Revelation

The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ

Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland

in collaboration with Rebekah Callow

Blackwell Publishing

Revelation

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In memory of our parents

Keith H. Tustison (1915–2002) *and*
Mary Carey Tustison (1915–1991)

Eric Rowland (1919–1994) *and*
Frances Mary Rowland (1914–1999)

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Series Editors' Preface

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible, is based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The series emphasizes the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music, and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments. Drawing on work in a variety of disciplines, it is designed to provide a convenient and scholarly means of access to material until now hard to find, and a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on western culture.

Until quite recently this whole dimension was for the most part neglected by biblical scholars. The goal of a commentary was primarily if not exclusively to get behind the centuries of accumulated Christian and Jewish tradition to one single meaning, normally identified with the author's original intention. The most important and distinctive feature of the Blackwell Commentaries is that they will present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred

text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates.

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries will consider patristic, rabbinic (where relevant), and medieval exegesis as well as insights from various types of modern criticism, acquainting readers with a wide variety of interpretative techniques. As part of the history of interpretation, questions of source, date, authorship, and other historical-critical and archaeological issues will be discussed, but since these are covered extensively in existing commentaries, such references will be brief, serving to point readers in the direction of readily accessible literature where they can be followed up.

Original to this series is the consideration of the reception history of specific biblical books arranged in commentary format. The chapter-by-chapter arrangement ensures that the biblical text is always central to the discussion. Given the wide influence of the Bible and the richly varied appropriation of each biblical book, it is a difficult question which interpretations to include. While each volume will have its own distinctive point of view, the guiding principle for the series as a whole is that readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations that have been especially influential or historically significant. Though commentators will have their preferences among the different interpretations, the material will be presented in such a way that readers can make up their own minds on the value, morality, and validity of particular interpretations.

The series encourages readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages and seeks to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture. The aim is to write a series of scholarly commentaries that draw on all the insights of modern research to illustrate the rich interpretative potential of each biblical book.

John Sawyer
Christopher Rowland
Judith Kovacs

Preface

This commentary starts from the assumption that what people believe the Bible means is as interesting and important as what it originally meant. Ulrich Luz deserves gratitude for his part in putting the history of the interpretation and the influence of biblical texts (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) on the agenda of New Testament studies (Luz 1989: 95–9; cf. Patte and Greenholm 2000). His commentary on Matthew raises the question whether the time has come to devote much more attention to reception history. The task of the interpreter is not completed by historical exegesis, since 'one does not yet understand what the subject matter of the text *means* if one only understands what it *has meant*' (Luz 1989: 98). Interpretation is not to be confined to the scholarly elucidation of the text, for religious practice, suffering, song, poetry and prayer all have their contribution to make to understanding. As Luz indicates, 'biblical texts do not simply have one set, closed meaning but are full of possibilities' (Luz 1989: 98).

While reception history has received little attention in New Testament scholarship, it is not an entirely new endeavour. Notable examples include Schweitzer's unravelling of the influence of interpreters' own times and interests on the quest for the historical Jesus (Schweitzer 1961) and the exploration

by Sanders (1977) of how Lutheran teaching has influenced the exegesis of Paul.

No one who has considered the history of the interpretation of the Revelation to John (referred to in this volume as 'the Apocalypse') will require any persuading of the great impact which this book has had down the centuries, initially on a Christian culture and more recently, in a more diffuse way and in a variety of contexts, on a much more secular age. Despite the general neglect of reception history by biblical scholars, those who set out to study the reception of the Bible quickly become aware of the enormous amount of scholarship that already exists. Much of what is contained in this commentary betrays our indebtedness to scholars in disciplines such as history, art history and literary studies who have studied the interpretation of the Apocalypse. We have not attempted to go afresh over ground so ably covered by others better qualified to judge and interpret texts that come from periods outside the limits of our expertise. The debt to a host of writers on the Apocalypse, particularly Bernard McGinn, Richard Emmerson, Marjorie Reeves, Kathleen Firth, C. A. Patrides, Joseph Wittreich, Arthur Wainwright, David Burr, Christopher Burdon, Morton Paley and Gertrud Schiller, will be readily apparent from the bibliographical citations. One particular word of appreciation is in order, to Charles Helms, whose unpublished doctoral dissertation (Oxford, 1991) has been an invaluable resource for the pre-Constantinian church fathers, especially for textual references. Since this work is not generally available, we have not given specific page references to it.

Given the immense influence of the Apocalypse on literature, art, theology, politics and popular culture, the decisions about what to include in this commentary have been difficult. Needless to say, it has been necessary to be selective about which interpreters and which writings to cite and discuss. Our aim is to give a representative sampling of different types of interpretation and of material coming from different periods of history. It is hoped that the major figures and the main types of interpretation have been fairly represented. Compared with earlier periods, there is relatively little on the modern period, and in particular not much on modern historical criticism. This is partly because this is so widely available in other commentaries and partly because the main hermeneutical options were already well established before the modern period (that is, before the end of the eighteenth century and the work of J. G. Eichhorn). Cost prevented us from including more pictorial representations. This is a particularly rich area, for the understanding of which the Apocalypse has been remarkably well served (Schiller 1990 and 1991; Carey 1999; Emmerson and McGinn 1992; see also the many plates in Van der Meer 1978 and Grubb 1977 and the websites noted in the bibliography, after the primary sources).

This commentary takes the form of an extended introduction to the Apocalypse and to the main types of interpretation of the book through the centuries, followed by examples of specific interpretations, arranged according to the chapters of the Apocalypse. The chapters on specific chapters of the Apocalypse are each divided into two parts. The first, entitled 'Ancient Literary Context', provides some historical context, noting especially links with the Hebrew Bible, Jewish and Christian apocalypses, and other ancient texts. The second, entitled 'The Interpretations', comprises the bulk of each chapter and is subdivided according to the major themes of the biblical chapter. The two parts of the book are intended to complement one another. The introductory chapter, with its typology of interpretations and survey of influential interpretations, offers a framework for the more diffuse commentary that follows. The body of the commentary, in its presentation of material of diverse types and periods, is more like an anthology (in this respect reflecting earlier commentaries like that of Beatus of Liébana). We have sought to ensure a balance between making clear the dominant types of interpretation down the centuries and conveying particularities of many different interpretations. In order to give readers a better idea of the particular flavour of various appropriations, we have included extensive quotations, especially from poems, songs and other literary works. To provide more cohesion, we have chosen a few interpreters and works for special emphasis, referring to them at various points in the commentary. These include Origen, Victorinus, Tyconius, Augustine, Joachim of Fiore, Peter John Olivi, Hildegard of Bingen, the *Geneva Bible*, John Bale, John Milton, John Bunyan, William Blake, the *Scofield Reference Bible,* and African-American songs.

Unless a particular translation has been specified, biblical texts are quoted from the NRSV. To help readers with the welter of names and to provide a chronological orientation, the 'Biographies and Glossary' contains brief biographies, with dates, of most interpreters cited, as well as explanations of certain writings, movements and terms. This is followed by a bibliography in three parts, containing primary and secondary sources and websites. The first part list editions and translations from which quotations in the text are taken and points readers to primary texts that are generally available – for example, the collected works of Milton and other poets, the various anthologies that have now made the history of interpretation of the Apocalypse more widely available, and the English translations of the church fathers in the two multivolume series The Ante-Nicene Fathers (abbreviated ANF) and The Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Works discussed for which translations can be found in ANF include (with volume and page numbers): Barnabas, i.133–52; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, i.194–270; Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, i.309–567; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, *The Resurrection of the Flesh*

and *Scorpion's Sting*, iii.269–475, 545–94, 633–48; Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel* and *The Antichrist*, v.177–91, 204–19; Cyprian, *Testimonies*, v.507–57; Methodius, Banquet, vi.309–55; Lactantius, *Institutes*, vii.244–55; Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, vii.344–66; Origen, *Commentary on John* and *Commentary on Matthew* (parts), ix.297–408, 413–512. Medieval sources (for example, the works of Joachim of Fiore and Peter John Olivi) are not so easily available, though enough is published on websites and in anthologies to offer readers the opportunity to follow up some of the more important themes. The influential commentary on the Apocalypse by the fourth-century church father Tyconius is not longer extant. Modern readers are dependent on the extensive quotations from Tyconius that are preserved by writers like Beatus of Liébana, the source of many of the references to Tyconius in this book (see Steinhauser 1987).

Following the Bibliography is a summary of allusions to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament found in the marginal notes of the widely used Nestle–Aland 26th edition of the Greek New Testament, arranged by chapter and biblical book. Although John's vision offers no explicit biblical citations, the various attempts to track its relation to earlier biblical books is an important part of the book's interpretation.

We are indebted to Bernard McGinn and Richard Bauckham, who read an earlier draft of the commentary and offered helpful suggestions. To Rebekah Callow we owe a special word of thanks. She laboured hard over a period of many months to assemble much of the data which we used as the basis of our commentary. We are delighted to be able to pay tribute to her diligence and patient contribution to our work. Thanks are also due to Abram Ring for preparing the index, to Jean van Altena for her careful editing of the text, and to Kip Gresham, a Cambridge artist who has produced a series of half-tone prints in the Apocalypse, for his generous permission to use two of them. The Arts and Humanities Research Board granted additional leave which has greatly facilitated the completion of this project. This is acknowledged with grateful thanks. Thanks are also due to Clare Hall, Cambridge University, for providing a stimulating and congenial setting for a year's research leave.

Abbreviations

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
CPW	*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
PL	Patrologia Latina
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SNTSMS	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Alexander the Minorite, *Expositio*	*Expositio in Apocalypsim*
Andrew of Caesarea, *Comm.*	*Commentary on the Apocalypse.*
Augustine, *Serm.*	*Sermons*
Beatus, *Comm.*	*Commentary on the Apocalypse.*

Preface	*Preface to the Commentary on the Apocalypse*
Brightman, *Rev. of Rev.*	*Revelation of the Revelation*
Cyprian, *Test.*	*Testimonies*
Fort.	*Fortunatus, An Exhortation to Martyrdom*
Vir.	*The Dress of Virgins*
Epiphanius, *Pan*	*Against All the Heresies*
Eusebius, *HE*	*Ecclesiastical History*
ExodusR	*Exodus Rabbah*
Hippolytus, *Antichrist*	*On the Antichrist*
Hippolytus, *Daniel*	*Commentary on Daniel*
Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephes.*	*Letter to the Ephesians*
Irenaeus, *AH*	*Against the Heresies*
Dem.	*Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching*
Joachim of Fiore, *Comm. Jer.*	*Commentary on Jeremiah*
Expositio	*Expositio in Apocalypsim*
Lib. Conc.	*The Book of Concordances*
Justin, *Apol.*	*Apology*
Dial.	*Dialogue with Trypho*
Minucius Felix, *Octav.*	*Octavius*
Peter Olivi, *Lectura*	*Lectura super Apocalypsim*
Origen, *Comm. Jo.*	*Commentary on John*
Comm. Matt.	*Commentary on Matthew*
Comm. Rom.	*Commentary on Romans*
Hom. Gen.	*Homilies on Genesis*
Hom. Jer.	*Homilies on Jeremiah*
Hom. Num.	*Homilies on Numbers*
Schol Ap	*Scholia on the Apocalypse*
Tertullian, *Dress*	*De cultu feminarum*
Resurr.	*Treatise on the Resurrection*

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

(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),[1] *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.

[1] 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.

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.[2]

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

[2] 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).

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 *4Q*405 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).

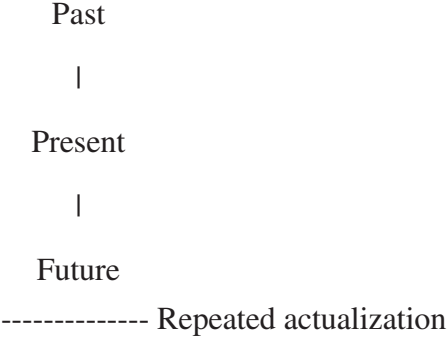
2 Differing Patterns in the Reception of the Apocalypse: A Summary

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.

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 historial 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,[3] 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,

[3] 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.

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 chiliasts 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