

*The Book of*  
***Revelation***  
*and the*  
***Johannine***  
***Apocalyptic***  
***Tradition***



***John M. Court***



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# **The Book of Revelation and the Johannine Apocalyptic Tradition**

**John M. Court**

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND THE JOHANNINE APOCALYPTIC TRADITION

It is important to see the book of Revelation in the particular historical context of the believing community which created it, because Christianity and its documents and doctrines relate to specific moments of history. But it is also important to see the book as a visionary interpretation of the church and its future; here we need to give full weight to the ideas and images contained in the visions. The complementarity of different approaches, historical, literary and psychological is vital for a modern understanding of the text (as I tried to demonstrate in my study guide on Revelation).<sup>1</sup>

We do not need to take Revelation literally, but we should take it seriously. It shows a relationship between pain, martyrdom and Christian belief. And it clearly depicts a continuity between past, present and future for the church and the individual believer, from which the disillusioned churches of today can learn. The text and tradition may also speak directly to the current doctrinal discussions in Christian circles about the reality of a vision of hell.

The book of Revelation has been seriously neglected by academic biblical scholarship until comparatively recently. This helps to explain, as consequences, two sets of phenomena: it has long provided a happy hunting ground for proof texts in Christian extreme-evangelical and fundamentalist groups; and most recently it has appeared as a polemical text for political use, furnishing material in Liberation Theology for example.<sup>2</sup> The present work seeks to restore the equilibrium and to

1. John M. Court, *Revelation* (New Testament Guides; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

2. See, e.g., John M. Court, 'The Book of Revelation', in R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (eds.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 593-95.



provide in several ways a more balanced, both academic and inclusive, approach to the book.

In relation to other books of the Bible scholars have been particularly careful to explore questions of sources, textual traditions and derivative works (for example the study of Paul's letters and the deutero-Pauline writings). With the book of Revelation this process has been one-sided and truncated: commentators such as R.H. Charles<sup>3</sup> were very concerned about the source materials; and the nature of John's Greek has been variously examined (e.g. by G. Mussies<sup>4</sup>). But the immediate possibilities of derivative apocalypses and related traditions remain largely unexplored. In fact until now there has been no recent edition of either the secondary Apocalypse of John or of the later work, an apocryphal Greek apocalypse 'fathered' upon St John Chrysostom.

The present book has four parts, by means of which it is hoped to present for publication a more adequate and comprehensive account of the Johannine apocalyptic tradition: this volume contains the Greek texts of three apocryphal apocalypses, each with an introduction, an English translation and critical notes; I also reproduce an English version of a further apocryphal apocalypse existing only in a Coptic text. I seek to assess the general nature of the relationship of these texts to the canonical book of Revelation. In this way it should be possible to identify any definitive characteristics there may be of the Johannine apocalyptic tradition overall.

I have a further dream, not fulfilled in this present volume. For the book of Revelation it seems to me highly desirable to represent not only the canonical book itself, together with those identifiable characteristics of the derivative traditions in the Johannine apocalypses, but also to reflect the influence of the book of Revelation upon many generations of Christian artists even up to the present day. It is necessary to concentrate on the potent symbols and significant themes of the book, as they were applied for example in illuminated manuscripts and in medieval 'doom' paintings. A catalogue of the art forms and examples would itself fill volumes; what would be intended in my dream is a selective presentation of the variety of applications of a number of key themes. The object would be to produce an essentially visual 'reading' of the

3. R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John* (International Critical Commentary; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920).

4. Gerard Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as used in the Apocalypse of St John: A Study in Bilingualism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971).

text, to demonstrate to what extent our modern view of this book has to be based on such a heritage of interpretations. Only then can it speak of modern politics, as one millennium ends and a new one begins. But, unlike Professor Caritat in Stephen Lukes's allegorical novel,<sup>5</sup> we should not be 'obsessed with the study of past ideas about the future to the exclusion of a close interest in the present'.

It is highly unlikely that the four 'Johannine' apocalypses included here have ever been studied together, before this present volume. The individual texts are not normally found even in the much more comprehensive collections of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts which serve the modern (sometimes gnostic) interest in 'alternative' texts of Gospels, acts and apocalypses. But even more strangely one cannot even find mention of all four together in the introductory notes in such collections under the heading of 'later apocalypses'. This makes the present opportunity to see the texts together and evaluate them of special importance.

As editor of the revised version of M.R. James's classic work *The Apocryphal New Testament*,<sup>6</sup> J.K. Elliott treats of *Other Apocryphal Apocalypses* towards the end of the book, from p. 682. It is in the form of notes, without any text, that he lists on p. 684 the Johannine apocalypses as follows:

4. Apocryphal Apocalypses of John

1. (Tischendorf) based on several manuscripts, while text itself is considerably older, possibly 5th Century; 'typical question and answer account of the other world'; English version—Walker 1870 Edinburgh (ANCL)

2. Another Greek apocalypse, attributed to John Chrysostom, published by F. Nau in 1914; the text is 6–8th Century

3. 11th Century Coptic manuscript, published by E.A. Wallis Budge in *Coptic Apocalypses in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, London 1913; pages 59–74 are the text and pages 241–57 the English translation

There is a similar, if more annotated, listing in Wilhelm Schneemelcher's *New Testament Apocrypha. II. Writings relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects*.<sup>7</sup>

5. Stephen Lukes, *The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat* (London: Verso, 1995).

6. J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

7. W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha, II* (Rev. edn; Tübingen:

Most surprisingly, there is not a more complete listing even in literary studies of the apocalyptic genre, such as those in the special issue of *Semeia* 14 (1979) *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*. The relevant article in this volume on 'The Early Christian Apocalypses' was written by Adela Yarbro Collins. She describes how 24 Early Christian texts fit the definition of Apocalypse:

'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world (p. 62).

These Early Christian apocalypses are of two basic types: Type 1 offers primary revelation through vision or audition; type 2 offers primary revelation through an otherworldly journey.

Of the examples of Type 1, 'the [canonical] Book of Revelation is the only one of this group of Christian apocalypses with...a clear interest in the politics of their times'. This is in contrast to Jewish examples.<sup>8</sup> Pseudonymity is not essential in the Early Christian corpus, although it is, of course, frequently found. Not least because the seer of the canonical book of Revelation apparently uses his own name, it is concluded that pseudonymity is not an essential part of the definition for the genre of apocalyptic.

The following are the Johannine examples of the genre listed and discussed by Adela Yarbro Collins, with a summary of her main comments:

1. The canonical apocalypse, the book of Revelation, in which the external epistolary form is subordinated to the essentially revelatory character of the book. The focus is on exhortation, which stresses the importance of standing firm in faith and love and enduring tribulation. The exhortation is reinforced by eschatological threats and promises. This work is classified as an apocalypse of type 1b: 'Apocalypses of Cosmic and/or Political Eschatology with Neither Historical Review Nor Otherworldly Journey'. Such a definition, disputing historical points

J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1989; ET R.McL.Wilson; Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992).

8. Yarbro Collins, 'The Early Christian Apocalypses', p. 64.

of reference, is clearly related to Adela Yarbro Collins's interpretation of chs. 6–22 as a recapitulatory series of eschatological visions corresponding to a common pattern.<sup>9</sup>

2. The Apocalypse of St John the Theologian (or the Questions of John) edited by Tischendorf. This work is dated sometime after 100 CE; its actual dependence upon the book of Revelation is noted, as is the fascination with Antichrist, in chs. 6–8, including the physical description to be found in ch. 7. This text is also classified, like the canonical apocalypse, as type 1b.
3. The Apocalypse of John the Theologian, attributed to John Chrysostom (c. 347–407 CE). The text was edited by Nau (1914) and is otherwise known as the Second Greek apocryphal Apocalypse of St John. In form it is actually a simple dialogue between 'John' and 'the Lord'. The proposed range of possible dates is sixth to eighth century CE. Although there is in the work both an eschatological expectation of a personal afterlife and an interest in the heavenly world, in the context of mystical experience (both aspects which relate very positively to the canonical apocalypse) Adela Yarbro Collins concludes that Questions of John the Theologian (as she renames it) 'should not be categorized as an apocalypse because it lacks the characteristic of mediated heavenly revelation'.<sup>10</sup>
4. Mysteries of St John the Apostle and Holy Virgin (Coptic Apocalypse). The work is extant only in Coptic, in a manuscript published by Budge (1913). It is an account of the revelation which John the beloved disciple received in the course of a heavenly journey. A distinctive feature of the work is its extensive adaptation of Egyptian mythology, associating the activity of heavenly beings with the fertility of the earth. Despite the range of aetiological references to human experience in general, and the cosmic nature of the conflict between Michael and the angel of wrath, Adela Yarbro Collins classifies this work as an apocalypse of type 2c: 'Apocalypses with an Otherworldly Journey and Only Personal Eschatology'.

9. A.Y. Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (HDR, 9; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976).

10. 'The Early Christian Apocalypses', p. 103.

Adela Yarbro Collins does not mention the Third Apocalypse of John in her survey. There may be some very distant relationship to the Apocalypse of James, which she notes as a Coptic text published by Budge in 1913. But the text I include here is Greek, not Coptic; and although it involves James as participant in the dialogue, its most striking feature is that the revealer figure is John (in a most interesting reversal of roles).

Given the incompleteness of these collections and surveys, their uncertain and disputed aspects, and the lack of supporting evidence from the texts themselves, there is abundant reason to present together for the first time in this volume the whole range of Johannine apocalyptic material.

Generalizations exist about the way in which the Christian apocalyptic traditions have evolved. Recently Ronald L. Farmer observed:

It is noteworthy that the first function—that of providing an alternative world vision and interpreting present persecution—is characteristic of the earlier Christian apocalyptic texts, whereas the second function—that of controlling the behavior of Christians by vivid descriptions of eschatological punishment—is characteristic of the later Christian apocalypses.<sup>11</sup>

He quotes from Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's comment about the changing socio-political situation of the Christian communities:

It signals a shift from an alternative vision of the world and political power to the rejection of the world for the sake of the afterlife, from a countercultural Christian movement to a church adapted and integrated into its culture and society, from a sociopolitical, religious ethos to an individualized and privatized ethics. [This shift in function] engenders a shift in apocalyptic language and form, from evocative-mythopoetic symbols and political language to allegorical descriptions of eternal punishments and moralistic injunctions against the sins of the individual.<sup>12</sup>

The present study will afford an opportunity to evaluate such an essentially sociological account of the contrasts, with respect to the Johan-

11. Ronald L. Farmer *Beyond the Impasse: The Promise of a Process Hermeneutic* (Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics, 13; Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 145.

12. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Phenomenon of Early Christian Apocalyptic', in D. Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983), pp. 313-14.

nine tradition. Towards this end, the next chapter introduces a discussion of the role of visions of hell and the afterlife within the Christian tradition.

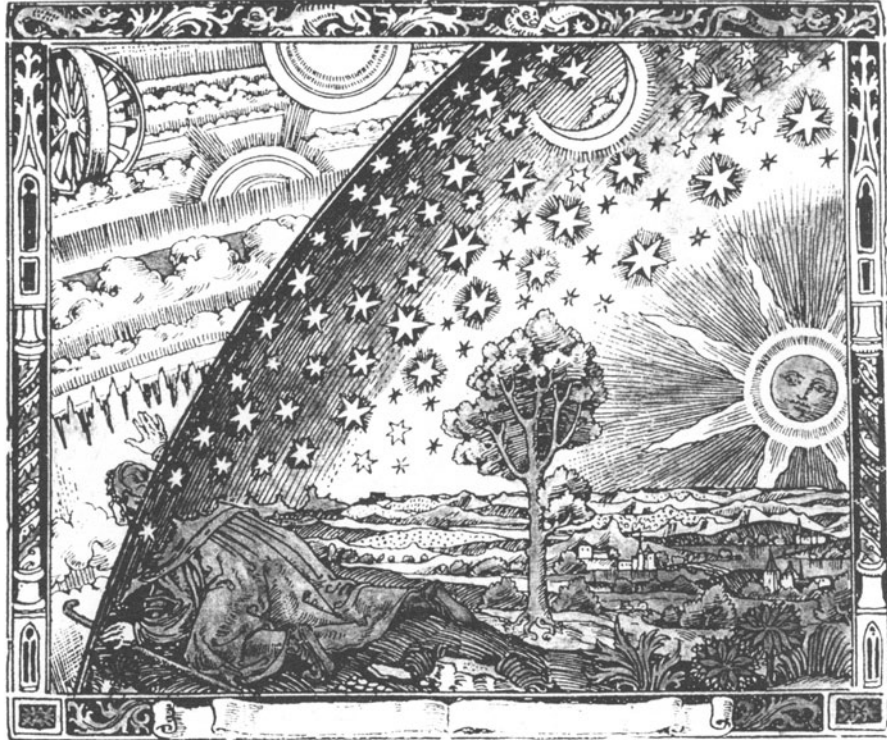


Figure 1. *Woodcut Heaven and Earth* (Mary Evans Picture Library)



Figure 2. *The End of the World is Nigh Again...* © 1996 Steven Appleby. Reproduced by permission



## Chapter 2

### VISIONS OF HELL

In our day, fear of the wrath of God has been largely replaced by fear of global warming and the declining sperm count.<sup>1</sup>

Alphonse Daudet wrote a short story, 'Le curé de Cucugnan' in which the eponymous hero, the Abbé Martin decides to pay a visit to Heaven to see how his former parishioners are faring. To his sorrow he could not discover any of them there. Nor were there any in Purgatory, for they were all roasting in Hell. With singed feet the priest returns to his flock, to urge them to behave better in order to avoid a similar fate.

Jerome K. Jerome, actor, schoolmaster and journalist, best known for his comic classic *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), died some 70 years ago. In his autobiographical essays *My Life and Times* (1926) he challenged churchmen to make up their minds about the significance of Hell and make the results public. His own childhood experiences had been traumatic:

I was brought up to believe in a personal God who loved you if you were good; but, if you were wicked, sent you, after you were dead, to a place called Hell, where you were burnt alive for ever and ever. My mother had the idea that it was not really for ever and ever; because God was so full of loving-kindness He would not want to hurt any creature more than He could help; and that, when they had been punished sufficiently and had repented, He would forgive them. But that was only her fancy; and perhaps it was wrong of her to think so...

Even as it was, not all mankind were to be saved, but only those who 'believed'. If you didn't believe the story you were still to be damned. As a child, my difficulty was that I was never quite sure whether I

1. David Marquand, 'Moralists and Hedonists', in David Marquand and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Ideas that Shaped Post-War Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 1996).

believed or not. That I made every effort in my power to believe it, goes without saying. My not believing would break my mother's heart: that I knew. Added to which, it meant going to Hell. From many a fiery pulpit, I had heard vivid and detailed descriptions of Hell. The haunting horror of it was ever present to my mind. Face downwards on my pillow, I would repeat 'I do believe', over and over again: ending by screaming it out aloud, sometimes, in case God had not heard my smothered whisperings. For periods, I would be confident that I had conquered—that I really did believe: there could be no doubt about it. And then the fear would come to me that, after all, I was only pretending to believe; and that God saw through me and knew I didn't.<sup>2</sup>

Other more recent novelists have conjured contrasting descriptions of Hell, or of what it might mean to talk about the context of eternal damnation. Here are four distinctive examples, to illustrate the point:

It was very silent in the wasteland, very cold and dark. I thought how strange it was that hell should be conventionally depicted as hot and noisy, an inferno of leaping flames and screaming souls welded together in a ceaseless roaring activity. I also thought how strange it was that the Modernists could attempt to slough off hell by defining it as an antiquated concept which could have no meaning for twentieth-century man. Hell was dereliction in the wasteland—the wasteland in which the soul was imprisoned when God was absent, the wasteland where there was no convenient exit marked 'Salvation' and no convenient signpost directing one to the spiritual presence of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

In the sermon he gave on graduating from the theological college, Thorvald took Hell as his subject. He spoke before the bishop and several professors of theology who had come, drawn by the rumours of this young graduate who preached with all the remorselessness of a Jesuit. His sermon made a powerful impression on those who heard it. It caused distant church bells to peal and the organ pipes to sigh darkly and the inside of the church to smell of red-hot iron filings and singed linen. None of those in attendance would ever forget the way in which Thorvald Bak had, at one stage, worked his way up on to the edge of the pulpit, where he had then hunkered down, hovering like a big bird of prey, and said, quite softly, 'Hell shall be the coals under the boilers of faith!'<sup>4</sup>

2. Jerome K. Jerome, *My Life and Times* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1926; reissued Folio Society, 1992), pp. 206, 210.

3. Susan Howatch, *Ultimate Prizes* (Glasgow: William Collins/Fontana, 1990), p. 205.

4. Peter Hoeg, *The History of Danish Dreams* (London: The Harvill Press 1996), p. 57.

Then suddenly he [Amos] leaped from his seat and thundered at the top of his voice:

'*Ye're all damned!*'

... Amos's voice now took on a deceptively mild and conversational note. His protruding eyes ranged slowly over his audience.

'Ye know, doan't ye, what it feels like when ye burn yer hand in takin' a cake out of the oven or wi' a match when ye're lightin' one of they godless cigarettes? Ay. It stings wi' a fearful pain, doan't it? And ye run away to clap a bit o' butter on it to take the pain away. Ah, but' (an impressive pause) '*there'll be no butter in hell!* Yer whoal body will be burnin' and stingin' wi' that unbearable pain, and yer blackened tongues will be stickin' out of yer mouth, and yer cracked lips will try to scream out for a drop of water, but no sound woan't come because yer throat is drier nor the sandy desert and yer eyes will be beatin' like great red hot balls against yer shrivelled eyelids...' <sup>5</sup>

'This is what you want: infinite worlds!'

'Surely you will allow me at least more than one. Otherwise where would God have set Hell? Not in the bowels of the earth.'

'Why not in the bowels of the earth?'

'Because'—and here Roberto was repeating in a very approximate fashion an argument he had heard in Paris, nor could he guarantee the precision of his calculations—'the diameter of the center of the earth measures two hundred Italian miles, and if we cube that, we have eight million miles. Considering that one Italian mile contains two hundred and forty thousand English feet, and since the Lord must have allowed each of the damned at least six feet, Hell could contain only forty million damned, which seems few to me, considering all the sinners who have lived in this world of ours from Adam until now.'

'That would be true,' Caspar replied, not even deigning to go over the calculation, 'if the damned were inside their bodies. But this is only after the Resurrection of the Flesh and the Last Judgement! And then there will no longer be either earth or planets, but other heavens and other earths!'

'Agreed, if the damned are only spirits, there will be a thousand million even on the head of a pin.' <sup>6</sup>

A report of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission, entitled *The Mystery of Salvation*, was published in 1995. Immediate interest and

5. Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 85.

6. Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before* (London: Minerva/Mandarin, 1996), pp. 315-16.