

# Introduction

## **THE APOCALYPSE IN HISTORY: THE PLACE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND LIFE**

On the day after the deaths of thousands of people in the World Trade Center in New York City, a British tabloid newspaper had a single caption to accompany its terrible picture: 'APOCALYPSE'. One word was considered sufficient to epitomize the destruction, the cataclysm and the sheer horror it inspired, and the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, otherwise so neglected and despised, provided a way of evaluating this awesome event. In the popular view, *Apocalypse is* about cataclysm, death and destruction, or, as another paper described the events of that day in September 2001, 'the end of the world'. It offers images that convey the magnitude and malignity of our experience, not only at a national, international and social level, but in individual lives as well.

At another time and in another place, in the north-east of Brazil in 1990, a group of campesinos were talking about their lives. One elderly man started speaking about the upcoming Brazilian elections and the campaigning going on in the state of Ceará. Without any prompting he described the candidates

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(particularly those on the right) as the representatives of the dragon of the Apocalypse, whose heads were manifested in corrupt practices, bribes and blandishments, whereas there was little but injustice for ordinary people and persecution by the large landowners of those who dared to stand up for a modicum of justice. It was a totally surprising, unaffected and spontaneous appropriation of the Apocalypse.

The original meaning of the word 'apocalypse', derived from the Greek *apokalypsis*, is in fact not the cataclysmic end of the world, but an 'unveiling', or 'revelation', a means whereby one gains insight into the present – for example, about the fallenness of a particular historical situation and the powers confronted there. It offers that alternative horizon which gives a different perspective. So, for example, John Howard Yoder envisions a new politics based on Rev 5 (Yoder 1972: 237), determined not by Caesar's rule, but by truth telling and love of the enemy. Seen from this perspective, the Apocalypse is not just for the community of the last days, but is applicable to every age, offering a way of seeing in our own history Eden and the Fall, Jerusalem and Babylon.

In a modern theological culture that both fears and eschews apocalyptic thinking, it may come as a surprise to find how influential, directly or indirectly, the Apocalypse has been on Western art, literature and theology. Through the centuries it has been read in a great variety of ways (Froom 1946–54; Elliott 1851; Wainwright 1993; Allo 1921; W. Bousset 1896; Charles 1910; Maier 1981). This commentary aims to give a representative sampling of different types of readings down the centuries. This introductory chapter includes the following: (1) an introduction to the Apocalypse which sets it in the context of Jewish and early Christian literature, especially apocalypses and visionary literature; (2) a classification of the main types of interpretation of the book that have emerged over the centuries; (3) the point of view and special emphases of this commentary; (4) a survey of some of the most influential interpreters and interpretations, including consideration of how the book has been represented in music, liturgy and art.

### 1 The Apocalypse in the Context of Jewish and Early Christian Literature

#### *The Apocalypse and other apocalypses*

The Apocalypse is a different sort of text in more ways than one. Few will need convincing that it differs substantially in form and content from most other parts of the New Testament. As the unique New Testament example of

the genre apocalypse, it is profoundly indebted to Jewish apocalyptic ideas (Rowland 1982). Its angelology, heavenly voices and preoccupation with the hidden are precisely what we find in Jewish apocalypses such as Daniel, 4 Ezra (= 2 Esdras 3–14),<sup>1</sup> *1 Enoch* and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (Charlesworth 1983; J. J. Collins 1979 and 1984). It reflects a distinctive use of prophecy parallel to, but in significant respects different from, other apocalyptic texts (Bauckham 1993a). As many commentators down the centuries have pointed out, the crucial chapter 5 shows the mutation of apocalyptic thinking as the result of the gospel.

While the Apocalypse has much in common with other apocalypses, it exhibits important differences, as a comparison with Daniel and 2 Esdras illustrates. The Book of Daniel has influenced John's vision from almost the first verse to the last: for example, the vision of 'one like the Son of Man' in chapter 1, the vision of the beast in chapter 13, and the description of the book as 'what is to take place after this' (Rev 1:19). Nevertheless, the differences are marked. Daniel is pseudonymous and was probably written in the second century BCE at the height of the crisis which threatened Jerusalem and its temple under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV. John's apocalypse does not claim authority through an apostle but on the basis of a prophetic call (1:9–20), although the author has the same name as the son of Zebedee, and the book was from a very early stage linked with the apostle (Justin, *Apol.* 28; *Dial.* 81). Irenaeus, an early witness to the book, claims it was written by the apostle John during the last years of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, who ruled CE 81–96 (*AH* v.30.3; i.26.3; cf. Eusebius *HE* ii.18; iv.8). This date still finds widespread acceptance (A. Y. Collins 1984: 54–83; L. Thompson 1990: 13–17; Roloff 1993: 16–19), although some assign a date prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in CE 70 (Rowland 1982: 403) or assume two editions reflecting both dates (Aune 1997: lvi–lxx).

The Apocalypse also differs from Daniel in the form of its visions (a point noted by Luther in his Preface to the New Testament of 1530). Daniel's format of dream-vision followed by interpretation by an accompanying angel (e.g. Dan 7:15: 'one of those who stood by made known to me the interpretation of these things') is almost completely lacking in the Apocalypse. Rev 17, where one of the angels of the seven bowls accompanies John and explains the vision of Babylon, offers a solitary exception. The closest parallels are between Dan 7:9–14 and the vision of the heavenly court in Rev 4–5 – probably because both are indebted to Ezek 1 – and between the beasts in Dan 7:1–8 and Rev 13.

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish apocalypse 4 Ezra is printed in Christian Bibles as chs 3–14 of 2 Esdras, which has Christian additions in chs 1–2 and 15–16. In subsequent citations both the Jewish and the Christian parts of this text will be referred to as 2 Esdras.

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A significant part of the book of Daniel concerns the royal court in Babylon. Young Jews are presented as positively encouraged by the foreign king and his entourage and as having to resist being co-opted into the culture of Babylon (Dan 1). The stories of the fiery furnace and the lions' den (Dan 3 and 6) are a reminder of the terrible consequences for those who refuse to conform. Even so, there is admiration for the Jews on the part of the king, and Nebuchadnezzar is depicted with a degree of sympathy. The situation is very different in the Apocalypse, which reflects a more suspicious and antagonistic attitude to the dominant power (Bauckham 1993b). The book offers a vigorous rejection of the power of empire and evinces satisfaction at the ultimate triumph of God's righteousness (14:11; 19:3). There is little sign of accommodation with Babylon (Rome). At the appropriate moment those within her have to 'come out of her' (Rev 18:4); meanwhile what is suggested is resistance. Indeed, accommodation may be a sign of apostasy (2:20).

The Apocalypse's imagery and its hope for messianic vindication and defeat of Rome parallels in many ways 2 Esdras (Stone 1990). The message of this late first-century Jewish text is that all things should be viewed in light of the *eschaton* ('the end-time'), although eschatological interests are to some extent eclipsed by another concern: the pervasiveness of evil. The book wrestles with the apparently merciless character of the divine purposes and with human frailty in the face of them. While it lacks the elaborate symbolism of the Apocalypse, there are several specific parallels. Both 2 Esdras and Revelation have separate visions that reflect two parts of Dan 7: the beasts emerging from the sea (2 Esdras 11–12; Rev 13) and the 'messianic' vision of Dan 7:13–14 (2 Esdras 13; Rev 1:13–17). Like the messiah in 2 Esdras 13, the Lamb stands on Mount Zion (Rev 14:1). In both texts there is a two-stage eschatology, a messianic reign followed by a new age. This twofold scheme, found in 2 Esdras 7:28–32; 5:45, possibly for the first time in such an explicit form, is evidence in a Jewish apocalypse of hope for a new age that is transcendent and beyond history. So also in the Apocalypse the vision of the new heaven and new earth (21–2) is preceded by the millennial messianic reign (20:4–6).

#### *Apocalyptic themes in early Christian literature*

Although it is the only work of its genre in the New Testament, the Apocalypse reflects an early Christian tradition of apocalyptic interpretation rooted in Jewish apocalyptic tradition (which was itself to continue into the kabbalistic tradition of Judaism). One feature of this tradition, its interest in eschatology (teaching about the end-time), has dominated popular perceptions of the

Apocalypse and featured in much of its interpretation and influence down the centuries. Passages such as Matt 24–5 par.; 1 Thess 4:13–5:11; 2 Thess 2:3–12; Rom 8:18–30; and 1 Cor 15:20–5 remind us of the importance of eschatological expectation among early Christians. Such hopes were not merely future but were in some sense anticipated in the common life and in what Christians saw happening in the world around them. This ‘realized’ dimension is signalled in the New Testament itself, where 1 John 2:18 is the earliest explicit example of the tradition of the Antichrist, the polar opposite of Christ expected in the last days – here applied to a catastrophic split in the life of the eschatological community, a situation the author could not comprehend except as a sign of the last days.

In Hebrews and Ephesians apocalyptic categories are utilized to express convictions about Christ’s exaltation and its consequences. The cosmology and the notion of revelation found in apocalypses and mystical literature provides a convenient starting place for reflection on the revelation inaugurated by the exaltation of Christ. The glory of the world above that is to be manifested in the future has now become a present possession for those who acknowledge that the Messiah has come and has already made available the heavenly gifts of the messianic age.<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel of John is frequently regarded as an example of the type of Christianity which firmly rejected apocalyptic, but the main thrust of its message has a remarkable affinity with apocalyptic thinking. John Ashton rightly calls the gospel ‘an apocalypse in reverse’ (Ashton 1991: 371; cf. Kovacs 1995). As in the Apocalypse, the goal is knowledge of the heavenly mysteries: in particular, the mysteries of God’s person. Much of what the Fourth Gospel says relates to this theme, though here the quest for the highest wisdom of all, the knowledge of God, comes not through visions and revelations but through the Word become flesh, Jesus of Nazareth (Rowland 1996: 1–23). The heavenly mysteries are to be sought not in heaven but in Jesus, the one who has seen the Father and makes the Father known (cf. John 14:9).

### *The Apocalypse and visionary literature*

The Apocalypse is also part of a broader visionary tradition evident not only in apocalypses but also in prophets such as Ezekiel and in other Jewish and

<sup>2</sup> The contrast between ‘above’ and ‘below’ which is so typical of apocalyptic texts is well captured in the vision of the Woman Clothed with the Sun in the Trier Apocalypse, where there is a contrast between the extraordinary sign on in heaven while on earth soldiers are coming towards, and threatening, John the seer (Van der Meer 1978: 97 below 140).

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early Christian texts. The christophany at its opening, the visions of heaven, the dirge over Babylon, the war against Gog and Magog, and the vision of the New Jerusalem – all exhibit the influence of the written forms of ancient prophecies on the more recent prophetic imagination of John of Patmos. The contribution of the first chapter of Ezekiel, the vision of the *merkabah* or heavenly throne of God, to the visionary vocabulary of John is evident in two crucial passages (Rev 1:13–20 and ch. 4), as well as in the references to thrones divine and demonic that form a *leitmotiv* throughout the book. The Dead Sea Scrolls found in Cave 4 demonstrate the importance of this *merkabah* tradition: for example, the fragment 4Q405 is dependent on Ezekiel and Isaiah, and was probably influenced by the same visionary tradition to which John belongs. Another example of this tradition, closely related in many respects, is the *Apocalypse of Enoch* (= *1 Enoch*, a work much emphasized in the Ethiopian Church; see Cowley 1983), many fragments of which were discovered in Cave 4 (Nickelsburg 2001). The heavenly ascent and vision of God in *1 Enoch* 14 displays many parallels with Rev 4, as does the similar vision in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 18.

Many strands of the New Testament refer to visions and revelations, including the accounts of Jesus' baptism and the conversion of Paul (Mark 1:9–11; 9:2–3; Gal 1:12, 16; Luke 10:16; Acts 9; 10:11–16; and 2 Cor 12:2–4; Rowland 1982: 358–402; Lane Fox 1986: 375–418). In the first century CE Philo used the allegorical interpretation of Scripture to foster the ascent of the soul to the divine (Goodenough 1935). Similarly, in many Jewish and early Christian texts a concern to ascertain the deeper meaning of Scripture is linked with the language of vision (Fishbane 1985 and Boyarin 1994). The 'oracular', enigmatic words of prophetic and apocalyptic texts are susceptible to new interpretation as hermeneuts seek to 'divine' their meaning. Paul's letters testify to the conviction that the Scriptures, the fountain-head and embodiment of tradition and the basis of a community's identity, are now read in light of the new experience of the Spirit (Gal 3:2–4). The meaning of the Scriptures can be fully understood only with that Spirit-inspired intuition that flows from acceptance of the messiah (2 Cor 3:1–18). What is required is revelatory insight which will enable the enlightened reader to pierce beyond the letter of the text to discern its inner meaning. This is similar to the way the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran, 'to whom God made known all the mysteries of his servants the prophets' (*1QpHab* 7.1), opened up the enigmatic prophetic oracles with his mystical insight. For Paul a mystery of ultimate importance had been revealed in Christ, and it is subsequently amplified by other divine mysteries (cf. 2 Cor 12:2–4). Paul's letters are an example of how the spirit of mystery and revelation recurs in New Testament theology (Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7; 15:51; Bockmuehl 1990; Becker 1980).

## 2 Differing Patterns in the Reception of the Apocalypse: A Summary

A striking example of the great diversity in the reception history of the Apocalypse is the contrast of the interpretations of the seventeenth-century independent Baptist Hanserd Knowlys and his contemporary Anne Wentworth. Knowlys follows conventional Protestant exegesis of his time, interpreting the book as an eschatological scenario and a critique of the Roman Catholic Church (Knowlys, *Exposition* 169 in Newport 2000: 31). Wentworth, a Baptist who had been ejected from her home by her abusive husband, sees in the book the promise of a great Day of Judgment when her husband and his co-persecutors will be judged. She uses the images of Jerusalem/Zion and Babylon (Rev 17–18 and 21–2) to interpret her own dire situation: ‘the word of the Lord came unto me, and said: Zion and Babylon they did fight it out, And Zion did whole Babylon rout: And wounded Babylon very deep, That Zion might rejoyce and no more weep’ (Hobby 1988: 50; for further discussion, see below, 189). Wentworth finds Babylon in a society based on patriarchy in which a woman who rebels against harsh treatment finds herself socially destitute. What is most striking is the fact that not only are the interpreters contemporaries, but there is every likelihood that the Knowlys mentioned in Wentworth’s text as one of her persecutors is none other than the interpreter of the Apocalypse, who used the book as religious sanction for his anti-catholic sentiments.

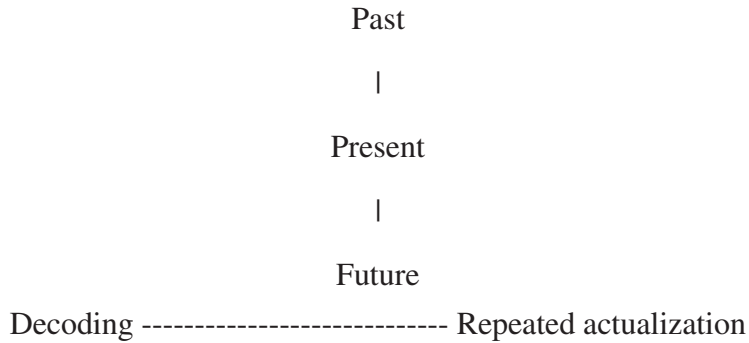
This coincidental connection highlights the variety in approaches to the Apocalypse. Both interpreters use the image of Babylon, but there the similarity ends. For Knowlys the biblical text is a source to be expounded and interpreted. His interest is detailed textual exposition. To Wentworth, on the other hand, the Apocalypse is a text that empowers and provides imagery for her own visions. She is emboldened to speak out because of the prophetic gift bestowed on her, just as was John on Patmos. Her interpretation is an explicit ‘actualization’, a reading in relationship to new circumstances (Houlden 1995) which uses the apocalyptic images to address the specific circumstances in which she found herself.

All this is a reminder that the Apocalypse, no less than the Bible as a whole, hardly offers an unambiguous message. William Blake’s witty aphorism ‘Both read the Bible day and night/But thou readst black where I read white’ (*The Everlasting Gospel*, notebook section, lines 13–14) is a salutary reminder to us as we embark on a study of the reception history of the Apocalypse, which has served many different agendas, those of revolutionaries and radicals as well as those of quietists and supporters of the status quo. In what follows an overview is offered of the main types of interpretation.

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At the risk of oversimplification, it is possible to plot the differing interpretations of the Apocalypse along two axes. One is chronological and includes the various ways in which the images are linked with past, present and future persons and events. The other plots interpretations according to the degree to which they exemplify decoding, on the one hand, or actualization, on the other (see fig.1).



Decoding involves presenting the meaning of the text in another, less allusive form, showing what the text *really* means, with great attention to the details. 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, having more than one meaning (Wheelwright 1962: 92; Ricoeur 1969: 15 in Perrin 1976: 28–30).

The Apocalypse only occasionally prompts the reader to ‘decode’ the meaning of the apocalyptic mysteries (17:9; cf. 1:20 and 4:3). In this respect it is different from its Hebrew Bible counterpart, the book of Daniel, which is replete with detailed elucidation of its visions. None the less, 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. An image is seen to have one particular meaning, and the interpreter assumes that if the code is understood in its entirety, the whole Apocalypse can be rendered in another form, and its inner meaning laid bare. Meaning is confined as the details of images and actions are fixed on some historical personage or event. For example, the Spiritual Franciscans saw Saint Francis as the angel with the living seal of Rev 7:2, and Hal Lindsey sees in Rev 9 a description of an all-out attack of ballistic missiles on the cities of the world (1970: 87–102). Joseph Mede (1632) saw the seven seals as providing the key to the exact sequence of

ages in the divine plan for history, while J. G. Eichhorn, a pioneer of historical criticism, interpreted the Apocalypse as a cryptic description of the history of John's day – for example, decoding the imagery of Rev 9:13–15 as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in CE 70.

There is a peculiar form of 'decoding' in which individuals 'act out' details of the text, in effect decoding the text once and for all in that person. For example, Joanna Southcott's understanding of her prophetic vocation was determined by the narrative of Rev 12, as she regarded herself as the incarnation of the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Hopkins 1982; Brown 2002). Similarly, the leaders of the Münster commonwealth in 1534 saw themselves as the two witnesses in Rev 11.

Actualizing interpretations take two forms. In one form the imagery of the Apocalypse is juxtaposed with the interpreter's own circumstances, whether personal or social, so as to allow the images to inform understanding of contemporary persons and events and to serve as a guide for action. Such interpretation has deep roots in the Christian tradition, going back at least to the time of Tyconius and Augustine (Fredriksen, in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 20–37; Dulaey 1986). In contrast with 'decoding', it preserves the integrity of the textual pole and does not allow the image or passage from the Apocalypse to be identified solely with one particular historical personage or circumstance. The text is not prevented from being actualized in different ways over and over again. An example is understanding the book's images as an allegory of the struggles of the individual soul, in which the Apocalypse serves as a model of the progression from despair and darkness to the brilliance of the celestial city. This pattern lies behind two of the great literary texts that describe a 'spiritual journey': Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Both are deeply indebted to the Apocalypse, for their narrative form as well as for particular images (Herzman in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 398–411).

Secondly, there is the appropriation by visionaries,<sup>3</sup> 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 of Bingen, many details of John's text reappear. Others, such as William Blake, exhibit a less direct relationship to the letter of the text. In his works the images and symbols of the Apocalypse appear in a different guise,

<sup>3</sup> Note the fourfold character of vision set out by Richard of St Victor (helpfully set out by Dronke 1984: 146): physical sight which contains no hidden significance; a mode of sight such as when Moses beheld the burning bush; seeing through visible things to the invisible; and, finally, contemplation of the celestial without the mediation of any visible figures. On Hildegard's description of the character of her visionary experience, see Dronke 1984: 168–9.

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woven into the tapestry of Blake's own visionary world and incorporated into his idiosyncratic mythopoiesis.

Approaches to the Apocalypse can also be plotted on a chronological axis, according to whether they emphasize the past, present or future. In the Apocalypse itself, past, present and future are interrelated: eschatological visions (Rev 6–22) grow out of the past (Rev 5) and have an import for life in the present (Rev 2–3). The same is true in many interpretations – for example, in those of Joachim of Fiore and Joseph Mede. None the less, there are different emphases. Some interpret the Apocalypse mainly as a book about the past. 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. This approach is typical of historical-critical interpretation since the Enlightenment, which has antecedents in the interpretations of Grotius and other sixteenth-century interpreters. Roman Catholic theologians such as Luís de Alcázar responded to Protestant actualizing interpretations with an approach called 'preterism', which sees most of the Apocalypse as a description of the past of the Church.

Interpretations that emphasize the meaning of the Apocalypse for the present time include the two types of actualization just described. An emphasis on the present also characterizes some 'decoding', interpretations: for example, the references to contemporary controversies in the notes in the *Geneva Bible* ('decoding' in that it limits the reference of the Apocalypse to only one set of events). In the other, 'actualizing', interpretations, the book is seen as applicable to every age. It offers that alternative horizon, functioning as a lens through which one can see one's own situation afresh (Yoder in Pipkin 1989: 69–76; Yoder 1972: 237). So, for example, during the political crisis of the USA torn apart by the Vietnam War, William Stringfellow (1977) uses the Apocalypse's stark contrasts between Jerusalem and Babylon as an interpretative key to understand present reality.

Other interpretations are called 'futurist' because they see the book primarily as a prophecy of the events of the end-time. For example, up to the end of the second century, Rev 20–2 had wide influence among those called chiliasmists or millennialists (after the Greek and Latin words for 1,000, respectively), who looked for God's thousand-year kingdom to be established on earth. The book's meaning for the future was also emphasized by sixteenth-century Roman Catholic theologians such as Cornelius of Lapide and Francisco Ribera, in another response to Protestant readings. In some forms of twentieth- and twenty-first-century North American eschatological expectation, the Apocalypse is seen to offer an elaborate blueprint for the events of the end-time. Varieties of this kind of interpretation are named after their various views about the millennium, the thousand-year messianic reign (see below, chapter on

Rev 20). These include pre-millennialism, which holds that the second coming of Christ will take place before the millennium, and post-millennialism, which teaches that Christ's appearance will take place only at its end. (Amillennialism involves the rejection of a literal future messianic reign on earth, a view often associated with the name of Augustine, which takes various forms.)

Finally, interpretations differ in whether they are responses to individual passages or images (for example, artistic portrayals of the Lamb or the Whore of Babylon or uses of individual images by poets) or interpretations of the book as a whole. Among the latter, some, like Alexander the Minorite in the mid-thirteenth century, read the Apocalypse as a sequential account of human history (Lerner in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 60). Others understand parts of the book (particularly the sequences of seals, trumpets and bowls) as recapitulations or repetitions. From Victorinus and Tyconius onwards it has been widely assumed that certain passages should be seen as running concurrently. Joseph Mede, for example, regarded the seals and the trumpets as so closely related in their subject matter that they must refer to events taking place at the same time.

### 3 Point of View: Distinctive Emphases of this Commentary

While this volume aims to give a representative sampling of different types of interpretation of the Apocalypse, allowing different interpreters to speak for themselves without being subjected to editorial judgement, it has a distinctive point of view. In a time when the most prominent interpretations of the book emphasize its meaning for the past (historical criticism) or the future (prognostications of the *eschaton*), we aim to round out the picture by calling attention to interpreters who seek to articulate the book's meaning for the present. Thus, alongside well-known examples of decoding interpretations, we present less known interpreters (church fathers, prophets and poets) who respond to the visionary character of the Apocalypse through actualizing interpretations.

The contrasting types of interpretation outlined in section 2 above presuppose quite different understandings of the nature of exegesis, of which we shall need to be aware as we proceed (Boxall 2002). No book in the Bible raises the question of the nature of the exegetical task more acutely than the Apocalypse. The conventional assumption that a detailed, verse-by-verse explanation of a biblical text is what is required and expected already weights the answer in a particular direction. If one compares such detailed expositions of the text with the poetic and imaginative appropriations of it, there may at first sight seem to be no contest. After all, it is Mede (and after him the editors of the *Scofield*

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*Reference Bible* and modern historical scholars) who attends carefully to the detail of the text and, by comparisons within the Apocalypse and to other prophetic texts of the Bible, offers some kind of overall explanation. The visionaries, poets and artists represent an altogether more oblique relationship with the text, hardly pausing to offer a justification for their interpretations. The biblical text is a springboard for other revelations, or a creative frame of reference for understanding their world. If we view exegesis as the close reading of the text, then this cannot be counted as exegesis. But the question is whether the Apocalypse is a text to be interpreted and deciphered or a text to be used and actualized.

Since the Enlightenment, there has been a growing interest in the location of the Apocalypse within the ancient world, which has led to intensive investigation of parallels between the book and other sources now extant from antiquity (see e.g. Aune 1997, 1998a and b; Hemer 1986). This has enabled us to imagine something of what life may have been like for those who converted to the way of life of a minority group with Jewish affinities. Historical scholarship has also helped articulate a critical perspective on interpretations that apply the Apocalypse in too facile a way to the contemporary world. Nevertheless, it is good to remember that in the Apocalypse references to ancient persons and situations are refracted through the visionary imagination.

Later visionaries who make use of the Apocalypse are attuned to something important in the text. Given the many references to visions in early Christian texts, it would be an excessively suspicious person who would deny that authentic visions lie behind some or all of these literary records. This is especially true of the Apocalypse itself. It is likely that actual visions, rather than literary artifice alone, have prompted the words we now read. When John the visionary on Patmos speaks of being 'in the spirit on the Lord's day' (Rev 1:10), he beckons interpreters to consider what is written in a way different from how they might consider the work of a mere collector of traditional material, requiring of them different interpretative techniques (Rowland 1998). Even if conjectures may be made about the significance of the time (the Lord's day) and the place (possibly, though not certainly, in exile) of the visions, it is impossible to know precisely what led to John's dramatic meeting with the heavenly 'one like the Son of Man' (1:13).

There may be signs of the seer's later reflection on his visions in verses like 17:9. Nevertheless, the explanation in such verses has the effect of complicating, rather than explaining, the detail of the visions. Perhaps the visions have been rearranged according to a certain 'narrative' sequence, starting with disaster and ending up with divine triumph (though there remain the abrupt changes and interruptions that have taxed interpreters down the centuries; see Lowth 1753). We should be careful not to assume, however, that order rather

than chaos suggests later reflection. Even a brief acquaintance with the world of dreams indicates that sequence, and even certain moments when the dreamer 'stands back' from the dream, can be part of a visionary experience.

To characterize the pre-modern interpretations of the Apocalypse as *eisege-sis* ('reading into the text') and compare them unfavourably with the exegesis ('reading out of the text') of modern scholars creates too sharp a divide (so Newport 2000: 21–3). An approach to visionary texts like Ezekiel 1, Isaiah 6 or the Apocalypse that stimulates a later reader to 'see again' what the biblical prophet saw in his vision might in fact offer an understanding of the text that is more faithful to the text than the results of patient historical exposition. Of course, such a use of the prophetic or visionary text is not without its difficulties and dangers (for further discussion, see below, 'A Hermeneutical Postscript'). The imagery opens the door to exegetical possibilities, whether via intertextual links within the book itself or those within the canon as a whole. This ambiguity irritates those who seek from Holy Scripture a clear message. As Tyndale recognized: 'The Apocalypse or Revelations of John are allegories whose literal sense is hard to find in many places' (2000: 157).

If what we have in this text is the written account of a vision or visions which came to John, even at different times, it becomes very difficult to describe any intention of the author, other than at most the ordering of the visions and their dissemination. John did not set out to write a literary work in an apocalyptic genre. Whatever the origin of the book's various components may have been, their function and juxtaposition are not the product of the visionary's conscious intention. And if the focus of interpretation is shifted away from the intention of the author, then reception history turns out to have particular importance; for then John's place is similar to that of the one who receives his visionary text. Both visionary and reader are in the position of interpreters. So, the 'afterlife' of the text, its reception by those who found in this visionary text an inspiration for their own visions or who have pored over it, seeking to use their interpretative skills to unlock its mysteries, is an integral part of its exegesis, as important as what the recipient of the vision and the original hearers may have understood it to mean.

An exposition of the Apocalypse that concentrates exclusively on the question 'What did this verse mean?' may miss the distinctive insight offered by later visionaries, who are inspired by the text to new imaginative insights or prophetic pronouncements. This was something recognized in debates about prophecy and apocalypse at the end of the eighteenth century. Herder, Hölderlin and Coleridge for example, sought to rekindle in their own writing the spirit of the Apocalypse (Shaffer 1972; Burdon 1997: 86–7, 146–52). Whether in Hölderlin's attempt to link his own work as a poet to the mystical insight of the seer of Patmos, Herder's recognition that reading the book is a

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means of being open to the converting power of Christ, or Coleridge's reaction against the historicism of Eichhorn, we find the same grasp of the dream-like quality of this text, and the same search for appropriate ways of engaging with it. Eichhorn had viewed the book's symbols as a cloak for early Christian history, concerned with the Jewish revolt of CE 66–70 and the fall of Jerusalem. Coleridge responds, albeit in a comment on Ezekiel, raising his voice in favour of the poetry of prophecy and vision:

It perplexes me to understand, how a Man of Eichhorn's Sense, Learning and Acquaintance with psychology could form, or attach belief to, so cold-blooded an hypothesis. That in Ezekiel's [*sic*] Visions, Ideas or Spiritual Entities are presented in visual Symbols, I never doubted; but as little can I doubt, that such Symbols did present themselves to Ezekiel in Visions – and by a Law closely connected with, if not contained in, that by which sensations are organized into Images and mental sounds in our ordinary sleep. (Coleridge, *Marginalia* ii.410 in Burdon 1997: 146; Shaffer 1972: 89)

To focus exclusively either on the detailed analyses of the text of the Apocalypse or on poetic and prophetic actualizations of it would be to ignore important parts of the book's reception history. In the specific commentary which follows, this will be recognized, and the tension among different interpretations maintained.

## 4 The Reception of the Apocalypse: Survey of Important Interpretations and of Artistic Representations

### *The early Christian appropriation (Helms 1991 and Daley 1991)*

An important part of the reception history of the Apocalypse is its textual history (Aune 1997: cxxxvi–clx; Hoskier 1929; Schmid 1955–6). Much work in this area has been devoted to the search for the original text, a task greatly complicated by the book's peculiar Greek, which is much influenced by Hebrew (Mussies 1971). Later writers tried to deal with difficulties by correcting John's syntax and smoothing out the style. The most famous textual variant, known as early as the end of the second century CE (through Irenaeus), occurs in 13:18, where some early versions read 616 instead of 666. Other significant textual variants include 1:5, where the Authorized Version reads 'and washed us from our sins in his own blood', while most modern translations follow the earliest manuscripts and translate 'freed us from our sins by his blood' (so NRSV). This

requires only a small change in the Greek, but leads to a significant difference in understanding of the death of Christ.

Despite the reputation of the Apocalypse as a book designed for martyrs, evidence of its direct influence on the early martyrologies is less than might be expected (Musurillo 1972). The popularity of apocalyptic ideas among groups such as the second-century prophetic movement called Montanism led to a growing suspicion of the book. Apocalypticism, with its urgent eschatological expectation and its critique of worldly power, was a thorn in the flesh of the wielders of ecclesiastical power in the centuries that followed, not least because it was a central component of Christian experience and self-definition from the very start (McGinn 1992). Questions about the book's authorship are not confined to the modern period but go back to the early centuries of the Church, when anti-Montanist polemic led writers like Dionysius of Alexandria to question its apostolic origin. Dionysius even suggested, based on its this-worldly eschatology, that it might have been written by the heretic Cerinthus. In the East the book was not read in the Divine Service, as is still the case in Eastern Orthodoxy (see Averky 1985: 37). Such negative responses to the book are evident in later discussions as well. Luther and Zwingli both questioned the book's apostolic origin (Backus 1998 and 2000; cf. a modern discussion in Massyngberde-Ford 1975). In our own time doubts about the traditional view that the Apocalypse has the same author as the Johannine Gospel are widespread, with the consensus being that it was written not by the apostle John but by an unknown prophet named John who lived in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

There is, however, evidence of a more positive appropriation of the book by patristic authors. In the struggle with Gnosticism, the Apocalypse's insistence on the materiality of the resurrection and this-worldly eschatology are echoed in Justin (*Dial.* 80), Irenaeus (*AH* v.26.1–36.3) and Hippolytus (*Daniel* 4.23.1–6; Cerrato 2002), all of whom had a chiliastic expectation of the coming of a kingdom of earthly bliss, as described in Rev 20. This view was shared by Victorinus of Poetovio, whose commentary on the Apocalypse, written around the year 260 (Dulaey 1993; Victorinus 1997; Matter in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 38–40), is the earliest we have (an earlier commentary by Hippolytus has been lost). Victorinus' work was preserved thanks to Jerome, who issued a revised edition of it in 398, in which the chiliastic elements were removed. Variant versions of the commentary have come down to us, some with and some without Jerome's changes (this is reflected in the varying modern editions and translations, to which reference will be made in the bibliographical citations as Victorinus 1916 and 1997, and ANF vii).

A very different interpretation of the Apocalypse was promoted by Tyconius (d.c. 400) and then by Augustine, having been anticipated in part by

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Origen in the third century. A pioneering exegete, Origen was the first to explicitly reject the chiliastic interpretation of the Apocalypse. He emphasizes the book's meaning for the present, focusing especially on what it teaches about Christ and about the spiritual life of the believer. Since the key event of redemption has already happened in Christ's incarnation and passion, Christians stand in the last times. What remains is a gradual process of ascent and return to God through an indefinite number of aeons, which is determined by the moral progress of the creature, not by the fall of this or that kingdom (in Monaci 1978: 148–9; cf. Anselmetto 1980; Mazzucco 1980). Tyconius, too, stressed the contemporary more than the eschatological import of the visions (Fredriksen in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 24–9; Dulaey 1986), as he used the book to interpret the struggles between his persecuted, minority church (the Donatists) and the 'great church'. Although Tyconius' commentary on the Apocalypse is no longer extant, its pervasive influence is evidenced by the many citations in authors such as Bede and Beatus of Liébana (both eighth century; Steinhauser 1987). His ethical/ecclesial reading is combined with a reverent agnosticism about the exact time of the last days. Tyconius claims that a biblical text has a dual perspective, as is appropriate for a Bible with two testaments.<sup>4</sup> So he writes about Rev 21:4:

This Jerusalem he says is the church, which he [John] sums up (*recapitulat*) from the passion of Christ up to the day in which it rises again and will be crowned unvanquished in glory with Christ. He mixes together two times, now present, now future, and it is more fully declared with how much glory [the church] is taken up by Christ and separated from all attacks of evil. (Quoted in Beatus, *Comm.* 12.2.1)

His hermeneutics of the Apocalypse and his general biblical hermeneutics were closely intertwined. The seven interpretative rules outlined in his *Book of Rules* allow the possibility of multiple reference (Babcock 1989); for example, a reference to Christ may include his 'Body' the Church (see 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 5:23) or vice versa. So, by the principle he calls 'the head and the body', the beast of Rev 13 has a double aspect. It symbolizes the devil but also his 'members', some of whom are in the Church: 'In the beast there are many members: sometimes devils, sometimes wicked priests, sometimes wicked people, sometimes false "religious" (*religiosos*)' (Beatus, *Preface* 5.17). The particular can suggest a general principle. Numbers may have a deeper symbolic significance, and sequential narratives may actually offer repetitions of the

<sup>4</sup> This kind of dialectic is akin to the apocalyptic hermeneutics of Melchior Hoffmann in the sixteenth century; see Deppermann 1987: 242–3 and below, 21.

same event. Such interpretative rules parallel in several key respects *mutatis mutandis* what one finds in the emerging rabbinic rules (*middoth*) attributed to Hillel and Ishmael (Fishbane 1985).

For Tyconius the biblical text is a tool that facilitates moral and spiritual discernment. His hermeneutical method allows him to apply even obviously eschatological passages to the present life of the Church. Present and future are always mingled. Seeing the world as divided into two opposed societies, represented by the Whore of Babylon (Rev 17) and the New Jerusalem (Rev 21), he finds references to them throughout Scripture. The struggle between the demonic and the divine is evident in both the individual and society. Like many other interpreters, Tyconius viewed the final days of the world as a time of tribulation and persecution. It would be similar to what the Donatists were experiencing in Africa in his own days, which prefigured the end. When the time of the Antichrist's revelation finally comes, his true adherents will be revealed. The three and a half days of Rev 11:9 refer to the 350 years that must elapse between Christ and the revelation of the Antichrist (Beatus, *Preface* 5.6).

Tyconius interprets the millennial kingdom of Rev 20 as referring to the time of the Church between the two advents of Christ. Thus Satan has already been bound, and the saints are already enthroned with Christ. All the blessings are already available in the Church (Daley 1991: 127–30). Augustine, who at first followed a millennialist reading, in later years was influenced by Tyconius, for example in his understanding of Rev 20 (Fredriksen in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 29–35). Through him the Tyconian interpretation influenced many later interpreters. For Augustine the Apocalypse is a source of insight into the present life of the Christian and also the *eschaton* (for further discussion, see below on Rev 20 and 21); but he does not interpret it as giving a blueprint for church history or world history, or as a means of calculating the time of the end. His approach to empire in *The City of God*, where he contrasts the 'city of God' with the 'city of the world' (Van Oort 1991), has much in common with the dualistic and suspicious attitude evident in earlier Christian apocalyptic interpretation.

### *The Joachite revolution*

The Tyconian-Augustinian approach to the Apocalypse dominated interpretation for centuries (Wainwright 1993: 36–44). But the later Middle Ages saw the emergence of another influential reading, by the monastic reformer Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202). Joachim saw the Apocalypse as a hermeneutical key to both the entire Scriptures and the whole of history (Daniel in Emmerson and

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McGinn 1992; cf. Lee, Reeves and Silano 1989; McGinn 2000: 74–109). He broke decisively with the Augustinian tradition in two ways. First, he opened up new possibilities for readers of the Apocalypse to discern their place in God's saving purposes as set out in Scripture, and, secondly, he saw human history the arena of the fulfilment of God's eschatological purposes. His interpretation reflected an optimistic view of what was happening in his own time and emboldened later groups and individuals to see themselves as participants in the imminent *eschaton*.

There are several threads which run through Joachim's complex hermeneutic. The Old and New Testaments are closely related: everything which happened in the former has its actuality in its own time but is also a sign pointing to a future happening in the new dispensation, which is (or will be) a fuller disclosure of God's purpose for humanity. The book of history is sealed with seven seals and cannot be opened until the Lion of the tribe of Judah opens it (Rev 5). God's purpose remains hidden throughout the seven periods of Old Testament history and can be understood only after the Incarnation ushers in the new age. One part of Scripture serves as a model for interpreting the whole (a principle Joachim calls *concordia*, or 'agreement'). He divides the Apocalypse into eight parts: 1:1–3:22 (letters to the seven churches); 4:1–8:1 (the opening of the seals); 8:2–11:18 (the trumpet blasts); 11:19–14:20 (the two beasts); 15:1–16:17 (the seven bowls); 16:18–19:21 (the destruction of the Babylon); 20:1–10 (the millennium) and 20:11–22:21 (the New Jerusalem). These correspond to the seven periods of the Church, followed by eternity. The seven seals, for example, have two interpretations, one relating to the seven ages of Israel and the other to the periods of the Church.

To Joachim the numbers two, three and seven have apocalyptic significance, and in the various sequences of seven, the sixth assumes great importance. This preoccupation with the penultimate period is characteristic of exegesis in the Joachite tradition: it is the period of the Antichrist which immediately precedes the fulfilment of the final age of the Spirit. Thus the sixth letter, to the angel of the church at Philadelphia (Rev 3:7–13), is a prophecy of the coming sixth age to begin soon after the year 1200, when a pope will be sent to renew the Church. Joachim incorporates these patterns of seven into an overarching trinitarian view of history: the age (*status*) of the old covenant belongs to the Father; the age of the Son began with the New Testament and continues through Joachim's day; and the coming age is that of the Holy Spirit, to be characterized by an outburst of spiritual activity in the form of monastic renewal. That time was imminent. The opening of the sixth seal (Rev 6:12–16) would begin a time of persecution and exile parallel to that experienced by the Jews in Babylon, which would purify the Church. The seventh era, begun by the opening of the seventh seal, would be the era of the Holy Spirit, when seeds

sowed long before would come to fruition. The silence in heaven described in Rev 8:1 reflects this sabbath age of history. Thus the Apocalypse offers the key to the reading of the Bible as a whole and to the interpretation of history.

In some ways this interpretation resembles that of earliest Christianity, where the earnest expectation of God's reign on earth dominated Christian hope. How it gives eschatological significance to the present is well exemplified by the most daring of the commentators in the Joachite tradition, Peter Olivi (c.1248–98), who used Joachim extensively in his *Lectura in Apocalypsim* (Burr 1993 and 2001). The book was investigated and condemned by the papacy in 1326, in part because of its enormous popularity, particularly among Beguins and radical Franciscans who sought to keep Francis' rule of poverty literally (Potesta in McGinn 2000: 110; Burr 2001). What is remarkable about Olivi's exegesis is his emphasis on the sixth period, in which he places himself, as the beginning of the time of renewal; he identifies Francis of Assisi as its inaugurator. Immersed in the conflict over poverty which dominated the early history of the Franciscan order, Olivi sees the forces of evil concentrated in a worldly Church, a present, or at least imminent, reality, which he identifies with the Whore of Babylon (Rev 17). Such views contributed to the intense social upheavals of the later Middle Ages, which were fired in part by apocalyptic revivals (Cohn 1957). One example is the prophetic ministry of Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) in Florence. His visions were combined with practical politics as he instituted a reformation which was to herald the new age, with life in Florence as its harbinger (Weinstein 1970). Unlike the Taborite revolution earlier in the same century and the one in Münster half a century later, this reform was not attended by violence, but it did end tragically for Savonarola (Cohn 1957: 205–22, 252–80).

### *The Reformation and the early modern period*

The Apocalypse did not dominate the interpretative horizons of the principal reformers (Backus 2000). Nevertheless, its importance in the sixteenth century should not be underestimated (Bauckham 1978; Firth 1979; Hill 1990, 1993). Luther initially relegated the book to a subordinate place within the canon of the New Testament, outlining his reasons in words that echo much earlier (and later) assessments in the Christian tradition. He believed that it was neither 'apostolic or prophetic' because 'Christ is not taught or known in it', and 'to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle above all else is bound to do' (*Preface to the New Testament*, 12 (1520), in Backus 2000). In the later editions of his New Testament, from 1530 onwards, he subtly modified his view because he recognized the usefulness of the Apocalypse for anti-Catholic polemic. The

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pope, he came to believe, was the Antichrist (cf. Rev 13 and 17), a view held also by Calvin (Firth 1979: 13).

Such interpretations proved very useful in the ideological struggle with Rome (Scribner 1994). Protestant interpretations of the Apocalypse in England are pervaded by a sense of the providential nature of their age and of the life-and-death struggle in which the fledgling Protestant realm of England was engaged. This is evident both in the poetry of Edmund Spenser and the more overtly apocalyptic interpretations of John Bale (1495–1563) and Thomas Brightman (1562–1607). Bale offered a refinement of the Augustinian appropriation of the two cities doctrine (Bale (1849): 252), whereas Brightman's use of the Apocalypse (taken up later by Joseph Mede) is very much in the tradition of Joachim of Fiore, as he aims to understand the sequence of the periods of history and the position of the present Tudor state in God's providential ordering (Bauckham 1978; Firth 1979: 32–68, 150–79). Reaction to such application of the Apocalypse to contemporary history is reflected in Roman Catholic commentators like Francisco Ribera (1537–91), Luís de Alcázar (1554–1613) and Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), who resorted to preterist or futurist interpretations in order to counteract this 'actualizing' method of interpretation (Wainwright 1993: 62–3; Armogathe in McGinn 2000: 190–1), though Bellarmine did claim that the demonic figure who rules over the pit in Rev 9:11 refers to Luther and Lutheranism (in Newport 2000: 69).

A witness to the interpretation of the Apocalypse in the early Calvinist tradition is provided by the notes in the *Geneva Bible*, which explore the relevance of the text for events and threats of the day (London 1578; cf. Hill 1993: 56; Firth 1979: 122). The book's Reformed protestant leanings are everywhere apparent, and it makes clear how the Apocalypse was used in the ecclesiastical struggle of the time. A similar approach is found in the sermons on the Apocalypse by the Swiss reformer Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75, for an example see Bauckham 1978: 298–320). The notes may have been influenced by Bale's writing (Bale 1849: 249–640; Firth 1979: 80 and Bauckham 1978: 45). The notes were supplemented in the 1602 edition by material from the commentary by Francis Junius (Bauckham 1978: 141–6; Daniell 2003: 369–75). As may be expected, Rome is identified with the Antichrist (see comment on Rev 13). The notes contain some distinctive interpretations, for example the locusts of Rev 9:3 are 'worldlie suttill Prelates, with Monkes, freres, cardinals, Patriarkes, Archbishops, Doctors, Bachelors and masters which forsake Christ to maintain false doctrine'.

The *Geneva Bible* sees the Apocalypse as a crucial tool for 'the true kings and priests in Christ' by which may be disclosed 'the wicked deceit' in their midst (on 16:12). It is a call to believers to act in a way appropriate to their election. Given that this hortatory reading of the Apocalypse rejects extremist

interpretations, such as those of the radical Reformation groups known as the Anabaptists, it is strange that the Apocalypse has a less favoured position in the lectionary of the Calvinist-influenced *Book of Common Prayer* than the Apocrypha does (Brightman 1915: I.51). The admonitory opening words of the *Geneva Bible*'s comments on the Apocalypse, 'Read diligently; judge soberly and call earnestly to God for the true understanding hereof', may reflect a widespread suspicion of the way the book might be used once it was in the hands of ordinary people, in the vernacular (Backus 2000; Barnes 1988).

Though Thomas Muentzer (c.1485–1525), who was active in the Peasants' Revolt, is the archetypal apocalyptic revolutionary, there is very little appeal to the Apocalypse in his writings. He does use the angel with a sickle of Rev 14:14 to describe his own activity of social purging. He uses other passages, such as the vision of the two witnesses in Rev 11, only to support his sense of vocation, as coming 'in the spirit and power of Elijah'. Muentzer was, however, sympathetic towards dreams and visions as an important means of knowing the ways of God, and he believed that the Holy Spirit could give the elect a clear understanding of their difference from the wicked. The Apocalypse was used extensively in the writings of the Anabaptist sympathizer Melchior Hoffman (c.1500–1534), who influenced the radicals who sought to set up God's millennial kingdom on earth in the city of Münster (Deppermann 1987). He saw the Apocalypse as the key to the understanding of history, whose secrets had been revealed to himself. In approaching Scripture, Hoffman used the principle of 'the cloven claw' – that is, engagement with contradictions in Scripture and its ambiguities – by which Scripture as a whole becomes a kind of apocalypse, a sealed book that can be opened only by someone who is identified with Christ and thus has that special knowledge necessary to understand its true meaning. This emphasis on 'contraries' anticipates the hermeneutics of William Blake (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 4 in Blake 1993: 141–93; and on Hoffman, Deppermann 1987: 242–3).

In the sixteenth century, radical Protestant groups called Anabaptists were known for their emphasis on prophetic inspiration and their challenge to ecclesial polity. An opportunity arose to translate Anabaptist ideals into political reality in the establishment of the 'New Jerusalem' in Münster, Germany (Cohn 1957; G. H. Williams 1962; Stayer 1972). Taken over initially by conventional means, Münster became a magnet for Anabaptist sympathizers, who established an eschatological commonwealth with an explicit apocalyptic colouring, from which Catholics and Lutherans who refused rebaptism were expelled (Wainwright 1993: 91–2). Some of the leaders' actions were marked by capricious ruthlessness, justified through a claim to ultimate authority bestowed by apocalyptic experience. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the

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conviction that led one of the leaders, Jan Matthijs, to become literally a lamb led to the slaughter (cf. Rev 5) as he went out to defeat the surrounding armies of the bishop, only to be slaughtered before the eyes of the horrified Münsterites. The experiment ended in a chaotic and enthusiastic messianism and an orgy of antinomianism, which was violently suppressed, becoming a paradigm of reformation which friends and foes alike viewed with horror. Münster is an unusual example of the use of the Apocalypse in the practice of a millenarian politics (compare the more recent example of the Branch Davidian community at Waco), which did not remain at the level of utopian idealism but led to violent attempts to establish an eschatological theocracy (Walzer 1985: 120). In the wake of the catastrophic defeat at Münster, a less activist form of Anabaptism emerged, with Menno Simons laying the foundations for an Anabaptism more suspicious of apocalypticism (Klassen 1992).

Parallel to that of the Anabaptists in some ways is the use of the Apocalypse in the radical politics of the period of the English Civil War in the seventeenth century (Hill 1972, 1993; Firth 1979: 242). This is best exemplified in the social radical Gerrard Winstanley (1609–76) who, with others called ‘Diggers’, asserted the common ownership of the land, on the basis of a belief that the earth was a common treasury (Sabine edn 190–7, 230–6). Here the rule of the Beast (Rev 13) is seen not as an eschatological reality but as something evident in the political arrangements of the day. Professional ministry, royal power, the judiciary, and the buying and selling of the earth correspond to the four beasts in the book of Daniel (Sabine edn 251–8; Bradstock 1997; Rowland 1988: 102–14). An echo of this radical appropriation of the Apocalypse was to permeate English religion through an individualistic, spiritual reading of the apocalyptic narrative, evident, for example, in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, written when the revolutionary politics of the mid-seventeenth century were on the wane and the hope of the establishment of a commonwealth of the saints on earth had receded (Hill 1989). In early North American exegesis we find an apocalyptic tradition that focuses particularly on the expectation of the coming earthly kingdom of Christ, after the four great empires of the world (R. Bloch 1985: 9–11, 7–1; Smolinski in Stein 2000: 36–71).

In the seventeenth century, alongside the use of the Apocalypse in radical religion, there was detailed exposition of the book, carried out in a more measured and less heated atmosphere, which was to encourage a long tradition of apocalyptic speculation. The most important representative was Joseph Mede (1586–1638), a fellow of Christ’s College, Cambridge, whose work had enormous influence on subsequent generations (Firth 1979: 240; Elliott 1851: 487–95). Mede saw in the book a series of ‘synchronisms’ or recapitulations, with several passages relating to the same period of history. He calculated a period of 1,260 years from the rise of the papacy (dated to 365) to its over-

throw some time in the seventeenth century (Firth 1979: 221). Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* (*The Key of Revelation*) is divided into two parts; the first, more important part provides the hermeneutical key based on synchronisms, and the second gives an example of how to apply it. Many in the seventeenth century thought Mede's own application of his method pointed to imminent fulfilment within a generation or two (though Mede himself was always extremely guarded about this).

Mede's emphasis on 'synchronisms' anticipates interpretative approaches that have had wide currency in modern scholarship, and it also resembles to some extent the recapitulative method of earlier interpreters such as Victorinus and Joachim of Fiore. His work was frequently quoted in subsequent centuries. Similar in approach (and explicitly indebted to Mede's work) are the writings on the Apocalypse by the Cambridge mathematician Isaac Newton (1642–1727). They are detailed and exhaustive attempts to demonstrate divine providence, what Mede called the marvellous orderliness in the history of Church and world, epitomized in the books of Daniel and Revelation and paralleled in the physical world (Burdon 1997: 37–51; Tannenbaum 1982).

### *William Blake and his contemporaries*

As already mentioned, the Apocalypse has also been read in existential terms, with its conflicts related to the spiritual life of the individual. This interpretation is evident among Romantic poets (Abrams 1973: 47; Butler 1981), although the tendency to see in the book an account of universal history, with references to contemporary events, had a new lease on life at the time of the French Revolution (Burdon 1997). Throughout his life the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) retained a fascination for the Apocalypse (Shaffer 1972). Like his contemporary Joseph Priestley, he saw its prophecy fulfilled in the French Revolution. He also recognized the biblical prophecies and visions as effusions of kindred, poetic spirits, a view shared by William Blake (1757–1827; Erdman 1977; Mee 1992; Burdon 1997) and by the German poets Herder (1744–1803) and Hölderlin (1770–1843; Shaffer 1972: 145–90). These poets sought to re-create the prophetic inspiration in their own poetry. William Blake, for example, is one of the most biblically based poets, seeing himself as a prophet, even though his writings are often only loosely related to the Bible. Although they contain numerous verbal allusions to the Apocalypse, there is rarely any explicit attempt to interpret it. Instead, we see in Blake's own poetry and illustrations an expression of the apocalyptic spirit which inspired the biblical writers, with biblical images woven into the fabric of his poetry.

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Recent study indicates that Blake was part of a prophetic movement in late eighteenth-century England, of which Richard Brothers (1757–1824) and Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) are the best examples (Mee 1992; Hopkins 1982; Brown 2002; Harrison 1979). We find also in the work of Robert Browning (1812–89), particularly his long poem *Sordello*, the kind of prophetic challenge which is stated more explicitly in Blake's apocalyptic prophecies (Woolford and Karlin 1996). Blake stands in a long tradition of Apocalypse interpretation in which text and illuminations are juxtaposed, as for example in medieval manuscripts of the commentary by Beatus of Liébana. Although Blake does not illustrate the biblical text itself, he seeks to reproduce the experience of apocalypse in the pictures and writing of his illuminated books (Blake 1991–5). In twentieth-century poetry and fiction, the indirect effect of an apocalyptic ethos has been emphasized by a succession of literary critics (Kermode 1999; Bethea 1989).

### *Deciphering the Apocalypse: the eschatological synthesis of modern fundamentalism*

The interpretation of the Apocalypse as a repository of prophecies concerning the future has existed from the beginning of the exegesis of the book, reaching a high point in the influential interpretation of Joseph Mede. The last 200 years have seen a growing trend toward eschatological interpretation. What distinguishes this modern interpretation from Mede's is that it sees the Apocalypse as one piece of a larger biblical jigsaw, the whole of which provides resources for constructing the exact sequence of events in the last days. John Nelson Darby (1800–82), Anglican clergyman and leader of the Plymouth Brethren, interpreted the book as unfulfilled prophecy, a reading followed by the widely influential *Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909. Also in this tradition is the best-selling popular book by Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970: 117–19, 173–4), which reflects the peculiar fears of the late twentieth century. Here the decline in religious and moral life, castigated in the Laodicean letter (Rev 3:14–22), is understood to refer to the twentieth century and viewed as a sign that the end is near.

Such interpretation, in which eschatological passages from different parts of the Bible (e.g. Daniel and Revelation) are woven together, encourages confidence that the elect will enjoy a miraculous rescue through the 'rapture', Christ's return to take the elect to himself (the idea is based on 1 Thess 4:17 and Luke 17:34; Mojtabai 1987: 146–60, 178–82; Boyer 1992 and in McGinn 2000: 140–78). The Apocalypse is seen to contain prophecies of contemporary

institutions (e.g. the United Nations, the European Union; and in Adventist interpretation the USA is identified with the second beast of Rev 13). Part of the eschatological scenario is the final conversion of Jews to Christ, a mixture of eschatological hope and practical politics that is at least as old as Oliver Cromwell, who in the 1650s allowed the Jews back into England because he saw their return as part of the eschatological events dawning in his day (Newport 2000; Numbers and Butler 1987).

Loosely related to the interpretation of the *Scofield Reference Bible* are the ten novels in the 'Left Behind' series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (1995–2002, with four more planned; 'left behind' refers to people left behind on earth after the true believers have been suddenly snatched up in the rapture). The novels have been enormously popular in North America, with 35 million copies sold in seven years. They portray the Antichrist appearing as a political leader, promising peace and prosperity. He takes over the United Nations and establishes a totalitarian world empire based in Iraq, the new Babylon. During the seven-year period of the tribulation, which follows the rapture, people can still become Christians, but they must endure the terrors of the end-time portrayed in the seals, trumpets and bowls of Rev 6–9 and 15. The novels depict a group of newly converted believers, called the 'Tribulation Force', as they deal with a world in turmoil and prepare for the last battle against the Antichrist (Rev 16:16). Many of their adventures are based on specific parts of the Apocalypse: for example, in the first volume, *Left Behind*, the conversion of a member of the Tribulation Force begins when he reads the promise of Jesus' second coming in Rev 22:20 (p. 122), and volume 9, *The Desecration*, begins with a reference to the seven bowls of wrath of Rev 16:1–2 (p. xiii).

### *Historical interpretations that relate the Apocalypse to its ancient context*

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 (cf. the Roman Catholic preterist interpreters discussed above). Historical study attends to issues such as the reasons why John was on Patmos, the extent to which his visions presuppose persecution of Christians, whether Domitian's or Nero's reign is the setting, and how

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to evaluate the earliest external testimony (W. Bousset 1896; Swete 1906; Charles 1910, 1920; Farrer 1949, 1964; Caird 1966; Massyngberde-Ford, 1975; A. Y. Collins 1976, 1979, 1984, 1996; Court 1979; Sweet 1979; Rowland 1982, 1993, 1998; L. Thompson 1990; Bauckham 1993a, 1993b; Roloff 1993; Schüssler Fiorenza 1993, 1999; Aune 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Murphy 1998; Beale 1999; Barker 2000; Boxall 2002). Studies of social and economic conditions in first-century Asia Minor (Ramsay 1904; Hemer 1986) and comparison with other early Christian sources for that region (Lieu 1997; Trebilco 1991) have illuminated the general background of the text.

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of modern historical study has been source-critical study. The recognition of inconsistencies led Grotius to think that the book was written at different times in John's life, a view that has undergone many variations. In the twentieth century R. H. Charles, doyen of source critics of apocalyptic texts, is the most important proponent of this approach (Charles 1910, 1920; see the latest and most comprehensive treatment of the modern scholarship on the Apocalypse, including source criticism, in Aune 1997). This approach may be contrasted with the evaluation of disjunctions and inconsistencies by eighteenth-century writers like Lowth (1753) and Bengel (1740/1857), who see them as typical features of prophetic books (Burdon 1997: 51, 76).

In the last few decades of the twentieth century, biblical exegetes began to use the social sciences, especially in the study of Paul and the gospels. Sociological study has had some influence on study of the Apocalypse (Thrupp 1970; Malina and Pilch 2000), though less than one might have expected, particularly since the rise of sectarianism and its ideology has been a major concern of the emerging discipline of sociology of religion (Esler 1995). A sectarian origin has often been posited for the Apocalypse and similar texts which see the world in terms of stark contrasts (Hanson 1974; Cook 1995; J. J. Collins in J. J. Collins 2000: 129–62). The book has been viewed as a myth for an oppressed community, which found itself confronted with the 'dissonance' between its beliefs and the socio-political realities of a militant Roman Empire, a means by which the reader could overcome the contradiction between the present, with its threat of persecution, and the hoped-for life of bliss. The connection with millenarian movements is discussed by Norman Cohn (1957), who also explores the social psychology of a dualistic mind-set. A social-psychological perspective is evident also in the work of Adela Collins, who discusses reading as a way of dealing with aggression, bringing about catharsis and displacement of difficult emotion (A. Y. Collins 1984). To some extent she follows in the footsteps of C. G. Jung, who juxtaposed the gospel and the Apocalypse as examples of different and unresolved aspects of the human personality (Jung 1984).

*The influence of the Apocalypse in twentieth-century theology and philosophy (Bull 1995)*

The emphasis on the influence of Jewish eschatological ideas on New Testament texts in the works of Weiss (1971, originally published in 1892) and Schweitzer (1961, first published in 1913) was to spill over in dramatic form into post-First World War theology in Karl Barth's commentary on Romans (first edition Barth 1919; cf. McCormack 1995; Gorringer 1999). For Barth, eschatology is central; but by this he means not so much the imminent expectation of God's reign in the world as the critical 'revelation' breaking in upon humanity. That which comes from beyond demands an attitude to the data of God's revelation which differs from the human hubris prevalent since the Enlightenment. Bringing about the ultimate crisis, it demands of a chastened humanity a reception in humility. Barth's theology offered a stark alternative to the world of destruction and devastation of 1918, and the compromises that contributed to it, which provoked an acute pessimism about humanity's resources to build a better world. Following the ancient apocalypses, Barth repudiated human attempts to comprehend God (natural theology). Divine revelation, an 'unveiling' or apocalypse, is the only basis for understanding anything about God (1958: 28).

Contemporary with Barth and equally committed to the eschatological inheritance of the Jewish tradition, but with a very different assessment of it, is the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch. Rehabilitating the perspectives of Joachim of Fiore, Thomas Muentzer and Gerrard Winstanley, Bloch aimed to rehabilitate that millenarian, apocalyptic/utopian inheritance on the fringes of orthodox Christianity. His mammoth book *The Principle of Hope* (E. Bloch 1986; Hudson 1982) explores how longing for a future age of perfection has coloured the whole range of culture in both East and West and contributed to Marxism as well as to the Judaeo-Christian tradition (though Bloch's views are tangential to the mainstream Marxist tradition and have been received with considerable skepticism by other Marxists; see Kolakowski 1978).

Bloch's work is echoed in a more attenuated form in the later writing of Theodor Adorno (1974; cf. Wiggerhaus 1994) and Walter Benjamin (1970). Adorno exhibits a pessimistic messianism, in which the present inadequacies are to be viewed 'in the messianic light' (Adorno 1974: 247). One of Benjamin's final works, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (written in 1940), though not an apocalypse in the sense of a vision or an audition, is an exercise in apocalyptic hermeneutics. It exemplifies the countercultural, non-conformist perspective of apocalypticism in the context of a disenchanted and pessimistic

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world. The work is full of a prophetic foreboding about the death and destruction perpetrated by evil in the name of civilization:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Thesis VII, Benjamin 1970: 249)

Both of these philosophers were close friends of Gershom Scholem, the great pioneer of modern study of Jewish apocalypticism and mysticism (Biale 1982), who called attention to neglected aspects of the eschatological tradition and of its political potential. In the light of Bloch's work it is not surprising that some Christians and Marxists influenced by this utopian tradition have been united in a quest for a new social order in this world, based on peace and justice. Like those of Benjamin and Adorno, however, such efforts display a decidedly pessimistic tone, in that they consider social and political upheaval as the necessary prelude to significant change (McLellan 1987). A different interpretation is given by theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in the 1930s. In a warning against a selective reading of biblical texts, he appeals to the Apocalypse in his challenge to the Church to be an advocate for the oppressed minority, the Jews, summoning it to be 'a community which hears the Apocalypse' (Bonhoeffer 1965: 324).

### *Modern liberationist interpretation*

There is much evidence of the power the Apocalypse has among the grass-roots groups influenced by late twentieth-century liberation theology. Exponents of liberation theology look for the fulfilment of God's purposes in history and facilitate the use of the Bible to interpret contemporary social and political realities and to foster change that benefits the poor and the marginalized (Rowland 1999). Read from this perspective, the Apocalypse, which refuses to accept that the dominant powers are the ultimate point of reference, offers hope but also stimulates resistance. Apocalyptic discourse, which consists of picture and symbol as well as words, asks the reader to participate in another way of speaking about God and world, a way more readily understood by those whose approach is not primarily through the rationality of the academy. It taps wells

of human response in those whose experience of struggle, persecution and death have taught them what it means to wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). Allan Boesak, a Reformed minister active in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, found in the Apocalypse a message of comfort and a resource for protest. While John writes about the political situation in first-century Asia Minor and how the Church should respond to it, his book is also prophecy that does not receive its full and final fulfilment in one given historical moment. What was true in the time of John is proved to be true over and over again in history, and this is why the Apocalypse continues to be relevant. The Apocalypse meant God's final judgement on the corrupt political and religious systems of oppression (Boesak 1987: 29). The liberationist perspective is also apparent in the marginal notes of the *Bíblia Sagrada* published in Brazil (1990; cf. Mesters and Orofino 2002), whose introduction explicitly promotes the relationship between text and 'our reality', which is qualified by the communal context of reading (Mesters 1993: 3–16 and 1989).

Two other interpreters ought to be mentioned in this context: Jacques Ellul (1977) and William Stringfellow (1973 and 1977). In works that are marginal to the mainstream of modern biblical exegesis, they show how the Bible, and particularly the book of Revelation, challenges ideology by its unmasking of the principalities and powers (see also the trilogy on the principalities and powers by Wink: 1984, 1986, 1993).

### *The Apocalypse in liturgy and biblical lectionaries*

From medieval times, the triple Sanctus of 4:8 (cf. Isa 6:3) has been an essential part of the eucharistic liturgy, and occasional liturgical use is made of other parts of the book. For example, Rev 21 figures in medieval liturgies for the dedication of Churches (see below, 236). Compared with other New Testament books, the Apocalypse does not feature prominently in Christian lectionaries, lists of biblical texts chosen for public reading on Sundays and feast-days. In Eastern Orthodox Churches the book is not read in the Divine Service (Averky 1985: 37). In the West, however, texts from the Apocalypse are appointed for several holy days and for several Sundays following Easter. In the Roman Catholic Breviary, the whole of the book of Revelation is read as part of the Office of Readings for weeks two to five of Eastertide (The Divine Office 1974: ii: 506–601). Four canticles, so-called, from Revelation are also used in the Roman Catholic Divine Office: Rev 4:11; 5:9, 10, 12 in Evening Prayer on Tuesdays and also in the Common of Several Martyrs and the Common of One Martyr; Rev 11:17–18; 12:10b–12a for Evening Prayer on Thursdays

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and Evening Prayer I and II of the Ascension; Rev 15:3–4 for Evening Prayer on Fridays and for Evening Prayer I of Pentecost, Evening Prayer II of the Common for the Dedication of a Church (except during the Easter season), and for the Common of Men Saints; Rev 19:1, 2, 5–7 for Evening Prayer II on Sundays (including Easter and Pentecost), and Evening Prayer I and II (during the Easter season) for the Common for the Dedication of a Church.

The lectionary in *The Book of Common Prayer According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* 1977 appoints Rev 12:7–12 for St Michael and All Angels (29 Sept.), Rev 7:2–4, 9–17 for All Saints' Day (1 Nov.) and Rev. 21:1–7 for Holy Innocents (28 Dec.). The medieval feast of Holy Innocents also featured a reading from the Apocalypse alongside the gospel reading from Matt 2:16–18, but the text was from Rev 14, not 21 (Flanigan in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 334–7). The reading from Rev 7 for All Saints' Day can be traced back to medieval times (Flanigan in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 334–5) and is continued in the Roman Catholic Church today. In the North American *Revised Common Lectionary* 1992, formulated by representatives of 25 Protestant denominations, this text is read on All Saints' Day in the first year of a three-year cycle, while Rev 21:1–6a is read in the second year. This common lectionary also appoints Rev 21:1–6a, with its promise of a 'new heaven and a new earth', for reading on New Year's Day of every year. The Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States* 1998 contains one additional reading from the Apocalypse: Rev 11:19a; 12:1–6a, 10ab, for the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (15 Aug.).

For regular Sunday services, the *Revised Common Lectionary* 1992 suggests the following texts for the second through seventh Sundays after Easter in the third year of a three-year cycle: Rev 1:4–8; 5:11–14; 7:9–17; 21:1–6; 21:10, 22–22:5, 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–1. The Roman Catholic lectionary (1998) and the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (1977) have virtually the same readings for these Sundays. One exception is that both include an additional reading from the Apocalypse, appointing Rev 1:9–19 (or 1:1–19) for the second Sunday after Easter; in these Churches Rev 1:4–8 is read in the second year of the three-year cycle, on the last Sunday of the Church year. Another divergence is that the Episcopal Church appoints Rev 19:1, 4–9, not Rev 21:1–6, for the sixth Sunday after Easter.

In the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* the Apocalypse is appointed for reading at Morning and Evening Prayer in November and December, but several chapters are omitted, including chapters 9, 13 and 17 (Brightman 1915: i.51). In the *Alternative Service Book* of 1980 the following passages are prescribed for the Sunday Eucharist over the two-year cycle: Rev 4; 21:1–7; 21:22–2:5; 1:10–18; 19:6–9; 3:14–end; 7:2–4, 9–end. In addition, the

following passages are prescribed for holy days and other festivals: 21:1–7; 12:7–12; 7:2–4, 9–end; 14:14–end.

### *The Apocalypse in music*

The heavenly hymns of praise in the Apocalypse have been a resource for musicians and hymn writers down the centuries. Best known are perhaps two choruses from Handel's *Messiah* (1742, libretto by Charles Jennens): 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain' (Rev 5:12) and the 'Hallelujah Chorus' (Rev 19:6; 11:15; 19:16). Isolated verses from the Apocalypse have been given musical settings, partly because of their use in the liturgy (Flanigan in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 333–51). The sixteenth-century English composition by Thomas Weelkes, 'I heard a voice from heaven!' (see Rev 19:1) is just one example of a setting in which a text is given a new interpretation as the awesome context of the destruction of Babylon is left behind. The papal approval of the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1476 led to the composition of votive antiphons based on Rev 12:1, a text long associated with Mary (Stratton 1994; Pesce 1997: 311–12; Blackburn 1999). Two passages from the Apocalypse (4:11 and 14:13) conclude Brahms' *German Requiem* (1867), which is based on a collection of scriptural texts.

The vision of the angel proclaiming 'There will be no more delay' in Rev 10:6 is the inspiration for Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, written in 1940 while he was a prisoner of war. Contemporary is Karl Weigl's Fifth Symphony ('The Apocalyptic'), written in 1945 in memory of F. D. Roosevelt and composed in exile from the Nazi terror in the 1930s. The final movement, entitled 'The Four Horsemen', complements an earlier movement inspired by the Golden Calf story in Ex 32.

The only setting of the whole Apocalypse is Franz Schmidt's oratorio *The Book with Seven Seals*, first performed in Vienna in 1938. Schmidt describes the breaking of the first seal as the proclamation of the Christian message which is followed by chaos, reflecting a pattern of interpretation that goes back at least to Victorinus (Schmidt 1938, and see below on Rev 6). Even this work represents a selective choice of texts. Significant omissions, in light of their political component and the time in which the oratorio was written, are chapters 13 and 17. Schmidt acknowledges that he has omitted the negative pole in the Babylon/Jerusalem contrast in order to bring out the importance of the positive image of Jerusalem and the triumph of good over evil.

William Walton's roughly contemporary *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931), whose libretto by Osbert Sitwell is indebted to Rev 18, foretells the imminent destruction of Babylon. Using the musical styles of the marginalized (such as jazz),

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Walton evokes the shifts of the text between the sadness of the elites that 'that great city' has been destroyed (Rev 18:22–3) and paeans of praise that express raw delight: 'Babylon the great is fallen. Hallelujah!' (Rev 18:2; 19:1; a point also brought out in Boesak 1987: 121–2).

Hymns inspired by the Apocalypse include 'O what their joy and their glory must be', based on a text by the medieval theologian Peter Abelard, and 'Lift your heads, ye friends of Jesus' by Charles Wesley. Images from Revelation are particularly prominent in African-American spirituals, especially in relation to two themes: (1) images from the plague sequences used to describe the dramatic end of life's trials at the time of the Last Judgement; (2) images of the New Jerusalem (chs 21–2) with its 'golden streets' and the 'tree of life', in descriptions of the heavenly joys that await the believer at the end of the earthly pilgrimage. Also frequently mentioned are the suffering Lamb (ch. 5), the white robes (6:11; 7:9, 13–14) and the 'book of life' (20:12).

### *Artistic representations of the Apocalypse*

Over the centuries the Apocalypse has had particular appeal for artists. Artistic interpretation includes the iconography of ecclesiastical architecture, illuminations and woodcuts that accompany the text, and painted panels and drawings of individual themes. There are cycles of scenes from the Apocalypse in church murals, stained glass, vault carvings and tapestries (Schiller 1990, 1991; James 1931; Kirschbaum 1968; Emmerson and McGinn 1992; Rowland 1993; Wright 1996; Boxall 2002; for plates see also Van der Meer 1978 and Grubb 1997). Among the most prominent motifs (see discussions in the relevant chapters below) are John on Patmos (Rev 1), the visions of the heavenly thrones of God and the Lamb (Rev 4–5), the four horsemen (Rev 6), the beast from the abyss attacking the two witnesses (Rev 11), the Woman Clothed with the Sun and Michael battling the dragon (Rev 12), the Last Judgement (Rev 20) and the New Jerusalem (Rev 21–2).

In early Christian art individual motifs from the Apocalypse begin to appear after the official recognition of Christianity by Constantine and the formulation of the Nicene Creed in 325 (Kinney 1992: 201–2). Themes such as the 'heavenly liturgy', with the majestic Christ on the throne, the four living creatures, the 24 elders and the book with seven seals (Rev 4–5), and the Lamb on Mount Zion (Rev 7 and 14) serve to glorify Christ and celebrate the victory of Christianity (Schiller 1990: 116). These motifs, along with the New Jerusalem of Rev 21–2, are featured in the triumphal arches and apses of Churches, especially in fifth- to ninth-century Roman churches such as Saint Paul Outside the Walls, Saints Cosmas and Damian and Saint Prassede, and in San Vitale in

Ravenna (Schiller 1990: 116–17; Van der Meer 1978: 32, 54, 57–8, 62). They also figured on the facade of old Saint Peter's (Kinney 1992: 204). The motif that appears most frequently, in a great variety of media, consists of the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, used to describe Christ in Rev 1:8, 17, and 21:6 (Kinney 1992: 201–2; Van der Meer 1978: 33–4). Notably absent in early Christian art are representations of the plague sequences (Rev 6–9; 15–16).

It is a matter of debate at what point artists began composing connected cycles of illustrations (Schiller 1990: 117; Kinney 1992: 201), but considerable evidence of this tradition survives in lavishly illustrated Apocalypse manuscripts from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries (see articles by Williams, Klein and Lewis in Emmerson and McGinn 1992). In the ninth century the Apocalypse began to be produced as a separate book, an honor shared only by the four gospels and the Psalms. This development was influenced by commentaries on the book written in the eighth and ninth centuries, and perhaps also by the introduction of readings from the Apocalypse into the liturgy in certain locales (Schiller 1990: 118). The earliest such surviving manuscript, the Trier Apocalypse, produced near Tours, France, around the year 800, has a cycle of 74 full-page illustrations (Trier, Staatsbibliothek, MS 31; Schiller 1990: 142–4; Van der Meer 1978: 92–100). In comparison with the surviving early Christian depictions, we find here more emphasis on demonic powers and on scenes of judgement (e.g. Rev 14:14–20 and 20:11–15). The present import of the book is expressed by the addition of contemporary figures as witnesses to scenes from the text. The Cambrai Apocalypse (Bibl. Munic. MS 386) is a copy of the Trier manuscript, made at the beginning of the tenth century (Schiller 1990: 144).

While many Apocalypse manuscripts were commissioned by monasteries, the genre also appealed to royal patrons, who followed early Christian emperors in seeing their own rule as a reflection of the world rule of Christ (Schiller 1990: 147). One early example is the splendid Bamberg Apocalypse (Bamberg, Stadtsbibliothek MS Bibl. 140), which was probably commissioned by the German emperor Otto III around the year 1,000 (Schiller 1990: 147–9; Mayr-Harting 1991). Its 50 illustrations are notable for their expressiveness and their depiction of violent action. Coiling beasts inspire terror, while wide-eyed human figures express their horror or adoration as the events of the book unfold (Van der Meer 1978: 102–7).

A special place in the manuscript tradition is occupied by Spanish manuscripts of the tenth through the thirteenth centuries which illustrate the commentary on the Apocalypse composed in 776 by the monk Beatus of Liébana (J. Williams 1994 and in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 217–33; Schiller 1990: 119–35; Van der Meer 1978: 109–27). The illustrations in these manuscripts, which reflect Beatus' commentary as well as the biblical text, are characterized

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by bands of vivid colours and lively depictions of fantastic animals. Beatus, writing in Christian northern Spain at a time when most of the country was occupied by Muslims, draws heavily on such earlier sources as Tyconius and Victorinus. His interpretation emphasizes ecclesiology and christology, reflecting a particular concern to combat the adoptionist christology of followers of Bishop Eliphandus of Toledo (Matter in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 45–6). The popularity of the Apocalypse in Spain can be traced back to the seventh century, when the book's exaltation of Jesus as God and as a world ruler was useful in the battle against Arianism. In 633 the Council of Toledo mandated preaching from the Apocalypse in the period between Easter and Pentecost and threatened with excommunication anyone who did not regard it as authoritative (Schiller 1990: 120–1).

Particular Beatus manuscripts to which reference will be made in subsequent chapters of this commentary include the Morgan (c.940–5), Girona (975), Madrid/Facundus (1047) and Osma (1086) Apocalypses (for a list of all the extant manuscripts, see J. Williams 1994: 1:10–11; Schiller 1990: 131–5). The Morgan Apocalypse (MS 644 in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York) includes a personal note from the scribe and painter, a certain Maius, which gives a sense of how and why monastic leaders commissioned such manuscripts:

Let the voice of the faithful resound, and re-echo! Let Maius, small indeed, but eager, rejoice, sing, re-echo and cry out!

Remember me, servants of Christ, you who dwell in the monastery of the supreme messenger, the Archangel Michael.

I write this in awe of the exalted patron, at the command of Abbot Victor, out of love for the book of the vision of John the beloved disciple.

As part of its adornment I have painted a series of pictures for the wonderful words of its stories, so that the wise may fear the coming of the future judgment of the world's end. . . .

Be glory to the Father and to his only Son, to the Holy Spirit and the Trinity from age to age to the end of time. (J. Williams 1991: 12)

One innovation in this manuscript is the addition at the beginning of pictures of the four Evangelists, which serves to claim for the Apocalypse the same authority enjoyed by the gospels (Schiller 1990: 125; J. Williams 1991: 167–8, fols 1v–4).

Another tradition of manuscript illustration, the Anglo-French, began around the year 1250 in England and continued through the fifteenth century, spreading to other countries, especially France (Schiller 1990: 242–3; Klein

1992: 188–92). An outstanding early example is the Trinity Apocalypse (Trinity College, Cambridge) dated to 1250–60 (Schiller 1990: 261–2; Van der Meer 1978: 152–70), which is known for its rich colours, use of gold leaf, and lively, graceful drawing. The luxuriousness of this manuscript suggests that it had a royal patron, often thought to be Eleanor, wife of King Henry III of England. Royal and noble figures, especially noble ladies, figure prominently in the illustrations: for example, in the miniature for Rev 13 a noble lady, perhaps Queen Eleanor herself, bravely wields a sword against the seven-headed beast (fol. 14v; Van der Meer 1978: 156). Elsewhere we see the founders of new monastic orders, Saints Francis and Dominic (fol. 28; Van der Meer 1978: 152). The Apocalypse is framed on either end by numerous scenes derived from apocryphal accounts of the life of the apostle John, which has the effect of locating the exile during which John receives the book's visions within the context of the rest of his life. The seer also appears in the margins of the framed scenes from the Apocalypse, a device that underlines their visionary character and links the book's spiritual vision to the experience of exile (S. Lewis 1995: 31–3).

Of the many other manuscripts in this Anglo-French tradition, which exhibit a common style and a similar selection of scenes, two other notable examples are Douce 180, commissioned by Eleanor's son Edward I (late thirteenth century, now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford) and the Cloisters Apocalypse (c.1320–30), one of the treasures of the Cloisters Museum in New York, whose illustrations of the plague sequences are particularly vivid (Deuschler, Hoffeld and Nickel 1971). Other manuscripts in this tradition served as models for the tapestries of Angers, France, created c.1375–83 (Schiller 1990: 268–71; Van der Meer 1978: 176–87). A later exemplar (c.1400–25) is the Flemish Apocalypse in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (BN néerl. 3; Van der Meer 1978: 202–35; Schiller 1990: 314–18), the first illustrated Apocalypse from the Low Countries. Here scenes that are portrayed separately in other manuscripts are combined into 23 complex illustrations, one for each chapter of Revelation, plus an introductory page with scenes from the life of John. Also in this tradition, but with the addition of numerous innovative scenes, including a number from the life of the Antichrist, is the Wellcome Apocalypse, part of a larger work produced in Germany around 1425–50 (Schiller 1990: 319–22).

A very different kind of artistic representation is found in the *Book of Figures* of Joachim of Fiore, which contains 16 diagrams apparently drawn under Joachim's direction and collected after his death in 1202 (Joachim of Fiore 1953 [facsimile edition, ed. Tondelli, Reeves and Hirsch-Reich]; cf. plates in Reeves and Hirsch-Reich 1972; McGinn 1979: 103–11; Schiller 1990: 168–71). These detailed drawings, which incorporate explanatory words of Joachim, do not illustrate specific scenes of the Apocalypse but instead express

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in symbolic pictures the essence of the Calabrian abbot's views on history and eschatology.

The influence of the Apocalypse on ecclesiological architecture, evident as early as the fifth century, continues in the cathedrals, churches and monasteries of the Romanesque and Gothic periods, where images from the book appear in portals, carved capitals, vault bosses, stained-glass windows, wall-paintings, altar-pieces and other decorations (Christe in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 234–58). Examples include the large east window in York Minster, England (1405–8), the west rose window in Sainte Chapelle, Paris (1485), capitals in the cloister in Moissac in southern France (c.1110; Schiller 1990: 64–6), bosses in the vaults of the cloister in Norwich Cathedral in England (c.1500), and Signorelli's frescoes in the cathedral at Orvieto in Italy (1499–1504). Earlier examples of frescoes, painted by Cimabue and by a follower of Giotto (c.1240), are found in the basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi (Schiller 1990: 272–85). These are interesting not only for their artistic quality but also because they reflect the apocalyptic self-understanding of the new Franciscan movement (see the discussion of Rev 7:1–3 and 8:1–2 below).

Church doorways often feature imagery taken from Rev 4–5, especially the 24 elders and the four living creatures surrounding the divine throne, in their presentation of the 'majesty of the Lord'. Examples include the royal portal in Chartres (c.1144–5), the south doorway in the abbey Church in Moissac (c.1120), and the 'doorway of glory' in Santiago del Compostela in Spain (1186). In the Gothic cathedral in Rheims (c.1260–70), the south portal on the western façade and the corresponding inner doorway are unusual in that they portray a whole cycle of scenes, beginning with John on Patmos (Rev 1) and ending with the fall of the devil into the abyss (Rev 20:1–3). This recalls cycles found in manuscript illustrations, but here whole scenes are indicated by just one or two figures. As in the manuscript tradition, scenes from the apocryphal life of John complement those from the Apocalypse (Schiller 1990: 201–4).

Various elements combine to symbolize the New Jerusalem promised in Rev 21–2 and to present the Church as a gateway to the heavenly city (Wainwright 1993: 190). This theme is especially evident in the great chandeliers, or crowns of light, that began to appear in Germany and France around the year 1010 (Schiller 1990: 192–5; for further discussion, see below on Rev 21). A later example is the Pazzi Chapel in Florence, whose overall structure is determined by the Apocalypse (Barolsky 1995).

With the advent of the printing press, manuscript illuminations gave way to woodcuts illustrating the text. Best known are the 15 woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer (1497–8; Carey 1999; Smith 2000; Van der Meer 1978: 283–314), which began a new era in the book's illustration. They emphasize the visionary, other-worldly, character of John's experience, while at the same time showing the

bored nonchalance of spectators as they casually watch the awesome incidents taking place in their midst. In the depiction of Rev 17 well-dressed people admire the Whore of Babylon (compare Lucas Cranach's portrayal in Luther's Bible, where the worshippers of Babylon include Ferdinand I, George of Saxony, Charles V and Johann Tetzl). This is also evident in the opening scene of John's persecution. When the terrible war in heaven takes place (Rev 12), there is tranquillity below on earth, where people have no comprehension of the spiritual battle being waged around them. It is only with the four horse-men (Rev 6) that a trace of fear appears, as royal personages, priests and prelates get trampled underfoot along with ordinary people. Dürer reflects some of the concerns that dominated exegesis in the Joachite tradition, where Saint Francis is identified with the angel of the sixth seal (Rev 7:2). In Dürer's portrayal of Rev 7 the angel from the sun holds a cross, perhaps suggesting Francis and the stigmata, and his emphasis on seals 5 and 6 and trumpets 5 and 6 may reflect emphasis on the penultimate, which is a distinguishing feature of the Joachite tradition. The appearance of trees in several of Dürer's portrayals brings to mind Joachim's *figurae* in which the Jesse tree plays an important role (Joachim of Fiore 1953; Reeves and Hirsch-Reich 1972; McGinn 1979: 109).

Both medieval manuscript illuminations and later woodcuts give contextual readings in which visions from the Apocalypse are used as an interpretative lens for viewing contemporary history. A well-known example is the depiction of the Whore of Babylon as papal Rome in Lucas Cranach's woodcuts for Luther's *Septembertestament* of 1522 (Van der Meer 1978: 308). These reflect the widespread iconic propaganda of the German Reformation, in which images inspired by the Apocalypse are pervasive (Scribner 1994: 148–89). The prominent place of Apocalypse illustrations in Luther's Bible of 1534 indicates the continuing role of artistic imagination in the exegesis of a controversial text (Martin 1983).

Over the centuries the Apocalypse has also inspired countless painted panels. These include altar-pieces such as that painted by Jan van Eyck for a chapel of Saint John in the cathedral of St Bavo in Ghent (Schiller 1990: 307–11; Van der Meer 1978: 236–57). Its central panel, known as the 'Mystical Lamb', exemplifies an interpretation that goes back to Tyconius and Augustine, which emphasizes relevance for the Church in the present time. Here the division between heaven and earth is transcended in the eucharistic feast, as the Lamb in the midst of the throne (Rev 5) is found on an altar on earth. Such eucharistic piety is paralleled in the central role which Dürer gives to the Lamb, whose blood is shed into a chalice held by a cardinal (plate 12, illustrating Rev 14, in Van der Meer 1978: 301). Another fifteenth-century altar-piece, a triptych made by Hans Memling for Saint John's Hospital in Bruges (1475–87),

### 38 Introduction

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features numerous scenes from the life of John as well as the seer experiencing the vision on Patmos. Scenes that appear frequently in painted panels include John's vision in Rev 1 (e.g. Hieronymus Bosch, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, c.1500) and the Last Judgement (e.g. Fra Angelico, Museo di San Marco, Florence, c.1431; Grubb 1997: 86; and Wassily Kandinsky, private collection, 1910; Grubb 1997: 97). From the nineteenth century come two striking paintings that illustrate Rev 6:8: J. M. W. Turner's (1775–1851) *Death on a Pale Horse* (c.1825) manages to conjure up a scene of desolation following a cataclysm (Grubb 1997: 47), while William Blake's picture of the same title is more energetic (Grubb 1997: 48). Among twentieth-century painters, mention should be made of the apocalyptic character of the painting of Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), who felt himself led by a prophetic vocation in his artistic work (Heller 1983; Carey 1999: 276–9).