

# 4

## Eschatologizing Apocalyptic *An Assessment of the Present Conversation on Pauline Apocalyptic*<sup>1</sup>

---

David W. Congdon

THE AIM OF THIS paper is to answer the question, “What does it mean to speak of apocalyptic?” Recent developments in apocalyptic theology make it increasingly difficult to give a clear and definite answer to this question. This paper seeks to clarify the enduring problem posed by this question and to put forward a way of answering it. My own research is in the relation between Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, and if Barth is, for some at least, the grandfather of contemporary apocalyptic theology, then Bultmann is “public enemy number one.” It is not an exaggeration to say that apocalyptic theology is an explicitly anti-Bultmannian enterprise. It was my uneasiness about this state of affairs that led me on the path of this essay.

I argue that apocalyptic theology is at a crossroads. There are so many different claims as to what counts as apocalyptic that it is becoming nearly impossible to gain clarity about what the word “apocalyptic” actually

1. A revised version of a paper given at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco under the title, “Eschatologizing Apocalyptic: Bultmann, Taubes, and the Copernican Turn.” The paper was given at one of the sessions of the Theology and Apocalyptic Working Group. The session’s theme for that year was Jacob Taubes. I am grateful to Ry Siggelkow and Nathaniel Maddox for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

means. I will not claim to put forward a general definition to encompass all the varieties—in fact, just the opposite. We need instead to be honest about our differences and not use ambiguous terminology to disguise our disagreements. I will proceed as follows: first, I will look again at the debate between Bultmann and Käsemann with an eye toward assessing what we mean today by “Pauline apocalyptic”; second, I will turn to the work of Jacob Taubes, whose materialist and messianic conception of apocalyptic warrants critical attention; and third, I will make some general remarks on the current state of apocalyptic theology and what questions need answers before we can make further progress.

I

Those of us who consider ourselves allies in the project of apocalyptic theology recognize our deep indebtedness to the work of Ernst Käsemann. Those who preceded him, such as Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, pioneered the historical scholarship on apocalyptic, but they were quick to put these ideas behind them. If we have Käsemann to thank, it is because he willingly stood in the dross-clearing light of early Christian apocalypticism. In a footnote to his 1962 essay “On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,”<sup>2</sup> he writes poignantly of the work of the historian: “How many of our students today,” he asks, “grasp the truth . . . that he who does not himself mature in the historian’s trade will shake nothing but unripe fruit from the tree of knowledge? The principal virtue of the historian . . . is the cultivation of the listening faculty [*Einübung des Hörens*], which is prepared to take seriously what is historically alien and does not think that violence [*Vergewaltigung*, lit. “rape”] is the basic form of engagement.”<sup>3</sup>

Käsemann makes this statement in view of two critical articles by Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs regarding his 1960 essay on “The Beginnings of Christian Theology.”<sup>4</sup> This piece attempts to provide a “reconstruction” of the theological concerns of the primitive Christian community. Whereas Ebeling writes about the “basis” (*Grund*) of Christian theology, and Fuchs on the “task” (*Aufgabe*) of theology, Käsemann focuses on “the beginnings.” He does this, he says, because “some have to dedicate

2. Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic” (German ed.: “Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik”). Citations to translated works will include the page numbers for the original German publication in parentheses.

3. *Ibid.*, 110 n. 2 (107 n. 2).

4. Käsemann, “Beginnings.”

PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

themselves to administering the literary estate [*Nachlass-Verwaltung*] of the historians with the object of preventing the interpreters from settling down too comfortably.”<sup>5</sup> It is therefore as a historian that Käsemann is interested in the question of apocalyptic, in opposition to those whom he calls “the interpreters”—by which he means hermeneutical theologians like Ebeling, Fuchs, and of course Bultmann. The famous line from this essay on “the beginnings” regarding apocalyptic being the mother of theology is often treated as a normative claim about theology *as such*, and while Käsemann certainly points in that direction, he first and foremost understands it as a historical claim. We should not forget that a few pages later he says that the apocalyptic hope in an imminent end “proved to be a delusion” and resulted in the collapse of the “whole theological framework of apocalyptic, with its expectation of the parousia.”<sup>6</sup> He insists on recognizing the “mythical character” of the early Christian understanding of history.<sup>7</sup> He warns against the notion of a “perennial theology” (*theologia perennis*), a system of thought universally valid for all times and places. And yet he asks “whether Christian theology can ever survive in any legitimate form without this [apocalyptic] theme.”<sup>8</sup>

How then does Käsemann define “apocalyptic”? He fully admits that the word, like any other theological term, is “ambiguous” (*mehrdeutig*).<sup>9</sup> In 1960 he writes, “The heart of primitive Christian apocalyptic, according to the Revelation [of John] and the Synoptists alike,”—notice his starting point—“is the accession to the throne of heaven by God and by his Christ as the eschatological Son of Man—an event which can also be characterized as proof of the righteousness of God.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say that Paul and the Fourth Gospel present basically the same view, though expressed in different forms from a *religionsgeschichtlich* perspective. The apocalyptic hope of the early Christian community is marked by *Naherwartung*, the expectation of something imminent within history.<sup>11</sup> History has a “definite beginning and a definite end” in this perspective.<sup>12</sup> His argument,

5. Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” 109 (105). More literally, “with the object of disturbing [*beunruhigen*] the interpreters.”

6. Käsemann, “Beginnings,” 106 (104); translation revised.

7. *Ibid.*, 96 (95).

8. *Ibid.*, 107 (104).

9. Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” 109 n. 1 (106 n. 1).

10. Käsemann, “Beginnings,” 105 (102).

11. Cf. *ibid.*, 99, 106 (97, 103). He appeals to passages like Matt 10:23 as evidence of this apocalyptic expectation.

12. *Ibid.*, 96 (95).

in a nutshell, is that Christian apocalypticism functions as a thoroughgoing critique (and appropriation) of what he calls “enthusiasm,” viz., the emphasis on a present possession of the Spirit as the telos of history. The presence of spiritual gifts is identified instead as a pledge of the “impending irruption [*baldig Hereinbrechen*] of the parousia.”<sup>13</sup> In his follow-up essay of 1962, he further explicates the apocalyptic expectations of an imminent Parousia with respect to Paul’s epistles and addresses the anthropological questions posed by Bultmann. He defines the central hope of the post-Easter community as “the return of Jesus in the role of the heavenly Son of Man.”<sup>14</sup> The community’s hope is not Jesus himself but rather him only as “the bearer of the Last Judgment . . . to which the correlate on the human side is the general resurrection.”<sup>15</sup> It is helpful, I think, to be clear about how Käsemann defines apocalyptic, because it is not a view that many, if any, of the current apocalyptic theologians subscribe to, at least not literally.<sup>16</sup> But that’s getting ahead of ourselves.

It is in this context that we should understand the debate between Käsemann and Bultmann on this topic.<sup>17</sup> In 1964, Bultmann writes an essay entitled, “Is Apocalyptic the Mother of Christian Theology?” He begins with an illuminating clarification of the problem:

In two significant essays Ernst Käsemann has championed the thesis that apocalyptic is the true origin of early Christian theology, indeed, the “mother of Christian theology.” I could

13. *Ibid.*, 92 (91); my translation.

14. Käsemann, “Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” 114 (110). The later emphasis in Christian teaching on a chronologically distant hope is the result of the failure of the Parousia to occur as expected. As Käsemann puts it in a footnote, “I speak of primitive Christian apocalyptic to denote the expectation of an imminent parousia [*die Naherwartung der Parusie*]. Where this is changed in apocalyptic literature to the expectation of something far distant in time [*Fernerwartung*], the change occurs because of disappointed hopes and consequent caution in prophecy, without being able to conceal the original phenomenon. We can understand well enough why apocalyptic seldom enjoyed the good will of the dominant church or theology. For this reason it is all the more important to define the limits of the problem which is presented by the fact that the beginnings both of church and theology were conditioned by ‘imminent’ expectation” (*ibid.*, 109, n. 1 [106 n. 1]).

15. *Ibid.*, 115 (111).

16. I am thinking here of the work of Christopher Morse and Nathan Kerr, in particular. Other Pauline apocalyptic thinkers could be mentioned as well, such as Philip Ziegler and Douglas Harink.

17. For a recent and comprehensive assessment of this debate, see Lindemann, “Anthropologie und Kosmologie.”

PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

accept this if instead of “apocalyptic” we speak of “eschatology.” Eschatology is the notion [*Vorstellung*] of the end of the world; it is a notion which as such does not intend to include a concrete picture [*Bild*] of the end-occurrence [*Endgeschehen*], which does not even think of the end as chronologically fixed. As Paul and John demonstrate, there is not only “future” but also “present” eschatology. By contrast, apocalyptic is a specific concretization of the eschatological notion. It draws up pictures of the end-occurrence, and it fixes the end chronologically. So because Käsemann chooses the concept [*Begriff*] of apocalyptic, he understands the early Christian eschatological expectation as the expectation of an *imminent* end [*Naherwartung*].<sup>18</sup>

Notice what Bultmann is objecting to in this opening paragraph. His primary problem with apocalyptic is that it (a) fixes the telos of history at a particular point in chronological time and (b) claims to describe the specific form that this chronological telos will take. In support, he points to the fact that this apocalyptic emphasis on an imminent end of history is not the only eschatology present within the New Testament, and he appeals to Paul and John—a different starting point than Käsemann, it’s worth noting. Whereas Käsemann states that present eschatology is strictly included *within* a future, apocalyptic eschatology, Bultmann makes a crucial dialectical addition: “As true as it is to say—that is, against the enthusiastic pneumatics—that present eschatology is ‘anchored and qualified’ [*verankert und eingeschränkt*] by apocalyptic, it is, in my opinion, also true to say, conversely, that apocalyptic eschatology is anchored and qualified by the present.”<sup>19</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to view the Bultmann-Käsemann dispute simply in terms of two different positions on the origins of Christian theology, even though that is how it tends to be received. Bultmann is not nearly as interested as Käsemann in the attempt to reconstruct the theological climate of primitive Christianity, and he has strong reservations about the very possibility of such a project. Bultmann is best read here as a theologian, as one who is seeking to articulate the conditions for the responsible proclamation of Christ’s significance for faith today, though certainly he does so on the basis of the biblical text.

Bultmann’s real concerns become clear later in his essay, where he turns to Käsemann’s specific conception of apocalyptic as referring

18. Bultmann, “Ist die Apokalyptik?,” 476. For Lindemann’s explication of Bultmann’s essay, see Lindemann, “Anthropologie und Kosmologie,” 167–70.

19. Bultmann, “Ist die Apokalyptik?,” 133 (127).

to Christ's reign and the subjection of the cosmic powers. Bultmann's problem is that, taken literally, this view conceives of apocalyptic as a supernatural battle taking place "over our heads," so to speak. Bultmann says that Käsemann's view is right only "if Christ's reign is understood as his lordship over me." The subjection of the cosmic powers "must be understood as my active participation in this subjection through my obedience."<sup>20</sup> He agrees with Käsemann that Christ's lordship is rooted in the defeat of death in the resurrection, but it is precisely on this basis that Bultmann insists on the existential and anthropological nature of Christian apocalypticism. As Bultmann puts it, with reference to 1 Corinthians 15.57, "Paul thanks God, who gives *us* the victory."<sup>21</sup> Without this intrinsic relation to the particularity of life in the world, apocalypticism becomes little more than mythological or metaphysical abstraction. On Bultmann's reading, however, Paul relocates "belief in the presence of salvation out of the realm of speculation . . . into the realm of concrete human existence."<sup>22</sup>

Bultmann's opposition to apocalypticism is thus bound up with his opposition to all forms of speculation. It is in this sense that he rejects the notion of a saving event that is "objectively" real and effective in the abstract apart from our concrete participation or acknowledgement of it. Bultmann does not mean that salvation is a mental fabrication or a work that we accomplish ourselves. Even though the event of Christ, he says, is "always a new beginning" for us in the sense that it "always demands our decision," the event "is in actuality [*faktisch*] always a beginning for us, whether we want it to be or not."<sup>23</sup> But we cannot assume a neutral posture that would allow us to state in advance what Christ is for each person. One is either obedient or disobedient in relation to Jesus Christ, and this obedience is a contingent response that is new in each particular moment. To speak of Christ is to speak of a concrete active relation between God and a human being, and this relation cannot be universalized as a general

20. *Ibid.*, 480–81.

21. *Ibid.*, 481.

22. *Ibid.*, 480.

23. Bultmann, *Verkündigte Wort*, 237–38. This is from a sermon, "Der Sinn des Weihnachtsfestes," which he preached on December 17, 1926, in Marburg. Bultmann goes on to say: "The Word became *flesh*, God became a *human being*. It's not about the miraculous transformation of some cosmic substance, but rather the fact that through the birth of a human being history has been decisively determined. It's also not about the fact that we have sensed God's grace in special contents [*Gehalte*] and special experiences [*Erlebnisse*] as something extra, but rather the fact that in the person of Jesus Christ God's grace and reality have appeared and marked our history" (238).

PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

relation without turning the event into a substance and revelation into something revealed. Bultmann's concern is finally identical with that of the Pauline apocalyptic theologians. He seeks to protect the contingency, otherness, and newness of God's eschatological inbreaking. Is the defeat of death and the subjection of the powers and principalities an event like other occurrences in history and thus capable of articulation by any neutral observer, or is it rather an event that is known and encountered only by the one who actively participates in it by faith and is thus an event that, to use the terminology of Christopher Morse, is never "in hand" but only ever "at hand"?<sup>24</sup>

Why this rehash of the debate between Käsemann and Bultmann? In short, because contemporary apocalyptic theology has (perhaps unknowingly) followed Bultmann, and not Käsemann. Where the decisive points of conflict between "apocalyptic" and "eschatology" are concerned, theologians today have largely—and, in my estimation, correctly—taken the path of a demythologized eschatology over against a literal apocalypse, though most still use the linguistic framework of biblical apocalypticism as a way of fleshing out what is, in fact, a post-Enlightenment interpretation of eschatological hope. The point of drawing out this genealogical connection to Bultmann is *not* at all to suggest that contemporary apocalyptic theology is, in fact, non-apocalyptic. Much to the contrary, the point is to argue that if these recent developments are rightly identified as apocalyptic—and I believe that they are—then there is no reason not to acknowledge Bultmann as a truly apocalyptic theologian.

The work of J. Louis Martyn marks the turning point in this Bultmannian direction, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. A full defense of this claim is not possible here, but let me note the following points. One quickly notices that Martyn's work places no emphasis on a chronologically imminent occurrence within world history as the basis for a Pauline apocalyptic, nor is there any attempt to describe some future catastrophic end of the cosmos.<sup>25</sup> The accent throughout is rather on the

24. Cf. Morse, *Difference*, 5–7, 21–25.

25. I credit Martyn as the turning point because it is his Pauline scholarship that forms the theological framework for contemporary apocalyptic theology. He is the one figure consistently cited as exegetical evidence for the apocalyptic position. That is not to say Martyn was a lone innovator. In terms of differentiating Pauline apocalyptic from the version that prognosticates about the imminent future, his work builds upon that of Christopher Rowland. As Martinus C. de Boer points out, Rowland's 1982 study of Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic is responsible for differentiating the concept of apocalyptic from a strictly futurist orientation. Rowland writes, "Apocalyptic is as

transcendent *otherness* of God's redemptive agency in Christ. The prominence of language regarding the *cosmic-historical scope* of this apocalyptic invasion does *not* mean for him that the Christ-event is *empirically cosmological* or *chronologically historical*. While Martyn rightly insists that the apocalyptic invasion is never the imaginative creation of an individual, he does not define its "reality" within the category of what human beings generally refer to as the "real world," because this invasion alone determines what is truly real. God's disruptive action in the advent of Christ "is not visible, demonstrable, or provable in the categories and with the means of perception native to 'everyday' existence. . . . The inbreak of the new creation is itself revelation, apocalypse." The invasion of divine grace causes an "epistemological crisis," he says, for those whom it encounters, since the world they inhabit now appears in an entirely new light. The one confronted by the apocalypse therefore "sees bifocally"; that person sees "both the evil age and the new creation simultaneously."<sup>26</sup> Martyn's concept of bifocal vision is, in fact, equivalent to Bultmann's concept of "paradoxical identity." The point for both is that the apocalypse is not an event alongside other events in history, nor does it create a new historical age that appears to all people apart from faith. On the contrary, it is an epistemological crisis in the sense that it alters our very relation to the world. The Christ-event transfigures history for the one who faithfully participates in it.

Where the apocalyptic theologians differ today from Bultmann is not at all where Bultmann and Käsemann differ. Instead, as Morse's book on heaven makes clear, the real point of departure from Bultmann is over the sociopolitical implications of apocalyptic thinking. The assumption is that Dorothee Sölle and others are correct in judging Bultmann's theology to be individualistic and apolitical, and for *this* reason primarily (though not exclusively) he is identified as non-apocalyptic.<sup>27</sup> Whether this judgment

---

much involved in the attempt to understand things as they are now as to predict future events" (*Open Heaven*, 2). Cf. de Boer, "Paul."

26. Martyn, *Galatians*, 104.

27. To be sure, Morse renders a number of other criticisms against Bultmann besides the political problem. While he affirms demythologizing in the limited sense of deliteralizing, he also states that Bultmann imposes an "alien framework" and "existential ontology" upon scripture (Morse, *Difference*, 40), as many have done ever since Barth rendered the same verdict. These are, however, passing remarks in Morse's book. He does not spend any time examining the merit of these claims; he mostly takes them for granted as established judgments in theology. His much more important claim is that demythologizing interprets heaven "too exclusively in terms of the self in disregard of a wider social and political world" (39). The significance of this statement



## PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

is accurate is a question I cannot take up in any detail here, but notice that this was not the concern in the debate between Bultmann and Käsemann. When Morse criticizes Bultmann for lacking “the sense of any cosmic and political eventfulness associated with heaven,” he has already made a demythologizing move to associate the cosmic language of apocalyptic with sociopolitical action in the world.<sup>28</sup> As a historian examining the views of the early Christian community, Käsemann understands the cosmic language to refer quite literally to the future of the cosmos.<sup>29</sup>

is made clear by the fact that Morse devotes an entire chapter to developing precisely the sociopolitical implications of Christian talk about heaven (75–98), not to mention the numerous other places where these ideas appear in the other chapters. This justifies my argument that it is the judgment regarding Bultmann’s ostensibly apolitical conception of faith that is the real, or at least primary, basis for his rejection among the contemporary apocalyptic theologians. The reasons that someone like Käsemann gave are rarely, if ever, mentioned.

28. Morse, *Difference*, 39.

29. Käsemann as a mature theologian is another matter entirely. In his posthumously published writings from 1975 to 1996 (he died in 1998), collected in *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene*, Käsemann affirms and extends Bultmann’s program of demythologizing in a way that reveals the surprising continuity between Bultmann and apocalyptic theology. See the following passage: “Bultmann was entirely correct to throw out this catchword that so horrified and enraged his opponents. There must be demythologizing. It was only that Bultmann was much too soft when he applied it principally to our worldview and called us from ancient Christian ideas to modern thought. Without question God does not intend that we run about as living mummies of the ancient world, everywhere assuming and making use of the technology of our time, but spiritually and religiously setting ourselves back 1,900 years. Faith must be lived today, and this means it must give thought today and give an account of itself. . . . Nevertheless, demythologizing may not only denote speaking in new tongues and with modern speech” (100–101). In other pieces he explains how demythologizing needs to be extended and furthered today. In an essay on the heritage of the Reformation, he writes: “[Demythologizing] is no doubt necessary and the task of all preachers and teachers, but it must be radicalized. For no one can hear the gospel without being summoned to the reality of earth from illusions about oneself, the world and especially God. Demythologizing must proceed to ‘de-demonizing’” (177). By “de-demonizing,” Käsemann means that the apocalyptic invasion of God destroys the illusory power structures that enslave the oppressed peoples of the earth. This is made even clearer by another lecture from 1987: “This is why I acknowledge the demand for demythologizing. The ancient worldview, which lived on in the Middle Ages and in our time openly or subliminally still haunts us, has no claim on us. Contrariwise, a demythologizing carried on and given legitimation theologically should not toll for a burial already conducted 200 years ago by rationalists inside and outside the church. Nor should it be used as springboard for a Christian existentialism that no longer needs theological heralds to remain up to date. Today, demythologizing must be more radical than in the days of the Enlightenment, more critical toward its faith in progress and science and toward the postulate of human maturity in the modern era. Not merely texts are to be

My point is that the literature on apocalyptic has tended to obscure the way in which this word has been associated with a variety of different theological commitments, some of them incompatible with each other. The most recent work in Pauline apocalyptic theology is highly actualistic, dialectical, and existential in nature—aspects that come out very clearly in the work of Morse and Kerr, among others. Even the eschatology is largely present tense rather than future tense.<sup>30</sup> In short, apocalyptic theology today is highly Bultmannian in nature, with the one crucial qualification being its explicitly theopolitical orientation. And it is with that in mind that I turn now to Taubes.

---

demythologized respecting their ideological wrappings. In the evangelical sense demythologizing occurs as a battle and resistance against superstition. And superstition, at least according to Luther's explanation of the first commandment, is everything that does not allow us most deeply and without compromise to fear, love, and trust God 'above all things.' Thus demythologizing, evangelically conceived and rooted, denotes ridding humanity and the earth of the demonic" (199–200). Käsemann then goes on to say that the demonic manifests itself today in "the cries of a humanity for centuries exploited by the white race, herded into the misery of slums and starved there, plagued by epidemic, and for the most part treated worse than cattle" (201). In this sense, "the gospel rids of demons" and "deserves to be called mother of the Enlightenment" (203). These passages, pregnant with numerous theological possibilities, reveal how misguided it is to limit demythologizing to deliteralizing or to reject Bultmann's project because it does not seem adequately political in nature. Such critiques do not perceive the radical implications of Bultmann's hermeneutical program. Despite his debates with Bultmann in his younger years, Käsemann later proved himself to be one of Bultmann's most faithful students. Käsemann rightly perceived that New Testament apocalyptic, the program of demythologizing, and liberation theology all belong together. See Käsemann, *Disciple*.

30. Despite the fact Morse concludes his book with a chapter on "the hope of heaven," there is virtually nothing said about the so-called afterlife or a traditional conception of creation's consummation. The chapter is instead a thorough demythologizing of Christian expectations; the eschatological "last day" is indeed the day "at hand," that is, every today. Morse acknowledges that this is a very different kind of hopeful expectation: "What then is the hope of heaven, if any, expressed in these parameters? At the least this much we can acknowledge, to sum up from the foregoing observations: The 'real world' is proclaimed to be one in which there is life currently arriving on the scene, in whatever situation we are facing, that is stronger than any undeniable loss threatening us, including death" (Morse, *Difference*, 117). I am in full agreement with Morse's conclusions, but it is important not to cover up or ignore the way these represent a *fulfillment* of Bultmann's hermeneutical insights and not their rejection.

PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

II

The work of Jacob Taubes stands in stark opposition to Pauline apocalyptic theology, and it does so for primarily political reasons. To understand why this is the case, we have to keep in mind two related strands of thought: the first is Taubes's Hegelian-Marxist philosophy of history, and the second is his analysis of analogical and dialectical theology. Put another way, Taubes is concerned with (1) a revolutionary politics and (2) the revolution of Copernicus. Both of these are affirmed by contemporary Pauline apocalyptic theology, but in a very different way.

Taubes is drawn to the apocalyptic and gnostic traditions, because he shares with them a critique of the status quo, a rejection of the present order of the world. Apocalypticism, he argues, is born out of a prophetic rebellion against the structure of society. This rebellion is a nihilistic overturning of the entire world system, hence the points of similarity with later gnostic thought. "Apocalypticism," he says, "negates this world in its fullness."<sup>31</sup> In its expectation of an imminent end, Jewish apocalyptic is a theology of revolution. God stands beyond and against the oppressive history of humanity, and thus "God's voice resounds as a call to action, to make ready the wilderness of this world for the Kingdom."<sup>32</sup> In a crucial passage, Taubes states that "the paramount question posed in the Apocalypse is *when?* The question arises from the pressing expectation of redemption, and the obvious answer is *soon*. Imminence is an essential feature of apocalyptic belief. The global statement *salvation is at hand* does not satisfy those who want to know the day and the hour."<sup>33</sup> Notice that this view is even more extreme in its emphasis on the chronology of the apocalypse than Käsemann's, and thus quite distant from the position of the Pauline apocalyptic school.<sup>34</sup>

31. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 9.

32. *Ibid.*, 16.

33. *Ibid.*, 32.

34. In addition to accenting the category of imminence, Taubes's discussion of apocalyptic is similar to that of Käsemann on another key point as well. According to Käsemann, the primitive Christian community's apocalyptic understanding of history—in which "the world has a definite beginning and a definite end" and "takes a definite direction"—is what "first made historical thinking possible within Christendom" (Käsemann, "Beginnings," 96 [95]). Taubes makes a similar claim, arguing that the development of an apocalyptic eschatological perspective within Israel is effectively the birth of history. He frames his entire study in *Occidental Eschatology* in terms of the question, "How is history possible in the first place?" He goes on to distinguish between myth, which sees time "as a cycle" and "under the dominance of space," and

Taubes is entirely unfazed by the historical observation that such apocalyptic expectations were unsatisfied. The problem of the Parousia's delay, which consumed the energies of his contemporaries in biblical studies, is *not* a serious concern for Taubes. He understands apocalypticism to be a response to a sociopolitical crisis whose purpose is then fulfilled through revolutionary action. Hence, Marx becomes the model of a truly apocalyptic thinker. For Taubes, there is no loss in the movement from a *theological* apocalyptic to a *philosophical* apocalyptic. This transition is simply the natural consequence of a scientific revolution that has made belief in a transcendent God impossible. The only way to be an intellectually responsible apocalyptic thinker today is to become a left-Hegelian Marxist revolutionary—something we need not reject outright, even if we dispense with Taubes's philosophical and theological framework.

To explain this move from theology to philosophy, we need to look at the key to Taubes, viz., his understanding of the Copernican turn. Taubes divides world history into two eras: the world under Ptolemy and the world under Copernicus. The former is the age of analogy, which posits a correspondence between heaven above and earth below; the latter is the age of dialectic, which posits “either contradiction or identity between man and God” in the form of a “dialectic of antithesis” or a “dialectic of synthesis”—represented philosophically by Kierkegaard and Hegel, and theologically by the early Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, respectively.<sup>35</sup> Ac-

the spirit of revelation and redemption that understands time as “irreversibly straining toward something new while inquiring into its purpose.” According to Taubes, the eschatological orientation of apocalypticism inaugurated the idea of history in the sense of progress toward a particular telos. “Israel breaks through the cycle of this endless repetition, opening up the world as history for the first time.” See Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 3–16.

35. Taubes, “Dialectic and Analogy,” 174. Cf. Taubes, “Theological Method,” 213. Barth is a common theme throughout Taubes's career. Though he tends to locate Barth in connection with Kierkegaard (in contrast to Tillich and Hegel), he also notes the way in which Hegel is suffused throughout Barth's writings. Barth is a kind of synthesis in himself between Kierkegaardian antithesis and Hegelian mediation. In a third essay from the same issue of *Journal of Religion*, Taubes writes a full piece on Barth's theological trajectory from the first edition of *Der Römerbrief* to *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*. He tracks the development in three stages: (1) a Hegelian “dynamic eschatology” in the first edition of *Romans*, (2) a Kierkegaardian “theology of crisis” in the second edition, and (3) a Hegelian “theology of reconciliation” in *KD*. Taubes is clear that the second stage is where he thinks Barth was best, and when he refers to Barth in other writings, it is usually to the Kierkegaardian Barth of radical crisis and dialectical negation. See Taubes, “Theodicy and Theology.” For a related piece on Barth that shares some content with the “Theodicy and Theology” essay, see Taubes, “Philosophic Critique of Religion.”

PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

According to Taubes, the Copernican revolution means that all language distinguishing between heaven and earth “become mere ‘metaphors,’” having lost their grounding in the cosmic order. “The vertical axis crumbles,” he says, “and above and below can no longer be genuinely distinguished.” The result is that “theistic religion and philosophy are forced to retreat.”<sup>36</sup> This retreat began with the Protestant Reformation and reached a climax in Barth’s rejection of the *analogia entis*. The result of the Copernican revolution is that we live in “an earth without a heaven.”<sup>37</sup> In the midst of a discussion of Kant in *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes makes the following key remark: “Because the space between heaven and earth has become meaning-less, Copernican man seeks to revolutionize the world according to an ideal that can become reality in the course of time. The ideal is no longer the Platonic idea which dwells on high, but is to be found in the future.”<sup>38</sup> What future is this? It is the one that *we* make, on the basis of an ideal that *we* devise. He affirms the notion of apocalypse as “a vision of future events,”<sup>39</sup> precisely because it is a vision that we must realize.<sup>40</sup>

We can now reconstruct the line of argument. Taubes works backwards from a kind of messianic Marxism that takes for granted a world without heaven that we must revolutionize according to an immanent historical ideal. Dialectical philosophy provides the intellectual matrix for this revolutionary action. He traces the genealogy of his position back through Thomas Müntzer and Joachim de Fiore, Marcion and Paul, to the apocalyptic prophets of Second Temple Judaism. The logic only becomes clear by the end: the conception of apocalyptic that he develops is one that can survive the Copernican revolution because it is entirely grounded in and oriented toward the immanent political situation. God only serves as a call to action, so that once God drops away with the loss of heaven, the apocalyptic action still survives intact. Insofar as God-talk remains, it has been collapsed into the rallying cries of the revolutionaries. The kingdom of God simply *is* the Marxist utopia. Whether one travels the path of Hegel or Kierkegaard, the move from analogy to dialectic results, according to Taubes, in the *direct identification* of God and humanity. To use Morse’s

36. Taubes, “Dialectic and Analogy,” 170.

37. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 108.

38. *Ibid.*, 137.

39. Taubes, “Dialectic and Analogy,” 166.

40. Augustine, with his conception of the two cities, represents the Ptolemaic world of analogy, and precisely for this reason is also the key anti-apocalyptic thinker. His theological framework undermines an immanent-futurist orientation, and thus it impedes the development of an apocalyptic politics of revolution.

language, this is a God who is very much “in hand”—literally “in hand,” in fact, insofar as God is the sign we raise in protest or the Molotov cocktail we toss across the barricades in order to fashion a new world. The question theology must pose to Taubes is whether there is anything to differentiate his apocalypticism from ideological propaganda.

I agree with Taubes that something has decisively changed in the move from Ptolemy to Copernicus. I further agree with him that any re-pristination of a metaphysical analogy of being is hopelessly misguided. And I agree also that apocalyptic has to be articulated from within the theopolitical situation of the suffering masses. Crucially, however, I side with both Bultmann and contemporary Pauline apocalyptic theology precisely because they articulate a third way beyond metaphysical analogy and immanent dialectics, that is, an alternative to a God who is *above* us and a God who is directly identified *with* us. For Martyn, this alternative appears in the notion of “bifocal vision.” For Bultmann, it is his concept of “paradoxical identity.” For Morse, it is found in the idea of God’s “at-handedness” and the corresponding notion of “incommensurable juxtapositions” that he borrows from Paul Lehmann.<sup>41</sup> What all of these conceptions have in common is the insight that God remains a critical *other* who stands radically beyond the creaturely situation, but in a way that is wholly nonmetaphysical. Heaven is not defined here as a supra-mundane location, nor is God defined as an abstract ontological entity associated with general philosophical concepts like simplicity, impassibility, and causality. But neither is God a “mere metaphor” whose content we define on the basis of our own idealistic projections, such that heaven is what we create for ourselves. God is instead a kerygmatic event whose transcendent-eschatological word addresses us in the gospel of God’s present advent and mobilizes a community of revolutionary action within a particular historical moment. Just because one agrees with Taubes that we must dispense with the supernatural does not mean that we must dispense with the transcendent. The two are not coextensive, and abandoning the former actually makes possible the proper articulation of the latter.

### III

Apocalyptic theology is at a crossroads. Proponents of such a theology will need to make a decision regarding which path to take. By now it should be clear from my paper that there are two distinct kinds of apocalyptic

41. Morse, *Difference*, 108–11.

## PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

theology. The first (what I will call “Apocalyptic A”) is the view that the apocalyptic event is something literal, immanent, and directly observable. This can take a number of different forms. It is the tradition of apocalyptic on which Taubes draws, and which New Testament historians like Käsemann and Christiaan Beker emphasize. This is a Jewish apocalypticism rooted in a prophetic critique of imperial oppression and oriented toward the imminent arrival of a cosmic kingdom. Whether one understands the new age in supernatural or political terms, there is a *sequential ordering* of two objective world ages. The second kind of apocalyptic (“Apocalyptic B”) is found in the theology developed by the likes of Martyn, Morse, Kerr, and others. This position views the apocalyptic event as something nonliteral, transcendent, and indirectly or paradoxically present. Here the new age is understood in neither supernatural nor political terms, and there is a *simultaneity* of the two ages. It is in this camp that I include Bultmann, alongside Barth and Bonhoeffer, despite some ostensible disagreements. As controversial as it may be for those who wish to posit a continuity between ancient Judeo-Christian apocalypticism and the present form of apocalyptic theology, I argue that we must differentiate very clearly between these two schools of thought. Certainly both share a common language regarding two ages, the old and the new, and both also share a common prophetic critique of the powers and principalities. And yet each approaches the issue in a radically different and mutually exclusive way. The two forms of apocalyptic cannot be harmonized within a more general account.

Apocalyptic A understands the apocalypticism of the biblical texts to be *mythical* in nature. This mythological quality is either (a) emptied of content and viewed as symbolic of political concerns (Taubes); (b) confined in its literal form to the primitive origins of the church but still given some normative significance for Christian theology (Käsemann); or (c) retained entirely as myth (modern fundamentalism and dispensationalism). Apocalyptic B, what I elsewhere refer to as “Pauline apocalyptic,” is a *demythologizing* of Scripture, and as Bultmann himself makes clear, demythologizing does not eliminate myth but rather *interprets* it for today.<sup>42</sup> In other words, Apocalyptic B is rooted in an interpretation of the biblical texts from within a decidedly modern—that is, Copernican—framework. It has no interest in historical reconstruction, as if apocalyptic

42. Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 12. In his 1952 clarification, Bultmann says that “[demythologizing’s] criticism of the biblical writings lies not in eliminating mythological statements but in interpreting them; it is not a process of subtraction but a hermeneutical method” (“Problem of Demythologizing,” 99).

has a univocal meaning that must be maintained today. It equally has no interest in speculation: either metaphysical speculation about the being of God, or eschatological speculation about a coming end of history. Instead of positing an earth without heaven, it proposes to rethink heaven itself. While dialectical, its emphasis on paradoxicality means that the relation between history and eschatology is one that must be conceived and posited ever anew. The apocalyptic event of Christ is neither removed to an obscure future, nor reduced to a past datum, nor conflated with a present construction. This event in all its living potency remains paradoxically present within each contingent situation *without ever identifying itself* with any single political mobilization or sociocultural mode of existence. Contrary to Joachim, and so Taubes, the Spirit does not “supersede Christ,” but rather the Spirit *is* Christ.<sup>43</sup>

There are, as I see it, *two* primary ways in which Apocalyptic A manifests itself today. The first of these two ways is to identify what is apocalyptic with a particular mode of sociopolitical and intellectual resistance to the world. This can take an atheistic-Marxist form, as it does in Taubes, or it can take the form of Anglo-American postliberalism, within which I include both Hauerwas and Milbank. Common to these views is the notion that heaven or the “ideal” is to be defined by a particular worldview, that is to say, by the political ideology or cultural-linguistic rules of a particular community, whether the proletariat or the church. Because it is all-encompassing, this worldview can only confront “outsiders” by means of violence, whether physical, social, rhetorical, or some combination thereof. All of these in some sense objectify the divine and conflate God with a particular cultural form, historical entity, or intellectual system.

The second way in which Apocalyptic A manifests itself is by identifying what is apocalyptic with a particular mode of metaphysical theology. Instead of conflating the inbreaking of Christ with an empirical community, this conflates the inbreaking with a culturally specific intellectual framework or philosophical *Denkweise*. As with the empirical community, this mode of theological thinking is a contingent and contextual form of the gospel’s manifestation in the world, yet it is explicitly or implicitly given a normative status for the articulation of Christian faith. It is explicit when theology baptizes a philosophical system (e.g., Hellenistic substance ontology) as authoritative; it is implicit when theology uncritically or naively imports philosophical notions into its articulation of the gospel. Either way, this second form of Apocalyptic A ends up directly

43. Taubes, “Dialectic and Analogy,” 168.



PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

identifying the gospel with a certain philosophical conceptuality. This is most clearly present in the repositioning of the *analogia entis*, but it is also evident in those attempts to associate the cosmic-historical nature of the Christ-event with a “soteriological objectivism” that presupposes certain ontological relations as given. It is on this ground, in particular, that one often finds praise bestowed upon Barth or Bonhoeffer for their ontologizing of salvation, whether in Barth’s account of Christ’s history as the universal history of humanity or in Bonhoeffer’s account of Christ’s incarnate reality as the bodily assumption of all humanity.

The problem here is not the appropriation of philosophical conceptions in theological reflection. Instead, the problem is that such appropriations often appear to have timeless and universal validity; they are not continually and contextually interrogated in order to assess whether new conceptualities might more faithfully correspond to the event of Christ’s inbreaking here and now. I am not suggesting that apocalyptic theology ought to avoid every form of theological ontology—that would be impossible—only that ontological concepts need to be (a) strictly distinguished from the gospel itself (thus emphasizing their contingency and replaceability) and (b) strictly ordered according to the logic of the gospel (thus dispensing with abstract universals in favor of concrete particularities and multiplicities). Apocalyptic A fails to uphold these points, often in spite of the right theological judgments. For instance, the attempt to articulate the basis for a “cosmic” and “historical” apocalypse in light of Barth and Bonhoeffer often ends up taking the form of an account of Christ’s universal mediation. While some way of accounting for this is necessary, it is problematic insofar as theology becomes tied up with a specific philosophical conceptuality—especially an outdated one. And lest we encounter the objection that Bultmann is tied to a Heideggerian ontology, we should note that this is one of the abiding myths of our time, one that should have long since passed from serious academic conversation.<sup>44</sup>

44. The seminal work of Roger Johnson has demonstrated that the sources for Bultmann’s theology are to be found in Marburg neo-Kantianism and the theology of Wilhelm Herrmann. Heidegger at best fills a very limited role in Bultmann’s thought. Moreover, there is the historical question as to whether the relation of dependence was really only unidirectional. In light of the fact that Bultmann and Heidegger had joint teaching assignments and participated in each other’s seminars, Johnson draws the important conclusion: “It may well be that we should have to correct our older picture of Bultmann’s dependence upon Heidegger. . . . The relationship may well entail a far greater degree of reciprocity than has characteristically been assumed to be the case: Bultmann’s own understanding of existence from the perspective of a religiously conceived individuality providing the stimulus to Heidegger’s formulation of

Each of these two forms of apocalyptic thinking belong to the first type, Apocalyptic A. What unites them is the way in which what is truly apocalyptic is identified with something given in the world—whether a community of people or a philosophical framework. They are borne out of the Jewish apocalyptic desire to specify exactly *when* the apocalypse will take place, or *what* it will look like. The *what* need not be a description of a future Armageddon; it can also be a certain ontology or a certain religious community within the world. The second type of apocalyptic, Apocalyptic B, which I advocate in this paper, has no interest in the questions of when and what. It speaks rather of a *who*, namely, the crucified Christ, who is the wholly other in our midst, the transcendent one who continually breaks anew into our immanent situation. The “when” is always *now*, and the “what” is always *new*. One cannot describe what the apocalyptic incursion of God will entail in advance of its happening in the particular moment. The invasive event of God in Christ is a contextual and contemporary occurrence. The event is always “new every morning,” always demanding a new interpretation within the present historical horizon. To speak of this incursion as *cosmic* is to acknowledge that there are no restrictions to where the risen Christ may manifest himself. To speak of this incursion as *imminent* is to acknowledge that God’s forthcoming is never “in hand” but must always happen again and again. As Bultmann puts it, “God is ‘the guest who always moves on’ (Rilke), who cannot be apprehended in any now as one who remains. Rather . . . God ever stands before me as one who is coming [*der Kommende*], and this constant futurity of God is God’s transcendence [*Jenseitigkeit*].”<sup>45</sup>

the existentialist interpretation of *Dasein* as the point of departure for a radical new ontology” (Johnson, *Origins of Demythologizing*, 175 n. 1). Beyond the question of just how dependent Bultmann ever really was on Heidegger (the historical question), there is the more important question regarding what Bultmann actually borrows from existentialist philosophy (the material question). On this point, Johnson also correctly reminds the reader that “Bultmann consistently appropriated for his own thought only that which was consistent with his own fundamental philosophical-theological conceptuality. This is true for his theological relationship with Barth as well as his philosophical relationship with Heidegger” (123). In other words, when Bultmann appropriates concepts like authenticity, decision, objectifying, and being-on-hand—not to mention research from the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*—they are always subordinate to his more basic theological concerns as an existential-dialectical Lutheran theologian.

45. Bultmann, “Science and Existence [1955],” 144. Cf. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 195: “The grace of God is not visible like worldly entities. His treasures are hidden in earthly vessels (2 Cor. 4.7). The resurrection life is manifested in the world in the guise of death (2 Cor. 12.9). . . . The grace of God is never an assured possession.

PART ONE: Apocalyptic and the Nature of Theology

The title for this paper is “Eschatologizing Apocalyptic.” This is, of course, a way of combining, via juxtaposition, the views of Käsemann and Bultmann. By stating the need to *eschatologize* apocalyptic, I mean that we need to include the concerns of the first type of apocalyptic within the second. The political concerns of Taubes are entirely valid and must find a positive place within theology, *yet* without collapsing the divine into any single form of revolution. Bultmann’s objections to apocalypticism are ones that contemporary theologians seem to share, and rightly so in my view. We can no longer sustain the original association of apocalyptic with a chronological and cosmological occurrence. Apocalyptic theology must not be a way of retreating to a premodern conception of history or an uncritical philosophical ontology. The apocalyptic invasion of Christ is properly understood as a concretely existential and eschatological event.

In conclusion, I pose the following questions. First, is apocalyptic functioning to justify the identification of God with a particular form of anti-worldly resistance (however we define “world”)? Second, is apocalyptic functioning as a way of keeping the door open for traditional supernaturalism and classical metaphysics without having to sound like a supernaturalist or a metaphysician? If apocalyptic is to have a future, it must, I believe, be unequivocal in saying no to both. Contemporary Pauline theology has the resources to do so. We must simply declare our allegiances.

---

It is always ahead of man, always a future possibility. As grace, the transcendence of God is always his futurity, his constant being ahead of us, his always being where we would like to be.” See also Bultmann’s very important essay, especially for the topic of apocalyptic, on “Die christliche Hoffnung [1954].” At the end of the essay he writes: “The God of the present moment is always the God who is coming [*der kommende Gott*]; and only because of that is God the God of the present whose grace frees the human being from bondage to the past and opens that person for the future—for God’s future” (90).