



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Apocalyptic Vision

These six study guides and lesson plans integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection to explore the centrality of apocalyptic imagination in the Christian life. The study guides can be used in a series or individually. You may download and reproduce them for personal or group use.

- The Church as a Company of Nomads** 2
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.”
- The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning** 4
In apocalyptic language, the Apostle Paul describes the corruption of nature and expresses the cosmic scope of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. If God plans to redeem the damaged material creation at the end of the age, God’s redeemed children should care for nature now. God’s plan for what we will be in the future in glory is the moral pattern for how we should live today.
- Satan and the Powers** 6
In apocalyptic writings we meet a cast of fallen characters – Satan, demons, and other nefarious beings – that indicate spiritual realities, earthly officeholders, or structures of power. How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by such powers? And where is God in the mix?
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- An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond** 12
What John sees--“a new heaven and a new earth”--is not a replaced, but a redeemed heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and the obstacles to intimacy are removed. Intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it involves community relationships with all those who love and serve God.



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Focus Article:

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

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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)



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Focus Article:

📖 The Whole Creation Has
Been Groaning
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,
pp. 19-28)

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The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning

In apocalyptic language, the Apostle Paul describes the corruption of nature and expresses the cosmic scope of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. If God plans to redeem the damaged material creation at the end of the age, God's redeemed children should care for nature now. God's plan for what we will be in the future in glory is the moral pattern for how we should live today.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:19-23

Meditation†

The apocalyptic literature...rejects the widespread perception that salvation is individual and spiritual, focused on the fate of individual souls after death. Countering this narrow and spiritualizing view, it insists that God's saving goals encompass global society, worldwide ecology, and even space/time reality....

The apocalyptic vision of salvation claims to be relevant for the here and now, as well as for the end times. It gives readers a "sense of an ending" to existence and history, assuring them that the life of faith has a satisfying conclusion despite appearances to the contrary.

Stephen L. Cook

Reflection

"One of the most profound New Testament expressions of God's plan for the natural world is in Romans 8:19-23," Harry Hahne writes. "It powerfully depicts the apocalyptic expectation that at the end of history God will reverse the damage from the Fall not only to humanity, but even to nature itself."

Too often the biblical apocalyptic tradition has been misinterpreted as narrowly focused on the salvation of human souls and, therefore, as world-denying and pessimistic about nature. But the apocalyptic writings, which began in post-exilic Judaism, "often express an ecological concern for nature by stressing that the natural world was created by God and is under God's control," Hahne notes. "God holds humans and fallen angels accountable for their sins against the earth and animals. Nature is a victim of human and angelic sin and cries out in suffering, and in the coming new age, the natural world will be redeemed and transformed to a state of great glory."

The Apostle Paul vividly depicts the natural world – the "creation" (*ktisis*) – as "subjected to futility" and in "bondage to decay" in the present age due to human sin (Romans 8:20-21). Yet the "suffering of creation is like birth pangs leading to a glorious new world, rather than the death pangs of a dying creation," writes Hahne. It longs to be transformed to share in "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:21).

In the biblical apocalyptic worldview Hahne discovers these "profound implications for ecological ethics":

- ▶ *God's plan for redemption is not just for individual human souls or even the corporate redemption of a new community. God intends "to*



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reconcile to himself all things" (Colossians 1:20). "God's priority is on human redemption," Hahne notes, "but since humanity is God's agent in caring for nature, when humanity is restored to a right relationship with God, the rest of creation will also be restored to God's intended operation."

- ▶ *Human beings have an essential solidarity with nature.* We groan together with nature as we long to be set free from the consequences of sin (Romans 8:22-23). Furthermore, as *embodied* spirits, we are physical beings as well as spiritual beings. "The eternal destiny of God's redeemed people is to dwell in perfect resurrected bodies in a perfected earth, full of glory and freed from bondage to decay (Romans 8:21; Revelation 21-22), not as disembodied spirits floating about in some immaterial emptiness (2 Corinthians 5:1-4)," writes Hahne.
- ▶ *God's redeemed children ought to show a strong concern for the care of nature.* In the biblical apocalyptic imagination, the material world suffers because it is a victim of sin, not because it is inherently evil (as in a world-denying Gnostic worldview). Since God plans to redeem the damaged material creation (8:19, 21), we should begin to act now in ways that anticipate the new creation. Nature "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (8:19), Hahne suggests, "because when believers are glorified and freed from sin, they will assume their proper relationship to the rest of creation so that nature itself will share in that glory (8:21)." "Far from avoiding involvement in the environmental movement, Christians should be leaders in it," Hahne concludes. "Christians should not care for the earth merely from enlightened self-interest that is only concerned for how it affects their quality of life and that of their children (an anthropocentric approach to ecological ethics). Neither should they care for the earth because they see humans as merely a part of nature (the view of evolutionary science and many religions). Rather Christians should see their responsibility to care for the earth as a stewardship given by God, which obedience to the Lord Jesus demands (a theocentric approach)."

Study Questions

1. The word "creation" (*ktisis*) has a variety of meanings in the New Testament. According to Harry Hahne, what clues indicate that the Apostle Paul is using "creation" in Romans 8:19-23 to refer to the natural world?
2. How, according to Hahne, does Paul allude in Romans 8:20-22 to Adam's sin and the Fall? Discuss how the suffering of the natural world could result from human sin.
3. In the biblical apocalyptic imagination, how does God's plan for redemption extend beyond the salvation of individuals and even the corporate redemption of a new community?
4. What practical implications for Christian commitment and actions to protect the natural environment does Hahne draw from the biblical apocalyptic imagination?

Departing Hymn: "A Searing, Blazing Hope is Found" (vv. 1, 5, and 6)



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Focus Article:

📖 Satan and the Powers
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,
pp. 29-36)

Suggested Article:

📖 Terrible Judgement
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,
pp. 64-67)

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Satan and the Powers

In apocalyptic writings we meet a cast of fallen characters—Satan, demons, and other nefarious beings—that indicate spiritual realities, earthly officeholders, or structures of power. How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by such powers? Where is God in the mix?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 26:9-18; Ephesians 3:7-13 and 6:10-12

Meditation†

Apocalyptic...can't be composed or spoken by the powers that be, because they are the sustainers of "the way things are" whose operation justifies itself by crowning itself as "the ways things ought to be" and whose greatest virtue is in being "realistic." Thinking through what we mean when we say "realistic" is where apocalyptic begins. If these powers are the boot that... presses down upon the human face forever, apocalyptic is the speech of that human face. Apocalyptic denies, in spite of all the appearances to the contrary, the "forever" part.

For both the very human wielder of the boot and the very human face beneath it, apocalyptic has a way of curing deafness and educating the mind.

David Dark

Reflection

Notice how Luke sets the stage: after Festus, a new Judean governor, invites King Agrippa to consider the strange case of Paul, Agrippa and Bernice (his sister turned consort) arrive "with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city" (Acts 25:23). Paul is brought to them in prison chains. Confronting these powerful Roman leaders, the Apostle adds an apocalyptic (and political) twist not present in the other records of his story: his ministry has cosmic dimensions, for in a vision God sent him to the Gentiles "to open their eyes so that they may turn from *darkness* to light and from *the power of Satan* to God" to be redeemed (26:18).

Paul and other New Testament writers use terms like "principalities," "powers," "authorities," "rulers," "kings," "angels," "demons," "spirits," "thrones," and "dominions" to refer "sometimes to *heavenly, spiritual realities* and sometimes to *earthly officeholders or structures of power*," Susan Garrett observes. "Often, both were meant at once. For example, when Paul wrote that the 'rulers of this world' had not understood God's secret wisdom or else they would not have crucified Jesus (1 Corinthians 2:7-8), he was apparently referring *both* to the human 'rulers of this world' who killed Jesus *and* to the spiritual forces that drove them."

"Christians today often interpret biblical language about the 'principalities and powers' by understanding them either as entities wholly separable from humans (and, indeed, from this world) or incarnated in the earthly officeholders and structures of power that govern our day-to-day existence," Garrett writes. "In the latter view, many of the principalities and powers were created to serve good purposes, but all are prone to making sinful demands, especially the



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purposes, but all are prone to making sinful demands, especially the demand—exemplified by Satan in his tempting of Jesus in the wilderness—that humans regard them as ultimate and give homage to them instead of to God.”

Garrett summarizes how Christ strengthens us to resist the powers distorted by sin, and shows that he is their Lord.

- ▶ *Jesus heals our blindness, gradually or at once, to see when the power of sin seduces us with its deceptive promises.*
- ▶ *Jesus undergirds us when death buffets us and torments us.*
- ▶ *When we fail morally, Jesus forgives us, enabling us to triumph over the forces that tempt us to despair.*
- ▶ *Jesus empowers us to love and serve ones whom we have wronged or hated, to forgive ones who have wronged us, and to call those wrongs to mind no more.*

Study Questions

1. In Acts 26:18, Ephesians 3:10 and 6:11-12, and Romans 13:1-7, do the words “Satan,” “powers,” and “authorities” refer to *spirit-beings*, to *social entities and norms of behavior*, or to both?
2. Why is it dangerous, according to Susan Garrett, to “interpret the principalities and powers [in the New Testament] exclusively as wicked spirit-beings”? Why is it important to see them also as social institutions and norms that are damaged by sin? Discuss how “principalities and powers” might refer to both spirit-beings and social structures.
3. Must the idea of spirit-beings be dismissed as pre-scientific?
4. Why might someone think Gislebertus’ sculpture *The Last Judgment* is offensive? Do you agree?

Departing Hymn: “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded,
for with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.

At his feet the six winged seraph;
cherubim, with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the Presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Lord Most High.

Liturgy of St. James (5th C.); trans. Gerard Moultrie (1864)

Tune: PICARDY

† David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse: the Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons and other Pop Culture Icons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 10.



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,
pp. 37-45)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 The End of It All
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,
pp. 73-77)

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Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?

Much religious violence draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration. Dangerous misinterpretations of the apocalyptic paradigm of cosmic warfare are often linked with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Revelation 19

Reflection

The depictions of cosmic warfare in biblical apocalyptic writings must be “handled with care,” Scott Lewis warns, because they portray “the world as a vast battlefield on which a war of cosmic dimensions between good and evil is being waged and the committed believer as a divine warrior on the side of light and good. This cosmic dualism of good versus evil, light versus darkness, and truth versus falsehood etches a deep imprint on the religious imagination, and encourages the idealization of one’s own group and demonization of the other.”

Over the centuries, extremists of all varieties have misinterpreted the imagery of passages like Revelation 19:11-21, projecting themselves into the cosmic battlefield as holy warriors for their own worldly causes. Hatred of their enemies “was perfected by leading a normal and righteous life, avoiding violence, and even practicing kindness, but with a growing and eager anticipation of the approach of God’s vengeance and the settling of accounts.” As these extremists engage in psychological “splitting” – idealizing their group as all good and denigrating opposing groups as completely evil – the “rhetoric becomes so unbelievably shrill and the opposition is painted in such negative and almost demonic terms that dialogue, civility, respect, or reconciliation become almost impossible. And how can it? If it is simply a battle between good and evil, compromise is impossible.”

Drawing on the work of Charles Kimball, Lewis notes three warning signs of the careless misuse of apocalyptic theology.

- ▶ *One contrasts an idealized version of one’s own religion with the worst flaws of the religion of others.* The sharp contrast between ‘saved’ and ‘unsaved’ in apocalyptic writings may be misused to reinforce “group identity against outsiders, whether they are non-believers, partial or ‘defective’ believers, or those who are different in any way,” Lewis writes. “This tendency has fed into anti-Semitism, sectarianism, religious bigotry, as well as pogroms and crusades of all varieties.”
- ▶ *One blindly obeys a charismatic authority figure.* Biblical apocalyptic visionaries enjoyed special communications from God. Narcissistic religious leaders today may demand unquestioning loyalty by claiming that they too are apocalyptic visionaries or have a unique ability to interpret apocalyptic symbols. This is opposed, Kimball notes, to “authentic religion [which] engages the intellect as people wrestle with the mystery of existence and the challenges of living in an imperfect world.”



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► *One manipulates the interpretation of apocalyptic writings to establish an ideal era. One may be tempted to “[rush] headlong to a time in the future in which God’s intervention has destroyed evil and ushered in God’s kingdom of peace and prosperity. The problem is that often eschatological patience is seriously lacking and some decide that God needs a helping hand – that is, they attempt to speed things along and force God’s hand,”* writes Lewis. “The real danger is that violent conflict is then seen as inevitable, even preordained, and it can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Only when the cosmic drama in biblical apocalyptic writings is handled with care can it “demythologize our own institutions and deflate human pretensions and arrogance,” Lewis notes. “As a theology of hope it counsels patient endurance and encourages us lest we be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the evil, injustice, and suffering in the world. The bar is raised very high for human justice and ethical behavior, and all human structures, institutions, and aspirations are measured by God’s standards rather than ours and eventually it is God who is victorious. Even the dualism of apocalyptic is overcome after the process is complete: the earth is unified and reconciled, and the polarities of the former age – Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female – are transcended.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss the three warning signs of the careless misuse of the biblical apocalyptic motif of cosmic warfare. Are they manifested by individuals or groups today?
2. Are apocalyptic descriptions of cosmic warfare (as in Revelation 19) too dangerous to be read in congregations today?
3. Why, to Brett Younger, are biblical apocalyptic writings “hard for those who enjoy religious freedom and material prosperity to understand”? How should we interpret Revelation 19?
4. How does Matthew Bridges’ hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” use the image in Revelation 19:12 to develop an alternate interpretation to the chapter?

Departing Hymn: “Crown Him with Many Crowns” (vv. 1, 3, and 6)

Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne.
Hark! How the heav’nly anthem drowns all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity.

Crown Him the Lord of love, behold his hands and side,
those wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.
No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,
but downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright.

Crown him the Lord of Heav’n, one with the Father known,
and the blest Spirit through him giv’n, from yonder triune throne.
All hail, Redeemer hail! For thou hast died for me:
thy praise shall never, never fail, throughout eternity.

Matthew Bridges (1852)
Tune: DIADEMATA



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Focus Article:

📖 Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 46-53)

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Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective

The history of American apocalyptic thought offers much reason for discouragement. Christians have been too eager to gloss biblical prophecy with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam's demise.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Mark 13:28-37

Meditation†

There is certainly a shadowy and sinister side to apocalyptic, or should we say pseudo-apocalyptic, ... [that encourages] sectarianism and exclusivism....

Here we can appeal to the apocalyptic vision itself, which is universal and cosmic. God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ restores humanity and the entire created order, and we move toward the end of history not aimlessly, but with the renewing and transforming of divine energies within us.... What is God's intent? The redemption of humanity and the cosmos. That should be our interpretive lens. There is nothing in apocalyptic theology that demands that our outlook be sectarian or exclusive.

Scott M. Lewis, S.J.

Reflection

Many Christians want to know more about Islamic practices, the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, and how Muslim societies are organized. They may be ministering to Muslim immigrants or meeting new coworkers, guiding missionary projects or organizing business activities around the world, traveling more widely or retreating in fear of jihadist violence. Unfortunately, looming over their newfound interest are the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Some are misconstruing Islam through events in Revelation. "The horrific collapse of the World Trade Center towers might well turn one's thoughts to the apocalypse, but something more than horror is at work," Thomas Kidd writes. "Although the details have changed over time, American Christians have actually been speculating about connections between Islam and the apocalypse for centuries. The level of apocalyptic interest generated by 9/11 is new. The pattern of thought is not." Kidd traces this apocalyptic perspective on Islam through the centuries.

- ▶ *Colonial-era Protestants perceived Islam as a threat* as Ottoman armies expanded into central Europe until 1683 and Barbary pirates attacked ships through the 17th and 18th centuries. They claimed that Roman Catholicism was the antichrist of 1 and 2 John, the rise of Islam was the locust plague of Revelation 9:2-3, and that God would destroy them both before Christ returned. The drying up of the Euphrates River (Revelation 16:12) betokened the defeat of the Ottomans. Later prophets, like Baptist layman William Miller who forecast Christ's return in 1843 or 1844, popularized such views.
- ▶ *Dispensationalists moved Islam to the center of eschatology.* As failed predictions like Miller's cast doubt on historicist readings of texts (as referring to past events), Dispensationalists took apocalyptic



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texts to predict future events. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) suggests Revelation 9:2-3 refers to demonic activity in the reign of the coming Antichrist. They said the literal return of Jews to Palestine would spark end-time events like “the rebuilding of the Jewish temple, the rise of the Antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, and the physical return of Jesus to Earth,” Kidd notes. “The anticipation of these developments led to an associated focus on the people living in Palestine, particularly Arab Muslims.”

- ▶ *Speculation took on new life in World War I.* The British capture of Jerusalem from Ottoman Turks in 1917 and promise to create a Jewish homeland, the Zionist movement in the 1920s and 30s, the Nazi Holocaust, and the 1948-1949 Arab-Israeli war that displaced hundreds of thousands of Arab Palestinians were taken as signs of the end times. Many evangelicals predicted Israel would soon destroy the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim shrine on the Temple Mount. Arab Muslims, on this view, stood obstinately in the way of God’s plan.
- ▶ *9/11 inspired new apocalyptic interpretations,* such as Muslims naturally hate the friends of Israel; Arab Muslims will join Russia in the Gog and Magog attack (Revelation 20:7-8); and Mahdi, a messianic figure in Shi’a Islam, will be the Antichrist who burns people with the mark of a Muslim creed.

While Christians and Muslims should recognize “there are essential differences between the faiths,” Kidd concludes, those differences do not give them “the right to harm, insult, or demonize the other. Anger over jihadist terror does not license the invention of extra-biblical forecasts of apocalyptic destruction.”

Study Questions

1. How has the Christian apocalyptic perspective on Islam changed over the centuries? How has it remained disturbingly the same?
2. Discuss how that perspective has been distorted by non-religious political and social events over the centuries. What events of this sort are influencing Christian attitudes today?
3. How should Jesus’ warning on watchfulness (Mark 13:28-37) inform the political applications of apocalyptic passages?

Departing Hymn: “O God of Earth and Altar” (vv. 1 and 2)

O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide,
take not thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation of honor, and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord!

G. K. Chesterton (1906)

Suggested Tunes: LLANGLOFFAN or PASSION CHORALE

† Scott M. Lewis, S.J., *What Are They Saying about New Testament Apocalyptic?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 81-83.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 71-81)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Leaving “Left Behind” Behind
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 82-87)
- 📖 Death, Resurrection, New Creation
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 88-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond

What John sees — “a new heaven and a new earth” — is not a replaced, but a redeemed heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and the obstacles to intimacy are removed. Intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it involves community relationships with all those who love and serve God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-8

Meditation[†]

Rabbi Mendel wanted to know what heaven and hell looked like, and the prophet Elijah took him to show him. Elijah led him into a large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a huge pot of spoons that were longer than their arms, and because the people could not eat with these spoons, they sat around the table and starved. Rabbi Mendel found this room and what he saw there so terrible that he quickly ran outside.... Then Elijah took Rabbi Mendel to heaven and into another large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a big pot of steaming soup on it. Around the table sat people with the same spoons, but they did not have to starve because they were feeding each other.

Dorothee Soelle (1929-2003)

Reflection

Every few years the great popularity of a movie like *Heaven Can Wait* (1943; remade 1978) or book like Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Life & Death* (2004) reminds us how much people want to know about what happens to them after they die.

“Inquirers could better turn to divine revelation for this kind of insight,” writes Harold Bryson. In the apocalyptic visions of John the Revelator, the “expressions ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ and ‘the new Jerusalem’ give us insight into what believers call heaven.”

John’s striking images must be handled with care. Initially Bryson interpreted them, as many people today are tempted to do, in an individualist and consumerist way. “I once sang about a beautiful place with streets of gold and gates of pearl. I even thought of having a mansion in heaven,” he admits. But now he realizes that John’s visions betoken:

- ▶ *incredible intimacy with God.* John describes the New Jerusalem as coming down from heaven like “a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2b). The rejuvenated city is teeming with life “precisely because all of the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and all of the obstacles to intimacy are removed,” Bryson observes. This “intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it with all those who love and serve God.”
- ▶ *perfect relationships with people.* In the immense city that sports elaborate walls, foundations, and gates (21:9-27), God announces,



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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“See, I am making all things new” (21:5b). Bryson realizes that John “did not have the mind of an architect or a decorator, but of a theologian.... [The city’s] newness is in the regard to the redemption of human relationships.”

- ▶ *complete wellness*. The inhabitants of the city shed no more tears, for death and pain have “passed away” (21:4b).
- ▶ *total absence of evil*. “Life on earth is never ideal because of the continual presence of self will, self trust, and self assertion in everybody’s life,” Bryson notes. Yet when John describes the New Jerusalem, he contrasts its citizens to “another group of people who still have a self-centered attitude: ‘The cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars’ (21:8a). They are outside the city. Believers experience an existence free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others.”

“I once thought about heaven in terms of what I would do and see there,” Bryson concludes. “Now, because of Scripture, I think of heaven in terms of...intimacy with God and with God’s people.”

Study Questions

1. Harold Bryson notes that we are often so caught up in the present that we do not think much about the past or future. Yet, some events do cause us to ask “What is life like beyond the grave?” When have you reflected on this question?
2. Of the four aspects of the New Jerusalem that Bryson notes, which is most appealing to you? How is it opposed to the individualist and consumerist lives we lead?
3. Discuss how the meditation—a rabbinic story about Rabbi Mendel’s glimpse into hell and heaven—extends the insights in John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-8.
4. According to Dan Epp-Tiessen in “Death, Resurrection, New Creation,” in what ways is the biblical apocalyptic view of life beyond the grave “both body- and earth-affirming”?

Departing Hymn: “Rejoice, the Lord Is King” (vv. 1 and 2)

Rejoice, the Lord is King;
your Lord and King adore!
Rejoice, give thanks and sing,
and triumph evermore:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Jesus, the Savior, reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains,
he took his seat above:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)
Tune: DARWALL’S 148TH

† Dorothee Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 159-160.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

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.

The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand Paul's apocalyptic description of the corruption and consequent suffering of nature.
2. To clarify how the biblical apocalyptic tradition highlights the cosmic goal and consequence of God's redemptive activity through Jesus Christ.
3. To consider the implications of the biblical apocalyptic imagination for Christians' commitment and actions to protect the natural environment today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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

What explains our abuse (or, at least, neglect) of the natural world over the last few centuries? Are there just too many of us for the planet to sustain, or have we become increasingly crass and negligent toward the environment? "The historical roots of our ecological crisis," Lynn White, Jr. wrote in his now-famous essay by that title, can be traced to religious "beliefs about nature and destiny." The culprit, he thought, is a misuse of modern science based on the Judeo-Christian view of human beings as "not simply part of nature, ... [but] made in God's image." He might also have mentioned the long tradition of interpreting the biblical apocalyptic writings as world-denying and pessimistic about nature.

Does the biblical apocalyptic imagination really undermine concern for the natural world? Or have we missed its true meaning?

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 open the "eyes of your heart" to the cosmic scope of salvation in Jesus Christ, which is "the hope to which he has called you" (Ephesians 1:18).

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:19-23 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The previous study "The Church as a Company of Nomads" addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings and warned against their abuse. This discussion focuses on one of the widespread misinterpretations of the biblical apocalyptic tradition—the idea that the natural world is coming to an end (rather than being redeemed), so we may neglect the environment. Harry Hahne responds to this misunderstanding by

providing a close reading of the view of nature in a representative apocalyptic passage, Romans 8:19-23, and then offering some implications for how we should participate in God's plan for nature. "Although the Apostle Paul does not work out all of these implications [for ecological ethics], they are the logical fruit of adopting the view of nature in this passage," Hahne suggests.

Study Questions

1. Harry Hahne thinks "creation" (*ktisis*) refers to the natural world. This is a "pivotal interpretive question," he admits, because *ktisis* does not have just one meaning. *Ktisis* can mean "everything created by God (Colossians 1:15); an individual creature, either humans and animals (Romans 1:25), or any created thing (Romans 8:39; Hebrews 4:13); humankind collectively (Mark 16:15); humans transformed by God through the new birth, which is like a second creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); 'the act of creation' (Romans 1:20); or, an authoritative institution or government (1 Peter 2:13)."

Following the lead of numerous commentators, Hahne shows how the passage rules out other aspects of the created order from the meaning of *ktisis*. Though Romans 8:22 refers to "the whole creation," Paul must not be thinking of *heaven* or the *angels*, for these were not subjected to futility or decay due to angelic sin or human sin (8:20-21); nor *demons*, for they will not be redeemed (8:21) and do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God when Christ returns (8:19); nor *unbelievers*, since they do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God (8:19), nor will all be delivered from the consequences of sin (8:21); nor *believers*, because Paul distinguishes them from "the creation" in 8:23. Hahne concludes, "When angels, demons, heaven, unbelievers, and Christians are excluded from the meaning of *ktisis*, the part of creation that remains is the subhuman material creation or nature."

2. Hahne interprets Romans 8:20-22 in light of Genesis 3:17-19. He writes, "When God pronounced the curse [on the ground] after the Fall, God subjected creation to futility and simultaneously gave hope of its eventual redemption through a descendant of Eve (v. 20, "in hope"; cf. Genesis 3:15). The Greek word translated 'was subjected' (*hupotassō*) suggests an authoritative action, in this case the curse that God pronounced after Adam fell." Just as Paul says in Romans 5:12-19 that Adam's Fall brought sin and death to human beings, in Romans 8:20-22 he indicates the impact of the Fall on the natural world. Hahne suggests, "Since Adam was accountable to God to rule the earth and to tend the garden as a vice-regent under God, his sin affected the natural world for which he was responsible. Thus, nature became frustrated in its purposes and can no longer be all it was created to be."

Encourage members to discuss some ways in which human sin, both individual and corporate, can either directly damage or cause the neglect of caring for species of animals and plants, ecosystems, and resources in the natural world.

3. "Romans 8:19-23 suggests that the Western church needs to broaden its understanding of redemption in Christ," Hahne writes. As human beings are restored to right relationship with God and with one another through the new redeemed community which is the Body of Christ, they can once again exercise their stewardship as God's agents in caring for nature.

Discuss how your congregation cares for the natural world. Does it practice good stewardship over its natural resources? Does it inspire and teach members to care for creation?

4. "God will hold people accountable for their interaction with and management of the natural world," Hahne concludes, because God has entrusted stewardship of the earth's natural resources to the human race. "Negatively, this means that Christians should not act in ways that contribute to the decay of nature and increase its groaning. This includes avoiding such behaviors as polluting the air, water and earth, squandering limited natural resources, and abusing animals. It also suggests that there is a place for a society to have legislation to restrain the selfish actions of fallen human nature that result in environmental harm. Positively, it means that Christians should act in ways that anticipate the new creation. Far from avoiding involvement in the environmental movement, Christians should be leaders in it."

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.

Satan and the Powers

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To recognize how New Testament authors use terms such as “Satan,” “authorities,” and “powers,” to refer to fallen spiritual beings, to social structures distorted by sin, or to both.
2. To consider objections to interpreting such apocalyptic language today as referring only to spiritual beings, or only to social institutions and norms of behavior.
3. To consider why some Christians find medieval depictions of Satan and the powers to be offensive.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 and suggested articles before meeting. For the departing hymn “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” locate the familiar tune PICARDY in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

In “Terrible Judgment,” Heidi Hornik describes Gislebertus’ famous twelfth-century sculpture depicting the Judgment. Below an inscription—“Let fear strike those whom earthly error binds, for their fate is shown by the horror of these figures.”—is a horrific image of the judgment of the damned: “An angel with a trumpet summons all creatures to judgment. Humankind’s pitiful weakness and littleness are distilled in terror-stricken, weeping, doll-like forms. Angels and devils fight at the scales where souls are being weighed as each tries to manipulate the scale for or against a soul. There are hideous demons on the right side whose legs end in claws. The devil is leaning from the dragon mouth of Hell and drags souls in. Above him, a howling demon crams souls head first into a furnace.”

Hornik recounts how the sculpture was defaced during the Age of Enlightenment, a time of increasing trust in the power of universal human reason to produce social progress. “By 1766, the apocalyptic imagery...was considered offensive and it was covered with plaster,” she writes. “Since the head of Christ projected outwards, in order to create a level plastered surface it was broken off.” (*Apocalyptic Vision*, p. 66)

Are we not still tempted to ‘clean up’ the gospel story by occluding Satan and the demonic powers? In this study Susan Garrett helps us to better understand the cast of fallen characters we encounter so frequently in apocalyptic writings.

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 for discernment to fathom the “cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12), the fallen powers in God’s good creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a three group members to read Acts 26:9-18 and Ephesians 3:7-13 and 6:10-12 from a modern translation. Encourage the group to listen for the apocalyptic theme in these passages.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The first study in this series, “The Church as a Company of Nomads,” addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings and warned against their abuse. This discussion focuses on one form of misuse—excessive fascination with spirit-beings. Susan Garrett stakes out a middle position, interpreting the scriptural language of principalities and powers as referring both to spiritual realities and to earthly officeholders or structures of power.

Study Questions

1. Notice how context is crucial for interpreting these terms. For instance, in Acts 26:18 “darkness” (*skotos*) and “the power of Satan” (*exousias tou Satana*) may refer to both a spiritual being and the fallen social systems that serve Satan’s ends. “Authorities” (*exousai*) in Romans 13:1-7 refers to earthly officeholders who exercise proper authority in a righteous manner. In Ephesians 3:10 the “authorities” (*exousiais*) in heavenly places might be angels or demons. In Ephesians 6:11-12, the classic verses on spiritual warfare, “authorities” (*exousias*) seem to be fallen spirit-beings who may ‘attack’ us through false, unjust, and violent social systems.
2. In overemphasizing “the invisible, spiritual side of the powers” in the New Testament, Susan Garrett warns we may “downplay or ignore their worldly dimension.” If we ignore “the systemic dimension of the powers,” she continues, we may make “the dangerous assumption that, once we are saved, all is right with us. We can safely pass the buck because the evil has been expelled from *our* individual souls.”
Garrett describes the “bi-directional working” of the powers and principalities in biblical apocalyptic literature: “actions of the unseen characters influence events among mortals and vice versa. In Luke’s Gospel, for example, Jesus remarks to those who arrest him, ‘But this is your hour, and the authority of darkness’ (Luke 22:53, my translation). Jesus is implying that the actions of his human adversaries are controlled by none other than the Prince of Darkness. Or, to give another example, when Michael battles the dragon and casts him out of heaven (in Revelation 12), voices proclaim that the victory was achieved by the blood of Jesus and the testimony of the martyrs, and that Satan’s expulsion means still more suffering for the followers of Jesus (Revelation 12:9-17). Unseen forces influence or even control what happens in the mundane realm, and what happens in the mundane realm reciprocally affects the unseen forces.”
3. How would we have to describe science in order to rule spirit-beings out of existence as pre-scientific? Modern science typically operates with methodological naturalism—the view that *scientific explanations will mention only natural entities and events*. Of course, if we think that spirits (human or otherwise) are part of nature, then they would not be ruled out at all, but could still figure into scientific explanations. We might go further and be materialists—the view that *all natural entities are material rather than spiritual*. Materialism would rule out all spirits (human or otherwise) as pre-scientific. Thus, the issue is not about how science typically works, but about what sorts of things exist. And it is difficult to see how we might rule out the spirit-beings in apocalyptic literature without ruling out, at the same time and for the same reasons, human spirits.
4. We take offense at a work of art when we find it to be morally outrageous—perhaps because it belittles or trivializes what is good, or because it honors or makes important what is evil. Do you think Gislebertus has done something like this by the way he depicts the Last Judgment in his sculpture?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the apocalyptic paradigm of cosmic warfare has been linked dangerously with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious.
2. To discuss three warning signs of the careless misuse of biblical apocalyptic writings.
3. To interpret the cosmic warfare described in Revelation 19.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns” locate the familiar tune DIADEMATA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Brett Younger bemoans the silliness in some popular interpretations of cosmic warfare in the Book of Revelation—like the *Rapture Index Web* site, which bills itself as the “Dow Jones of end times, a prophetic speedometer. The higher the number the faster we’re moving towards the rapture.”

However, “Before we pitch the Second Coming entirely, we need to remember that while many of the answers we have come up with are foolish, the questions that started it all are not.” Younger writes, “The biggest questions for all of us remain: ‘Is the future still in God’s hands? To what are we heading? Who will have the final word? What’s going to happen?’”

“...If we believe that God will win, then sorrow is finally less permanent. The minister and scholar James Stewart describes a painting hanging in a museum in Scotland—a picture of a man playing chess with the devil in order to secure his soul. The man, who has only a few pieces on the board, looks dejected. Satan is smiling; he will soon checkmate the man. For years people came to the gallery and saw only hopelessness. Then one day a chess champion stood for hours looking at the chessboard. Finally he announced: ‘It’s a lie. The king still has moves left.’” (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 76)

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 for discernment as you study the violent images of cosmic warfare in the biblical apocalyptic writings.

Scripture Reading

Ask three people to read the visions in Revelation 19:1-10, 19:11-16, and 19:17-21 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The first study in this series, “The Church as a Company of Nomads,” addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings and warned against their abuse. This discussion focuses on one form of misuse – the claim that apocalyptic cosmic battle imagery justifies violence. Scott Lewis, S.J., warns against linking the apocalyptic dualism of good versus evil to our own political, economic, and social agendas by idealizing our group as all good and denigrating another group as irredeemably evil. The next study in this series, “Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective,” applies this warning to American Christian views of Islam over the centuries.

You may enrich this discussion (or extend it to a second session) by studying the insightful interpretation of Revelation’s cosmic war imagery found in Harry Maier’s essay “The War of the Lamb” in the *Peace and War* issue of *Christian Reflection*. Maier writes, “The War of the Lamb is a call to arms, to wage war with what at first glance seems to be no weapons at all – the words of faithful testimony – but to those with eyes of faith are mightier than bullets and bombs, because their power resides in the promise and faithfulness of God.” Download the entire *Peace and War* issue, Maier’s article, or a study guide from www.ChristianEthics.ws.

Study Questions

1. Scott Lewis identifies three warning signs: idealizing one’s religion or group as wholly good and denigrating another one as evil; blindly obeying a leader who claims to have (or be able to interpret with unique insight) apocalyptic visions; and misusing apocalyptic writings to justify violent actions to establish a perfect era. These are symptoms of uncritically identifying oneself with the biblical apocalyptic visionaries or the good characters in their visions in order to advance one’s favored political, economic, or religious cause.

Invite members to mention individuals or groups that have misused apocalyptic writings in recent years. Encourage them to discuss not only their opponents, but also some individuals or groups whose causes they sympathize with.

2. Lewis gives two suggestions on interpreting these passages with care. First, they should not be central to worship and teaching. “The Book of Revelation was not viewed as the core of Christian faith in the very early church,” he notes. “In fact, it was viewed with distrust and suspicion, for it was so obtuse that the diverse interpretations were disruptive to church life and unity.” Second, Jesus’ teachings against violence in the Sermon on the Mount should be the “interpretive key” for apocalyptic passages. While Jesus accepted “the apocalyptic worldview of Second Temple Judaism,” Lewis writes, “he reached out with compassion, respect, and mercy to the most despised and hated members of his culture regardless of their group identity, lifestyle, or their religion, and he forbade his followers to even think or speak evil of others. The values of the kingdom taught in the Sermon on the Mount were manifested perfectly in the life and person of Jesus.”

It is even more dangerous to read apocalyptic writings outside the interpretive community of faithful disciples. Members will find careless interpretations of apocalyptic theology in popular books, films, and on the Internet. How does your congregation respond to a popular misreading of apocalyptic writings – through its worship and teaching of adults and young people – without drawing undue and dangerous attention to it?

3. Brett Younger writes that Revelation reflects the theology of persecuted Christians, while “The call for most of us is to follow Jesus while living in a seductive culture” of prosperity. Material wealth can lead to spiritual captivity, and “Christians can be victims of the Stockholm syndrome, the psychological response of starting to cooperate with one’s captors. We too easily come to terms with evil winning the day. We have trouble believing the culture will ever be overthrown. We are used to the lies, but God’s truth will win.”

In “The War of the Lamb” (available [here](#)), Harry Maier notes that the Laodicean church, one of the seven churches for which Revelation was written, is warned about the spiritual danger of its self-reliant prosperity (3:14-22). Maier suggests helpful ways of understanding the apocalyptic message from the Laodicean’s perspective.

4. The hymn – from Matthew Bridges’ “Song of the Seraphs: Revelation 19:12” in his book of devotional poetry *The Passion of Jesus* (1852) – calls on one to crown the risen Christ, “the Lamb,” as the “Virgin’s Son,” “Lord of Love” (verse 3), “Lord of Peace,” “Lord of Years,” and “Lord of Heaven” (verse 6). Christ’s love is evident in his “rich wounds” from the cross (verse 3) where he died to redeem us (verse 6). In verse 4, which is not printed here, Christ’s love causes “wars to cease” as combatants become “absorb’d in prayer and praise.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To review how American Christians have misused biblical apocalyptic writings to denigrate Islam over the centuries.
2. To recognize how political and social events continue to influence a Christian apocalyptic perspective on Islam today.
3. To discuss how Jesus' warning on humble watchfulness should limit our political applications of biblical apocalyptic passages.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Apocalyptic Vision (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O God of Earth and Altar" locate the familiar tunes LLANGLOFFAN or PASSION CHORALE in your church's hymnal or in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

"Before 9/11, Islam had played a significant role in American apocalyptic thought. But the terrorist attacks of that day sharpened Protestant conservatives' attention to Islam like no other event," Thomas Kidd reminds us. "Often, the initial reaction was anger and rage toward Islam itself. Samaritan Purse's Franklin Graham called Islam a 'very evil and wicked religion,' while Liberty University founder Jerry Falwell opined on *60 Minutes* that the Prophet 'Muhammad was a terrorist.' Most notoriously, former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines said in 2002 that Muhammad was a 'demon-possessed pedophile'" (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 51).

In this era of anger and anxiety over terrorism, we may be sorely tempted to misuse biblical apocalyptic writings to denigrate Islam. Kidd helps us to step back and weigh our statements and actions in both historical and biblical perspective.

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 for discernment in interpreting the biblical apocalyptic writings in light of current events.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Mark 13:28-37 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The earlier studies in this series addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings (see “The Church as a Company of Nomads”) and warned against using apocalyptic cosmic battle imagery to justify violence (“Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?”). This one applies that warning to the American Christian apocalyptic perspectives on Islam. Thomas Kidd briefly sketches the history of this perspective from the Colonial era to today, but this study focuses on developments through the 1940s. Group members probably are more familiar with recent developments in the perspective, but if not, you can enrich this discussion by considering some of the currently popular views that Kidd mentions.

Study Questions

1. Members may notice how the focus on particular Muslim societies has shifted over the centuries, roughly from west to east and from north to south. In the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries the focus was on Mediterranean states from Turkey (the home of the Ottoman Empire) to North Africa (the havens of Barbary pirates). In the mid-twentieth century the focus began to shift eastward to Egypt, the newly formed Arab states of the Middle East, and the Arab Palestinians. More recently the non-Arabic Islamic Republics to the east (e.g. Iraq, Iran, Pakistan) and African nations with significant Muslim populations to the south (e.g. Nigeria, Sudan, and Somalia) have been the focus of attention. A second, but related change is the focus on the formation of the modern state of Israel in the twentieth century.

The method of interpreting apocalyptic writings changed as well. Christians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used the historicist method that interpreted passages as prophecies which had already been fulfilled in the past. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Dispensational theologians interpreted the same passages as prophecies about events that will occur in the future.

Nevertheless, the Christian apocalyptic perspective on Islam remained fixated on the religion’s “supposedly duplicitous and violent nature, and its coming demise.” Thomas Kidd continues, “Christians often seem to indulge extremes when it comes to Islam, either denouncing all Muslims as violent and demonic, or (as is the case with some more liberal Christians) papering over all differences with hopeful assertions that we are all God’s children. Perhaps there is a middle way. Christians should refuse to indulge sensational characterizations of Muslims or the Prophet Muhammad, or ghoulish scenarios of Muslims’ demise in the last days. But honest understanding and dialogue with Muslims must also acknowledge that there are essential differences between the faiths that cannot be ignored.”

2. The expansionist policies of the Ottoman Empire, the violent disruption of shipping by pirates from North Africa, military alliances in World Wars I and II, the creation of the secular state of Israel and dislocation of the Palestinians, the creation of the state of Pakistan, discovery of vast oil reserves in states surrounding the Persian Gulf and in Nigeria and the formation of OPEC, Cold War politics between the United States and Russia, the failure of modern states formed from a mix of tribal territories (as in Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia), and so on, have influenced American Christian attitudes toward Islam over the years. Members may mention more recent influences such as international terrorism by groups like Al Qaida and localized terrorism by the Taliban which claim to represent a radical interpretation of Islam, violence between followers of Sunni and Shi’a Islam, piracy in eastern Africa, development of nuclear weapon programs in Pakistan and Iran, and state-sponsored political disarray in the Palestinian territories.
3. Concerning the identification and timing of apocalyptic events, Jesus clearly warns, “no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were embarrassed by their failed identifications of end-time events; Dispensationalist theologians have fared better because their identifications are often in the indefinite future.

Jesus concludes the so-called “Little Apocalypse” in Mark 13 by urging his disciples to “Keep awake” (13:37). Discuss how we can remain vigilant today if we stop trying to correlate apocalyptic passages with current political events and predict a date for Christ’s return.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss what events lead people seriously to wonder “What is life like beyond the grave?”
2. To interpret the “newness” of the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21 as a redeemed, rather than a replaced creation.
3. To consider how the biblical apocalyptic view of life beyond the grave is both body- and earth-affirming.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Rejoice, the Lord Is King” locate the familiar tunes Darwall’s 148th in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“As our teacher held up a large rocket-shaped song book, we would sit in the small attic of our church on miniature chairs and gleefully sing (or shout) ‘The Countdown’ at the top of our lungs,” Jonathan Sands Wise recalls. “‘Somewhere in outer space, God has prepared a place for those who trust him and obey,’ the song assured us, and then continued, ‘and though we don’t know when, Jesus will come again,’ so call upon your Savior ‘while you may.’ The song concluded, ‘three and two, the countdown’s getting lower every day!’ with the clear message that we are almost at ‘one’ and...blastoff!

“Though the image of God creating a heavenly home for us ‘somewhere in outer space’ is quaint, and the song a seemingly innocent prompt toward faithfulness and wakefulness, its emphasis on our removal to an otherworldly heaven and countdown toward the second coming of Christ have made some question the truth and worth of both the song and the apocalypse that it seems to represent.” (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 82)

Though “The Countdown” can be fun, like much of popular religious culture it is seriously misleading about the return of Christ and the life beyond death. That is why Harold Bryson urges us to turn directly to the apocalyptic visions of John the Revelator when we are ready for more serious reflection on the “authorized look into the life beyond.”

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 both your reflection on and desire for the new heaven and new earth.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Revelation 21:1-8 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study Harold Bryson interprets the glimpse of life beyond the grave recorded in Revelation 21. This vision of John the Revelator, like other glimpses in the biblical apocalyptic writings, runs counter to the individualist and consumerist depictions of the afterlife in many popular books and movies. By reflecting first on those occasions that cause us to wonder about life beyond the grave, members can be sensitive to one another's life-experiences with suffering, death, and unresolved sin. Some members will have good reasons that they focus on personal happiness, an end to their personal suffering, and reunion with loved ones in the afterlife. Use this study to enlarge the appreciation of and anticipation for being taken up into the life of God through a restored community of all God's disciples.

Gauge the group's interest in further reflection on Christian eschatology. Several books reviewed by Jonathan Sands Wise in "Leaving 'Left Behind' Behind" and Dan Epp-Tiessen in "Death, Resurrection, New Creation" would be appropriate for follow-up studies.

Study Questions

1. The existential crisis of "A severe illness, the death of a friend, or a national tragedy may move us to ask, 'What is life like beyond the grave?'" Harold Bryson writes. As we focus on our own death or the deaths of other people we personally care for or identify with, we want to know what we and our loved ones may expect from a faithful and just God. Additional questions arise when such deaths involve unresolved sin, rejection of God, or despair.

We raise questions about life after death in other, less personal, contexts as well. We may wonder about God's reception of people in special circumstances—e.g., those who lived cruel and unjust lives, who remained severely undeveloped mentally, or who never heard the gospel. Or, we may want to respond to those critics of the faith who object that believers trust God only for selfish reasons.

2. Bryson develops each of the four aspects—"incredible intimacy with God, perfect relationships with people, complete wellness, and the absolute absence of evil"—in a way that is opposed to the individualism and consumerism that pervades our lives. You might divide members into four groups to discuss each aspect, or invite them to select one aspect to discuss together. The intimacy with God involves friendship with all of God's people. The "redeemed people live together harmoniously: they love, respect, care, help, and encourage each other. It is a genuine community where everyone shares Christ as Savior and has been changed by him." Their physical, emotional, and mental wellness allows them to love and serve one another. In their redeemed lives, believers are "free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others."
3. The people and events in the rabbinic story should be interpreted symbolically rather than literally. Rabbi Mendel sees that the resources in hell and heaven are the same, but the inhabitants are different: the selfishness of those in hell is the source of their suffering. Bryson notes that John contrasts the peaceful New Jerusalem to "another group of people who still have a self-centered attitude: 'The cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars' (21:8a). They are outside the city. Believers experience an existence free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others. The life beyond for believers involves the experience of sinless perfection."
4. Dan Epp-Tiessen says the biblical apocalyptic view of life beyond the grave is "body- and earth-affirming" in two ways. First, the "resurrection of the body...[means] the actions we engage in now to build for God's kingdom will be taken into and fulfilled in God's new heaven and earth in ways that we cannot yet imagine." Second, God will not trash this world, but "renew all of creation and grant the faithful renewed bodies" at Christ's coming. He sharply contrasts the biblical perspective to "the Gnostic denigration of the body and the physical world."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.