Apocalyptic self-destruction that one sees at Waco can be found. While not underestimating the strength of other points of view, it does seem to me that the Davidians set fire to Mt Carmel and that they did so purposely (that is, they did it with a specific goal in mind). In my view this was not a random act of desperation that arose out of the pressures brought about by the siege; it was rather a quite exceptionally dramatic act of faith, the necessity of which had long been anticipated and planned for. In the spring of 1993 it was plain to the Branch Davidians that they were facing desperate times. The great beast of Revelation 13 was about them and it was clear that the time had come for action.

At the very least it is important, I think, to consider the way in which those inside Mt Carmel reacted to the fire once it had taken hold. It is true that some fled the flames, but the majority did not despite the fact that it would have been quite possible for them to have done so. Indeed, one Branch Davidian, Ruth Riddle, escaped the flames at one point, only to run back into them moments later. Clive Doyle, an individual who had been a Branch Davidian longer than most and an eventual survivor of the fire, testified at the 1995 congressional hearing regarding the events of Waco that as he was leaving Mt Carmel through the chapel area, he saw Wayne Martin. Doyle turned to Martin and asked him 'What do we do now?' According to Doyle the as yet uninjured Martin slid down the wall into a sitting position and said simply 'Well I guess we just have to wait on God'.³² All in all it is reasonably plain that many of the Branch Davidians made no effort at all to escape despite the overwhelming instincts they must surely have felt to the contrary. What was it that held them back? Some would say FBI tanks and snipers, but such a view has no evidence to support it. It is much more probable that it was the words of the Bible and the uncompromizing belief that the Branch Davidians had that they understood those words properly. The time for the fulfilment of the fifth seal had come. The souls must go under the altar to 'wait a little while'. The time had come to be 'faithful unto death' (cf. Rev. 2.10).

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32. Doyle, Congressional Testimony. A video tape clip of Doyle's testimony on this point is in my personal possession.

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EARTH LEFT BEHIND? ECOLOGICAL READINGS OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

Michael S. Northcott

1. Introduction

We were discussing global warming and vehicle emissions in the back of a large air-conditioned Mercedes Benz travelling in the rush hour from Kuala Lumpur to its neighbouring city of Petaling Jaya in West Malaysia. My companion was a retired government economist who is also a Methodist and we were on a six lane motorway passing alongside tall condominium blocks and air conditioned offices which had replaced squatter settlements, fruit trees and old style bungalows since I lived in Malaysia in the 1980s. I suggested that Malaysia was neglecting the health of its own people by failing to regulate vehicle emissions, or to require the installation of catalytic converters on vehicle exhausts. And in evidence I quoted a prominent Malaysian paediatrician who had told me that asthma rates are reaching epidemic proportions among children in the city. My companion commented that it was not right for the grandfather to expect the grandchild to be like him. The country and its economy are still young, he indicated, and Malaysia has a long way to catch up on the pollution and greenhouse gas emissions of countries like the UK and the United States. 'And', he continued 'are we not people of faith? And it says in the Bible that the world will come to an end at some point. Is it not likely that global warming is a sign of the end? In that case we do not need to worry.'

Ecological pessimism has pervaded far and wide in the world Church as a result of the global dissemination of dispensational millenarianism. This is indicative of the homogenous shaping of popular cultures that are occurring in tandem with economic globalization and as promoted by global media and publishing companies in the last thirty years. Through satellite TV, the internet, international newspapers, and global bookstore chains, ideas and cultural mores originating in North America exercise an ever increasing hold on urban populations in many parts of the world. These channels of global cultural influence include Christian television and publishing companies which disseminate the American

dispensationalist credo among evangelical and Pentecostal Christians.¹ Pentecostalism has long been linked to dispensationalism and with the global spread of neo-pentecostalism it has become a doctrine which is as popular amongst conservative evangelical and charismatic Christians in Kuala Lumpur and Kaohsiung as it is in Los Angeles and London.² Neo-pentecostal influence is particularly widespread in the urban areas of Southeast Asia. Some Christians have left the former mission churches to join new churches such as the Full Gospel Assembly which has congregations in the major urban centres of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.³ Many more have adopted neo-pentecostal styles of worship and teachings while remaining in mainline congregations. Christians drawn to dispensationalist eschatology are also often advocates of a prosperity gospel that indicates that wealth is a sign of divine blessing on the faithful and that the faithful have a right to enjoy an abundance of the good things that capitalism procures from the earth before the end times when the earth will be destroyed.⁴

Dispensationalism is the form of millenarianism developed by the founder of the Plymouth Brethren, John Nelson Darby. The schema arose in the context of profound pessimism about the established churches in England and Scotland in the nineteenth century among a group of preachers and theologians who included not only Darby but other anti-establishment figures such as John Henry Newman in England and Edward Irving in Scotland. Though it achieved only a small following among Plymouth Brethren in England it was more influential in Scotland where it is associated not only with Irving but the brothers Andrew and Horatius Bonar who, with Thomas Chalmers, led the Disruption in which the Free Church arose from internal rupture of the Church of Scotland in 1846.⁵ Dispensationalism received its greatest following in the United States where it was taken up and popularized in a highly successful way by Charles Scofield and Lewis Chafer who, through the Scofield Bible and Dallas Theological Seminary respectively, have exercised a profound influence on conservative evangelicals in America and beyond.

1. Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford and Susan D. Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

2. Damian Thompson, *Waiting for Antichrist: Charisma and Apocalypse in a Pentecostal Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3. Michael S. Northcott, 'A Survey of the Rise of Charismatic Christianity in Malaysia', *Asia Journal of Theology* 4 (1990), pp. 266-78.

4. Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

5. On the disruption and its interconnections with Tractarianism in England, see Stuart J. Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland and Scotland 1801-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

At the heart of the dispensationalist reading of the Book of Revelation is a fragmented, literalistic and ahistorical hermeneutic. Apocalyptic texts are extricated from their context in the first Christian century and through a contemporaneous reading are said to literally describe the circumstances and events which, two millennia later, will attend the events which lead up to the return of Christ and the inauguration of the millennial reign of peace. As Ben Witherington III suggests, what is particularly significant about this style of literalism is the radical Calvinist individualism that accompanies it.⁶ Scripture is read as addressing the eternal destiny of Christians as individuals who live in the midst of the divine historical drama. But as members of churches individuals play no part in this drama. History is the terrain of divine action and the only place where individuals interact with divine action is in the interior of the human heart. Through being twice born, and through remaining faithful to Christ in their emotional commitments and prayers, individuals are identified as those who will be 'raptured' and rescued from the earth before the 'great tribulation' with the pouring out of the destructive plagues, wars and earthquakes, which see the earth literally being degraded and destroyed in the events which are said to precede the second coming.

The interpretation of the Book of Revelation as indicating that the present physical earth will be destroyed in the course of the divine plan of redemption means that for dispensationalists there is no rationale for caring for the earth in the present era since the return of Christ will sweep away the present physical order and replace it with a 'new heaven and a new earth' which are physically discontinuous with the present cosmos.⁷ This eschatological stance intersects with a deep-rooted evangelical suspicion of environmentalism as a progressive or even pantheist creed. This linkage is particularly strong in North America – as indicated in the experience of a Portland Pentecostal pastor who was converted to the environmental cause by a 1,000 mile sabbatical hike in the Rockies, and who undertakes speaking engagements on behalf of the Christian Society of the Green Cross. In a visit to a Baptist church in Portland, Oregon, he spoke on how God requires Christians to steward the environment for future generations. In response a member of the congregation challenged him with the question 'Do you worship God or nature?' The clear implication is that intergenerational ecological concern is inspired

6. Ben Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

7. Janel M. Curry-Roper, 'Contemporary Christian Eschatologies and their Relation to Environmental Stewardship', *Professional Geographer* 42 (1990), pp. 157-69.

by nature worship and not the Bible.⁸ Another asked 'Why should we worry about the earth when the Bible says it'll all be destroyed in the end times, when God will make a new heaven and a new earth?'

At the root of the anti-ecological rhetoric of dispensationalism lies the escapist doctrine of the 'rapture' which has become the lynchpin of the dispensationalist schema invented by Darby. Darby is said to have originated his account of an instant rapture after hearing about a vision which occurred to a small girl called Margaret Macdonald at a healing service in Glasgow in 1830. She received a vision of a two-stage return of Christ to earth.⁹ At the first return Christ comes secretly to rescue the raptured from the earth before the Great Tribulation and the battle of Megiddo or 'Armageddon'. At the second return Christ comes to reign over the earth in Jerusalem in the one-thousand year reign of peace which is said to be predicted in Revelation 21. The word rapture occurs nowhere in the Book of Revelation but it is a Latin translation of the Greek root *arpazo*, meaning 'catch up', and as used in 1 Thessalonians 4.17. The preaching of the rapture did not catch on in England but Darby made many evangelistic trips to the United States before, during, and after the American Civil War when the escapist theology of the rapture turned out to have widespread appeal.¹⁰ The doctrine of the rapture is what produces the peculiar division of world history into seven stages and it is the most significant innovation that Darby adds to his Joachimite forbears. And it is this teaching which singularly reshapes the modern millennialist reading of the Book of Revelation.

This escapist reading of the Apocalypse has found a particularly influential form in the best-selling *Left Behind* novelistic series of Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.¹¹ Since the terror attacks on America in 2001, an event that many dispensationalists interpreted as a 'sign of the end', each new issue in this fictional series has made it to the top of the New York Times bestseller list. The series commences with the novel *Left Behind* whose central premise is that born again Christians are 'raptured' from the earth in a sudden event which causes planes and cars piloted by

8. Jeffrey Smith, 'Christian Evangelicals Preach a Green Gospel', *High Country News* 29 (April 1997), pp. 2-14.

9. Thomas D. Ice, 'Margaret MacDonald', in M. Couch (ed.), *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology: A Practical Guide to the People, Viewpoints, and History of Prophetic Studies* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), p. 243. See also Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1970).

10. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, p. 94.

11. Melani McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular: The Left Behind Series and Christian Fundamentalism's New World Order', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003), pp. 773-98.

Christians to crash. The rapture leaves the world bereft of 'true' Christians apart from those who convert to Christianity after the rapture. The novels focus on a group of new converts, called 'tribulation saints', who constitute a tribulation force that sets out to disrupt the plans for global domination of the antichrist. Their lives are set against the backdrop of a series of political upheavals and natural disasters that are described as the unfolding of the prophetic meaning of the events described in the Book of Revelation. The dominant narrative is of the rise to power of an antichrist figure—Nicholae Carpathia—who is a Romanian and becomes Secretary General of the United Nations. In that capacity he builds a world government and a global army. He also organizes world disarmament, destroying 90 per cent of all existing weapons, and having the remaining 10 per cent put in the hands of the UN army. He uses a miraculous scientific formula invented by a Jewish scientist called Chaim Rosenzweig which is said to have made the deserts bloom in Israel as the carrot to persuade all the nations to disarm.¹² Thus the parts of the earth that had turned to desert—from Botswana to the Russian Urals—are said to be given a new lease of life by a miracle of science which is shared around the earth as part of a plot to establish a world government headed by the antichrist.

Each novel contains an extended digression on particular passages from the Book of Revelation. These are reprinted in the book and then commented upon, most often in the form of a sermon from a church pastor. These digressions are to provide the reader with the sense that what is being fictionally portrayed is also linked to an authoritative set of prophetic texts whose real meaning is known to the authors of the *Left Behind* series. However the textual basis for the core narrative of a global government and world leader as antichrist is limited. The principal source within the Book of Revelation is the description of the beast in chapter 13 whom 'the whole world' goes after 'in wondering admiration' (Rev. 13.3). The beast is said to wage war on the people of God and to have been 'granted authority over every tribe nation, language and race' (Rev. 13.7), and 'all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it (Rev. 13.8). The identification of the beast, a figure conventionally said to be the Roman Emperor, with antichrist is a common ploy in dispensationalist readings of Revelation. The linkage of world disarmament and deserts blooming is however a novel twist. It indicates that human efforts to improve the ecological condition of the earth, and to reduce the threat of war, are related projects. This is of course a central contention of the Hebrew prophets. Third Isaiah clearly links disarmament and the restoration of

12. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of Those Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), pp. 99-102.

the fertility of the deserts in a redeemed and restored Israel. However in the *Left Behind* series the coming together of ecological projects to restore deserts, and disarmament projects, are indicative of an evil plot to promote the authority of a world government led by the 'antichrist'. A curious twist is that the headquarters of the world government move from New York City to a big new secure headquarters in Baghdad, which is capital of the 'new Babylon', and where, back in our real space and time, the United States is presently engaged in building the largest American military base outside of the United States and the biggest embassy in the world, and moreover an embassy which will have the capacity to generate its own power, its own independent water supply, and a helicopter pad to ferry personnel in and out.

This Babylonian twist in La Haye's plot and its contiguity with present events in Iraq is of course not coincidental. The underlying trope of the *Left Behind* series is that the United States plays a central role in the unfolding events of the 'end times'. The novels sustain a kind of American Zionism in which American support for Israel, American engagement in war in the Middle East, and American saints, are essential elements in the events that lead to and follow the rapture, including the rise of the antichrist, and the eventual return of Christ to the earth after the Tribulation. And this fictional relationship maps onto a cultural reality as the growing political influence of conservative evangelical and dispensationalist Christianity which the popularity of the *Left Behind* series exemplifies has seen growing support for Israel across the United States, and a growing focus of American military power on the Middle East in the Clinton and Bush administrations.¹³

The second major element of the backdrop against which the tribulation saints pursue their lives and loves are a series of natural disasters, the first of which is a devastating global earthquake which is said to be predicted in Rev. 6.12-14: 'There was a violent earthquake; the sun turned black as a funeral pall and the moon all red as blood; the stars in the sky fell to earth, like figs blown off a tree in a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was dislodged from its place.' *Soul Harvest*, the third novel in the series, opens with a description of a gigantic ongoing and intercontinental earthquake.¹⁴ The main characters survive the quake, which affects the total land area of the earth, through their skilful manipulation of machines which include a Range Rover,

13. McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular', p. 776. See also Michael S. Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

14. Timothy LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Soul Harvest: The World Takes Sides* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998).

a helicopter, and an executive Lear Jet. All around people are dying in their millions but the tribulation saints heroically pilot their machines around the globe, rescuing their friends and acquaintances where they can from destroyed buildings or holes in the ground. The prominent role of transport machines, and sophisticated lap-top computers and cell phones, is an interesting feature of these novels. From the beginning air travel is a central trope since in *Left Behind* many pilots disappear from planes, and many drivers from cars, giving rise to a large number of air crashes and car pile-ups. The first visible signs of the rapture then are felt by people who are already on the move in mechanical devices. And these visible signs are moreover first communicated through mobile communication devices or cell phones. This orientation to mechanical movement and technological communication continues throughout the series. Consequently technology and the earth are set in an inverse relationship. The earth as desert, or as ravaged by an earthquake, is only redeemable, in the sense that it may play a part in the larger apocalyptic schema, by the intervention of science and technology as manipulated by the novels' central characters. Natural processes and systems offer no assistance or hope. Only by conquering or rising above the earth through technological devices can the characters secure their existence on an earth which is subject to divine judgment in the tribulation. Analogously the community of the tribulation saints who are the core band of heroes of the series is not sustained by them living in the same neighbourhood or city. They are constantly on the move in planes and cars and helicopters between Chicago, New York, Jerusalem and Baghdad. Instead of a shared place their community is sustained by electronic communications on cell phones which continue to work even after the devastating global earthquake because the Global Community army expends great efforts to repair and replace phone masts. And whereas the saints use technology to save one another from the wrecked earth, the earth itself is said to have been given over entirely to the devil. The 'anointed prophet' Tsion Ben-Judah, a Messianic Jew, suggests that the great earthquake which kills a quarter of all people living is indicative that 'God the Father has conceded control of the Earth's weather to Satan himself, the prince and power of the air'.¹⁵

The idea that the earth is under the rule of Satan and will be gradually destroyed by end time events which include meteor showers, nuclear war, global earthquakes and a darkening of the sun, are all indicative of the ecological pessimism which characterizes the dispensationalist perspective on the fate of the earth. The post-rapture 'tribulation' involves systematic ecological destruction of the earth. And this destruction is

15. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Soul Harvest*, p. 323.

invariably linked to readings of the 'seven seals' in Revelation 6 and 7 as the punishment of God on the earth.

For evangelical dispensationalists living in the shadow of the second coming, and in expectation of an 'imminent rapture', the Book of Revelation is said to indicate that the earth will be systematically wrecked as a punishment on sinful humanity as the end approaches. Dispensationalists consequently are often excited by news of major natural disasters or wars because such bad news validates their philosophy of history.¹⁶ And if the world is soon to be subject to the rule of Satan, any efforts on the part of Christians to improve the moral condition of human society, or the ecological condition of the earth, for example by attempting to mitigate anthropogenic global warming, are futile. As the dispensationalist theologian Charles Ryrie puts it,

this is one of the tensions under which Christians must live. They know they cannot bring in peace, righteousness, or social justice; these will be accomplished only by Christ at his Second Coming. At the same time, they know equally well that they ought to pray for peace and practice righteousness.¹⁷

For the dispensationalist, history is reaching an end point where the earth is given over to Satan and the rule of antichrist and only those who believe, and are soon to be raptured, may be saved from the destructive events that this rule will unleash. Consequently many Christians of this theological persuasion when faced with intractable social or ecological problems such as global warming turn to the maxim of Darby, 'the Church must be entirely passive'.¹⁸ The created order is already on the way to perdition and there is nothing that Christians can do to save it.

This is why we find dispensationalist evangelicals who believe, like my Methodist friend in Malaysia, that global warming is a sign of the end of time. Hal Lindsey suggests something a little different when he argues that global warming is not so much a scientific fact as a scientific deceit to create fear in the general populace. Such fears he suggests are prophesied in the words of Christ when he warned of 'men's hearts failing with fear' as they look for 'those things which were coming on the earth: for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken'. It is then to be expected that politicians and scientists will come up with accounts of ecological and historical developments which provoke great anxiety

16. Dave Hunt, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1984), p. 57.

17. Charles Ryrie, 'Theological Perspectives on Social Ethics, Part I,' *Bibliotheca sacra* 134 (1977), p. 43.

18. John Nelson Darby, *Collected Writings*, IV (ed. William Kelly; Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, 1977), p. 157.

in the end times.¹⁹ But such accounts are likely to be deceits since they come from leaders of a world which is being prepared for rule by the antichrist.

Lindsey's resistance to the science of global warming is indicative of a larger anti-science attitude amongst dispensationalists who are also creationists. However this resistance to mainstream science in the dispensational worldview does not carry over into a resistance to the technological fruits of science. On the contrary the *Left Behind* series display a technological fetishism in elaborate descriptions of the cockpits of Boeing 757s, the arts of computer hacking and the bugging of rooms and planes with hidden devices hooked up to sophisticated software which can translate foreign languages.²⁰ Their characters are situated in the secular scientific world not as resisters to the dominant technologies but as elite globetrotters who have access to the most sophisticated technologies. In this respect the *Left Behind* series reflects the technophilia of American popular culture. They also rely on the mythology of redemptive violence with which this technophilia interacts. The tribulation saints are saved time and again in their battle with the antichrist by their superior skills with 'choppers' and computers, guns and sports utility vehicles. They fight the good fight with all the technological wizardry and weaponry that Uncle Sam puts at the disposal of its wealthier citizens. And at no point do their lives intersect in significant ways with natural systems. We never read of them procuring food or seeking shade under a tree. When water is needed it comes from a shower faucet or even a toilet bowl. Technology redeems even as the earth is gradually destroyed. In the *Left Behind* novels the followers of the lamb are to be found in the cockpits or driving seats of Range Rovers, Boeing 757s, and luxury yachts, and commune with each other using the latest cell phone and computer technologies. They survive earthquakes and meteor showers through their skilful manipulation of the imperial technologies which are at the heart of the global flows of goods and peoples which characterize the present technologically sustained global economy.

The technophilia and anti-ecological subtext of the *Left Behind* novels contrasts significantly with a more progressive strain of contemporary American interpretation of the Book of Revelation which suggests that the Apocalypse is best understood as a critique of the Roman Empire and its ecologically rapacious economy. For Chilean theologian Pablo Richard the reign of Christ in Jerusalem represents not an event beyond history or

19. Hal Lindsey, 'More Hot Air from the U. N.', *Worldnet Daily*, March 2, 2007, online: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1794066/posts>, no pages, accessed on 21 June, 2007.

20. McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular', p. 783.

the end of history but 'a new creation within history' which is 'the final achievement of our history'.²¹ On this interpretation the whore of Babylon is clearly code for Rome since Babylon in the Old Testament is the destroyer of Jerusalem and for John of Patmos, writing in c. 96 CE, Rome *was* the destroyer of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Thus Richard suggests that the plagues and woes described in Revelation 7–12 are not so much natural disasters, nor the punishment of God on a world going awry. Instead they describe the consequences of Rome's destructive rule which impacts deleteriously on the poor and on the earth. And he suggests these first century accounts of the plagues of Revelation provide a powerful prophetic reading of the apocalyptic consequences of contemporary imperialism in the forms of 'ecological destruction, the arms race, irrational consumerism and the idolatrous logic of the market'.²²

Barbara Rossing similarly argues that the ecological destruction described in Revelation is not indicative of a divine intent to punish or wreck the earth before the end, but on the contrary the whore of Babylon is described as one who is at war with God's earth, as well as with God's people. The arrogant claim of Rome to rule the earth eternally in Revelation 6.10 is answered with the message that Rome will rule for 'just a little longer' in 6.11. And in Rev. 11.18 is revealed the divine intention to destroy 'the destroyers of the earth'. The point, as Rossing avers, is that 'Revelation's insistence on the imminence of the "end" assures its audience that Rome will not rule the earth forever'.²³

This approach also makes sense of a curious feature of the new heaven and new earth in which 'the ocean is no more'. As David Hawkin points out the isle of Patmos is situated close to the imperial port of Miletus and served as one of three fortress islands designated to protect ships entering this vital trading post with goods sourced from all over the Roman Empire.²⁴ Many of the items listed in the cargo list in Revelation 18.12 are luxury items, trade in which was a major cause both of the oppression of the poor and of ecological destruction in the empire.²⁵ On this account the crucial pivot between the way of destruction and the new creation is the conflict between the power and wealth of the Roman

21. Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 172.

22. Richard, *Apocalypse*, p. 86.

23. Barbara Rossing, 'For the Healing of the World: Reading *Revelation* Ecologically', in David Rhoads (ed.), *From Every Tribe, Tongue, People, and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 174.

24. David J. Hawkin, 'The Critique of Idolatry in the Book of Revelation and its Implications for Ecology', *Ecotheology* 8 (2003), pp. 161–72.

25. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 351–54.

Empire, its ecologically rapacious trade in goods from far and near which are brought to Rome on the oceans, and the peaceable austerity of those who follow the lamb of God. John of Patmos therefore envisages the revelation of the reign of Christ on earth as having the effect of bringing the rapacious and enslaving trade of empire to an end. And this is why the ocean dries up for the ocean is a symbol of the global trade of empire. When the sea dries up the ships of Rome will no longer be able to drag trees and minerals and foodstuffs from all corners of the earth to feed the idolatrous greed of her inhabitants. With the Fall of Rome evil is judged and ended within and not beyond history and hence the story ends with a 'merger of earth and heaven' rather than the destruction of the earth as the dispensationalists envisage.

American feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza takes up a related interpretation when she argues that the Book of Revelation represents a struggle between the use of power for destruction and for wellbeing.²⁶ For Fiorenza there is a continuity between the 'new heaven and new earth' and the existing physical cosmos. This physical continuity indicates that Revelation's depiction of the emergence of the reign of Christ on earth and the overthrow of empire reveal the divine intention to heal the earth from the burden of destruction that empire has imposed upon it. In this perspective Babylon and New Jerusalem represent two opposing visions of the historical destiny of the earth. Under the rule of empire and global trade the earth suffers plagues and woes of the kind that are growing in the present era of economic globalization. And under the other the world is healed and renewed. The form of this ecological renewal for Rossing is demonstrated in the water of life which flows through the renewed urban landscape of the New Jerusalem. Against the tendency of modern capitalist cities to turn the earth into commodities where even water is bought and sold, in the New Jerusalem life-giving water is offered to the inhabitants 'without cost'. And the rivers of the New Jerusalem are moreover surrounded by trees which provide fruits to its inhabitants throughout the year and again without need of money. And at the same time 'the leaves of the trees provide healing for the nations'.²⁷ The contrast with LaHaye and Jenkins could not be more complete. In the progressive American reading of Revelation the earth is healed and restored and peace between nations come about as the related results of the reign of Christ on earth. But in the nightmarish vision of the *Left Behind* series deserts blooming and nations disarming are both evidence of the influence of the antichrist.

26. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), p. 109.

27. Rossing, 'For the Healing of the World', p. 177.

For progressive American Christians the book of Revelation presents a vision of a restored earth in which the damage being done by American corporations and the American military to the earth and its peoples is ended. America in these accounts is analogous to the whore of Babylon; America as the new Rome is indicted by this reading of the Apocalypse of John. By contrast in the novels of LaHaye and Jenkins American economic, military, political and technological domination are crucial to the role of the saints in preparing the earth for the coming rapture, and for the tribulation saints in resisting the rule of the antichrist. There is, however, one agreed subtext between these two contrasting readings of the book of Revelation. In both America plays a pivotal role either as the imperial colossus against which Christians are called to witness by the Apocalypse of John or as the nation whose military power allows Israel to flourish in the end times and so to prepare the way for the rapture.

Where these visions radically disagree is in the relation between America and the fate of the earth. In the one America's domination of a global imperial economy must end if the earth is to be freed from subjection to ecological destruction. In the other the ecological destruction of the earth—whether by America and its military and technological prowess or by the supernatural plagues which God sends on the earth—is the destiny, the fate of the earth. The saints can no more prevent this destruction than they can prevent the rise of the antichrist. Instead Christians are called to pray that they may escape the earth before the end. But of course John of Patmos has no such account of an escape or rapture for the saints within his text. Instead, as Ben Witherington III points out 'like many early Jews and Jewish Christians, he believed that justice must be done on earth and must be seen to be done, and likewise so must redemption if God's word and sovereignty is to be vindicated'.²⁸ And this is why progressive interpreters, like Witherington, believe that the end of history that is prefigured in the Book of Revelation in the 'new heaven and new earth of the new Jerusalem' does not involve the destruction of the earth, but the downfall of empire and the doing of justice within history.

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28. Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 204.

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FEMINISTS IN SEARCH FOR A USABLE FUTURE: FEMINIST RECEPTION OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Hanna Stenström

1. *Introduction*

In a number of feminist exegetical works, especially from the 1970s and early 1980s, early Christian history is reconstructed in a way that legitimates contemporary work for women's rights in the churches.¹ Thus, a reconstruction of the past becomes a 'usable past'. In feminist exegesis of the Book of Revelation, we meet a different feminist task: a quest for a 'usable future', that is, visions of a future that inspires work for social change here and now, making our efforts to create a more just world deeply rooted in God's struggle for a world of perfect justice. Through feminist interpretations of Revelation, feminist biblical scholars who are also Christian feminist theologians can create utopian visions, which give hope and inspiration in the daily struggles for some more justice on this Earth.²

However, even a cursory reading of Revelation makes clear that the book is not the most likely choice for feminists seeking a usable future. Actually, a feminist reader will most probably be repulsed by the grotesque caricature of a woman, Babylon the Prostitute, and the vision of how this woman must perish for God's victory to be accomplished (Rev. 17.1-19.4). On the other hand, the reader also encounters the Woman Clothed With the Sun (Rev. 12.1-2), who, alone of all biblical women, resembles the great ancient goddesses³ and is still, in spite

1. About this phase in feminist interpretation of the Bible, see, e.g. Inger Marie Lindboe, 'Recent Literature: Development and Perspectives in New Testament Research on Women', *ST* 43 (1989), pp. 153-63 (p. 155).

2. It may well be discussed if the reconstructions of the past give an accurate picture of the past, or if they are actually – or at least also – a kind of utopian visions but located in the past: images of an ideal which may inspire struggles to get as close as possible to the ideal today. This discussion is too complex to repeat here.

3. The information that the attributes of the Sun Woman are also attributes of ancient goddesses, such as Isis, is recurrent in commentaries; see, e.g., Adela Yarbro Collins, 'The Apocalypse (Revelation)', in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer

of that, a positive figure. Revelation may therefore perhaps also hold promises for those who want to find something in the Bible that can be claimed for feminist spirituality.

At the same time, feminist exegetes who are more concerned with gender analysis of the biblical texts than with using them in construction theology for believers most probably find Revelation an extremely suitable object for feminist analysis, i.e., an analysis with gender as an analytical tool.⁴ Briefly, such an analysis will show how in Revelation one of the basic dichotomies of Western thinking is used to speak about the struggle between Good and Evil and to make the audience take sides in this struggle, namely the dichotomy Good (pure, obedient) Woman vs. Bad (impure, uncontrolled) Woman, Bride (Rev. 21.2) vs. Whore (Rev. 17.1-6). Impurity, sexual excesses, and lack of concern for shame is characteristic of 'Bad' women and of Babylon (Rev. 17.2, 4);⁵ purity, control, obedience, and concern for shame is characteristic of 'Good' women, and therefore also of Jerusalem, the Bride (Rev. 19.7-8; 21.2).⁶ 'Women' is even used as a symbolic term for all that Christians are to avoid when Rev. 14.4 says about the elect who are gathered with the Lamb on Mount Zion that 'they are those who have not defiled themselves with women, they are virgins' (*houtoi eisin hoi meta gynaikōn ouk emolynthēsan, parthenoi gar eisin*) with *parthenoi* ('virgins') in the masculine grammatical form. This grammatical form can be used with reference to men and women inclusively. However, since the group is described in contrast to women—being virgin means

and Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Student Edition (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), pp. 996-1016 (1008); David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC, 52B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), pp. 680-81.

4. This distinction between different kinds of feminist exegesis is present in the discussion between Tina Pippin and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See also, e.g., Elizabeth A. Castelli, 'Heteroglossia, Hermeneutics, and History: A Review Essay of Recent Feminist Studies of Early Christianity', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10.2 (1994), pp. 73-98; Pamela J. Milne, 'Toward Feminist Companionship: The Future of Feminist Biblical Studies and Feminism', in Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 39-60. In those articles, the differences I describe as between 'gender analysis' and 'liberation theological readings' are mentioned, although the actual wordings may differ.

5. For an example of how the image 'Babylon the Prostitute' in Revelation has been understood in the framework of honour-and-shame, see Halvor Moxnes, 'Honor and Shame', *BTB* 23 (1993), pp. 167-76 (174).

6. Although Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary of the Book of Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), could be expected to study the use of purity language in Revelation, and the role of the honour-and-shame value system, the book primarily uses astronomy and astrology as keys of interpretation of Revelation, and does not add much to the issues I am concerned with in this essay.

being undefiled by women—it is, in my opinion, best understood as exclusively male.⁷ Therefore, if we understand the 144,000 as an image of Christian identity,⁸ this identity is a male identity.

To sum up, the construction of the world in Revelation, and of Christian identity within this world, is as androcentric as can be. There are certainly positive images of women in the text, but these images are textbook examples of stereotypes from a patriarchal, honour-and-shame, culture. Their positive meanings are dependent on the negative images: if there is no Whore, no 'Bad' Woman, there is no Virgin or Bride, no 'Good' Woman.⁹

Thus, gender analysis opens the text and offers a wealth of possible meanings. Since the format in which the message is conveyed is inextricably linked with female stereotypes, androcentrism and misogynist imagery, it may seem self-evident that Revelation does *not* provide feminists with a usable future. A language that is part of oppression cannot speak about liberation.

As will be shown in this essay, Revelation has, in spite of this, been read as a vision of a just world, e.g. by the most prominent of its feminist

7. I argue for this reading of Rev. 14.4 in Hanna Stenström, *The Book of Revelation: A Vision of the Ultimate Liberation or the Ultimate Backlash? A Study in 20th Century Interpretations of Rev 14:1-5, with Special Emphasis on Feminist Exegesis* (PhD thesis, University of Uppsala, 1999), pp. 71-72. For further arguments, see Jorunn Økland, 'Sex, Gender and Ancient Greek: A Case-Study in Theoretical Misfit', *ST* 57 (2003) pp. 124-42 (131-35).

8. There is a discussion on whether the 144,000 should be understood as a limited group of Christians, a kind of elite—e.g. martyrs or celibates—or as a symbolic description of all Christians. For a survey of the discussion, see, e.g., Aune, *Revelation* 6-16, pp. 440-45, 804. I argue for my reading in Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 68-78; see esp. p. 70 on the issue of whether the 144,000 are an elite or not, with further references.

9. This outline is further developed in Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 83-97. It has much in common with Tina Pippin's understanding of Revelation in, e.g. *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992). Similar readings of Revelation by Adela Yarbro Collins, Susan Garrett, and Marla Selvidge are presented and discussed in Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 194-99, 209-16. Adela Yarbro Collins, 'Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation', *Biblical Interpretation* 1.1 (1993), pp. 20-33, shares the critique, but differs from others since she uses Jungian psychology as a perspective for reading the symbolism. See also Caroline Vander Stichele, 'Just A Whore: The Annihilation of Babylon according to Revelation 17:6', in *lectio difficilior*, online: www.lectio.unibe.ch, 1/2000, no pages, 2008-02-28; Økland, 'Sex, Gender'; Jorunn Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly Miss Jerusalem Just Shut Up?', in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (eds.), *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), pp. 311-32.

interpreters, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. As a contrast to her reading, I will present a feminist reading written in a critical discussion with Schüssler Fiorenza that has become the standard example of a different feminist reading, namely that of Tina Pippin.¹⁰

The works I use as my main examples were written in the early 1990s.¹¹ I find it justifiable and interesting to focus on works written ten years ago or more, since it was in the 1990s that two main alternatives in feminist exegesis of Revelation emerged.¹² Other studies, earlier and recent, can be described as examples of one of these alternatives: liberation theological readings concerned with making the imagery of Revelation speak about liberation also for women *or* gender analysis and feminist critique of Revelation. Feminist works with Revelation written after 1999 are short studies that develop certain aspects of interpretation rather than creating radically new alternatives. However, those works show possible ways forward for feminist exegesis of Revelation, and they will therefore be included in my concluding reflections.

Due to the size of the essay, I focus on presentation more than on analysis and discussion. With the exception of *The Woman's Bible*,¹³ I have limited my focus to the field I know best, New Testament exegesis, a

10. See, e.g., the selection of works to be discussed in Alison M. Jack, 'Out of the Wilderness: Feminist Perspectives on the Book of Revelation', in Stephen Moyise (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), pp. 149-62, where Tina Pippin's approach is contrasted to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's and Adela Yarbro Collins's approach in 'Feminine Symbolism'.

11. I do not include works by Adela Yarbro Collins since feminist analysis is not prominent in her work, and since those articles where she adopts a feminist perspective have not created influential alternatives of feminist interpretation of Revelation. As far as I have found, the articles in question are 'Feminine Symbolism' and 'Women's History and the Book of Revelation', in Kent H. Richards (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 80-91. For her work, including articles with a feminist perspective, see Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 174-205, and the above-mentioned presentation and discussion of Yarbro Collins, 'Feminine Symbolism', in Jack, 'Out of the Wilderness', pp. 155-57. I have not included works that use Revelation as a source of women's history, since the main focus in feminist exegetical discussions of Revelation has been on the female and sexual imagery. For an example of such an approach, see Yarbro Collins, 'Women's History'. The passage on Jezebel in Rev. 2.18-29 has of course been of interest for work with women in early Christianity; see, e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 164.

12. This essay builds on Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, which covers works written until the mid-1990s, but the concluding reflections bring in later works.

13. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The Woman's Bible* (Seattle: Coalition on Women and Religion, 1895, 1898; re-published May 1974, fifteenth printing, 1990).

field where we find some distinctive examples of feminist reception of Revelation.¹⁴

In spite of their differences, Schüssler Fiorenza and Pippin share context. They – and a considerable number of scholars working with Revelation today – work in the US, i.e. in a society where apocalyptic thinking and apocalyptic texts are very much part of the culture in general, and where some Christian groups have put the Apocalypse high on their agendas, often to serve religiously motivated right-wing politics. Biblical scholars can therefore be engaged in a struggle about the interpretation of those texts and their imagery, a struggle over the interpretation of a common heritage. Interpretation of this heritage is closely related to concrete politics with global consequences.¹⁵

In such a context, the biblical scholar may do his or her historical work in order to say that Revelation is not about us, it is about events 2,000 years ago in Asia Minor. This may also be a kind of resistance to political interpretations of apocalypses. In this essay, it will be shown how other biblical scholars, in this case Tina Pippin, chose instead to explore *different* possible contemporary meanings and formulate critique of both the biblical text and its contemporary uses. Others, here represented by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, try to wrench Revelation out of the hands of the reactionary forces and give it – as usable futures – to feminists and others whose Christian faith supports other political agendas than those of the Christian right.

Although this essay is more concerned with description than with debate, I do not come to the subject as a neutral observer. As my description of Revelation above shows, I am one of those who focus on gender analysis and critique, not on reclaiming Revelation for contemporary feminist women. In my concluding words, I will point to different ways that may be taken from this basic approach.

2. *Feminist Reception of Revelation: A Beginning*

It may be discussed where and when the history of feminist interpretation of the Bible starts.¹⁶ In this context, it is relevant to begin in a rather

14. I include references to Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), although it is systematic theology, not exegesis, since it is written in dialogue with the exegetical debate.

15. The emphasis on this context is a recurrent theme in US scholarship on Revelation, e.g. in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); see esp. pp. 7-10. See also Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash*, pp. 12-13.

16. It may be argued that the history starts with the first works of academic feminist exegesis in the 1970s. Others draw the line of development back to feminist

conventional way, with *The Woman's Bible*,¹⁷ a commentary on biblical passages about women written in the late 1890s by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was prominent in the women's movement in the US, and a group of women she gathered for the purpose. None of them was a biblical scholar, although they intended to take advantage of current biblical scholarship. In *In Memory of Her*, Schüssler Fiorenza writes this work into the history of feminist interpretation of the Bible, claiming that *The Woman's Bible* is important since it is the first work where the problem with the Bible for feminist readers is not just located in the interpretations—the Bible is good but it has been misinterpreted by its male interpreters—but is in fact present in the biblical texts themselves.¹⁸ Therefore, it can be understood as a beginning of feminist interpretation of the Bible, and as interesting also for my purposes.

In *The Woman's Bible* two authors write about Revelation: Mathilda Joslyn Gage¹⁹ and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Gage formulates a sharp criticism (with her tongue in her cheek) of common literalist Christian readings.²⁰ She reads Revelation as a mystical and symbolical work, which can be understood with the aid of esoteric knowledge, especially

interpretations of the Bible in the women's movement of the nineteenth century, or even find its roots in mediaeval women's interpretations of the Bible. For examples of what can be included in the history of feminist biblical interpretation, see, e.g., Lindboe, 'Recent Literature'; Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, 'American Women and the Bible: The Nature of Woman as a Hermeneutical Issue', in Adela Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Biblical Scholarship in North America, 10; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 11-33; Elisabeth Gössman, 'History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures. Volume One: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993; and London: SCM Press, 1994), pp. 27-40; Karen Baker-Fletcher, 'Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth: Two Nineteenth-Century Black Feminist Interpreters of Scripture', in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching*, pp. 41-51.

17. This is also where Jack, 'Out of the Wilderness', starts her presentation of feminist interpretations of Revelation. For her treatment of Stanton's reading of Revelation in *The Woman's Bible*, see Jack, 'Out of the Wilderness', pp. 153-54.

18. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory*, pp. 7-14. For discussions of *Woman's Bible* in relation to contemporary feminist interpretation of the Bible see also, e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Transforming the Legacy of *The Woman's Bible*', in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching*, pp. 1-24; Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, 'Politicizing the Sacred Text: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and *The Woman's Bible*', in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching*, pp. 41-63; The Bible and Culture Collective (George Aichele et al.), *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 236.

19. About Gage's interpretations of the Bible generally, see Victoria S. Harrison, 'Modern Women, Traditional Abrahamic Religions and Interpreting Sacred Texts', *Feminist Theology* 15 (2007) pp. 145-59 (esp. pp. 147-50).

20. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, p. 177.

astrology and ancient Egyptian lore.²¹ Actually, Gage claims, Revelation is 'largely referring to woman, her intuition, her spiritual powers, and all she represents'.²² A central text in this reading is the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Revelation 12).²³ For Gage, the Sun Woman represents the triumph of Sun over Moon, which means: the triumph of soul and spirit over matter and body, of woman and the female principle over man and the male principle.²⁴

I do not know if Gage was ignorant of the connection between female gender and matter, male gender and spirituality, in the Western tradition, or if she deliberately inverted the symbolism. The argument she gives for her way of understanding the symbolism is that in Egypt the life-giving Sun was regarded as feminine and the moon, which did not shine by its own light but reflected the light of the Sun, was masculine.²⁵ She may thus have based her understanding also of the symbolic meanings of masculine and feminine on Ancient Egyptian lore, as it was (rightly or wrongly) presented in esoteric traditions current in the late 19th century, or in other (19th-century) esoteric traditions. Her interpretation of the Sun Woman goes beyond the esoteric into a splendid image of the (American) woman of the late 19th century, an image which may be considered the most magnificent feminist reclaiming of the female imagery of Revelation ever:

'There was war in heaven.' The wonderful progress and freedom of woman, as woman, within the last half century, despite the false interpretation of the Bible and by masculine power, is the result of this great battle; and all attempts to destroy her will be futile. Her day and hour has arrived; the dragon of physical power over her, the supremacy of material things in the world, as depicted by the male principle, are yielding to the spiritual, represented by woman. The eagle, true bird of the sun and emblem of our own great country, gives his wings to her aid; and the whole earth comes to help her against her destroyer.²⁶

Stanton, on the other hand, does not think much of Revelation, a work with 'frightful visions' where 'Satan and woman are the chief characters'.²⁷ Obviously, she has the same problems that many, learned and lay, within rationalistic, liberal theological traditions have with Revelation and other apocalyptic texts, and is repulsed by its terrible visions.²⁸ In her confusion,

21. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, pp. 176-79.

22. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, p. 176.

23. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, pp. 181-83.

24. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, pp. 182-83.

25. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, p. 183.

26. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, p. 183.

27. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, p. 180.

28. For examples, see Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, pp. 179-80, 183-84.

she sometimes resorts to conventional anti-Catholic readings.²⁹ Stanton makes some astute comments on the misogynistic imagery,³⁰ and her reading ends with a call for rejection.³¹

Thus, a plurality of possible meanings, which is today recognized as one of the characteristics of Revelation and explored by, for example, Tina Pippin and Catherine Keller, is divided into two different, irreconcilable, readings by two different readers. Gage's reading hints at a possible path of interpretation that later feminist interpreters of Revelation have not taken, while Stanton's critique is an embryo of the feminist critique and gender analysis developed in late-20th-century exegesis of the text. This is the reason why I include the two readings in *The Woman's Bible* here, although they are not critical and scholarly. *The Woman's Bible* provides us with a very clear example of feminist ambivalence towards Revelation, both rejection and reclaiming of the text, an ambivalence that can be followed also through the body of late-20th-century critical, scholarly works.³²

3. Feminist Exegesis of the Book of Revelation: Examples

a. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

The perhaps most influential feminist reading of Revelation was created by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,³³ who explicitly identifies as a feminist liberation theologian.³⁴ In her feminist reading, it is possible to read

29. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, pp. 183-84.

30. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, p. 184.

31. Stanton, *Woman's Bible*, p.184.

32. For another early example of a work that recognizes the ambivalence of Revelation for feminist readers, see Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), pp. 302-303, 338. In Keller, *Apocalypse*, the ambivalence of Revelation is used throughout as a kind of methodological tool, see, e.g., pp. 24-25 about her position as one of 'constructive ambivalence'.

33. For a complete presentation of my reading of Schüssler Fiorenza's work with Revelation, with discussion, see Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 226-63. Integrate criticism of her works by feminist scholars such as Keller and Pippin. For Schüssler Fiorenza's response to their critique, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Epilogue' in *The Book of Revelation: Justice or Judgment, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 205-36; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), pp. 93-95, 99-101; Jack, 'Out of the Wilderness', p. 157, gives a short presentation of Schüssler Fiorenza's work with Revelation.

34. On feminist liberation theology, including that of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, see Elina Vuola, *Limits of Liberation: Praxis as Method in Latin American Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology* (Annales academiae scientiarum fennicae, 289; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1997), pp. 95-113.

Revelation as a liberating text—a usable future—also for women. This may be understood as due to two strong influences on her work with Revelation, two ways of reading that she makes her own and develops in her own way.

First, Schüssler Fiorenza is indebted to Ernst Käsemann: she herself makes this explicit.³⁵ In the context of resistance to totalitarian regimes, he developed an understanding of the basic question of apocalyptic writings as *‘Wem gehört die Erde?’* (translated by Schüssler Fiorenza as *‘Who is Lord over the world?’*).³⁶ The apocalypses formulate the answer through their visions: God. Such a reading makes Revelation a source of inspiration for resistance to totalitarian regimes: the power of human dictators—understood as enemies of God in their claim to a power no human can claim—is short and limited, while the sovereignty of God is without end in time and space.³⁷

Secondly, in some liberation theology readings (e.g. by Pablo Richard in Latin America and Alan Boesak in South Africa during the apartheid era),³⁸ Revelation is read as a vision of God’s ultimate victory over oppression and unjust social structures. The liberation theological readings of Revelation have become a point of reference for feminist interpreters: either you write in this tradition and find strategies for handling the female and sexual imagery³⁹ or you reject the possibility of combining ‘liberation’ and ‘feminist’ in the case of Revelation. As will be shown below, Tina Pippin’s works gives examples of the latter.

A commentary, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (1991), is the work on Revelation where Schüssler Fiorenza most clearly combines exegetical analysis of Revelation with constructive theological work intended to give contemporary Christian feminist women a usable future. Important themes in her earlier work on Revelation—the language and genre of the

35. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), is dedicated to Käsemann; see also pp. 24, 120–21.

36. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice* pp. 24; cf. p. 121 for a different formulation.

37. For Käsemann’s understanding of apocalyptic texts, see Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), p. 129; Ernst Käsemann, *Der Ruf der Freiheit* (Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck, 4th edn, 1968), pp. 178, 180.

38. Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: The People’s Commentary to the Book of Revelation* (The Bible and Liberation Series; New York: Orbis Books, 1995); Alan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987). See also Keller, *Apocalypse*, pp. 16–19.

39. See, e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 5. For another example of a liberation theological reading of Revelation, see Luzia Sutter Rehmann, ‘Die Offenbarung des Johannes. Inspirationen aus Patmos’, in Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2nd edn, 1999), pp. 725–41.

text and the relation between Revelation and its original historical context and audience—are still present, but they are to a greater degree than earlier integrated in a reading that goes beyond exegetical analysis into reclaiming the text for feminist women, and in fact for all the marginalized and oppressed of this world. Therefore, I will focus on *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, but read it in light of Schüssler Fiorenza's earlier works on Revelation, especially works on the text's language and genre.⁴⁰

Schüssler Fiorenza understands Revelation as a rhetorical and poetic construction, which challenges its audience to take sides in what its author considers to be the final struggle between God and Evil.⁴¹ Revelation does this through the creation of an alternative⁴² symbolic universe.⁴³

The understanding of Revelation as rhetorical is crucial in Schüssler Fiorenza's reading.⁴⁴ Revelation is understood as one of many competing interpretations of the realities in Asia Minor in the 90s CE, one of many alternative symbolic universes,⁴⁵ and as a response to the situation where Revelation was written that inspires resistance against the ruling powers. She admits that this situation has been understood in various ways and emphasizes that Revelation is an interpretation of its context from a specific standpoint. *From that standpoint* the prophet sees a world full of injustice, a world where God fights against Evil. The situation in Asia Minor 2,000 years ago looked very different from various perspectives, as does the situation of any society today,⁴⁶ but the standpoint from which the world is seen in Revelation is recognized by Schüssler Fiorenza as a privileged standpoint whose perspective is to be preferred. In other words, she reads Revelation as a standpoint feminist, an epistemological

40. Of special relevance is 'Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation' in Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice* pp. 181-203.

41. See, e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, pp. 187-92, esp. 192; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 26-31.

42. The symbolic universe in Revelation is an alternative both to the symbolic universe that provided a sacred canopy over the Roman Empire and to other Christian symbolic universes.

43. See, e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, p. 183.

44. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, pp. 187-92; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 14-15, 20-37, 117-39.

45. See, e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 124, 132-39, esp. 132.

46. The view that Revelation was written at a time of violent persecution has been contested in contemporary scholarship on Revelation, and so has the understanding of apocalyptic literature as a literature that responds to an actual crisis. For a short survey of the debate, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 124-26. Two important works that present alternatives to the older view are Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

position closely related to the standpoint epistemologies of liberation theology and Marxism.⁴⁷

Furthermore, it is crucial for Schüssler Fiorenza that Revelation is written in mythopoetic language whose symbols cannot be reduced to specific meanings, since it is not a cipher but a language of symbols that opens up a number of possible meanings for its readers. Mythopoetic language reaches its audience on a deep, not always conscious, level and influences their interpretation of themselves, of their world, and of their praxis in the world.⁴⁸ This understanding of Revelation, and its language, makes it necessary for Schüssler Fiorenza to ask: What does a reading of Revelation *do* to someone who submits to its world of vision?⁴⁹ Analysis is indissolubly connected with 'theo-ethical assessment'.⁵⁰

Therefore, we might expect Schüssler Fiorenza to reject Revelation completely because of its female and sexual imagery. She certainly recognizes the problems, claiming that the female and sexual imagery, which originally may have persuaded Christians to reject Babylon the Prostitute (i.e. Rome and the Emperor Cult) and choose Jerusalem the Bride (in practice: John's way of being Christian), has a different, unacceptable effect today. Today, it invites us to imagine women in traditional, stereotyped ways, as either good or evil, pure or impure, wives or whores.⁵¹ Revelation certainly needs feminist analysis and critique.⁵²

Thus, Schüssler Fiorenza's works show that a focus on gender is a real challenge to liberation theological readings. However, one of the primary aims of her feminist work with Revelation is to find ways of overcoming this difficulty. For Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation is not irredeemable. She claims that if we recognize that the gendered meaning is not primary, Revelation and its female and sexual imagery can be 'translated' into a contemporary rhetorical situation to be a fitting response.⁵³

The presupposition for such a translation is that focus is moved from the text to the reader and the process of reading, and that the reader is allowed to be a creative, independent subject, not subjected to the marginal position given to female subjects in androcentric texts and cultures. Language, including the female and sexual imagery of Revelation, must be

47. About standpoint epistemologies in liberation theology, see, e.g., Vuola, *Limits*, p. 60.

48. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, pp. 183-86; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 31.

49. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, p. 199; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 4.

50. See, e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 5.

51. See, e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, p. 199; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 14, 131.

52. See, e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, p. 199; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 13-14, 130-31.

53. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*, p. 199.

understood as 'a convention or a tool that enables readers to negotiate and create meanings in specific contexts and situations'.⁵⁴ Since the female and sexual imagery of Revelation is highly conventional language, almost 'dead metaphors', its gendered meaning is not primary. It does not say anything about women but speaks about God, justice, injustice, etc.⁵⁵ The task of the feminist exegete is to make this clear, and to translate what the text says into a language where we can, once again, hear it speak clearly about justice and injustice, and of a God who is on the side of the oppressed.⁵⁶

In such a translation project, it is necessary to focus not only on gender in the text and in the world around us, but also on the many intersecting forms of injustices: classism, racism, colonialism, etc. If we do so, the image of Babylon the Great Prostitute will no longer be just a picture of a woman. When we look at the image of Babylon in Revelation 17–18 we will also see wealth, political power and social status, and see past the dead metaphor of a promiscuous woman to see a strong and vivid image of an oppressive Empire. Thereby, Revelation can be read anew in all contexts where injustice and oppression are the characteristics of reality, and speak anew about the hope for ultimate liberation and the coming of a just world.⁵⁷

For Schüssler Fiorenza, the strategy for translating that she develops is necessary for making it possible to reclaim the text for women, and such reclaiming is, although it is not spelled out, the aim for all true feminist readings of biblical texts. A consciousness raising analysis of the problems with a text is not a complete feminist work. The questions whether there are alternative roads to take after feminist critique is left unanswered. In fact, it is implied that there may not be any such roads that are truly feminist. In a later work, in a discussion of Tina Pippin's reading of Revelation, Schüssler Fiorenza claims that such a reading is in danger of becoming apolitical.⁵⁸

For reasons of space, I cannot make a thorough discussion of Schüssler Fiorenza's reading, but I want to make one critical remark, which is of relevance for the discussion whether a consistent gender analysis has political dimensions or not. Its point of departure is that Schüssler Fiorenza's basic understanding of the language of Revelation as mythopoetic, and of Revelation as a rhetorical and poetic construction, is convincing.

54. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 13.

55. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 14.

56. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 13–14.

57. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 14.

58. Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Epilogue', p. 208.

Therefore, what I find most unsatisfying in Schüssler Fiorenza's reading strategy is that she, on the one hand, has taught us that its language reaches us deeply, on not conscious levels, but that she, on the other hand, wants us to reinterpret language as if its meanings were all accessed through our rational minds. In other words: what levels of deeply internalized woman hatred, even self hatred, in all of us, even women and, I am afraid, even feminist women, are touched by the imagery of the splendid but contemptible Babylon the Prostitute? Doesn't the power of the imagery derive from its reaching of those levels? Can this be changed because we make up our minds to leave aside the gendered meaning and make the image speak about something else?

b. Tina Pippin

Tina Pippin's readings of Revelation are explicitly formulated as an alternative to Schüssler Fiorenza's.⁵⁹ In Pippin's work, gender analysis is central and leads to rejection of the text.⁶⁰ In the following, I will mainly focus on her book *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*. In my concluding reflections, I will turn briefly to a later work, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*.⁶¹

When we move on to Pippin's work, we also move on to a post-modern reading. Pippin is not concerned with the relationship between Revelation and its original historical situation. Her aim is rather to explore many possible readings of Revelation, using a number of theoretical perspectives.⁶² To find *the* reading of Revelation that makes it possible to, once and for all, categorize Revelation as thoroughly Good or Bad, liberating or oppressive, is not possible and in fact not even desirable. Thus, it is not possible to do justice to her work here: the very idea of it is to move the reader on from reading to reading, testing various alternatives and pushing the limits of reading in different directions. What I can do is

59. For a complete view of my understanding of Pippin's reading of Revelation, with discussion, see Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 264-85. I integrate Schüssler Fiorenza's criticism of Pippin's reading from Schüssler Fiorenza's 'Epilogue'; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing*, pp. 93-95, 99-101. For a discussion of Pippin's works see also Jack, 'Out of the Wilderness', pp. 157-61, and Alison M. Jack, *Texts Reading Texts, Sacred and Secular* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 193-97.

60. For other feminist exegetical works with Revelation where gender analysis is the primary feminist task, see Susan R. Garrett, 'Revelation', in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 377-82; Vander Stichele, 'Just A Whore'; Økland, 'Sex, Gender'; Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly?'

61. Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

62. See, e.g. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 16.

to make a short presentation of one aspect: what happens when the text is subjected to a consistent gender analysis.

An assessment of Revelation and its effects on its readers is central to both Pippin and Schüssler Fiorenza, although they use different images (and theoretical frameworks) for describing what they are doing. If Schüssler Fiorenza uses the image of 'submitting to its world of visions' and explores the possible consequences of that, Pippin's aim is to take a post-modern turn and enter '...into the fictional world as a participatory reader [...] to feel and see and hear and touch...' her 'way through the narrative.'⁶³ This way of reading, which involves facing fear and releasing feelings of anger and guilt, grief and joy, is supposed to have a cathartic effect on the reader.⁶⁴ Pippin's post-modern reading is certainly not a play for its own sake, or an example of moral relativism and political indifference. Rather, ideological criticism is crucial in her reading,⁶⁵ and feminist,⁶⁶ Marxist⁶⁷ and post-colonial⁶⁸ theories central in the methodological collection.⁶⁹

This post-modern approach differs from Schüssler Fiorenza's standpoint position in the sense that no perspective, interpretation of reality or reading can claim a privilege. One person's Utopia is another person's Dystopia,⁷⁰ and since no perspective or standpoint is seen as privileged, Revelation cannot be simply classified as 'Good' or 'Bad'. However, Pippin argues forcefully that when a gender perspective is chosen,⁷¹ Revelation emerges as not only Dystopia (a bad place) for women but as Atopia, i.e., not a place.⁷² Rather than searching for a liberating reading where every oppressed human being is included – and the specific oppression of women recedes into the background – she lets different readings live side by side, recognizing the ambivalence and many possible meanings of the text. However, although many meanings are possible, Pippin makes clear that Revelation does not provide (feminist) women with a usable future,

63. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 16.

64. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 16-17. Her understanding of the cathartic effects of Revelation is developed on pp. 17-21, in dialogue with Yarbrow Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*.

65. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 23, 27.

66. See, e.g., her materialist-feminist reading in Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 57-68.

67. See, e.g., Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 30-39.

68. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 53-56.

69. See also Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 43, 47, on the ethical and political dimensions of her work.

70. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 30.

71. For a discussion of earlier feminist responses to Revelation, see Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 45-86, 96-107. See also Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 92-99, 117-25.

72. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 103.

since the format in which the message is conveyed is inextricably linked with stereotypes, androcentrism and misogynist imagery. For Pippin, a consistent gender analysis is and remains a central concern in a feminist reading.⁷³

Thus, Revelation may still, Pippin argues, be read from a liberationist or post-colonial perspective as a vision of a usable future, but when a gender perspective and women's realities in the past and present are taken seriously, this is no longer possible.⁷⁴ In the (world of the) text, women are consistently marginalized and often destroyed.⁷⁵

To use her own words:

A political reading using liberation theology does reveal the call to endurance and hope in the text, and this reading is important. Having studied the evils of Roman imperial policy in the colonies, I find the violent destruction of Babylon very cathartic. But when I looked into the face of Babylon, I saw a woman.⁷⁶

The feminist task is not to translate the female imagery but to unveil it, to face the sexism and misogyny in the text,⁷⁷ and to listen to voices of women from past and present who tell their stories of sexism and misogyny.⁷⁸

Still, Pippin does not leave us there, with the veil lifted from Revelation and its gory patriarchal face revealed. Like Schüssler Fiorenza, she recognizes the power of the text, and the need for powerful visions in feminist work. If Schüssler Fiorenza wants to find a usable future through translating the ancient vision into a contemporary idiom, Pippin exhorts feminist women to create new visions, new imagery, as powerful and fantastic as the ancient one in Revelation, which show the horrors of the present clearly and inspire work for change.⁷⁹

4. Possible Ways Forward

In this essay, I have focused on the feminist reception of Revelation in a certain field, feminist exegesis. The ambivalence visible already in the

73. See, e.g., Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 53-68; Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 92-99, 117-25.

74. This is implied in, e.g., Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 47, 80, 102, 105.

75. See, e.g., Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 53, 77.

76. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 80.

77. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 47.

78. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 47, 53, 107.

79. See, e.g., Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 107.

non-scholarly *The Woman's Bible* in the late 19th century can be seen also in contemporary feminist exegesis of this text.

Therefore, actual feminist reception of Revelation in New Testament Exegesis raises a number of issues of principle concerning feminist biblical scholarship. Feminist reception of Revelation can be studied both for what it says about ways of reading and/or re-using Revelation and for what it says about different understandings of the tasks and identity of feminist biblical scholarship,⁸⁰ including different understandings of its political dimensions.⁸¹ In feminist exegesis of Revelation, we find examples of scholars who have clearly theological aims, and regard this as a necessary for the work to be politically relevant, and examples of scholars for whom feminist exegesis is gender analysis of the biblical texts, and who more or less explicitly see this as a work with political relevance.

If we now look beyond the discussions of the 1990s towards the future of feminist biblical scholarship on Revelation, we will see how other contexts than the US in the 1990s, and other theoretical perspectives than those used by Pippin⁸² and Schüssler Fiorenza, are used in feminist exegesis of Revelation. At the same time, no radically new alternatives are constructed.

My impression is that the feminist liberation theological reading in Schüssler Fiorenza's tradition has not been developed further, although it is still an option well established in works as those already mentioned. It is the other line of interpretation, with gender analysis as its primary aim – and sometimes also a sharp critique of the text, its implied values, imagery etc – that has been developed further by some scholars. Since this is also my own way of working with Revelation,⁸³ I find this the most promising way forward for new work.⁸⁴ I here use gender analysis in its current sense, i.e. it includes studies of masculinity.⁸⁴

80. This is in fact one of the overarching aims in Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*

81. I develop my own position on the political dimensions of the 'gender analysis'-alternative throughout Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*; see esp. pp. 312-15. My position on those issues is also accessible in Hanna Stenström, 'Is a Liberating Feminist Exegesis Possible without Liberation Theology?', *lectio difficilior* 1/2002, online: www.lectio.unibe.ch, no pages, 2008-02-28.

82. It must be noticed that Tina Pippin herself continues to explore different theoretical perspectives and possible readings in Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*; see e.g. pp. 117-25.

83. As will be shown at the end of the article, I recognize the power of the text and the need for visions in mythopoetic language, and I even find it possible to find valuable meanings in some parts of Revelation, but when I the text as a whole seriously, it becomes very difficult to read it as a vision of a usable future for women.

84. One problem with bringing in works written after 1999 is that three of the works

I am also convinced that there is a lot of work left to do with the reception and effective history of Revelation, and I will return to that below.

Thus, there is a kind of double focus in this concluding part. On the one hand, I treat feminist exegesis of Revelation as part of the reception of the text, looking at some more examples of it and pointing forward to new possible receptions. On the other, biblical scholarship is a discipline in which we study the reception and effective history of this text in all other fields and contexts than biblical scholarship.

My first example of further development of theoretical frameworks is the post-colonial feminist reading of Revelation 17 by the Korean-American scholar Jean K. Kim.

In the works treated above, Schüssler Fiorenza claims that her way of reading Revelation serves the interests of women in the so called Third World better than the one advocated by Pippin, and also reflects their contexts better than Pippin's does.⁸⁵ Although Schüssler Fiorenza does not make much explicit use of post-colonial theory, she counts colonialism among the social evils that God fights against when she translates Revelation into a language of our time.⁸⁶ The primary meaning of the story of the violent end of Babylon the Prostitute (Rev. 17-19) is thus the downfall of the Empire, the colonizing power.⁸⁷

Even Pippin just seems to take for granted that this is *the* post-colonial reading of Revelation, and that it takes her feminist perspective to see the story in Revelation 17-19 as also a story about the killing of a woman.⁸⁸ Post-colonial readings and gender analysis seem to be in tension with one another, and, as Caroline Vander Stichele points out in an article written in dialogue with Kim, although Schüssler Fiorenza argues for integration of gender, race, class and imperialist oppression in the analysis, she actually creates an opposition between a gender-focused reading and a reading focused on those other dimensions.⁸⁹

I've found, Vander Stichele, 'Just A Whore'; Økland, 'Sex, Gender'; and Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly', have references to my own work, Stenström *Liberation or Backlash?* Thus, a study of feminist reception of Revelation suddenly also becomes a study of the reception of my own research. I leave to the reader to judge whether this is a problem or not.

85. This is explicit in Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 14. For a discussion of this passage, see Stenström *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 256-58.

86. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's contribution to post-colonial interpretation of Revelation, 'A Decolonizing Interpretation of the Book of Revelation', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word. Scripture and the Rhetoric of the Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 130-47, was published after the completion of this essay and it was therefore not possible to include a discussion of it above.

87. So, e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, pp. 95, 98, 101-104 (esp. 102, 104).

88. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, p. 80.

89. Vander Stichele, 'Just A Whore', with a reference to Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice*

However, when Jean K. Kim joins the discussion with two articles, in 1998⁹⁰ and 1999,⁹¹ she integrates feminist concerns in a post-colonial reading that may be described as rather of the Pippin than the Schüssler Fiorenza kind.⁹² Kim is critical of Pippin (and all other feminist interpreters of Revelation) for not taking the situation of women in colonized and decolonized contexts seriously.⁹³ Thus, gender analysis and feminist critique of Revelation are enriched by a post-colonial perspective,⁹⁴ which both criticizes and strengthens the way of reading Pippin proposes. Kim, and following her also Vander Stichele, actually do what Schüssler Fiorenza claims must be done, namely integrate various structures of oppression in the analysis. Thus, Kim's articles are a critique of Schüssler Fiorenza's reading, although that is not made explicit.

This example shows that post-colonial theory is one of the theories that can be combined with feminist theory to move feminist exegetical work with Revelation forward. There may be more to do along this line of interpretation.

As mentioned above, Caroline Vander Stichele, in 'Just a Whore: The Annihilation of Babylon according to Revelation 17.6' (2000)⁹⁵ writes in dialogue with Kim. There is no space here for summarizing the article in its entirety, so it must suffice to say that she develops gender analysis of certain texts in Revelation, as well as the critique of Schüssler Fiorenza's reading strategy, further. What must be mentioned is a new contribution to feminist post-colonial reflection on Revelation. Both Vander Stichele and Kim write in a postcolonial situation and understand the down fall of Babylon as a story about the killing of a prostitute *and* the down fall

and Judgement, p. 218. See also Schüssler Fiorenza *Vision*, pp. 12-14, esp. p. 14, and Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, pp. 256-58.

90. Jean K. Kim, 'Inter(con)textual Reading of Rev 17 from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective', *Journal for the Critical Study of Religion* 3 (1998), pp. 35-50.

91. Jean K. Kim, "'Uncovering her Wickedness": An Inter(con)textual Reading of Rev 17 from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective', *JSNT* 73 (1999), pp. 61-81.

92. See, e.g., Kim, "'Uncovering'", pp. 61-62.

93. So, e.g., Kim, "'Uncovering'", pp. 62-65, 77-78. It may be noticed that Kim, like Pippin, describes her reading as deconstructive, and explores the many possible meanings of the text that emerge in the meeting between text and reader from different theoretical frameworks. See, e.g., Kim, "'Uncovering'", pp. 80-81. 'Inter(con)textuality' is a keyword: she explores both intertextual relations between, e.g., Revelation 17 and prophetic texts (Kim, "'Uncovering'", pp. 65-66, 71) and between text and context, the original as well as the one of the reader (Kim, "'Uncovering'", pp. 63-65, 67-69, 79-81). Thus, she has a concern for the socio-historical context of Revelation in common with Schüssler Fiorenza.

94. Kim uses post-colonial theory to show aspects of gender in nationalistic, colonial and postcolonial discourses; see, e.g., Kim, "'Uncovering'", pp. 62-65, 73-74, 77-81.

95. Vander Stichele, 'Just a Whore'.

of the Empire at the same time. Vander Stichele makes explicit that she writes from within one of the former colonial powers inside Fortress Europe, as a person living *in* this Empire, in a place in which trafficking in women and sex business have become big business.

Both Kim and Vander Stichele articles are as much concerned with contemporary contexts and the political implications of Revelation and its interpretations as Schüssler Fiorenza, whatever Schüssler Fiorenza may say on the apolitical character of works focused on gender analysis.

Another and recent example of a work which integrates gender and post-colonial theories in work with Revelation is Chris Frilingos's 'Wearing It Well: Gender at Work in the Shadow of the Empire' (2007).⁹⁶ Revelation 17.1–18.24 is analysed together with a number of other texts, with 'self representation' as the connecting theme.⁹⁷ In difference from Kim and Vander Stichele, who focus both on the text and on contemporary contexts, Frilingos focuses solely on ancient gender discourses, thus showing still another road to be taken for further work with Revelation. The political dimensions are not as explicit as in the two earlier works, and are present in the analysis of the ancient discourses,⁹⁸ not in reflections on the social context of the scholar.

In 'Wearing It Well' and, even more, in an earlier article, 'Sexing the Lamb' (2003),⁹⁹ Frilingos works with theories of masculinity, thereby bringing in still another set of theories and connecting studies of Revelation with the wider field of gender studies. In 'Sexing the Lamb' he argues that the influence of certain Roman understandings of masculinity, connected with a '(s)toicizing ethics'¹⁰⁰ where self-control is central,¹⁰¹ was strong on the understanding of both the saved and the condemned in Revelation, in spite of the strongly anti-Roman character of the text as a whole.¹⁰² The condemned are, according to 21.8, *deiloi*, unable to control their fear and thus lacking masculinity, the 144,000 are soldiers in God's army and thus very virile.¹⁰³ Following Stephen Moore—who already

96. Chris Frilingos, 'Wearing It Well: Gender at Work in the Shadow of the Empire', in Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (eds.), *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 84; Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 333–49.

97. Frilingos, 'Wearing It Well', pp. 338–39.

98. See, e.g., Frilingos, 'Wearing It Well', p. 348.

99. Chris Frilingos, 'Sexing the Lamb', in Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (eds.), *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 297–317.

100. Frilingos, 'Sexing the Lamb', p. 298.

101. Frilingos, 'Sexing the Lamb', pp. 298–99.

102. Frilingos, 'Sexing the Lamb', p. 306.

103. Frilingos, 'Sexing the Lamb', pp. 306–307.

in 1996 wrote about the hypermasculinity of God in Revelation¹⁰⁴ – Frilingos points to the virility of the Christians in Revelation, due to the use of martial imagery, e.g. the possibility to understand the undefiled men in Rev. 14.4 as soldiers in the Holy War.¹⁰⁵ The main emphasis in ‘Sexing the Lamb’ is, however on the ambivalent gender of the Lamb.¹⁰⁶

If Kim, Vander Stichele and Frilingos show how gender analysis and feminist theories can be combined with theories focusing on other power structures than gender and the interplay between those structures in their work with Revelation, Jorunn Økland deepens and widens work on Revelation with feminist theory in two closely related articles from 2003¹⁰⁷ and 2005.¹⁰⁸ In both articles, an analysis of Revelation is at the same time an opportunity to discuss general issues in feminist scholarship and to test different feminist theories on a text, to explore their consequences for interpretation of a specific text.¹⁰⁹

If Kim and Vander Stichele brought the contexts of Korea and the decolonized countries of the so-called Third World as well as the Netherlands, a former colonial power (and in fact all of contemporary Europe) into the discussion, Økland writes from within another context: the academic contexts of Scandinavian feminist theory, and Scandinavian research in feminist theology and biblical studies where feminist theory is important.¹¹⁰

Økland does a number of things at the same time in those articles. In ‘Sex, Gender and Ancient Greek: A Case Study in Theoretical Misfit’ from 2003

104. Stephen D. Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 117-38, esp. pp. 121-22. See also Stephen D. Moore, ‘Revolted Revelations’, in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (ed.), *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 183-98, on masculinity in Revelation. ‘Revolted Revelations’ is also to be found in Stephen D. Moore, *God's Beauty Parlour and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Contraversions; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 173-99.

105. Frilingos, ‘Sexing the Lamb’, p. 307, has a cursory remark on the masculinity of the 144,000 of Rev. 14.1-5 with a reference to Moore, ‘Revolted Revelations’, esp. p. 193. That the Holy War is a recurrent theme in Revelation and the 144,000 can be understood as soldiers in this war is argued in, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 76-80. Moore, ‘Revolted Revelations’, also focuses on the theme of war in Revelation.

106. Frilingos, ‘Sexing the Lamb’, pp. 306-17, develops this theme.

107. Økland, ‘Sex, Gender’.

108. Økland, ‘Why Can't the Heavenly’.

109. Økland, ‘Sex, Gender’, pp. 124-26, 130-39; Økland, ‘Why Can't the Heavenly’, pp. 312-32.

110. Økland, ‘Sex, Gender’, pp. 124-30; Økland, ‘Why Can't the Heavenly’, pp. 312-15.

she presents the differences between Scandinavian and Anglo-American gender discourses, relates them to differences between languages¹¹¹ and explores the benefits of using Scandinavian gender theories when trying to understand the meaning of male virginity that is at work in Rev. 14.4.¹¹² The exploration of different gender theories is carried further when Økland develops her reading of the texts about Jerusalem the Bride through theories by Luce Irigaray.¹¹³ Thus Økland, as Pippin in *Apocalyptic Bodies*, shows how the spectrum of theories used in feminist exegesis of Revelation can be widened, and she does it in a way that leaves open for more work to be done along the same lines.

In these two articles, Økland further substantiates my claim in the beginning of this essay, namely that the text Revelation and the world constructed in it are androcentric, and that Christian identity in this world is a male identity. At the same time, *parthenoi* is used in a transferred sense about these men. Therefore, 'femininity is usually lurking somewhere just under the surface'¹¹⁴ of this *parthenos* and '...the use of this term on men is a bit queer.'¹¹⁵ In my opinion, two consequences can be drawn from Økland's analysis for further feminist exegetical work with Revelation.

The first is, that if we accept that Christian identity in Revelation is masculine, one next step may be to see if the growing field of masculinity studies can contribute to the study of Revelation. As mentioned above, there are already some examples. It think it might still be possible to continue this work, e.g. going *from* noticing that the Christian in Revelation is a male *to* interpreting, for example, the constructions of Christian identity in Revelation (including the descriptions of the opposites of the Christians, the condemned) with understandings of masculinity in Antiquity as interpretative tool.¹¹⁶

The second is related to Økland's observation on the instability of the masculinity of the 144,000 – we may even use the word 'queer' when describing them.¹¹⁷ Another example of a work where the instability of

111. Økland, 'Sex, Gender', pp. 124-29.

112. Økland, 'Sex, Gender', pp. 130-32.

113. Økland, 'Sex, Gender', p. 133; Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly', pp. 325-31.

114. Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly', p. 331.

115. Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly', p. 331.

116. For two recent examples of such an approach, see Lynn R. Huber, 'Sexually Explicit? Re-reading Revelation's 144,000 Virgins as a Response to Roman Discourses', *Journal of Masculinity, Men and Spirituality* 2.1 (2008), pp. 3-28, online www.jmmsweb.org, cited 2008-10-22; and Hanna Stenström, 'Masculine or Feminine? Male Virgins in *Joseph and Aseneth* and The Book of Revelation', in Bengt Holmberg and Mikael Winnige (eds.), *Identity Formation in the New Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 199-222.

117. Økland, 'Why Can't the Heavenly', p. 331.

gender in Revelation is made clear is Pippin's *Apocalyptic Bodies*¹¹⁸ with the 144,000 as a very clear example.¹¹⁹ The 144,000, who are male, are the saved ones, those who will enter the Bride and live inside the walls of the New Jerusalem. At the same time, Pippin claims, they can be identified with the Bride, who will marry the Lamb.¹²⁰ This raises many questions, and Pippin formulates her reading as questions, trying out various possibilities. For example: Is the text about men who become women in order to be forever with God? Is this the well-known early Christian notion about women becoming men in order to enter Heaven turned upside down? Is this the ultimate transgression of the borders of gender or is it something totally different—and if so, what?¹²¹ By means of all her questions and all the possible interpretations she mentions, Pippin shows that gender is ambivalent, unstable and eludes simple interpretations in certain central texts in Revelation.

The gender analysis I sketched in the beginning made the androcentrism of the text and the world it creates clear. It draws attention to the construction of the Christian as a male who is understood in contrast to women, and to the use of clear-cut dichotomies and stable dichotomies of females in Revelation. In other words, at the beginning of this essay and in the works from the early 1990s, gender in Revelation seems to be simple and stable. Here, at the end of the essay and in the examples from 1999 and to the present, the examples of gender analysis point to the instability of gender in Revelation. This suggests that there may be more possibilities waiting for explorations of gender instability, and thus for queer interpretations, of Revelation.

The gender analysis we meet in the works I point to as future possibilities, and which we meet in, for example, the articles by Økland mentioned above, are not as explicitly political as, for example, the articles by Jean K. Kim. However, it must never be forgotten that even a gender analysis that is not explicitly political and relating to the social context where it was written is political, since it shows that gender is a socially conditioned construction, and makes it impossible just to claim, that social conditions and structures must be in a certain way because women and men just are in a certain way.

Finally, I will turn from work with the text to work with its reception and effective history. I am convinced that there must be a lot of work on this field that is still not done.

118. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 117-25; on p. 121 the instability is mentioned explicitly.

119. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 119-23, 125.

120. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, p. 121.

121. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 121-23.

To begin with, it must be possible to search for women's interpretations and uses of Revelation throughout history, and to study those works also with gender as analytical tool. It might be rewarding to widen the focus to uses of apocalyptic texts and imagery regardless of its origins,¹²² and on the role of apocalyptic biblical texts, including Revelation, in different forms of feminist theology.¹²³

If the effective history¹²⁴ of Revelation is in focus, we may first notice that in difference to texts as the Household Codes in Col. 3.18–4.1, 1 Pet. 2.18–3.7, Eph. 5.21–6.9, or 1 Cor 14.33b–35 there is no well-known use of Revelation to support subordination of women. The first question that must be asked is of course if this is correct. However, even if Revelation cannot be understood as a text used to legitimize subordination of women, a history of its reception is not irrelevant for feminist scholarship. Parts of Revelation may still be studied as parts of, symptoms of, the cultural contexts where it was written and received. To be concrete, it would be possible to integrate feminist exegetical work with Revelation in a larger interdisciplinary study called 'Images of the Prostitute and the lives of real prostitutes throughout history' – to take an example.

Finally, there must be a lot of work to be done on reception of Revelation with a gender perspective, i.e. analyses of the reuses of, for example, Babylon the Prostitute in images in different contexts. We can find a kind of beginning of such studies in some of the pictures included in Pippin's *Death and Desire*¹²⁵, and *Apocalyptic Bodies*¹²⁶ and in the texts commenting on them, but there must be more to be done. To take a concrete example, we may ask about the understandings of female gender and sexuality that are used when the image of Babylon the Prostitute are used in pictures drawn in various contexts where she is something to be shunned or resisted, for example in the Roman-Catholic Church.

122. See, e.g., Catherine Keller, 'Eschatology', in Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (eds.), *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (London: Mowbray, 1996), pp. 86–87, which makes the same points as I do on feminist reception of apocalyptic texts but also points to some eschatological and even apocalyptic traits in feminist theology that could be subjected to further analysis.

123. To be specific, a full treatment of feminist reception of Revelation and other apocalyptic texts must include such ecofeminist theological works as Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis. Ecology, Feminism and Christianity* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1991), and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

124. I use 'effective history' in the sense it has been used by Heikki Räisänen, 'The "Effective History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship?', *SJT* 45 (1992), pp. 303–24, esp. pp. 310–13.

125. Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 133–44.

126. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 90–91, 93, 120.

5. Final Words

Even if I join those who insist that Revelation is and remains highly problematic for feminist readers, I agree with Tina Pippin and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza that the text is powerful. Work with Revelation makes clear the necessity for powerful visions that can function as usable future(s). When the analytical task of feminist biblical scholars is finished, there are still many tasks left for feminist theologians, poets and visionaries. Therefore, I will finish my study of *actual* feminist reception of Revelation with some examples of *possible* feminist reception, that takes the imagery of Revelation as its point of departure for creating new texts, new visions of usable futures:

In such new visions, perhaps some will imagine the oppressive power no longer as the Great Prostitute but as the Great Pimp, or a man who earns billions from producing pornographic magazines and movies, seated on the Huge Beast and drunk of the blood of all the women and children, sisters and brothers of Jesus, whose degradation became his wealth. And their end will be in the Sea of Sulphur.

When this vision is created, others will reject it because it preserves that dualistic thinking and scapegoating which has been so destructive through history. They will instead create imagery of the consummation as transformation and inclusion, claiming that if a new world is to come, it can not come through throwing porno billionaires and patriarchs in the Sea of Sulphur, for as long as there is a Sea of Sulphur it is still the old order.

In those new visions, the just world does not come when the pure bride meets her husband and master. Instead, salvation will be as when two old lovers are reunited, without one of them giving up herself, after many misunderstandings, separations and infidelities. The victory of God will not be manifested in the dismemberment of the prostitute but through the gathering of her shattered bones. The new world will not come through the destruction of the old, but through its transformation. The new world grows out of death and darkness, nourished by all that has died, as the wheat grows from the Earth.

When those visions are created, others will find them too idyllic, not taking evil serious enough, and envision oppressors as Beasts, doomed for destruction and the end as sinful structures returning to the Abyss. And those visions will invite others to protest and to create images of a different salvation.¹²⁷

127. Stenström, *Liberation or Backlash?*, p. 317. The quotation is from the final pages of my dissertation. I find it justifiable to reuse them nine years later, since they are not a description of the state of affairs in recent research but my own fantasies about still not written feminist utopian writings.

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THE SPECTRE REVEALED AND MADE MANIFEST: THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN THE WRITINGS OF KARL MARX AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS

Jorunn Økland

Erst der Messias selbst vollendet alles historische Geschehen,... Darum ist das Reich Gottes nicht das Telos der historischen *dynamis*; es kann nicht zum Ziel gesetzt werden. Historisch gesehen ist es nicht Ziel, sondern Ende.

Walter Benjamin¹

In the case of the Utopian texts, the most reliable political test lies not in any judgment on the individual work in question so much as in its capacity to generate new ones, Utopian visions that include those of the past, and modify or correct them.

Fredric Jameson²

1. Introduction: The Utopian Impulse and the Utopian Text

In his recent book *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson makes the historically unconscious claim that utopianism started with Thomas More, who in his book *Utopia* describes an alternative model of society (in contrast to his contemporary, chaotic European one) with very firm boundaries and hierarchies bringing forth the fruits of harmony and tolerance.³ Jameson says 'the inventory has a convenient and indispensable starting point: it is, of course, the inaugural text of Thomas More (1517)'.⁴ Armed with a wide definition of utopianism, it is surprising that this otherwise long-sighted, Marxist literary critic who surely knows his Marx and Engels, is not able to see further back. He must have noticed that his masters find inspiration in alternative models of society in far earlier

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Theologisch-politisches Fragment', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften II.1* (ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), pp. 203-204 (203).

2. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p. xv.

3. Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

4. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 1.

texts?⁵ In his eager review of Jameson's book, even Terry Eagleton has left behind his usually high sensitivity towards religious influences on literary culture, and jumps right into a discussion with Jameson over whether or not the utopian impulse can be located in Marx and Engels themselves. Eagleton points out that 'though Marx had some approving comments to make about Utopian thinkers, he began his career in combat with this current of thought, and is notoriously silent about what a future socialist order would look like [...]. Any idle fantasist could dream up some ideal society, but it took a historical materialist to identify those contradictions in the present which might eventually lead to its negation. Once this was done, there was logically nothing left to say.'⁶

Jameson and Eagleton rightly point out Marx and Engels's scepticism against the utopian socialists, and their refusal to describe the future classless society in much detail.⁷ Yet the question is whether their struggle with utopian thought left an indelible scar on their own. Or was it perhaps the other way round, that the utopians focused differently on what was already an ambiguous spot in Marx and Engels's thought, perhaps going back to an 'undecidability'⁸ in the subject-matter itself: How to move towards a radically different society from within the parameters of that of today? As Foucault put it in friendly opposition to the Frankfurt School, 'we must produce something that doesn't yet exist and about which we cannot know how and what it will be'.⁹ It is to Jameson's honour that he makes the focus of his analysis exactly the paradox that follows when the future is constantly put into textual form in the present, 'Utopia, which combines the not-yet-being of the future with a textual existence in the present' as he puts it.¹⁰ Yet it feels as if he

5. More writes in the context of the Pope gradually losing control over parts of Europe defining themselves as 'protestant', with More on the Pope's side arguing for unity and harmony. This 'inaugural text' is thus created in a highly charged situation of religious and political tension. The absence of the text's religious-political *matrix* in a book by Jameson is curious, as is the absence of More's sources of inspiration.

6. Terry Eagleton, 'Making a Break', in *London Review of Books* (9 March, 2006), pp. 25-26.

7. See, e.g., *The Communist Manifesto*, Section III, 'Socialist and Communist Literature', first published in German in 1848 in London as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei'. The edition used here is taken from Karl Marx, *Die Frühschriften, herausgegeben mit Einleitung von Siegfried Landshut* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2004). Available in English from online: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>, no pages, cited 08.2006. See also 'Socialism Utopian and Scientific', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, III (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), pp. 95-151.

8. Jameson, *Archaeologies*, p. xv.

9. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (New York: Semiotexte, 1991), p. 121.

10. Jameson, *Archaeologies*, p. xvi.

has overlooked an even earlier, and even more foundational text that fits this description: The Book of Revelation, which Marx and Engels were wise not to overlook—wise, because of the urgent and vivid readings of it in the culture surrounding them during the early phase of their work. As it happens, this was also the case in the period in which More wrote, over 300 years earlier.¹¹ In some periods, the end of the world has definitely been nearer than in others. In their discussion of Revelation 10 in the ‘inaugural text’ of *this* volume, Kovacs and Rowland’s *Revelation*, the authors point to the expectations of the imminent end of the world in the late 1830s to early 1840s,¹² which is also the period when Marx and Engels authored their first texts. Kovacs and Rowland also quote a poem by believers (from the *Recollections of Luther Boutelle*) trying to come to terms with the disappointment when Christ did *not* return in 1844 as masses of people around Europe expected:

In eighteen hundred forty four,
We thought the curse would be no more.
The things of earth we left behind,
To meet the Savior of mankind [...]
The day passed by—no tongue can tell
The gloom that on the faithful fell.
That what it meant they hardly knew
But to their Lord they quickly flew.¹³

As I hope to have highlighted so far, there *is* indeed a spectre in the core of Marxist writings—that of apocalypticism and messianism in general (as the epigraph demonstrates), and the Book of Revelation in particular. The aim of this essay is to *reveal*, or make this spectre *manifest*, so to say, in the writings of Marx and Engels. I agree with various recent thinkers that Marxism is basically and structurally a secularized version of (especially Pauline) Messianism, only emptied of content.¹⁴ Yet the particular NT

11. More’s book was published in 1516, a year before Luther’s 95 theses. Luther’s tendency to represent the Pope and the Catholic Church as the Beast of Revelation (in later tradition identified with the Antichrist mentioned in the Johannine Letters) was just a further development of a literary *topos* on the corruptions of papacy since the 12th century. See Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 150–55; see also Ian Boxall, ‘The Many Faces of Babylon the Great: *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the Interpretation of Revelation 17’, in S. Moyise (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), pp. 51–68.

12. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 119.

13. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 119.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (trans. P. Kamuf; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 28: ‘this

text that Marx and Engels themselves draw on most often, is not a Pauline letter, but the Book of Revelation. Interesting as it would be to trace the apparitions of this spectre in a whole range of subsequent Marxist writings and ask if the Book of Revelation and other Jewish apocalypses have left in them a paradigm or cultural prototype or notion of 'the end of history' and 'New Jerusalem',¹⁵ I will limit myself to something far more modest: to offer a rather close reading and comparison of Marx and Engels's respective uses of the book. As a biblical scholar it is my conviction that this is where we have to start, and 'close reading' is also the most valuable gift from biblical scholars to an interdisciplinary conversation.

2. *Christianity – A Story of Success!*

First, in order to follow the further argument, it is necessary to nuance some popular assumptions concerning Marx and Engels's take on religion.

That religion 'is the opium of the people' is the most famous statement by Marx on religion. The statement, taken from the introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*,¹⁶ is representative of his fierce *Religionskritik* although the context of the quote severely modifies it. The statement has been quoted frequently by Christian groups in the post-war period as the proof-text, in need of no further explanation or questioning, that Marxism and Christianity are incompatible. This perception *does* need further scrutiny because the statement was neither the only one made by Marx and Engels on the topic of religion, nor was it their excuse for not taking religion seriously, nor does it mean that there is nothing of interest to be found in their writings for scholars of religion. At the moment, the scholar working the most intensively in this area is Roland Boer, and I can only refer the reader interested in the intersections between Biblical and Marxist studies to his work.¹⁷

desert-like messianism (without content and without identifiable messiah).' The term 'messianism' is used no less than 9 times in Derrida's book on Marx. Benjamin's writings refer to Jewish messianism in a concrete and neither aestheticized (like Adorno) nor demythologized away. According to Jacob Taubes, Benjamin's messianism is 'Pauline' in all but the name (Jacob Taubes, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* [Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2003], pp. 97-106, 169-70).

15. That this is also very closely related to Hegel's thought is a fact I will leave to rest here, the influence of Hegel on Marxist thought has been sufficiently illuminated, at least by comparison with the Bible.

16. Karl Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung', published in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in 1844. Edition used here: Marx, *Die Frühschriften*, pp. 274-91.

17. Roland Boer, 'Twenty Five Years of Marxist Biblical Criticism', *Currents in*

Especially Friedrich Engels's engagement and fierce discussions with some biblical scholars of his time show that Marx and Engels took religion extremely seriously, and Engels repeatedly returns to the fact that his own views on religion are based on German, liberal biblical scholarship, he just takes the logical, materialist consequences of this scholarship.¹⁸

Prompted by the French revolutionary communists before them who had referred to early Christianity, Marx and Engels took a special interest in the question of whether early Christianity in fact was a kind of early communist movement. The French philosopher/biblical scholar Renan, who Engels liked to read and then argue with, was the mediating figure in this respect.¹⁹ As Engels says in the opening lines of his essay 'On the History of Early Christianity':

The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society. Both are persecuted and baited, [...] in spite of all persecution, nay, even spurred on by it, they forge victoriously, irresistibly ahead. Three hundred years after its appearance Christianity was the recognized state religion in the Roman World Empire, and in barely sixty years socialism has won itself a position which makes its victory absolutely certain.²⁰

Biblical Research 5.3 (2007), pp. 1-25; Roland Boer, 'The Perpetual Allure of the Bible for Marxism', *Historical Materialism* 15.2 (2007), pp. 53-77; Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, in press). See also further discussions of the Bible and/in particular Marxist feminist writings in Roland Boer and Jorunn Økland (eds.), *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

18. He says for example that 'German criticism of the Bible, so far the only scientific basis of our knowledge of the history of early Christianity...' (Friedrich Engels, 'On the History of Early Christianity,' in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), pp. 313-43 (320) – published originally in German as 'Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums' in 1894-95. German edition available online: http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me22/me22_447.htm, no pages, cited 03.2007; cf. also his 'The Book of Revelation', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), pp. 204-77 – published originally in English in London in 1883.

19. Engels, 'Early Christianity', p. 315. Renan, whom Engels frequently takes issue with, is quoted there as saying, 'If I wanted to give you an idea of the early Christian communities I would tell you to look at a local section of the International Working Men's Association'.

20. Quoted from *On Religion*, p. 313.

Thus, part of the benefit of this comparison between early Christianity and socialism is that it makes the growth of the socialist movement understandable and its final victory more plausible: the success of the former is a lesson to be learnt, copied and eventually superseded by the latter.

In addition to the use of early Christianity as a historical model for the socialist movement, there is also an aesthetic use of biblical language, metaphors, symbolism and allegory in Marx and Engels's texts. Such use functions as mirror of Marx and Engels's own contemporary world, and is no less interesting than their use of the Bible in historical reconstruction. This two-fold use of the Bible as historical source to early Christian social realities and as allegory of one's own time, is one we will find also when we turn to their use of the Book of Revelation proper.

3. The Presence of the Book of Revelation in the Works of Marx and Engels

I will continue by presenting some main texts where Marx and Engels deal with the Book of Revelation. A problem presenting itself straight away is the selection of materials. Their work is interspersed with so many vague or explicit intertextual references to the Book of Revelation that we cannot deal properly with them within the limits of this essay. Only works where the Book of Revelation or ideas from it are engaged more concretely will be discussed. However, one short example of an intertextual reference deserves mention: it is found in the *Communist Manifesto*, where they very significantly (in light of the introduction to this essay, that is!) link the concepts of Utopia and the 'New Jerusalem', and describe the former in derogatory terms as a dwarfed version (Duodez-ausgabe) of the latter.²¹ But there is a further intertextual link even in the titles of the respective works: *Manifesto* and Revelation. What is revealed, is made manifest. The future encoded in writing is remembered and made manifest in the present. There are thus not only thematic interconnections between John's Revelation and Marx and Engels's *Manifesto*, also the approach to their visions of the new world has important similarities. And naturally, as Peter Osborne points out, the title of Engels's first draft (June 1847) of what later became the *Manifesto* was 'A Communist Confession of Faith'.²²

21. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, p. 89. Marx and Engels present utopian socialists as distinguishable from the conservative or reactionary socialists only in their more systematic 'pedanterie' and fanatic superstition: in their dream of a 'versuchsweise Verwirklichung ihrer gesellschaftlichen Utopien...' they compromise the highest ideals, those of the New Jerusalem. One should clearly aim for nothing less.

22. Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 67, in a chapter entitled 'Remember the Future: *The Communist Manifesto* as Cultural-

The writings by Marx that engage the Book of Revelation in more than such general terms, are 'The Critical Last Judgement' and a chapter in *German Ideology* entitled 'The Revelation of John'. I will give most attention to the former, but also shortly comment on the latter. Among Engels's works there are 'The Book of Revelation', and his 'On the History of Early Christianity'. I will present the four works in chronological order; concentrate on certain typical features, analyse *how* they approach the Book of Revelation, and look for similarities and differences among them. I will also place Marx and Engels's interest in the book into a broader context.

4. Marx's 'The Critical Last Judgement' (1844–45)

'The Critical Last Judgement' is the final, ninth chapter of the first joint venture of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, an 1845 book entitled *The Holy Family, or: Critique of Critical Critique*.²³ The book, in which they wrote all chapters except the introduction separately, is their sustained critique of a young aspiring group of Hegelians with views relatively close to their own,²⁴ and especially of Bruno Bauer and his brother Edgar – who in this context constitute 'The Holy Family'.²⁵ Already the title of the book then,

Historical Form' (pp. 63–77). Unfortunately, contrary to his promise here, Osborne has never explored the parallels further.

23. Karl Marx, 'The Critical Last Judgement', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family, or: Critique of Critical Critique* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), pp. 276–77 – published originally in German as 'Das kritische jüngste Gericht'. German version available online: www.mlwerke.de/me/me02/me02_222.htm, no pages, cited 08.2006.

24. As mentioned in a previous note, Marx and Engels owed much to Hegel themselves, namely the dialectics. But they rejected Hegel's idealism.

25. In May 1882, a month after Bruno Bauer's death, Engels had changed his mind and wrote a glowing obituary listing Bauer's achievements and landmarks in his studies of Early Christianity. It becomes clear that Engels shares Bauer's understanding of Early Christianity, but then their ways part: Bauer goes off into Hegelian speculative theology (editing *Zeitschrift für spekulative Theologie*), 'Hegel had set philosophy the task of showing a rational evolution in world history' (Friedrich Engels, 'Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity,' in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* [Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957], pp. 194–204 [194]), hence Engels accepted that Christianity could not be written off only as the work of deceivers but had to be taken seriously as the provider of the only language/power that made it possible for the masses to unite against Rome. For more on the discussions between the various Hegelians in 19th cent. Germany, see Hans Steussloff (ed.), *Die Junghegelianer (David Friedrich Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Arnold Ruge: Ausgewählte Texte* (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1963).

gives us an indication of how biblical language is used in it as mirror of contemporary characters and events. The book represents Marx's only extensive piece of literary criticism, and I think we should be grateful for that: He is brimming with sarcasm, emotion and contempt. Polemics and very approximate characterizations take the place of the clear analysis for which he is so famous. But it is very entertaining!

As final chapter, 'The Critical Last Judgement' occupies a similar position in relation to *The Holy Family*-book as the Book of Revelation itself does in relation to the NT – a bizarre epilogue, like Greek tragedy's Satyr play if you will, in a different genre and modus than the rest of the book. The difference is that whereas the continuity between the Book of Revelation and the rest of the NT has been contested from the beginning (not least in Engels's own work discussed below), Marx's 'Critical Last Judgement' drives home the same point as the previous chapters by himself and Friedrich Engels, only in a different form and genre.

Rudolph of Geroldstein is the protagonist of Eugène Sue's sentimental, not-sufficiently-socialist *Les Mystères de Paris* published two years earlier. This is the work Marx 'analyses' or rather ridicules in the previous chapter of *The Holy Family*, Chapter 8 entitled 'The Worldly Peregrination and the Transfiguration of Critical Criticism, or Critical Criticism in the Person of Rudolph, Prince of Geroldstein'.²⁶ Seven out of the eight subchapters of 'The Worldly Peregrination' have 'Revelation' in their title, which prepares us for what follows in Chapter 9, 'The Critical Last Judgment'. Marx points out that just as Jehovah through Christ throughout the Bible has saved the world, 'Critical Criticism' through its 'son', Prince Rudolph, has twice saved the world from ruin, but now decrees the end of the world (i.e. in Hegelian terms). The protagonist Rudolph is presented in Hegelian spiritual and Christ-like terms as 'more fruitful for mankind than all the experiences of the latter in its history' (unattributed quote in Marx's text, used sarcastically by him).²⁷ Rudolph's personal character is the 'revealed mystery of all mysteries' (cf. Rev. 10.7 and title of subchapter 8.8 in 'The Worldly Peregrination'), the revealed mystery of 'pure Criticism'. Finally, in this chapter, Marx mockingly calls Rudolph 'the Critical Hercules,' able to *krinein*, to discern between good and evil, and do good.

26. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, pp. 217-75.

27. The quote is probably from Herr Szeliga, a pseudonym for the Young Hegelian F. Zychlinski, who gave the novel a favourable review. Marx has devoted a full chapter to criticism (or we should really say deconstruction) of Herr Szeliga and of Sue's novel earlier in the book, namely in Chapter 5: 'Critical Criticism as a Mystery-Monger, or Critical Criticism in the Person of Herr Szeliga' (Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, pp. 75-104).

The following chapter, the 'Critical Last Judgment', which is our centre of attention, takes the form of a paraphrase of Rev. 10.1-7:

And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He held a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring; when he called out, the seven thunders sounded. And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down'. Then the angel whom I saw standing on sea and the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it: There will be no more delay, but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets (RSV/NRSV).

In Marx's version, the mighty angels of Rev. 5.2 and 10.1 are merged into 'Herr Hirzel', another, but less luminous member of the circle around the Bauer brothers. Rather cleverly and metonymically, Revelation's 'Zion' is changed into another mountain city, 'Zürich', so that we get: 'And I saw and heard a mighty angel, Herr *Hirzel*, flying down from Zürich across the heavens. And he had in his hand a little book open like the fifth number of *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*; and he set his right foot upon the Mass and his left foot upon Charlottenburg; and he cried with a loud voice as when a lion roareth, and his words rose like a dove – Chirp! Chirp! – to the regions of pathos and the thunder-like aspects of the Critical Last Judgment.'²⁸

The *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* was the forum of the 'Young Hegelian' circle that Marx and Engels devoted their book to criticizing, and the *Zeitung* was published in Charlottenburg. 'The Mass' is an unfortunate translation of German 'Masse', which can mean both 'matter' (as in materialism) and an assembly of people, but for Hegelian *Geistes-Menschen* also had all the connotations of 'base', 'low', *un-critical*, etc.²⁹ However, what comes out of Herr Hirzel's mouth is not as impressive as the angel's words in Rev. 10.3. There, when the angel shouts like a lion roaring, the seven thunders give solid resonance³⁰ whereas out of Herr Hirzel's lion roar only comes

28. Marx, 'Critical Last Judgment', p. 276.

29. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, Chapter 7 (pp. 193-216), deals with these issues of critical mass, un-critical mass, and un-critically critical mass.

30. The seven thunders are another way of mentioning the voice of God; cf. Rev. 1.4 and 4.5; cf. 8.5; 11.19; 16.18. More specifically, they may recall the sevenfold description of the voice of God in Ps. 29.3-9 as sounding like thunder and shaking both sea and land. Virtually all the images in this scene, are borrowed from the Hebrew

the sound of a dove: 'Chirp! Chirp!' Not very impressive, indeed! This dove-chirp (possibly a reference to Rev. 19.17) did not resonate all the way to Patmos where the Book of Revelation was apparently written (Rev. 1.9), but only to the regions of Pathos, thus appealing more to people's feelings than to their *logos* and critical faculties that the Young Hegelians so frequently and rhetorically appeal to.

Then there is reference to the final battle when all is united against Criticism and the world will end in dissolution. It was given to the world, in Marx's text also represented by 'hostile knights', to fight against the Holy, i.e. the followers of Criticism. The 'hostile knights' are added into a quote of Rev. 16.14 as specification of the daemonic spirits mentioned there, and thus are 'spirits of the devil, going out to the whole world and they gather to fight in the battle on the great day of God, the Almighty'.³¹ So there will be an Armageddon, teases Marx, where the speculative Young Hegelians will fight against the masses in order to move over to another *Stufe* (stage) of dialectic progression, whereas the rest will be annihilated. The seven thunders that failed to resonate after the 'Chirp! Chirp!', do however return with a bang towards the end of the text, where the thunders start to sing *dies irae, dies illa*....

The piece then, borrows language from the Book of Revelation (and also some expressions from the Gospel story), but changes the literary characters into specific characters in Marx's own time. Since both the Appendix-style relationship to the rest of the volume, the language and partly characters are used to convey something else, one could say that The Book of Revelation as a whole serves as allegory in Marx's text.

As allegory, 'The Critical Last Judgment' is an entertaining, but hard read, since the immediate context Marx so closely engages with is now mostly lost apart from the philosophical record, as also the editor of *Karl Marx: Die Frühschriften* points out concerning *The Holy Family*: 'zeitbedingte, heute kaum noch verständliche Polemik'.³² Marx shows no deeper insight into the content of the biblical book. The title itself, 'Critical

Bible and other Apocalyptic texts. That an association with established imagery is intended, is argued by David Aune. Along with many other nouns and concepts drawn from stock apocalyptic imagery, he points to how also the seven thunders are introduced with the anaphoric definite article upon first occurrence in the text, which shows that the author presupposes 'that the readers are already familiar with the reality which the substantive represents' (David Aune, 'Intertextuality and the Genre of the Apocalypse', in E. Lovering [ed.], *SBL 1991 Seminar Papers* [SBL Seminar Papers Series, 30; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991], pp. 142-60 [144]).

31. Marx, 'Critical Last Judgment', p. 276.

32. In 'Editorische und überlieferungsgeschichtliche Anmerkungen' in Marx, *Die Frühschriften*, pp. 631-52 (644). For the philosophical context, see also the above mentioned Steusloff, *Die Junghegelianer*.

Last Judgement/kritische jüngste Gericht', is obviously a combination of the theological concept of the Last Judgement and the philosophical concept of critical judgment. Both the German original and the English translation contain the same combination of concepts, although the exact expression 'The Last Judgment' does not actually occur in the Book of Revelation itself.³³

5. *Why Would Marx Complete the Book on Such a Biblical Note?*

Earlier in the book (Chapter 7) Marx has accused Herr Hirzel of speaking a lot of hot air: 'in nicht "gangbaren" Redensarten einherzutragen'.³⁴ Marx has chosen the opposite of a non-communicative genre of speech himself in order to fight back, namely a biblical genre that everyone knows. As mentioned above, the end of the world was predicted in 1844, a date which coincides with Marx's writing of this piece. There were strong end-time expectations around. Kovacs and Rowland also mention this in their commentary in connection with Revelation 10: 'Adventists used Rev. 10 to come to terms with the "great disappointment", the failure of the eschatological events to appear as predicted in 1844'.³⁵

What Marx gains with his genre choice in addition to contemporary relevance, is a strong effect. There is certainly a large surplus value of meaning available in the Book of Revelation, and Marx has understood how to tap this surplus and put it into service in his own production of meaning and criticism.

But this strategy is not without risk, because in the end it somehow posits Marx himself as the last link in the chain of apocalyptic prophets. It is noteworthy that after the allegorical 'The Critical Last Judgment' follows an 'Historical Epilogue' of just two lines. It reads: 'As we later learned, it was not the world, but the Critical *Literatur-Zeitung* that had its last day'.³⁶ Thus, whoever predicts the end of the world or its total reorganization at a higher level, will themselves be brought to an end. From the post-Marxist perspective of the 21st century, how true, indeed...

33. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation* (p. 214), point out concerning 'The Last Judgment', that Rev 20.11-15, along with Mt. 25.31-45, offers one of the few explicit descriptions of what later became a central theological concept. The difficulty for reception historians is that it is not always clear if a reference to the Day of Judgment has been inspired directly by the Apocalypse or not.

34. In 7.1, German quote online: http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me02/me02_152.htm, no pages, cited 08.2006.

35. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 119. Engels, too, writes about the disappointments of 1844 long after the fact, in his Early Christianity essay that I will return to below.

36. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, p. 277.

The outcome of the apocalyptic battle between the literary, speculative idealists and the historical materialists is reflected in the relationship between Chapter 9 and the historical epilogue. But since it was not after all the end of the world, but only of the *Literatur-Zeitung*, must that not mean that the Armageddon as the day of Judgment/Criticism (both going back to the Greek *krisis*) is still imminent, even after another 150 years, and that Marx himself in this text takes the place of the Angel who predicts a better, and final, victory of the Masses?

We may speculate why Marx chose the apocalyptic genre, but also why did he choose these particular passages from the Book of Revelation to convey his message? There are other texts in the Bible that distinguish between good and evil. As biblical prototype for Rudolph, the Jesus of the Gospels would have been much closer at hand, travelling around as he also did, helping the sick, poor and excluded. Something in the Book of Revelation provided Marx with the arsenal he needed. The point is that the meaning of the piece cannot be found entirely in the 19th-century context, which would have meant that the choice of biblical text would have been arbitrary. In some way, Revelation fitted better than the alternatives, and Marx estimated that he would get his message across better by using this biblical text than not using it.

In Revelation 10, John the Seer is about to write down his vision but is told not to. Instead he is told to eat the piece of writing, the scroll, the angel saying to him: 'Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth' (10.9). Then the Seer is commanded: 'You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings' (10.11). This is what Marx and Engels did in their subsequent works. Of course I could not argue any further that this was the attraction of the text on Marx and the reason why he chose it. But in my view it is an odd coincidence, which fits well with Derrida's reading of Marx. In his book, he represents Marx as a messianic prophet frequenting spectres who share very many common traits with angels.³⁷

6. Marx's German Ideology (1845–46)

A similar use of the Book of Revelation, and indeed many other books of the Bible as well, is found in *German Ideology*, probably written mainly by Marx but with contributions from Engels shortly after *The Holy Family*. In their lifetime, it was impossible to find a publisher willing to publish the work in full, and even after their death the movement that came to carry the name of Marx was rather reluctant to make the work readily

37. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, e.g. pp. 98–99.

available.³⁸ Perhaps by that time, when Marx's and Engels's *Religionskritik* had become mainstream in socialist circles, the over-abundance of biblical allegory seemed just too baroque.

The work not only continues *The Holy Family's* allegorical use of Revelation, it also continues *The Holy Family's* critique of Bruno Bauer and the Young Hegelians that we learnt about above. In part 3 of volume 1 there is a long subchapter entitled 'The Revelation of John the Divine, or "The Logic of the New Wisdom"'. The actual content of the subchapter does not echo its biblical namesake to the same extent as does 'The Critical Last Judgment'. Rather, it opens by echoing the *Gospel* of John, thus reflecting popular ideas that the two biblical books are written by the same author. This is another indication of Marx's limited interest in biblical criticism. Again, he reproduces popular notions and uses the title ('Book of Revelation') and some genre-related terminology for effect, while the actual content relates mostly to his own time.

Marx and Engels named other chapters of *German Ideology* after biblical testaments ('Old' and 'New') and books such as the *Song of Songs*, and *Genesis*. Other chapters again are named after theological concepts such as 'The Doctrine of Justification', 'prophets' and 'saints'. Hence, Roland Boer argues along slightly different lines than those pursued here, that there is more to *German Ideology's* use of biblical allegory than meets the eye of a biblical scholar:

Dubbed 'Saint Bruno' and 'Saint Max', Marx and Engels pepper their critique with biblical quotes and wheel out one biblical theme after another to argue that both Bauer and Stirner offer a barely concealed theology in their reading of Hegel. But perhaps my favourite section is that third chapter on Max Stirner, organized in terms of the books of the Bible. Thus, we find the first section entitled 'The Old Testament: Man' and the second 'The New Testament: Ego'. Both have a discussion of the 'economy' of the testaments. While Genesis is favoured in the first section, the gospel of John the Divine becomes the preferred focus of the second, and the whole closes with 'Solomon's Song of Songs or the Unique'. Not averse to some delightful satire, Marx and Engels pull apart Bauer's spiritualist appropriation of Hegel, but they do so by invoking the Bible in depth.³⁹

Even if I remain to be convinced about the level of 'depth' with which Marx and Engels invoke the Bible here, Boer's larger argument that *German Ideology's* use of the Bible is very apt philosophically, is impossible to

38. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (ed. S. Ryazanskaya; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964) – published originally in German (but not in full until 1932!) as *Die deutsche Ideologie*. German version available online: http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me03/me03_009.htm, no pages, cited 08.2006.

39. Roland Boer, 'A Web of Fascination: Marxism and the Bible', unpublished essay.

disagree with. To use the Bible against bad theology, is a good, old recipe that does not list 'depth' among its ingredients.

7. *Engels's The Book of Revelation (1883)*

Moving into work indisputably from Engels's hand and almost 40 years down the line, we are in a different framework of biblical interpretation entirely. Published the same year as Marx died after a long illness, Engels's little piece entitled 'The Book of Revelation' could be seen as dissemination of German historical-critical scholarship. It introduces to the general reader historical and ideological criticism of the Book of Revelation, which is exactly the kind of 'science of the Bible' that Engels would like to see. The interest in the Book of Revelation is no longer grounded in its form immediately recognizable to 19th-century Germans, thus allegory, sarcasm and the aesthetic approach of the early works are gone.

Engels's sources include Renan, described by Engels as a 'poor plagiarist of the German critics'.⁴⁰ But very interestingly, his main sources are his own lecture notes from a course given by Professor Ferdinand Benary back in 1841 in Berlin, where Engels was a student!⁴¹ Whoever wants to explore the influence of messianism and apocalypticism in the thought of Engels ought to start right there. But in a different perspective, this scholarly grounding is exactly what makes Engels less interesting within the context of a reception history of the Book of Revelation: Much of what he presents, is just standard 19th-century German historical-critical scholarship.

What still makes the piece interesting is Engels's ideological interpretation of the historical-critical research. By 1880 the Book of Revelation has become an interesting object of study as window into the beliefs, superstitions and practices of an ancient mass movement and witness to its historical success: 'Christianity, like every great revolutionary movement, was made by the masses'.⁴² Engels reads the Book of Revelation against the grain and sympathizes with the seven churches ('sects over and over again'), who like every revolutionary movement practice 'free love' as one way of 'shaking off of old traditional fetters'.⁴³

Throughout, Engels makes a virtue out of the rather deviant theology of the Book of Revelation compared to other NT writings. Others in his German environment found the NT relatively clear, but the Book of Revelation dark,

40. Engels, 'Revelation', p. 204; for even worse characterizations see his 'Early Christianity', p. 315.

41. Benary was a scholar of the Ancient Near East and an epigraphist.

42. Engels, 'Revelation', p. 206.

43. Engels, 'Revelation', p. 205.

mysterious and obscure. Engels has a conceptual framework that allows him to make sense of Revelation on its own terms, hence 'it is the simplest and clearest book of the whole New Testament'.⁴⁴ As probably the earliest [sic] text of the NT, the Book of Revelation is 'an authentic picture of almost primitive Christianity, drawn by one of themselves'.⁴⁵ It documents the beliefs of a Jewish, revolutionary movement in its inception. This origin also explains for Engels why we do not even know its author—Engels knows from German biblical scholarship that the various 'Johns' of the NT are not the same person—yes, even its bad grammar and Creole Greek!⁴⁶

This origin contrasts starkly with the later development of 'Christianity' proper, attempting to break free from Judaism and construct its own doctrinal superstructure by borrowing from Graeco-Roman philosophy:

....afterwards formed into a doctrine by the addition of theorems of [...] Philo, and later on of strong stoic infiltrations. In fact, if we may call Philo the doctrinal father of Christianity, Seneca was her uncle [...]. Of all these doctrinal elements there is not a trace to be found in our Book of Revelation. Of original sin, not a trace. Nothing of the trinity. Jesus is 'the lamb', but subordinate to God. In fact, in one passage (15:3) he is placed upon an equal footing with Moses. Instead of one holy ghost there are 'the seven spirits of god' (3:1 and 4:5).⁴⁷

The contrast between the original and the 'second wave' Christian movement explains for Engels the contrast between the Book of Revelation and NT doctrine and theology more in general. Anyone who has read the work of Kautsky and other later Marxists on early Christianity will immediately recognize the 'heterodox' chronology compared to mainstream NT scholarship, as well as some of the perspectives.⁴⁸

8. Engels's On the History of Early Christianity (1894–95)

The essay on the history of Early Christianity is a more extensive text that repeats and develops further many of the themes from the one previously discussed, which shows how Engels's interest in the parallels between the socialist movement and primitive Christianity continued to grow throughout his life. At this point, he is ready to respond to Anton Menger—who wondered why socialism did *not* follow the slave/working

44. Engels, 'Revelation', p. 205.

45. Engels, 'Revelation', p. 211.

46. Engels, 'Revelation', p. 207.

47. Engels, 'Revelation', p. 206.

48. Karl Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums: Eine historische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1908). For an overview, see P. Kowalinski, 'The Genesis of Christianity in the Views of Contemporary Marxist Specialists in Religion,' *Antonionum* 47 (1972), pp. 541–75.

class' overthrow of the Roman Empire – that it actually did, only under a different name:

'socialism' did in fact, as far as it was possible at the time, exist and even become dominant – in Christianity. Only this Christianity, as was bound to be the case in the historic conditions, did not want to accomplish the social transformation in this world, but beyond it, in heaven, in eternal life after death, in the impending 'millennium'.⁴⁹

Thus, the Book of Revelation becomes a key text, and all later European revolutionary movements only variations of an Early Christian theme.

I have quoted from the introduction to this work already, in order to illustrate Engels's interest in both historical-critical scholarship and in early Christianity as a phenomenon. Having taken the opportunity to argue with Bruno Bauer – *noch einmal*, but much more sympathetically this time – Engels concludes that the truth about early Christianity cannot be defined on the basis of the sources available in 19th-century Germany, i.e. the NT. He is certain that the new discoveries in Rome, Egypt and the Orient will contribute more knowledge in the future than any critical reading of the existing sources (this in contrast to historical critics such as Bauer and Strauss).

Engels does, however, make an exception for the Book of Revelation. He states:

But we have in the NT a single book the time of the writing of which can be defined within a few months, which must have been written between June 67 and January or April 68; a book, consequently, which belongs to the very beginning of the Christian era and reflects with the most naïve fidelity and in the corresponding idiomatic language the ideas of the beginning of that era. This book, therefore, in my opinion, is a far more important source from which to define what early Christianity really was than all the rest of the NT, which, in its present form, is of a far later date...⁵⁰

He thus repeats much of what he said in 1883, stresses even more the Book of Revelation's uniqueness as a window into the historical situation and mentality, but also emphasizes more strongly the genre to which it belongs: The Apocalypses. 'All the apocalypses attribute to themselves the right to deceive their readers'⁵¹ says Engels, they prophesy things that have already happened and they are consistently pseudepigraphical. In his great poverty of mind – and as Professor Benary demonstrated in the lectures Engels attended – the author of the Book of Revelation has borrowed every picture from previous apocalypses. But Engels is clearly tempted to change his view on the authorship question yet again,

49. Engels, 'Early Christianity', p. 314.

50. Engels, 'Early Christianity', pp. 325-26.

51. Engels, 'Early Christianity', p. 323.

for if the apostle John really were to be the author, 'that would be the best confirmation that the Christianity of this book is real genuine early Christianity'.⁵² Thus we see, Engels's interest is to boost even further the Book of Revelation as the most 'authentic' voice of primitive Christianity, and closest to the 'origin'.

Then follows a basic outline of the content of the biblical book, where he points out all the instances where it does not fit with the dogmas of Christianity that came about later in the intellectualizing, unifying *interpretatio graeca* of the movement. Again, his survey of the content of the Book of Revelation is too familiar to be interesting in our context, but this is in itself slightly suspicious, given that he wrote over 100 years ago. What strikes me as a NT scholar, then, is how many of Engels's views that were probably rather extreme in his own time are a hundred years later explored as 'new-ish' perspectives in mainstream NT scholarship. I am especially thinking of the idea of Early Christianity as a conglomerate of sects along a spectrum between traditional Judaism, Greek materialism and Roman paganism, and that orthodox, primitive Christianity was a retrospective construct of fourth- and fifth-century imperial Christianity. Also the nature of the theology of the Book of Revelation (deviant Christian, deviant Jewish or something else?) has been more noted in scholarship since the 1980s.

A few further points deserve to be mentioned: In his interpretation of Revelation 14 and the 144,000, Engels takes the number as an expression of modesty: it is a small number, reflecting an author who feels 'one is struggling against the whole world', but with a strong determination to win: 'That was how little our author was aware in the year 69 of the Christian era that he represented quite a new phase in the development of a religion which was to become one of the most revolutionary elements in the history of the human mind'.⁵³

Engels also points out that the heavenly paradise does not open to all, nor to the faithful by the mere fact of their death. Entrance to the New Jerusalem (mentioned also in the *Communist Manifesto*, see above) must be struggled for and conquered, and the enemies to be conquered are none other than the powers of hell.⁵⁴

9. *Early and Late*

Originally, I intended my contribution to this volume to be a comparison between the Book of Revelation's New Jerusalem and the Marxist notion

52. Engels, 'Early Christianity', p. 324.

53. Engels, 'Early Christianity', p. 326.

54. Engels, 'Early Christianity', p. 332.

of the classless society, with the aim to point out the structural similarities, historical connections, and to trace the afterlife of the Book of Revelation in later Marxists, especially Benjamin and Bloch.⁵⁵ To claim that Marx's and Engels's view of historical progress and development was *influenced* by the Book of Revelation would be too risky. The connection is definitely there, but so is the connection between their view of historical progress and Hegel's dialectics, von Holbach's view of causality and the purpose and aim of existence, to mention just a few.

I still hope to return to Benjamin, Bloch and apocalypticism before the end of days, but I ended up elsewhere for now, in a much closer reading of Marx's and Engels's texts, first, because of my disappointment with what was done in the 1970s in terms of Marxism and Bible. It was so much about showing how the two were or were not compatible philosophically and ethically, and so little about actually taking the *texts* seriously,⁵⁶ those by Marx and Engels, and those by biblical authors. But there is also another reason that brings us back to the introduction: the various quotes there commenting on Marx's and Engels's notorious silence about what a future society would actually look like are very strongly confirmed in the writings I have analysed. If we take the example from the *Communist Manifesto* also mentioned above, it even seems as if the attempt to describe the New Jerusalem will inevitably be a reduction of it, as if the *via negativa* is the only way to remain faithful to it while keeping all the focus on the struggle here and now.

The writings I have analysed fall into two distinct periods: the early writings from the mid 1840s, and the very late writings from the hand of Engels, both written around and after the death of Marx. During the 40 years in between, their particular interpretation of socialism had won, there was no longer any point in arguing with other thinkers holding close, but not identical positions to themselves (such as Bauer and bourgeois socialists). Socialism, which in the 1840s still was a multifaceted phenomenon, had turned into a distinct movement that had lessons to learn

55. Heikki Räisänen postulates in his famous article, "The 'Effective History' of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship?" (in Heikki Räisänen, *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991–2001* [Leiden: Brill, 2001], pp. 263–82 [277]), that 'An influence of biblical apocalyptic on Marxism is obvious'. Kovacs and Rowland (in *Revelation*, p. 27) equally postulate that the Book of Revelation influenced Ernst Bloch. I fully agree with both, but further textual analysis to show it is still needed.

56. One important exception is Fernando Belo's *Lecture matérialiste de l'évangile de Marc* (Paris: Cerf, 1974). For my broader views on the difference between studies in Marxism and the Bible now compared to 30 years ago, see Jorunn Økland and Roland Boer, "Towards Marxist Feminist Biblical Criticism," in Roland Boer and Jorunn Økland (eds.), *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

from similar movements in history. The situations set apart by 40 years colour the two sets of texts differently.

But there are also differences between the writings that come mainly from the pen of Marx and those from Engels. It seems that while Engels's approach to the Book of Revelation was historical—he studied it at university, was well read and was able to enter historical-critical scholarly discussions over content and interpretation, Marx's approach was aesthetic and allegorical. The Book of Revelation was applicable form and rhetoric, and damn good as such, that had to be filled with new content in order to be useful in a new period. Engels the elder wanted to teach the socialist movement lessons from history, wanted to understand the key to success, but the young Marx wanted to persuade. If religion is opium to the people, one simply has to offer better opium, one might be tempted to suggest.

10. *Why Does the Spectre Keep Reappearing?*

I have in this essay explained their use of the Book of Revelation in the 1840s with reference to the expectations of the imminent end of the world, and 40 years later with reference to the necessity of learning from history. I have also mentioned how it inspires hope for the socialist movement, since it proves that even a little movement can grow fast and win access to a totally new and better society. But there is probably more.

The Book of Revelation is the only biblical book that consistently returns in the oeuvre of Marx and Engels, and this is a great paradox. For in spite of their radical *Religionskritik*, in spite of their contempt for utopian socialists who were too busy with the details about the world to come to be alert here and now, in spite of their uneasiness with having the role of Messiah and prophet ascribed to them, they seem to accept their need for religious language and the common frame of reference that the Bible represented in order to communicate with the masses.⁵⁷ The spectre must reappear. Thus, a good explanation for the prominent place of Revelation in the work of Marx and Engels is found in the conclusion to Engels's 1894 essay on Early Christianity:

The core of the universal religion is there, but it includes without any discrimination the thousand possibilities of development which became realities in the countless subsequent sects. And the reason why this oldest writing of the time when Christianity was coming into being is especially valuable for us is that it shows without any dilution what Judaism, strongly influenced by Alexandria, contributed to Christianity. All that comes later

57. Räisänen points to Bertrand Russell, who once claimed that it was the Bible that made Marx psychologically credible (Räisänen, 'Effective History,' p. 277).

is western, Greco-Roman addition. It was only by the intermediary of the monotheistic Jewish religion that the cultured monotheism of later Greek vulgar philosophy could clothe itself in the religious form in which alone it could grip the masses. But once this intermediary was found, it could become a universal religion only in the Greco-Roman world, and that by further development in and merging with the thought material that world had achieved.⁵⁸

If we translate this to Marx's and Engels's own project, it would read approximately like this: The core of the universal religion can be found in the Book of Revelation, but the subsequent Christianization of it excluded the thousand other possibilities of development contained in it. Like ancient Greek Epicureanism, also Marxism is philosophical, atheist, materialist, scientific, universal—but lacks appeal to the Masses it wants to liberate. Only by the intermediary of the monotheistic religion can Marxism clothe itself in the religious form in which alone it can grip the masses.

And so it did.

On the content side, the Book of Revelation had some features that fitted very well with Marx's and Engels's overall theory of historical development and overturning of the decadent rich and powerful of this world, represented by Babylon and her lovers (Rev. 17). It also, bizarrely, fitted with their rather militant critique of institutionalized religion: Look what it predicts about the destiny of the religious centres, the old Jerusalem, and about superstitious worshippers of various pagan deities! They are all brought to an end. Further, Christ-language is conveniently absent, and in the New Jerusalem there is no Temple (Rev. 21.22) — since God and the Lamb are there anyway.

11. *Epilogue*

A Marxist reader may feel offended by the way I have treated Karl Marx. I would like to respond to that and end with a final quote from Eagleton, and a reflection:

The founder of Marxism thus manages to wriggle out of the pincer movement to which his followers are often subjected: if you can describe a desirable future in any detail, you are the prisoner of some desiccated blueprint; if you cannot, you are a pathetic dreamer. As far as the future goes, Marx writes, "the content goes beyond the form," meaning perhaps that you cannot simply read off the nature of the just society from the institutions set up to establish it. The task of socialists ends with the transition itself.⁵⁹

58. Engels, 'Early Christianity', pp. 342-43.

59. Eagleton, 'Making a Break', pp. 25-26.

Thus we may here have a final explanation for why Marx himself had very good reasons for using Revelation as allegory, but refrained from using it as a source to history past and future. Revelation's imaginary language gave him form but not content, a point of reference, but one that he did not have to stand by and remain faithful to. The disjointed tableaux of the Book of Revelation⁶⁰ provided him with a dramatic form flexible enough to be open to the future. Thus he can present the form in a spectral and ironic way, and save the actual content for the future manifestation.

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60. For a discussion of the book's narrative sequence as a series of tableaux without any claim to inner connection and coherence, see A.J. Garrow, *Revelation* (London: Routledge, 1997).

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THE INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND EFFECTIVE HISTORY

Christopher Rowland

1. The Propriety of Writing a Reception History Commentary

The contributors to this volume pay Judith and myself the compliment of recognizing the importance of what we did. The greatest debt that could be paid to our work is evident on every page, in that our work functioned as a catalyst for questions and generated important perspectives which take our work in new and exciting directions. That one should think of writing a commentary on any biblical book without paying attention to the way in which the book has influenced people, in different ways and in different media down the centuries, now seems to me unthinkable. Nevertheless the preoccupation with the commentary reflects part of our cultural context and may indeed have seduced those of us who first floated the reception history commentary series into thinking that this genre could be given new life by injecting the diachronic into what is essentially usually a history of modern scholarship and relatively judicious remarks on what may best be considered the original meaning of the text. The papers at the Bristol conference show us that the framework of the modern commentary (at least in book form) is not flexible enough to deal with the plethora of interpretative possibilities, many of which were new to me and which reminded me that when we did the research for the Blackwell commentary we only scratched the surface of what was out there. One is now tempted to raise one's hands in a resigned way and complain, in the vein of the editor of the Gospel of John, that all the books in whole world would not be sufficient to contain what would be possible, let alone a book with a strict publisher's word limit of 110,000 words! Nevertheless, lack of inclusion of that which might be loosely called 'apocalyptic' in contemporary culture (film, for example) or the history of the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy such as the Sibyllines or 2 Esdras reflects not only editorial discipline but also the limits of our knowledge as well and the economies of publishing.

But that is to get too quickly into an apologetic vein about this particular book. We do need to ponder the searching questions about the

commentary format not only for a consideration of reception history but also for the discussion of any biblical book. It is, of course, a well-worn genre, whose demise has often been predicted, but whose economic viability is guaranteed while ever there is a significant segment of the world's population which looks back on the Bible, and its literal sense, as in some sense constitutive of what the world ought to be about, not least in its relationship to God. It is that preoccupation with the literal sense, what the original authors intended to say, and which is often linked with God's purpose for humanity, which reception history so problematizes. It reminds us that however infallible the original word of God might have been, its reception is in the fallible perceptions of humans who can only guarantee correct readings by establishing political structures, (churches with their ecclesial police – usually – men, academies and the like) which will be guardians of truth. The history of the Bible has been a history of hermeneutical wrangling and power struggles in which particular kinds of reading have come out on top and theirs discredited and forgotten about.

2. Diachronicity and Synchronicity

The modern preoccupation with the original setting of the biblical text has always to be seen within the context of past interpretations which affect the present form of interpretation. A glance at most modern, historical, interpretation of biblical texts reveals how narrowly focused the attention to history actually is. Little attention is given to either the pre-Enlightenment interpretation of these texts, or the wider cultural appropriation of the texts in literature and other media, which are less obviously conscious interpretations but exhibit an influence whose importance for exegesis should not be neglected because of the insight which the subtle mix of tradition and imagination offers. *Wirkungsgeschichte* is, I believe, a plea to be truly diachronic and appreciate the history of texts *through time* as a key to their interpretation and to see that exegesis should not be confined to written explication of texts which seek to relate their origins, purpose and reception solely to their original literary context, or to the views of a few academic exegetes who are preoccupied with this.

There was a significant shift in interpretation with the rise of the historical method at the end of the eighteenth century and the rise of the historical method from the diachronic to the synchronic. I realise that this represents a use of these words which contrasts with what is current, but I would maintain that, although historical study of the Bible is usually linked with the diachronic, it is in fact more accurately linked with that which is strictly speaking synchronic. The words diachronic and synchronic arise out of the study of linguistics and social anthropology with the diachronic referring

to historical study of a subject whereas the synchronic concerns that which is found to exist in its totality at a particular, limited, time. Synchronic approaches do not ask whence an idea comes but rather concentrate on how it functions or is part of a belief system or social matrix at a particular time and place. If one examines post-Enlightenment hermeneutics, one way of viewing it is that a tradition of interpretation based on the received wisdom of the Christian tradition *through time* was replaced with a form of interpretation which either sat loose to that tradition of interpretation or rejected it completely. In its place there emerged an interpretation in which the exegesis of biblical texts was based on the relationship with texts which were contemporaneous with them rather than on the history of the way those texts had been interpreted within faith communities and their traditions of interpretation (orthodox or heterodox). In other words, it was a synchronic approach to the biblical texts that came to hold sway, as they were set in the context of that which was contemporary rather than that which followed after them. Of course, the emergence of the historical method as a hegemonic mode of biblical interpretation in the academy, and then the church, meant that a new form of diachronicity had emerged in which the antecedents of texts were minutely examined. But this meant that there was a significant caesura with earlier patterns of interpretation. Historical criticism in fact means the contextualization of biblical texts with other, contemporaneous (ancient), texts, rather than with a tradition of interpretation, which is determined by the rules of interpretation of the Christian church and rather than the way the text impacts on modern readers.

Any one involved in the history of interpretation of biblical texts will soon be aware that this received wisdom represents a very narrow view of that which has been handed down. To ask theological questions, therefore, which merely use the models of the past, whether ecclesial or otherwise, risks using heuristic patterns which distort the evidence and skew it in favour of what we loosely call 'orthodoxy'. Theological reflection needs to eschew the judgments which theology as a tradition has left us. Or, put it another way, other understandings are needed of what constitutes tradition, in order to be in a better position to reflect theologically on those which have hitherto not been part of the tradition by the dominant interpretative communities.

The Apocalypse has been much beloved by those on the margins of the Christian tradition. Its place within the mainstream churches is (and has been) deeply problematic (and the ambivalence towards the Apocalypse was brought out in the conference as our commentary was accused of offering a sanitized version of its effects – more of that anon). Its role in the liturgy even now is severely circumscribed, and that has historically been the case within most mainstream denominations. One understands why.

Its allusiveness means that it is either opaque, its readings are not easily policed, and the political positions it takes have been uncomfortable for those churches which have been more closely allied with political power. It is no accident that the Apocalypse hardly featured in the lectionary of the Church of England, for example. While the Orthodox say that they act out the Apocalypse in their Eucharistic liturgy, that is a way of domesticating and incorporating it into ecclesial life rather than allowing its words to have their effect on the understanding of hope and politics.

3. On Visions and Revelations

There can be no escape from the impact of reading the terrible imagery. As a result it is easy to question the sanity of a writer who communicates this as prophecy. I may not dream in the imagery of Ezekiel and Daniel, but I *do* dream, and it is that dream world, which as Coleridge so accurately understood, best helps me understand what is going on in the Apocalypse. Jon Roberts's paper at the conference reminded us that such dream like language may itself be an elaborate fantasy which may have its effect on an audience (as it surely had its effect on those of us sitting in the room when Jon spoke to us) but that is what it does. It communicates an effect, like a Davidsonian understanding of metaphor,¹ not a series of propositions about the doctrine and ethics. The person who goes to the Apocalypse hoping for a clear understanding of what they should do, and whether they are going to be among the elect or the damned is going to be bitterly disappointed. Along with the Gospel of Matthew, it is the most uncompromisingly uncomfortable and unsettling text in the New Testament, but little more. The best we can do after reading it is that we should not put ourselves in the place of being co-opted by the Beast of Babylon. Blake thought he knew what that meant when he surveyed English political life in the 1790s and exclaimed 'The Beast and the Whore rule without control', but for most of us, living in greyer times, how we relate to the Beast is not easily discerned, and no amount of patient exegesis of the Apocalypse will make us any the wiser.

I remain unrepentant in thinking that the book is what it says it is—a vision. Perhaps the vision came to John piecemeal; we cannot now be sure. There is a kind of story line moving via the three sequences of sevens from disaster to resolution when heaven comes down to earth. That apart, there is much that doesn't hang together, and it may be the case that we have discrete visions which have been strung together. But the underlying conviction of the visionary is that he had to communicate

1. Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry* 5.1, Special Issue on Metaphor (1978), pp. 31-47.

what he had seen and so the first act of the reception of the book took place as the vision was written down and was handed on to others. What the first recipients of the messages to the angels (or indeed the visionary) made of it we cannot know, other than John thought that it was of ultimate importance (Rev. 22.18). I would hazard a guess that in antiquity they may have been as bemused as we are with it, and as many of us are with our dreams. While not wanting to exclude the possibility of artifice, I think that the character of what we read is best explained as what one 'receives a dream or nightmare and as such is less the result of deliberate effect (except in so far as John has the conviction that these words are words of prophecy and must be passed on, Rev. 22.18).

4. *Claims to Authority*

Revelation 22.18, mentioned by Jo Carruthers in her essay on Rossetti, reminds us that the Apocalypse presents as the most authoritative text in the New Testament. Here, of all the New Testament texts is one which offers itself as having normative status, as befits the oracles of God. One can see why one may consider the New Testament Apocalypse as *the* text that ended the living voice of prophecy in Christianity, just as the collection of earlier prophetic words in Second Temple Judaism put an end to the living voice of prophecy (Goldsmith 1993). A whole range of biblical, especially prophetic, books, offer John his visionary language, and points especially to the authoritative, quasi-canonical, claim suggested by the allusion to Deut. 4.2 in Rev. 22.18. This does indeed set this book apart from other New Testament writings as a work which is recognized by its writer as having its origin in heaven: it is the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

In the canon of the New Testament as we have it, the presence of the Apocalypse may close down debate and dissent by making itself *the Apocalypse*, thereby excluding all other claims to revelation, and offering an interpretative key for the Bible as a whole, and with its eschatological perspective having the last word in any hermeneutical discussion, thereby putting an end to debate. Rev. 22.18 gives the text authority, but it does not thereby exclude the possibility of further prophecy. Rather, it makes this text the archetypical prophetic text. Thus, in engagement with it, a prophet may, like John, find that they can engage in the resistance to the Beast and Babylon in their own day, just as John found in the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel inspiration and language for his own prophetic visions. The history of its interpretation shows that the Apocalypse is not only the catalyst for visionaries and the hunting ground for analytical prognosticators, but is also a text whose form resists the kind of authoritative hermeneutical contours.

The Apocalypse was in the canon because it *had* to be there. By the third century, when questions were asked about its authority, it was impossible to get rid of it, as it had provided the very justification for the kind of doctrines, which were central to emerging orthodoxy. We know too little about the struggles of the second century, but what the proto-orthodox writers do assert is that the this-worldly framework of hope in the Apocalypse was an important weapon against the otherworldliness which was endemic in some sorts of spirituality in the second century (what we now loosely refer to as Gnosticism). It is true that Gnosticism spawned its own apocalypses and the canonization of one New Testament apocalypse may have had the effect of marginalizing the rest. But, the Apocalypse was important because it had played a key part in offering support for the historical soteriology of emerging Christian orthodoxy. Attempts to get rid of it took place later when Montanists and others had used it as a licence for their prophetic activity and millenarian beliefs, as many others down the centuries were to do.

The interpretation of the Apocalypse down the centuries indicates that it has not been an ideal text for closing down debate. Luther rightly recognized that the form of the Apocalypse set it apart from Daniel. In the latter, the obscure dreams have been rendered *more* transparent by angelic interpretations. The Apocalypse's polyvalent imagery, almost always without explanation, means that it is a text, which more than any other biblical text, manifests open-endedness and lack of closure. Interpreters of the Apocalypse have tried to deal with its open-endedness by using a form of allegorical exegesis to suggest that the imagery is an elaborate code for this or that historical event. But that kind of interpretation only shows that the meaning of this text needed to be tied down so that the flights of fancy of the ordinary interpreter did not subvert the neat and tidy systems of church and state. Of no other biblical text are these words of Blake more appropriately written than the New Testament Apocalypse:

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
 Is my vision's greatest enemy.
 Thine has a great hook nose like thine,
 Mine has a snub nose like to mine.
 Thine is the Friend of all Mankind;
 Mine speaks in parables to the blind.
 Thine loves the same world that mine hates;
 Thy heaven doors are my hell gates.
 Socrates taught what Meletus
 Loath'd as a nation's bitterest curse,
 And Caiaphas was in his own mind
 A benefactor to mankind.
 Both read the Bible day and night,

But thou read'st black where I read white.
(The Everlasting Gospel, E524)

The Apocalypse has been both extraordinarily influential, theologically and yet has not been anything like as influential as some might suppose. Thus, the fabric of Christian theology, as has been suggested, owes much to the dualistic contrast between the heavenly and earthly cities, between Babylon and Jerusalem, which is the centrepiece of Augustine's *City of God*. The form which this version of the Apocalypse takes, however, as the text becomes part of the Christian orthodox edifice, is that the future hope for God's kingdom on earth is reinterpreted ecclesially, thereby suggesting that Christ's millennial reign already takes place in the life of the church created at Christ's ascension. Paradoxically, the reason for which the Apocalypse was so much favoured in the early decades of the church has been lost sight of, as the this-worldly eschatology is replaced by a belief in an eternal destiny of the elect with God in heaven. In this systematic narrative of Christian theology, the Apocalypse becomes a component, along with elements from many other biblical books, and in the course of this construction its peculiar power tends to get played down, as the emotional reaction to its imagery, whether positive or negative, is evacuated, as the underlying theological elements become the building bricks of theology. On the other hand, the history of the interpretation of the Apocalypse is about its marginalization down the centuries because of the role it has played, for good and ill, as a motor of subversion, by those groups which were either marginal to the life of the church or found themselves excluded from it. These two points are crucial to any understanding of the reception of the Apocalypse.

5. Facing up to the Problems We Find in the Apocalypse

The fact that mainstream Christianity has found this a problematic text reflects wider trends, not least in the academy where apocalypticism (at least in the form that it takes in the Apocalypse) does not get the attention it deserves as the necessary heuristic category for understanding Christian origins. Reaction to the Apocalypse in the modern world has undergirded revulsion with its theology and its ethos, particularly its simplistic dualities, and its attitude to women. As has been suggested, a sea change took place in attitudes to the Bible at the Enlightenment when the authoritative text of the Christian church became a text from antiquity to be read like any other text and alongside other texts which were contemporaneous with it. Before that there was a much more appreciative attitude to the Apocalypse (Luther notwithstanding). Yet Luther's revulsion apparent in his 1522 New Testament translation pervaded the attitudes of German

Christianity and thence scholarship. Paul and the Gospel of John, which in their different ways either tone down or reinterpret apocalypticism, became normative for Christian theologizing. Historically this now seems untenable, yet, when one seeks to understand the history of the interpretation of this text and its effects, the pre-Modern period did not have as many reservations as we do in the modern world.

That would also apply to women's attitudes also. The Apocalypse seems to us to epitomize the problems of androcentrism and negative image of women in the Bible. The book seems to project images of women who are either whores or brides, active Jezebels or passive wives and mothers. Women are viewed in terms of a patriarchal culture and its attendant economy. The picture in the Apocalypse is a complicated one, however. The ultimate source of the inspiration for the immoral behaviour lies with the Beast supporting the woman. While it would not be correct to describe Babylon as a victim of the beast and its allies, Babylon is consistently never the active partner in the 'fornication' but the object of the attentions of the kings of the earth. They have played their part in making Babylon what it is. They have committed fornication with her rather than vice versa (17.2; 18.3, 9). Without the support of the beast Babylon perishes. So the apocalyptic imagery suggests the complexity of oppression. Babylon is deceived and culpable but ultimately at the mercy of the beast – the story of women throughout history.

Paradoxically, as a prophetic book, the Apocalypse has offered space for women as well as men to enable their spirituality to flourish and them to emerge as characters in their own right, in the midst of a society permeated with patriarchy. The one thing that is allowed to women in Paul's church is to prophesy (1 Cor. 11.2) – there is after all no gainsaying the Spirit. Thus, the prophets and the mystics have found in the Apocalypse an inspiration to explore the inner life and to exercise a ministry denied by much else in scripture and tradition (with the possible exception of the Song of Songs).² Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen, like the male radicals who turned to the Apocalypse, found in this allusive text a licence to resist received religion and practice precisely because a canonical text opened a door for an experience of God which enabled them to transcend the boundaries imposed by what was conventionally possible.

2. Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth Century England* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992).

The problem, of course, is that the medium detracts from its message, so that the unpalatable character of its imagery becomes an obstacle. There is no easy answer, notwithstanding the attempts to understand and apologize for the language and imagery of the Apocalypse. Perhaps a way to a solution is offered by William Blake's prophetic mythology in which the imagery of the Apocalypse is taken up and expanded, different from, but in continuity with the Apocalypse itself. He embarks on a new form of mythopoiesis. Blake is not a commentator or exegete and thus not closely tied to the text. He engages with, and his work embodies the 'spirit of apocalypse'. He is capable of leaving the detail of the Apocalypse behind in exploring an apocalyptic vision for his own day. Of him it can be said that he develops 'voices of apocalyptic thunders' (to quote Tina Pippin)³ for his own day, in a medium different from, but intimately linked with, the Apocalypse; he is not tied to the ancient images and their context, historical or textual, but instead seeks to re-imagine and recast them.

Blake understood well that one didn't have to accept the Bible as Holy Scripture in order for it function as a stimulus to imaginative engagement, as the text blended with one's social context and psychology giving one a language in which to articulate the depths of one's experience. There is nothing sacred about the words, therefore, which separated them off from other words, in other books. They just worked well, whether by way of reaction to their 'sentiments and examples', or positive inspiration to the poetic genius, which Blake regarded as the spirit of prophecy ('All Religions are One').

6. Death, Destruction and the Environment

At the risk of continuing to seem to be in apologetic vein connected with the Apocalypse, something more needs to be said about this work—and, indeed, the New Testament's relationship with the natural world. Rightly, have commentators pointed out the lack of concern among many Christians with changing a world which they think doomed to destruction. The Apocalypse of all New Testament texts is in some respects the most world-affirming in the New Testament, however, and its description of the cosmic upheavals seem to be less about destruction than restructuring of a world which is out of joint. If the Apocalypse is anything to go by, early conviction was that the world was the arena of God's saving purposes, past, present and future, but the form of the world in its entirety had

3. Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), p. 107.

been demonstrated as being disordered in the light of the messiah and his rejection. So, in asserting that early Christianity was world-denying we should be clear that it was not because Christians believed that the end of the world was imminent through some cosmic disintegration. Rather its arrangements would be changed. Meanwhile in the midst of its disorder it was important not to be conformed to the world as it was.

Nevertheless, in the Apocalypse the dominant impression we have is of wanton destruction issuing from a vengeful God against a world which is unrepentant. One way of reading the Apocalypse is that it does not *create* an image of divine barbarity, so much as that the politics of the world is the cause of the chaos and barbarism rather than humans being unfortunate victim of some supernatural vindictiveness. The barbarity is ours and in which we collude. We do not like to be reminded of that possibility and salve our consciences by blaming the book for the violence we cannot see within us and around us. The Apocalypse may be a way of holding up a mirror to the reality of the evil and destruction in our world, therefore. Nevertheless, in a world where the fight for good against evil, dubbed the fight against terror, is itself imbued with the stark contrasts of apocalyptic dualism. We write this book in the wake of violence unleashed against thousands and when, deliberately or not, the Apocalypse is evoked.

Press reactions to the terrible events of 9/11 included the descriptions 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypse'. The use of such terms communicated a sudden, cataclysmic disruption of a horrific destructive kind in which ways of thinking and behaving could never be the same again. Commentators in such circumstances found themselves searching for appropriate words to communicate the unique terror and moment of the catastrophe. The New Testament Apocalypse lay to hand, and it provided an intellectual landscape for so doing. Indeed, in the banner headline in London's 'Daily Mail' on 12 September 2001 the image of the twin towers in flames had the single word printed across the top of the front page: APOCALYPSE. The contents of the Apocalypse, with its cosmic disasters and suffering on a wide-scale, offered a resource whose images may be conjured up when the tranquillity of normal life is disrupted and suffering, death and destruction take place.

While the Apocalypse does not at first sight appear to be eco-friendly, that needs to be matched by the occasional glimpse that chaos is the result of human injustice (e.g. Rev. 11.18). Robert Murray has pointed out that, in addition to the covenant theme related to Sinai, there is evidence in the Hebrew Bible, for a parallel belief, a covenant between God and creation.⁴ There are hints of the covenant in Rev. 4.3, 4 (cf. Exod. 19.16). A covenant is made with Noah after the flood (Gen. 9; Isa. 54.9-10). In

4. Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant* (London : Sheed and Ward, 1992).

Hosea 2 (especially 2.18-20) the whole of the created world is linked to God's covenant. The breach of this 'cosmic covenant' is linked with the practice of humans, however, though in Isa. 24.5. A future just social order embracing the whole world, humans and animals is the vision of Isa 11. The coming of the messiah is a key in restoring and maintaining the stability of cosmic order (Pss. 72 and 89). That requires that what is unstable and disordered needs to be put right; 'The land mourns', says Hos. 4.1ff (cf. Jer. 12.4; Joel 1.8-20). The apocalyptic upheaval described in the Apocalypse could then be seen as a consequence of the fracture of the cosmic covenant whose repair was the function of the messiah. The Apocalypse is as its name implies an unmasking of the world's *disorder*. The world is so out of kilter which is demonstrated in the destruction of the messiah by the representatives of the present scheme of things. But the messiah's coming shows up the distorted and fractured nature of the world, humans, beasts and the whole of creation for what it really is and what it might become (cf. Isa. 11.4).

7. Retrospective on the BBC Apocalypse

There are two aspects about the Blackwell commentary that I'd write differently today. Firstly, I would recast the hermeneutical typology. Despite the long and intense discussions between Judith and myself about the ways in which we described the two main poles of our interpretative grid, I think that we misnamed one. 'Actualization' would have been better reserved for those attempts to act out apocalyptic images, whether it be Joanna Southcott as the Woman Clothed with the Sun giving birth to the Messiah in 1814 or David Koresh living out the apocalyptic struggle of the Branch Davidians in 1993. Better would have been more familiar terminology from biblical hermeneutics: allegory and analogy. The translation of the apocalyptic images into a prosaic historical narrative is exactly what the application of the allegorical method is. The ways in which writers like William Stringfellow follow in the Tyconian tradition of applying the apocalyptic images to their situation, not in the sense that there is a translation, a cashing out, of the image and a reduction of its meaning to one event, but as part of an process of contextual illumination. One may illustrate the two approaches by reference to Matthew 13, where the allegorical and the parabolic (which is essentially what the analogical is) sit by side. The allegorical reduces by decoding, whereas the parabolic offers a means of understanding a concept by juxtaposing one with (in this case a story) with something else (the Kingdom of God). I can see more clearly, that some writers do not slot in neatly into either heuristic category. Thus, Blake, while much nearer to the analogical pole, found illumination in the Beast and Babylon to illuminate political repression

and a climate of fear in late 1790's England. But in addition he used the images of the Apocalypse as a language to speak and in turn to invent his own mythology, which last he saw as being in direct continuity with what John had seen on Patmos.

Secondly, I wonder whether it was wise to include the epilogue, which gave some readers of our book the impression that we were overly sympathetic to the book. Personally, I would be less sanguine today about the book and its effects, recognising that its power has to be the result of a wrestling with the text to enable it to speak to our generation, as its present medium may probably be an impediment to be the vehicle of its underlying worth. Nevertheless, I would like to think that the sentiments that we expressed in the epilogue did not distort the discussion of the earlier part of the book. The simple point can be made that, prior to modernity, the book was either ignored, or people did engage with it as scripture, and nearly always respected its authority while understanding its message in different ways. The kinds of reactions, which may characterize our attitudes to biblical theology in modernity, were largely absent. To that extent, the positive approbation of the book reflects the interpretation of the book down the centuries. The reception of the book in the last two centuries is a different matter, and is part of the revulsion felt and the somewhat perplexing assumption that this book is worse than other parts of the Bible in its theology and ethics, a view which should be challenged.

8. Text, Context and Ideology

The Apocalypse merely concentrates the problems posed by a literal reading of the Bible for anyone who wants to use this collection of texts in the modern world. Like Heikki Räisänen, I do worry that the medium of biblical language may be at odds with the sentiments and practices of modern liberals. I do not believe that the Apocalypse is more problematic than any other book in the Bible, and its effects have been no worse than say Paul's doctrine of election or the anti-Judaism with which the New Testament is replete (and in which the Apocalypse is less complicit). I am also sufficiently Marxist to believe that ideas by themselves are not responsible for the power struggles and oppressions of humans. Ideology has an important function, and the use of images of punishment and judgment has served the interests of the powerful. That cannot be gainsaid. But, except in a few isolated instances (and I still need some persuading that even in the case of the Branch Davidians the Apocalypse is really to blame and not the pernicious exercise of power by a charismatic person who skilfully manipulated texts and a view of biblical authority to his own ends).

Jorunn Økland is right to remind us that we should at least have mentioned Engels on the Apocalypse. It's true that it repeats some of the (interesting) views of mid-nineteenth-century biblical scholarship about the early date of the Apocalypse, but it is also remarkably prescient in the way it anticipates the views of those of who think that apocalypticism is a key to understanding Christian origins, with the Apocalypse at its centre. I think that Fredric Jameson was right to omit it from his consideration of the history of utopianism. The Apocalypse is not a utopian text. It does not allow that kind of flight of fancy from the reality of struggle by allowing people to dream (at least for more than few moments) about another world. Instead, it is about struggle in the present and nothing is allowed to distract from resistance to the Beast and the ease with which one can get co-opted to a system whose end is inevitable.

These are sentiments with which any good Marxist might sympathize. Indeed, Marx's preoccupation with criticism rather than action, and his own aloofness from the struggle might make the apocalypse a more historically engaged text, and one in which criticism arises out of the praxis in ways which challenge Marx's actual abstraction, and the tendency of much Marxist criticism to remain aloof from the struggle. Christianity managed, at least in its earliest phases to resist utopianism and escapism. It may have ended up a conservative religion but the history of its practice was of the way in which it sought to balance future hope and engagement with the world as it was.

Marx's contribution to the history of the interpretation of the Apocalypse is that distinctive version of dialectic which certainly from Hegel and possibly ultimately from the influence of Boehme on Hegel allowed the dualism of the Apocalypse not to appear as mutually exclusive poles but together parts of a comprehensive theological and historical movement. 'Without Contraries there is no Progression', wrote William Blake in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' (plate 4). That peculiar rendering of apocalyptic dualism rewrites that of the Apocalypse as it indicates its indebtedness to a way of thinking which is thereby transcended. The fantastic imagery may suggest a lack of the down to earth approach which is key to Marxism, but when one sees it as the form in which political understanding and criticism took place in the Judaism of antiquity we can see that, far from obfuscation it is the necessary means of the critique of empire and the politics of resistance which were key to early Christianity as they were to Judaism.

Fredric Jameson in his classic study, *The Political Unconscious*, argued that a text must be interpreted as part of a struggle between different class interests in which a ruling class ideology seeks to offer itself as

'common sense' or 'normality' and all else as deviant and irrational.⁵ As compared with a ruling class ideology which will promote strategies of legitimization, a minority culture will seek to contest and to undermine the dominant value system. We can see this happening in the Apocalypse. It drew on an emerging prophetic critique of empire, and is an unmasking, and denunciation, of the ideology of the powerful, by which the latter seek to legitimize their position by violence and economic exploitation. The book is full of counter-cultural items: its language and symbolism; its emphasis on witness and prophecy, the lack of any 'churchiness' (unlike the Pauline letters) or any comfort for the prophetic faithful. It is not too difficult to imagine how the early Christians capitulated to their feelings of political powerlessness by concentrating on individual and ecclesial holiness. The Apocalypse does not allow a retreat into the conventicle, for it is an act of persuasion to prophesy before 'peoples, nations, and languages'. The promise of a part in the New Jerusalem is linked with present behaviour. The readers of the Apocalypse are not allowed to dream about millennial bliss without being brought face to face with the obstacles which stand in the way of its fulfilment and the costly part to be played by them in that process.

9. *History of Interpretation, Reception History and Wirkungsgeschichte*

Participants in the conference picked up, but were gracious enough not to take us too much to task, on the indiscriminate ways in which we used reception history and *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It is not just a degree of antipathy to theory which leads me to question whether the neat distinctions which are often made actually help the debate about the ways in which biblical texts are received and used. I can see that a general separation between the history of interpretation to describe the account of the ways in which the Bible has been taken up, used and has affected people at different times and places, on the one hand, and attention to the specifics of a reception may be useful. But the theoretical debate has so far not been of great use to understand the particular instances of the appropriation of a biblical text. Thus, whether we describe it as reception history or *Wirkungsgeschichte* does not get to the heart of how the Antichrist image is used in the film, *The Omen*, for example. The discussion needs to be worked out on a case-by-case basis, as does the interaction between biblical text and social context and the relative weight that might be attributed to each in the interpretative process. Thus, when I examine the ways in which William Stringfellow made use of images from the Apocalypse, especially the

5. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen 1981), especially p. 299.

Jerusalem/Babylon typology, in *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, the ways in which a left-wing Barthian found himself resorting to the Apocalypse in the resistance to, and protest against, the Vietnam War and a Christian culture represents an extraordinary blend of the Bible and infusing the interpretation of one's immediate context, much as was the case with William Blake's work 150 years previously. We shall probably find that the discrete examples of the history of the interpretation of the Bible correspond to the different kinds of exegesis with which we are already familiar, and should be categorized as such, whether they be literal, figurative, or allegorical interpretations, examples of *Sachexegese*, more oblique allusions, such as we find when the Jewish scriptures were quoted by early Christian writers, or, as we often find with a classic text, quotations taken out of context which become part of a nation's language and culture, having little or no relationship with the original context (or even meaning). Stringfellow's use of the Apocalypse, very much in the Tyconian tradition resembles Blake's, but the latter's is much more in the mode of 'Sachexegese' in which (to use Barth's image of the walls between past and present tumbling down) the modern reader engages with the text and in the process makes something of it as s/he gets at its underlying character).

Both are at the opposite pole from the allegorizing exegesis which typifies historicizing interpretations which translate the symbols one for one onto events or persons, whether past, present or future. Both the literalist eschatology of the kind we find in Hal Lindsey, or the diachronic historicizing of Alexander the Minorite fall into this category as also does the (ancient) historicizing of Hugo Grotius, and, indeed, modern historical criticism, both of whose primary task is to relate the images to the events and persons of John's own day. Indeed, it is one of the characteristics of a thoroughgoing commitment to reception history that historical exegesis becomes part of the story rather than the frame for reference for all other forms of exegesis.⁶

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6. This is what we find in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document 'Interpreting the Bible in the Church' (1993).

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