



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Church as a  
Company of Nomads  
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,  
pp. 11-18)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Church as a Company of Nomads

The 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 can celebrate this vision through worship and service is truly a people who have heard “what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

### Prayer

Responsive Scripture Reading: Mark 1:15 and 13:1-27

First Reader: Mark 13:1-8

**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**

Second Reader: Mark 13:9-13

**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**

Third Reader: Mark 13:14-23

**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**

Fourth Reader: Mark 13:24-27

**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**

### Reflection

All of the biblical apocalyptic passages – including Jesus’ stark warnings about the Temple’s destruction and the Son of Man’s coming – should be labeled “Handle with Care!” At their heart is a characteristic ‘this world is not my home’ perspective. The faithful children of Abraham, the writer of Hebrews observes, see themselves as spiritual nomads longing “for the city that is to come,” the “city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 13:14 and 11:10). To them the world seems less like a comfortable house and more an open field through which they roam without so much as a cozy tent.

According to one popular misinterpretation of these texts, the apocalyptic imagination denies all value to the world and predicts the imminent end of space and time. No wonder, then, that many Christians today isolate the apocalyptic themes that are integral to the New Testament, treating their strange visions and hyperbolic language as an unnecessary distraction from the gospel, or worse as a dangerously immoral competitor.

If we are to properly interpret the biblical apocalyptic way of seeing the world and living in it, Barry Harvey observes, then we must pay careful attention to three aspects of these texts.

- ▶ *Communal and historical context.* Apocalypticism appeared in post-exilic Judaism. A few exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, but most of God’s faithful remained dispersed. What could God be doing in all of this? Apocalyptic (from the Greek word for “revelation” or “unveiling”) promises to show how, despite these depressing appearances to the contrary, God is taking decisive and timely action to bring about the divine intention for creation. Apocalyptic visionaries proclaimed “the



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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," Harvey writes. "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...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." In this tradition Jesus of Nazareth emerged, proclaiming that the kingdom was drawing near and thus his fellow Israelites must "repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

- ▶ *Use of temporal foreshortening.* Apocalyptic visionaries speak from the juncture where the two ages overlap: they see both the destructive sin in the world and the coming of God's everlasting rule. "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," Harvey writes. For example, in the "Little Apocalypse" of Mark 13 (cf. Matthew 24, and Luke 21) Jesus warns about the imminent destruction of the Temple, the persecution of his followers in the consummation of this age, and heaven-and-earth shattering events that will occur when the Son of Man comes to inaugurate the new age.
- ▶ *Vision of Church and society.* The first Christians "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," Harvey notes. But as centuries passed, the apocalyptic compression of time "re-expanded" and 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."

### Study Questions

1. How did the early Christian apocalyptic imagination grow out of and remain continuous with post-exilic Judaism?
2. What are the moral implications, according to Barry Harvey, of apocalyptic temporal foreshortening (viewing past and present in light of God's coming everlasting rule)?
3. How, according to Harvey, is "the form of worship that developed in African-American churches" a model for "modern day disciples to regain a view of the world steeped in an apocalyptic imagination"?
4. What are some abuses of the biblical apocalyptic viewpoint today? How does Harvey's interpretation address them?
5. Discuss how Terry York depicts the apocalyptic hope and sense of time in "A Searing, Blazing Hope."

Departing Hymn: "A Searing, Blazing Hope" (vv. 1, 2, 4, and 6)

# The Church as a Company of Nomads

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Scripture Reading	Responsive Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To discuss how the biblical apocalyptic imagination which pervades the New Testament arose among prophets in post-exilic Judaism.
2. To identify features of apocalyptic writings – the foreshortening of time and vision of God’s kingdom and earthly societies – which grounds their ‘this-world-is-not-my-home’ stance.
3. To consider how embracing this biblical apocalyptic imagination could lead a congregation to more faithful discipleship today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide.

Distribute copies of *Apocalyptic Vision (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Comment

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was martyred by the Nazis in 1945, warned that the modern church must once again be shaped by the biblical apocalyptic vision. “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.” He continued, “But it is merely passing through its host country. At any moment it may receive the signal to move on. Then it will break camp, leaving behind all worldly friends and relatives, and following only the voice of the one who has called it.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 4, translated by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 250-251.)

How would embracing this biblical apocalyptic vision lead a congregation to more faithful discipleship?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your group’s reflection on the nature and importance of embracing a biblical apocalyptic vision.

## Responsive Scripture Reading

Invite four members to read Jesus’ apocalyptic warnings of the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:1-8), of persecution (Mark 13:9-13), of the desolating sacrilege (Mark 13:14-23), and coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13:24:27). After each reading, the group responds with the line in bold print (Mark 1:15).

## Reflection

This study explores two defining features of the biblical apocalyptic imagination – the foreshortening of time to view present and past events prophetically in light of God’s redeeming purposes, and a stance toward the world that results from keen awareness of the tension between God’s kingdom and earthly societies. These two

salient features, Barry Harvey suggests, are the substance behind the ‘this world is not my home’ attitude that is so prevalent in apocalyptic writings. When interpreted this way, the apocalyptic imagination neither denies all value to the world nor predicts the imminent end of “history.” Use this understanding to examine and correct current abuses of the biblical apocalyptic writings. Subsequent studies will focus in more detail on several abuses—the idea that the world is coming to an end, so we may neglect the natural world (“The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning”), the temptation to excessive fascination with spiritual beings (“Satan and the Powers”), and the claim that apocalyptic battle imagery justifies violence (“Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?” and “Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective”).

### **Study Questions**

1. Apocalypticism began as a prophetic reinterpretation of the Exile and subsequent suffering of God’s people. To borrow words from Christina Rossetti’s poem “In the Bleak Midwinter,” these prophets proclaimed through dramatic visions: “Our God, heaven cannot hold him, / nor earth sustain; / heaven and earth shall flee away / when he comes to reign.” The apocalyptic imagination gave these prophets a powerful critique of sin and enduring source of hope. That the New Testament writings are pervaded with their perspective is one indication of their strong continuity with post-exilic Jewish thought.
2. The foreshortening enables (and, indeed, forces) us to evaluate current and past events by divine standards of justice and mercy revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Barry Harvey concludes, “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.”
3. Harvey commends Gayraud S. Wilmore’s view in *Last Things First* (1982) that African-American worship allowed the vision of the age to come stand in judgment over the present order of things. The apocalyptic perspective “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,” Wilmore observes. Which powerful images in apocalyptic writings might inspire you to critique and address the ills of society?
4. Members might mention such abuses as predictions of the imminent end of history, demonization of one group of people or a society and sentimental idealization of an opposing group, the justification of violence against political enemies, the neglect of caring for the natural world, neglect of actions that correct social injustices or ameliorate suffering from poverty, justifying political actions as strategies to hasten the end times, and so on. Do you think these abuses are based on failure to understand how apocalyptic visionaries foreshorten time, or a failure to realize how they prophetically urge us to embrace God’s redeeming activity? Do they interpret apocalyptic visions too literally, or triumphantly, and so on?
5. In the second verse Terry York characterizes the apocalyptic hope as “courageous” because “before earth’s kings it boldly stands, / but bows before Christ’s name.” This does not mean we should disrespect proper authority, but it echoes Harvey’s point that “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.” In the fifth verse York draws on Malachi 3:1-7 to depict the “boundless sense of time” in which the “Refiner’s fire / burns then and now, the same.”

### **Departing Hymn**

“A Searing, Blazing Hope” can be found on pp. 60-61 of *Apocalyptic Vision*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.