

Explaining Islam Apocalyptically

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In his book, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, John Tolan observes that the Christian response to the seventh century Arab conquests led to several responses, all in the attempt to answer the question: why? In medieval Christian cosmology God was the determinant actor. God caused nations to rise and fall. What possible explanation could there be for these blasphemous Saracens being granted dominion over true believers, and then prospering in ways that Christians never had?

Among the responses given was one drawn from the apocalyptic texts of the Bible with their themes of judgment and retribution, cataclysmic endings and new beginnings. According to Tolan,

For some Christian authors, the Arab invaders were something more than a mere divine chastisement: they were actors in the divine drama of the last days. In other words, the invasions represented the beginning of the end of time, as predicted by the Hebrew prophets, the Gospels, and the Book of Revelation.¹

This response serves as the backdrop for this all too brief study of Islam in the Christian apocalyptic imagination, a study which in this case will take us beyond early responses to the Arab invasions to our own time, in which Islam as religious “other” continues to haunt the more triumphalistic expressions of the Christian faith. The focus, in fact, will be less on the early medieval apocalyptic treatment of Islam than on the apocalyptic texts which have shaped a uniquely American evangelical perspective of Islam. It will be guided by an observation made by R.W. Southern: that the location of Islam in the apocalyptic imagination waxes and wanes according to its perceived threat to Christianity, or better, to Christendom.²

Defining Apocalyptic

Leon Morris suggests that it is difficult to nail down a precise definition of the word “apocalyptic” (from the Greek term *apokalypsis* of Revelation 1:1) let alone identify exactly which canonical or non-canonical texts fit the definition:

While most agree that the term is valuable because there is such a thing as apocalyptic, there is no consensus as to exactly what the term denotes. There is no agreed list of apocalyptic books and it is not easy to define what we mean by apocalyptic literature.³

At the same time it can be said that there are notable characteristics which set this genre of literature apart, so much so that even an untrained eye can spot it. In this way, apocalyptic literature might be suitably compared to what Stewart Potter said about pornography in a landmark Supreme Court ruling on obscenity in 1964. Noting that hardcore pornography was difficult to define, he at the same time could say: "I know it when I see it."⁴ Even a cursory glance at the books which are readily identifiable as apocalyptic – Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation – will allow the reader to recognize that she has entered an alternative realm of the religious imagination. We know it when we see it.

What is puzzling to Christians who do not feel drawn to apocalyptic interpretations of history, and who may, in fact, find it to have other parallels to pornography in its appeal to the darker realms of the human psyche, is why these works are so popular. Scholars have come belatedly yet convincingly to recognize the widespread impact of apocalyptic literature on Christian thought and practice in Europe throughout the medieval period. Those who pay attention to such things notice that such literature regularly tops not only Christian bestseller lists, but also general bestseller lists in America today. Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the bestselling non-fiction book in this country during the decade of the seventies.⁵ The latest novelizations of Lindsey's scenario in the *Left Behind* series also regularly top bestseller charts.

Obviously this material has great appeal. The reason for its appeal lies at the heart of this study. It has to do with making sense out of what can otherwise be a frightening and incomprehensible world. Paul Boyer, who did an extensive historical survey of this literature and its impact up to and including its contemporary expressions, puts it this way:

This belief system is . . . noteworthy because of the psychological and even ontological function it performs for those who embrace it. Prophecy belief is a way of ordering experience. It gives a grand, overarching shape to history, and thus ultimate meaning to the lives of individuals caught up in history's stream. Here, I believe, is a key to its enduring appeal.⁶

Our examination of this "enduring appeal" as it relates to the placement of Islam in the apocalyptic imagination begins with one of the earliest apocalypses to deal with the subject, written soon after the Arab conquests had swept through the region of its composition. We begin with the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*.

The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius

The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius was originally identified by the 19th century German scholar, Ernst Sackur, as a seventh century Greek text composed in Northern Syria.⁷ This was challenged by later scholarship, most notably that of the American scholar

Paul Alexander who, building on the work of the Hungarian Orientalist Michael Kmosko,⁸ was able to determine that it was instead originally written in Syriac by an Oriental Orthodox clergyman near the present city of Mosul, Iraq “after A.D. 644 and prior to 678.”⁹ What this means is that at the time of its composition the writer and his faith community not only would have witnessed and lived through the Arab Muslim conquest of their territory, but also experienced life as members of a nascent *dhimmi* community. The question “Why?” would have loomed large in their minds as this writer formulated his apocalyptic response to an existential experience of Islam as a dominant and dominating presence.

In her introduction to Alexander’s work, Dorothy Abrahamse identifies *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* as a particular type of apocalyptic writing which uses a literary technique known as *vaticinium ex eventu*, which reads both historical and predictive material through a prophetic lens.¹⁰ It is also marked by a historical fiction, insofar as the work is attributed to the third century Christian bishop and writer named Methodius.¹¹ This was a common practice of early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, which had the dual purpose of cloaking the work in the aura of a celebrated divine and giving “the reader the assurance that the revelation about what was to come deserved his full confidence.”¹² In this way, the writer would have been seen to have predicted what the readers themselves were currently experiencing.

What they were experiencing, of course, was the full brunt of the Islamic conquest which *Pseudo-Methodius* sees as being foreshadowed in a previous era, the fifth millennium, when “the sons of Ishmael . . . fled from the desert of Yathrib . . . (and) made war with the kings of the nations and devastated them. . . . and the whole Promised Land came to be under their dominion.”¹³ He also makes a point of describing them in dehumanizing terms saying that “they were like locusts” who “walked naked” and “drank the blood of animals.”¹⁴ This is the “historical” section.

In the prophetic section (which is actually for the most part a description of the current situation in which the author is living), the language becomes even more dehumanizing as the beastly nature of the “sons of Ishmael” is put on full display. This is the seventh millennium when God will lead “the sons of Ishmael . . . out of the desert of Yathrib” and set them loose like ravenous wolves on “the kingdom of the Greeks” for “a chastisement in which there will be no mercy.”¹⁵ They then morph into “four captains of the chastisement” who are named “Desolation and the Spoiler, Ruin and the Destroyer” casting lots to determine which countries they will get to devour.¹⁶ These, say the seer, are people who are used by God, but not loved by God,¹⁷ used to carry out God’s punishment on Christians who have strayed far from the moral tenets of their faith, particularly in the area of sexual morality.¹⁸ As for those who have remained faithful, the humble servants of God who also become victims of the Islamic beasts, the chastisement becomes a time of testing so “the faithful might be separated from the

unfaithful, and the tares and those who are rejected from the choice wheat, because that time will be a furnace of trial.”¹⁹

And then comes the good part – the part for which the reader would have been eagerly waiting – the assurance that this time of testing and chastisement will not last as God will send “the king of the Greeks . . . against them with great anger.”²⁰ This final judgment is a definitive mark of all apocalyptic writing – the bad guys get it in the end – much worse in this case than what they themselves had dished out.

Their oppression will be one hundredfold stronger than their own yoke. . . . They will serve as slaves of those who were serving them. And their servitude will be one hundredfold more bitter than theirs.²¹

Thomas Newton’s *Dissertations on the Prophecies*

We now take a great leap forward to another location at another time, Great Britain in 1743 to be precise,²² which is the year Anglican Bishop Thomas Newton published his three volume *Dissertations on the Prophecies which have Remarkably Been Fulfilled, and at This Time are Fulfilling in the World* which, despite its British origin, would become one of the most influential prophetic treatises of what Richard Lee Rogers calls “the post-Revolutionary renaissance of prophetic interpretation”²³ in America.

The early Islamic conquests were now a distant memory. But the westward expansion of the Ottoman Empire, which had reached its peak in the late 17th century before slowly slipping into the inevitable decline of an empire which had reached too far too fast, was still a relatively fresh memory, fresh enough for Bishop Newton to devote an inordinate amount of space both to the Ottomans and Islam in general.

What we find here are echoes of *Pseudo-Methodius*, albeit with less exaggerated language. The “pseudo” is no longer necessary, nor believable to people in the age of enlightenment, but the form is surprisingly similar. It is prophecy in the guise of history, *vaticinium ex eventu*, as Thomas works his way from Adam to his own era, then confidently predicts what is yet to come.

Arabs enter the picture early as Newton notes the accuracy of the biblical picture of Ishmael as a determinant of their character today, a description reminiscent of the less than flattering portrayal of “the sons of Ishmael” in *Pseudo-Methodius*:

He was a wild man, his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him; and they live in the same state of war today, their hand against every man, and every man's hand against them. ²⁴

There is also a reaffirmation of *Pseudo-Methodius'* belief that the Islamic hordes, first Saracens, then Turks, were enacting God's cleansing retribution on the eastern churches for their grievous sin, in this case idolatry:

[T]hese calamities were inflicted on the Christians for their idolatry. . . . At first they were visited by the plague of the Saracens, but this working no change nor reformation, they were again chastised by the still greater plague of the Othmans.²⁵

Thomas also repeats *Pseudo-Methodius'* assertion that the Saracens were like locusts, only in this case he does so in reference to Revelation 9 with a strong indictment of the "false religion" which sent these locusts out:

At the sounding of the fifth trumpet (ver. 1-3) "a star fallen from heaven" meaning the wicked imposter Mohammed "opened the bottomless pit, and there arose a smoke out of the pit, and the sun and the air were darkened by it; that is, a false religion was set up; which filled the world with darkness and error; and swarms of Saracen or Arabian locusts overspread the earth."²⁶

Here is an example of *vaticinium ex eventu* – reading back into history a prophetic perspective that has implications for what is yet to come. And like *Pseudo-Methodius* what is yet to come carries with it the "good news" that this "false religion" which "filled the world with darkness and error" and its "swarms" of locust-like armies will crash and burn. This would be related to a subject which would take center stage in all subsequent American apocalyptic writing – the restoration of the Jews to Palestine:

Ezekiel (xxxviii. xxxix.) and Daniel (xi. 44, 45.) have given some intimations, that the Othman empire shall be overthrown in opposing the settlement of Israel in their own land in the latter days.²⁷

The Late Great Planet Earth

Our next leap is a large one – from antebellum New England to the swinging sixties, that is, the 1960s. In the intervening years there were three important developments which affected the apocalyptic outlook: 1) the rise of premillennial dispensationalism as the predominant apocalyptic perspective,²⁸ characterized by an extreme pessimism about human history and near idolization of the nation state of Israel as the centerpiece of the divine denouement of history, 2) the marginalization of Islam as a political force with the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI, and 3) the Cold War. All three developments figure into the apocalyptic perspective of Hal Lindsey's wildly popular *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which was first published in 1970.

As can be expected from R. W. Southern's observation about Islam's location in apocalyptic literature, *The Late Great Planet Earth* has almost nothing to say about Islam as a religious phenomenon. It receives only a passing mention in one reference as the ideological underpinning of a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt's Gamel Abdul Nasser, a coalition which would figure large in Lindsey's End Times scheme:

Using the "Gospel of Materialism," plus the common bond of Arabic race identity, wedded with the *Moslem religious ties*, Nasser believes that he can unite the Arabs to lead the resurrection of all underprivileged nations into a mighty third world force (emphasis mine).²⁹

Once again, as was true with *Pseudo-Methodius*, Islam is of less importance as a religious phenomenon than as the ideology of a political entity whose role in this case is crucial, yet relatively minor, as the ally of the major End Times player, Communist Russia:

Shortly after the restoration of the Jews in the land of Israel, an incredible enemy will arise to its "uttermost north." This enemy will be composed of one great nation which will gather around it a number of allies. It is this "Northern Confederacy" that is destined to plunge the world into its final great war which Christ will return to end.³⁰

The good news, at least for those readers who believed, as Lindsey did, that all these things were about to happen, is that those who oppose God and his people – in this case, Israel – will meet a violent end. Communism will fall. Those who allied themselves with Russia – Iran, Arab and African states, China – all will be crushed, this time by Jesus, the vengeful Warrior King:

The nature of the forces which the Lord will unleash on that day against the armies gathered in the Middle East is described in Zechariah 14:12: "And this shall be the plague wherewith the Lord will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem. Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth" (KJV). A frightening picture, isn't it? Has it occurred to you that this is exactly what happens to those who are in a thermonuclear blast? It appears that this will be the case at the return of Christ.³¹

Jerusalem Countdown: A Prelude to War

By this time it should be apparent that our apocalyptic writers have a larger agenda beyond their stated purpose of simply elucidating a prophetic biblical perspective on current and future events. Each in their own way is responding to a contemporary cultural and political context which has disturbing implications for their own faith

community, implications that may or may not be related to Christian-Muslim relations. For *Pseudo-Methodius* it was the social and political marginalization of Christians in the Islamic empire. For Newton it was, as Ruth Bloch indicates, the theological challenge of Deism.³² For Lindsey it was threat of Communism and the general decline of morals in the Age of Aquarius. For the next and final author we will consider it was and is the threat posed by religious pluralism. This, at least, is the contention of Richard Cimino whose exhaustive review of post-9/11 evangelical literature on Islam leads him to conclude that:

[T]he events of September 11 and its aftermath tended to drive home the reality of religious pluralism in the U.S. among evangelicals, intensifying their concerns about the threat of syncretism, or the mixing of Christianity with other religions. This concern has led evangelicals to reassert and sharpen the differences between the teachings of Christianity and Islam.³³

This is certainly one way of understanding what we find in this literature. But at the same time we should not discount Paul Boyer's observation that it is also "a way of ordering experience" (see above) in light of frightening historical phenomenon over which the reader perceives himself or herself to have little control. Certainly John Hagee's *Jerusalem Countdown: A Prelude to War*, first published last year, now in its second printing, should be read in this way. It is a triumphalistic response to political events which have once again raised the specter of Islam as a threatening political and religious phenomenon.

In some ways Hagee's book should not be classified as apocalyptic literature. The bulk of the initial material he presents is simply one long diatribe against what he calls "Islamics"³⁴ in the most polemically distorted language possible. He states, for instance, as incontestable fact (without references) that "Muslims worship the moon god of Mecca called Allah" and that "Muslims say their sins can be forgiven, but they have to kill an infidel (non-Muslim) to obtain forgiveness."³⁵ He suggests, quoting the anti-Muslim speaker Walid Shoebat that "over 73 percent of the Arab world supports the jihad ideology" which will produce "a religious army unlike anything the Western world has seen since the dawn of civilization."³⁶ He also portrays Muhammad as a bloodthirsty killer who "slaughtered thousands of people in establishing and spreading Islam."³⁷ All this is to suggest that the greatest threat to world peace is Islam, particularly Iranian Islam whose current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he describes as a new Hitler.³⁸ There is little apocalyptic speculation here, nor in what takes up another large chunk of his material, which is an historical description and defense of the state of Israel which combines both prophetic and purely political elements: Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and Israel as a defender of American democratic principles.³⁹

Clearly there is a larger agenda here. But Hagee puts it all in an apocalyptic framework which more or less follows the contours of Lindsey's scheme. Russia continues in its role as the key End Times player as Ezekiel's "Gog."⁴⁰ The Arab nations and Iran are allied with her, as is China. But this time Communism is removed from the equation, replaced with fanatical Islam as the ideological basis for the series of wars leading to the Second Coming of Christ:

What's the payoff for the Arabs? They believe the Islamic fanatical vision of exterminating the Jews can be realized with Russia's help. Absolute control of Jerusalem as the capital for the new Palestinian state will be within their grasp.⁴¹

And, yes, once again in the end God will set things right. The dreaded Islamic threat will be removed to God's – and we can assume John Hagee's – great amusement and delight:

When Russia and its allies invade Israel, and America and Europe fail to respond, "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh" (Ps. 2:4) as He crushes the Russian-Arab tormentors of the apple of His eye. He will crush them as he crushed Pharaoh, Haman, and Hitler so that Israel and the world "shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 38:23).

¹ John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 45.

² R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 27.

³ Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 20.

⁴ Wikipedia reference: wikipedia.org/wiki/Potter_Stewart

⁵ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷ Francisco Javier Martinez, "Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius" (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1985), 3.

⁸ Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ Martinez, "Eastern Christian Apocalyptic," 26.

¹² Walter Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement: Introduction and Interpretation*, trans. by John E. Steely (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), 15.

¹³ Martinez, "Eastern Christian Apocalyptic," 128. (Note: the translation used in this paper is Martinez', which I found to be easier to follow than Alexander's translation.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Richard Lee Rogers, "A Bright and New Constellation: Millennial Narratives and the Origins of American Foreign Missions," in *North American Foreign Missions: 1810-1914: Theology, Theory and Policy*, ed. by Wilbert Shenk (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 43.

²³ *Ibid.* See also Ruth H. Bloch, *Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 120.

²⁴ Thomas Newton, *Dissertations on the Prophecies Which have Been Fulfilled, at this Time are Fulfilling in the World*, (London: Longman & Co., 1832), 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 484.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 472.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 606.

²⁸ Gary Burge notes that "throughout the 20s and for the next 40 years, Dispensationalism tied to Israel and prophecy became the litmus test for evangelical orthodoxy." Gary Burge, "Christian Zionism, Evangelicals and Israel" www.hcef.org/hcef/index.cfm/ID/159 (12/13/2003).

²⁹ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

³² Bloch, *Millennial Themes*, 120.

³³ Richard Cimino, "New Boundaries - Evangelicals and Islam After 9/11" in *Review of Religious Research*, December, 2005, 2. Available online at: www.religionwatch.com/doc/2005-Cimino-Evangelicals-Islam.pdf

³⁴ John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown: A Prelude to War* (Lake Mary, Florida: Strange Company, 2007), 23 *et passim*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁹ Hagee lists seven reasons why we must support Israel based on a speech given by Oklahoma senator James Inhofe. Only one of them relates to biblical prophecy. See *Ibid.*, 238-39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 143.
