

# The Apocalyptic Imagination: *Challenges and Opportunities*

BY HEROLD WEISS



IMAGE SOURCE: [HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:SCHNORR\\_VON\\_CAROLSFELD\\_BIBEL\\_IN\\_BILDERN\\_1860\\_237.PNG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Schnorr_von_Carolsfeld_Bibel_in_Bildern_1860_237.png)

**Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld**

**A**pocalyptic literature arose as a theological way of defending the righteousness of God even when human experience finds it hard to affirm this. It argues on the basis of two presuppositions: at the moment God is not in full control of the world, and our present historical existence will be eventually destroyed. God's justice will then be evident in a new creation. In other words, apocalyptic proclaims the doctrines of The Fall and of the Two Ages. Christianity has had a problematic relationship with the apocalyptic imagination. This is an attempt to explore its challenges and to show its opportunities for the Adventist tradition.

## Early History of Christian Apocalyptic

Some early Christians held highly apocalyptic views and wrote apocalyptic texts. They were influenced by their roots in a Judaism that counted several apocalyptic sects among its many manifestations. Best known among these were the disciples of John the Baptist, the Covenanters of Qumran, the Zealots, and the Pharisees. Both the Jewish and the Christian apocryphal collections contain important apocalyptic texts written in the late BCE and the early CE centuries.

When, after the destruction of the temple, Second Temple Judaism reconstructed itself as Pharisaic Rabbinic

Judaism, the so-called Council of Jamnia rejected apocalyptic texts as sources for understanding the Jewish way. The Zealot's apocalyptic visions had been a major cause for the revolt that brought about the Jewish War. When the Rabbis had to determine the canon of the Jewish Scriptures, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Esther required long debates. All three of them ended up in the canon, but not without serious arguments against them, Esther was suspect because it does not contain the word *Yahveh*; Ezekiel and Daniel because of their apocalyptic content.

When Christians found a need to present a strong front against emergent Rabbinic Judaism, they had to consider their own canon of the Scriptures. This process took place in a happenstance manner in different locations. As Christianity became institutionalized, no longer being a Movement, the church developed an institutional hierarchy and the bishops published lists of the books that could be used for doctrinal instruction within their territories. These lists included books that later did not become part of the Christian canon and left out some which did. By the time of Augustine in North Africa and Pope Damasus in Rome, most lists contained the twenty-seven books now in our New Testament, including Revelation. The canon of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, however, did not include Revelation until the fifth century.

Within Christianity, from the earliest times to modern times, the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation have not been considered of much value as sources for the Gospel, except by groups at its fringes. These books were relevant mainly to communities which were experiencing great economic hardships and political injustices. At the cosmopolitan centers, Christianity was predominantly a tool used by those with financial and political power, and there is no support for that in Revelation. Besides, the Hellenistic doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the introduction of the doctrine of purgatory in the ninth century obscured the notion of the resurrection essential to the doctrine of the Two Ages.

## Modern Scholarship: Elision and Recovery

The Enlightenment, with its new ways of understanding the natural world and of studying the human past, put Christianity on the defensive and forced it to establish its cultural credentials. On the other hand, the flowering of the Romantic Movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century gave Christianity a new way to understand the Gospel subjectively in terms of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural worlds—that is, Christianity was to be understood in loving terms as the “Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man” [sic].

The opening up of the Americas and of Asia gave Europe access to abundant natural resources. Those involved in the exploitation, transportation, and manipulation of gold, silver, slaves, sugar, chocolate, coffee, tobacco, tea, etc., now enjoyed the benefits of great wealth. The new economy, however, also created a new underclass, especially in England which was at the time the ruling power in Europe. In the context of the consequent widespread misery, apocalyptic gained new relevance in England and America.

The interpretation of Daniel and Revelation developed by William Miller in New England was not an isolated phenomenon. It was incubated in a well-established apocalyptic heat-chamber that had developed in England, had come to America, and was quite ready to welcome what Miller was offering. Miller's apocalyptic preaching plays a significant role in the history of the Adventist Church. From the perspective of life in the United States in general, however, it does not occupy a central role in its history. American Establishment Christianity carried on as if nothing had happened.

In the nineteenth century, German biblical scholars read the New Testament with the presuppositions of the Romantic Movement and saw the Gospel in terms of utopian ideas of progress characteristic of the Victorian Era. Toward the end of that century, they were shocked by the work of Johannes Weiss, who

**Esther was  
suspect  
because it  
does not  
contain the  
word *Yahveh*;  
Ezekiel and  
Daniel because  
of their  
apocalyptic  
content.**

**His conclusion was that these books told more about the views of these authors than about the life of Jesus.**

identified the worldview of Jesus and his followers as apocalyptic. Then Weiss' son-in-law, Albert Schweitzer, brought down the house with his doctoral dissertation. He did a study of all the "life of Jesus" books that had been published between the 1790s and the early nineteenth hundreds.<sup>1</sup> His conclusion was that these books told more about the views of these authors than about the life of Jesus. The one thing that was obvious to Schweitzer was that they had worked with rationalistic or romantic presuppositions and had missed the one thing that was indisputably at the center of Jesus' preaching: an apocalyptic world view. According to Schweitzer, since Jesus had been an apocalypticist, he was incomprehensible to rationalists and romantics of modern times. Famously, he declared that as a historical figure Jesus was "a stranger and an enigma" to anyone living in the early twentieth century. In 1892, Martin Kaeler had taken some of the sting away from the results of historical investigations of Jesus by arguing that the details of Jesus' life were not the basis of Christianity. The biblical Christ is the one that sparks and sustains Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

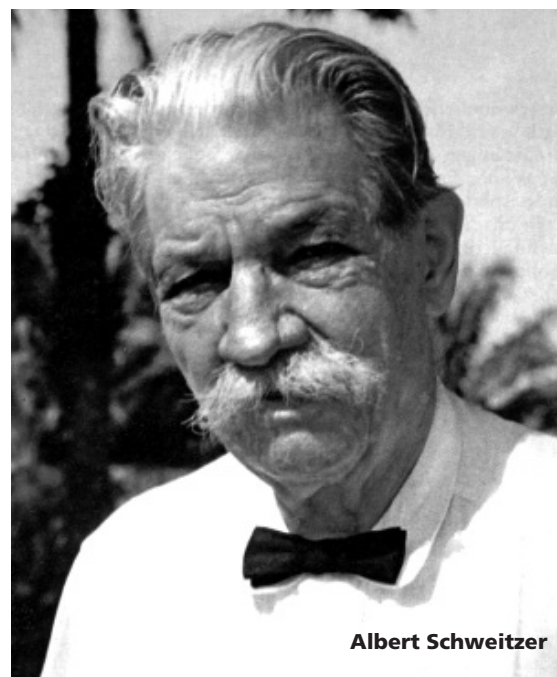
The optimism of the Victorian Era came to a radical halt with the First World War. It was the most incontrovertible demonstration of all that is wrong with the human spirit, thus questioning the Hegelian notion that humanity was on its way to reaching access to the Absolute Spirit. The use of aerial bombardment of cities and of poison gases had an unprecedented effect on civilian populations. The notion of a "just war," carefully designed by warring Christians, was shattered. The exposure of humanity's fatal flaw gave new impetus to the apocalyptic imagination within evangelical Christianity.

When, instead of being "the war to end all wars," the First World War established the causes for a Second World War, the apocalyptic imagination took over not only conservative Christianity but also popular culture. Entrepreneurs ever since have been providing ever more violent apocalyptic movies to audiences that seem never to become satiated. The apocalyp-

tic imagination that had been popular among many Jews at the time of Jesus has taken contemporary popular culture by storm.

Schweitzer's claim that Jesus had been an apocalyptic visionary could not be ignored by his scholarly colleagues. They, however, were unwilling to admit apocalyptic was the reality in which humans lived in the twentieth century. Toward the end of the previous century, scholars had already begun to study in earnest the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha of both the Old and the New Testaments.<sup>3</sup> Among these books were quite a few apocalyptic ones. These studies of the emergence and the characteristics of the apocalyptic worldview in antiquity resulted in a new appreciation for this literature, which had developed as an alternative to prophetic and sapiential visions of the world.

The Hebrew prophets were now given universal significance as the ones who had transferred the revelation of God from nature to history. In fact, they were the ones who created a new understanding of time and gave to the present significance unrelated to the cycles of nature. According to them, humans live in a timeline that extends into a future where new things are possible. By envisioning The Day of the Lord, the prophets gave a dominant role to history



**Albert Schweitzer**

IMAGE SOURCE: [HTTPS://WWW.BLUPELA.COM/LOTW.PHP?ID=31/DR-ALBERT-SCHWEITZER](https://www.blupela.com/lotw.php?ID=31/DR-ALBERT-SCHWEITZER)

in the human understanding of time. The Sages of Israel retained a special place for nature, understood as Creation, and conceived universal human life as a search for Wisdom to be applied in daily living in such a way as to prosper and be honored by one's neighbors. Both the prophets and the wise men understood that the Creator God of history demands obedience. They also agreed that the reward of obedience was prosperity and wealth in the land. According to the prophets, the Day of the Lord was to be a day in history.

The apocalyptic imagination sought to solve the problem created by the experience of those who, though obedient to God's will, were not being rewarded with happiness and prosperity in the land. Instead, they were exiled in Babylon. Ezekiel and Daniel were written to affirm that, despite all evidence to the contrary, God is still in control and his will to reward the righteous cannot be denied by earthly circumstances. To this end, these books explore the avenues to new beginnings and a resurrection of the dead. They find new use for the language of the ancient creation myths popular among the nature religions of antiquity. These myths told of battles between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and how the eventual triumph of the forces of good brought with it the creation of the world. In other words, the apocalyptic imagination retrieved from antiquity the ancient notion of time as circular. The cycle of time, however, is not yearly. It is cosmic. The Day of the Lord is not to take place within history, as the prophets proclaimed, but is going to end history and bring about a New Creation. This new conception of reality is present in apocalyptic additions to Isaiah, Daniel's vision of the resurrection of the just, and is fully represented in Revelation; the new earth will be a restoration of the Garden of Eden.

The problems created by the scholarly studies of apocalyptic literature were addressed directly by Rudolf Bultmann while the Second World War was raging.<sup>4</sup> He proposed that the Gospel Jesus had preached within an apocalyp-

tic framework in the first century is not inextricably bound to the apocalyptic language found in the gospels. That language is by its very nature mythological, indebted as it is to ancient creation myths. The solution to the problem identified by Schweitzer, the impossibility of believing in a Jesus who is a stranger and an enigma in our culture, is to transpose the Gospel from the mythological language in which it was originally cast into a language that is meaningful in the twentieth century, when mythologies are not considered descriptions of reality.

Bultmann's proposal was not to throw out the Gospel and its language (to throw out the baby with the bath water), but to recast the message of Jesus in contemporary language (to throw out the bath water and bathe the baby with clean water). He suggested that since God is a being in transcendent reality and mythological language is incomprehensible because it objectifies God's activity within the immanent world, the Gospel must be expressed now in a language that does not objectify God's activity. God is an absolute subject, and humans also live an "interior life" that is subjective. The Gospel, therefore, must be understood in a language that expresses what is transcendent in human subjectivity. He found that in the existentialist language developed by Heidegger, his colleague at the University of Marburg. Bultmann's proposal failed because people found Heidegger's existentialist language even more incomprehensible and distant from reality. The mythological language of apocalyptic, it has become clear, turns out to be quite understandable when it is recognized that it is not a description of reality, but metaphorical or analogical.

The first quest of the historical Jesus which had been a major project in the nineteenth century came to a halt by Schweitzer's analysis. Bultmann's shift from the life to the message of Jesus gave impetus to a second quest of the historical Jesus, no longer interested in the details of Jesus' life.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the message was found to be free of apocalypticism. However, in the 1950s, Ernst Käsemann, the most prominent of

**Ezekiel and Daniel were written to affirm that, despite all evidence to the contrary, God is still in control and his will to reward the righteous cannot be denied by earthly circumstances.**

**The  
mythological  
language of  
apocalyptic,  
it has become  
clear, turns  
out to be quite  
understandable  
when it is  
recognized  
that it is not  
a description  
of reality, but  
metaphorical  
or analogical.**

Bultmann's disciples and the initiator of the second quest, claimed that apocalypticism was "the mother of Christian theology;"<sup>6</sup> it had been the womb in which Christian theology had been gestated. His proposal was considered and soon discarded by his peers.

The effort to establish with historical accuracy the message of Jesus was judged inadequate by those who thought that the person of Jesus was also essential to the Gospel. Thus, a third quest of the historical Jesus was launched seeking to succeed by using more advanced methodologies. Jesus came out in these studies as a Galilean peasant, a Rabbi, a peripatetic prophet, a Cynic philosopher, a miracle worker with the mantle of Elijah and Elisha, etc. Some of them brought out the unquestionable fact that Jesus had to be seen within a Jewish milieu, beginning with the work of E. P. Sanders.<sup>7</sup> These studies also discounted the apocalyptic sayings in the gospels. It was Paula Fredriksen who, after a very careful explanation of the methodology to be employed, argued that Schweitzer's conclusion was correct: Jesus had been an apocalyptic visionary.<sup>8</sup> If, as the gospels agree, Jesus' ministry began in the context of the activities of John the Baptist, an apocalyptic visionary *par excellence*, and his disciples had preached an apocalyptic message after his crucifixion, how could anyone account for a non-apocalyptic Jesus?<sup>9</sup>

Coming to terms with a Jesus who proclaimed an apocalyptic Gospel has required a major effort throughout the centuries for a Christianity that, since the publication of the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, has been searching for the way to fit within the political and economic realities of human life on earth. What scholars have been discovering is that the apocalyptic imagination is not amenable to uniformity. For some time, the Society of Biblical Literature had a section in which scholars studied apocalyptic literature trying to determine what was essential to it as a literary genre. After many years of regular sessions in which different apocalyptic books were studied, they

could not arrive at a list of criteria which a book should have in order to be considered apocalyptic. This made them realize that there was an apocalyptic mindset, but not an apocalypticism. The word could only be used as an adjective. Those who worked within that mindset did not constitute a movement.

## **Apocalyptic Reflections in the New Testament**

A brief survey of the apocalyptic texts in the New Testament reveals significant differences among them. It is agreed by all that the first Christian documents in our possession are the letters of Paul. They were written somewhere between 49–50 and 61–62 CE. Albert Schweitzer, the proponent of an apocalyptic Jesus, thought that Paul was a mystic. This gave some impetus to the notion that Paul had been the actual founder of Christianity. It was more comfortable not to have an apocalyptic founder. This popular way of understanding Paul in the first half of the twentieth century has been rejected by most New Testament scholars who see Paul's worldview to be apocalyptic. Paul's Gospel is the Gospel of the cross that put an end to the world fallen under the power of Satan by the sin of Adam, and of the resurrection of Christ as the New Creation in which those who crucify themselves with Christ live empowered and guided by the Spirit. His is an apocalyptic, not a sacrificially substitutionary, understanding of the Christ Event. His vision of the righteousness of God is fixed on life in and with Christ. He looks forward to the coming Parousia that will give believers a Spirit body, and believes he will be alive when it takes place (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Significantly, however, Paul the apocalypticist lacks any interest in cosmic speculations about battles, descriptions of landscapes, or torments and does not point to signs announcing the arrival of the Parousia, even though he is sure of its proximity (1 Corinthians 7:29).

It is also agreed that Mark is the first of the gospels to have been written, and that all the

gospels were written anonymously.<sup>10</sup> All of them give ample evidence of the use of oral traditions and collections of sayings of Jesus by their authors. They were written within and for the benefit of specific Christian communities in order to provide encouragement and guidance. Mark was written in the midst of the war Rome fought against the Jews between 66 and 73 CE. The major battle of the war brought about the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The war did not end, however, until the fall of Masada in 73 CE. Mark was written in the midst of the ups and downs of this war. It superimposes the Parousia on the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. This is quite clear when four disciples ask Jesus when the temple will be destroyed and Jesus answers by giving them a description of the coming Parousia (Mark 13:4–36). For Mark, the Parousia is going to take place tomorrow at the latest. His generation will experience it. (Mark 13:30).

Matthew had a copy of Mark available, as shown by the many passages copied word for word from it. This means that some of the imminence of the Parousia that characterizes Mark is also found in Matthew, but Matthew is quite aware that the Parousia did not take place at the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Fifteen years or more have passed, and the Lord has not returned in glory and majesty. Thus, he disassociates the Parousia from the destruction of the temple by having the twelve disciples (not just four) ask two questions, one about the destruction of the temple and one about the Parousia (Matthew 24:3). Jesus' answer has to do with the second. Matthew tells his community that there has been a delay, but their situation is not, therefore, disheartening. In Matthew's gospel the Parousia has a different role. He dramatizes the Resurrection to affirm the hope of the relatives of those who died during the delay, and highlights the Final Judgment as the significance of the Parousia. For Mark, as for Paul, the Parousia makes present an absent Lord. Matthew diminishes this role and comforts his community by having Jesus tell them that "where

two or three are gathered together there I am" (Matthew 16:17–18; 18:20). The last words of the Risen Christ are, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). This is further emphasized by the role Matthew gives to the church as an institution that is to enhance and protect the life of the believers (Matthew 16:18–20; 18:15–19). Since Jesus is already with them, the Parousia is what sets up the Final Judgment. In Matthew 13, parables of judgment are added to those found in Mark 4, and in Matthew 25, more parables of Judgment are found. Other parables, in particular the parable of the ten virgins, point out that the Lord is delaying his coming.

Luke explicitly says that he is writing after having consulted as many written accounts as he could find (Luke 1:1–4). Among the texts he used was Mark. Luke softens the apocalyptic aspects of the tradition and emphasizes the need to accommodate oneself to life in the Roman Empire. He says specifically that the kingdom would not come immediately (Luke 19:11), and that it is useless to be in expectation of the kingdom because "the kingdom is among you" (Luke 17:20–21).

To the Sadducees Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Luke 20:25). In the second volume, written by the same author also for the benefit of Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), the apostles are conscious of the need to live at once under the rule of God and the rule of the emperor. Both volumes picture Roman officials, be they Pontius Pilate, Felix, Festus, a centurion, or just a Roman soldier, as quite aware of the rights of Jesus, his disciples, and the apostles. Pilate declares three times that Jesus is not guilty of a crime (Luke 23:4, 14, 22), and a centurion declares him "innocent" (Luke 23:47, rather than the "Son of God" Mark 15:39, Matthew 27:54).

Luke has Jesus stay in Jerusalem teaching the disciples after the resurrection and then describes his ascension to heaven. This both establishes the delay and eliminates the anxieties caused by the delay. The way in which

**The effort  
to establish  
with historical  
accuracy the  
message of  
Jesus was judged  
inadequate  
by those who  
thought that  
the person of  
Jesus was also  
essential to the  
Gospel.**

the author in both volumes describes the breaking of the bread at the Last Supper (Luke 22:30), with the disciples of Emmaus (Luke 24:30–31) and by Paul at Troas (Acts 20:7) gives to this rite the power to have the disciples experience the presence of Christ. By accommodating Christianity to life in the Roman empire, postponing the Parousia, having the Risen Christ instructing the disciples for forty days, telling of his ascension to heaven and of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, Luke greatly softens the apocalyptic tone of his sources and directs the eyes of his readers away from the heavens and straight forward on earth.

John was not based on the sources used by the authors of the Synoptic Gospels. The few incidents found also in the synoptics seem to have come to the Johannine community as part of the early oral tradition. The clearest feature of this gospel is the complete omission of apocalyptic concerns. Not even one parable of the Kingdom, a clear apocalyptic metaphor, is found in it. The language of Jesus is totally different. The central motif is not the kingdom but eternal life, and all believers are enjoying it *now*. It was not without reason that Bultmann found in John the justification for his attempt to transpose the message of the Gospel to a non-apocalyptic key.

The Apocalypse of John of Patmos is the classic apocalyptic text within the New Testament. It is totally immersed in the apocalyptic imagination, and as such it is unique. To read it as prophecy is to ignore its modality. Its aim is not to foretell the future but to give strength and guidance in the present. The throne and the temple are the symbols that emphasize God's sovereignty, but God's wrath is what receives detailed treatment. Paul, as we have said, was an apocalyptic Christian. As such he was aware of the wrath of God. Like the Revelation (Apocalypse) of John, the epistles of Paul also are sure that all will have to appear before the judgment of God and give an account of what they have done while living in the world. According to Paul, the wrath of God is revealed when God "gives up" to their own devices those who do what is contrary to God's will (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28).

In Paul's description of the Parousia in 1 Corinthians 15, he is silent about those who are not resurrected to be with Christ. Paul knows about the dark side of God and agrees that those who disregard God's merciful grace "deserve to die" (Romans 1:32), but he has no masochistic interest in the execution of their sentence. Revelation, by



Diego Velázquez, *Saint John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos*

contrast, seems obsessed with describing the fate of the wicked. In this text the wrath of God is not just God having to deal with wicked people. Instead of exposing the justice of God as what gives life to those who are dead, Revelation depicts a sadistic God, a vengeful enthroned King. Here we find apocalyptic with a vengeance. It gives a picture of God that is not particularly appealing to those who are attracted to the Prince of Peace. The apocalyptic worldview cannot envision the God of loving surprises. It views the passage of time to be as determined as the passage of the seasons of the year. The cosmic cycle will run its course according to the way it has been set. The apocalyptic imagination operates in a closed universe.

### The Challenge and Opportunity for Adventism

There is ample evidence that the apocalyptic imagination shows itself in many varied forms, and not all are

theologically appealing. Since it is present in many forms within the canon, it has to be read with as fertile an imagination as the one displayed by the authors who exhibit it. This presents an unavoidable challenge to the Adventist Church in the twenty-first century. Having been established in the midst of a culturally informed, apocalyptic enthusiasm, and still convinced that its mission is to bring to the forefront an apocalyptic worldview, it must exercise theological discretion in its use of the imagination.

The current trend to read apocalyptic texts in terms of historical-allegorical interpretations leaves the Church open to misguided enthusiasms, and confused in the midst of a popular imagination that finds in apocalyptic a way to escape from reality, and a membership that is quite aware of the eroding power of the delay of the Parousia. Are we tied to our Adventist past and to a restriction of "Present Truth" to its nineteenth-century exposition by our mothers and fathers? Or, are we bound to repeat the history of the early Christians, as recorded in the four gospels, journeying from an absorbing enthusiasm for an imminent Parousia to a realization that Jesus is present in the midst of us at all times, to a settling down to the realities of economic and political situations that demand practical choices, and finally to an abandoning of enthusiasm for an afterlife when this life offers all kinds of opportunities to live in faithfulness to our Creator? Our apocalyptic tradition presents an opportunity to be theologically responsible and continue to affirm with full confidence that in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, God's sovereignty and justice will prevail.

The evangelistic efforts of those who continue to preach a gospel that is hidden in the book of Revelation (which they have been privileged to "unlock" by supernatural sources) find competition in the cacophony produced by the current enthusiasm for cosmic battles in apocalyptic scenarios. They are supported by Adventists who find in those visions a way out of

dispiriting human conditions, and are attracted to charismatic leaders with extremist negative views of the world in which we live. It is sobering to realize that David Koresh was able to convince quite a few Adventists to follow him into a suicidal tragedy. It was the result of a grandiose messianic egotism, gullible apocalyptic believers, and the inability of those who were trying to prevent a tragedy to understand the mindset of extreme apocalypticists. To the agents of the FBI at Mount Carmel, David Koresh was a stranger and an enigma.

The apocalyptic imagination is flourishing these days on account of the insecurity and fear in which people live. Security has become the key word of our times. The world does not need the populist political rhetoric or the apocalyptic escape from reality that exploits the people's insecurity. What is needed is a theological construct that is able to give security and peace of mind by a prophetic characterization of the righteousness of God in line with Paul's theology, and not by an exploitation of insecurity and fear by apocalyptic chimeras that no longer supply the joy and the peace of the Gospel of Jesus. The imagination needed to read biblical apocalyptic texts is not one that exhibits theological immaturity.

In January of 2018, several television channels broadcasted documentaries marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of what happened at the Mount Carmel compound of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists at Waco, Texas. In his analysis of the way in which Seventh-day Adventists reacted to that tragedy, Ronald Lawson identified three responses.<sup>11</sup>

The ecclesiastical administration paid the media consultant firm of Porter/Novelli between \$75,000 and \$100,000 to distance the church from the Branch Davidians and keep the church's reputation clean for the benefit of the traditionalists.

The conservative wing of the church, consisting mainly of new converts, some pastors, and the "independent ministries" who claim that the church has been abandoning its original

**Instead of  
exposing the  
justice of God  
as what gives  
life to those  
who are dead,  
Revelation  
depicts a  
sadistic God,  
a vengeful  
enthroned  
King.**



**Our  
apocalyptic  
tradition  
presents an  
opportunity  
to be  
theologically  
responsible  
and continue  
to affirm with  
full confidence  
that in spite  
of all the  
evidence to  
the contrary,  
God's  
sovereignty  
and justice will  
prevail.**

landmarks, saw the tragedy as an opportunity to take advantage of the media's attention to proclaim the Adventist apocalyptic gospel. In their view, the tragedy was one more sign of the approaching Parousia and the expected persecutions that precede it.

The progressive wing of the church, represented by the Association of Adventist Forums and those Adventists who attend Forum events and read *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today*, identified the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists as fellow church members who, like they, were at the margins of the mainstream, but at the other end of the spectrum. In an editorial,<sup>12</sup> then *Spectrum* editor Roy Branson wrote: "We didn't start the fire, but the tinder was ours."<sup>13</sup>

As a matter of fact, the only ones who could follow David Koresh's interpretation of the seven seals of Revelation were those who knew the Adventist interpretation of them. His efforts seeking converts were strictly aimed at Adventists, and over 90 percent of those in Mount Carmel were members in good standing of Adventist churches.

The media's recent attention to the events at Mount Carmel from February 28 to April 19, 1993, gives the church a new opportunity to reconsider its apocalyptic roots. The recycling of Revelation Seminars which claim to "unlock the secret" found in the book are fodder for another demonstration of misguided apocalyptic dreams. According to Jon Paulien, they may "become models for unstable people like Koresh."<sup>14</sup>

Paulien called for a serious and responsible reading of Revelation that would discourage interpretations without adequate support. It does not take much acumen to see that the intention of the book of Revelation is not to "lock in a secret" but to reveal what needs to be known about life in God's creation, even as it does so in a language that is not intended literally. It has been my intention in this brief survey of the apocalyptic trajectory within Christianity and our Church to call for a re-evaluation of the role of this literary genre so as to make sense of it,

not by an historically allegorical mismatch but by a theological metaphorical interpretation. This will allow apocalyptic to be a positive contributor to the living of full lives under God on this earth, rather than a predator of our fears and insecurities. The apocalyptic imagination rightly employed is quite intelligible to reasonable people; probably more so than convoluted arguments that claim to be reasonable explanations of the sovereignty and the righteousness of God. ■

---

**Herold Weiss** is professor emeritus of Religious Studies at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana.

## Footnotes:

1. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906, 2nd. ed., 1913.
2. *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, 1892.
3. Texts written between 200 BCE and 200 CE using the name of a patriarch or an apostle which are not canonical.
4. *The New Testament and Mythology*, 1941.
5. James M. Robinson. *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1959.
6. The original essay appeared in English translation in *Perspectives on Paul*, 1971.
7. *Jesus and Judaism*, 1985.
8. *From Jesus to Christ*, 1988.
9. See, John P. Meier, "The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80 (1999): 459-489.
10. I will refer to the gospels and their authors by the traditional names.
11. "Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1995, 3): 323-341.
12. <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2018/01/31/we-didnt-start-fire-tinder-was-ours>.
13. *Spectrum* 23 (May, 1993) 2, cited by Lawson.
14. "The Impact of Waco on Adventist Teaching of Revelation at the Graduate Level," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, Chicago, November 19, 1993, cited by Lawson.