

# THE APOCALYPTIC GOSPEL

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# THE APOCALYPTIC GOSPEL

MYSTERY, REVELATION,  
AND COMMON SENSE

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BY JUSTIN MARK STALLER

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APOCRYPHILE  
P R E S S



# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the church.  
May it please my Lord.



# THE POEM OF BEDE THE PRIEST

Translated by Edward Marshall

An exile from the busy haunts of men,  
Forbidden now to see his country's soil,  
He—the Beloved John—to heaven triumphant soars,  
And joins the choir around the King enthroned on high.

His sacred eye surveys the world below,  
As over its waters pass the fleeting ships.  
Babel and Jerusalem, in conflict, join their several hosts  
In quick succession: here they turn in flight,  
And there the strife renew.

The white-robed soldier of the gentle Lamb  
May with his leader gain the realms of joy.  
But the scaly Serpent in the dark abyss  
Overwhelms—in hunger, flame, and pestilence—  
his gathering hordes.

Desiring to unfold this warfare's dread form,  
Its art, its numbers, its rewards,  
I wandered through the sacred plains,  
Where those of old have sown,  
Collecting thence some fruits—but few,  
So that profuseness will not cause them to loathe the feast,  
Nor forbid the weaker guest from attempting too great a preparation.

And now, if these my scanty morsels please thy taste,  
Give praise to God, Who reigns above the skies.  
Or else accept a friendly heart's intent,  
And, armed with pumice, this my verse erase.

From the early eighth-century commentary on John's Apocalypse by Bede, the venerable "Father of the Footnote." This rendering adapted from Edward Marshall, *The Explanation of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1878), 10. See also Faith Wallis, "The Poem of Bede the Priest," in *Bede: Commentary on Revelation* (Cambridge: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 99.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	13
Introduction.....	17
1.1 Disclaimers and Warnings.....	21
1.2 A Book of Mysteries .....	24
1.3 A Final Warning .....	29
2.1 The Proposal .....	33
2.2 Revelation and the Gospels.....	34
3.1 The Heavenly House of God .....	45
3.2 An Apostolic Structure.....	46
3.3 An Apocalyptic Vision .....	47
3.4 The Jewish Scriptures.....	49
3.5 A Jewish Priesthood .....	52
3.6 A Hebrew Precedent .....	56
3.7 A New Testament .....	58
3.8 The House of God.....	62
3.9 The Lamb .....	64
3.10 The Four Horsemen.....	64
3.11 A Jewish-Gentile Host .....	68
4.1 Fun With Numbers.....	71
4.2 An Old Testament Formula: $A = B$ .....	74
4.3 Markan Figures: $A + B = C$ .....	76
4.4 Johannine Figures: $5A + 2B = 7C$ .....	77
4.5 The End of Times: $X + 2X + \frac{1}{2}X = 3\frac{1}{2}X$ .....	80
4.6 Seven Thirds .....	84
4.7 Seven And Ten.....	85
4.8 $666 = \$\$ \$$ .....	90
5.1 War in Heaven .....	97
5.2 The First Woe .....	98
5.3 The Second Woe.....	102
5.4 In The Beginning.....	108
5.5 The Woman.....	109

5.6	The Dragon .....	112
5.7	The Beast .....	112
5.8	The Ram .....	114
5.9	Battlefield Earth.....	116
5.10	The Mount of Megiddo .....	118
5.11	The Place of The Skull .....	121
5.12	The Crucified Christ.....	126
5.13	The Substance of The Faith .....	130
6.1	Resurrection .....	133
6.2	The Resurrection of the Saints .....	134
6.3	The Resurrection of the Christ.....	137
6.4	The Woman in the Garden .....	141
6.5	The Resurrections .....	143
6.5	New Jerusalem.....	150
6.6	Seven Churches .....	153
6.7	Seven Angels.....	162
6.8	1000 Years .....	164
7.1	The Son of Man .....	169
7.2	A Theory of Construction.....	171
7.3	The Synoptic Core.....	175
7.4	Johannine Extensions.....	189
7.5	Pauline Nuts and Bolts .....	200
7.6	The Apocalyptic Portal.....	202
7.7	The Revelation Of John .....	209
	Afterward.....	223
	Bibliography.....	225

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I am blessed to have been raised by devout parents in an American, Protestant, fundamentalist, evangelical, Pentecostal, holiness church, and I passed through the care of several fine pastors associated with the wider organization who instilled in me a desire to serve the Lord: to do rightly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with my God. (Thank you, Bill.) Although I have grown apart in many ways from the faith of my childhood, I will be forever grateful for the careful, sincere training and instruction I therein received, and for that family of saints I still claim as my very own. May the Lord bless you and keep you.

For a time I found a digital niche within the Christian Classics Ethereal Library ([www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)), a free online library containing thousands of classic works of Christian literature, collected from out of the centuries and now hosted by Calvin College. I was a very young Christian when I first connected with its open forums, and matured substantially through my contact with saints from all over the world

who had come to examine the great works of the Christian past. I was privileged to be involved in several online discussion groups therein hosted, where I was first exposed to the substance of a more catholic faith. An idea or two developed out of those online groups—concerning John’s Gospel and also concerning Revelation—have found their respective ways into this book, but some have fallen by the wayside. I would like to thank Robert, Michael, Dan, Maria, Tom, Noshi, Mike, the CCEL staff, and several others for putting up with me, and for increasing my Christian maturity.

Academically, I have been privileged to attend very fine institutions. It was at the University of California, Berkeley that I first submitted an undergraduate honors thesis to Dr. Daniel Boyarin regarding an alternative hermeneutical approach to John’s Apocalypse. His encouragement was a godsend, and much of what is herein presented has been developed out of that early academic effort. Subsequently, I was privileged to attend the Graduate Theological Union as I studied the requisite Hebrew and Greek, and several sections of this book contain bits and pieces of papers and posts submitted to the exceptional faculty of the GTU, especially at the Pacific School of Religion, the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, and the Jesuit School of Theology. Without the robust and demanding programs of the Union, and without its interdenominational, multicultural atmosphere, this would indeed be a very different book, or no book at all. It is my hope that I will be able to further pursue this work as I continue my doctoral studies in Christian Spirituality at the GTU.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the many fine scholars, interpreters, and exegetes that I have relied upon, engaged, or otherwise cited. I have taken painstaking care to give credit where credit is due, and then some. In no particular order, several of these are: David Aune, David Barr, Richard Bauckham, George Beasley-Murray, Daniel Boyarin, Raymond E. Brown, George B. Caird, Adela Yarbro Collins, John J. Collins, Robert D. Daly, Charles H. Dodd, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, David Frankfurter, Hank Hanegraaff, Philip A. Harland, John Paul Heil, Matthias Reinhard Hoffmann, Richard Horsley, J. Nelson Kraybill, Bryan Kromholtz, James Kugel, Dorothy Lee, Burton L. Mack, Bernard McGinn, John Anthony

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All translations of the scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are my own, and are generally based on NA28 and UBS4.



## INTRODUCTION

Frederick George Smith (1880-1947) was a devout student of Revelation from a previous generation. His conclusions were very different from mine. But his prefatory notes relate much of what I must say with a grace much greater than my own:

“In the preparation for this work, I have gleaned historical information from all the general and ecclesiastical histories, encyclopedias, etc., within my reach, and only regret that I had not access to a still greater number. However, knowing that large books are seldom read, I determined in advance not to write an extensive work, but to condense the subject matter as much as possible, and therefore, I have been obliged to omit much valuable material previously gathered. For this reason many lines of prophetic truth penned by others of the sacred writers have been passed over in silence, even though relating to the same events as certain symbolic visions in the Revelation.

I have availed myself of all the helps and the commentaries within my reach in the study of this important subject. However, I have but seldom referred to the opinions of expositors. In most cases their explanations are not based upon any established rule of interpretation, and the definite laws of symbolic language are usually overlooked or disregarded. Ordinary readers of the Revelation have always supposed that the only course for them was to take the opinion of some learned expositor and to believe on his authority; and when they have found that equally learned and judicious men sustained the most opposite views, they have been bewildered amid conflicting opinions and have decided that, when such men were at issue, it was useless for them to investigate. While, therefore, I have made every available use of their opinions, it was only for the purpose of forming my

own and of enabling myself so to unfold the nature of the symbols that every one might see for himself the propriety of the interpretation given.

The present knowledge that has been attained of this prophetic book is largely the result of the combined efforts of all who have labored to unfold its meaning. No one has had the honor of first understanding all its parts, and very few have failed to contribute something, more or less, to its true interpretation. Therefore I have endeavored as much as possible to gather up the good from the labors of my predecessors and to combine it with the results of my own study and research.”

—F. G. Smith, *The Revelation Explained*, 7-8

But I will add a few things. When I began drafting this book, I was determined to keep the footnotes to a minimum. This was a decision born from my own frustration with scholars who would use footnotes to excuse themselves from clarification.<sup>1</sup> But, upon the insistence of my instructors and editors, I have decided to include more-extensive footnotes, especially where men and women much smarter than myself have said things similar or dissimilar to what I suggest—so that you, dear reader, can make your own decisions. Accordingly, I have (in most but not all instances) included actual words written by actual scholars, and not the citation only, so that you can access pertinent information not only eventually, but immediately, if that is your desire. If that is not your desire, do not worry—I have endeavored to write in such a style as makes checking the footnotes unnecessary, for those brave souls willing to take my word for it. But you should probably check the footnotes anyway.

In writing, I have aimed at a broad audience; scholars and specialists were something of an afterthought. My goal is to get through the forest, so I have not stopped to inspect every tree—though one in

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the unlikely and provocative thing I just represented as common fact, cf. Currant Lee Outhoffprint, in *A Book to Which You Don't Have Access* (Fringe: Merda Press, 1912), 13-798.

particular demands our attention. In this spirit, I have not attempted to exhaust every puzzle, or to resolve every question, or to critique every errant opinion (of which there are many), or to acknowledge every controversy, or to explain every symbol, or to display a mastery of some subject, or to nuance each point, or to sift through and analyze every hermeneutical option. If that is your interest, I highly recommend G. K. Beale's *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Book of Revelation*, and also David Aune's three volume *Word Commentary* on the same subject, though these are substantially longer and cost a little more. Alternatively, I have condensed about ten years of research—and a lifetime of interest—into what I hope is a short, easy-to-read volume, one that is the beginning, and not the end, of a new exegetical adventure for the whosoever will.

Furthermore—and this is important; I don't want you to waste your time—there are certain things you *will not* find in the following pages. Within, there are no theories about when Christ will return, no thoughts about what to expect at the world's end, no forecasts about the rise of some impending Antichrist or his evil, global machinations, no attempt to induce popular panic for profit. Those kinds of predictive prognostications belong to a different class of exegesis.

What you *will* find in this book is an attempt to look at the book of Revelation with fresh eyes, and to examine its mysteries in light of the evangelical proclamation of a crucified Christ that is front-and-center in the rest of the New Testament. The end result is an analysis that often cuts against the grain of longstanding academic assumptions and conclusions regarding the book of Revelation, the gospels, and the formation of the Christian canon. It also, on occasion, runs contrary to traditions cherished within certain quarters of the church. If this sounds alarming, my advice is to heed my words of warning, which I offer with the utmost sincerity, and to turn back now. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.

Finally, this has not been, for me, a mere game or an idle academic question, but a question of identity, and of truth, and of God. I am no mystic, nor preacher, nor priest, nor pastor of souls. But I am a

Christian. I didn't expect it to turn out like that. To do what I have herein done, I had to release many things that were dear and precious to me. And remarkably, some of these returned, and will remain with me forever. I do not expect you to become or remain a Christian based on what I tell you. This is not that kind of book. (Sincerely: make your own decisions.) But if you embrace the faith, now or later, it is my prayer that you will also embrace me as your brother.

## 1.1

# DISCLAIMERS AND WARNINGS

*And they brought to him children, that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. And seeing this, Jesus was indignant, and said to them, “Permit the children to come to me. Do not hinder them—for of such is the kingdom of God. Amen, I say to you, whosoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter therein.” And hugging them, he blessed them, laying his hands upon them (Mark 10.13-16).*

If, in your estimation, the book of Revelation is a strange and intimidating text, you are in good company. Revelation is difficult, the occasion of both fascination and frustration for a wide body of Christians. Though many are not quite sure what treatment the book should receive, others are confident that the Revelation of John contains prophecies predicting the cataclysmic end of our world, at some near or distant moment, and the birth of another. If you’ve ever heard of the *Left Behind* series or read *The Late Great Planet Earth*, you’ve been exposed to this type of popular interpretation of John’s Apocalypse.<sup>1</sup>

Other readers are not so sure that John intended to predict a distant future, given that the book implies a sense of immediate relevance for the first generation of Christians that received its visions (Rev 1.1,

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<sup>1</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 1995); Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970); Stan Campbell and James S. Bell Jr., *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2002), 276-290, 5374-5396/6636.

2.16, 3.11, 22.6-7, 12, 20). In a valiant effort, biblical scholarship has, in recent decades, been therefore appropriately eager to resurrect the “real” meaning of John’s Revelation by exposing the social and historical situation in which the book was originally published. If, for example, you’ve ever heard a scholar assert that Revelation is really about the notorious Roman emperors Nero or Domitian,<sup>2</sup> or that it refers in part to the volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii in 79 CE,<sup>3</sup> you’ve been exposed to this school of thought.

A few interpret Revelation as a story with no secret or hidden meaning at all. Rather, they read it as an entirely allegorical vision, having no significant historical referent.<sup>4</sup> While at least this approach recognizes the presence of allegory in the Apocalypse, it neglects the precedent of Daniel, a book with a noteworthy presence in the Revelator’s work, containing apocalyptic visions that require knowledge of, and sympathy towards, certain historical events from any would-be interpreter.<sup>5</sup> John’s Revelation of course contains symbolic stories that explore the conflict between good and evil, and yet both books—Daniel and Revelation—belong to similar categories of literature, depicting what might be called “historical” events in prophetic, allegorical language.<sup>6</sup> In both books, readers must supply for themselves the historical pieces of the puzzle, or risk misunderstanding the text.

<sup>2</sup> i.e., “John’s contemporaries would have known that here he refers to an emperor, and some probably would have guessed the emperor Nero, who reigned from 54 to 68 C.E. and was rumored to have been killed by his own sword, although many believed that he had survived.” Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), 32.

<sup>3</sup> “As we noted, his vision of a great mountain exploding reflects the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 C.E. The dragon’s seven heads suggests the emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, as “the number of the beast” may allude to the hidden name of Nero.” Pagels, *Revelations*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> “The Idealist view, which is often closely allied with the Preterist school, considers Revelation to be only a symbolic picture of the enduring struggle between good and evil, and between Christianity and paganism. It holds that its symbols cannot be identified as historic events either in the past or in the future; they are simply trends or ideals.” Merril C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, ed. Walter M. Dunnell (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1953-1961), 386.

<sup>5</sup> cf Daniel 7-12, Revelation 4-22

<sup>6</sup> ““HISTORICAL” APOCALYPSE (Apokalypse bezüglich der Geschichte). A subgenre of apocalypse characterized by the lack of an otherworldly journey and the inclusion of an *ex eventu*

The aim of this book is to offer up, for your consideration, a specific historical narrative as the primary referent of Revelation's obscure images and cataclysmic events.

As with all strong medicine, a warning is in order: if you are unprepared, decoding John's Apocalypse may do you more harm than good. It was written to be difficult on purpose, as a safeguard against premature deployment. Once you begin to unearth the Mystery so carefully encrypted in this vault of the Christian religion, it may become difficult to escape its power. Knowledge thus acquired may prove disruptive to the practical continuity of your faith. Consult with appropriate specialists if further complications arise.

Furthermore, the book of Revelation is puzzle literature,<sup>7</sup> and one of its great rewards is the satisfaction of dawning comprehension, as strange things become unstrange, as the problematic pieces begin to fall into place. In this sense, reading Revelation is like undertaking a series of exercises; you might benefit from watching someone else demonstrate, but the real benefits are in the doing, not the watching. If you like puzzles, and prefer to solve them on your own power,

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prophecy of history. The most typical form of revelation is the symbolic dream vision. The content typically includes an *ex eventu* prediction of the course of history, often divided into a set number of periods (periodization), followed by eschatological woes and upheavals which are signs of the end, judgment, and salvation. Apocalyptic eschatology, even in the "historical" apocalypses, typically involves the resurrection of the dead. The "historical" apocalypses are usually related to an historical crisis, e.g., the persecution of the Maccabean era or the fall of Jerusalem. Cf. Daniel 7-12; 1 Enoch 83-90; 4 Ezra; 2 Baruch." John J. Collins, *Daniel: With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, eds. Rolf Knierim and Gene M. Tucker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 1879/2057.

**Note:** Unless we qualify John's "in the spirit" account as a "symbolic dream vision," Revelation does include otherworldly journeys, contrary to the criteria which Collins doth propose, and so he might object to the classification of Revelation as an "historical" apocalypse. On the other hand Collins also acknowledges that it is impossible to neatly group most apocalypses based on so-called common characteristics, John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 6-11.

<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarship is starting to pick up on this frequency: "Mystery had become a special *topos* in apocalyptic discourse by the first century." Vernon K. Robbins, "The Intertexture of Apocalyptic Discourse in the Gospel of Mark," in *The Intertexture of Apocalyptic Discourse in the New Testament*, ed. Duane F. Watson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 29. He may have in mind the complex "mystery" fixation represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

reading further may interrupt the maturing of your own faculties, and may undermine the natural course of your spiritual development. A supplemental regimen is advised.

## 1.2 A BOOK OF MYSTERIES

There are several moments throughout the New Testament, and also the Old, where biblical authors and characters intentionally choose to obscure what they really mean. Typically the logic behind this way of speaking is simple enough—one avoids saying the wrong thing to the wrong audience, or even the right thing at the wrong time. Parables, riddles, and mysteries are a convenient way to hide truth in plain sight, to spread your message at the right frequency, so that the right audience picks up your signals, while the wrong audience does not. The book of Revelation is one such message: broadcasted to many, fully received by a few. This is the way Revelation seems designed and intended to function.

Many find this notion unsettling, especially if they envision the Christian gospel as something that is always plainspoken in style and universal in scope.<sup>8</sup> While it is true that the gospel may be universal in scope, it is necessary to remember also that its earliest preachers—men like Jesus, Paul, and John—used parables and mysteries when they were appropriate to the audience and occasion. These were not always plain-speaking men.

Jesus, for example, is depicted in the gospels as frequently addressing the general public in parables, explaining his symbolic stories only to full-time students, those who had qualified for further training and were—under his careful supervision—learning to bait, hook, and reel in an audience (Mark 1.18). Perhaps the best example of this comes early in our earliest canonical gospel,<sup>9</sup> in a passage containing the par-

<sup>8</sup> “Many suppose that this understanding of parable as dark mystery contradicts the purpose of Jesus’ open, simple stories. F. Grant, who argues that Jesus’ parables “were a device to aid his hearers’ understanding, not prevent it,” refers to [the gospel of] Mark’s theory [of parables] as “perverse.”” Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 22.

<sup>9</sup> I assume Markan priority throughout, though some still argue that Matthew came first. Cf. E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM – Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 51-119.

able of the Sower and the Seed (Mark 4.1-20). In this passage, Jesus tells of a sower who casts seeds on the ground, and describes the various conditions that prevent most of those seeds from growing up and bearing fruit. When his disciples privately express confusion over the meaning of this story, Jesus says to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all parables?” (Mark 4.13).

The story of the Sower and the Seed helps explain a primary function of evangelical parables, and alerts the reader (or listener) to a special mode of interpretation that is fundamental to the evangelical genre. Throughout the gospels, Jesus is the sower, spreading his prophetic word throughout the land of Israel. His parables, his “mysteries of the kingdom,” his hard sayings, are seeds which take root in the minds and hearts and souls of his listeners—some more successfully than others. There are, of course, people predisposed to reject his message without adequate consideration (Mark 4.4, 15). And some who listen are nevertheless shallow, not having the necessary depth to sustain growth (Mark 4.5, 16). Others are impeded by mundane circumstance, and don’t give his doctrine the attention it requires (Mark 4.6, 19). An elect few, however, are correctly disposed and they, according to their various gifts and abilities, receive his message and run with it (Mark 4.7, 20).

The beauty of this parable is that it endures beyond the immediate historical situation of Jesus, who was preaching to Jews in Palestine during the first century. It remains relevant to any teacher of the gospel, and demonstrates the need for evangelical speakers—and writers—to choose their words carefully, to use metaphors and other rhetorical devices in order to sift through the chaff in search of the wheat.<sup>10</sup> This is an ideal method for someone in search of an audience that will not merely listen to a story, but which will also appreciate the point. When employing riddles and mysteries in this sense, the gospel preacher is finding out who is who—who gets it, and who does not (Mark 4.24-25).

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<sup>10</sup> “The parable for Mark is a secret bearer of the kingdom, and his Gospel’s narrative is a hermeneutical context for the parables. Mark’s Gospel not only proclaims the kingdom of God but is also like a parable a bearer of the kingdom.” Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 55.

Jesus did not invent this way of extracting the right clientele from a mixed audience. Neither was he the first Jewish preacher and teacher to provide his disciples with symbolic puzzles that required their mental and spiritual attention (cf Prov 1.1-7). These facets or modes of biblical communication are in large part the consequence of an increasingly complex and diverse culture that began to emerge during Israel's post-exilic era, as Hellenism and Judaism started to freely intermix.<sup>11</sup>

Written perhaps one hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the Letter of Aristeas gives an account of the way the Hebrew scriptures were first translated into Greek, for the library of a foreign king. In this epistle, the high priest explains the presence of difficult, symbolic puzzles in the Jewish oracles through an analogy.<sup>12</sup> Eleazar teaches that puzzles exist in scripture so that we can mull them over, ponder them, and—like a calf ponderously chewing the cud—become stronger, more mature, transformed:<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "In the course of the Hellenistic period, even Jewish culture had been penetrated by Hellenic influences. The broad geographical dispersion of Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean empire had accelerated this influence, reflected in later Jewish religious literature such as the Wisdom books, in the Septuagint and in the biblical scholarship of Alexandria, and in the Platonic religious philosophy of Philo. But with Christianity, and particularly with Paul's mission to expand its gospel beyond the confines of Judaism, the Judaic impulse in turn began a countervailing movement that radically transformed the Hellenic contribution to the Christian world view emerging in the later centuries of the classical era. The powerful currents of Greek metaphysics, epistemology, and science, the characteristic Greek attitudes toward myth, religion, philosophy, and personal fulfillment—all were transfigured in the light of the Judaeo-Christian revelation." Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1991), 106.

<sup>12</sup> "Eleazar himself, in accounting for the peculiar dietary restrictions of the Jews, explains them either as having a rational basis with the objective of practicing justice or as having symbolic value demanding allegorical interpretation. They aim at truth and serve as a mark of right reason. "Aristeas" has the High Priest speak like a Greek philosopher. The treatise plainly portrays cultivated Jews as comfortable in a Hellenic setting, attuned to Greek customs and modes of thought, and content under the protection of a Hellenistic monarch." Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 215.

<sup>13</sup> *Letter of Aristeas*, 152-164, in R. H. Charles, "The Letter of Aristeas," in *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), <http://m.ccel.org/ccel/charles/otpseudepig/aristeas.htm> (accessed March 2, 2014);

He [the lawgiver, Moses] bids men also, when lying down to sleep and rising up again, to meditate upon the works of God, not only in word, but by observing distinctly the change and impression produced upon them, when they are going to sleep, and also their waking, how divine and incomprehensible the change from one of these states to the other is. The excellency of the analogy in regard to discrimination and memory has now been pointed out to you, according to our interpretation of “the cloven hoof and the chewing of the cud” (Letter of Aristeas, 160-161).

Certain passages are difficult and obscure, argues Eleazar, so that we can feast on them, dwelling on them and reviewing them over time, improving both our faculties and our character. Further, many of these puzzles are fully decipherable only to the “initiated,” those who are given special knowledge by an insider regarding the spiritual meaning of the literal language.<sup>14</sup> In explaining Jewish dietary restrictions for a non-Jewish audience, Eleazar seems to be revealing a new dimension in them that is not plainly evident. A critic might argue that he is allegorizing scriptures that require no allegory. An apologist might counter that his was a valid way to make old scriptures relevant to a new situation, for an audience that had recently become attracted to the ancient oracles of the Jews, but was not obligated to observe them—an audience of Gentiles.<sup>15</sup> “Sure, the laws of Moses seem bizarre,” says Eleazar. “So let me tell you what they really mean. Let me initiate you into the true meanings of the Jewish oracles.” For his Gentile audience, the laws of Moses held no legally binding authority, but nevertheless became morally informative. By the contemplation of these allegorized laws, they were transformed.<sup>16</sup>

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cf Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates: Letter of Aristeas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 163.

<sup>14</sup> *Letter of Aristeas*, 154

<sup>15</sup> cf *Letter of Aristeas*, 136-138

<sup>16</sup> “The treatise of “Aristeas” is a complex, multilayered, and occasionally entertaining piece of work. In these regards, it exemplifies much of the Jewish literature in Greek that emerged in the Hellenistic period. No single purpose drove its composition. The idea, prevalent in modern scholarship, that it promoted a synthesis between Judaism and Hellenism is inadequate. Eleazar affirms the uniqueness of Jewish practices and principles, Jewish sages

Keeping this in mind, consider the voice of Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, in the New Testament (Rom 11.13, Gal 2.2). Throughout the Pauline writings we can hear this voice speaking about, and in, mysteries (1 Cor 4.1, 13.1-2, 14.1-2, 15.51, Col 1.27, 2.2, 4.3, 2 Thes 2.1-12, 1 Tim 3.8-10, 16). Paul believed himself to be in possession of a hidden wisdom, to which only a few people were fully privy (1 Cor 1.18-3.4). He was careful to “speak wisdom among those who are mature,” which is “the wisdom of God in a Mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages” (1 Cor 2.6-7). This wisdom was a gift of the divine spirit, and was the basis for a method of Christian instruction through comparison and analogy, which was above reproach (1 Cor 2.10, 13). Paul even seems to attribute this method directly to Christ (1 Cor 2.16). And, like Jesus, Paul is more than willing to give his audience only as much wisdom as it can handle (1 Cor 3.1-4).

This approach to revelation—this method of carefully, selectively explaining the things of heaven to those upon earth—is something we find also in the Gospel of John (John 3.10-12). Although in John he tells almost nothing resembling a synoptic parable, Jesus is presented as a riddler at every turn. From his first sayings to his farewell discourse (John 1.52, 16.25-26), Jesus barrages his befuddled listeners with cryptic puzzles and enigmas that they cannot understand. Only in hindsight, and with special assistance, do his followers begin to make sense of the briefly apparent, arresting, and brilliant spectacle that is Jesus Christ crucified (John 15.26-27, 16.5-7).

Being also many other things, our New Testament is a sort of developmental record, one that shows us some of the ways in which apocalyptic and eschatological rhetoric was developed and employed among the earliest believers. The canon is the best of their literary first fruits, consciously sorted and gathered by the maturing church, for the benefit of those who would follow.<sup>17</sup>

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surpass Greek philosophers, and the Torah receives obeisance from the king of Egypt. This narrative, like so many others, implies that Jews are fully at home in the world of Hellenic culture. The use of a fictive Greek as narrator and admirer of Judaism carries that implication clearly enough. But the message is still more pointed: Jews have not only digested Hellenic culture, they have also surmounted it.” Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 220.

<sup>17</sup> “The canon cannot be determined wholly by the church’s acceptance of the books. Some were widely received, a few were hesitantly accepted by certain churches and not all by

In the Pauline writings we find a charismatic, apostolic ministry actively reinterpreting the whole of Jewish tradition in light of what scholars sometimes call the Christ event, and what the faithful are often inclined to call the resurrection.<sup>18</sup> In Paul we find early evidence that many people expected a sudden and cataclysmic end to the present order of the world. The apostle comfortably fits in with this crowd (1 Cor 9.16-23), but he has seen some things that he keeps to himself (2 Cor 12.1-6).

In the gospels we find a Jesus who tells parables, riddles, and mysteries about himself and Israel (Mark 2.10, 28), frequently in anticipation of his own crucifixion and resurrection (John 12.34), but also in anticipation of Jerusalem's impending destruction (Mark 13, 14.62). In the synoptic tradition especially, the gospels bind together the fate of Jesus and the fate of Israel, as if they are one single figure (Mark 8.31-32, 9.3-13, 13.14-27).

And, late in apostolic Christianity, we have the Revelation.

### 1.3 A FINAL WARNING

You may discover, upon further inquiry into the signs and symbols of Revelation, that not everything you know or believe about the Christian gospel is as it seems. You may experience some emotional dis-

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others, and some were not mentioned until a relatively late date, or else their right to be included in the canon was definitely disputed. Local prejudice or individual taste could influence the verdict that had come down from the churches and the writers of antiquity. Notwithstanding this fact, what one person or section of the church rejected another person or section accepted; and it was not true that those who passed judgment were so uncritical as to accept anything that struck their fancy irrespective of its inherent merits. The critique of the ancients was no less fallible than that of modern scholars. On the other hand, they had access to records and traditions that have now perished, and their testimony cannot be set aside simply because it does not belong to the twentieth century. Ecclesiastical assent to canonicity supplies corroborative evidence, though it may not in itself be decisive." Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 402.

<sup>18</sup> e.g., "The hermeneutical pattern for Paul's interpretation of the Hebrew/Jewish scriptures seems to center on a comparative dimension that relates Israel's redemptive history to those who confess Jesus as the Christ. Paul readily actualized these traditions because he believed that the Christ event had altered history as he understood it." B. J. Oropeza, "Echoes of Isaiah in the Rhetoric of Paul: New Exodus, Wisdom, and the Humility of the Cross in Utopian-Apocalyptic Expectations," in *The Intertexture of Apocalyptic Discourse in the New Testament*, ed. Duane F. Watson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 91.

comfort, perhaps even intellectual or spiritual disorientation. These are unavoidable risks, incumbent upon those who would undertake a journey into higher realms and chance a conversation with the spirits.<sup>19</sup> I cannot guarantee that you will return unchanged, or even changed for the better. Proceed with caution.<sup>20</sup>

I have been so careful to warn you—believe it or not—out of a genuine concern for your wellbeing, and not as a thinly veiled effort to arouse your further interest. As a matter of disclosure I must admit that John’s Revelation has been instrumental in my own spiritual formation. The challenges for me have been many and difficult, and so they promise to remain. But perhaps this will not be your experience.

My hope is that you will find what I have uncovered by the way to be beneficial, but the power of evaluation is the privilege of the reader, not the author. Perhaps what follows may seem like the desperate efforts of a modern mind trying to redeem an irredeemable error; you may come to believe that I am deluded, heretical, or—God forbid!—irrelevant. Or perhaps what I must say will seem perfectly

<sup>19</sup> The ever-enigmatic Edward Swedenborg understood this risk: “249. To speak with spirits, however, is at this day seldom given, since it is dangerous;\* for then the spirits know that they are with man, which otherwise they do not know; and evil spirits are such that they hold man in deadly hatred and desire nothing more than to destroy him, both soul and body. . . . Those who think much on religious subjects, and are so intent upon them as to see them as it were inwardly in themselves, begin also to hear spirits speaking with them; for religious persuasions, whatever they are, when man from himself dwells upon them, and does not modify them by the various things of use in the world, go interiorly and dwell there and occupy the whole spirit of the man, thus entering the spiritual world and affecting spirits there.” Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell: From Things Heard and Seen*, (EBook: Theodore D. Webber, 2012), 1875-1881/8961; “\*Man is able to speak with spirits and angels, and the ancients frequently spoke with them. In some earths angels and spirits appear in human form and speak with the inhabitants. But on this earth at this day it is dangerous to speak with the spirits, unless man be in true faith, and led by the Lord.” *Ibid*, 7455/8961.

<sup>20</sup> Kugel’s admonition also bears repeating: “WARNING: This book is intended for both the specialist and the general reader, those who already have great familiarity with the Bible and those who have never read a page of it. It is my hope that any reader will be able to learn a great deal from it. But there is one group of readers who must be cautioned about its contents. Precisely because this book deals with modern biblical scholarship, many of the things it discusses contradict the accepted teachings of Judaism and Christianity and may thus be disturbing to people of traditional faith.” James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Free Press, 2007), 253/25533.

sensible, and it will be a minor thing for you to agree; maybe it will seem entirely too complex, and it will be a minor thing for you to disagree. Perhaps you have better things to do with your time, things more productive than the close examination of an esoteric text produced almost two thousand years ago for an obscure religious subculture. In any case, I can only cast my words to the wind. May they take root in the right soil and season.