

CHOOSING BETWEEN TWOS:  
APOCALYPTIC HERMENEUTICS IN SCIENCE FICTION, THE  
RADICAL RIGHT AND RECENT HISTORICAL JESUS SCHOLARSHIP

Jeffrey L. Staley, Seattle University, Washington, USA

This essay explores the dualistic hermeneutics and ethics of ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic as it is found in three diverse contemporary contexts: science fiction films, the radical Christian Right and recent historical Jesus scholarship as typified by the Jesus Seminar.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that these three very different contemporary responses to ancient biblical apocalyptic have adopted its dualistic perspective on the world. This is due, in part, to a shared, determinate understanding of ancient apocalyptic that never significantly challenges apocalyptic's hermeneutical and ethical underpinnings. Apocalyptic, for them, seems to preclude indeterminacy.

In view of the terrorist attacks of September 11 and recent US 'Homeland Security' responses, is it possible for professional interpreters of scripture to find ways of complicating these canonical apocalyptic texts in ethically and hermeneutically responsible ways? Can we re-vision them as indeterminate? Or are there always only two ways, two choices, only determinate meanings for interpreters of biblical apocalyptic? And what about the church's theological engagement with biblical apocalyptic? Do we tend to read the Bible 'apocalyptically', operating with a concept of scriptural authority that is 'apocalyptic' and 'determinate' and requires a commensurate reading approach? Or can a concept of scriptural authority function within a certain range of meanings, accommodating different reading strategies?

*An Apocabiography*

I was born just a few years after the end of World War II into a devout Plymouth Brethren family of itinerant fundamentalist preachers and missionaries. The Plymouth Brethren (non)denomination began in England in the 1830s when revivals were sweeping Great Britain with apocalyptic hopes, evangelical fervor and yearnings for Christian unity. John Nelson Darby was its patron saint (a 'born again' Irish Anglican), and he, along with later 'Brethren', disseminated the peculiar

1. An earlier version of this essay entitled 'Brains and Pens, Brawn and Bodies: Contemporary North American Appropriations of Christian Millennialism', was presented as part of the Distinguished Speakers Lecture Series, January 30, 2000, at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Canada.

eschatology of dispen(sen) sationalism and its pretribulational rapture to Canada, the United States and Europe. These beliefs gained a particularly firm hold in the hearts of North American Protestants through the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of a pretribulational rapture was so deeply ingrained in my soul that as a child I can remember occasionally waking up in the morning to an unearthly silence in my house and being terrified that Jesus had come in the night. Had he taken my parents and siblings to heaven and left me behind (Mt. 24.40-41; cf. 1 Thess. 4.17; Dan. 7.25; Rev. 13.5)? In those brief anxious moments I was convinced that I was an orphan, left alone to face the awfulness of the end-time catastrophes summarized in sermons on Mark 13. No amount of fervent praying could dislodge this paralyzing fear and convincingly confirm for me that I was ‘on the right side’ of the end-time cosmic battle. Thankfully, my parents’ or siblings’ voices, or the soft shuffle of feet heading to the bathroom, always broke through the eerie morning silence, reassuring me that the last trump had not yet sounded.

In June of 1967, just after I finished my sophomore year of high school, I could be found huddled over my little transistor radio listening to the hourly updates of the Arab-Israeli Six Day War, wondering if the Rapture of the church would occur by the end of the week. My family and I waited breathlessly, on kitchen stools, as the Israelis captured the old city of Jerusalem and prayed at the Wailing Wall. Surely the rebuilding of the Jewish temple could be only a few years down the road! Would the wildly popular US (Roman Catholic) president, John F. Kennedy, with his mortal head wound miraculously healed (Rev. 13.12), reappear as the Antichrist and stride into the Jerusalem temple to proclaim himself to be God (2 Thess. 2.3-4)?<sup>3</sup> Rumors were circulating in fundamentalist Christian circles that Kennedy’s body had been whisked away from Dallas Parkland Hospital in November, 1963, and had been cryogenically preserved, awaiting the day when medical technology would be able to heal his assassin’s fatal bullet wound. Perhaps the day for Kennedy’s resuscitation had finally arrived, now, three and a half years after his shocking death.

During that momentous week in June of 1967, my mother recalled her evangelist father sitting in their Kansas City living room in May 1948, transfixed by other radio reports – of the United Nations’ vote to partition Palestine. Ezekiel’s prophecy of the dry bones (Ezek. 37) was being fulfilled in his own lifetime. My grandfather, along with countless other interpreters of biblical prophecy, firmly believed that Jesus would come again within a generation of that 1948 date. (So how many years *is* a generation? Twenty years? Thirty years?)

2. Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1982* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 16–17, 21–22; see also James M. Efrid, *End-Times: Rapture, Antichrist, Millennium* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 17–37; and David Van Biema, ‘The End: How it Got that Way’, *Time Magazine* (July 1, 2002), pp. 46–47.

3. For example, see <http://www.raptureme.com/rr-antichrist.html> (accessed June 28, 2002).

It was no mere coincidence that in 1970, three years after the Six Day Arab–Israeli War and twenty-two years after Israel’s independence, Hal Lindsey’s multimillion best seller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*,<sup>4</sup> popularized Darby’s apocalyptic theories for the next generation of Bible novices and religious enthusiasts. In the summer of 1971, with Larry Norman’s popular Christian rock lament, ‘I Wish We’d All Been Ready’, and his call to arms, ‘Right Here in America’, playing over and over in my head, I devoured Lindsey’s sensationalist writings and transposed them into a study guide on the book of Revelation for fireside Christian camp devotionals. But contrary to Lindsey’s whimsies, the seventies passed without Armageddon’s onslaught.

Fifteen years later I had finished a PhD in New Testament, joined the United Presbyterian Church and begun a university teaching career. I thought I had left my adolescent apocalyptic imagination in the dust of Ezekiel’s mythic valley. But in fact only a fragment of it lay buried there. As I grow older I find myself forming new friends from the mounds of Ezekiel’s bleached bones. Our pasts never quite leave us. Like Ezekiel’s bizarre vision, apocalyptic imagery has reappeared in mainstream American conversation and life, reconfiguring and reconstituting its bony frame in imaginative and surprising ways.

Apocalyptic rhetoric dominated the international politics of ‘Desert Storm’ in the early 1990s, the Y2K scare of 1999, and has reached a fever pitch in our present, patriotic post-September 11 ‘War on Terrorism’.<sup>5</sup> Apocalyptic metaphors have invigorated recent Hollywood blockbusters like *The Matrix*<sup>6</sup> and *Independence Day*, and have resurfaced in New Testament scholars’ reassessments of the Jesus tradition.<sup>7</sup> Having seen US popular culture yank the beasts of apocalyptic dualism out of the primordial seas of Near Eastern mythology one more time, biblical interpreters are being forced to confront its political rhetoric and wild-eyed hermeneutics with renewed vigor. In light of September 11, it has become imperative that biblical scholars become ethically sensitive to ways in which these dualisms get translated into the popular political rhetoric of ‘us against them’, and the blameless and good against the cowardly and evil ‘other’. Are there ways to interpret ancient apocalyptic narratives without giving in to the

4. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). Like McDonald’s Hamburgers’ neon marquees, each new printing proudly listed how many copies had been gobbled up by a hungry public. See Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, pp. 211–17.

5. See for example, Nancy Gibbs, ‘Apocalypse Now’, *Time Magazine* (July 1, 2002), pp. 40–48.

6. Two sequels to the immensely popular *The Matrix* are set for release in 2003 (<http://keanuweb.com/credits/movie.matrix2.html>, accessed June 28, 2002; and <http://www.norcalmovies.com/TheMatrix2/>, accessed June 28, 2002).

7. For example, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2: *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000); and Dale C. Allison and Robert J. Miller (eds.), *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2001).

binary oppositions that are so easily assimilated by nationalism and theological dogmatism? Biblical interpreters must address this question if they hope to have a voice in contemporary US politics and the ideological battles over globalization and postcolonialism.<sup>8</sup>

*Images of Ancient Apocalyptic Dualism in  
Contemporary North American Culture*

My own interest in ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions is thus framed by personal and professional issues, by ethical and hermeneutical questions. It arises out of my own autobiographical roots in Christian apocalyptic sectarianism, and it continues to be challenged by the resurgence of dualistic apocalyptic rhetoric in popular culture and US politics. By analyzing how biblical scholars have appropriated (or failed to appropriate) this tradition over the past century, I believe that we may find ways to evaluate critically its dualisms for contemporary American culture and Christian communities.

In order to grasp the pervasiveness of apocalyptic dualism in contemporary North American culture and in order to construct a framework for reading beyond that ideology, I propose the following two theses. The first is that the apocalyptic dualisms of late twentieth-century, secular North American culture are found most explicitly in science fiction films and the militant Radical Right<sup>9</sup> and reflect two recurring responses to an ancient apocalyptic phenomenon. The second is that liberal Protestant (and more recently, liberal Roman Catholic) reconstructions of Jesus – regardless of their critical stance to the biblical tradition – stand as dualistic antidotes to the popular, eschatological hopes of secular North American culture and science fiction, fundamentalist Protestantism, and the militant Radical Right.

To a certain extent, my understanding of the role of apocalyptic dualism in twentieth-century North American culture is rooted in a provocative quote from John Dominic Crossan's book, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.<sup>10</sup> Crossan writes: 'Apocalypticism, which is usually called millennialism or millenarianism within the wider scope of comparative anthropology, comes in two main types, one stemming... from the Retainers, who support the Governors with their brains and pens; and the other from the Peasants, who support it with their brawn and bodies'.<sup>11</sup> To put my first thesis in Crossan's words, I believe science fiction as a literary genre reflects the 'brain and pen' dualisms of contemporary apocalyptic, while militant Radical Right groups and such represent a 'brawn and bodies' response to contemporary expressions of apocalyptic dualism.

8. For example, see R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 299–305.

9. Robert Jewett describes their ideology as a 'Captain America Complex'. See Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1984).

10. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

11. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 40.

*Ancient Apocalyptic Dualism, Contemporary  
Science Fiction and the Radical Right*

Frederick Kreuziger's 1982 monograph, *Apocalypse and Science Fiction: A Dialectic of Religious and Secular Soteriologies*,<sup>12</sup> has been largely overlooked by scholars of biblical apocalyptic.<sup>13</sup> But it is a provocative book, and one of the earliest attempts to argue that there is a correspondence between ancient apocalyptic views of salvation and modern science fiction. Kreuziger believed that if scholars of religion studied the social and literary origins of science fiction, they would be better able to contextualize ancient apocalyptic socially, theologically and literarily. Although his attempt to draw a clear line of connection between the ancient genre of apocalyptic and the modern genre of science fiction is perhaps overstated, there is a provocative, postmodern edge to the way he juxtaposes the ancient literary genre with a contemporary one.

Kreuziger has surprisingly little to say about science fiction films,<sup>14</sup> but within a few years a number of scholars were connecting the two apocalyptic media forms. One of the earliest scholars to look at the relationship between science fiction films and ancient apocalyptic was Ron Large. In an insightful essay entitled 'American Apocalyptic',<sup>15</sup> Large used James Cameron's vastly popular *Terminator* movies<sup>16</sup> to show how apocalyptic dualism carried over into science fiction and interpenetrated American politics. Before long, a number of writers – both secular and religious – joined in the conversation.<sup>17</sup> These scholars have opened up an entirely new way of thinking about how ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic continues to influence North American culture. Taken out of an explicitly Christian context, the secularization of dualistic apocalyptic motifs and ideology, along with apocalyptic's fantastic visions and graphic violence, have found fertile grounds for growth in Hollywood and popular culture.

12. (AARAS 40; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

13. Surprisingly, Kreuziger's name is not found in the index of Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr (eds.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995) or in the index of George Aichele and Richard Walsh (eds.), *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), despite the fact that both books draw connections between science fiction films and biblical apocalyptic.

14. Kreuziger, *Apocalypse and Science Fiction*, pp. 84, 193, 213, 215.

15. Ron Large, 'American Apocalyptic', *The Fourth R*, 4 (1991), pp. 1–8.

16. *Terminator 3* is set for release in July 2003. (<http://www.upcomingmovies.com/terminator3.html>. Accessed June 29, 2002).

17. See especially, Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr, 'Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation', in *Screening the Sacred*, pp. 55–63; Kevin Pask, 'Cyborg Economics: Desire and Labor in the *Terminator* Films', in Richard Dellamora (ed.), *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 182–98; and Richard Walsh, 'On Finding a Non-American Revelation: *End of Days* and the Book of Revelation', in *Screening Scripture*, pp. 1–23.

*Ancient Apocalyptic Dualism*

Although it is little known outside the realm of biblical scholarship and was not part of Kreuziger's or Large's analysis,<sup>18</sup> the book of *I Enoch* is one of the most useful apocalyptic texts for drawing comparisons between the ancient dualistic genre and modern science fiction. This book, which scholars have divided into five distinctive parts, was most likely the creation of 'brain and pen' scribes of Qumran, and was probably written over a period of about two hundred years, from around 150 BCE down to 50 CE.<sup>19</sup> The literary connections between ancient apocalyptic and modern science fiction can be seen most easily in Book One (*I En.* 1–36) and Book Four (*I En.* 83–90). Book One, 'The Book of Watchers', begins with Enoch's prophecy of a future cataclysmic judgment and is followed by a narrative section that describes the fall of the angels or 'watchers'. As a result of cohabiting with human women, catastrophic evil enters the world through a cosmic invasion of fallen angels or 'watchers' (cf. Gen. 6.1-5). Besides teaching humans immoral acts, these creatures teach humanity all forms of technology. For example, they instruct humans in the art of making weapons, mining, writing and in the crafts related to beautifying the body – jewelry, cosmetics and dyes. They also teach humans the natural 'sciences', that is, the skills necessary for healing: medicinal herbs, magical spells and astronomy (*I En.* 8; see also 65 and 69.1-11).

For Enoch, then, 'science' and technology enter our world through the reckless misuse of otherworldly power. And although Enoch himself will use these same scientific and technical skills to write and to navigate through the cosmos, science and technology are clearly not benign powers. Only the wisest can use them with impunity (cf. Rev. 18.11-24). As a result of the evil that invaded the earth, Enoch was told to warn the fallen watchers of the judgment that would soon befall them (*I En.* 12–13). He does this by taking tours of the judgment places above, within and beyond the edges of the earth (*I En.* 14–21).

The 'Book of Watchers' by itself, apart from the later parts of *I Enoch*, plays a central role in subsequent developments of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic. And its significance for the development of science fiction should not be overlooked. First, the invasion of the earth by hostile outside forces – an invasion that alters the course of humanity – is one of the most common motifs in science fiction today. Second, the destructive potential of science and technology is a dominant theme in our everyday lives, as well as in science fiction. The Y2K crisis is the most obvious recent example of this, along with our fears of germ warfare and a nuclear holocaust. These three crises are of our own making, and all three have had worldwide destructive, apocalyptic language associated with their misuse. Third, otherworldly journeys – not merely as dreams or visions, but as actual ascensions and tours of physical places that are full of sights and sounds – prefigure contemporary cosmological narratives of events on distant planets and in far-off galaxies.

18. Kreuziger quotes briefly from *I Enoch* (*Apocalypse and Science Fiction*, p. 184). Large does not.

19. Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 513–14; D.S. Russell, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Patriarchs and Prophets in Early Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 24–43.

‘The Book of Dreams’ comprises chs 83–90, or Book Four of *I Enoch* and is a section of the book that compares most favorably with modern science fiction. It is a survey of Israel’s history in the form of *ex eventu* prophecy, whereby the fictional character, Enoch, looks down into the distant ‘future’ (which is the real author’s actual past) and prophesies what ‘is to come’. This section of *I Enoch* can be dated fairly easily to about 164 BCE, shortly after the *ex eventu* prophecy of Daniel 8–12.<sup>20</sup> The importance of the ‘Book of Dreams’ for science fiction is threefold. First, as many scholars have noted, prophecy ‘after the event’ gives the audience a powerful sense that ‘all things have been determined’. Second, *ex eventu* prophecy works toward a climactic earthly battle (e.g., the battle of Armageddon), which pits the forces of good against the forces of evil. This, then, culminates in a third important motif common to much of science fiction – a divine intervention that rescues the embattled, righteous, earthly minority at the moment when circumstances look their bleakest.

Although it is not my purpose here to show how these central motifs and dualisms are found, elaborated upon and revised in later Christian apocalyptic texts such as Mark 13, 1 Thessalonians or Revelation, it is important to note at least a few differences between Christian apocalyptic texts and Jewish apocalyptic texts. By and large, surveys of successive world empires in the guise of *ex eventu* prophecy are absent from apocalypses composed by Christians. For example, while the ‘Little Apocalypse’ of Mark 13 (cf. Revelation 13) is probably *ex eventu* prophecy, ‘Jesus’ does not give an expansive overview of human history leading up to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. There is no mention of the four world empires of Daniel in Mark 13, in Paul’s letters, the book of Revelation or the *Shepherd of Hermas*.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that classic dispensational interpretations of the book of Revelation have viewed the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2–3) typologically, as representing seven periods of church history from Jesus to 1900.<sup>22</sup> Feeling the need for an expansive survey of history in the New Testament’s only full-fledged apocalypse, some fundamentalists have invented one: John’s seven letters to the churches of Asia.

20. See H.F.D. Sparks (ed.), *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 176. Science fiction films that deal with *ex eventu*-like phenomena are *Back to the Future*, the first two *Terminator* films, and *Twelve Monkeys*.

21. For an elaboration of the differences between Christian and Jewish apocalyptic, see John J. Collins, ‘Pseudonymity, Historical Reviews, and the Genre of Revelation’, *CBQ*, 39 (1977), pp. 328–43; and D.S. Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 128–40.

22. Recognizing that there will be some variation among interpreters of Bible prophecy, the serious student can still roughly distinguish the following seven periods of church history in Rev. 2.1–3.22. The church at Ephesus represents the Apostolic Church (30–100 CE); the church at Smyrna represents the Church of the Roman Persecution (100–313 CE); the church at Pergamum represents the Constantinian Church (313–600 CE); the Church at Thyatira represents the Papal Period (590–1517 CE); the church at Sardis represents the Reformation Age (1517–1730 CE); the church at Philadelphia represents the Church of the Great Missionary Movement (1648–1900); and the church at Laodicia, represent the Apostate Church (1900–?). See ‘The Seven Churches’, [http://www.prophecyupdate.com/the\\_seven\\_churches.htm](http://www.prophecyupdate.com/the_seven_churches.htm) (accessed June 30, 2002).

Secondly, in contrast to Jewish apocalypses, their Christian counterparts tend to spend much more time describing the cosmic savior figure who intervenes in human history at its moment of deepest crisis.<sup>23</sup> Of course, in the Christian tradition, this figure is Jesus Christ himself. Finally, Christian apocalypses all characterize the faithful as non-violent resisters to the ever-present evil forces pervading the world.<sup>24</sup> Ancient Jewish apocalypses have mixed responses to confronting evil. In other words, the ‘brawn and body’, proactive, militant-resistant category of apocalypticists is a later development within Christianity. Mark’s gospel is an excellent example of an early Christian non-violent response to an apocalyptic crisis. It juxtaposes Barabbas and Jesus in such a way that Jesus, the nonviolent liberator, is killed, while Barabbas, the violent resister to Roman hegemony, is released by Pilate (Mk 15.7). Nevertheless, it is not Barabbas but the nonviolent Jesus who brings ultimate salvation in Mark’s story.

In an early effort to define the literary genre ‘apocalypse’, John Collins argued that ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses fall into two main categories: temporal apocalypses and spatial apocalypses.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, both elements are present in *1 Enoch* and the book of Revelation. In *1 Enoch*, the Book of Watchers is primarily a spatial apocalypse, since most of it describes Enoch’s tour of heaven, while the Book of Dreams is a temporal apocalypse, since it is a survey of human history that culminates in God invading this world and radically changing it.

### *Contemporary Science Fiction*

Although neither Collins nor Kreuziger applies these two categories of ancient apocalypses – spatial and temporal – to contemporary science fiction, they fit the genre quite well. Indeed, Tim LaHaye’s vastly popular Christian science fiction/apocalyptic *Left Behind* series<sup>26</sup> (he and his wife hit it big in 1976 with their Christian sex manual)<sup>27</sup> combines science fiction and an explicit dispensational view of history. But, there are other obvious ‘temporal’ science fiction films such as *2001*, *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*, *Superman*, *Cocoon 1*, *Cocoon 2*, *The Abyss*, *Independence Day* and *Men in Black*,<sup>28</sup> where our world is invaded by either benevolent or malevolent powers. Then there are the ‘spatial’ science fiction films like *Star Wars*, *Alien* and *Star Trek: First Contact*, which take place entirely in other galaxies or planets that have no physical connection to our earth. Like their ancient prototypes (the spatial, tour-of-the-heavens apocalypses), this sub-genre of

23. For example, cf. Dan. 7.14-14; *1 En.* 46, 48; Rev. 1.12-18.

24. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 128–44.

25. John J. Collins (ed.), ‘Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre’, *Semeia*, 14 (1979).

26. With Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1996); *Tribulation Force*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1997); *Nicolae* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1998); *Soul Harvest* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999); *Apollyon* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999); *Assassins* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2000); *The Indwelling* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001); *The Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001); *Desecration* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2002); *The Remnant* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2002). See also, John Cloud, ‘Meet the Prophet’, *Time* (July 1, 2002), pp. 50–53.

27. Tim LaHaye and Beverly LaHaye, *The Act of Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

28. *Men in Black 2* was released in July 2002.

science fiction film seems to be a bit less common than the ‘earth invasion’ type. But contemporary science fiction often mixes the temporal and spatial elements in ways that ancient Jewish and Christian cosmology did not. For example, the two *Terminator* films, *Twelve Monkeys* and *The Matrix*, have someone from the future invade the present world. That is, there is no hint of another spatial plane beyond this world in the films. The fiction is completely temporal and non-spatial. On the other hand, *The Alien* movies and some of the *Star Trek* films (most notably the *The Search for Spock*) have humans invading other planets and radically affecting them or being affected by them. The closest equivalent to this latter motif in the Bible would be Satan’s invasion of Heaven (Rev. 12.7-9).

Just as ancient apocalyptic speculates on the nature of the savior figure who invades human history, so also does modern science fiction. It is no coincidence that the initials ‘JC’ are connected with the savior figures of many contemporary science fiction films. For example, in the *Terminator* films the hero is ‘John Connor’ and in *Twelve Monkeys*, James Cole.<sup>29</sup> And at the beginning of *The Matrix*, Thomas Anderson, the future hero ‘Neo’, is greeted with ‘You’re my own personal Jesus Christ, man’. But is the hero a human look-alike with ‘superhuman’, otherworldly powers – like Superman? Or is the person an ordinary human with special gifts as in *Terminator*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *The Matrix* and *Spiderman*? And what of technology? Is it a gift from a world beyond our own or simply a projection of human ingenuity into the future? Does it have the power to destroy and deceive (*2001*, *Star Trek*, *Terminator*, *The Matrix*)? Or does it have the ability to save humanity (*2001*, *Star Trek: The Journey Home*, *Men in Black*)? Is technology harnessed to an evil impulse that comes from within humans as in the apostle Paul, *The Matrix*, the *Terminator* films, *Twelve Monkeys* and the Y2K crisis? Or does it come from outside humanity, as in *First Enoch* and *Independence Day*?

My point in this brief listing of motifs and themes is simply to show that on the level of literary genre, there is a deep connection between the ancient dualistic world of biblical apocalyptic and our present world. And while the contemporary expressions of apocalyptic in ‘brains and pens’ is most obvious in the wildly popular science fiction films of the entertainment industry rather than in the esoteric myths of an ancient priestly aristocracy, the dualistic symbolic world of apocalyptic must resonate deeply within our psyche if Hollywood can return to it time and again and continue to reap high profits. Writing about James Cameron’s first *Terminator* film, Ron Large wrote, ‘One reason why the film [and I would add, most science fiction] works so well is its connection to apocalyptic motifs in American life. The relationship between American self-understanding and God’s plan for the future is a central component of American identity and sense of purpose. It is ultimately a desire for hope and meaning. This is not an unworthy goal; however, one problem is that it may also serve to further establish the association between the apocalyptic vision and present violence’.<sup>30</sup>

29. In *End of Days*, a film whose plot is explicitly dependent upon the book of Revelation, the hero’s name is ‘Jericho Cane’.

30. ‘American Apocalyptic’, p. 7. See also James H. Smylie, ‘A New Heaven and New Earth:

*The Radical Right*

The connection between apocalyptic and two distinct social classes is an important component of John Dominic Crossan's two-pronged analysis. His quick brush strokes place the writers and the doers, the upper class and the lower class in binary opposition.<sup>31</sup> But generally speaking, biblical scholars have argued one way or the other. *Either* ancient apocalypticists were among the elite, writing class of priests and royal retainers, *or* they were numbered among the illiterate, disenfranchised peasants and the destitute. In Crossan's more complex social analysis of Second Temple Judaism, both 'brains and pens' and 'brawn and body' apocalyptic responses are common cultural reactions to perceived crises.

As noted earlier, Crossan has argued that there is a 'brawn' element to ancient apocalyptic that is the complement to the elite 'brain' component that I have just been analyzing. The 'brawn' side of apocalyptic is usually represented by a lower social class that is literally willing to embody its apocalyptic ideology by giving over physical body and life to the cause. In our contemporary world, 'brawn' is symbolized in the cyanide-laced Kool-Aid of The People's Temple in Guyana, the lethal cocktail mix of phenobarbital and vodka taken by Southern California's Heaven's Gate group, and the exploding jet airliners of September 11.

Over the past seven years, The Southern Poverty Law Center has devoted a number of its publications to the relationship between Radical Right groups and Christian apocalypticism.<sup>32</sup> The Law Center's intent is to help educators and church leaders understand the ideological basis for some of the violence perpetrated by apocalyptic groups and to give educators and church leaders the tools to deal with these ideologies when confronted with them in schools and churches.

As documented by the Center, Christian and non-Christian apocalyptic hate groups grew enormously in the United States in the 1990s. They began to decline shortly after the year 2000 – no doubt due to the failure of the Y2K crisis to materialize, but they have begun to mushroom once again in the aftermath of September 11. Fueled in part by a growing economic disparity between upper-middle class whites and lower middle class to lower class whites, by internet communication and crisis events like September 11, these groups have found the relatively isolated, sparsely populated, predominantly white, 'inland empire' of the US Pacific Northwest a particularly hospitable place to settle down. Consequently, the geographical region I call home (Washington, Idaho and Montana) has become a hotbed of Radical Right groups that are heavily indebted to apocalyptic interpretations of the Bible.

Uses of the Millennium in American Religious History', *Int*, 53 (1999), pp. 143–57; Hal Lindsey, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantam, 1980), pp. 131–58; John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis: What the Bible Says about the Future of the Middle East and the End of the Western Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 53–64.

31. *Jesus*, p. 40.

32. The Southern Poverty Law Center is a non-profit organization based in Montgomery, Alabama, 'internationally known for its tolerance education program, its legal victories against white supremacist groups, its tracking of hate groups and its sponsorship of the Civil Rights Memorial' (<http://www.splcenter.org/>; accessed June 30, 2002).

Like the various Zealot groups in the first Jewish Revolt (66–73 CE), Radical Right groups are not easily categorized theologically or ideologically. In Crossan's terms, this is because they are more focused on 'brawn and body' strategies than 'brain and pen' ideas.<sup>33</sup> However, most make some claim of being rooted in Christianity – even if, for them, that 'authentic' Christian tradition was quickly corrupted. The Southern Poverty Law Center has identified 'Christian Identity' as one of the most violent and explicitly 'Christian' groups of the radical right. For example, Timothy McVeigh, the man responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing on the anniversary of the Branch Davidian conflagration, had ties to Christian Identity groups in the Midwest. Hence, I will focus on 'Christian Identity' as a way to briefly introduce the contemporary 'brawn and body' apocalyptic groups of the US Radical Right. According to an Intelligence Report of the Southern Poverty Law Center,

Identity's apocalyptic roots are British-Israelism, a curiosity of mid-Victorian England that maintained that the Anglo-Saxons were the true lost tribes of Israel. In America these beliefs were transformed into a fiercely anti-Semitic, racist theology... The American Identity doctrine maintains that whites will be pitted against evil non-white satanic forces in an apocalyptic battle. Identity professes that Adam was a white man, the product of a second creation. In Identity's system, God's first creation produced people of color, 'the beasts of the field,' or 'mud people'. Jews, according to Identity, are literally children of Satan, the descendants of a union between Eve and the serpent. These individuals mated with the 'beasts' to produce the Edomites, mongrel people who are the embodiment of Satan and the source of the world's evil.<sup>34</sup>

Like ancient apocalyptic (*I Enoch*) and much of science fiction, the origin of evil – especially in terms of miscegenation – plays an important role in the ideology. The Southern Poverty Law Center's description of Christian Identity goes on to note that its eschatology is also rooted in apocalyptic language. But unlike most of apocalyptic Protestant fundamentalist groups, Christian Identity is 'postmillennial',

meaning that in order for the Second Coming [of Christ] to occur, God's law on Earth must first be established through a great battle, Armageddon. In this battle, the forces of good – the white 'Israelites' – will be pitted against the armies of Satan, represented by the Jewish-controlled federal [U.S.] government. Identity followers will wage an all-out war against ZOG (the Zionist Occupied Government), 'race-traitors' [especially whites who intermarry with other racial groups] and anyone else who stands in their way.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the proponents of Christian Identity are virulently opposed to the pre-millennial, pretribulation apocalypticism represented by much of Protestant fundamentalism.<sup>36</sup> And although many adherents of the ideology grew up with

33. Crossan, *Jesus*, pp. 43–44.

34. Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Racist Identity Sect Fuels Extremist Movement', Intelligence Report #79 (August 1995), p. 3.

35. Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Racist Identity Sect Fuels Extremist Movement', p. 3.

36. Interestingly, Hal Lindsey's 1980 sequel to *The Late Great Planet Earth*, *The 1980s*:

Darby's dispensationalism and the Scofield Reference Bible as I did, they are now committed to Identity Pastor Peter J. Peters's point of view, which

criticizes 'Judeo-Christian churches in America' for planning to 'leave earth via the "rapture"' and for listening to 'doomsday date setters (like Hal Lindsey) who predict the end of the world and who always miss'. [Peters] has little regard for those who 'want to escape the corruption in the world rather than expose it'. These are the people, Peter observes, who have an 'I just want to go home to Jesus mentality rather than stay and fight for Jesus'. Instead of complacently waiting for the end, Peters counsels his listeners and readers against letting the last days (i.e. the end of this period) be 'yours or your family's last days'. The goal for Christians, according to Peters, is learning 'how to survive, overcome and be victorious'.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, not all Radical Right groups share Peter J. Peter's theological roots and agenda. There are hundreds of Radical Right groups hunkered down in the United States today, and a look at any of their websites quickly reveals their differences.<sup>38</sup> Some do not claim to be Christian at all. Yet all do share a certain apocalyptic view of the future, of a nation and a people spiraling downward toward disaster – a disaster that the chosen ones have been called to oppose, body and soul. But biblical scholars have generally argued that ancient apocalypticists were either among the disenfranchised elite, writing class of priests and royal retainers, *or* they were numbered among the illiterate, disenfranchised peasants and the destitute. From John Dominic Crossan's more complex social analysis of Second Temple Judaism and from my quick survey of contemporary American culture, it is clear that a dualistic hermeneutic is at work in both the 'brain and pens' and the 'brawn and body' forms of apocalyptic. But more than that. As we shall see below, the same hermeneutic is at work in this past century's two most prominent scholarly views of the historical Jesus.

### *Apocalyptic Dualism and Historical Jesus Studies*

In *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Crossan writes that John the Baptist preached 'the imminent advent of the avenging apocalyptic God',<sup>39</sup> who would 'restore a terribly disordered world' through 'some massive and world-shaking divine intervention'.<sup>40</sup> And although Jesus was baptized by this same John, a 'peasant apocalypticist',<sup>41</sup> Crossan argues that Jesus became 'almost the exact opposite of the Baptist'.<sup>42</sup> That is to say, Jesus was non-apocalyptic and this-worldly in his

*Countdown to Armageddon* weds pretribulational apocalypticism to a Christian Right political agenda (pp. 131–75). See also Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, pp. 218–26.

37. Linda Scheearing, 'Millennialism, Mayhem, and the Year 2000: Apocalypticism and the Radical Right' (unpublished paper), p. 12.

38. For example, see <http://personalwebs.myriad.net/steveb/mil.html> (accessed February 25, 2000).

39. <http://personalwebs.myriad.net/steveb/mil.html>, p. 38.

40. <http://personalwebs.myriad.net/steveb/mil.html>, p. 32.

41. <http://personalwebs.myriad.net/steveb/mil.html>, p. 38.

42. <http://personalwebs.myriad.net/steveb/mil.html>, p. 48.

understanding of God's activity and human responsibility. He did not speculate about the end of the world or God's imminent, dramatic intervention in human history. His message was not intended for non-Jews, and it was not about his own role as divine savior or about a repentance focused on salvation from hell. While Crossan's description of Jesus sounds scandalous to many people raised in the church, that is not what I find most interesting about his work. What intrigues me about Crossan's Jesus research is the fact that his conclusions stand in complete contrast and opposition to the view of Jesus promulgated by Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of the twentieth century. And Schweitzer's view of Jesus was what dominated the first half of that just completed century. While newer theories of oral sources, reevaluations of the biographical importance of Mark, the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas*, and developments in the sociology of ancient Palestine all combine to play a role in Crossan's historical reassessment of Jesus, I believe that there are also underlying theological and apologetical reasons for the shift in his emphasis. And thus my argument below shall be that the shift in 'liberal' New Testament scholars' assessments of Jesus' relationship to apocalyptic is a litmus test for the role apocalyptic plays in the North American cultural consciousness. And it is no less dualistic than the views these scholars seek to overturn.

Written in 1906 and translated into English in 1910, just a few years before the outbreak of the 'Great War', Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*<sup>43</sup> brought to life a new vision of Jesus. It was one that spoke in a prophetic voice against the eschatological hopes of those Christians standing on the threshold of the second millennium's last century. *The Christian Century*, a liberal Protestant magazine founded shortly before the end of the nineteenth century, recently reflected back over its one hundred years of publication and quoted from its first printing in the twentieth century. The editors wrote: 'Expressing hope "in God and Christian people, and especially the God-fearing, liberty-loving brotherhood that pleads for the unity of God's children", they dared to believe that "the most Christian of all the centuries so far" lay ahead of them. And they wanted to turn that vision into reality'.<sup>44</sup> For the early editors of the magazine, their hope and conviction was that the twentieth century would indeed be *the* Christian century, a century when Christ's message of God's Kingdom – a kingdom of love, peace and harmony between all peoples – would empower humanity to new heights of virtue and perfection. But Schweitzer's bombshell would show how the preceding two centuries' liberal views of Jesus – views so eloquently expressed in the pages of *The Christian Century* – had misconstrued the message of Jesus, turning it into a this-worldly message of God-blessed human potential.

After first outlining eighteenth and nineteenth century critical investigations into the Jesus of history, Schweitzer took pains to show that those portraits of Jesus said more about the scholars doing the research than they said about the historical Jesus. It is a masterful book, and perhaps the time is ripe to redo what Schweitzer did one

43. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

44. *The Christian Century* 117/3 (January 26, 2000), p. 77.

hundred years ago. But Schweitzer does not stop with an analysis of one hundred years of Jesus scholarship. He goes on to unveil a Jesus who was radically apocalyptic, who was expecting God to break into human history in some powerful new way through his own mission. Jesus was, in a word, not a wimpy, liberal-minded Protestant preaching pious platitudes about the ‘brotherhood of man’. In language bordering on poetry, Schweitzer writes of Jesus:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears and cries: ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand’. Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; it crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and so bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that Schweitzer’s interpretation of Jesus looked in two directions. Schweitzer looked both at his Western culture’s scholarly presentations of Jesus and at the (historical) Jesus himself. And in his reconstructed historical Jesus, Schweitzer found a person who prophetically spoke *against* the prevailing ethos of his day, against ‘the Messiah who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God [and]... founded the Kingdom of Heaven on earth’.<sup>46</sup> *That* Jesus of Nazareth, he writes, ‘never had any existence’.<sup>47</sup>

The recent spate of non-apocalyptic Jesuses floating around in North American biblical scholarship do not make explicit mention of Radical Right groups like Christian Identity or contemporary science fiction films. Instead, Crossan and other founders of the Jesus Seminar are pointedly directed toward exposing the errors of fundamentalist Protestant portraits of Christ as typified in their literalistic, dualistic interpretations of biblical prophecy.<sup>48</sup> But in so doing, Crossan and the Jesus Seminar radically undercut not only the apocalyptic Christ so dear to the heart of Protestant fundamentalism but also the apocalyptic Jesus of Albert Schweitzer, science fiction, and the Radical Right.

### *A Non-Apocalyptic Jesus for an Apocalyptic Age*

Schweitzer’s apocalyptic Jesus dominated the first half of the twentieth century. It successfully weathered a world war and the decades immediately following that war, during a time when Jesus’ and the early church’s apocalyptic words seemed more and more profoundly attuned to the unraveling of human history – another world war, genocide, the dawning of the atomic age and the emerging Cold War. But the end of Schweitzer’s apocalyptic Jesus was foreshadowed in Rudolf

45. *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, pp. 370–71.

46. *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 398.

47. *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 371.

48. For example, see Walsh, ‘On Finding a Non-American Revelation’, pp. 5–6, esp. n. 15.

Bultmann's New Testament theology, which stood at the century's midpoint.<sup>49</sup> Bultmann's New Testament hermeneutical project took Schweitzer's emphasis on apocalyptic seriously, so seriously that his student, Ernst Käsemann, could later argue that 'apocalyptic [was] the mother of Christian theology'.<sup>50</sup> However, Bultmann's research into Christian origins led him to attribute Schweitzer's apocalyptic worldview primarily to the early Christian communities rather than to Jesus himself. Because of liberal Protestantism's misguided preoccupation with the life of Jesus, Bultmann had little to say about the physical details of Jesus' life or the internal workings of Jesus' mind. Instead, having taken the first-century apocalyptic worldview seriously, Bultmann understood his task to be primarily and profoundly hermeneutical. Here, the Christian interpreter's goal was to 'demythologize' the apocalyptic world of Jesus and the early church and appropriate its existential center for contemporary theology, for a European world that knew the meaning of crisis but for whom the language of demons, angels and the Second Coming of Jesus held little meaning.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, New Testament scholars – particularly those from the United States – continued to be interested in Jesus, despite the relative skepticism of the 'Second Quest' with its focus on Jesus's words over his deeds. This late twentieth-century, largely North American movement is sometimes called 'the Third Quest' (Schweitzer to Bultmann being the first quest and Bultmann's students having initiated the Second Quest), but it removes Bultmann and his followers' explicit hermeneutical questions from the Jesus equation. The self-proclaimed voice of this 'Third Quest', Robert Funk's Jesus Seminar, has sought to refocus scholarly attention on Jesus for the public at large and in a context outside any church or parachurch organization. In its evaluation of the Jesus tradition, a non-apocalyptic (or as Marcus Borg argues, I think incorrectly, a non-eschatological Jesus)<sup>51</sup> is revealed.

The purpose of the Jesus Seminar has never explicitly been to 'reinvent Jesus'. It is based largely upon a reassessment of the gospels' saying material, or 'Q', especially in light of the 1946 discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas*, more thorough archaeological work in Galilee and the refinement of sociological models for studying first-century Palestine. Nevertheless, Robert Funk writes in the introduction to the *Five Gospels*:

In the aftermath of the controversy over Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (published in 1859) and the ensuing Scopes 'monkey' trial in 1925, American biblical scholarship retreated into the closet. The fundamentalist mentality generated a climate of inquisition that made honest scholarly judgments dangerous. Numerous biblical scholars were subjected to heresy trials and suffered the loss of academic posts. They learned it was safer to keep their critical judgments private.

49. *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 1955).

50. As quoted in Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (trans. Margaret Kohl; London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 14.

51. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 2; cf. Crossan, *Jesus*, pp. 52–53.

However, the intellectual ferment of the century soon reasserted itself in colleges, universities and seminaries. By the end of World War II, critical scholars again quietly dominated the academic scene from one end of the continent to the other. Critical biblical scholarship was supported, of course, by other university disciplines which wanted to ensure that dogmatic considerations not be permitted to intrude into scientific and historical research. The fundamentalists were forced, as a consequence, to found their own Bible colleges and seminaries in order to propagate their point of view. In launching new institutions, the fundamentalists even refused accommodation with the older, established church-related schools that dotted the land.

One focal point of the raging controversies was who Jesus was and what he had said.<sup>52</sup>

As the Jesus Seminar has made clear through its many press releases and publications, it has uncovered a Jesus who was an illiterate Galilean peasant, a charismatic teacher, healer and exorcist, who, in Marcus Borg's words, was a boundary-crosser, breaking purity boundaries in the name of a compassionate God.<sup>53</sup> Eventually Jesus went to Jerusalem – why, we cannot be sure – confronted the entrenched priestly elite in the temple, was arrested and crucified.

In outward appearances, then, Jesus at the end of the twentieth century looks radically different from Schweitzer's Jesus at its beginning. Or different even from Bultmann's Jesus at the middle of the century. In contrast to Bultmann and his followers, the 'Third Quest' has no explicit interest in the hermeneutical questions that sought to relate the past world of Jesus to the present world. There is no attempt to 'get into the mind of Jesus', to relate Jesus to the world outside the Judaism of the Roman empire or to construct a detailed sequence of the events in his life. And there is a radical rejection of Schweitzer's apocalyptic Jesus. However, on a deeper pastoral and prophetic level, there are some remarkable points of connection between the first quest, the second quest and the third quest. The 'Third Quest' for Jesus, as typified by Crossan, Funk and Borg, argues that Jesus was non-apocalyptic. His message was centered not on issues of the end of the world, or the end of an age, but rather on the revitalizing of the Jewish people and their covenant with their God.

All this may sound radical and revolutionary to the outsider who is unfamiliar with the last hundred years of research on the historical Jesus. But there is an important connection between the seemingly disparate perspectives of Schweitzer and the Jesus Seminar. Writing in a non-apocalyptic period of Western European cultural history, Schweitzer's historical and critical research – or should we say his *faith?* – led him to find in the Jesus tradition an 'authentic' person and voice that spoke against the prevailing ethos of his day, a person and voice that challenged the false optimism in the human spirit and the blindness to colonial and racial

52. *The Five Gospels*, p. 1.

53. *Meeting Jesus Again*, p. 58. See my analysis of Borg's 'boundary crosser' metaphor in *Reading with a Passion: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and the American West in the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 122–27.

oppression, a voice opposed to an optimism that believed human effort could usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth. Similarly, toward the end of the twentieth century (beginning in the mid-1980s with President Reagan's apocalyptic predictions of Soviet power and a disinterest in ecological issues, in a period of radical fear and pessimism in the lower middle class over issues of economics and race), we find liberal Protestants and liberal Roman Catholics discovering a non-apocalyptic Jesus, a Jesus who can speak powerfully and pointedly against other-worldly copouts from the messiness of day-to-day living. This 'new' Jesus is a 'this worldly' Jesus, one who does not speculate about the future or wring from history a catastrophic end where only the 'faithful' survive. This Jesus, like Schweitzer's before it, is a counter-cultural Jesus, one who is at odds with the social angst of late twentieth-century politics, one who can call – despite the absence of religious commitment – all people to recommit themselves to the world and its earthbound problems. In this sense, then, both the 'First Quest' and the 'Third Quest' share an implicit connection to the 'Second Quest', that is, a commitment to the hermeneutical (and spiritual) task of connecting the world of Jesus to one's own day.<sup>54</sup> And finally, these quests often share with their apocalyptic pretexts and cultural precursors a dualistic, determinate hermeneutic of adversarial response, an 'us against them' mentality that tends to replicate the problematical binarisms of apocalyptic rather than moving beyond them to a more broadly based literary indeterminacy and ethical pluralism.

### *Complicating Apocalyptic (Determinate) Dualisms*

Can the non-apocalyptic, historical Jesus of John Crossan, Marcus Borg and Robert Funk 'save' North America from the apocalyptic-fed, post-September 11 dualisms of a new millennium? It would be nice to think so. But if Schweitzer's study were used as a test case, the answer could turn out to be more negative. 'Brawn and bodies' tend not to listen very attentively to the 'brains and pens' of the 'priestly', 'scribal' world of academe.

In light of my analysis of science fiction, the Radical Right and historical Jesus studies, there is evidence to suggest that the Jesuses of liberal Protestantism – whether that of the first, second or third quest – all share a religious or faith commitment: to find a Jesus in the Christian tradition who speaks counter-culturally to their contemporary worlds. Interestingly, Schweitzer's prophetic, apocalyptic Jesus was heavily indebted to the Markan tradition, while the Jesus of the third quest is heavily dependent upon the less apocalyptically-driven Lukan Jesus. It remains to be seen whether New Testament scholars and church folk can find (or will want to look for) in the Christian canon, at the beginning of the third millennium, a portrait of Jesus that can speak prophetically, existentially, beyond the determinate dualisms of apocalyptic, to the issues of postcolonialism, globalization, re-entrenched religious dogmatism, nationalism and personal alienation.

54. Cf. Staley, *Reading with a Passion*, pp. 14–15.

If Schweitzer was right in arguing that John's gospel was the favorite of the early nineteenth-century liberal lives of Jesus,<sup>55</sup> perhaps a positive reassessment of Johannine historical traditions will reinvigorate Jesus and apocalyptic studies at the beginning of the third millennium.<sup>56</sup> But even a diehard Johannine scholar like myself is not holding his breath on that possibility. However, I do think that Johannine scholars have been forced, by the very nature of the texts they investigate, to deal creatively with the hermeneutical challenges of Johannine dualism. And perhaps the lessons learned from problematizing and complicating its determinate dualisms may infiltrate historical Jesus studies and apocalyptic studies.<sup>57</sup> Whatever our resources will be, the shadow of post-September 11 apocalyptic rhetoric demands that biblical scholars and pastors find ways to complicate its dualistic oppositions in ethically life-giving, productive ways.

*Is It Possible to 'Befriend' an Apocalyptic Dualism When We Find One?*

One way to avoid the determinate dualisms of apocalyptic is to read apocalyptic in ways that undermine these dualisms. Various hermeneutical strategies, including those associated with deconstruction, offer inviting escape routes. Nevertheless, apocalyptic texts, like propagandistic rhetoric (which apocalyptic in many ways resembles), is much more difficult than other kinds of literature to read as 'subject to indeterminacy'. For example, *Mein Kampf*, I would think, is more difficult to read as 'subject to indeterminacy' than Joyce's *Ulysses*. And since *Mein Kampf* is not a canonical text for me, it is not worth the effort to read it for its literary indeterminacies. It is easier to dismiss it on other grounds. Since Revelation is a canonical text for me, I will work harder to 'find' literary indeterminacies in it or to create a context for reading the book as indeterminate despite its rather pervasive determinate dualisms.

But finding indeterminacy in Revelation (and biblical apocalyptic more generally) is not the only way to reread apocalyptic dualism. Another avenue for rereading Revelation (and biblical apocalyptic more generally) against the grain of determinate dualism is suggested by Adele Reinhartz's recent book on the Fourth Gospel, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*. Reinhartz proposes a thought-provoking, fourfold model for reading beyond that book's determinate binarisms. Taking a cue from Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*,<sup>58</sup> Reinhartz focuses on the ethical implications of

55. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, pp. 58–67, 86–89.

56. For example, see Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher (eds.), *Jesus in the Johannine Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).

57. Here I am thinking particularly of Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Continuum, 2001) (see below), and the collection of essays edited by Musa Dube and myself entitled *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space, and Power* (New York: Continuum International, 2002). See also Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Stephen D. Moore, 'Revolted Revelations', in *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 173–99.

58. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

what she terms ‘compliant reading’, ‘resistant reading’, ‘sympathetic reading’ and ‘engaged reading’ as she explores the Johannine metaphor of the Beloved Disciple in four roles: the reader’s mentor, opponent, colleague and ‘other’. With each type of reading she asks two interrelated questions: (1) What kind of ‘friend’ is the Beloved Disciple to the different types of readings, that is, does the ‘implied author’ ‘encourage’ compliant, resistant, sympathetic, or engaged readings of ‘his’ text? and (2) What kind of reader do we become when we read the text in these various modes?<sup>59</sup> Reinhartz’s choice of metaphor opens up the reader’s imagination to multiple active reading strategies and challenges the normal understanding of what counts as a ‘faithful’, ‘friendly’ reading of the Bible, where the faithful reader is the one who ‘submits’ to the determinate, ideological perspective of the text without a critical engagement of its ethos or its literary indeterminacies. So what might her fourfold reading metaphor look like in relation to the binary oppositions of apocalyptic literature and the apocalyptic/non-apocalyptic Jesuses of academic discourse?

Reinhartz defines a ‘compliant reading’ as one where readers accept the implied author’s ‘gift *in the terms in which he offers it*... They comply with the directions that the implied author describes’.<sup>60</sup> If one were to apply Reinhartz’s description of compliant reading to contemporary North American cultural readings of ancient apocalyptic texts, my dispensationalist childhood experience of biblical apocalyptic, most science fiction’s re-imagining of ancient apocalyptic themes, and the Radical Right’s apocalyptic reworking of biblical texts would all generally reflect compliant readings of ancient biblical apocalyptic. And in terms of recent historical Jesus studies, N.T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God* would typify a reconstructed Jesus that is generally compliant and accepting of the canonical gospels’ portrayals. That is, none of these approaches challenges the implicit or explicit ‘determinate’ binary oppositions that seem to dominate the texts’ ideologies.

Reinhartz’s resistant reading is the mirror image of a compliant reading. She argues that it ‘entails the effort systematically to read from the point of view of the Other as defined by the text or genre under discussion’.<sup>61</sup> Applied to apocalyptic and to Jesus, Radical Right groups like Christian Identity vie for sensationalist headlines with their violent, resistant readings against the grain. If the Jew is the persecuted faithful remnant of ancient biblical apocalyptic, suffering under the pervasive power of pagan *Gentiles*, then Christian Identity and the like paint the world with theories of *Jewish* world domination (Zionist Occupied Government) and conspiracies drawn from the fraudulent *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. They, the Gentile, white faithful, along with their white, Gentile Jesus become the purified remnant of the last days, standing guard against the mud race of Jews, Africans, Arabs and Asians.

From Reinhartz’s perspective, the problem with resistant readings is that they ‘cannot overcome or bypass the rhetoric of binary opposition... but rather repro-

59. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, pp. 54, 82, 99, 131.

60. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 54 (emphasis added).

61. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 81.

duce them in reverse'.<sup>62</sup> Her observation is correct. But the Radical Right's resistant readings of Jesus and apocalyptic can also have a positive affect on disengaged readers who might otherwise dismiss these ancient texts out of hand. When *resistant* readers find racism, sexism, violence and hatred at the core of biblical texts, disengaged readers are sometimes able to see for the first time that the same sorts of ethical problems arise from *compliant* readings. In the name of 'orthodoxy' and evangelical fervor, these readings also often vilify the 'Other' as Arab, Chinese, Roman Catholic or Russian.<sup>63</sup>

The final pairing of readings is the most interesting and challenging for contemporary Christians. Reinhartz defines a sympathetic reading as one in which the implied author is a 'colleague... a peer who struggles with similar issues in similar ways [as I do]',<sup>64</sup> but without being engaged 'over the issues that divide us'.<sup>65</sup> An engaged reading, on the other hand, is one that 'attempts to engage seriously and directly with the fundamental content of the Beloved Disciple's gift [or for us, the apocalypticist's gift] as well as with [one's]... own inability, or if you like, unwillingness, to accept it'.<sup>66</sup> For me, most scholarly readings of ancient Jewish apocalyptic and Jesus fail precisely at this point: We are not honest in dealing with our inability to accept the apocalypticist's 'gift'. Finding ourselves in a corner where we must deal with canonical apocalyptic texts that dismay or repel us, we invent ways to reject what we dislike in the name of some overarching methodological or hermeneutical consistency. For the scholar, disengagement with the text often begins to occur at the point where theory begins to dominate. Rather than straightforwardly saying, 'I don't like this apocalyptic Jesus because', or 'I can't accept this view of the world for the following reasons, but I can work with this', we cover up our own ethical misgivings with the biblical text through complex historical reconstructions and theoretical constructs. But an engaged reading of ancient apocalyptic writers and the Jesus tradition would entail, in Reinhartz's words, 'fac[ing] the challenge of opening up [our] own understanding[s] of the world to include... [them] without at the same time abdicating [our] right to judge the ethos, and the ethical criteria, that... [they] support'.<sup>67</sup>

Reinhartz's models of reading raise important questions regarding the kind of reading approach that is appropriate for scripture. Does the concept of scriptural authority require a particular kind of reading approach, or can a concept of scriptural authority function within a certain range of types, accommodating different reading strategies? Perhaps scriptural authority is a somewhat indeterminate concept, one which believers too often reduce – through binary thinking – to the model of an apocalyptic oracle that demands a forced choice between compliant

62. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 98.

63. E.g., Lindsey, *Countdown to Armageddon*, pp. 43–45, 67–68, 95–96; cf. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 13–31, 100–16.

64. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 130.

65. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 130.

66. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, 131.

67. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 162. However, Reinhartz recognizes that honest ethical judgment of canonical texts can present problems for communities of faith (p. 166).

reading (submissive to scriptural authority) or resistant reading (rejecting scriptural authority). Space does not permit an extended discussion of these questions. It is enough to note that the kinds of genres that seem to call for this forced choice – apocalypse and prophetic oracle – are not the only genres in scripture. Hence, it is fair to ask whether the presence of other genres in the Bible – wisdom, poetry, romance, historical narrative – may call for a rethinking of what kind(s) of reading approaches the Bible ‘wants’. If we let some of those other genres shape our conception of the kind of ‘book’ the Bible is, then we may also consider it appropriate to read biblical apocalyptic not submissively but in a sympathetic and engaged way.

So what would a sympathetic or ‘engaged’ reading of ancient apocalyptic look like? Would we know a befriended dualism if we saw one? Would Reinhartz count the work of Walter Wink,<sup>68</sup> Tina Pippin,<sup>69</sup> Stephen Moore<sup>70</sup> or Catharine Keller<sup>71</sup> as ‘engaged readings’ of Jesus and apocalyptic? Or do these readings of biblical texts merely reflect unsympathetic, idiosyncratic, ideological critiques without real ‘engagement’? It is not clear what Reinhartz would make of postmodern, ethically interested readings of Jesus and apocalyptic. However, from my point of view, insofar as these authors lead us to engage, critically and constructively, the determinate dualisms of apocalyptic and at the same time reveal those features of the apocalyptic texts that are indeterminate or give cause for questioning the determinate dualism of the apocalyptic vision, they can foster conversations and communities that move beyond the ethical binarisms of ‘my protestations of innocence’ and ‘your obvious guilt’.

Reinhartz’s metaphor of ‘befriending the Beloved Disciple’ complicates biblical hermeneutics in an ethically responsible manner and pushes beyond the traditional norms of reading approved by historical critical methods. But I believe that reading apocalyptic – or reading Jesus reading apocalyptic – is still more complex than her fourfold metaphor appears to presume. Reinhartz herself hints at this in her conclusion when she writes, ‘as real readers, even as real scholars, we float freely among these [four] perspectives and draw on two or more at once in the process of interpreting or explaining the texts to ourselves and to others’.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, she acknowledges that her own ‘particular identity and family history’ has molded her perception of Johannine dualisms.<sup>73</sup> And since she never fully engages the Johannine text on the level of *her own* ‘particular identity and family history’, there is still an air of academic objectivity to her argument. She reads the Johannine text the way she does because she has an adult *theory* to back up her reading, not because of any peculiar childhood memory or adolescent trauma. The same is even more obvious, of course, in historical Jesus research,

68. *The Powers that Be*.

69. *Apocalyptic Bodies*.

70. *God’s Beauty Parlor*.

71. *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

72. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 165.

73. *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, p. 166.

where ‘reading Jesus’ appears under the rhetorical guise of antiseptic, germ-free interpretation. If John Dominic Crossan or Marcus Borg have ever had apocalyptic nightmares where a giant, fire-breathing Jesus destroys the world, they wouldn’t get caught telling us about it. Even if it were to become the basis of a revolutionary new theory and book.

*An Apocabiographical Postscript*

I awoke on September 10, 2001, in a dark funk of depression. I am not a person given to wide mood swings, but a certain unquantifiable weight lay heavy on my shoulders that day. After a quick breakfast, I turned on my computer and pretended to start writing. In an ironic moment of bemused whimsy (or was it merely procrastination?), I typed into my favorite search engine something like ‘incredible weight of sadness’. I don’t remember the exact phrase. By the end of the day I had erased it from my computer and my memory. I don’t like my family finding my more bizarre search histories on my hard drive. So I typed something like ‘incredible weight of sadness’ and hit ‘enter’. Up popped part of a poem by John Donne, one I didn’t recognize. I was looking for a sign from God that life was worth living. For the moment, John Donne had done it. The next day was September 11, 2001. I heard about the planes on my way to Gold’s Gym to work out. The story was live on National Public Radio, but I just thought I was listening to the review of a new Tom Clancy novel. Then I walked into the gym and saw the TV images. Two monstrously huge towers collapsing into Manhattan dust. Dry, choking. Thousands dead. Is there a Jesus out there who can save us from the twos of ancient apocalyptic, science fiction, the Radical Right and the rubble of Ground Zero? Maybe one Jesus isn’t enough anymore. Canonical *and* otherwise. Pluriform *and* monochrome. Jesus! We are desperate. We need more than one of you.

I want to be an ethically responsible postmodern person. I seek to write about apocalyptic in a postmodern mode, one that keeps endings ‘open’, ‘indeterminate’, without losing sight of apocalyptic’s notion that actions matter or apocalyptic’s warning against complacency and its protest against dominant power. In our postmodern, post-September 11, postcolonial culture, I am looking for a hermeneutical third way, a fourth plane – a fifth for the third to wonder about and plan and weigh and find lurking behind the I AM-big pentameter loins a sonnet set free, escaped, alive.<sup>74</sup>

74. With apologies to Frank Kermode, this essay has no ‘tock’. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 51–52.