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# Death and Resurrection as Apocalyptic Event

David P. Scaer

## The Inevitability of an Apocalyptic Theme

"At the Dawn of the Third Millennium: Fanaticism, Eschatology, and Death" was an inevitable theme for the 2000 Symposium at Concordia Theological Seminary. The year 2000 is the best of all calendar possibilities: a new year, century, millennium. This homiletical privilege will be denied future generations of preachers. The downside is that calendar concerns in theology are an accommodation to the times and can be embarrassing. "Millennium" some have judged the most useless English word. Trendiness in religious matters is annoying. The New Testament writers paid no attention to such things. They were concerned with their message, not world events or, in this case, nonevents. When sermons say what everyone else says, the "otherness" of the gospel is lost.

## The Apocalypse: Doing Our Part

The December 21, 1999 CBS "60 Minutes II" defined the apocalypse as Christ's thousand year reign on earth (Revelation 20:2-6), which will begin when Christians are vaporized into heaven by the rapture. To arrive at this definition, the show's producers apparently combined the thousand year reign with the Apocalypse, the alternate name for the book of Revelation, where this reign is predicted (20:2-7). Contemporary apocalypticism, as defined by Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*,<sup>1</sup> involves three events: the establishment of Israel as a state, the capture of Jerusalem, and the reconstruction of the temple. Establishing an earthly Jewish kingdom was known during the Reformation and condemned by Augsburg Confession XVII.<sup>2</sup> Most Neo-Evangelicals make the success of

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<sup>1</sup>(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1970). At the present time there are five million (!) copies in print. Undoubtedly some have found their way into Lutheran homes.

<sup>2</sup>"Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate all the godless," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 38-39.

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Israel an article of faith.<sup>3</sup> The Ascension narrative that Jesus would return in the same way in which He left (Acts 1:11) has motivated some to prime the apocalyptic pump, apparently without success. Although Israel has allies in the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, its military remains on alert to assure that no one establishes the millennial kingdom with or without Jesus—call this “synergistic apocalypticism.” What God fails to do, the enthusiasts will.

### “Apocalypse Now”

An apocalyptic event is an extraordinary act in nature or history in which God brings His final condemnation on unbelief into the present. Such events are in the near or not too distant future and bring divine judgment upon those who have known and rejected the gospel. God’s patience with unbelief has been exhausted. God’s ordinariness in which He approaches us in the preached word and the sacraments is replaced by the extraordinariness of the apocalyptic, so that those who see these events are awestruck (Matthew 17:6; 27:54). Not every extraordinary natural or historical event is apocalyptic, but apocalyptic events are in every case extraordinary. Although apocalyptic events do not signal that God has written the world’s final chapter, they do spell finality for that generation. The time of grace has come and gone; their *kairos* is over. An event predicted only for a distant future that no person living then will experience is not apocalyptic. Biblical apocalyptic events include the world’s destruction by the flood (Genesis 6:11-17), Sodom and Gomorrah’s incendiary end (Genesis 29:24-25), and Jerusalem’s destruction in the sixth century B. C. by the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:9). These Old Testament apocalyptic themes appear in Jesus’ preaching. Anyone not heeding His Sermon on the Mount faces a watery apocalypse (Matthew 7:27). Capernaum will go the way of Sodom (Matthew 11:23-24). Coming destruction is like the flood (Matthew 24:27-38; Luke 17:26-27). His own death and resurrection will be an apocalyptic judgment against the generation that rejected Him.

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<sup>3</sup>The topic in 2000 for the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, which is scheduled for November 15-17, is “Israel: Past, Present and Future.” Information taken from a letter of Darrell L. Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary, Program Chairman (December 1999).

### Apocalyptic: Beyond Law and Gospel

In spite of the terrors instilled by apocalyptic preaching, which necessarily precede the predicted events, apocalypticism is something beyond the law-gospel dichotomy. Missing is the note of hope, a virtue that the law implicitly promises in preparing for the gospel. The law's devastating diagnosis is not only preliminary to, but necessary for the solution provided in the gospel. Law is not God's retribution leveling the field with sinners, but an incision into the diseased soul to address the wretchedness of the human condition to lay it bare for the gospel's saving balm. Even if no one is capable of taking advantage of the law's conditions, its preachment is an act of divine mercy in preparing for a better future in the gospel. The law tells us about ourselves and the gospel tells us about the God who is love, loves the Son, and, in loving the Son, loves the world. Apocalyptic preaching does not describe the human condition, but God's coming — not in the mercy of the gospel but in judgment against unbelief. Unlike the law, apocalyptic judgment is not God's universal condemnation of sin, but His carrying out of a divine verdict against particular rejections of the gospel. Apocalyptic events are divine retribution on those who see but do not perceive and who hear but do not comprehend. Such acts hold out no promise of a future salvation (Matthew 13:14-15). Flood waters engulf the world, fire reduces Sodom to ashes, and Jerusalem's stones are left in an unreconstructable disarray. In the apocalyptic event there is no "tomorrow" for those who have rejected the gospel. Judgment against those who reject the gospel is as final as Noah's flood (Matthew 24:34-39; 1 Peter 2:5; 1 Peter 3:20). By the sacramental rainbow God pledges to spare the world from water, but not from all destruction.<sup>4</sup> Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction by celestial fire is a pledge of retribution against unbelievers.<sup>5</sup> God's chosen people no longer inhabit Jerusalem's precincts. A remnant is saved, but nearly all are eternally condemned. In each of Matthew's five discourses Jesus includes an absolute judgment on those hearers who refuse to believe Him and His words (7:21-27; 10:14-15; 13:47-48; 18:32-33; 25:41-46).

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<sup>4</sup>Genesis 9:16: "When the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth."

<sup>5</sup>Genesis 19:24: "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven." One may also see Matthew 10:15; Romans 9:29; 2 Peter 2:6; Jude 1:5.

Jerusalem is Sodom where Jesus was crucified (Revelation 11:8) and Babylon, which persecutes God's saints (18:18-24). She is forever forsaken (Matthew 23:37-38).

### Apocalyptic Motif in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

Heightened apocalyptic awareness characterized several periods of church history in which the world's end seemed immanent.<sup>6</sup> Lutheran hesitancy to include a developed apocalypticism in its theology may have resulted from the fanaticism of the Peasants' Revolt and, in the present, today's neo-Evangelical preoccupation with Israel.<sup>7</sup> Luther lacked this sensitivity. He found himself living in the Last Days and his extravagant language in condemning the Jews and the papacy was apocalyptic.<sup>8</sup> Without this understanding, some have concluded that he was anti-Semitic and overly critical of the papacy. Melancthon attributed the Reformer's hyperbole to a personality flaw, rather than understanding that Luther saw the events accompanying the Reformation as apocalyptic ones through which God was bringing a swift judgment against the papacy, the Jews, and the German populace for their rejection of the gospel, which God had allowed to shine through the Reformation.<sup>9</sup> The Last Days were at hand and alarms had to be sounded. Zwingli had fallen in battle. Charles V had sacked Rome. The outrageous immorality

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<sup>6</sup>In the third century Montanus predicted an earthly reign of Christ and had the famous theologian Tertullian as a disciple. Joachim of Fiore predicted the end of the world in the twelfth century. William Miller made the same prediction for the years 1843 and 1844.

<sup>7</sup>Lutheran theology either ignores the apocalyptic or relegates it to a distant and, hence, an untouchable eschatology. For example, Francis Pieper's three volume *Christian Dogmatics* does not discuss the topic and there is no listing for it in the index volume. John Stephenson does not provide a listing for apocalyptic in his index, but discusses the topic under "The Signs of Our Lord's Coming." He addresses aberrant interpretations of the passages that are most often seen as apocalyptic and directs his discussion to a future fulfillment of them. One may see *Eschatology, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, edited by Robert D. Preus, volume 13 (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Luther Academy, 1993), 63-97. One may see note 43.

<sup>8</sup>See Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwartzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 292-97; Smalkald Articles, II, IV, 10.

<sup>9</sup>Oberman notes that in his funeral oration, "Melancthon did not neglect to mention Luther's sharp tongue and heated temper, even though it was a time when profound sorrow called for the comfort of unadulterated praise" (*Luther*, 10).

of the Anabaptist communities threatened to undo the Reformation and unravel the fibers that held society together.<sup>10</sup> Luther saw himself sent before the great and terrible day of the Lord.<sup>11</sup> The Formula of Concord saw removal of the gospel as final judgment.<sup>12</sup>

### A Missed Opportunity

Millennialism, the idea that a serene kingdom will be established on earth in relationship with Christ's return, belongs to our colonial heritage and peaked this century with President Woodrow Wilson's attempt to export the American dream with the League of Nations. Today societal millenarianism does not awaken that fresh enthusiasm that greeted the twentieth century. The timing is off. In theology, the precision of the moment counts for everything. Timing is like a diamond cutter striking the right fissure. Wycliff, Savanarola, and Huss failed to be the reformers Luther became because the time was not ripe. A dawning millennial utopia in 1900 was followed by a war that brought apocalyptic horrors for the neo-Orthodox Karl Barth and the confessional Hermann Sasse.<sup>13</sup> World War II rekindled the fires of apocalyptic judgment. Christian Canaan lay in ashes. Her sons were dead. Paradise was lost. Then to accommodate Marxism, which fueled Communism, the theology of hope and then the theology of revolution in the 1970s used futuristic themes to promote political agendas. Through Ernst Bloch's futuristic philosophy, Jürgen Moltmann drank of Hegel's philosophy, which looked to the future for final solutions.<sup>14</sup> German theologians found a common philosophical basis to dialog with Communists. At first, the theology of hope was monergistic: God would deliver his people. On its heels came an impatient theology of revolution, determined to bring about heaven on earth with revolution, a method particularly attractive to some Latin

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<sup>10</sup>For Luther the devil was as much at work among the Anabaptists, the Sacramentarians, and the Zwinglians as he was among the papists. One may see Oberman, *Luther*, 229.

<sup>11</sup>Oberman sees the matter rightly: "In the tumult of the Last Days, individual qualities are lost in collective judgments and 'all who are not with us are against us'" (*Luther*, 229).

<sup>12</sup>*Solid Declaration*, XI, 57-58.

<sup>13</sup>"American History and Theological Nerve," *First Things* 99 (January 2000):72-74.

<sup>14</sup>Jürgen Moltmann acknowledged his dependency on Ernst Bloch, who was a philosophical Marxist. One may see *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, translated by M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1969), 15-19.

American priests and in practice akin to the Peasants' Revolt and today's biblically motivated fanatics. These theologies no longer occupy the lead position in theology, upon which feminism has a weakening grasp. With the calendar as the *norma normans*, these futuristic theologies would have been perfectly suited for the year 2000. Had the theology of revolution been delayed a quarter century, it might have provided fanatical apocalypticism with a scholarly philosophical-theological base. In turn, the theology of revolution would have found willing soldiers to march under its banner.

### Jesus and the "Son of Man": Recovery of an Old Theme

An exception to the current scholarly malaise greeting the third millennium is the "apocalyptic Jesus." Bart D. Ehrman takes advantage of the millennium change to revive the theme that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who expected deliverance by the "Son of Man." A revolutionary Jesus with an apocalyptic agenda of bringing the kingdom of God on earth is perfectly suited for launching the new millennium, but unfortunately, the theme is not new and hence without shock value.<sup>15</sup> According to this view, Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet looking to further His revolutionary movement with help from the heavenly "Son of Man," especially in delivering him from the agony of the cross. Instead, He died hopelessly.<sup>16</sup> Later, an anonymous early church community erroneously concluded that Jesus was Himself the "Son of Man." Without critically analyzing their sources, the Evangelists took this misidentification over into the Gospels. Since Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, this surgical separation of the "Son of Man" from Jesus has been standard scholarly fare.<sup>17</sup> In the place of one Jesus as the Son of Man, scholars offer two figures: Jesus and the "Son of Man." The apocalyptic card has been played too often for Ehrman's *The Apocalyptic*

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<sup>15</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Chapter eight is entitled "Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet" (125-140) and chapter nine "The Apocalyptic Teachings of Jesus" (141-62). The final chapter bears this title, "Jesus as the Prophet of the New Millennium Then and Now" (230-46).

<sup>16</sup>This theme of a revolutionary Jesus facing a hopeless death appeared in the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

<sup>17</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1948).



*Jesus to be startling. He serves leftovers with the elegance of a gourmet chef, but they are still leftovers.*

### The Late, Notorious Bishop of Woolwich

A fascinating twentieth century figure was the late John A. T. Robinson, at first a Cambridge don, then Anglican bishop of Woolwich, and at Cambridge again at the time of his death. His deviations were a breath of fresh air in the world of the theologically predictable, whether it be of the orthodox or heterodox variety. If Luther's metaphor is the drunken peasant falling off one side of the horse and then the other, Robinson was like the pendulum of a fine clock set in an expensive oak casket, moving back and forth with graceful ease from outrageously liberal views to unforgivably conservative ones. Finding that others saw him as a theological elitist, he produced *Honest to God* as a popular introduction into the demythologizing and form criticism of Rudolph Bultmann and the neo-Orthodoxy of Paul Tillich and Barth and ushered in the "God is dead" theology of Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton. He was a progenitor of Joseph Fletcher's situation ethics.<sup>18</sup> If Jesus did not really exist in the way the New Testament said He did, and if God was so far away from us to be outside the realms of ordinary communication or so deep within the depths of human existence that He cannot be separated from it, then why not say so?<sup>19</sup> Robinson did, and for his generation God evaporated into a Barthian cloud and dissolved into a Tillichian fog. The bishop removed the "let's pretend" biblical dress from neo-Orthodoxy and laid bare its principles by taking them to their logical conclusions. He prepared the world in which a "God outside of us" and a "God inside of us" would no longer exist. Then the pendulum swung right. The bishop, now back as Cambridge scholar, published *The Redating of the New Testament* and *The Priority of John*.<sup>20</sup> These publications consigned the once darling of the left to the unredeemable right and eternally ostracized him from the fraternity of scholars. These books enjoyed no reviews, no

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<sup>18</sup>John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

<sup>19</sup>Robinson could speak of God in the depth of non-religious experience. *Honest*, 62.

<sup>20</sup>John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, edited by J. F. Coakley (Oak Park, Illinois: Meyerstone Books, 1985). He was diagnosed with cancer in 1983 at which time he was preparing this book for the 1984 Bampton Lectures. It was published posthumously (vii).

second printings. He was ignored – a scholar’s worst fear – and set adrift on an ice flow headed for warm waters. How far Robinson backed away from his former views about God is not known, but for confessional Lutherans most Anglicans are among life’s inscrutable mysteries. Their liturgical form rarely translates into orthodox belief. Clearly the bishop underwent a conversion, but it is hard to say what it entailed. Nonetheless, a conversion it was. Perhaps he died as a subordinationist like Origen or a semi-Arian,<sup>21</sup> but either fate was better than dying believing in the deity that emerged in *Honest to God*.

In *Jesus and His Coming* Robinson argued that Jesus expected the apocalyptic events about which He preached to happen in his own life time.<sup>22</sup> These included the Son of Man sayings, which saw His death as divine judgment. These sayings were delivered at the end of Jesus’ life and collected in Matthew’s final (19:1-26:1a) or fifth discourse (23:1-26:1a). The other Evangelists, including the fourth, proceeded in the same way. In His last words Jesus focused His predictive vision on His death and resurrection as the final apocalyptic event in which God would judge Israel for not believing in Him. Robinson is careful not to deny a second coming, but sees it as an extension of Jesus’ coming in judgment by death and resurrection. “For Jesus, the messianic act would certainly not be exhausted in his death and resurrection. On the contrary, this moment would release and initiate the right of God in which *henceforth* the Father’s redeeming work could be brought to fulfillment which hitherto it was denied.”<sup>23</sup> He called it “inaugurated eschatology.” Something different really did happen with Jesus’ death and resurrection. After Easter, Christians projected His apocalyptic preaching into their future, but Jesus’ future was His cross and resurrection. In recognizing the apocalyptic preaching of Jesus as a predictive description of His coming in judgment in His crucifixion and resurrection and not merely in a distant event world, the late bishop broke with the scholarly world in several ways. The need to date the composition of the Gospels after

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<sup>21</sup>*The Priority of John*, 341-397. Robinson frames his Christology within the framework of contemporary scholarship, which requires detaching himself from Chalcedon.

<sup>22</sup>John A. T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming* (1957; reprint, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979).

<sup>23</sup>Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming*, 81.

A. D. 70.<sup>24</sup> was removed and he could reassign traditional dates to the New Testament. Matthew, and not Mark, was the first Gospel and may have been written as early as A. D. 40 and hardly later than A. D. 50. Paul's Epistles were written after Matthew and some after Luke.<sup>25</sup> This was revolutionarily unacceptable for scholars, but redemptive for *Honest To God's* author. The bishop often traveled wrong roads, but he ultimately arrived at the right destination in seeing that Jesus saw His death and resurrection as God's vindication of Him.

### A Look at the Evidence

Martin Kähler noted that the Gospels were the accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus with introductions. He was right. The Gospels are not level playing fields, but ascents culminating in Jesus' death and resurrection. As each Gospel progresses, implicit references to death and resurrection give way to explicit ones to prepare listeners for the actual events themselves. This is a reasonable, yet demonstrable expectation. Each Evangelist intends to make the final discourses authoritative, theological, and interpretative preludes to Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus is the interpreter of His own death. In addition to editorial arguments that the last discourses are about what God will do through crucifixion and resurrection, Gethsemane gives a rare picture into the mind of Jesus, who was obsessed not with a far off return, but with the agony of His death and its meaning in God's plan of salvation. We should therefore expect to find in Jesus' final discourses not predictions of a distant fantastic future, but parables of His death and resurrection—and we are not disappointed.

Millennialism, the belief in an earthly Jewish kingdom, relies on passages in Jesus' last discourses, especially Matthew 23:36 ("Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this *generation*") and 24:34, ("Truly, I say to you, this *generation* will not pass away till all these things take place"). "Generation" is understood as a prediction that the Jews will remain a people until Christ's return; however, all Matthew's uses of "generation" refer to his contemporaries who heard and, in most cases, rejected Jesus, and not to the race of Jews.<sup>26</sup> These passages can no more be used to

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<sup>24</sup>Robinson, *Redating*, 105-106.

<sup>25</sup>Robinson, *Redating*, 351-358.

<sup>26</sup>11:16; 12:29, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17.

support Israel than anti-Semitism. Jesus preaches in the style of the prophets so that the predictive word embraces the future through current events. Prophetic predictions were not verbal abstractions, but took on life in extraordinary historical occurrences or natural events soon to be experienced by the hearers. These occurrences then became the lens through which future generations understood the events they would encounter. Deliverance through the Red Sea held out promise of a greater future deliverance (Psalms 136). Nathan's promise to David that Solomon would build the temple (2 Samuel 7) extended to Jesus as the final temple, a claim for which He was sentenced to execution (Matthew 12:6; 27:40). Paul expanded the idea of the temple to include believers (Ephesians 2:18-22). Jesus saw Israel's history coming to reality in His time. In turn, Jesus' predictions fulfilled by His death and resurrection stretched into the future and shaped it.

Matthew conveniently gathers the crucifixion's apocalyptic signs in 27:50-53: 1) the shout of triumph; 2) the release of the Holy Spirit; 3) the tearing of the temple curtain from the top to the bottom; 4) the earthquake; 5) the splitting rocks; 6) the opening sepulchers; 7) the resurrection of the sleeping bodies of the saints; 8) their entering the "holy city" after Christ's resurrection; and 9) their appearance to "many." Add to these 10) the darkness covering the earth (verse 45); and 11) the first cry, which is described as a bellowing shout (verse 46). By two editorial devices the Evangelist ties the crucifixion to the resurrection as sides of one event: 1) the report of the resurrection of the dead is contained within the account of the crucifixion, but the resurrected saints appear in the "holy city" only after Jesus' resurrection (27:53), even though the complete account of the resurrection first comes in 28:1-10; and 2) an earthquake accompanies the resurrection (28:2), which recalls the one attached to the crucifixion or it may be the same one (27:54). Earthquakes, splitting rocks, and the four events connected with the resurrection of the saints are recognizably apocalyptic. Jesus' triumphant shouts are not those of a helpless victim, but of the victorious Immanuel, "God with us," who carries out judgment on the enemies of His people (1:23). Earth-covering darkness fulfills the prediction of 24:29, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken," and suggests the pericope in which this passage is located finds a full focus in the death of Jesus. His death is in every way *the* world shattering event. It defines apocalyptic.

The identification of events accompanying the crucifixion as apocalyptic is secured by the response of those with the centurion "who saw the earthquake and what took place [and] they were filled with awe, and said 'Truly this was the Son of God!'" (27:54; one may compare 17:6). In His crucifixion the Son of Man had come with power and glory, as He promised the high priest (24:30), yet gentiles (Romans) and God's covenant people did not recognize it.<sup>27</sup> Not only is the cross surrounded with these apocalyptic phenomena, but the cross itself is "the sign of the Son of Man in heaven" (24:30), the one apocalyptic event that spectacularly exceeds all others. Here Christ is lifted up and draws all men to Himself (John 12:31-34). The cross is an historical event—and more. It is proclamatory judgment against those who rejected Him and is appropriately accompanied by events associated with the Last Days. His executioners and all who reject Him "shall look upon him whom they have pierced" (John 20:37; one may compare Revelation 1:7).

There are two passages that are not generally, if at all, seen as christological references. Matthew 24:28, "wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together," is understood as example. Dead flesh attracts vultures, that is, people take advantage of bad situations. But does this meaning fit? The proper translation is "Where the corpse is, there the eagles gather." English translations temper the full impact of this passage by using body and carcass instead of corpse, and vultures instead of eagles.<sup>28</sup> The *sensus literalis* is more productive. Around Jesus' corpse gather eagles mounted as insignia on Roman military standards. Then follows the prediction of a darkness encircling the earth (verse 29) and the sign of the Son of Man (verse 30), which is the cross. Another reference pointing to the cross as *the* apocalyptic event is 24:15: "So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)." Scholars refer it

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<sup>27</sup>To demonstrate his position Robinson also relies on John 3:14; 11:52 as Jesus being lifted up and drawing all men to Him (*Jesus and His Coming*, 172-173). The high priest and the Sanhedrin seeing the Son of Man coming in judgment is a promise that is about to be fulfilled, that is, in the crucifixion (*Jesus and His Coming*, 46).

<sup>28</sup>KJV, "For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together." ASV, "Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together." AS, "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." RSV, "Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together." NRS, "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." NKJ, "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

to the setting up of the emperor's statue in the temple.<sup>29</sup> Understanding "the holy place" as the temple runs counter to Jesus' claim that He is the temple. Appropriately Christians transferred allegiance to Jesus and soon lost interest in the Jerusalem building. Also Matthew sees no redemptive value in the city that rejected Jesus (23:37) for whom its temple was no longer a "a house of prayer," but is "a den of robbers" (21:13). Jerusalem hardly qualifies as "the holy city" into which the resurrected saints enter (27:53). The Evangelist adds an instructive rubric intended *only* for the liturgical lector: "let the reader understand." Understand what? Abruptly the lector is alerted that "the desolating sacrilege" is something very important, arguably the most important something in the Gospel. This and the Markan parallel (13:14) are the only occurrences of this kind of rubric. The referent cannot be the emperor's statue. Jesus was as indifferent to the emperor as He was to the temple, as were the early Christians who were urged to honor Him (1 Peter 2:17). Why should Christians care if his statue were erected in the temple, which was designated for destruction and whose authorities continued to reject Jesus? If Paul can speak of the crucified Jesus as a curse for us (Galatians 3:13), then "the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place" can describe the cross placed in Golgotha. At the heart of Christianity is that Christ as *the* sinner is an abomination to God. This Jesus recognizes in the cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (26:46). By adding "where it ought not to be" before "let the reader understand" (13:14), Mark provides a further interpretation that God ought not to be at Golgotha. But He is! "Let the reader understand." Not only is the fulness of the deity present and revealed in the ignominy of the cross, but it is only there that the sinner can find Him. Where Jesus contrasts "abomination" with "the holy place," Paul, in describing the cross, contrasts "folly" and "wisdom," and in it he glories.<sup>30</sup> Paul's fully developed theology of the cross clearly has Jesus as its source.

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<sup>29</sup>W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 3 volumes (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988-1997), 3:345-47. It is used to date the Gospels after the fall of Jerusalem in A. D. 70.

<sup>30</sup>1 Corinthians 1:18: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Galatians 6:14: "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

Absence of the Ascension in Matthew is crucial to understanding how he focused God's judgment in Jesus' death and resurrection. He does not move beyond the crucifixion and resurrection to the ascension as Luke does, who has two accounts of it (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:1-6). By including angels at the Ascension, Luke sees it as theologically spectacular as His conception, birth, and resurrection, in all of which angels are prominent. Where Luke includes the promise of Jesus' return (Acts 1:11), Matthew has no departure and accordingly no promise of return. The one who is perpetually with His followers cannot return: "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Judgment has already been carried out on those who knew that His promise to destroy and rebuild the temple was a reference to His death and His resurrection (27:63). His accusers knew that the charge that Jesus would destroy government property, which was a capital crime, was bogus (26:61). After they succeed in having Jesus crucified, they took steps to prevent a fabricated resurrection. When a real resurrection happened, they package it as body theft (28:11-15). Since His opponents fully understood that Jesus' parables spoke of His death and resurrection and then took steps to stop His program, they face certain condemnation.

Apocalyptic judgment plays a prominent role in all Jesus' preaching and is introduced by Matthew as early as the genealogy (1:11-12) and the birth narrative where the slaughter of the infants brings Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians into the present (Matthew 2:17-18; Jeremiah 31:16-17) and anticipates a greater one. God's judgment on Israel consummates in Jesus' death and resurrection, which together are two sides of the one divine event. Resurrection is as necessary as death and to locate importance on either side of the one divine act at the expense of the other does an injustice at one level to the biblical texts and at another to the divine plan itself.

### Neo-Evangelicals and Higher Critics as Allies

For neo-Evangelicals the apocalyptic passages point to Israel.<sup>31</sup> As a result, neo-Evangelicals have a vested interest in not identifying them with Christ's death and resurrection. At the root of this aberrant

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<sup>31</sup>For a full discussion and refutation of the sectarian usage of the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus, one may see chapter 7, "The Signs of Our Lord's Coming," in John Stephenson's *Eschatology*, 63-97.

interpretation is not the nonuse or misuse of objective, hermeneutical principles, but a christological deficiency in biblical interpretation. Critical scholars are not likely to follow the neo-Evangelical conclusion that the final discourses point to Israel and premillennial return of Christ, but their historical-critical methods discount the miraculous and at best Jesus' resurrection is only a retrojection of the church's Easter faith back into His life.<sup>32</sup> Simply put, the church believed He rose from the dead, but as an event in history it is unprovable. Because His resurrection is historically problematic, His return is hardly immanent. Alleged predictions were read back *ex eventu* into the mouth of Jesus. The king's order to destroy the city of the invited guests who did not attend his feast (Matthew 22:7) is regarded as an historical allegory of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> This supports the majority view that the Gospels could not have been written before A. D. 70.<sup>34</sup> In spite of different methods and goals, conservative neo-Evangelicals and liberal scholars agree that the apocalyptic discourses attributed to Jesus are not His descriptions of His crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Bart D. Ehrman uses the principle of what he calls "the criterion of dissimilarity." If there is any coherence between what the church preached and what is attributed to Jesus, then what is said of Jesus is biased and hence questionable. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 91-94. Bultmann used a similar method in demythologizing the Gospels.

<sup>33</sup>By placing the Gospels after the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70 scholars make it impossible for the apocalyptic preaching to be a prediction of what He would soon accomplish by death and resurrection. For scientifically valid reasons it seems improbable that the Mark 6:52-53 fragment dates from before A. D. 70, even though the debate over the date of this fragment is hardly concluded. Robert H. Gundry notes that higher critics who held that the Gospels could have only been written after the fall of Jerusalem could not even entertain the possibility that a Gospel manuscript might come from before this time: ". . . but under the usual dating of Mark the chronological problem remains, and higher critics are loathe to give up the *ex eventu* understanding of Mark 13:1-2, 14-23 that an earlier date [for Mark] would torpedo," "No Nu in Line 2 of 7Q5: A Final Disidentification of 7Q5 with Mark 6:52-53," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (Winter 1999): 698. Jesus was not the only apocalyptic preacher and there is no reason that He could not have predicted a destruction that seemed inevitable years before it happened.

<sup>34</sup>Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 43.

<sup>35</sup>If the scholars are right in positing late dates for the Gospels, then the question arises why the Evangelists failed to take advantage of the theological and apologetic significance of the destruction of Jerusalem in confronting an increasingly anti-Christian Judaism. Had Jerusalem already fallen when the Gospels were written, the truth claims of the new religion over the older one would have been proven. It would



### Bach Got It Right

Artists and composers are often better biblical interpreters than preachers and scholars. The doctrine of the universal priesthood means that the Scriptures are too important to be left to the often arbitrary and contrived hermeneutical rules whose authority rests on the orthodox pedigree of their proponents or the incessantly changing criteria proposed by historical critics. Artists have the advantage of placing on one canvas items and events that may take theologians several chapters to unpack. It is easier to paint the crucifixion and resurrection on one canvas belonging to one event, which it is for God, than it is to explain how the cross's humiliation is the moment of Christ's exaltation (John 17:11) or that the resurrected Lord remains the crucified Jesus (Matthew 28:5; John 20:27). Paul understood this (1 Corinthians 2:2). Similarly Peter's death glorifies God (John 21:19). In addressing the emotions with the intellect, composers involve more of the human nature. *A Mighty Fortress* sung rouses the troops for battle. Recited at the end of a sermon, it goes flat. Musicians have at least four parts that blend different themes into one unified message. Johann Sebastian Bach, the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of whose death was commemorated at the 2000 Symposium, could use two choruses and, hence, eight parts. He was Luther's faithful disciple, perhaps the most faithful one, in handling the themes of death and resurrection in his cantatas, such as *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* or *Komm süss Tod* or *Christ Lag in Todesbanden*. His *Saint Matthew* and *Saint John Passions* concentrate on interpreting Christ's death chiefly, but not only, from a human perspective, which may account for its appeal even among unbelievers. Such devotees of Bach's passions do the Lutheran thing in taking the first step to God by approaching Him in the utter desperateness of Christ's humanity, but they do not take the determinative second step by stepping through an agonizing death into the redemptive and apocalyptic significance of that death. For Lutherans this is unintelligible tragedy. Bach recognizes that the Evangelists see Christ's death as the proclamation of His divinity and in this he sees what the theologians often do not. In the *Saint Matthew Passion* he includes the apocalyptic significance of the death of Jesus (Matthew 27:51-53) and he transposes it into the *Saint John Passion*. In this death scene the contralto aria introduces the *Christus Victor* theme: "The Hero from Judah hath triumphed in strength." Then the tenor Evangelist sings Matthew 27:51-

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have been the ultimate trump card.

53 with its ripping of the temple veil, the quaking earth, and the resurrection of the saints. All this is accompanied by running up and down on the keys of a harpsichord to approximate God's opening up the earth in judgment. In the *Saint Matthew Passion* this is accomplished by a bass fiddle. Inclusion of Matthew 27:51-53 into the *Saint John Passion* appears to be an alien intrusion into this Gospel; however Matthew's apocalyptic resurrection of the saints corresponds with Christ's words in John: "for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth" (5:28-29a). Robinson correctly notes this about John's description of the crucifixion: "In ['the single redemptive act,' that is the cross] God 'glorifies' the Son; in it Jesus is 'exalted', and ascends, and in it the Spirit is given. The Passion is the decisive, the eschatological moment, when the world is judged (12.31) and the end is reached (13.1) and all things are finished (19.28-30)."<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusion

A more detailed study of Jesus' final discourses as apocalyptic, interpretative predictions of His death and resurrection rather than that of far distant future events deserves more attention. The intent of this article is simply to introduce the topic within the climate afforded by the turn of the millennium and to indicate its possibilities for biblical interpretation, theology, and preaching, and to offer certain correctives.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>*Jesus and His Coming*, 166-67.

<sup>37</sup>Stephenson properly says "we must be careful to respect the genuinely prophetic quality of the New Testament teaching concerning the signs of our Lord's coming; . . ." (96-97). He also notes quite correctly ". . . to a great extent, many of the signs specified in the Olivet Discourse were already fulfilled on Good Friday, that is, within a week of our Lord's utterance" (97). This essay attempts, in a preliminary way, to show that Good Friday, at least from Matthew's perspective, was a complete judgment on the Israel of that time. There is no future. Luke and Paul focus on a cosmic judgment which is not different from the one made from the cross but a projection of it into the future. Recognizing that Matthew's perspectives are different from Luke's is the best antidote against neo-Evangelical and other sectarian obsessions with Israel and will provide for a far richer Christology than customarily found in Lutheran theology.

For this essay, I am in debt to Johann Sebastian Bach's interpretative music and John A. T. Robinson's courage to break with the scholarly flock and to understand the apocalyptic words of Jesus within the context of His redemptive death. Tribute is also due to the friendship of the Anglican scholar Christopher Stephen Mann, who opened a window of biblical interpretation through which I have only recently looked.