

GREG CAREY

Death, the End of History, and Beyond: Eschatology in the Bible

INTERPRETATION *Resources for the Use of
Scripture in the Church*

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“Writing about eschatology is an exceedingly risky business, involving as it does our deepest fears and longings. In this fine volume, Greg Carey surveys the biblical canon with intelligence, honesty, and even wit. The results place before readers the diverse witness of the Bible to hope in God’s good future. An important, accessible read!”

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of New Testament Literature and Exegesis,
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“Scripture’s many and varied perspectives on eschatology require slow and careful analysis—especially for those of us who preach and teach. Carey shepherds us through the process in this volume by deftly raising interpretive hurdles and outlining the rhetorical agendas that motivate biblical authors. The proposals in this book are timely and crucial for those who want to reflect on the future that awaits us individually, collectively, and ecologically.”

—Donyelle C. McCray,
Associate Professor of Homiletics,
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“In *Death, the End of History, and Beyond*, Greg Carey is a consummate tour guide and teacher, drawing readers into conversation about ultimate questions regarding the very shape and future of the world and the possibility of life beyond death. Modeling an uncommon and refreshing epistemic humility, Carey invites the audience behind the curtain, emphasizing the limits of our knowledge and the rich diversity of ancient and modern views. Like the sources he examines, Carey’s own work is both creative and constructive. It is also eminently practical, foregrounding the consequences of eschatology for moral imagination and equipping preachers to proclaim Christian hope.”

—Anathea Portier-Young,
Associate Professor of Old Testament,
Duke Divinity School

“Greg Carey has done us a great service. In this careful examination of the Bible’s multiple eschatological traditions and texts, we are offered a thoughtful and thorough exploration of the biblical writers’ richly differing visions of the future of the world, of history and time as we know it, of what lies beyond death, and, crucially, of how these perspectives impinge on the present. The author also gives good counsel on how these texts and themes may be preached. The approach is exegetical, theological, and deeply pastoral, with rich connections repeatedly drawn between biblical perspectives and our contemporary situations and worldviews. An invaluable resource for preaching and teaching.”

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INTERPRETATION

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To Matthew, in Hope

Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:8)

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SERIES FOREWORD

This series of volumes supplements *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. The commentary series offers an exposition of the books of the Bible written for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith. This new series is addressed to the same audience and serves a similar purpose, providing additional resources for the interpretation of Scripture, but now dealing with features, themes, and issues significant for the whole rather than with individual books.

The Bible is composed of separate books. Its composition naturally has led its interpreters to address particular books. But there are other ways to approach the interpretation of the Bible that respond to other characteristics and features of the Scriptures. These other entries to the task of interpretation provide contexts, overviews, and perspectives that complement the book-by-book approach and discern dimensions of the Scriptures that the commentary design may not adequately explore.

The Bible as used in the Christian community is not only a collection of books but also itself a book that has a unity and coherence important to its meaning. Some volumes in this new series will deal with this canonical wholeness and seek to provide a wider context for the interpretation of individual books as well as a comprehensive theological perspective that reading single books does not provide.

Other volumes in the series will examine particular texts, like the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount, texts that have played such an important role in the faith and life of the Christian community that they constitute orienting foci for the understanding and use of Scripture.

A further concern of the series will be to consider important and often difficult topics, addressed at many different places in the books of the canon, that are of recurrent interest and concern to the church in its dependence on Scripture for faith and life. So the series will include volumes dealing with such topics as eschatology, women, wealth, and violence.

The books of the Bible are constituted from a variety of kinds of literature such as narrative, laws, hymns and prayers, letters,

parables, and miracle stories. To recognize and discern the contribution and importance of all these different kinds of material enriches and enlightens the use of Scripture. Volumes in the series will provide help in the interpretation of Scripture's literary forms and genres.

The liturgy and practices of the gathered church are anchored in Scripture, as with the sacraments observed and the creeds recited. So another entry to the task of discerning the meaning and significance of biblical texts explored in this series is the relation between the liturgy of the church and the Scriptures.

Finally, there is certain ancient literature, such as the Apocrypha and the noncanonical gospels, that constitutes an important context to the interpretation of Scripture itself. Consequently, this series will provide volumes that offer guidance in understanding such writings and explore their significance for the interpretation of the Protestant canon.

The volumes in this second series of Interpretation deal with these important entries into the interpretation of the Bible. Together with the commentaries, they compose a library of resources for those who interpret Scripture as members of the community of faith. Each of them can be used independently for its own significant addition to the resources for the study of Scripture. But all of them intersect the commentaries in various ways and provide an important context for their use. The authors of these volumes are biblical scholars and theologians who are committed to the service of interpreting the Scriptures in and for the church. The editors and authors hope that the addition of this series to the commentaries will provide a major contribution to the vitality and richness of biblical interpretation in the church.

The Editors

PREFACE

“Nobody knows what happens after we die.” I wish I’d recorded that quote immediately after hearing it, as I’m not sure I have it just right. Yet I’m just as mindful of friends who describe their absolute confidence that a deceased loved one now resides in heaven. Presumably, if I were to reply that no one could possibly know what lies beyond this life, they’d reply, “Yes, I do.”

Eschatology involves questions such as what lies beyond death, the sacred shape of the cosmos, and the direction of history. Who could *know* the truth about any of these things? Some Christians think they do, but most of us do not. I want to believe Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was correct when he said, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” In the face of climate change, resurgent racism, and widening inequality, I’m not so sure.

“So now you’re an expert on eschatology. Must be nice to know all those things.” I don’t know these things, and I don’t claim to. Throughout my career I’ve written about the book of Revelation and other apocalyptic literature as biblical scholars generally do. We interpret the texts as literary works, taking account of their social, historical, and cultural contexts. We trace literary patterns, rhetorical arguments, and religious meaning. We often write about specific questions. Where did the Son of Man concept come from? How do we account for Revelation’s violent imagery? Did Paul change his mind about the afterlife? We biblical scholars relish the Bible’s historical contingency and capacity to include diverse, even conflicting, points of view. We generally avoid making broad theological pronouncements of our own.

For these reasons I was at once honored and frightened when Brent Strawn, now of Duke University Divinity School, invited me to contribute this volume to the Interpretation Resources series. I felt honored because I highly respect Brent and the series general editor Sam Balentine of Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The Interpretation Resources series features authoritative volumes by distinguished authors. But I also felt intimidated. Very few people are expert in the full range of literature and scholarship addressed in this book. I am not one of them. More importantly,

I was reluctant to cross that divide between textual analysis and the theological synthesis this project requires.

I accepted the task for two primary reasons. First, biblical scholarship constitutes a fundamental dimension of my Christian vocation. Although I am a layperson, I've been preaching since I was sixteen years old and am active in a variety of ministries. I teach in a theological seminary, preparing people for Christian leadership. This project has called me to pursue this vocation with integrity. Although I think about the Bible's relationship with theology every day, it's high time I thought a single theological issue all the way through, particularly a set of issues that lie so close to my body of research. Second, I knew this requirement would force me to learn a great deal, acquainting myself with texts and scholarship about which I needed to know more.

In the end, I am profoundly grateful for this experience. I have learned much, although it remains true that I'm more impressed by the gaps in my scholarship than by its content. I've changed my mind about questions that are important to scholars and issues that matter to believers—topics that sometimes, but not always, overlap. Most rewarding, this book advances some proposals for how contemporary Christians might imagine the kingdom or reign of God, the resurrection, the return of Jesus, the course of history, and the judgment of God. Indeed, no one knows the ultimate truth about any of these things. But I have found a voice for speaking to them.

Without question, the research underlying this volume is uneven. It covers an enormous amount of territory. In some areas I knew the primary and secondary literature quite well. In others I was generally familiar with the flow of the conversation. In still others I had a fuzzy familiarity: I knew just a little more than a well-rounded liberal arts graduate should. The Covid-19 pandemic has restricted my access to valuable material, and sometimes it shows. So far as I'm aware, I've given credit where credit is due for the perspectives and information that shape this study. At some points I hope to add insight or new information to the conversation. I would suspect the primary value of the volume lies in three areas. First, it attempts to make sense of a vast amount of wisdom from predecessors and colleagues. Second, it provides one model for what it means to grapple with the Bible theologically. Most importantly, it offers a constructive set of proposals regarding eschatology that is deeply informed by the many biblical witnesses.

I extend my gratitude to Susan Hylan of Emory University's Candler School of Theology, the Interpretation Resources editor who worked most closely with this volume. She is a wonderful colleague, and this volume is all the richer for her generosity and insight. I am grateful to her and to Sam Balentine for their encouragement, their patience, and their editorial wisdom. Julie Mullins, an editor with Westminster John Knox, has made substantive positive suggestions and offered invaluable counsel, and Bob Land surely stands among the saints for his editorial wisdom and care. Kendra-Grace Love, a Candler alumna, contributed to some of the technical aspects of bringing this book together.

Some other colleagues have contributed to this project directly; others may not know they deserve my thanks. These include Eric Barreto of Princeton Theological Seminary, Lisa Bowns of Princeton Theological Seminary, David A. Burnett of Marquette University, Jaime Clark-Soles of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, Beverly Gaventa of Baylor University, Mark Goodacre of Duke University, Anatheia Portier-Young of Duke Divinity School, Rob Seesengood of Albright College, and Matthew Skinner of Luther Seminary. Myka Kennedy Stephens, seminary librarian of Lancaster Theological Seminary, and her staff, including Tim Whitney, made materials available to me under the challenging circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, and Jamie Schindler, Lancaster's former faculty assistant, has provided both clerical skills and editorial expertise. My Lancaster colleague Julia O'Brien consults on every significant project I undertake, while Lee Barrett has contributed invaluable cautions and resources from the world of academic theology. Lancaster Theological Seminary provided me with a fall 2019 sabbatical leave that proved absolutely essential for the completion of this project, and I extend my gratitude to our board of trustees, to President Emerita Carol Lytch, to our former dean David Mellott, now president of Christian Theological Seminary, and to Dean Vanessa Lovelace for their support.

My family deserves gratitude as well. My wife, Jennifer Craighhead Carey, gifts me with love, wisdom, and clarity. For too many months we've largely worked in the same space in our home, accommodating one another through Zoom sessions and other demands but also enjoying some precious time to go on walks and sip warm drinks. My stepsons, Andrew and Isaac Schlager, also endured

PREFACE

sharing our common workspace for many of these months, and graciously so. My daughters, Erin Carey and Emily Carey, support my work enthusiastically, while my incredible grandson, Matthew, informs me that he is “always” sticking his tongue out at me, even in his sleep. Given the times we’re living in and the challenges we face, how could I not dedicate this book to Matthew? He, like every other child, bears the promise of life, vitality, and hope—and the challenge to leave him and billions like him a world in which they may flourish.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
LBT	Library of Biblical Theology
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
NETS	New English Translation of the Septuagint
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NovTSup	Supplements to <i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
RRA	Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SemeiaSt	Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WAW	Writings from the Ancient World
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Introduction

The Domain of Eschatology

Eschatology is a big word, and not just because it would stump lots of spelling bee contestants. Its eleven-letter spelling suggests the scope of the question: where are things headed, ultimately?

We might ask the question about ourselves as individuals: where are things headed for you and me? The most recent Pew Religious Landscape Study, conducted in 2014, found that 72 percent of Americans believed in heaven, a ratio that had dropped just a little from 2007, when 74 percent affirmed that belief. African Americans are more likely to believe in heaven than are other racial groups. Belief in hell was less popular—but more common than I had expected, at 58 percent. Lots of people believe in an afterlife. Those numbers will continue to decline unless something changes, as younger Americans are less likely to believe in heaven or hell.¹ Nevertheless, most Americans believe in some form of afterlife. It's reasonable to imagine that this belief proves important to them at some points in their lives.

It is unclear how deeply afterlife belief derives from formal religious teaching. Many people experience “visitations” of deceased loved ones, experiences that generally have little or nothing to do with the teachings of their own religious traditions. These

1. Pew Foundation, Religious Landscape Study, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

visitations might involve seeing or hearing from their loved ones. Sometimes they take the form of omens: mystical signs that indicate the loved one's presence. Every week millions of Christians confess they believe in the "resurrection of the body." In my experience few actually believe in a resurrected body, hoping instead that we have immortal souls. Many suppose the soul escapes from the body at death, leaving the body disposable. Think how often we hear, "I bet she's smiling down on us right now." Even most evangelical Christians, whose churches teach that faith in Jesus is the only way to enter heaven, believe all people will enter heaven, where they will reunite with their loved ones.² Perhaps formal church teaching holds less influence than wishful thinking.

But eschatology is a big word, and our individual fates account for only one dimension of the question. A second question involves the course of history: where are things headed? The question forces us to ask what we believe about God, specifically whether God will bring all things together in a way that is peaceful and just. Some Christians argue that God is moving the world toward progress and will continue doing so until the return of Jesus. Others maintain that human sin is intractable, so history's only hope lies in a dramatic intervention by God. Most adherents of the Bible prophecy movement, also known as millenarians, hold this second view. Still others suggest that God is as present and active right now as God will ever be. Many biblical traditions address the question of God's aims for history.

A third set of questions lies at the intersection where eschatology meets cosmology: what is ultimately real? The question seems vague because it is. Nevertheless, in a biblical context, belief in an afterlife implies expectations regarding souls and bodies, heavens and hells, and supernatural beings like angels and demons—not to mention convictions concerning the nature of God. Jewish and especially Christian eschatology took a distinctive turn with the emergence of apocalyptic literature in the third and second centuries BCE, where these questions garnered a great deal of attention. Although they do not represent a primary focus of this book, there's no avoiding questions of ultimate reality.

2. LifeWay Research, "Americans Love God and the Bible, Are Fuzzy on the Details," September 27, 2016, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/>.

So eschatology is a long word that covers a lot of territory. *Personal eschatology* involves what lies beyond death, where we're headed as individuals. *Historical eschatology* poses the "Where is the world heading?" question. Our third category, *cosmology*, deals with realities that lie beyond our phenomenal world, transcendent things we cannot know through our five senses. Personal and historical eschatology get more attention in popular religion, but a good deal of biblical and related literature explores the heavens and the beings who dwell there. When you think about it, our cosmological assumptions undergird anything we might imagine concerning the destinies of human beings, of civilizations, and of the world.

It's natural to ask "What does the Bible say?" about such things. But if eschatology is a big word, the Bible is a big book: more accurately, a small library. The Bible contains diverse points of view, including ideas that developed over the course of centuries. When it comes to eschatology, the Bible says lots of things—things that don't all cohere. The Bible does not provide a unified perspective on the topics we're investigating. Nor does this book attempt a grand synthesis, which would violate the integrity of the diverse testimonies included in the Bible. Instead, we offer proposals for contemporary readers who desire to interpret the Bible's eschatological language faithfully.

The Bible is scarcely the only source that informs people's eschatological outlooks. Other religious and spiritual traditions have their own views. And the secular world is filled with eschatological discourse. People find comfort in their own beliefs about what lies beyond death. Historical eschatologies range from the pervasive belief in human progress to gloom and doom. Will climate change put an end to the human experiment? Have we so outsmarted ourselves with artificial intelligence that machines will bring our demise? Scientists have long speculated about our vulnerability to a grand epidemic even more devastating than one we're experiencing as I write. Some people fear the human race has outrun its boundaries; others will tell you the market holds the solutions to our problems. As for cosmology, yes, you can take courses about angels and archangels that have almost nothing to do with conventional theology—but no, generally not for academic credit.

From a biblical or theological perspective, eschatology involves more than a belief in progress or concern that we mortals will bring about our own demise. It's more than optimism. The core of

theological eschatology is God. Israelite, Jewish, and Christian traditions confess that God is faithful and creative, that God endowed the world with beauty and abundance, that God created humankind for community with one another and with God, and that God actively works to bend evil toward good. Apart from God, there is no biblical eschatology.³

As public biblical scholarship, this book aims to survey the broad range of biblical perspectives on eschatological topics. More often than not, other scholars have already spoken to the texts and the questions addressed here. If this book contributes unique value, it will rarely, though occasionally, lie in primary insights concerning the biblical texts. The contribution should lie in the ways we gather and assess the biblical materials on the whole, and in the ways we make sense of them together. To repeat, making sense of the Bible does not necessarily mean presenting a grand doctrinal synthesis.

My perspective is Christian, specifically Protestant, and theological. I care about eschatology. I believe ancient Israelite, Jewish, and Christian testimonies on eschatological matters have value. They remain relevant. They inform our faith. They present us with assumptions and questions we may find strange—and in doing so expand our perspectives in life-giving ways. Although that surprise may feel disorienting at first, by engaging these materials we may find ourselves thinking and behaving differently.

Years ago I opened a book with a quote from Umberto Eco's fantasy novel *Baudolino*: "There is nothing better than imagining other worlds . . . to forget the painful one we live in. At least I thought so then. I hadn't realized that, imagining other worlds, you end up changing this one."⁴ I choose to agree with Baudolino. The stories we tell, the word pictures we paint, and the metaphors we promote bear real-life fruit.

For example, almost everyone who reads this book will experience surprise at some of the perspectives reflected in the Bible. One thing I've come to appreciate only in the past several years is that biblical authors generally take death seriously. They neither deny nor evade death, not even by appealing to notions like the

3. Bill T. Arnold, "Old Testament Eschatology and the Rise of Apocalypticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

4. Umberto Eco, *Baudolino* (New York: Harcourt, 2002), 99.

resurrection or eternal life. I've come to appreciate this sensibility. If we truly acknowledge death as "the last enemy," as Paul does (1 Cor. 15:26), we may be less prone to rush through grief, more outraged by cultural systems that devalue human life. This is pure speculation, but perhaps Christians who are quick to talk about the afterlife are less likely to regard health care as a basic human right. Maybe "those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4; see also Luke 6:25) will protect life more fiercely.

The Bible's diverse viewpoints offer a second benefit. So long as we don't rush to develop a single rigid view of eschatological matters, we may benefit from imagining things in multiple ways. To offer another example, the Bible includes multiple images of judgment. We find judgment in this world and judgment at the end of the age, and we observe judgment applied to individuals, to nations, and to the cosmos. Scattered here and there are resources for universal hope. With the Bible itself extending hospitality to so many points of view, perhaps the church might do so as well. Even conflicting visions can be instructive. The notion of divine judgment affirms God's commitment to justice. While some of us may fear divine examination—I do—we may also extend our imaginations beyond the individual to the social. We may hear the testimony that justice is good news for most of the world's inhabitants, hard truth for others. Meanwhile, the hints of universalism remind us never to give up on God's mercy. We don't have to choose.

Although my perspective is theological, public scholarship addresses a much broader audience that may not share my convictions, assumptions, and values. My theological approach does not conform to the movement that identifies itself as "the theological interpretation of Scripture." As I understand it, in that movement theological norms precede and govern interpretation: interpretation speaks from and for the church, and it requires adherence to those already given creedal norms. In my view public scholarship, theological or not, must rely upon arguments and evidence that aim to persuade a much broader audience that embraces people who do not share a common point of view. Our considerations include historical and cultural context, the processes of literary development, the interaction of canonical literature with a host of other texts and cultural artifacts, and the literary shape of the biblical and related materials. As a Protestant I do privilege the Protestant Bible, but I am reading it in conversation with a much broader range of materials. Extracanonical and

<p>Deliver your servant, <i>N.</i>, O Sovereign Lord Christ, from all evil, and set <i>him</i> free from every bond; that <i>he</i> may rest with all your saints in the eternal habitations; where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. <i>Amen.</i></p>	<p>With faith in Jesus Christ, we receive the body of our brother (sister) <i>N.</i> for burial. Let us pray with confidence to God, the Giver of life, that he will raise <i>him</i> to perfection in the company of the saints.</p>
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We find this kind of tension in other denominational worship resources. The United Church of Christ's *Book of Worship* includes an Order for the Time of Dying. There we encounter prayers suggesting hope for a grand future reunion along with those expressing hope that death brings people immediately into God's presence.⁶

<p>Let death be as gentle as nightfall, promising a new day when sighs of grief turn to songs of joy, and we are joined again in the presence of Jesus Christ in our heavenly reunion.</p>	<p>May you rest this <i>day/night</i> in the peace of God's eternal home.</p>
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The language we're considering is evocative rather than precise. Perhaps the Episcopal and UCC liturgists were careful in avoiding the kind of precision that leads to contradiction.

The liturgies reflect the New Testament's own ambiguity. Luke's Jesus tells a man crucified alongside him that "today" they will both enter Paradise (23:43), while Matthew depicts very dead people rising from their graves at the moment of Jesus' crucifixion (27:52–53). Even Paul sends mixed messages. He voices the expectation that he will remain alive upon Jesus' return, while believers who are dead will be resurrected at that moment (1 Thess. 4:14–17; 1 Cor. 15:51–52), *and* he suggests that death will usher him directly into the presence of Christ (Phil. 1:21–23). Maybe Paul changed his mind?

We consider the diversity of biblical views regarding the afterlife later in this book. For the moment, it's enough to recognize how ambiguities within our tradition express themselves in the popular

6. *Book of Worship, United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church of Christ Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986), 361, 365.

imagination. Many people wonder what, if anything, lies beyond this life, especially in times of grief and as we grapple with our own mortality. Dale C. Allison, a scholar who knows as much about biblical eschatology as anyone, acknowledges that many people prefer the notion of an immortal soul over the metaphor of resurrection, a trend that accelerated during the Enlightenment.⁷ Perhaps our afterlife hopes amount to wishful thinking. Julius Caesar built a strategy upon the observation that people readily believe what they want to believe, a quote at once obvious and profound.⁸ Biblical authors deploy multiple, even conflicting images to imagine this reality. This book aims to explicate those views to the best of our ability. Acknowledging we cannot attain certain knowledge on the subject, and accounting for the conventions of biblical writing, we explore what value these metaphors have for shaping our own reflections. Hopefully we can think about our individual fates in ways that do more than satisfy our own anxieties. If we're familiar with conversations about loved ones looking down at us from heaven or resting in the arms of Jesus, we also have the opportunity to imagine an afterlife in which wrongs meet their resolution, community flourishes, and creation is renewed. We are responsible for the biblical metaphors we lift up and the ones we minimize. This book offers resources for dealing with multiple, even conflicting ways of imagining ultimate realities.

Speaking of wishful thinking, many people—including serious theologians—believe an afterlife is necessary because it can compensate for the prevalence of injustice in this life. Indeed, that may be precisely how resurrection hope emerged: as a response to injustice.⁹ Without question many individuals live and die without experiencing as much justice as injustice. There are obvious cases, like persons who experience brief lives of intense emotional or physical pain. But there's also the balance of human existence. In his brilliant history of humankind, Yuval Noah Harari demonstrates that while the agricultural revolution created the conditions for rapid population growth among humans, it also created structures that amplified domination and inequality. Once people learned to cultivate land and to store foodstuffs, it became possible for some to appropriate

7. Dale C. Allison Jr., *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 25–30.

8. Julius Caesar, *Gallie War* 3.18.

9. C. D. Elledge, *Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism, 200 BCE–CE 200* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 199.

the land and labor of others, passing down their advantages from generation to generation. Likewise, large-scale war began to make sense as a means of acquiring and defending resources. Over the millennia, humankind grew both more violent and more stratified. Most people, in fact, live in states of permanent oppression.¹⁰ This reality challenges belief in God's goodness. After all, we'd expect a just god to create a fairer world for that deity's creatures. Many hope an afterlife will rectify these inequities.

Eschatological Trajectories: The Course of History

Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of saying, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." He said it so many times and in so many places, the saying occurs with variations. Is it "the arc of the moral universe" or "the moral arc of the universe" that bends toward justice? The basic metaphor seems to go back to Theodore Parker, the celebrated Unitarian and abolitionist.

In their ways Parker and King were laying out an eschatological vision for the trajectory of history. Confronted with slavery (Parker) and Jim Crow (King), both preachers voiced a confidence that justice would finally have its way. Parker did so in the tentative manner typical of Unitarian speculation, while King pronounced the sentiment with the conviction of a civil rights evangelist.¹¹ I suppose we'll never know whether either preacher believed the statement literally: "Dr. King, do you actually believe that things are getting better and justice will eventually prevail?" I suspect they did. For his part, King ruled out the "strangely irrational notion" that time will eventually kill all ills, but he also believed that God is active in history.¹² Neither King nor Parker was speaking to a philosophy seminar: both preachers were calling people to action.

10. Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

11. Mychal Denzel Smith, "The Truth about 'The Arc of the Moral Universe,'" *Huffington Post*, January 18, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_n_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4.

12. Lisa Marie Bowens, "God and Time: Exploring Black Notions of Prophetic and Apocalyptic Eschatology," in *T & T Clark Handbook of African American Theology*, ed. Antonia Michelle Daymond, Frederick L. Ware, and Eric Lewis Williams (New York: T & T Clark, 2019), 220.

One flavor of eschatological discourse trades in visions of history's ultimate resolution. Prophetic and apocalyptic literature present these scenarios as products of divine revelation: "Thus says the LORD" and "Then I saw." Scholars still debate the degree to which authentic mystical experience underlies such texts, but one thing is beyond debate: claims regarding the final course of history begin with convictions about God's character and purposes. A just God who creates a good world, elects Israel, and resurrects Jesus (for early Christian authors) will not allow injustice to go on forever. In biblical literature the "moral universe" does not have an arc; it has a Creator.

As with Parker and King, biblical eschatological discourse does not end in pie-in-the-sky optimism. Historically oriented eschatology comes with a call to faithful action. Millennial hope—that is, hope that history is moving toward its blessed resolution, and soon—constitutes one essential stream in American colonial history. The Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay interpreted their project in eschatological terms, as did their fellow sectarians in England. Upon the execution of King Charles I, John Cotton preached on the defeat of the Beast, predicting 1655 as the year in which the antichrist's power would be destroyed.¹³ According to Reiner Smolenski, the Puritan theologians did not develop a common or authoritative understanding of end-time events; on the contrary, they lacked even an agreement on the basic interpretive options. While some believed history was headed to a dramatic conflagration that would usher in the millennium, others portrayed the New England project as marking grand progress leading to the blessed age. Today we might employ terms like "premillennialism" and "postmillennialism" to distinguish between these two options, though the vocabulary is alien to the Puritans.¹⁴ It appears the more optimistic option held sway in the first generation of Puritans.¹⁵ For

13. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 68. The classic study of New England millennialism is Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977).

14. Reiner Smolenski, "Apocalypticism in Colonial North America," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 3, *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum, 2000), 39. In confirmation of this view, see Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996), 96–97.

15. J. F. Maclear, "New England and the Fifth Monarchy: The Quest for the Millennium in Early American Puritanism," *William & Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975): 227.

his part, Cotton proclaimed that the Puritans were living the eschatological crisis, their response to determine their place in Christ's millennial kingdom: "If we do not now strike a fast covenant with our God to be his people, . . . then we and ours will be of this dead hearted frame a thousand years."¹⁶ In short, Puritan preachers saw millennial optimism as a motivational resource for inspiring righteous behavior.

I'm belaboring the point for two reasons. First, many people believe eschatological discourse does not bear upon human conduct in the here and now—at least, not without the threat of hellfire. But second, the Puritans challenge us to appreciate the competing eschatological scenarios popular among some Christians, particularly in the United States. Most American Christians do without a detailed theoretical framework for the last days. But, especially in evangelical Christianity, some Christians debate the value of pre-millennial versus postmillennial theologies.

The distinction involves how Jesus' return relates to his millennial rule, the ideal period when all things will be peaceful and just. Postmillennialists believe the millennium *precedes* Jesus' return: that is, things get better and better before Jesus returns. Some post-millennialists might go so far as to suggest that people bring about the millennium through their efforts to accomplish a just world order. Premillennialists believe Jesus will return *before* the millennium: things grow worse and worse before Jesus intervenes in a dramatic way to sort things out. Using the metaphor of drama, post-millennialism advances a comic (or optimistic) disposition, premillennialism a more tragic (deterministic) one. The premillennial version is currently more popular than the postmillennial, but that hasn't always been the case. Contemporary premillennialist eschatology generally maps onto predictable political positions: absolute loyalty to the modern state of Israel, disregard of environmental and climate concerns, suspicion of international collaboration, and opposition to a social safety net.¹⁷

The two great American revivalists of the nineteenth century, Charles Grandison Finney and Dwight L. Moody, model the relationship between post- and premillennialism and social outlook. It's

16. John Cotton, *Churches Resurrection* (London: Henry Overton, 1642); quoted in Maclear, "New England and the Fifth Monarchy," 234.

17. Among the immense literature on premillennial politics, see Tony Keddie, *Republican Jesus: How the Right Has Rewritten the Gospels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 247–65.

essential to note that Finney's career was most prominent before the Civil War, while Moody's ministry flourished after that national calamity. It appears that catastrophic wars tend to produce tragic theological moods: in response to periods of great trauma, theology sheds some of its optimism and places more emphasis on inequity and suffering. (Witness the emergence of theological neo-orthodoxy in the wake of World War I.)¹⁸ We might describe Finney's outlook as postmillennial with a high level of social engagement, while Moody's theology was premillennial and he avoided mixing the gospel with politics.

We might compare the dispositions of Finney and Moody by considering the imagery of ships in trouble, a metaphor each preacher used. Finney preached a gospel of individual conversion, but his message also called for social reform. The Finneyites, the evangelist's followers, were notorious for their progressive social engagement. On a national day of prayer and fasting, Finney held forth before the Oberlin College community. Finney, the college's second president, was a noted abolitionist. Moreover, the college not only admitted women as students, some of those women were preparing for ministry. Rejecting the view that preachers should avoid political topics, Finney set forth his position:

Let no man say, that ministers are out of their place in exposing and reproofing the sins of this nation. The fact is, that ministers, and all other men, not only have a right but are bound to expose and rebuke the national sins. We are all on board the same ship. As a nation, our very existence depends upon the correct moral conduct of our rulers. And shall they deafen their ears to our petitions, expostulations, and entreaties? Shall ministers be told, shall any man be told, that he is meddling with other men's matters, when he reproofs, and rebukes the abominations of slavery? As well might a man be accused of meddling with that which does not belong to him, who is on board a ship in the midst of the Atlantic ocean, because he should expostulate with and rebuke a man who should attempt to scuttle the ship.¹⁹

18. James H. Moorhead, "The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought, 1865–1925," *Church History* 53 (1984): 61–77.

19. Charles Grandison Finney, "Lecture XXXIV: The True Service of God," *The Oberlin Evangelist*, June 9, 1841, https://www.gospeltruth.net/1841OE/410609_national_fast.htm. A partial quotation of the passage is cited by Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe,

Moody saw things as differently as one could. In a sermon on the return of Jesus Moody maintained, “This world is getting darker and darker,” and that world is like a sinking ship:

I look on this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a life-boat, and said to me, “Moody, save all you can.” God will come in judgment to this world, but the children of God don’t belong to this world; they are in it, but not of it, like a ship in the water; and their greatest danger is not the opposition of the world, but their own conformity to the world. This world is getting darker and darker; its ruin is coming nearer and nearer; if you have any friends on this wreck unsaved, you had better lose no time in getting them off.²⁰

The contrasts are stark. Finney believes there’s hope for the world, the ship, while Moody’s ship is “wrecked.” Finney identifies his own fate with that of the ship; Moody aims to rescue people from the ship, which is doomed. Moody characterizes believers as “in the world but not of it.” Therefore, Finney believes evangelism goes hand in hand with social and political engagement, while Moody wants to save individuals from a coming conflagration. John Cotton and Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t use the premillennial/postmillennial language, but both were essentially postmillennial in their outlooks. They believed progress would usher in a better age. Premillennialism stands out for its skepticism concerning human progress.

This grand narrative is common and generally helpful, but it is also an oversimplification. People are notoriously complicated, and the fit between their eschatological views and their social behavior can defy our expectations. It’s easy to overstate the Civil War’s significance in transforming attitudes concerning the course of history, just as it’s easy to oversimplify the links between socially progressive postmillennialism and more disengaged premillennialism. Some held views that resemble premillennialism before the Civil War,

Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 198.

20. This sermon is famously quoted and discussed in George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 38. The sermon is “The Second Coming of Christ” and may be found in Wilbur M. Smith, ed., *The Best of D. L. Moody: Sixteen Sermons by the Great Evangelist* (Chicago: Moody, 1971).

while others maintained optimistic, even postmillennial, views after it. For example, in the 1840s a New York farmer named William Miller caused a national stir by claiming he had calculated the date of Jesus' return. Miller revised his calculations a couple of times, but the final date he settled on still did not mark Jesus' return. This "Great Disappointment," as it was called, occurred before the Civil War, but it was not characterized by social optimism. On the other hand, the progressive social gospel movement emerged after the Civil War. Its proponents especially devoted themselves to improving the conditions of poor laborers and their children. Social gospel preacher and theologian Walter Rauschenbusch characterized the kingdom of God as "humanity organized according to the will of God."²¹ Examples such as Miller and Rauschenbusch proliferate: labels like pre- and postmillennialism defy neat chronological demarcations.

Individuals can change their views over time, as in the case of Angelina Grimké Weld, a Finneyite feminist and abolitionist who for a period embraced Millerism.²² In her own words, Grimké was "prepared to give up the old idea of a Millennium & to embrace the opinion that the destruction of the world will precede it."²³ Moreover, diverse eschatological views often nourish a broadly shared social vision; as Timothy E. Fulop argues, in the "nadir" of African American life following Reconstruction, "Black Americans may have differed in how they understood their destiny in different types of millennialism, but they were united in the strong belief that God was in control of history and their future."²⁴

Pre- and postmillennial eschatologies have tended to wax and wane according to the flow of history. Most Christians don't identify with either view. For example, amillennials do not reject ultimate

21. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1917), 142.

22. Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers*, *Women and Gender in Religion* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000). Discussed in Speicher, "Angelina Grimké Weld, Abolitionist, Feminist, and Millerite," *Peace Messenger*, October 20, 2007, <https://adventistpeace.typepad.com/peacemessenger/2007/10/angelina-grimke.html>.

23. Quoted in Marshall Foletta, "Angelina Grimké: Asceticism, Millenarianism, and Reform," *New England Quarterly* 80 (2007): 212.

24. Timothy E. Fulop, "The Future Golden History of the Race: Millennialism and Black Americans in the Nadir, 1877–1901," in *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 248.

hope; they simply refuse to spell it out in detail. Few Christians identify as amillennials either; the labels seem too esoteric for most. But premillennialism and postmillennialism continue to influence public life through the behavior of their adherents.

Fictional though he may be, Baudolino is correct. This survey of Christian historical eschatologies, views concerning history's ultimate trajectory, demonstrates that eschatological beliefs often map onto distinctive behavioral patterns. People who believe differently act differently than one another. Eschatology is not simply pie-in-the-sky optimism. It may be that, but a long track record shows that belief and behavior go together, often for good.

The Acceptable Time

Despite the influence of postmillennialism and premillennialism in American discourse, the view most commonly advanced by New Testament authors fits neither model. Both pre- and postmillennial frameworks place eschatological hope largely in the *future*. But most New Testament witnesses advance what we might call an *inaugurated* eschatology. The slogan “now but not yet” roughly fits this model. According to this view the full realization of God's reign remains unfulfilled: injustice, wickedness, and suffering still mar the human, indeed the cosmic, experience. But proponents of an inaugurated eschatology believe that God has acted decisively through the resurrection of Jesus, accompanied by the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. These are eschatological realities, inaugurating God's ultimate reconciliation of all things. God's blessings are present *now*, but they are *not yet* fully realized.

A few examples illustrate how inaugurated eschatology works. In his Pentecost speech in Acts 2, Peter interprets the Holy Spirit's arrival as a sign of the last days (2:17), the Spirit having been poured out by the risen Jesus (2:33; *now*). But in his next speech Peter announces a *future* return of Jesus and “universal restoration” (3:19–21). Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 12:7, Paul celebrates the *present* manifestation of the Spirit through spiritual gifts, then almost immediately reminds the Corinthian believers that their gifts pale in comparison to God's future (13:8–12). Even Revelation, which so dramatically puts a divine future before our eyes, begins with a celebration of the status believers enjoy in the present (1:5–6). All

of these texts voice a sense that the *present moment* carries eschatological significance, while they anticipate full realization of God's redemption in the future.

For many people future eschatology seems the most intuitive category: things may be bad now, but God will bend history toward a better end. I experienced this flavor of eschatological hope when I visited the church of my maternal grandparents. They attended a rural Missionary Baptist congregation that practiced baptism in "living water": that is, they constructed a pool outside the church building so that water could flow through it; they also sang from a shape-note hymnal in which each musical note was keyed to a particular shape to help people sing the hymns. My memories, now fuzzy, recall hymns that acknowledged the painful world we live in, a vale of tears, and the glory to come, a heavenly city with pearly gates and golden streets (Rev. 21:21).

Life was often hard for the people who filled this North Alabama church. Most had lived through the Great Depression; they knew poverty firsthand. Many of the men had experienced combat in Europe, the Pacific, or Korea. Lots of people lived in visible pain. I associate my grandfather's favorite hymn with that context: when he was just fourteen, his mother's mental illness resulted in her institutionalization, and he and a brother quit school to set out on their own. We sang his favorite hymn, "Shall We Gather at the River?" at his funeral.

Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God.

Another favorite there was "When We All Get to Heaven." The final verse is,

Onward to the prize before us!
Soon his beauty we'll behold;
soon the pearly gates will open;
we shall tread the streets of gold.

- 16 These are the marks of future eschatology: a critical analysis of the present age, contrasted against the glory of the age to come, whether it is in heaven or on earth.

is already available. In our current cultural context we encounter this model among preachers who proclaim that faithful believers should enjoy prosperity, avoid illness, and triumph in every area of life. This view is often associated with what's known as the prosperity gospel. Present eschatology is hardly new. The Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, which probably has roots in the second century, has nothing to do with the prosperity gospel. At the same time, *Thomas* rejects any hint of future hope. Salvation is present right now, and fully so. *Thomas* begins with three short sayings of Jesus that include these claims:

Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death. (1)

Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All. (2)

Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. (3)

For the *Gospel of Thomas*, the kingdom lasts forever. But it begins right here in the present.

Within the New Testament we encounter occasional passages that sound like an affirmation of realized eschatology. Scholars once identified the Gospel of John with this position: there Jesus proclaims that the judgment has already occurred (3:17–21) and that believers already enjoy eternal life (e.g., 3:36; 5:24; 6:47). But few interpreters maintain that perspective today: John emphasizes the present but clearly affirms a future resurrection (5:28–29). In the Synoptic Gospels we see a different pattern, where Jesus affirms that the kingdom of God has drawn near in his ministry (Mark 1:14–15 par.; Luke 17:21). But these passages occur in a broader context that clearly holds out an element of future hope.

We find traces of present eschatology on the fringes of the New Testament. One New Testament edge involves what's assumed but not stated explicitly. By reading between the lines, we can reconstruct plausible positions held by Paul's opponents. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul addresses Christian believers who apparently accept that Jesus has been raised from the dead but deny that a future resurrection awaits them. In the same letter Paul affirms that many believers have received impressive spiritual gifts (1:4–7). One of the most prominent of those gifts is wisdom, while others

include more mystical expressions like prophecy and speaking in tongues. But Paul insists upon what scholars call an “eschatological reservation”: those gifts are real and to be celebrated, but they pale in comparison to the revelation that will accompany Jesus’ return (13:1–13). Thus, as soon as Paul affirms the Corinthians’ rich gifts in his first letter to them, he reminds them that they “wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7). Many scholars link Paul’s argument concerning the resurrection with his take on spiritual gifts: some Corinthians apparently believe they have already received all the blessings of Jesus’ resurrection.

If one New Testament “fringe” involves reconstructing voices silenced or countered by biblical authors, another includes voices that have been subsumed into larger works. In the 1990s significant scholars began to question the notion that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. One key element of that argument involves reconstructions of Q, the hypothetical source that explains why Matthew and Luke share material that Mark lacks. Although I affirm the likelihood that something like Q existed, it seems more obvious to me than to some other scholars that we are unlikely to trace the historical development of a document we do not actually possess. Nevertheless, some scholars have proposed that Q’s earliest layer, Q¹, shows no interest in eschatology at all.²⁷ Perhaps the Q community, the community hypothesized to have produced the hypothetical Q, held a present eschatology in which the kingdom of God was fully present among them in the here and now.

A third area on the margins of the New Testament involves extratestamental literature. In this context the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* plays an especially important role. The *Gospel of Thomas* consists almost entirely of sayings attributed to Jesus. Jesus discusses eschatological questions only in response to queries from his disciples—and in *Gospel of Thomas*, the male disciples always ask foolish questions. When the disciples ask, “When will the repose of the dead come about, and when will the new world come?” Jesus replies, “What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it” (51).²⁸ Jesus’ answer dismisses the disciples’ interest in

27. John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987).

28. Translation by Helmut O. Koester and Thomas O. Lambdin, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 123.

both personal and historical eschatology, affirming a present eschatology instead: “What you look forward to has already come.”

Important voices have attributed a present eschatology to Jesus, founding this view on both Q and the *Gospel of Thomas*.²⁹ The argument, which we discuss more fully in a later chapter, essentially rests upon two key claims: that future eschatology is lacking in Q’s earliest layer (Q¹) and that parts of the *Thomas* include Jesus traditions more ancient than the perspectives of Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels. Most scholars find both positions unpersuasive. The claims I have advanced concerning present eschatology are all open to debate, and we discuss them more fully in the chapters that follow.

By far, *inaugurated eschatology* constitutes the perspective most prevalent in the New Testament. This point of view is more complicated than are future and present eschatologies. In Christian theology the inaugurated view affirms that God’s eschatological action has broken forth in the ministry and resurrection of Jesus, but salvation’s consummation remains to be fulfilled in the future. To take just one example among many, in Romans 8 Paul celebrates the gifts of Jesus’ resurrection: through Jesus, God has allowed believers to walk according to the Spirit, but still more awaits. Indeed, the entirety of Romans 8 balances the celebration of life in the Spirit now with a glorious future consummation. Romans 8:11 offers a particularly helpful distillation: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you [now], he who raised Christ from the dead will [in the future] give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

What’s Ultimately Real?

In science fiction, authors and scriptwriters turn to creatures from outer space, zombies, and vampires as resources from which to craft stories about very human conflict. From time to time we also encounter outbursts of popular interest in other supernatural beings such as angels and demons. This interest can be sentimental: people buy angel figurines, imagine having personal angels attending to their welfare, or suppose that their departed love ones still

29. The most influential example is John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

accompany them as angels. And yes, angels can function as plot devices in film and fiction just like zombies can. But there's also the dead seriousness with which some Christians take spiritual warfare. The amorphous movement sometimes known as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR)—and by other names like Network Christianity—emphasizes the role of angels and demons in influencing human affairs. NAR preachers frequently describe manifestations of this supernatural activity, ranging from angel feathers floating down upon believers to demonic spirits governing nations. Experts guess that about three million Americans belong to churches that promote NAR teachings.³⁰ If someone thinks supernatural beings are pulling the strings of nations, banks, and multinational institutions, they're making a claim that what seems to be real to our five senses merely shadows a far more profound reality.

Ancient Jews and Christians also speculated concerning things we cannot see. We call the literary genre that produced works like Daniel and Revelation, among a host of noncanonical examples, “apocalypses” for a reason: the Greek verb *apokalypō* means to uncover or reveal a secret reality. Some texts, like the Book of the Watchers (in *1 Enoch*) and *Jubilees*, explore the skies in order to promote the proper calendar. This may strike modern readers as a marginal interest, but a correct calendar is essential in cultures where gods appreciate sacrifices and festivals observed on specified dates. The Book of the Watchers also investigates meteorological and astrological phenomena. A former student of mine, who formerly chaired a college chemistry department, described those passages as examples of ancient science.

Still other Jewish and Christian texts look into heaven, the place where God dwells, and hell, understood as the place of punishment. (Hell, by the way, was sometimes understood as part of the heavens, or the sky.) Scholars have typically tracked the evolution of biblical cosmology, but more contemporary research emphasizes *why* Jews and Christians wrote such speculative literature. For example, many ancient societies commonly envisioned a heavenly court, in which lesser deities surrounded the primary deity. This

30. Brad Christerson and Richard Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10; citing R. Douglas Geivett and Holly Pivec, *God's Super-Apostles: Encountering the Worldwide Prophets and Apostles Movement* (2014; repr., Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018).

divine assembly appears in several psalms (see Pss. 29, 58, and 89). A primary example, Psalm 82, begins,

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.

The divine council motif is developed prominently in Isaiah 6, where the prophet encounters YHWH seated upon a heavenly throne and receiving worship from other supernatural beings. These scenes promote the superiority of Israel's deity over and above others.

Similar scenes occur in Revelation and other early Christian apocalyptic texts, where they serve other purposes. In Revelation, for example, the worship that God receives can serve as justification of the horrific plagues issuing from the heavens (e.g., 15:3–8; 16:5–7). In my view, these moments of heavenly worship function to minimize the audience's revulsion to the devastation laid before its imagination.³¹ And the early Christian tours of hell, which detail the gruesome punishments that await sinners in the afterlife, aim to dissuade Christians from sinful conduct and to comfort those experiencing various forms of oppression.³²

When ancient Israelites, Jews, and Christians discussed other-worldly things, they were offering more than abstract speculation. They were shaping values and promoting, or discouraging, behaviors. Their this-worldly engagement is just as profound as that of those who wrote about the afterlife or the ultimate course of history.

Eschatology and Apocalypticism

Earlier biblical scholars often used the word “eschatology” to address a fairly specific set of conceptions: that the cosmos features a conflict between the supernatural forces of good and evil, that Jesus' bodily resurrection represents the “first fruits” of a future resurrection of the dead, that Jesus will return to earth at the climax of history, that a final judgment will separate the righteous and

31. Greg Carey, “Revelation's Violence Problem: Mapping Essential Questions,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 42 (2015): 300–301; but see Ryan Leif Hansen, *Silence and Praise: Rhetorical Cosmology and Political Theology in the Book of Revelation*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

32. Meghan R. Henning, “Eternal Punishment as *Paideia*: The *Ekphrasis of Hell* in the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul,” *BR* 58 (2014): 29–48.

Taken together, notions concerning angels and demons, resurrection and judgment, a future blessed age, and eternal dwelling places of blessing and (possibly) torment indicate apocalyptic eschatology. Apocalyptic eschatology commonly expresses itself in dualistic categories: God and the supernatural forces of righteousness combat a Satan figure and its minions; human beings are divided into a righteous minority and the wicked multitudes; and the age to come scarcely resembles “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

Jewish apocalyptic literature emerged in the third and second centuries BCE. Its sources are complex: we see resonances with biblical prophecy and wisdom traditions, Persian eschatology, Greco-Roman literature, and other factors. Scholars no longer attribute the rise of apocalyptic literature to a single cause; rather, most complex cultural phenomena reflect multiple influences. However, scholars frequently discuss “proto-apocalyptic” passages among the Hebrew prophets, passages that bear family resemblances to apocalyptic literature. We might describe these passages as not quite apocalyptic or as “early” apocalyptic. The passages lack the formal features of the great literary apocalypses like *I Enoch* and Daniel, but they express some of the motifs we encounter in that later literature.³⁵ Chances are, ancient scribes in Jerusalem did not conceive of themselves as inventing a new literary genre, but concepts and literary forms that emerge in sections of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Joel, and Zechariah appear in the literary apocalypses that develop later.

The book of Ezekiel provides several examples of proto-apocalyptic discourse. YHWH leads the prophet to a valley full of dry bones and commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and bring them to life (37:1–14). The image sounds like it implies resurrection—many religious communities and some scholars regard it precisely in that way—but most scholars see it as portending Israel’s restoration. The reconstitution of Israel after the devastation brought by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians would amount to a miracle. Ezekiel 38–39 depicts a great final battle in which YHWH defeats Israel’s enemies, mythologized as Gog and Magog, and reconstitutes its scattered people. This sounds very much like an apocalyptic scenario; indeed, the book of Revelation appropriates Gog and Magog for its climactic conflict (20:8).

35. Cook, *The Apocalyptic Literature*, 92.

Likewise, an extensive section of Ezekiel, chapters 40–48, provides a tour of an idealized temple to replace the one destroyed by the Babylonians. Ezekiel provides descriptions and measurements of walls, windows, courts, gates, and chambers, along with instructions for sacrifices when the temple is operational and provisions of land and revenue for the priests and the temple. Revelation echoes this vision with its detailed account of the New Jerusalem that descends from heaven (21:1–22:5). Whereas Ezekiel relates how YHWH’s glory returns to the temple and fills it up (43:1–5; 44:4), Revelation declares the new city as God’s home among mortals (21:3), needing no temple and no sun or moon because God and the Lamb inhabit the city and illuminate it directly (21:22–23; 22:5).³⁶ One of the more prominent Dead Sea Scrolls participates in this tradition. The Temple Scroll (11QTemple) lays out its own design for an ideal temple. The Temple Scroll inspires curiosity: unlike Revelation and possibly Ezekiel, it was composed when the Second Temple was standing and operational. Presumably, the Temple Scroll amounts to a protest against the present temple and the authorities responsible for it. Although the Temple Scroll does not constitute a literary apocalypse, as Revelation does, it seems to have emerged from the Qumran community, which held a decidedly apocalyptic outlook. The temple scenes in Ezekiel, 11QTemple, and Revelation show us how authors appropriated proto-apocalyptic texts and adapted them in new contexts and for new purposes.

Apocalyptic discourse emerged as a discrete phenomenon with the appearance of the literary apocalypses *1 Enoch* and *Daniel*. These apocalypses constitute a new literary genre. Specialists continue to debate whether a single definition for the literary apocalypses is helpful, but some commonalities do stand out.

- The literary apocalypses all narrate a visionary experience or a series of visions. They attribute these revelations to a single visionary.
- Most of the time, this visionary is a hero from the past who carries mystical associations; we characterize this literary device as pseudonymity, attribution of a literary work to someone who is not the author. The only exceptions to this are Revelation and the early Christian *Shepherd of Hermas*.

36. Specifically, 21:23 reads, “the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”

- In every literary apocalypse the visionary interacts with a heavenly figure: this mediator may guide, scold, and instruct the visionary.
- The visions reveal (*apokalyptō*) mysteries mortals cannot know on their own: “tours” of heaven (or hell), revelations concerning the ultimate course of history, or both.
- The apocalypses deliver these revelations through striking, often bizarre, symbols.
- And apocalypses oriented toward the course of history often pretend to “predict” events that have already occurred by the time of their writing, a device called *ex eventu* prophecy.

This is quite a long list of characteristics, but it demonstrates the distinctive shape of the literary apocalypses.

Jews and Christians tended to write apocalypses in response to great historical crises. Major chunks of *1 Enoch* and Daniel emerged in the period surrounding Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) and the Maccabean Revolt. Other apocalypses emerged in the wake of the First Jewish Revolt, specifically the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE: we would include Jewish apocalypses like *2 Baruch*, *3 Baruch*, *4 Ezra* (chaps. 3–14 of *2 Esdras*), and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* in this group along with Christian works like Revelation and possibly the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Other Christian apocalypses include the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Apocalypse of Paul*.

Apocalypticism expresses itself as a social movement when groups adapt the literary conventions and ideas that are common to the literary apocalypses. Chances are, apocalyptic ideas emerged before we can identify them in the literary apocalypses, but we turn to that literature to guide our assessment of other apocalyptic expressions. For example, the apostle Paul appeals to his own “visions and revelations [*apokalypseis*] of the Lord” (2 Cor. 12:1). Without writing a literary apocalypse, he describes a visit to the third heaven, in which Christ responds directly to Paul’s prayer. Paul provides one example of apocalyptic theology expressing itself apart from the great literary apocalypses.

The Bible includes many perspectives on eschatology that have nothing to do with apocalypticism. At the same time, apocalyptic eschatology permeates the New Testament. In the Hebrew Scriptures, ideas like the resurrection of the dead, a final judgment of individuals, a world beset by Satan and his demons, and even a

messiah who inaugurates a messianic age appear only in shadow form, never fully developed. But without those concepts, the New Testament Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, Revelation, and other sections of the New Testament would be unrecognizable. To be sure, some parts of the New Testament emphasize these elements more than others do. Paul's letters suggest that perhaps some early Christians resisted or rejected them—a factor we observe directly in a text like the *Gospel of Thomas*. On the whole, apocalyptic discourse plays a determinative role in the New Testament.

The Roots of Eschatology

Eschatology looks toward the future, whether the ultimate destiny of individuals or the ultimate destiny of humankind. But in a fundamental sense eschatology orients itself to core convictions about the past and about eternity; that is, eschatology grounds itself in the nature of God. Both Judaism and Christianity identify a God tied to stories. Judaism and Christianity hold creation, exodus, exile, and restoration in common; Christianity proclaims incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and Pentecost. We interpret these stories as signs of God's character and purposes. Whatever we say about God's aims for ourselves and the future must somehow comport with widely shared understandings of these stories and of God's character. What God aims to do, we assume, carries on the trajectory of who God is and what God has done.

Although I believe the shape of the canon should inform biblical interpretation but should not determine it, we may take a clue from the ways in which Revelation's conclusion appropriates the creation stories of Genesis 1–2. The theologian Joseph L. Mangina comments, "Apocalypse recapitulates Genesis."³⁷ Revelation 21 begins with the announcement of a new heaven and a new earth, the first heaven and earth having passed away along with the sea (21:1). Genesis 1 describes the formation of the heavens and the earth, with the division of light from darkness taking primary place (1:3–5); as we have seen, Revelation conjures a holy city with no need for sun or moon (see Gen. 1:16–17) because God's presence provides light for the city (Rev. 21:23; 22:5). And where Genesis 2 lays out a garden featuring the tree of life and a great river (2:9–10), the river of

37. Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, BTC (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 238.

life runs right through the middle of the holy city, with the tree of life apparently straddling the river and nourishing the nations (Rev. 22:1–2). In other words, Revelation’s New Jerusalem can be read as a reconstitution of Israel’s creation stories. Revelation does all this, we should note, by appropriating how the book of Isaiah draws on the same motifs: YHWH creates a new heavens and a new earth, with Jerusalem the source of joy and delight for deity and mortals alike (65:17–19; see 66:22) and a site of worship for all people (66:23; see Rev. 22:3). Looking back to Genesis through Isaiah, Revelation’s vision of last things roots itself in the first things.

Eschatology’s journey toward hope can take diverse forms. It can look like the civil rights movement’s fusion of hard, bloody sacrifice with confidence that God would lead the way to justice. And it can twist itself into the cults of death and abuse spawned by David Koresh and the Branch Davidians or Jim Jones and the People’s Temple. Certainly the nationalist politics embodied by Bible prophecy teachers like Hal Lindsey and Pat Robertson express a version of eschatological hope among their millions of followers. And the hope some people express amounts to little more than pie-in-the-sky optimism. But we recognize when an eschatological vision grows deep roots. The ethicist Joan M. Martin articulates a womanist eschatology nourished by the Bible, the African American struggle for life and dignity in the midst of slavery and systemic racism, and the “transformative integration of African heritage and Christian faith.”³⁸ Eschatology has made and continues to make a basic contribution to Black Christian resilience.³⁹ That sort of resilient faith feeds from deep roots.

The Perspective of This Book

Interpretation is never unbiased. Rather than claim pure objectivity, accountable interpreters aspire to persuade one another through the logical force of the evidence we provide and the arguments we

38. “A Sacred Hope and Social Goal: Womanist Eschatology,” in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 216.

39. Lisa M. Bowens, “God and Time: Exploring Black Notions of Prophetic and Apocalyptic Eschatology,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Antonia Michelle Daymond, Frederick L. Ware, and Eric Lewis Williams (New York: T & T Clark, 2019), 213–24.

develop to support our judgment. We aspire both to be as transparent as possible concerning our own perspectives and to engage a wide variety of viewpoints. Public interpretation invites us to advocate for our best understanding and to welcome critical engagement from our conversation partners.⁴⁰

This study emerges from my own investment as a theologically engaged Christian reader of Scripture. This perspective entails several commitments. First, I am committed to honor the integrity of the Jewish Scriptures as just that, the Jewish Scriptures. I avoid the term “Old Testament” because its use leads many readers to infer an imposition of Christian values upon the Tanakh. I affirm that Christian readers have a right to ask Christian questions of that literature, but we should always perform the critical work of interpreting those texts in their own cultural and historical settings as best we can. I reject the premise that Hebrew writers were “foreshadowing” the New Testament, even more so that they were “predicting” the career of Jesus, and I reject the assumption that the Jewish Scriptures, understood in their own contexts, necessarily confirm Christian doctrine. Of course we’ll encounter consistencies between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, but we will not impose consistency upon those texts. The Bible includes myriad diverse perspectives: this is true of both “testaments,” and my aim is to honor that diversity. I cannot promise that I will always follow through with this commitment successfully. Some Christian ways of thinking run so deep that they shape the most basic ways I think: other colleagues have rightly called attention to this factor on occasion. I would hope my engagement with the Hebrew Scriptures will prove persuasive to readers Jewish, Christian, and otherwise.

A second commitment creates some tension with the first. Although one aim of this study is to articulate the diversity of the biblical materials, another involves the work of theological integration from a Christian perspective. In this respect my work appropriates the Hebrew Scriptures into a Christian conversation that privileges the New Testament writings. This book devotes more attention to the New Testament than to the Jewish Scriptures, far more when we account for their relative length. It does so in part because New

40. I articulate these values in *Using Our Outside Voice: Public Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020).

Testament authors generally speak to eschatological concerns more densely than do the authors of the Tanakh. However, a theological consideration comes into play as well: the early Christians developed ideas they inherited from Judaism in ways that create a distinctive conversation for Christians. To be precise, few if any New Testament authors thought of themselves as “Christians,” members of a world religion distinct from Judaism. Some surely considered themselves Jews who devoted allegiance to Jesus. Yet all New Testament authors are involved in interpreting Judaism through the person of Jesus and the traditions concerning him. Paul accounts for his life through a before-and-after narrative that distinguishes between his “earlier life in Judaism” (Gal. 1:13) and his present life in Christ (Gal. 1:13–17; Phil. 3:4–11). In many respects one cannot pretend that this project will commend itself to Jewish readers or to others who are not invested in Christian theological reflection. For example, the motif of resurrection occurs in Jewish and Christian literature alike, far less so in the Jewish Bible, but for Christians the resurrection of Jesus plays a determinative theological role.

This project entails both surveying the diversity of viewpoints in the Bible and setting forth integrated Christian theological proposals. Biblical scholars, even Christian ones like myself, in some respects find ourselves uncomfortable doing the work of theological integration: we have trained ourselves to emphasize textual diversity and historical contingency, to “analyze” texts rather than to form grand syntheses. (I regard these qualities as our discipline’s distinctive gifts.) At the same time, we can reduce this critical reluctance into an excuse to avoid accountability for the implications of our work. The Christian theological imperative of this project leads to the fundamental question “So what?”

A third commitment follows from the second: if we are asking theological questions, we must enter into conversation with theological literature. Generally speaking, biblical scholars and theologians do very different kinds of work. We relate to philosophy differently. Biblical scholars often turn to contemporary cultural critics and theorists for guidance as to the process of meaning-making, as do theologians. Rarely do we turn to philosophy, as theologians do, for fundamental questions concerning the possibility of human knowing (epistemology), the mystery of being human (anthropology), or the nature of time, power, and a host of related subjects. Not very many biblical scholars rely on the wisdom of early Christian

readers, the church fathers or the Protestant Reformers, concerning biblical texts and their theological significance. Immodestly, we tend to elevate our own judgment above the witness of previous generations. Although we can hope that our differences prove more productive than disorienting, I anticipate complications in bringing my work into conversation with the theological literature.

Finally, although I am committed to developing some concrete proposals, I aim to cultivate a distinctive disposition. I aim to invite readers into the construction of meaning, offering suggestions more than complete theories and leaving explicit room for curiosity. In the end, I hope to cultivate humility in myself as a scholar and writer, a kind of humility that invites and inspires conversation rather than the sort of vapidness that leaves readers frustrated.

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