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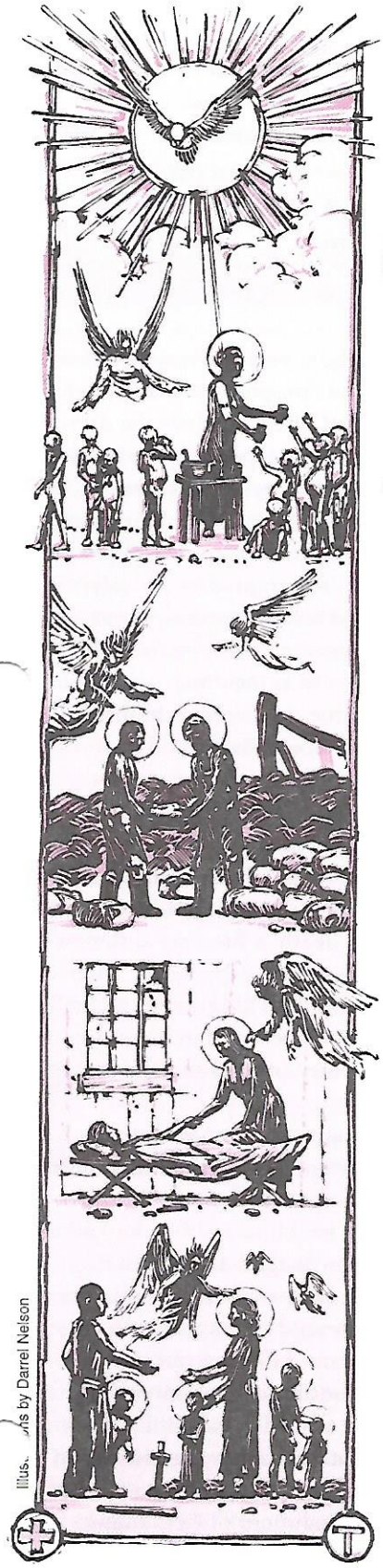
ScripturefromScratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

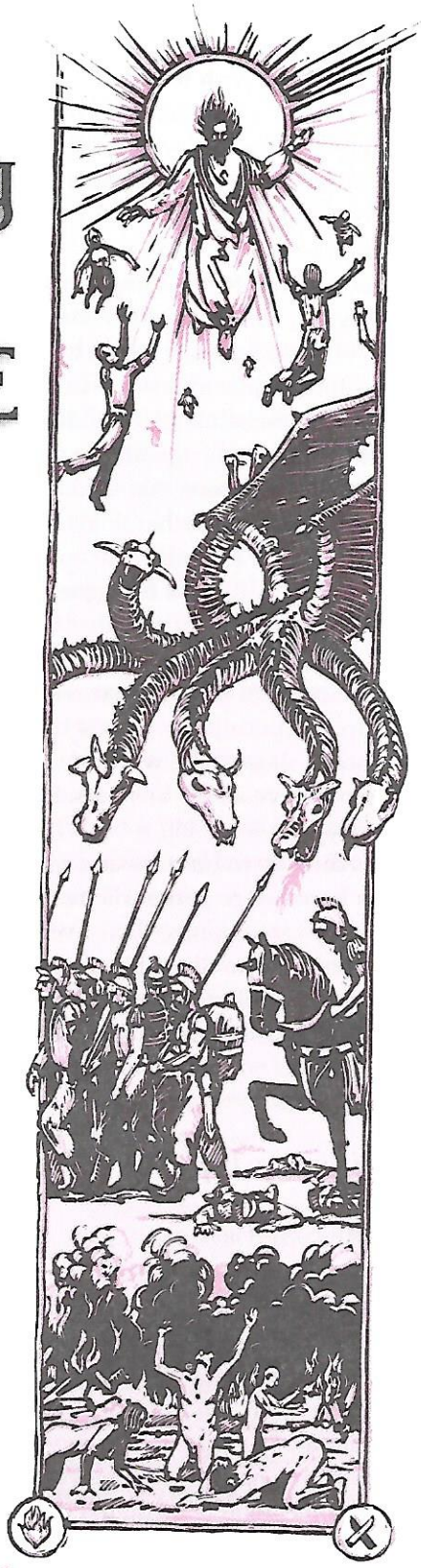


Illus. ns by Darrel Nelson

Understanding THE APOCALYPSE

For some the year 2000 is a magical date—irrespective of the fact that its computation is arbitrary. There has been much talk of the millennium, which in fact means only that ten centuries have gone by! To me, it's no big deal, but evidently others see it differently. Fair enough. My concern, however, is that some of those spooked by the prospect of an imminent millennium are capable of spooking others. They can do serious hurt. Without generalizing, one can say, assuredly, that we face an apocalyptic perspective. Apocalypticism has its own respectability. What is dangerous is a misunderstanding of it.

by Wilfrid Harrington, O.P.



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Defining the Terms

We have not only to define an already elusive word; we need to distinguish between *apocalypse* and *apocalypticism*. This is not a pedantic exercise. We must know what we are talking about. A lot of nonsense has been talked about apocalyptic—and not only by fundamentalists. Let us come to grips with the terms. *Apocalypse* is a literary genre or form—the kind of literature in which apocalyptic views are expressed. *Apocalypticism* is the worldview of an apocalyptic movement or group.

The most inclusive term, perhaps, is *apocalyptic*, which would encompass both of these terms. It might help to view apocalyptic in relation to providence and eschatology. Providence has to do with looking ahead; the providence of God means that God sees the course of history. Eschatology, from the Greek *eschaton* ("final," "the end"), means that God has a final goal in view. Apocalyptic affirms that the final goal is near at hand.

Disclosure of heavenly secrets is a feature of apocalyptic. This is because Scripture, though the word of God, does not have all the answers. In the apocalyptic view, God reveals his mysteries directly to humans and gives them knowledge of the true reality so that they can organize their lives accordingly. The two biblical apocalypses (the *Book of Daniel* and the *Book of Revelation*) support such a view of apocalyptic.

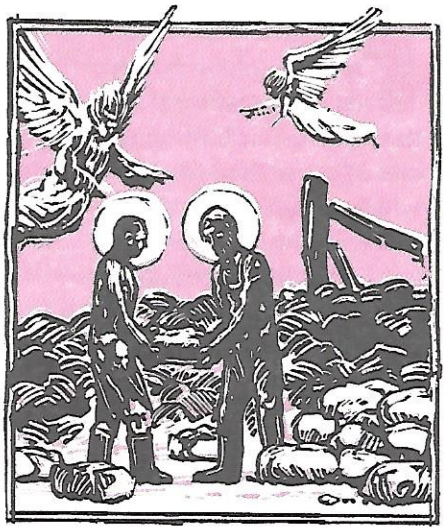
Praying With Scripture

- **The Book of Daniel is the only apocalypse in the Old Testament. The author's purpose, in face of a national crisis, was to hearten his people. He based his summons to courageous faith on the conviction that God ruled the course of history. Yet the prayers in the book acknowledge, without excuse, the failures of Israel and appeal solely to the graciousness of Yahweh. Such are the prayer of Azariah (Dan 3:26-45) and, notably, the prayer of Daniel (9:4-19). We can readily make these prayers our own.**

A Literary Type

The word *apocalypse*, then, designates a type of Jewish literature that flourished from about 200 B.C. to the end of the first century A.D. The Christian Book of Revelation fits the pattern. Apocalypse has been defined as: "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world."

Quite a mouthful! A brief analysis of the definition will clarify its content.



The narrative framework of an apocalypse describes the manner of revelation. An apocalyptic visionary claims to have been let into the secrets of the heavenly realm. He has access to these heavenly secrets either by means of visions or hearing the heavenly word, or through an otherworldly journey—in effect, a guided tour of heaven. A constant element is the presence of an interpreting angel. This is to underline the fact that revelation alone is not enough; the visions are beyond the power of human interpretation. The content of the revelation is typically in the form of a "prophecy" of an event long past and often involves the division of history into periods (for example, a series of "weeks" of years). Angelic and demonic forces also play a significant role.

It is taken for granted in apocalyptic writings that a supernatural world stands above our earthly world. That heavenly world is the "real" world. There is, indeed, a twofold dualism: vertical (the world above and our world) and horizontal (our age and the age to come).

In short, the presumption is of an otherworldly reality that dictates the fate of our world. There is a looking to life beyond death, a life very different from the life of our experience. There is always a definitive judgment: the final clash between good and evil, issuing in the total victory of God and the end of evil.

Eschatology—concern with the "endtime" events—emerged in biblical prophecy. To put it very simply, the prophets of Israel, when they looked to the future, envisaged a world that would find form and shape in history. Some people said that apocalyptists had opted out of history, but this appears to be an overstatement. The apocalyptic attitude toward the present age does not arise from the conviction that the present world was too corrupt for the establishment of God's kingdom. Rather, it is a frank admission

that without God's help the coming of the new age could never be achieved.

'Them and Us'

In practice, apocalypse is, frequently, a gospel of the marginalized. It proclaims: God is on our side. Here we are—the minority—whether in relation to an alien power or in face of a power-group within our own society. "We" have no clout. But right is on our side, and a God who looks not to might but to right has to be on our side. When one takes God seriously, it is a powerful argument. The question, of course, is whether one might make God to be whatever one wants God to be.

It has been generally assumed that apocalyptic arises from the experience of alienation or in times of crisis. An apocalyptic group sets up its own symbolic universe or worldview: a system of thought within which it can live its life. Usually it does so in protest against the dominant society with which it is in conflict. The group has a painful experience of alienation and of powerlessness. Alienation and crisis are of many kinds. And it may be said that an apocalyptic writer is usually addressing what he perceives to be a crisis situation.

Reading an Apocalypse

The canon of Scripture is the collection of writings—the Old Testament and the New Testament—recognized by the Church as divinely inspired. There were, of course, many other religious writings in Israel and in the early Church. Among these were many more apocalypses. We know of some seventeen Jewish apocalypses. They are of uneven worth, but two of them are of particular interest.

1 Enoch is a compilation of five "books" or sections of unequal length and of differing dates. In general the work reflects the historical events preceding and following the Maccabean Revolt (167-164 B.C.)—the same setting as the Book of Daniel.

The apocalypse of 4 Ezra was written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. It dates from about the time of the Book of Revelation. Because we are unfamiliar with the genre, apocalypse is, to us, strange and disturbing—when it is not incomprehensible. We should realize that for Jews and early Christians it would have been part of their culture. They would have understood its literary conventions and heard its message.

What It Means

What does apocalyptic mean today? One may, paradoxically, start by observing that what it has come to mean for many is a classic instance of what it most certainly does *not* mean.

An example is "premillennial dispensationalism," a brand of fundamentalist eschatology that is notably present in the United States. An indication of its popularity is the best-selling book by Hal Lindsay, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). This is also the position that underlies the preaching of the major contemporary TV evangelists.

The term *dispensationalism* refers to the theory that God "dispenses" or administers the divine purpose throughout history in seven distinct and successive stages, called "dispensations." The seventh dispensation is that of the millennium (Revelation 20:1-6). Premillennialists believe that Christ will return before the millennium. After a brief reign of Antichrist, he will come decisively to destroy the powers of evil in the great battle of Armageddon.

The concept of a millennium—perceived, literally, as a thousand-year reign with Christ on earth—and the final battle of Armageddon, show the influence of Revelation on the dispensationalist stance. History is rapidly moving to a showdown: the final, decisive battle of good and evil will be fought in the valley of Megiddo (Revelation 16:16).

A further refinement is the "rapture"; this time the single text of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 is pressed into service. Using vivid apocalyptic language, Paul had underlined the truth that all the faithful will live with the Lord forever. He spoke of all being "caught up" ("rapt up") to meet the Lord at his Coming—hence the "rapture" of the dispensationalists. According to them, true believers will, at the end, be "raptured" from the earth and will thus escape the gruesome destruction of the rest of humankind.

Living the Scriptures

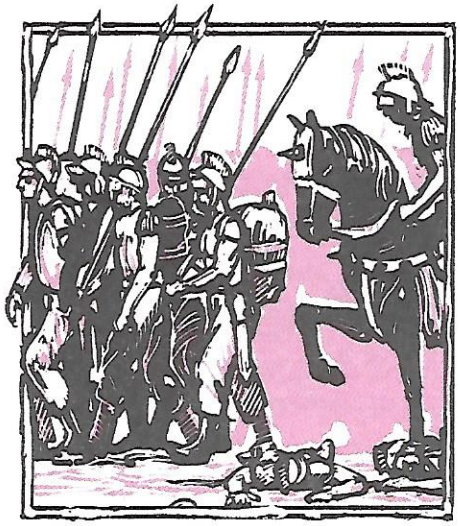
- **Apocalyptists tend to take a pessimistic view of history and look to direct divine intervention. We must remind ourselves that we have responsibility for our lives and obligation to the world in which we live. After all, we pray: "Your will be done, on earth...."**

Here we have not only gross misinterpretation of Revelation (and other biblical texts), but something unsavory and even dangerous. The idea of an elect minority being shunted to the safe regions of the upper air while a vengeful Lamb destroys the inhabitants of the earth is scarcely Christian.

Assessment

I suggest that apocalyptic is marginal to Christianity. It is a feature of our tradition, but it must be set in the context of the broader tradition. I would, tentatively, propose my assessment of the place of apocalyptic in the Christian world of today. It is quite negatively slanted.

In apocalyptic dualism, the heavenly world is the real world. What occurs on earth is repercussion of something already determined in a heavenly world. This means that human and earthly life is seriously devalued. The situation is aggravated by expectation of an imminent end. The sharp division of the world into good and evil is simplistic. It would seem that an apocalyptic group is, inevitably, sectarian. It sees itself as in the right. "We" are the suffering righteous ones. "They" are the wicked oppressors. There is a marked tendency to demonize the perceived opposition.



On the positive side, apocalyptic is an emphatic assertion of the sovereignty of God. It takes a serious view of evil. It urges that the righteous must take a stand against evil, no matter the consequence. Apocalyptic is, at its deepest level, hopeful. There, I believe, is its saving grace.

It is easy to see apocalyptists as alarmist and hopelessly unrealistic. They may, instead, be reminding us that only God can bring about a kingdom that is the measure of human desire.

Historically, the Christian churches have striven to be so many things. Too often the Church has done "as the Gentiles do." We have suffered much from bad theology. Bad exegesis has proved even more disastrous. Poor understanding of, and blatant misuse of, Scripture is not, unhappily, the preserve of fundamentalists.

With a proper understanding of apocalyptic, we can rest assured that the year 2000 will not mark the end of the world. The Church will become kingdom only in God's way and in God's time. In this belief we find the true hope that underlies the apocalyptic writings in our Bible. ■

Wilfrid Harrington is a Dominican priest in Ireland. A well-respected Scripture scholar, he has written numerous articles and books on the topic of apocalyptic writing and the Book of Revelation.

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Talking About Scripture

- **Should the advent of the third millennium raise expectation—or fear—of an imminent end of the world?**
- **Apocalyptic is an emphatic assertion of the sovereignty of God. He is a God of right, of justice. What does that tell us about our actions in the world?**
- **Apocalyptic takes a very serious view of evil. It urges that the righteous must take a stand against evil, whatever the consequence. How might we respond to this today?**

Reading About Scripture

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