

# The Church as a Company of Nomads

BY BARRY HARVEY

Early Christians, steeped in the apocalyptic imagination of post-exilic Judaism, saw themselves as a company of nomads in the present age. A Church that celebrates this vision through worship and service is truly a people who have heard “what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

---

Looking back over the centuries, we can notice many times and places in which people have imagined the world as a house in which they are comfortably at home. When this is the case, the moral task for individuals is to find their proper place in that world and to act in accordance with its foundational practices and institutions. Be it in ancient Athens, the first-century Roman Empire, a medieval kingdom, or a twenty-first century capitalist society, for such people who see themselves living in a comfortable world, the way the world *is* seems to be just the way the world *should be*. Continuity and stability are the guiding principles of such a society.

Yet at other times and places, people have seen themselves as living in an open field, often without owning the pegs with which to pitch a tent.<sup>1</sup> That is how the first Christians imagined the world and their place in it. They saw themselves as citizens belonging to another commonwealth, a company of nomads garnered “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9) to populate a city making its way through history on pilgrimage to the city of God. They traced this way of seeing their lives back to Abraham, who “obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states that Abraham and his sons lived in tents, as though the land of promise to which they had been directed was a foreign land. We are told

that they looked forward “to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (11:10). In the conclusion of the letter the author reiterates this stance, stating that Jesus’ followers have no lasting city here, but are looking instead “for the city that is to come” (13:14).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly describes how God’s pilgrim people view their existence in the world: “Here on earth, the church-community lives in a foreign land. It is a colony of strangers far away from home, a community of foreigners enjoying the hospitality of the host country in which they live, obeying its laws, and honoring its authorities. With gratitude it makes use of what is needed to sustain the body and other areas of earthly life.” This community of pilgrims participates in the life of the host country, prays for those in authority over it, and offers the best service they can, but in the end “it is merely passing through.” At any given moment it might hear the call to move on, and then “it will break camp, leaving behind all worldly friends and relatives, and following only the voice of the one who has called it.”<sup>2</sup>



This way of seeing the world is rooted in the apocalyptic imagination that first developed in post-exilic Judaism. “Apocalyptic” is derived from the Greek *apokalypsis*, which is usually translated “revelation” or “unveiling.” This translation is accurate as far as it goes, but the disclosure is not primarily information regarding a previously hidden state of affairs or a prediction about the end of the world. What is being unveiled has to do instead with God taking decisive and timely action to bring about the divine intention for creation. In the words of Jesus, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come” (Mark 1:15a).

Apocalypticism first appeared on the scene as the Jewish people struggled to make sense of what had happened to them following their expulsion from the Promised Land in the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of the eighth to sixth centuries B.C. The covenants that God had made with them seemed remote, their promises largely unfulfilled. And yet as a people they continued to believe that God’s redemptive work had not been arrested by their hardheartedness. When in the past they cried out in repentance, God had heard their cry and acted on their behalf. Manna was provided in the wilderness; judges were raised up to deliver the people from their enemies; a man after God’s own heart was anointed as king; Jerusalem was graciously spared when threatened with seemingly overwhelming force. With each provisional fulfillment the original promise was elaborated or augmented, often in surprising and yet consistent ways. Each partial resolution created an expectation and hope for something more, thus expanding the content and range of the original promise.

The return of some exiles to the land of Israel in the centuries that followed (though once there they remained under the dominion of foreign rulers) was seen by some Jews as a partial fulfillment of the ingathering

promised by the prophets. But it was evident that a complete return had not occurred, and that their dispersion among the nations continued. In response to these circumstances a group of apocalyptic visionaries began to proclaim that the God of their ancestors had actually begun “a new thing” in their midst (Isaiah 43:19) which eluded human planning and calculation, and would culminate in the rescue and restoration of Israel and the consummation of God’s blessing to all nations as well. A new covenant with the chosen people was in the works, though one that would not be like the covenant that God had made with their ancestors when he had taken them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, “a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 31:32).

According to these visionaries, the present order of the world could not contain what God had in store for Israel and for the rest of creation. To make sense of the changes that would result from God’s decisive act, they saw the time of creation divided into two ages. There was the exile of the present age (*ha-’olam hazeh*), when the wicked flourish and God’s people suffer the rule of idolatrous powers that claim for themselves what belongs to God alone, and the age to come (*ha-’olam haba’*), when all creatures would witness the restoration of God’s sovereignty, the defeat of sin and death, and the vindication of Israel and the righteous Gentiles (see, for example, Isaiah 24:4–5, 21–2; 25:6–8; and 65:17; Zechariah 1:7–21; 2:11; 4:1–4, 10b–14; and 6:1–8; and Daniel 7:1–28 and 12:1–13).

Extraordinary phenomena – cataclysmic upheavals such as earthquakes and floods, and visions of the heavenly throne room – appear in apocalyptic texts as portents of this momentous transposition, for only such imagery does justice to what will take place. Modern readers should take care, therefore, not to be put off by such images, nor to be distracted by the timetables endlessly concoct-

ed by certain preachers and fiction writers that purport to predict when and how the world will come to an end. The purpose of apocalyptic language is not to “picture” the world, but to position the church-community in right relation to the things, people, events, and institutions that presently constitute it, a relation determined by the course history will take and the consummation that awaits all creation in the messianic kingdom.

Far from predicting the imminent destruction of time and space, (that is, of “history” itself), apocalyptic imagination both preserves and intensifies the sense of expectation, delay, tension, and eventual resolution that per-

---

**Apocalypticism first appeared on the scene as the Jewish people struggled to make sense of what had happened to them following their expulsion from the Promised Land.**

---

vades Israel's attentive following of history. The biblical writers hold in generative tension the motifs of the nearness *and* the deferment of God's reign and regime—that is, the “is” and “is not” of apocalyptic thought. We thus find throughout these writings a pronounced sense of exigency and longing for the day of the Lord compounded by exhortations to patience that tacitly acknowledge that God does delay.



It is from this communal and historical soil that Jesus of Nazareth emerged, proclaiming to his fellow Israelites that the kingdom was drawing near, and thus they needed to “repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). Through his life, death, and resurrection, God's messianic reign became a present reality in connection with the day-to-day concerns and celebrations of life. Over against the forces and powers that had governed the course and content of life in the ancient world virtually uncontested, Jesus introduced an alternative pattern of communal life, a distinctive set of personal habits and relations, and a different story in terms of which to make sense of all things on earth and under heaven. The meaning of all other figures, events, and institutions no longer resided in themselves. They were now derivative signs, the significance of which could only be followed in their relationship to this one Jewish man and the body politic of the Church, over which he rules as head.

The New Testament witness to the unveiling of God's messianic kingdom in and through Christ is by no means uniform, as evidenced by its literary and theological diversity, but the distinctive motifs of apocalyptic thought nonetheless figure prominently in virtually every book. Owing to what God accomplishes in Christ, Scripture testifies to the fact that the world had crossed a decisive threshold with the triumph of God over death and sin. At the same time, however, creation still awaits the final transfiguration of heaven and earth. The necessities of eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, having children, burying parents, acquiring and disposing of property, producing and exchanging goods, continue as before. The biblical writers thus locate the time of the Church at the juncture where the two ages and two social orders overlap. There is the present age over which the authorities and powers exercise dominion, but which will ultimately pass away, and the age of God's everlasting reign, when all creatures will witness God's triumph over sin and death, and the vindication of the righteous in Israel and among the nations.

Apocalyptic texts make effective use of the literary device of foreshortening to depict the coming of God's everlasting rule in connection with events in history. Foreshortening compresses the time between what is near at hand and the last things, putting them into immediate juxtaposition. The author of Daniel, for example, writing sometime in the middle of the second

century B.C. during the Maccabean revolt, adopts the sixth-century perspective of the character of Daniel to describe events that had already occurred (the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rise of Hellenistic kingdoms in the Middle East, culminating with the rule of the tyrant Antiochus IV) in connection with God's immanent judgment on these kingdoms (the "present" of Daniel's readers) and the establishment of the everlasting kingdom of the Son of Man (the eschatological backdrop against which all these events are depicted).

Through skillful use of foreshortening, the things that had already occurred, the things that would occur shortly, and the things that will be revealed at the end of the age are blended together with the "present" of the author. There is no intention to deceive readers by surreptitiously claiming an after-the-fact authority of a past hero of Israel. Rather, the goal is to fashion an new awareness to (1) the memory of Daniel and his friends struggling to survive in Babylon during the Exile, providing the narrative standpoint for the passage, (2) a depiction of how everything on earth and under heaven would eventually end up with the coming of the Son of Man whose reign would be everlasting, and (3) how both of these impinged upon the times and tasks of the Jews during the Maccabean revolt (the "present" of the book's intended readers).<sup>3</sup>

The same procedure is used in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, the so-called "Little Apocalypse." In this extended discourse (which is rare in Mark), Jesus warns about the impending destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. When questioned about the timing of these events by his inner circle of disciples, Jesus gives what appears to be a confusing answer. He begins by stating that a time of persecution is coming for his followers leading up to the consummation of this age, as they will be brought before governors, kings, and synagogues to testify about him.

Jesus then ties these tribulations to allusions about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, which will bring with it terrible suffering, and give rise to false messiahs and prophets (13:5-23). He speaks in explicitly apocalyptic terms about the sun being darkened and the stars falling from the heavens, which are harbingers of the final coming of the Son of Man in clouds of glory (an image drawn from Daniel 7) to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth (13:24-27).

---

**Apocalyptic authors skillfully use the literary device of foreshortening to blend together things that had already occurred, things that would occur shortly, and things that will be revealed at the end of the age.**

---

Finally, he counsels his disciples to learn the lesson of the fig tree, and recognize from the signs that “all these things” will occur within this generation, but that no one but the Father knows the day or hour these things will occur. Jesus concludes with a short parable summoning his disciples to stay awake, to remain alert (13:28-37).

If the author of Mark wrote these verses sometime between 60 and 70 (or even later), then it would seem that Jesus was mistaken about the timing of these events, if not completely incoherent. The end of the age had not occurred during the generation of Jesus’ listeners, and the fall of Jerusalem had either already taken place or was imminent. And yet the evangelist sets these words down with no apparent discomfort. Mark had skillfully adopted the standpoint of the pre-Easter disciples for his narrative. All the events depicted in this chapter, “the spread of the gospel, the suffering of the missionaries, the destruction of Jerusalem, the coming of false Messiahs, and the apocalyptic last coming of the Son of man were from the time standpoint of the first disciples future events.” Through the technique of foreshortening Mark has fashioned an attentive awareness to “(1) what Jesus had once said and done (the ‘present’ of Mark’s narrative), (2) how everything would end up (the long future), and (3) how both of these impinged upon the ‘present’ needs and tasks of the Marcan church (the ‘present’ of Mark’s readers).”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus and his followers thus marked the beginning of the recapitulation of all things, setting before a rebellious cosmos the decisive sign in terms of which all other relationships and exchanges that comprise humankind’s common life were to be parsed. As a consequence of this one Jewish man’s life, the prevailing order of time and space was turned upside down in classic apocalyptic fashion. For those with eyes trained to see and ears to hear what was happening in their midst, the times between the present age and the age to come had contracted and the last things (*eschata*) were near at hand, pressing upon the ways and means of this world. The people, places, and things of this age were immediately confronted with God’s critical, decisive, and final action for all of creation, an action that continues through the life, worship, and witness of the Church.



Steeped in this way of looking at the world and of living in it, the early Christians thus regarded earthly kingdoms and empires with a wary eye because, though they served an important function within the fallen order of creation, they invariably laid claim to an authority that belonged to God alone. By its very existence, then, the Church called into question the dominant political and moral categories of the Roman world. Christians, like everyone else, married and had children, but did not expose their young. They showed hospitality to those in need, but protected the sanctity of marriage. They prayed for the welfare of the emperor, but refused to take up the

*gladius ultor*, the avenging sword. In short, writes the anonymous author of a second-century letter to someone named Diognetus, "Their lot is cast 'in the flesh', but they do not live 'after to the flesh'."<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, it took considerable conviction to identify oneself with such a group. Conversion was not seen as a private matter between God and the individual, but a social act with profound political repercussions. Add the intermittent threat of persecution to the more mundane problems that invariably come with minority immigrant status, and we can conclude that cheap grace was not a widespread problem among the faithful.

The New Testament's apocalyptic imagination was preserved to varying degrees well into the early centuries of the Church. The Shepherd of Hermas reminded Christians in the early second century that "you servants of God live in a foreign country, for your city is far from this city" (50:1). But as the centuries wore on, the apocalyptic compression of time that captivated the imagination of the early church gradually faded into the background, and the vivid sense of expectation generated by this view of things was relaxed. History "re-expanded" and the *eschata* were projected further and further into the future "and thus into insignificance."<sup>6</sup> The keen awareness of living in the tension between the "is" and the "is not" gradually faded, and the demarcation between Church and world grew more and more opaque.

When the Church sees itself essentially at home in the world as it is, it becomes easier to assume that Christians share essentially the same set of moral ends and virtues with most everyone else. The moral expectations of the Church for its own members must then be consistent with what is required of those who maintain society's principles and directives: the ruler, the diplomat, the investment banker, the soldier, the chairman of the board, the social worker, the factory manager. Ethical obligations are aligned with what is needed to maintain the given order of things, not by what is entailed in the apocalyptic intrusion of God into that order. Over the centuries the outlines of the body of Christ become less and distinct, and the day-to-day existence becomes co-extensive with and thus indistinguishable from that of any other citizen.

The identification of an earthly social order with the will of God is part of an unfortunate yet consistent pattern in the history of Christian thought. Beginning with Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century praising the emperor Constantine as a kind of messianic figure, Christians have abandoned their tents and built houses. What would it look like for modern day disciples to regain a view of the world steeped in an apocalyptic imagination? We do not have to look too far to see one exemplar. In his book *Last Things First*, Gayraud Wilmore describes how the form of worship that developed in African-American churches held in creative tension this world and the next, allowing the vision of the age to come stand in judgment over the present order of things.

The result was a new eschatological perspective in America. It arose in the sanctuary as the ecstasy of a vision of paradise at one moment, and in the next it drove believers into the streets to give that vision material actuality in the structures of society. In the worship experience of the black congregation Jesus Christ came every Sunday as the guarantor of a new reality 'for all God's children' – bringing to naught the things that are and bringing into existence the things that do not yet exist (1 Corinthians 1:28).<sup>7</sup>

The Church that can learn to celebrate this vision of the world to come in worship week after week, and then move into the world to serve as a concrete sign of that reality in the present social order, is truly a people who find in Christ the center in which all things hold together, in the Spirit the true communion of human flourishing, and in God's reign the just rule for all creation. It is a Church that has heard "what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Revelation 2:7).

## NOTES

1 Martin Buber draws this distinction between those who see the world as a comfortable home and those who see it as a field through which they journey. See "What is Man?" in *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 150–152.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 4, translated by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 250–251.

3 James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, volume 2, *Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 94.

4 Ibid.

5 *The Epistle to Diognetus*, V.4–8, translated by Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, volume 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

6 McClendon, *Doctrine*, 90.

7 Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Last Things First* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982), 88.

---



### **BARRY HARVEY**

*is Professor of Theology in the Honors College at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*