A PEACEABLE HOPE

Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives

David J. Neville

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Introduction

There is a discrepancy at the heart of the New Testament. Briefly stated, the discrepancy is this: although the canonical Gospels present a fairly uniform picture of Jesus as an advocate of peace and practitioner of nonretaliation, certain texts within these same Gospels and in other parts of the New Testament apparently anticipate a future arrival, or *parousia*, of Jesus in the guise of a violent avenger. The same Jesus who blesses peacemakers, teaches nonretaliation, and responds nonviolently to violence directed against himself is nevertheless associated with end-time vengeance. To varying degrees, in fact, the biblical Gospels portray Jesus himself as anticipating a role in end-time judgment, whether of violent vengeance or of a more benign kind.[1] Among the four canonical Gospels, the Gospel according to Matthew accentuates the retributive character of the parousia of Jesus, whereas the other three downplay the prospect of eschatological vengeance. Outside the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles envisages the judgment of the returning Jesus in relatively benign terms, whereas the Apocalypse of John depicts the returning Jesus in imagery suggestive of retributive vengeance. The emphasis on end-time recompense in the Gospel according to Matthew and the violent imagery employed to depict end-time judgment in the Revelation to John have had a dominant influence on the church's teaching on last things, despite the presentation in both texts of an understanding of Jesus's identity and significance incompatible with an affirmation of divine violence.

Although this book focuses principally on eschatological texts, I am not preoccupied with eschatology for its own sake. Insofar as end-time expectations contribute to shaping moral vision, moral convictions, and moral

1. This book is not concerned with Jesus as a historical figure but with a select number of texts in which some of his earliest interpreters witness to his enduring significance. What can be ascertained about the historical Jesus pertains to its argument, however. For example, the dispute over whether or not Jesus was an "apocalyptic prophet" bears on the substance of this study.

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commitments, however, eschatological texts in the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation are profoundly important for New Testament theology and ethics. Moreover, to the extent that the Christian conviction concerning the incarnation discloses who God is and how God relates to the world, New Testament texts featuring divine or divinely authorized eschatological vengeance provoke the perturbing question of whether or not Jesus's end-time role conforms to and coheres with his historic role.

Among people of faith for whom the Gospel accounts of Jesus's mission and message provide moral orientation, the tension caused by the biblical discrepancy between peaceful incarnation and vengeful return is disorienting no less than perplexing. This is especially so for Christians who recognize that a commitment to peace is at the heart of Christian discipleship. What authorizes that commitment to peace is generally understood to be the peaceable character and teaching of Jesus. If the returning Jesus is understood to abandon peaceful confrontation of the powers that diminish life, however, that calls into question the peacefulness of Jesus's historic mission—in terms of both its efficaciousness and its exemplariness. If the returning Jesus resorts to violent retribution, must that not invalidate the particular mode of incarnation "fleshed out" by Jesus? And if the returning Jesus resorts to vengeance, must that not offer an alternative christologically grounded rationale for the moral life of Christians?

In recent theological discussion of the atonement, concerns have been raised about the image of God inherent in theories of atonement fixated on propitiation, penal substitution, or satisfaction of divine honor. No less troubling, however, is the image of God inherent in end-time expectations that feature violent retribution on the part of God and/or God's agent(s). To anticipate that ultimately God will resort to vengeance on those who oppose the divine will is equally likely, if not more likely, to authorize violent attitudes and conduct as atonement theories predicated on the necessity of divinely willed violence, especially when coupled with the conviction that one (or one's group) is on God's side and knows God's will. It has been argued that, in certain circumstances, nonretaliation can be predicated only on the expectation of eschatological vengeance,[2] but I find this argument troubling for two reasons. First, while the expectation of eschatological vengeance may restrain violent retaliation for some here and now, it may also have the opposite effect of authorizing, if only implicitly, violent retribution for wrongs suffered or threats perceived. Second, it effectively manufactures God in our image, largely because we find it difficult to imagine violence being quelled by anything other than greater violence. There is enough in the biblical narrative of God and God's ways, especially in the story of Jesus recounted in the Gospels, to encourage people of Jewish and Christian faith to envisage God as more creative and imaginative than we can conceive. Indeed, to insist on God's prerogative to resort to

2. See, e.g., Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 275–306; and Holland, "Gospel of Peace."

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vengeance is to call into question the salvific significance of the cross, which in Christian tradition signifies the disarming of evil.

A number of biblical passages discussed in this book might be described as both "eschatological" and "apocalyptic." These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but to no one's advantage. Although they invariably qualify interrelated ideas found in New Testament (and related) texts, they are nevertheless distinct. For example, on the basis of extensive analysis of primary texts, Christopher Rowland argues that while eschatology features in many apocalyptic texts, it is neither necessarily present in nor determinative for all such texts.[3] For Rowland, then, within the genre of apocalyptic writings, eschatology is but one of a number of possible topics addressed. In the following description by Leander Keck, "eschatology" and "apocalyptic" are related, but not necessarily so, and "apocalyptic" serves to qualify a particular conception of "eschatology":

> Although the Greek *eschatos* means last in a sequence (as in Mk 12:22) or rank (as in Mk 10:31), in theological discourse the "eschatological" refers not to termination (as in "the end of the world") but to telos, the goal or consummation of God's purposes and activities. The expected *eschaton* takes on an "apocalyptic" cast when God's consummating action abruptly intervenes (irrupts, breaks in) in an increasingly rebellious scene, bringing both definitive judgment and salvation.[4]

On the basis of a distinction similar to that made by Keck (above), John Dominic Crossan argues for differentiating between eschatology and apocalyptic along the lines of genus to species. In other words, when conceived in relation to each other, apocalyptic may be considered a subset or particular form of eschatology, of which there are other, nonapocalyptic expressions. The views of Rowland and Crossan, two scholars who have thought long and hard about such matters, may seem the reverse of each other, but they are not mutually exclusive. The crucial point on which they concur is that to varying degrees in relation to certain texts from antiquity, eschatology and apocalyptic overlap but are not synonymous.

Perhaps the most basic distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic is that eschatology relates to a set of beliefs about the end of things, in terms of both their termination and their purpose (*telos*),[5] whereas apocalyptic relates to a perception of reality shaped by an interpretation of the flawed character of the world, especially in view of its divinely ordained origin. Eschatology concerns the realization of the divine purpose, whether by restoration to

3. Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 23–48. See also idem, *Christian Origins*, 54–61.

4. Keck, *Who Is Jesus?* 70.

5. In the citation from Keck above, *telos* is separated from termination, but such a separation does not pertain in biblical literature. On different ways in which the term "eschatology" has been used in theological discourse, see Caird, *Language and Imagery*, chap. 14.

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original harmony or by renewal to something beyond the imaginable. Eschatological convictions as part of an apocalyptic worldview necessarily address how wrongs will ultimately be righted, how the flawed and fractured features of the world and human interrelationships will finally be fixed. In apocalyptic perspective, what is wrong with the world is beyond remedy by humanity alone; ultimately only the One responsible for the world in the first place can bring it to its intended last place, its goal.

While eschatology and apocalyptic are overlapping rather than synonymous concepts, the eschatologies of the four biblical Gospels, Acts, and the Revelation to John are apocalyptic to varying degrees. Few would contest this, except perhaps in relation to the Fourth Gospel, which is often regarded as nonapocalyptic because of its emphasis on realized eschatology, meaning eschatology that stresses fulfillment already realized in the mission and message of Jesus. The remaining Gospels, however, along with Acts and Revelation, have more future-oriented eschatological perspectives. This differentiation between future-oriented and realized eschatological perspectives demonstrates that eschatology is not a fixed, inflexible set of beliefs. It features different aspects according to other core convictions with which it is combined. In this connection, Crossan has drawn helpful distinctions, albeit focused on pre-Gospel sources for understanding Jesus as a historical figure. I am concerned with the variegated eschatological perspectives of some early Christian writers, but Crossan's distinctions nevertheless apply and in my judgment may be pressed further.

In a significant number of publications spread across four decades, Crossan has been concerned to safeguard the eschatological outlook that he attributes to Jesus from what is commonly associated with apocalyptic eschatology. His descriptions have changed over time, but he has consistently affirmed that Jesus's own eschatological outlook was nonapocalyptic. For this purpose, in his book *In Parables*,[6] Crossan differentiates between prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology; in *The Birth of Christianity*,[7] he distinguishes between ethical and apocalyptic eschatology; and more recently, he favors collaborative as opposed to apocalyptic eschatology.[8] According to Crossan, Jesus repudiated the apocalyptic eschatology of his mentor, John the Baptist, and embraced a prophetic or ethical or collaborative eschatology, each intended by Crossan to characterize Jesus's own stance as a disavowal of eschatological resolution premised on divine violence. For now, however, Crossan's differentiations are the important point. Apocalyptic eschatology is one type or species of eschatology, not the only kind on offer.

For those with access to Crossan's *Birth of Christianity*, a careful reading of chapters 15 and 16 of that book is good medicine. There Crossan discusses

6. Crossan, *In Parables*, 25–27.

7. Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, esp. chaps. 15–16.

8. See, e.g., Crossan, *God and Empire*, chap. 3; idem, "Jesus and the Challenge"; idem, "Divine Violence."

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eschatology as a genus-level term, ever in need of qualification if one is not to be misunderstood. In his view, three species of eschatology can be detected in the earliest sources for understanding the historical Jesus: apocalyptic, ascetical, and ethical. Interestingly, however, Crossan finds it necessary to differentiate further between two subspecies of apocalyptic eschatology: *primary* apocalyptic eschatology, in which the apocalyptic dimension is intrinsic and indispensable; and *secondary* apocalyptic eschatology, in which the apocalyptic perspective is peripheral and subsidiary. "Secondary apocalypticism is like a cosmic sanction—believed in, of course, but added on as one's primary and essential message is refused and rejected."[9] In Crossan's view, one finds primary apocalyptic eschatology in Paul and the Gospel according to Mark, secondary apocalyptic eschatology in Q (understood as a sayings *Gospel*). For my purposes, not only Crossan's distinctions between apocalyptic and nonapocalyptic eschatologies but also his subcategorization of apocalyptic eschatology into two subforms are helpful.

For Crossan, "eschatology is divine radicality. It is a fundamental negation of the present world's normalcy based on some transcendental mandate."[10] Perhaps this evocative definition is rather too removed from the term's etymological roots, but it helps to make sense of Crossan's specific distinctions between apocalyptic eschatology and both ascetical and ethical eschatology. Since my own distinctions between two different subforms of apocalyptic eschatology are indispensable to the argument of this book, I here cite Crossan on apocalyptic eschatology at length:

> Apocalyptic eschatology (or apocalypticism) negates this world by announcing that in the future, and usually the imminent future, God will act to restore justice in an unjust world. Whether the result will be earth in heaven or heaven on earth can remain quite vague and open. Whether the space-time universe of ordinary experience will continue or not can also remain vague and open. But two aspects are not negotiable if apocalypticism is intended. One aspect is that the primary event is an interventional act of God. Human actors may certainly be important in preparation, by their sufferings, in initiation, by their symbolic activities, or even in cooperation, by military action under angelic or divine control. All of those human details may be open for discussion, but what is not debatable is that some intervening act of overwhelming divine power is imagined and invoked. In plain language, we are waiting for God.
>
> The other aspect that is not negotiable is the total absence of evil and injustice after the apocalyptic consummation takes place. It will not be just a case of kinder, gentler injustice but of a perfectly just world. There will be no evil

9. Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 265. In debate with Dale Allison, Crossan teases out this distinction between primary and secondary apocalyptic eschatology into five interrelated distinctions: destructive or transformative; material or social; primary or secondary; negative or positive; violent or nonviolent. See Crossan, "Eschatology, Apocalypticism."

10. Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 282.

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> or evildoers in this postapocalyptic world. One could imagine an apocalyptic revelation of God such that all humans thereafter would freely and voluntarily live together in perfect justice, peace, and love. Willingly and without constraint. That is, after all, how theology has always explained human free will in an after-this-life heaven. But that is not the standard apocalyptic scenario for the unjust. There is all too often a transition from justice to revenge, a divine vengeance that results in human slaughter. When those two aspects are combined, apocalyptic eschatology almost inevitably presumes a violent God who establishes the justice of nonviolence through the injustice of violence. That may well be understandable in particular human circumstances. That may well be understandable when a genocide of them from above is invoked to prevent their genocide of us here below. But all too often, be it of pagans by Jews or of Jews by Christians, apocalypticism is perceived as a divine ethnic cleansing whose genocidal heart presumes a violent God of revenge rather than a nonviolent God of justice.[11]

There is little, if anything, to gainsay in these two luminous paragraphs. Note carefully, however, what Crossan himself affirms is indispensable to apocalyptic eschatology and what is negotiable. Observe, too, the way in which Crossan's crucial sentences are constructed following this statement: "But that is not the standard apocalyptic scenario for the unjust." Such a statement accepts that there is a standard apocalyptic scenario but also that there are deviations from the norm, hence the presence of sentences containing the phrases "all too often" and "almost inevitably." My argument in this book is that while the standard apocalyptic scenario is undoubtedly represented in the New Testament, most noticeably in the Gospel according to Matthew and in the Revelation to John, there are also deviations from this standard scenario, most notably in the Gospel according to Mark, the Fourth Gospel, and Acts. Moreover, even in New Testament texts that feature the standard apocalyptic scenario, other prominent features within these texts subvert or destabilize that scenario.

In Crossan's classification, ascetical eschatology is a form of world-negation by means of various forms of withdrawal, and "ethical eschatology . . . negates the world by actively protesting and nonviolently resisting a system judged to be evil, unjust, and violent."[12] The key feature of ethical eschatology is its implacable opposition to systemic or structural evil, but without resorting to the violent means by which such structures are maintained and perpetuated. Moreover, according to Crossan, ethical eschatology is not grounded in transcendent violence, as is apocalyptic eschatology. This is not fully in keeping with the description of apocalyptic eschatology cited in full above, even if true to the "standard apocalyptic scenario."

11. Ibid., 283.
12. Ibid., 283–84.

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After presenting two historical illustrations of ethical eschatology (or nonviolent resistance) from about the time of Jesus and drawing two corollaries from this kind of eschatology, Crossan reminds readers that these forms of eschatology are but three of a larger number of eschatological types. He also indicates that these three forms can be combined in various ways. Although he sees no difficulty in combining apocalyptic with ascetical eschatology and ascetical with ethical eschatology, he has misgivings about the possibility of combining apocalyptic with ethical eschatology. "Can they be combined?" he asks, and the answer he provides is best heard in his own words:

> As long as apocalypticism involves a God who uses force and violence to end force and violence, they cannot be combined; one has to choose between them. This is implicit in my terminology. Ethicism, short for ethical eschatology, is ethical radicalism with a divine mandate based on the character of God. What makes it radical or eschatological ethics is, above all else, the fact that it is nonviolent resistance to structural violence. It is absolute faith in a nonviolent God and the attempt to live and act in union with such a God. I do not hold that apocalypticism and asceticism are not ethical. Of course they are. It may also be ethical to go to war in the name of an avenging God. But all ethics is not eschatological or divinely radical. Ethical eschatology is, by definition as I see it, nonviolent resistance to systemic violence.[13]

Notice how Crossan's answer begins: "*As long as* apocalypticism involves a God who uses force and violence to end force and violence. . . ." In other words, there is at least a theoretical possibility of *nonviolent* apocalyptic eschatology, which would then qualify that mode of apocalyptic eschatology as ethical in Crossan's sense. It is difficult to know what to make of Crossan's concession that both apocalyptic and ascetical eschatology are ethical in and of themselves, but their disqualification as ethical in his precise sense seems to stem from their nongrounding in the conviction that God is nonviolent. For Crossan, the decisive issue is whether or not any form of eschatology is grounded in, and is an expression of, God as nonviolent. On this we concur. The question between us, then, is whether there are expressions of biblical eschatology that meet the two nonnegotiable criteria for counting as apocalyptic eschatology but do not presume divine vengeance because of an understanding of God as nonviolent.

In *Peace, Violence and the New Testament*, Michel Desjardins discusses the apocalyptic worldview of the New Testament as a whole, contending that this vision of reality is "overtly violent," by which he means that within the apocalyptic worldview of the New Testament writers, "Satan and his forces were determined to inflict horrific violence on earth and on humankind, and in this respect God was no different."[14] In other words, the apocalyptic vision

13. Ibid., 287.
14. Desjardins, *Peace, Violence*, 83–92, esp. 84.

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of reality shared among New Testament writers is inherently violent because it is premised on divine or divinely authorized eschatological vengeance. A similar perspective pervades *Knowing Truth, Doing Good*, by Russell Pregeant.[15] The first time one encounters the term "apocalyptic" in this book, it occurs within the phrase "standard apocalyptic expectation."[16] One is reminded of Crossan's "standard apocalyptic scenario." Although Pregeant demurs from Crossan's judgment that Jesus repudiated John's apocalyptic eschatology,[17] the way in which he characterizes this particular mode of eschatology reveals that he, too, regards apocalyptic eschatology as inherently violent.[18]

As much as I have learned from Crossan, Desjardins, and Pregeant on the moral implications of apocalyptic eschatology, I nevertheless see things somewhat differently. I accept that apocalyptic eschatology often, perhaps standardly, anticipates eschatological vengeance on the part of God or God's agent(s), but I also consider that the interpretive creativity clearly evident in so many of the New Testament writings led some of those writers to relativize or even eliminate divine vengeance from the standard apocalyptic scenario to which they were otherwise indebted for expressing their understanding of Jesus's significance, theologically and ethically.

Lest anyone think that I regard New Testament writers as absolute pioneers in this respect, I consider that Jesus and his followers innovated only insofar as they drew, even if selectively, from Jewish tradition. The range of biblical expressions of eschatological vengeance demonstrates that the New Testament, no less than the Old, presents a violent God-image. Even when the theology of New Testament writers subverts or destabilizes such a violent God-image, however, that, too, is grounded in Jewish theological traditions and convictions. Grappling with either the prospect or expressions of divine violence is not a task reserved for scholars of the Hebrew Bible nor one in which stories of Jesus provide only the antidote. Some early apocalyptic texts served a militant purpose or function, but others advocated a nonmilitant stance, as John J. Collins has shown.[19] Analogously, in my view, apocalyptic eschatology may be premised on the radicality of divine peace no less than on divine violence. Indeed, under the impress of the mission and message of Jesus, apocalyptic eschatology was seemingly squeezed toward an alternate grounding in divine peace rather than divine violence. Although some New Testament writers found the impetus for this reorientation in the life, teaching,

15. Pregeant, *Knowing Truth, Doing Good*.

16. Ibid., 31.

17. Ibid., 95.

18. See ibid., 144, 162–63, 318, 325–30. Unfortunately, where Pregeant begins to address the theme of eschatological vengeance hermeneutically (325), he seems to equate eschatology with apocalyptic, thereby confirming the importance of Crossan's efforts at terminological clarification.

19. J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism."

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death, and resurrection of Jesus, that does not imply that such a reorientation was not Jewish. Insofar as this shift in orientation was influenced by Jesus, it was first and foremost a shift *within* Judaism or, perhaps better, within one expression of Judaism.

At various points throughout this book, I pause to preclude a potential inference from my larger argument, to wit, that I disavow divine judgment. It is comprehensible why a theological and ethical aversion to eschatological vengeance might lead to the inference that divine judgment is considered inimical. Though Walter Wink may be correct to underscore the ambivalence of the biblical theme of judgment,[20] I nevertheless affirm divine judgment as biblically and theologically meaningful. Judgment is the theological corollary of divine sovereignty, which was the burden of Jesus's message, at least according to three of the Gospel writers. In biblical perspective, judgment is the Creator's prerogative. Moreover, if God is not our judge, humanity and history judge themselves, leading to the conclusion that historical winners, those with wealth and might, are ultimately proved right, irrespective of the means by which they prosper and prevail.

Eschatological judgment is more about reversal than about retribution, however, more about righting than requiting wrongs. This is illustrated by Jesus's eschatological blessings, formulated two different ways in Matthew 5:3–12 and Luke 6:20–26. In their Matthean form, divine judgment is expressed as eschatological reversal impinging on the present, without reference to recompense for wrongdoing. In their Lukan form, promises of eschatological reversal are balanced by corresponding warnings of eschatological woes. Reversal is not only primary, to the point that the woes of Luke 6:24–26 largely emphasize the reversal motif, but even the woes themselves do not belabor the theme of retribution. In other words, anticipation of eschatological judgment is principally and indispensably focused on reversal; the concern with recompense is secondary and peripheral.

In *Who Is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense*, Keck laments the relative absence of attention to eschatological judgment in recent Christian theology and ethics. "This has resulted in a gross impoverishment of discourse about the moral life," in Keck's view, "as well as a serious abbreviation of the role of Jesus in that life and in the discourse about it."[21] Although I affirm the theological and ethical significance of divine judgment, it is my conviction that such judgment should be conceived christologically, in other words, in light of the story of Jesus recounted in the Gospels. In this respect, the Gospel according to Matthew is perhaps the most difficult to read with integrity because Matthew records Jesus himself as warning of eschatological vengeance in redundant fashion. When compared with the other Gospel accounts, however, it becomes

20. Wink, *Human Being*, 179–81.
21. Keck, *Who Is Jesus?* 153.

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apparent that Matthew has heightened the theme of eschatological vengeance in Jesus's teaching. In any case, since all four Gospel writers envisage that Jesus mediated divine presence in some sense, Jesus's way of responding to human recalcitrance is presented as God's way of doing the same. As a result, divine judgment construed christologically is unlikely to be purely retributive or vengeful, however much God may be entitled to avenge wrongs.[22]

Various passages discussed in the following chapters feature a Semitic expression represented in Greek as ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (*ho huios tou anthrōpou*, lit., "the son of the person"). Where this expression occurs in much of the Old Testament, it generally signifies an individual human being, but Daniel 7:13–14 refers to a heavenly figure described as "one like a son of man." Although this humanlike figure seems to be interpreted as representing "the holy ones of the Most High" (see 7:18, 22, 27), by the first century of the Common Era there is evidence that Daniel's image of "one like a son of man" was conceived in certain circles as a transcendent deliverer with the authority to judge. The biblical Gospels compose a significant part of the textual evidence for this historical judgment, but there is also the evidence of the Parables of Enoch (*1 Enoch* 37–71) and 2 Esdras (or *4 Ezra*).[23]

I am not concerned with whether and, if so, how the historical Jesus made use of Daniel's image of "one like a person." Often enough, however, Gospel passages considered throughout this book attribute to Jesus the use of the phrase "the son of the person," with apparent reference to himself. I have wrestled with how best to translate this linguistically awkward phrase, especially if, as seems likely, it was (in the passages discussed) a pointed allusion to Daniel's humanlike heavenly figure. In *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*, Wink claims to translate this idiom literally, so as to draw attention to the oddity and crudity of the twofold definite article, but the Greek expression he translates as "the son of the man" is more gender-inclusive than he conveys.[24] A more accurate translation option would be "the son of the person." My own preference, wherever one is confident of an allusion to Daniel 7:13–14, is *the (or that) humanlike One*, not only because this phrase is gender-inclusive but also because it draws attention to the allusive function of the Greek idiom and is faithful to the generic meaning of the original Semitic expression.[25] Perhaps not every "the son of the person" saying alludes to Daniel's heavenly figure, however, and some New Testament

22. On divine judgment in biblical tradition, see Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment*; Travis, *Christ and the Judgement*.

23. On the development, by the first century CE, of a Jewish "tradition" of a transcendent deliverer-judge derived from Dan. 7:13–14, see Nickelsburg, "Son of Man"; A. Collins and J. Collins, *King and Messiah*, chap. 4; J. Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, chap. 8.

24. Wink, *Human Being*, 17.

25. For a discussion of the linguistic evidence relating to this expression and various context-sensitive translation options, see A. Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology*, 139–58.

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scholars have turned to translating this expression as "the Son of humanity." This seems a reasonable compromise, not least because it represents one solecism with another.

None of the canonical Gospels provides us with the name of its author, but in the case of the first three Gospels and Acts there is no reason to depart from the convention dating back to antiquity of referring to their respective authors as Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In retaining these traditional names, however, I make no inferences about the respective identities of these Gospel writers. The Fourth Gospel is traditionally known as the Gospel according to John, but in this book I refer to its author as "the evangelist" or "the Fourth Evangelist" because a certain prophet-seer named John is incontestably the author of the Revelation to John. References to this John are therefore always references to John the prophet-seer, not to the author of the Fourth Gospel.

Some readers may wonder whether the Revelation to John fits within a discussion of narrative texts from the early Christian movement(s). The Gospels and Acts are clearly narrative in form, but can the same be said for Revelation? In certain respects, Revelation fits the genre of apocalypse, although it is not attributed to some figure from the ancient past such as Enoch or Ezra, as are other apocalyptic writings. On the one hand, the book itself seems to be an amalgam of literary types. Revelation 1:3 and numerous references in the final chapter (22:7, 10, 18–19) indicate that John himself understood his work as a prophecy, and Revelation 1:4–7 takes the form of a letter opening. With respect to genre, therefore, the book of Revelation is mixed. On the other hand, insofar as John recounts the content of his vision in narrative form, even if somewhat disjointedly with respect to chronology, his work can be analyzed from a narrative perspective. Indeed, in *Tales of the End*, David Barr opens the prologue to his commentary on Revelation by intimating that the most important point to grasp for making sense of John's Apocalypse is that it is a narrative.[26] Like the Gospels, moreover, Revelation (re)tells the story of Jesus, even if in different mode and perspective. Barr actually discerns three interrelated story lines within Revelation, not a single and unified narrative account, but he acknowledges that how one outlines this book is largely dependent on what one seeks. Barr's three separate story lines are the result of his quest for sequences of causally connected events.[27] Other narrative analyses have also been proposed.

Among New Testament scholars, James Resseguie has done more than most to master narrative analysis as an interpretive method and to apply narrative criticism to New Testament texts. In his introductory *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament*, he devotes at least half of the chapter on plot to discussing what he describes as the "U-shaped plot" of Revelation, U-shaped

26. Barr, *Tales of the End*, 1.
27. See ibid., 10–16.

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because there is discernible movement from unawareness to insight.[28] Moreover, Resseguie has authored two volumes on Revelation from a narrative-critical orientation.[29] In his narrative commentary on Revelation, Resseguie argues for a linear conception of the literary structure of the book, although not along the lines of strict chronological sequence.[30] Whether this conception of Revelation's literary structure has emerged from Resseguie's narrative analysis of the book or vice versa, the point is that Revelation is susceptible to narrative interpretation as are the Gospels and Acts. In short, the Revelation to John is discussed in this book not only because it would be absurd to omit it from an ethical appraisal of violent eschatology in the New Testament but also because there is a narrative dimension to the Apocalypse of John that makes it fitting to discuss Revelation along with the four canonical Gospels and Acts.[31]

Furthermore, as will become clear in the first and final chapters of the body of this book, Revelation is important for its paradoxical canonical role. Along with the Gospel according to Matthew, the Revelation to John encloses the New Testament with books that feature eschatological vengeance, a theological emphasis that provokes the central moral concern of this study. By contrast, however, along with the vision of creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3, the vision of the new Jerusalem at the end of Revelation serves to enclose the entire biblical canon within visions of divinely intended *shalom*. Against the symbolic tenor of the book, therefore, I advocate a *shalom*-oriented interpretation of Revelation in line with its christological heart.

At the end of a book titled *Christ Is the Question*, Wayne Meeks poses this question about the eschatological Jesus:

> So how ought we to imagine the End of Days—the last chapter of the Jesus story, the ultimate shape of Jesus' identity? Shall we imagine Jesus standing in armor, his foot on the neck of the conquered infidel? Shall we imagine the Jesus of Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, averting his gaze from the anguished hordes of the pagans and heretics and sinners who are being dragged off to hell? Or shall we imagine a Christ who smiles at the surprise of those sons of Abraham who come from east and west to join him in the kingdom that now is to be handed over to the one inscrutable God, who cannot imagine that they are really here? Can you picture the Son of the Human who, at the last judgment when he sits on his throne, surprises the sheep on his right as much as the goats on the left: "Lord, when did we see you . . . ?"[32]

28. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 213–40.

29. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*; idem, *Revelation of John*.

30. Resseguie, *Revelation of John*, 54–59.

31. The definition of the genre of apocalypse developed by the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project begins as follows: "'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework." See J. Collins, "Introduction," 9.

32. Meeks, *Christ Is the Question*, 139; see 130–32 for his discussion of Christ's handing over the kingdom to God, drawing from 1 Cor. 15:24–28.

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In Matthew's scenario of final judgment, the enthroned Son of humanity surprises the sheep no less than the goats, but that does not preserve the goats from eternal punishment. On the evidence of the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation, readers might well answer each of Meeks's four final questions in the affirmative. But to do so would be to affirm that the last chapter of the Jesus story is conceivably another story, not the final chapter of the same story. My study of the four canonical Gospels, Acts, and Revelation is premised on the conviction that the *final chapter* of the Jesus story is the final chapter *of the Jesus story* and therefore that "the ultimate shape of Jesus' identity" is already known.

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