

Redefining Apocalypse in Blake Studies

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It must be stated at the outset that a great deal of the current discussion of apocalypticism and of the apocalypses is being carried on in the midst of a semantic confusion of the first order.

Michael E. Stone, "Lists of Revealed Things"

1 MICHAEL Stone argues that biblical scholars sow confusion by defining the ancient apocalypses in terms of the eschatological content or worldview that many contain (their "apocalypticism") at the expense of other defining features. This conflation of apocalypse with eschatology emerged with the first comprehensive study of the apocalypses, by the German theologian Friedrich Lücke in 1832.¹ The problem has been exacerbated in our time by the ubiquitous use of the term "apocalypse" in the media, popular culture, the churches, the arts, academe, and environmental studies, which has all but emptied the term of its core meaning as "revelation" or "disclosure." When "the apocalypse" is invoked, it most often refers to a large-scale catastrophe or cataclysm, usually involving the collapse of civilization or the end of the world. Such references comport better with the concept of eschatology, the study of last things or the "end" of history, than with apocalypse. The terminological confusion appears in the history of Blake criticism as well, from S. Foster Damon, through Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, and Morton Paley, to more recent

1. According to Richard Sturm, Lücke set himself two goals in the book, a study of John's Revelation: to provide a history of apocalyptic literature and to determine its "concept and character." But in addressing the latter goal, he introduced an "ambiguity" that persists into our time: "Theoretically the concept and character ... are presented as a unity, but they are approached as though they were independent of one another" (Sturm 18). Lücke took Revelation as his primary example and identified eschatology as its core feature. Thereafter, while scholars continued to debate which characteristics define the genre, they treated apocalypse and eschatology as synonymous.

work by Steven Goldsmith and Lucy Cogan. It is marked by an uncritical and inconsistent use of "apocalyptic" or "the apocalypse" to refer primarily to an end-time judgment. A scholar who has resisted this critical conflation in both biblical and Blake criticism is Christopher Rowland, who wrote the landmark book *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (1982), as well as *Blake and the Bible* (2010). Rowland, along with a burgeoning cadre of biblical scholars who address the issue, can help bring more precision to the way these concepts are used in Blake studies.

2 Though the word "eschatology" does not appear in English until the mid-nineteenth century (*OED*), most Christian writers viewed the two concepts as parts of a single phenomenon, mainly because the two biblical apocalypses (Daniel and Revelation) combine them, with Revelation serving as the capstone of an entire tradition. The concepts do overlap, insofar as both derive from biblical prophecy.² Eschatology, which emerges in the eighth century BCE, is rooted in the belief that God acts "purposefully in history, guiding events toward the fulfillment of [his] promises" (Bright 265). As a theology of history, it carries both a temporal and a teleological meaning, with the goal of establishing God's kingdom on earth, including a final judgment against evil and salvation for the just. It is concerned with both the sweep of history and God's power to do "a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19), to bring a "decisive turning-point" in the present (Barton 218-20; see also von Rad 112-15). In this sense, eschatology plays a defining role in the emergence of Christianity and the New Testament. Early Christians believed that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom during his ministry and that his resurrection foretold a general resurrection at his return (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

3 Apocalypse, which appears later (c. 250 BCE-150 CE), is a mode of communication in which God reveals his secret knowledge to a human recipient through vision or angelic mediation, with an emphasis on the present relevance of what the seer or prophet experiences. The revealed secrets or mysteries are often but not always eschatological. They also contain revealed cosmology and speculative wisdom, which suggests that apocalypse is not reducible to its eschatological content. Such content appears in other genres and modes of expression beside apocalypses. If John's Revelation offers a definitive account of eschatological mysteries, that does not make those types of mysteries "apocalyptic,"

2. For the continuity of prophecy and apocalypse, see Barton 122-32; Rowley 13-14; J. J. Collins, "From Prophecy" 139; and Najman 36-48. Rowland and Stone show that wisdom traditions and esotericism also are central to the apocalypses (Rowland, *Open Heaven* 245-47; Rowland and Morray-Jones 3-12; Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature" 388-91, 431-32).

any more than the cosmological ones would be inherently apocalyptic. More determinant are the means of communication and the transformative experience in the present that the seer undergoes, an experience that authenticates the work. While congruent with the usage of “apocalyptic” in the Jewish context, New Testament use of the adjective refers primarily to the manner or mode of communication that is authenticated by its source in Christ.

- 4 I want to acknowledge at the outset that I am treating the conflation of a pair of concepts in modern theological exposition and in Blake studies, not covering the entire vast phenomenon. Nor do I assume that Blake scholars should have “known better,” since explicit distinctions between apocalypse and eschatology did not emerge until the 1970s-80s. Also, in the sections below, I emphasize apocalypse over eschatology not because it is more important, but to highlight the problem of conflating them.
- 5 The first section provides an overview of the term “apocalypse” as used in biblical scholarship since 1900; it is followed in section II by an extended discussion of “apocalypse” and “apocalyptic” in Blake criticism over roughly the same period. A final section analyzes a specific Blake work to show the heuristic value of recent studies for understanding his approach to apocalypse and eschatology. I focus on *Milton a Poem* because it foregrounds these concepts, in both structural and thematic terms, and does so without conflating or confusing them. Narrative setting and action take place both in heaven and on earth, organized around three major descents from the eternal world to Blake’s dwelling in Felpham. The first is by Milton, the eponymous hero; the second by Ololon, his divine counterpart; and the third by Los, Blake’s prophetic persona. Although these descents appear sequentially, Blake presents them as occurring simultaneously, in the same apocalyptic moment. Also, Los and Ololon announce the end of 6000 years of history, the traditional time frame of Judeo-Christian eschatology, though the last judgment does not occur in the space of the poem. This section argues that while Blake maintains a strong sense of the future hope and its pending fulfillment in history, he emphasizes the primacy of revelatory experience (apocalypse) and its capacity to open eternity *within* time.

I. “Apocalypse” in Biblical Scholarship (1900–2020)³

- 6 At the beginning of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer and R. H. Charles helped revolutionize New Testament studies by establishing the eschatological foundation of ear-

3. The most helpful overviews of modern apocalypse studies are by Sturm, DiTomasso, A. Y. Collins (“Apocalypse Now”), Fletcher-Louis, and Henze.

ly Christianity. Schweitzer’s epochal *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) showed that, contrary to orthodox and liberal views, Jesus did not preach about an internal kingdom of repentance but about an imminent end to the reigning world order (224).⁴ Drawing on the ancient apocalypses available—1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, Psalms of Solomon—he demonstrated their close similarities to New Testament texts (367-87). His use of the word “apocalyptic” to designate the eschatological form of these texts, however, sealed the conflation of the concepts through most of the twentieth century. Alongside Schweitzer, Charles was equally important, mainly through his textual editions and translations of extrabiblical apocalypses, especially his two-volume *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (1913), the standard reference for the first half of the century.⁵ He also wrote the oft-reprinted *Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life* (2nd ed., 1913), retitled *Eschatology* in 1963. In a chapter on “The Eschatology of . . . Apocalyptic Literature,” Charles made several points that gained wide currency; namely, that the apocalyptic writer “despairs of the present,” that “his main interests are supramundane,” and that he offers a “deterministic view of history” (174-75). These views were extended in two major studies at mid-century, H. H. Rowley’s *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (1944) and D. S. Russell’s *The Message and Method of Jewish Apocalyptic* (1964), which similarly rooted discussion of apocalypse in Old Testament eschatology.

- 7 It was not until the 1970s and early 1980s that biblical scholars began to make a distinction between the two concepts. Four scholarly texts appeared that shaped subsequent debate: Klaus Koch’s *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (1972), Paul D. Hanson’s *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (1975), Christopher Rowland’s *The Open Heaven* (1982), and John J. Collins’s *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (1984).⁶ Koch outlines a set of conceptual features typical of apocalypses, though he distinguishes these from “apocalyptic as a historical movement” and ideology, which, he says, are “dominated by an urgent expectation of the impending overthrow of all earthly conditions in the immediate future” (28). He asserts that, in addition to “cosmic catastrophe,” apocalyptic texts express a fundamental “pessimism” and “predetermined” view of history, though individual behavior is not predestined (28-29). Similarly, in his widely influential book, Hanson

4. In Schweitzer’s view, Jesus failed as a prophet because the kingdom never materialized. For his impact on New Testament studies, see A. Y. Collins (“Apocalypticism” 327-31) and Rowland (“*Immediate Revelation*” 449-60).

5. On Charles, see J. J. Collins (*Apocalyptic Imagination* 14-16).

6. Henze comments that while apocalypse studies continue to make substantial advances, the “basic framework” established in the 1970s and 1980s “has remained largely intact and continues to set the terms for discussion” (407).

argues that the “matrix” of apocalyptic prophecy emerged in the post-exilic era (sixth-fifth centuries BCE) as prophecy fell into distrust and declined. Having gradually abandoned a realistic hope in history as the theatre of divine activity, a group of “hierocratic” writers developed a mythical vision “transcending all mundane institutions and structures, a vision which constantly calls those institutions and structures into judgment” (30-31). Hanson’s primary texts antedate the appearance of actual apocalypses, limiting his theory’s effectiveness, but he also published an article on “Apocalypticism” that made three enduring distinctions: between *apocalypse* as a literary genre, *apocalypticism* as a symbolic worldview, and prophetic and *apocalyptic eschatology* (30).

- 8 Of the four studies, Collins’s *The Apocalyptic Imagination* has gained the most traction, and his definition of an apocalypse is the most frequently cited to this day. Developed in concert with a group of scholars at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in the mid-1970s, it first appeared in the journal *Semeia* under the title *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (1979):

An apocalypse is defined as: “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” (*Apocalyptic Imagination* 5)

Collins recycled this definition in subsequent works, including an introductory essay to volume 1 of *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (1998), a standard overview of the subject, and in the more recent essay “What Is Apocalyptic Literature?” that opens *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (2014), which he edited. It advances study by uniting form and content, linking the “spatial” or vertical dimension that discloses transcendent reality with the “temporal” or horizontal dimension of history with which it corresponds. The revelation is mediated by an otherworldly figure, which for Collins distinguishes apocalypses from traditional prophecies. In *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, he makes a further distinction between two kinds or “strands” of apocalypses: the “historical” and the “otherworldly” (6-9). The former—typified by Daniel and 4 Ezra (2 Esdras)—largely concern themselves with eschatology, while the latter—typified by 2 Enoch and 3 Baruch—are characterized by otherworldly journeys and focus on cosmological speculation, showing “no interest in the development of history” (7).⁷ While the latter type of apocalypse suggests that eschatology is not central to its definition,

7. The standard edition of Jewish apocalypses is Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1.

Collins insists that the cosmological feature alone is incomplete, since “the distinctive conceptual structure” of apocalyptic writing is defined by its worldview or “shared presuppositions” about reality. “Most crucially,” he writes in “What Is Apocalyptic Literature?,” “the apocalypses are distinguished by the belief in the resurrection and judgment of the individual dead,” a feature “sometimes missed by critics who think of ‘eschatology’ only in historical terms” (5). Collins thus loosens the formal boundaries of the genre to allow for the inclusion of eschatology as the defining feature of the “apocalyptic” worldview.⁸

- 9 Despite its usefulness and staying power, this definition has not gone uncontested, as scholars, most forcefully Rowland and Michael Stone, have questioned the stress on eschatology in the *Semeia* approach. In a pioneering essay, “Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature” (1976), Stone argues that the lists or catalogues of subject matter “stand at the center of the revelatory experience” and thus “form an integral part” of the definition of apocalypse (414). The subjects, which are often cosmological and oriented toward nature, are connected with the wisdom tradition as well as prophecy, and contain aspects of esotericism. In “Apocalyptic Literature,” Stone insists on a clear distinction between “apocalypticism as a pattern of thought, primarily eschatological in character,” and apocalypse as “a literary genre” (388-94). Building on the discovery of fragments from the book of Enoch among the Dead Sea Scrolls, his definition of apocalypse begins with 1 Enoch rather than Daniel; he states that “the content and character of these oldest fragments of apocalyptic literature are far from exclusively or even predominantly eschatological” (391). He asserts further that eschatology cannot account for “the presence or absence of a real experiential basis of the visionary form” (433-37; “Lists” 452n79), a central component of Rowland’s approach as well.⁹
- 10 As Rowland’s work on Blake is discussed in the section that follows, my focus here is on his broader account of apocalypse and apocalypticism.¹⁰ It is important to state that Rowland recognizes the relevance of eschatology to the apocalypses and to the origins of Christianity and the New Testament.¹¹ His main objection is to making eschatology,

8. In his “Introduction” to vol. 1 of *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Collins writes: “The genre apocalypse provides the focal point,” but “the focus ... is on a worldview ... and the objective is to be as inclusive as possible” (xiv).

9. See also Stone’s “A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions.”

10. Rowland’s many essays on apocalypse and apocalypticism have been collected in the volume “*By an Immediate Revelation*,” which includes a section on Blake.

11. In *Christian Origins* (1985), he traces the development of ancient Jewish eschatology as the defining context for the emergence of Christianity.

or “the future hope of Israel,” the core element in a theory of apocalypse. Rowland hews close to the etymological roots of apocalypse as revelation or disclosure. Acknowledging that apocalypses offer hope for the future, he insists that the temporal horizon is not the most distinctive feature of apocalyptic texts. The primary feature is their “mode of revelation” or the “direct communication of the heavenly mysteries in all their diversity” (*Open Heaven* 13-14, 26). For him, apocalyptic texts concentrate on the “vertical” dimension of revelation, on the fact that divine knowledge exists in heaven before it manifests itself on earth, making heaven a “kind of repository” of hidden knowledge in which “the whole spectrum of human history,” not simply its future culmination, is available to the seer. The “unveiling of the counsels of God directly to the apocalyptic seer” through “dreams, visions or angelic pronouncements” forms the “key to the whole movement” (9-11). Rowland locates the origin of apocalyptic vision in biblical texts that offer glimpses of the divine court (1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1, 8-10; Zechariah 1-6), focusing especially on Ezekiel’s vision of the divine chariot-throne. He takes his title concept from Ezekiel’s opening verse: “In the thirtieth year ... as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens opened, and I saw visions of God” (1:1). For Rowland, Ezekiel’s extraordinary depiction of his encounter with God’s “glory” or presence shows the impact of “direct” experience on his vision.

- 11 In an introductory “Rationale and Retrospect” for his collection of essays on apocalypticism, Rowland states that study of early Jewish mysticism rather than biblical scholarship informed his reading of apocalyptic writing. He credits the work of Gershom Scholem for inspiring a lifelong interest in the subject of “*merkabah* mysticism,” the tradition of creative exegesis stemming from engagement with the throne scene in chapter 1 of Ezekiel (1:4-28).¹² Scholem convinced him that “there was a visionary experiential dimension to engaging with biblical visionary texts, which persisted for centuries” (“*Immediate Revelation*” 3-4). The revisionings of Ezekiel’s vision in 1 Enoch 14, Daniel 7, Revelation 4-5, and the Apocalypse of Abraham 18 are exemplary, as is the reinterpretation of Daniel 7 in 4 Ezra 12-13 (*Open Heaven* 214-32).¹³ Rather than a repetition of Ezekiel or Daniel, however, these interpretations involve “actually seeing again” (re-experiencing and re-creating) what the former writer saw (219, 226). Rowland lays out

12. In Scholem, this tradition stretches from the ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses, through rabbinic mystical texts such as *Māṣeh Merkabah* (“work of the chariot”) and the *Hekhalot* (“heavenly palaces”) literature of late antiquity, to the early modern Kabbalah.

13. In a letter of 12 Sept. 1800 to John Flaxman, Blake identifies “Ezra” as an important early influence, with Isaiah (E 707). He knew 4 Ezra as 2 Esdras in the Apocrypha of the Authorized Version.

specific borrowings and departures from Ezekiel in these texts, but he finds that their lack of “precise biblical language” and the “variety” in their content suggest that “while Ezekiel may have been the starting-point,” the “order and detail of the original have been left behind in favour of a more elaborate view” of God’s dwelling (226). In accentuating the psychological impact of the vision on the seer, these and similar texts can be taken as credible accounts of experiences in which “the imagination of the visionary enabled him to transcend the original,” producing “an entirely new view of the character of God and his world” (226-27). Even as these texts include a significant amount of material concerning divine judgment and messianic expectation, Rowland asserts that for the apocalyptic writer, “it was not the details of eschatology which most concerned him but the affirmation of their verisimilitude by means of heavenly authentication” (227). Content remains central to a definition of apocalypse, but a key aspect of content is its mode of revelation, which enables access to “the innermost recesses of heaven,” where knowledge of the divine purposes is stored. Such access empowers a writer to stand “in visionary continuity” with the text, not succumb to its scriptural authority (“Common People” 155).

- 12 A final aspect of Rowland’s theory can serve as a transition to Blake studies. He writes that it was Scholem’s emphasis on the anthropomorphic form of Ezekiel’s deity that “above all else” intrigued him to pursue it as a subject of study (“*Immediate Revelation*” 2). Scholem declared that the essence of “throne-mysticism” was not oneness with or “absorbed contemplation of God’s true nature, but perception of his appearance on the throne” (*Major Trends* 43-44). Referring to the human-like figure of fire and light in Ezekiel 1:26-28, Scholem writes that the “vision of the shape of God on the throne” manifested his hidden glory or *kavod*, “his transcendence bridged by revelation” (*Mystical Shape* 16). Rowland develops the point by focusing on the reappearance in Ezekiel 8 of this figure, now detached from the chariot-throne, who lifts the prophet “between the earth and heaven” and “in the visions of God” brings him to Jerusalem (8:2-3). For Rowland, this ascent and “separability” from the throne “enabled the figure to act as an agent of the divine purpose,” a “quasi-angelic mediator” (*Open Heaven* 96-97). He traces the evolution of this mediator in apocalyptic texts, notably to the “Son of Man” in Daniel 7:13, who resembles Ezekiel’s *kavod* figure but who functions more as a vice-regent of God’s power than as his human form (98). Rowland then turns to the angelic vision, or “angelophany,” in Daniel 10—of a man in linen, with eyes of fire, arms and feet of brass, and the voice of a multitude (10:2-6)—which, he says, develops Ezekiel’s figure in terms that John applies to the risen Christ in Revelation (1:12-18). He asserts that Daniel’s anthropomorphic figure is no “ordinary angelic being” but “an exalted angel” that John viewed as a “natural

quarry for imagery to describe his Lord.” He concludes that the traditions stemming from Ezekiel helped to form the mystical-apocalyptic matrix of Christianity, not least its language of mutual indwelling and being “clothed with the divine Christ,” which he describes as “mystical in its intensity and conviction” (Rowland and Morray-Jones 6). These connections have obvious relevance for Blake, as S. Foster Damon was among the first to recognize, though his work came before Scholem and the Dead Sea Scrolls altered the direction of apocalypse study.

II. “Apocalypse” in Blake Studies (1924–2022)

- 13 My aim in this section is to trace the scholarly views that have shaped critical discourse on Blake’s use of apocalyptic traditions. This discourse tracks with developments in biblical studies, especially its merging of apocalypse with eschatology. Northrop Frye is treated at length because *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) is a foundational work, still cited in discussion. He exerted a strong influence on Bloom, Paley, Altizer, Abrams, and Wittreich, though each developed his own emphases and insights. Goldsmith’s *Unbuilding Jerusalem* (1993) offers a counterresponse to previous views from a post-structural approach, while Cogan provides strong feminist readings of the prophecies and an innovative thesis about Blake’s response to the eschatological “failure” of the French Revolution. With the partial exception of Wittreich, Rowland is the one scholar who avoids conflating apocalypse with eschatology, though most scholars recognize that Blake’s apocalypse highlights revelatory experience.

Damon and Frye

- 14 Damon’s *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924) appeared during a surge of interest in mystical, esoteric, and occult writings in England and the United States, led by two popular books, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) by William James and *Mysticism* (1911) by Evelyn Underhill. Drawing especially on the latter’s more proselytizing approach, Damon identifies her “five stages” of “the mystic way” with Blake’s work, claiming that Blake himself “passed through these identical five states” (2). While he explicitly uses the term “eschatology,” he refers only indirectly to “apocalypse,” as when he cites Swedenborg’s phrase “Influx from above” and speaks of “mystical revelation” as the “highest moment possible to the flesh” (152). In an exposition of Blake’s “fourfold” myth, though, he cites a recent translation of the Apocalypse of Abraham, quoting a passage that builds on Ezekiel’s chariot-throne vision:

I saw under the fire a throne of fire, and round about it four all-seeing ones, reciting the song, and under the throne four fiery living creatures singing, and their ap-

pearance was one, each one of them with four faces. (quoted on 146)

Damon does not comment, moving on to discuss Blake’s zoas and view of the last judgment. He associates this event with the traditional “six thousand years allotted to the created world,” though he makes a distinction between “a” last judgment and “the” last judgment: “There must be innumerable such Last Judgments, which will not end until the ultimate day terminating this continuous eschatology. No Last Judgment will be final until the six thousand years are completed” (151-52). Finally, he speaks of the revelatory moment in *Milton*, saying that the last judgment may appear either “in a mystical revelation” or “not until death,” depending on the person (152). But he does not pursue the insight.

- 15 With the publication of Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), Blake’s relation to mystical tradition was severed in one fell swoop. Or so it seemed at the time.¹⁴ This move helped turn Blake into a canonical poet, but the break, coupled with Frye’s persistent conflation of apocalypse with eschatology, cast a spell on Blake scholarship for the next two generations. Although Frye’s complex and varied deployment of “apocalypse” and “apocalyptic” displays his vast erudition and ingenuity and has moments of vivid clarity, the sheer proliferation of these terms is dizzying and ultimately counterproductive. Since *Fearful Symmetry* remains a fundamental text and continues to inform critical discourse on Blake’s idea of apocalypse, a fresh assessment of Frye’s approach is needed.
- 16 An account of Frye’s treatment of apocalypse cannot avoid his larger archetypal theory of literature that develops out of *Fearful Symmetry*. This theory is rooted in his typological reading of the Bible, his view that the Old Testament culminates in the New Testament figure of Christ, forming what he calls “a total body of words” whose analogy is the “Word of God” incarnate in Jesus. This “anatomy” or “total body” becomes the governing idea in all of Frye’s criticism. In a seminal chapter for his literary theory, “The Word within the Word,” he similarly states that “the universal visionary” mind or Logos embodied in Jesus “sees this world of time and space as a single creature in eternity and infinity,” a view that “works of inspired art” turn into a “gigantic myth” whose outlines are “creation, fall, redemption and apocalypse” (108). The use of “apocalypse” here refers mainly to its function of providing a narrative or thematic

14. Scholarship on Blake’s mysticism continued to appear—by G. M. Harper, Désirée Hirst, and Kathleen Raine—but it was disparaged by critics influenced by Frye. More recently, Sheila Spector has explored Blake’s relation to Kabbalism, though without reference to apocalyptic tradition.

“ending.” He puts it most succinctly in *Anatomy of Criticism* when discussing his theory of symbols. In the archetypal phase, civilization builds “a total human form out of nature” (*Anatomy* 105), but in the final or anagogic phase, nature itself disappears and becomes “apocalyptic.” “By an apocalypse,” he adds, “I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body” (119). These statements indicate that in the first part of *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye uses apocalypse and apocalyptic to refer to a narrative mythos, largely avoiding the confusion that comes with his treatment of Orc and revolutionary history in part 2.

- 17 In analyzing Blake’s views of the American and French revolutions, Frye continues to define apocalypse in narrative terms, but he also identifies it with eschatology. Two central concepts in the book contribute to the confusion, the “Orc cycle” and the “Seven Eyes of God,” which are intersecting eschatological constructs.¹⁵ Frye associates the Orc cycle with nature as well as history, making Orc a symbol of both elemental energy and political revolution. But in his view, while revolutions can signal “apocalyptic” or “utopian” desire, “they cannot be the cause of an apocalypse” because they come in cycles (*Fearful Symmetry* 202-06). That is why Orc cycles must be supplemented by the Seven Eyes of God, each of which contains an Orc cycle but which evolves in a “seven times recurring” pattern, until Jesus breaks the pattern and opens time and space into eternity (128-34, 207-18). Frye argues that Blake expected “a final apocalypse” with the spread of Orc’s revolutionary energy around the world, but that he rejected Orc “as an apocalyptic agent” because, bound to nature, he inherently “falls short of a complete apocalypse”—meaning “a transfiguration of the world into Paradise” (216-18). In Frye’s account, only Los as an eternal being can bring a “final” apocalypse, though he does not say if this means it is eschatological.
- 18 In his interpretation of the long poems, Frye contends that Blake fully articulates his “central myth” only in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, a view that persists among many to this day. It implies that we must read Blake’s work backward, much as Frye reads the entire Bible from the perspective of John’s Revelation, an approach that underpins his treatment of apocalypse (317). His influential analysis of *The Four Zoas* is a case in point. Frye says that Blake retains a place for Orc’s redemptive capacity, but only when Los shapes him into a “permanent form” and incorporates him into the larger body of the “One Man” Jesus. For Frye, the problem

15. Hobson offers a critique of Frye’s “myth” of the Orc cycle (*Chained Boy*, chapter 2). Scholarly discussion of the Seven Eyes of God also distorts or inflates its importance in Blake, since it appears primarily in *Milton*.

is that in Night IX (Blake’s “apocalypse”) neither Jesus nor Los exerts agency over “the end of time,” so that the last judgment is basically “the old revolutionary doctrine of a spontaneous reappearance of Orc” (308). In effect, Blake has not brought the Seven Eyes of God construct to bear sufficiently on the Orc cycle, as Frye explains in the *Milton* chapter that follows. He informs us that insofar as Jesus was depicted as dying and rising in spring, he “was a re-birth of Orc,” but as “the seventh ‘Eye’ or vision of God” who fulfills the scriptural prophecies, “he was an incarnation of Los” (322). This claim is based on Los’s symbolic role as the “Eternal Prophet” who shapes time, including the historical Jesus, into “a permanent eternal form” (323). Frye adds that this “archetypal form” emerges when “any one visionary attains a final recreation of another’s vision” (323), so that by merging with Los and Milton in the poem, Blake achieves “an apocalyptic restatement” of Milton’s vision (323-37). This recasting of Milton’s work into “a single human form” is also eschatological because it is “the labour of six thousand years” (339), but again Frye does not distinguish between these concepts.

- 19 In his account of Blake’s “Final Synthesis,” Frye declares that *Milton* and *Jerusalem* form a “double epic” in which the former serves as an “individual prologue” to the latter’s universal “Last Judgment” or “full apocalypse” (323-24). But when he finally comes to discuss this apocalypse on the final plates in *Jerusalem*, he finds that “nothing very tangible” happens and that the poem ends in “an anticlimax” (358). To address this problem, he makes a virtue of it. He returns to his underlying premise, the body of the “God-Man,” but he throws in a Viconian *ricorso* to move beyond the impasse. He says that while all things “proceeded from a divine Man . . . and will be reabsorbed into him,” this “total vision of life must have a circular form” (386). Frye insists that he does not mean an eternal recurrence, for that implies a “closed circle,” like the orthodox Christian view of the Bible as canonically sealed. Instead, he posits an approach in which the hermeneutical circle remains open and incomplete, requiring readers to make an “apocalyptic” or revelatory leap into the “gap” that follows Revelation and precedes the return to Genesis.

The final comprehension of the Bible’s meaning is in the spark of illumination between its closing anode and its opening cathode, and if that gap were not there the Bible would not stimulate the imagination to the effort of comprehension which recreates instead of passively following the outline of a vision. (386)

Frye contends that within this gap a decision confronts the reader: to “remain inside the gap with the Jesus of history” or to push through it “into eternity,” where the division between human creature and divine creator disappears—if

readers identify their own bodies with Jesus's eternal body (431). This last point is especially intriguing, not least because Frye describes this identification as "the real apocalypse" in a general note on "Blake's Mysticism" at the end of the book (431-32). There he restates his view that the word "mystic" only causes confusion in relation to Blake, but he qualifies it by saying that he refers to the "conventional mystic," adding that when readers come to experience "the identity of God and Man," then "the struggles of the mystics to describe the divine One ... begin to have more relevance for Blake" (431). This concluding volte-face suggests that Frye ultimately recognized the link between apocalypse and mysticism that Damon introduced and he initially denied. But he did not develop the point and in the decades following it was not pursued by most scholars.

Bloom and Paley

20 In *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963), Bloom adheres closely to Frye and assumes throughout that readers know the meaning of apocalypse, obviating his need to define it. This results in an amorphous and inconsistent use of the term that comes to typify subsequent studies. In discussing *The French Revolution*, he cites the phrase "slumbers of five thousand years" of fallen history as "an apocalyptic fog" and then speaks of "a world over-ripe for apocalypse" (63-64). In the first instance, he seems to mean "eschatological" fog; in the second, "eschatological transformation." Concerning *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he refers to the "improvement of sensual enjoyment" that will "precede the Apocalypse" (capital A) and to the "time of troubles that must precede apocalypse" (small a), without explaining the difference. More confusions follow: the French Revolution is "an outward apocalypse"; the Memorable Relations alternate with "groupings of apocalyptic reflections" (72-74); the Bard's dualistic separation of earth from heaven in the "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience* echoes "orthodox Christian accounts of apocalypse" (131); and Night IX of *Vala The Four Zoas* is a "visualization of apocalypse" (266). Then, in *Milton*, the seven angels "sound the trumpets of apocalypse" but the poem functions only as a "prelude to apocalypse" (360), which, as Frye claimed, is not "revealed" until plate 96 of *Jerusalem* (431). Bloom is unique in showing the importance of Ezekiel's *merkabah* vision to *Jerusalem* and to Blake's poetic myth overall, but he does not associate it with apocalyptic tradition, despite speaking of Scholem's influence on him. He observes that Albion resembles the Adam Kadmon or "Divine Man" of the Kabbalah (189), but he repeats Frye's caveat that Blake is not a mystic, emphatically rejecting the idea in his commentary to the Erdman edition (E 898).

21 While also indebted to Frye, Paley's understanding of apocalypse is clearer and more refined than Bloom's, exerting an

influence that continues to shape discussion. Paley tends to overrely, though, on the eschatological doctrine of millennialism. First alluded to in *Energy and the Imagination* (1970), the millennial focus is developed especially in *The Continuing City* (1983) and *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (1999).¹⁶ In *Energy and the Imagination*, Paley's approach seems to be an amalgam of Frye's theory of the Seven Eyes of God and Orc cycles, Mircea Eliade's "myth of the eternal return," and R. H. Charles's distinction between prophecy and apocalypse. Echoing Charles, Paley argues that in *The Four Zoas*, as opposed to his earlier prophecies, "Blake, having abandoned his revolutionary hopes, no longer employs the eschatological conception of the Hebrew prophets, who had looked for a fulfillment of God's design *in history*." Instead, he "turned to Revelation," which presents "an apocalyptic view promising other-worldly fulfillment" (163-64). Channeling Frye, Paley asserts that only with the "Eighth Eye" will the "apocalyptic" dawn arrive, a time when history will be "abrogated" and the "regeneration" of the cosmos will occur (140). His language closely mirrors Eliade's *Cosmos and History* (129-30), drawing especially on the idea of an "apocalyptic syndrome," which Eliade says involves a "premonitory phase" of "cosmic and human deterioration" leading to destruction of the wicked, "followed by the millennium of bliss" (Eliade 126-27). This sequence underpins Paley's treatment of apocalypse, making it virtually synonymous with eschatology.

22 In *The Continuing City*, his study of *Jerusalem*, Paley offers a concise overview of millennialism from the church fathers to Blake's contemporaries, but in *Apocalypse and Millennium* he most succinctly, and problematically, elaborates his argument. The opening sentence encapsulates the idea of a sequence: "A major topos in English Romantic poetry is the imminence of an apocalypse that will be succeeded by a millennium" (1). While he states that it is important "to stress that the whole conception of apocalypse has to do with a revelation of ultimate truths" (2), adding the key point that the "apocalyptic mode ... involves a seer who communicates his visions" (2-3), he does not emphasize these features in his analyses. He focuses more on apocalypse as a narrative that moves "from a revelation ... of human history, usually characterized by great upheavals, to a society characterized by harmony and justice for a very long period of time" (4). Paley asserts that while Revelation is the "master prototype for the movement from apocalypse to millennium," its details are less important than the transition from catastrophe to millennial peace (4-5). He finds examples of this narrative pattern in other biblical texts—

16. This focus is not prominent in *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (1986), which includes an illuminating chapter on Blake.

Joel 2:28-32 and Matthew 24:29-30—and in Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684). His handling of the pattern yields impressive insights, especially in the English Romantic poets, including Blake, who write in the prophetic mode. But it is important to recognize, as Paley states, that his model of apocalypse prioritizes the eschatological over the revelatory element (3), for his influence has been extensive.¹⁷

Abrams and Altizer

- 23 Although M. H. Abrams did not write on Blake alone, his approach to apocalypse and eschatology in the Romantic period influenced a generation of scholars.¹⁸ He builds on Frye's work while being more grounded in contemporary biblical scholarship. His views are expressed most fully in the first chapter of *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), which contains a succinct overview of biblical eschatology, using the book of Revelation as its definitive example of an "apocalypse." Abrams takes unusual care in defining the term, though he does merge it with eschatology, referring to "the apocalypse of the world" or speaking of apocalypse as the "last act of the drama of history" (37-38). Despite this conflation, he offers an illuminating account of the development of New Testament eschatology, one that grasps both the gradual demise of its historical urgency and its present-oriented focus, changes that he closely relates. Citing the passage in Luke that speaks of the "kingdom of God within you" (17:20-21) and the passage in John on the last judgment that is both "coming, and now is" (5:24-25), he argues that they "internalize apocalypse by transferring the theatre of events from the outer earth and heaven to the inner spirit of the single believer" (47). Of course, as a visionary experience, apocalypse already is internal or interior, even if it is attributable to a transcendental source. But if we take Abrams to mean eschatology and not apocalypse, his insight stands: New Testament writers individualize eschatology, displacing what in Jewish tradition and early Christianity was a collective concept involving the people of Israel. In arguing that "the coming universal kingdom may achieve an immediate realization in the spirit of each believer," he captures the already inaugurated aspect of Christian eschatology. But unlike New Testament writers (and Blake), Abrams interjects his own dualism, arguing that the "here and now" kingdom "all but displaces reference to an historical apocalypse" (47). His oft-quoted idea about an "apocalypse of imagination" that separates a

17. See the volume dedicated to Paley, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, edited by Tim Fulford. The introductory essay foregrounds the eschatological aspect, as does Beer's essay on Blake.

18. The key statements are in "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" (1963), *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), and "Apocalypse: Theme and Variations" (1984).

"mental" from a "historical" mode of eschatology (334) does not accord with the New Testament understanding, which maintains a dynamic tension between the "already" arrived aspect of the kingdom initiated by Jesus and its "not yet" fulfilled promise in the future.

- 24 It is a virtue of Thomas Altizer's approach that he preserves this tension in his study of Blake, *The New Apocalypse* (1967), drawing on Rudolf Otto's *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man* (1934), which helped to popularize the idea of inaugurated ("realized") eschatology in biblical studies. Otto maintains both the present and future aspects of eschatology but insists that the "supramundane, future" kingdom "already extends its operation into the present" (59). Altizer adds another element to the discussion, asserting that, like "the mystical way," the kingdom of God negates the "fallen form of history and the cosmos" (174-75). His idea of negation derives from the Hegelian dialectic rather than apophatic mysticism, thus preserving a role for history. Altizer's theory pivots on a view of "kenosis" developed from Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), in which the preexistent Jesus is said to "empty" or divest himself of divine status to incarnate in human form. He interprets this emptying as the "death of God" because it leads, inexorably, to Jesus's suffering and death on the cross. He finds this process at work in Blake's long prophecies, which, he says, enact the negation of transcendence in the historical embodiment of God in Jesus. What Altizer finds most original in Blake is that his Jesus appears within Albion, who "embodies the promise of ... final things while simultaneously calling for a total identification with our neighbor," defined as "the weak and broken ones about us." This act is "a repetition of God's eternal death" and it enables "participation even now in the End which he has promised" (134-35). While Altizer often lumps apocalypse with eschatology and rivals Frye's profusion of meanings for the term, he joins the mystical and eschatological aspects in a unique way, asserting that "the function of an apocalypse" is to facilitate "an immediate and total participation in ultimate Reality" (175). He also recognizes that the mystical eschaton, "even now becoming all in all," is shadowed by the "totality of darkness" that is contemporary history (176; *Living* 167-68).

Wittreich and Goldsmith

- 25 While Joseph Wittreich writes within the orbit of Frye, Paley, and Abrams, his approach to apocalypse is unique in two main respects. One, he concentrates on its formal and epistemological rather than its eschatological aspects, foregrounding the relational dynamic between the prophet and precursor. Two, he redefines its genre as a special mode of prophecy, tracing the emergence of its "new form" in Reformation commentaries on the book of Revelation and, con-

currently, in the epic poems of Spenser (*The Faerie Queene*) and Milton (*Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*). He presents his theory in the essay “Opening the Seals: Blake’s Epics and the Milton Tradition” (1973) and its programmatic sequel “A Poet Amongst Poets’: Milton and the Tradition of Prophecy” (1975), and in *Visionary Poetics: Milton’s Tradition and His Legacy* (1979), especially the opening chapter, “Revelation’s ‘New’ Form.”

26 We can focus on “Revelation’s ‘New’ Form,” since it encapsulates and develops the argument of the essays. Wittreich describes Revelation as both the “epitome” of biblical prophecy and the “prototype” of a new mode of prophecy, distinguished by its own set of literary features: visionary rhetorical strategies, synchronistic narrative structure, encyclopedic form, and antiestablishment ideology. “Recognizing the encyclopedic character of John’s Apocalypse,” he writes, “is an indispensable guide to understanding its genre; for that recognition unlocks the meaning of the fusion of epic and prophecy that, initiated by Spenser, is completed by Milton” (*Visionary Poetics* 9). While it evolved over centuries, the new genre, “epic-prophecy,” does not fully emerge until Reformation exegetes discern Revelation’s “inner workings” and codify its poetics, focusing especially on its “strategies of vision” and “the kind of revelation” that John experiences, which, they insist, is both visual and aural, “pictures together with words” (22). This feature is of obvious relevance to Blake. The visionary strategies—generic mixture, obscurity, allusiveness—and the synchronistic structure both contribute to an “unmasking process,” one of gradual “revelment” that culminates in an “epiphany,” which is “marked by an unveiling, a sudden recognition of error—an apocalypse” (29). The revelatory moment serves as the primary goal of the new genre, whose “motive force” is to “brighten the mind” and expand consciousness. This objective is facilitated by the strategy of allusion, which “turns prophecy into a literature of contexts,” “pushing the reader beyond the confines of any one prophecy,” thus enabling a view of all prophecy as “one central form” (30). This form, the hybrid genre of epic-prophecy, finds its fullest expression in Milton, though it extends back through Spenser to Revelation and forward to the Romantic poets, especially Blake. Though Wittreich subsumes apocalypse under the “transcendental form” of prophecy, the target of Steven Goldsmith’s critique, his emphases on visionary experience, the process of revealment, and the creative relationship between prophet and precursor are his salient contributions.

27 In *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (1993), Goldsmith covers similar historical ground to Wittreich but criticizes the idea of what he calls the “formal apocalypse” of Revelation exegesis. Like Paley, he places eschatology, especially millenarianism, at the cen-

ter of his definition of apocalypse—the “idea that history can come to an end,” he writes, is “the most basic assumption of apocalyptic literature”—but he claims that it “has often been bound up with the promise of an aesthetic space relieved of historical determinants” (xii, 2). He locates the model for this “formalist aesthetics” in both Revelation and its exegetical history: “John’s apocalypse describes how the end of history and the appearance of an ideal form occur simultaneously, how time stops with the revelation of a utopian architectural space, the New Jerusalem of monumental and perfect symmetry” (5). Goldsmith argues that “formal apocalypse evolved as a means of suppressing social conflict and, more specifically, of containing millenarianism” (19). He finds this strategy in biblical scholarship from Irenaeus, through Joseph Mede and Richard Hurd, to Austin Farrer and Leonard Thompson. It is said to operate through Revelation’s “linguistic allegory” and canonical function. In his “linguistic model,” Goldsmith asserts, John transmutes history into “a heavenly city and a book,” so that the end-time can “seem already to participate in a language beyond history” (56). This move enables John to silence rival voices in the name of the transcendental “Logos” (67). Goldsmith says that the strategy also underpins the text’s “canonical work,” which is “to create and even impose the universal and metaphysical consensus in Christ that it claims to transcribe.” Most importantly, he states that it aligns with “the incipient institutionalization of the church” (20), which sought to negate millenarianism, along with “the multiplicity of tongues” inherent in fallen history (61-62).

28 Goldsmith argues that Blake adopts Revelation’s millenarian politics while rejecting its “universalizing transcendentalism,” a feat he achieves through the “strategies of textual indeterminacy” that characterize his narratives (137-39). In emphasizing the “primacy of representation over apocalypse,” Blake aligns himself with the “intrinsically counter-apocalyptic” discourse of democratic politics, especially as practiced by Thomas Paine, whose enlightened skepticism toward language and truth undercuts any claims to universal authority. Identifying fallen human language with the “preapocalyptic condition” of existence, Goldsmith contends that both Blake and Paine organize their discourse “around the counterapocalyptic resistance to the Logos by Babel” (180-81). Blake’s primary symbol for this condition is the “Whore of Babylon” (Rahab or Female Will), who has “a nearly ubiquitous presence in his work” (140). For Goldsmith, “Babel/Babylon” does not symbolize the empire-religion nexus or the ideology of nature but post-structural difference and heterogeneity, the “multiplicity of voices that is never [or can never be] subsumed into a commanding unity” (141). In an analysis of Blake’s painting *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, he reads the placement of the Babylon harlot in the lower center of the design as countering the

“absolute authority” of Christ the Logos enthroned above, her female body and sexual power refusing to succumb to the fires of consummation (142-52). In a deconstructive move, he inverts the two figures, saying that the “persistence of Babylon . . . , her refusal to go easily,” is the “governing logic of the image” (147). In Goldsmith’s view, Blake’s portrayal of her is “a lesson in negation and critique,” the “subversion of apocalypse through representation” (141).

- 29 While Goldsmith sharply critiques the authoritarian and exclusivist tendencies in Revelation, its patriarchalism, and the antimillenarian aims of its conservative exegetes, neither he nor other Blake scholars have considered the main political theology in John’s text. It is not the millenarian eschatology of chapter 20 but the redefinition of “conquering” that appears throughout, from the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2-3) to the advent of New Jerusalem (chapter 21).¹⁹ Translated as “overcoming” in the KJV, John’s “conquering” (NRSV) refers to the act of witnessing or being “faithful unto death” practiced by early Christian martyrs: Antipas at Pergamum (2:13), the slain witnesses under the altar (6:9), the two witnesses “conquered” by the beast (11:3-12), and the army of 144,000 whose robes are “washed . . . in the blood of the Lamb” (7:1-14, 14:1-3). Their model is the slain Lamb of chapter 5, whose self-sacrifice exalts him to the throne of God and sets in motion the eschatological narrative events that follow. This political theology, rooted in the concept of passive resistance, has been displaced by the pyrotechnic violence of John’s imagery and the influence of millenarianism on subsequent interpretation. While the theology of passive resistance is not foregrounded in Rowland’s approach, he is the only scholar to show the central importance of chapter 5 to Blake’s idea of apocalypse (*Blake and the Bible* 224-25, 235-36). His work offers several counterpoints to Goldsmith’s that can help clarify discussion of the concept.

Rowland and Cogan

- 30 First, Rowland takes a hermeneutic rather than a formalist approach to apocalypse that places the “primacy of the interpreting subject’s experience” at the center of his method. Like Wittreich, he emphasizes the allusive nature of scripture and the “scope for exploration” that it affords, describing the “room” or “semantic space” of the text that, applied to Revelation, refers not to the transcendental “building” exegetes construct but to its capacity to stimulate creative interpretation (“Rouzing” 542). Second, he stresses Blake’s

19. In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), each letter ends with Jesus urging members to conquer, “as I myself conquered” (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21), and when the New Jerusalem descends, he promises that if they “conquer,” they will become his son (21:7). See A. Y. Collins, “Political Perspective” 243-45, 254-56; Blount 37-89.

own “mystical” experiences as crucial to the meaning of apocalypse in his work, highlighting the two well-known episodes at Felpham that Blake recounts in letters to Thomas Butts. In the first letter (2 Oct. 1800), Blake describes a visionary scene in which he is lifted into the sky and heavenly beings enfold his body as “One Man.” Rowland calls it “a moment of apocalypse, a disclosure, about the totality of Blake’s life” and likens it to accounts of visionary transformation in ancient “apocalyptic ascent texts” (*Blake and the Bible* 135-36). In the second (22 Nov. 1802), Blake depicts a merger with his own prophetic persona Los, from which he develops the concept of “fourfold vision” that becomes a central feature of his art and poetry (E 722). For Rowland, this experience underpins Blake’s appropriation of Ezekiel’s chariot-throne vision, particularly as reenvisioned in Revelation 4-5. He speaks of Blake’s “creative fusion” with John’s vision, his conviction that John had “already seen what he, Blake, had seen and was writing about,” as Blake states explicitly at the end of Night VIII in *The Four Zoas*.²⁰ In *Blake and the Bible*, Rowland covers an array of Blake’s texts and designs that reinvent John’s vision, including *Europe, Milton, Jerusalem*, the watercolors on Revelation and Enoch, the Dante illustrations, the commentary on *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, and, especially, the Job engravings.

- 31 He views the Job engravings as providing a unique lens on Blake’s hermeneutic approach, one that stages the “visionary, or apocalyptic, theme” of the book as a prompt for the reader-viewer’s “personal revelation” (14). The revelatory response is not an end in and of itself, however, but leads, “above all,” to “a way of life, a practice demonstrated in universal brotherhood and forgiveness of sin” (62). This ethical emphasis offers a third counterpoint to Goldsmith’s approach to Revelation, and to apocalypse more broadly. In his reading of Blake’s *Job*, Rowland highlights the contrast between the plates numbered 1-2, which present an image of the divine throne and its separation from earth, and plate 17, which depicts Job and his wife in direct contact with Christ. He argues that their experience removes “the division between heaven and earth” and thus “reflects a major theme of the Book of Revelation,” namely the descent of the New Jerusalem in John’s final chapters (17). Moreover, the caption below the image on plate 17, “but now my Eye seeth thee,” and the quotation from the gospel of John about the mutual indwelling of Jesus and his followers inscribe Blake’s central theme. For actually “seeing” God, which Rowland says is “the goal of the heavenly ascents in the apocalyptic seers,” is in John’s gospel “related to the revelation of God in Jesus,” and particularly to Jesus’s manifes-

20. *Blake and the Bible* 146-52. Speaking of his own characters and events in the poem, Blake says that “John Saw these things Reveald in Heaven / On Patmos Isle” (115/111.4-5; E 385).

tation in his followers' acts of love and self-giving. The last point is especially important, Rowland argues, because Job's epiphany remains incomplete without an ethical transformation (64), which is depicted on plate 18 as Job praying for the "friends" that have persecuted him. This inclusion of an ethical dimension in revelatory experience is a feature that Blake shares with such radical Christian forebears as Gerrard Winstanley and Abiezer Coppe (157-74).

- 32 Rowland's theory has yet to take hold in Blake studies, but he is cited in several recent books that engage with Blake's view of apocalypse—Susanne Sklar's *Blake's "Jerusalem" as Visionary Theatre* (2011), Naomi Billingsley's *The Visionary Art of William Blake* (2018), and Lucy Cogan's *Blake and the Failure of Prophecy* (2021).²¹ Drawing widely on Rowland's work, Sklar defines apocalypse as revelation, though she associates it more broadly with the transformative potential of reading and performing texts, applied to *Jerusalem* in particular (19, 42). Billingsley argues that in his "visual representations of Christ" Blake develops an "apocalyptic religious aesthetic" (9), and she too defines "apocalyptic" as the viewer's transformation or "regeneration" (14, 130); unlike Sklar, she conflates it with eschatology throughout. Cogan's approach is similar. She argues that Blake seeks to expand the reader's self-understanding and to bring "a transformative truth." His works enact change through the "subversive potential" of their "formal experimentation" (22), especially their use of multiple perspectives, a view that echoes both Wittreich and Rowland. Although she curiously grounds her understanding of apocalypse in the Old rather than the New Testament, Cogan offers a substantial account of Blake's relation to prophetic traditions that deserves further elaboration.
- 33 Cogan's primary claim is that the defeat of Blake's eschatological hopes in the mid-1790s compelled him to reinterpret the meaning of prophecy throughout his career, incorporating failure as a key component. Taking his comments on Jonah in the Watson annotations as "his definitive statement on prophecy," she emphasizes the prophet's agency in negotiating terms with God: the "paradox of prophecy as prognostication," she writes, is that "the future it sees may be changed," as Jonah's story demonstrates. However, Cogan finds the "subcategory of prophecy, apocalyptic literature," lacking in this respect because in it "the prophesied future cannot be changed" (3). Echoing the views of Charles and Hanson, she defines apocalypse as a deterministic mode of eschatology, rooted in mythical rather than historical categories and thus "abstracted from practical reality" (75). She acknowledges that, in *America*,

21. My review of *Blake and the Failure of Prophecy* is in *Blake* 56.3 (winter 2022–23).

Blake combines myth and history in "a hybrid mode in which the two sides seem ... to pull against one another," but she says that as Orc comes to dominate, he "seems to draw the work ever further towards the mythic and [thus] to displace human agency within the historical narrative" (76-77). Her reduction of apocalypse to a mode of eschatology, coupled with her disregard of Christian apocalyptic tradition, limits her argument, which otherwise yields impressive insights about Blake's engagement with prophetic traditions. These include a robust treatment of gender and sexual themes and a lucid account of Blake's merger with Los—recorded in both the Felpham letter and *Milton* (22/24.5-14)—which leads him to reenvision "the eschatology of apocalyptic," creating a more personal "*parousia*" or return of Christ. Cogan argues insightfully that in this new vision, Blake and his audience are "capable of accessing Eternity within any individual moment but only as part of an intersubjective visionary experience" (167-68). In her view, however, only *Milton* achieves this aim because *Jerusalem* succumbs to "a surprisingly conventional" view of the *parousia*, one in which Jesus displaces Los as the primary agent of transformation (190-91).

III. Apocalypse and Eschatology in Blake's *Milton*

- 34 While indebted to each of the Blake scholars discussed above, I want to show how recent biblical studies can help clarify Blake's treatment of apocalypse and eschatology. I have chosen to examine *Milton* because it foregrounds these concepts without conflating them. It is especially valuable for the way it distinguishes the immediacy of the apocalyptic moment from the futurity of the end-time hope. As indicated in my opening section, the narrative reflects the two-tiered structure of apocalypse and is organized around the descents of the three major characters, Milton, Ololon, and Los, who depart from heaven and arrive, simultaneously, in Blake's cottage garden at Felpham. The readiest way to grasp this apocalyptic feature is through Blake's illustrations.²²
- 35 The vertical relationship is prominent in each design. And while each descent leads to discussions of eschatology, their simultaneity cuts across the visual frames as it does the textual sequences of the narrative, focusing attention on the revelatory moment itself. As he prepares to descend, Milton prays for the last judgment and imminent return of Je-

22. Blake's watercolors also feature the vertical dimension of apocalypse: see especially *Ezekiel's Wheels* (Butlin #468), *The Four and Twenty Elders Casting Their Crowns before the Divine Throne* (#515), "And the angel which I saw lifted up his hand to Heaven" (#518), *The Baptism of Christ* (#475), *The Magdalene at the Sepulchre* (#504), *The Conversion of Saul* (#506), *Jacob's Dream* (#438), and *Epitome of James Hervey's "Meditations among the Tombs"* (#770).



1. Milton, as falling star. *Milton* copy D (composed c. 1804–11, printed 1818). 16.0 x 11.2 cm. Library of Congress, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection. PR4144.M6 1815.



2. Los, in the sun. *Milton* copy D (composed c. 1804–11, printed 1818). 16.0 x 11.1 cm. Library of Congress, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection. PR4144.M6 1815.

When on the highest lift of his light pinions he arrives
 At that bright Gate, another Lark meets him & back to back
 They touch their pinions tip tip: and each descend
 To their respective Earths & there all night consult with Angels
 Of Providence & with the Eyes of God all night in slumbers
 Inspired; & at the dawn of day send out another Lark
 Into another Heaven to carry news upon his wings
 Thus are the Messengers dispatch'd till they reach the Earth again
 In the East Gate of Golgonooza, & the Twenty-eighth bright
 Lark, met the Female Ololon descending into my Garden
 Thus it appears to Mortal eyes & those of the Ulro Heavens
 But not thus to Immortals, the Lark is a mighty Angel.

For Ololon step'd into the Polypus within the Mundane Shell
 They could not step into Vegetable Worlds without becoming
 The enemies of Humanity except in a Female Form
 And as One Female: Ololon and all its mighty Hosts
 Appear'd: a Virgin of twelve years her time her space was
 To the perception of the Virgin Ololon but as the
 Flash of lightning but more quick the Virgin in my Garden
 Before my Cottage stood for the Satanic Space is delusion
 For when Los join'd with me he took me in his fury whirlwind
 My Vegetated portion was hurried from Lambeth's Shades
 He set me down in Felphams Vale & prepar'd a beautiful
 Cottage for me that in three years I might write all these
 Visions
 To display Natures cruel holiness: the deceits of Natural
 Religion
 Walking in my Cottage Garden, sudden I beheld
 The Virgin Ololon & address'd her as a Daughter of Beulah
 Virgin of Providence fear not to enter into my Cottage
 What is thy message to thy friend: what am I now to do
 Is it again to plunge into deeper affliction? behold me
 Ready to obey, but pry thou my Shadow of Delight
 Enter my Cottage, comfort her, for she is sick with fatigue



3. Ololon, descending. Milton copy D (composed c. 1804-11, printed 1818). 14.1 x 10.2 cm. Library of Congress, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection. PR4144.M6 1815.

sus (14/15.18-23), and both Ololon and Los announce the completion of 6000 years of eschatological history (21/23.51-52; 22/24.15-17). At the same time, Blake seeks to interrupt the temporal movement of the narrative, compressing history within the visionary moment, as shown in the following well-known passage:

Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years.
For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the
Great
Events of Time start forth & are conciev'd in such a Period
Within a Moment (28/30.62-29/31.3)

Blake asserts something more radical and innovative than the arrival of the end-time, saying that the experience of a time “less than” a human pulsation is equal in value to, not identical with, the 6000-year span of Christian eschatology. He redefines the end-time as an apocalyptic or revelatory experience, albeit one that takes place within time. As a discussion of the three descents will show, Blake maintains an urgent expectation of the last days while emphasizing the capacity of apocalypse to disrupt the linear movement of time, opening it to a perception of eternity.

- 36 Readers conversant with *Milton* know that it begins with a long preamble, “a Bards prophetic Song,” which is set entirely in the heavenly world. It motivates Milton to descend to earth, giving up immortal life to redeem his “Sixfold Emanation.” The identity of this figure is not revealed until the main narrative begins, when Milton enters his “Shadow ... hermaphroditic,” a composite of the male Satan and female Rahab whose formation is one of the two principal subjects of the Song (2.25-14/15.9). The other is Satan’s conflict with Los and his sons for control over the “harrow of the Almighty,” the key eschatological symbol of the Song. Satan no longer is the heroic rebel celebrated in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but an amalgam of Milton’s God and Newton’s Pantocrator, the “Supreme Being” who governs his deistic cosmology. Satan’s egoism and imperial ambition enable him to gain control of the harrow, but when he drives it “among the constellations,” a “third” of the stars fall from heaven like Milton’s apostate angels (12/13.25-26). But rather than denounce Satan, as Milton did, the Bard says that Enitharmon (Los’s counterpart) creates a “New Space” or cosmos to “protect” him from punishment, to which an “Assembly” of eternal adds a time frame, the “Six Thousand years” of traditional Christian eschatology. A central feature of this construct is its division into seven periods, culminating in the appearance of Jesus as the “Lamb of God,” whose self-sacrifice on Satan’s behalf inspires Milton to both reclaim Satan and redeem his posthumous emanation, Rahab, born at the end of the Bard’s Song (13/14.12-42).

- 37 When Milton descends, he embraces Satan as his “Selfhood,” described as “twenty-seven-fold” (14/15.30-41), the dimensions of the fallen cosmos that Blake names “the Mundane Shell” (17/19.21-26). At the same time, Milton’s “real and immortal Self” is guarded by “Seven Angels of the Presence,” a group of eternal who enter the Shadow with him, “journeying above” the Mundane Shell (15/17.9-12; 17/19.18-19). Milton’s descent thus introduces the two-tiered narrative setting into the poem. He first appears to Blake as a falling star that lands on the “tarsus” of his left foot (15/17.47-50), an image many scholars view as an allusion to Paul of Tarsus (Essick and Viscomi 27). This reference is bolstered by the small design above the passage, depicting the star trailing light and fire as Blake’s body arcs backward in an ecstatic pose, echoing Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.²³ As Wittreich observes, Blake “magnifies” this interlinear design into a full-page illustration (illus. 1), showing its importance to “the underlying concept of the poem” (56). The underlying concept is the moment of Milton’s descent, when Los and Ololon also descend, events whose simultaneity Blake seeks to suggest by placing them in consecutive order (21/23.4-22/24.5).²⁴

- 38 In describing the descent of Los, Blake writes that Los appears just as he (Blake) ties the “immortal” sandal onto the foot that Milton enters: “And Los behind me stood; a terrible flaming Sun: just close / Behind my back; I turned round in terror, and behold. / Los ... also stoop’d down / And bound my sandals on” (22/24.6-9). In the illustration of the passage (illus. 2), Los appears within the flaming sun as Blake kneels on the earth, turning to face Los with his head directly in Los’s groin, suggestive of sexual contact. The passage and design also allude to Ezekiel’s second vision of God, in which the spirit lifts him “between the earth and the heaven” and he beholds “a likeness as the appearance of fire, from the appearance of his loins even downward ... and from his loins, even upward” (8:1-3).²⁵ Blake brings the apocalyptic and homoerotic aspects of the design into proximity, the image of physical intimacy conveying his merger and identification with Los: “I became One Man with him” (22/24.12). Rowland observes that the image of Los’s “potency” being “transmitted” to Blake is an innovation that accords with the tradition of apocalypse, in which the vision and power of the former prophet serve as “the medium of a new form of creativity” (*Blake and the Bible*

23. Blake illustrates this encounter in *The Conversion of Saul* (Butlin #506). Acts refers to Paul’s experience as a “trance” (22:17); Paul refers to it as a “revelation” (*apokalýptō*) (Galatians 1:12).

24. In book 1, Blake inserts a passage on Ololon’s descent in between the descents of Milton and Los (21/23.45-60), reserving its narration for book 2 (31/34.8).

25. Rowland’s discussion of the Ezekiel passage is included in my section 1 above; also see *Blake and the Bible* (75-76, 237).

237). The creative impact of their union is shown in Los's speech, which introduces the concept of the apocalyptic moment into the poem.

I am that Shadowy Prophet who Six Thousand Years ago
 Fell from my station in the Eternal bosom. Six Thousand
 Years
 Are finishd. I return! ...
 I in Six Thousand Years walk up and down: for not one
 Moment
 Of Time is lost, nor one Event of Space unpermanent

 They vanish not from me & mine, we guard them first &
 last (22/24.15-23)

The traditional 6000-year framework presented at the end of the Bard's Song takes on new meaning, as Los announces both its completion and his capacity to render permanent each moment and event in history. While he transforms its meaning, Los retains an essential feature of the Bard's Song construct, the act of "guarding" each moment. This feature links the seven tutelary figures "sent" by the Assembly to serve as "Guard[s]" to protect Satan with the other sevenfold entities in the poem: the Seven Angels of the Presence who comfort Milton and "guard round him" (15/17.14); the "Seven Ages" of providential history, each with its own angelic "Guard" (28/30.58-61); and, most importantly, the "Seven Eyes of God" that Los says "continually / Guard round" the generations of time (24/26.7-9). Though the Seven Eyes culminate in the "Last Vintage," which becomes the main eschatological symbol in the narrative, they also are closely related to the apocalyptic moment, which both arrests and condenses time, dislocating its movement toward the eschaton.

- 39 Blake introduces the Seven Eyes of God in the first of Los's final two speeches, which offer an impassioned account of Christian eschatology that dramatizes the tension between its already-not yet features (23/25-25/27). On the one hand, Los hails Milton as the "Awakener" whose return is a "Signal that the Last Vintage *now* approaches" (24/26.42), proclaiming that "the Great Vintage & Harvest is *now* upon Earth," and adding that every living thing "*now* is flocking to the sound of the Trumpet" (25/27.17-22; emphases added). On the other hand, he addresses the fear of his sons that Milton will bring the eschatological violence associated with his support of the English revolution and regicide. Los thus counsels the kind of patient endurance that John advocates in Revelation, urging his sons to "be patient yet a little" (using variations on the phrase four times) until "the Last Vintage is over" (23/25.32-59).²⁶ Los's explanation for

the delay, "that the Seven Eyes of God may have space for Redemption" (23/25.52), seems straightforward, referring simply to the "time" needed to prepare for redemption. But it also goes to the heart of Blake's redefinition of the end-time, which transforms time in a uniquely spatial way, as he reveals in the pulsation of an artery passage (29/31.4-26).

- 40 Blake delivers this passage himself, having turned abruptly from Los's last speech to a discussion of "the Constellations," showing his interest in the cosmological dimension of history, akin to the ancient apocalypses. As he narrates the actions of Los's sons, "Labourers of the Vintage," he calls attention to their creation of the multiple divisions of time—from moments and hours to ages and periods—which he describes as "wondrous buildings," a spatial metaphor. He adds that just as "Seven Ages" can contract into a moment "less than a pulsation of the artery," so "every Space smaller than a Globule of Mans blood. opens / Into Eternity" (29/31.21-22). This opening of space into eternity, correlated with the compression of time into the moment, provides the liminal path for Ololon's descent in book 2.
- 41 The descent of Ololon is arguably the most significant event in the poem. It enables Milton to complete his journey, it manifests the second coming of Jesus, and it situates the Seven Eyes of God within the apocalyptic moment, as conveyed through the figure of the Lark, who symbolically enacts the extension of time into eternity. As soon as Milton and the Seven Angels behold Ololon, they rejoice to see that "a wide road was open to Eternity," making possible the fulfillment of Los's prophecy that Milton would "up ascend / Forwards" from Felpham back to Eden (35/39.34-35; 20/22.57-60). They also fall silent in awe, "for they saw the Lord in the Clouds of Ololon" (35/39.41): Christ's second coming is associated with Ololon throughout (21/23.60; 31/34.10-16; 42/49.10-12). An account of the apocalyptic moment follows, elaborating the descriptions in book 1. Blake first identifies Ololon's descent with the "Moment" that Satan and his "Watch Fiends" cannot find and which, "if rightly placed," can renovate "every Moment" of the day. In a series of abrupt transitions, he adds that "Just in this Moment" a fountain appears and that "Just at the place" where "the Larks nest" is located, Ololon sits beside the fountain. Blake describes the Lark as "a mighty Angel" and as Los's "Messenger," whose purpose is to ensure that "the Seven Eyes of God who walk ... / Thro all the Twenty-seven Heavens may not slumber nor sleep" (35/39.48-65). The Lark's awakening function is especially important in shifting the eschatology of the Seven Eyes toward apocalypse.

26. The phrase "patient endurance," which occurs at several key places in Revelation (1:9; 2:2-3; 14:12; NRSV), underpins the militant paci-

fism at the core of Revelation's political theology, discussed in my section 2 above.

- 42 The Lark performs this shift in a beautiful lyrical passage that appears early in book 2, just as Ololon descends to earth. As it leads “the Choir of Day” in song, the Lark mounts “upon the wings of light” and “vibrates with the effluence Divine,” compelling all of nature to listen in silence; the sun “Stands still upon the Mountain” (31/34.31-37). The image of the motionless sun, which derives from the book of Joshua (10:12), is used by Augustine in the *Confessions* to demonstrate God’s power not only to stop time but to distend it into eternity, Blake’s meaning also.²⁷ Similarly, when the Lark mounts into the twenty-seven heavens, it interacts with a series of twenty-six other Larks who “all night consult with Angels / Of Providence & with the Eyes of God,” until a twenty-eighth Lark meets Ololon “descending into [Blake’s] Garden,” and time and space are transcended altogether.

... nor time nor space was
To the perception of the Virgin Ololon but as the
Flash of lightning but more quick the Virgin in my Garden
Before my Cottage stood for the Satanic Space is delusion
(36/40.17-20)

The hyper-quickness of Ololon’s descent matches in speed the “less than a pulsation” moment described in book 1. Both passages seek to convey the effect of simultaneity linking the three descents. What makes the experience of such an instantaneous moment possible is Blake’s belief in the reality of the eternal world behind the “delusion” or epiphenomena of rationalist space and time. In concert with the activity of the Lark and Seven Eyes, Ololon’s descent opens a “space” for redemption that passes through the Mundane Shell into the world above, the “spatial” dimension of transcendence in J. J. Collins’s definition of apocalypse. Rather than a movement toward the end, the “more quick” moment creates an interval or duration that is discontinuous with chronology.²⁸

- 43 On the penultimate plate of *Milton*, Blake writes that the multiple events in the poem occur during a “moment” of ecstatic trance as he lay “outstretchd upon the path” of his garden at Felpham. In this moment, Ololon, Milton, and the Seven Angels all merge with “Jesus the Saviour,” who returns in the Clouds of Ololon as the Lark mounts and the Four Zoas sound their trumpets, heralding the imminent arrival of the Last Vintage (42/49.7-30). It is significant that the Last Vintage has not arrived. Blake underscores the fact that eschatological history continues despite the apocalypse

27. Blake applies the image to the Lark’s song rather than to Joshua’s battle at Gibeon. See Augustine, *Confessions*, book 11, chapter 23.

28. I draw on Agamben’s treatment of “messianic time” in Paul’s letters (60-71).

he records in the poem. This experience prepares him for an event that remains a future hope, one in which he ardently believes. Even so, he shows that revelatory experience can facilitate what Altizer views as “an immediate and total participation” in divine reality, distinguishing it from the horizontal movement toward the eschaton. As readers of Blake know, such apocalyptic moments are fundamental to his art and theology, even as he situates or leverages them from within history. He is a deeply eschatological thinker and artist, but he recognizes the qualitative distinction between the future hope and the richness and depth that apocalypse unveils in the present moment. The unilinear direction of history remains the defining feature of eschatology, but apocalypse abridges and transforms time from within, creating what Hannah Arendt describes as “the small non-time space in the very heart of time.”²⁹ What *Milton* reveals more clearly than any other work in Blake’s canon is how to keep the telos of eschatology open to further apocalypse. Both concepts are essential to Blake, but he does not confuse or conflate them.

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29. Arendt uses this description in defining the medieval concept of eternal time, citing Blake’s aphorism about holding “Eternity in an hour” (204, 210).

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