Apocalyptic Writing

Apocalyptic writing appears throughout the New Testament but is most extensive in the Book of Revelation. Apocalypses are usually written in times of severe crisis for a community, times in which people look beyond the present and beyond human sources for help and hope. This literature is highly visionary, symbolic, pessimistic about world conditions, and hopeful only in terms of the invisible beyond the visible and the victory beyond history. Just retribution and reward characterize the visions of the end of the world. Apparently, Revelation was written during the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 96.

Literary Forms

Within these four major types of literature, many forms appear: poems, hymns, confessional formulas, proverbs, miracle stories, beatitudes, diatribes, lists of duties, parables, and others. Recent scholarship has given a great deal of attention to literary form not only as necessary in understanding content but also as a vehicle by which the reader can share the experience created in a given passage. Forms have the power to create worlds and to define relationships; they are not mere accessories to content. In the writings of biblical scholars, much attention in the past was focused on the parable, which for centuries was regarded as an allegory. At the close of the last century, the German biblical scholar Adolph Jülicher (1857-1938) took a new direction in the interpretation of parables. He insisted that the New Testament parables be understood as real similes, rather than as allegories. Thus, he held that Jesus' stories should be understood as illustrations, the meanings of which could be restated in single themes or propositions. More recently, parables have been respected as works of literary art, having a force and function similar to poetry, and therefore not to be destroyed by paraphrase or summary or propositional digest. As literary art, a parable does not simply make its point, but it does its work on the reader—creating, altering, or even shattering a particular view of life and reality. Scholarly explorations into other literary forms in the New Testament are also under way.

History in the New Testament

The New Testament is not a collection of maxims, reflections, and meditations dissociated from historical concreteness. On the contrary, its documents focus on a historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, and address the problems faced by his followers in a variety of specific contexts in the Roman Empire. This concern with historical events, persons, and situations does not mean, however, that the New Testament submits itself to purely historical and chronological interests.

Determining the Broad Chronological Outline

A number of difficulties are encountered in a historical reconstruction of the period as revealed in New Testament sources. First, the documents are arranged theologically, not chronologically. The Gospels are first because they tell the story of Jesus, but they were written between 70 and 90, as much as 60 years after his death. The Acts of the Apostles is also from this period. The Epistles of Paul, however, are earlier; they date from the decade between 50 and 60 because they were written at the very time Paul was involved

in missionary work. The remaining books, which can be dated between 90 and 150, reflect church conditions of the postapostolic period. Second, the documents do not evidence much interest in history as a chronological process, partly because their authors believed in the impending end of history. Third, the New Testament is not one book but an ecclesiastical collection, preserved for the specific purposes of worship, preaching, teaching, and polemics. Fourth, all the documents were written by advocates of the Christian faith for purposes of proclamation and instruction; hence, although they contain historical references, they are not pieces of historical reporting. Add to these difficulties the lack of many references to Jesus and his followers from other contemporary sources, and the possibility of a detailed history grows dimmer. Nevertheless, scholars are in general agreement as to the broad chronological outline. The major anchor points are provided by Luke and Acts, which set the story of Jesus and the beginning of the church in the context of Jewish and Roman history. The Gospel of Luke states that Jesus began his ministry in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius (see Luke 3:1), which would be AD 28-29. All four Gospels agree that Jesus was crucified when Pontius Pilate was governor (AD 26-36) of Judea. Jesus' ministry was conducted between 29 and 30, according to the view that he ministered one year; between 29 and 33, according to the theory that his work extended three to four years.

The Infancy Narratives

Before his public life, little is known of Jesus. He was from Nazareth of Galilee, although both Luke and Matthew place his birth in Bethlehem of Judea, the ancestral home of King David. Only the books of Luke and Matthew contain birth and infancy stories, and these differ in several details. Luke (see 1:5-2:52) relates the stories in poem and song woven from Old Testament texts that highlight God's concern for the poor and despised. Matthew (see 1:18-2:23) patterns his story on that of Moses in the Old Testament. Just as Moses spent his childhood among the rich and wise of Egypt, so was Jesus visited and honored by rich and wise magi. As Moses was hidden from a wicked king slaughtering Jewish male children, so was Jesus saved from Herod's massacre. (Since Herod the Great died in 4 BC, Jesus was probably born between 6 and 4 BC.) The remainder of the New Testament is silent about Jesus' miraculous birth. Throughout the history of the church, some Christians have insisted that the infancy narratives be taken literally; others have regarded them as one among many ways of expressing belief in Jesus' relation to God as Son. The tendency of the New Testament to proclaim the meaning of events without giving a reporter's account of the events themselves has always provided much room for disagreement among those involved in the historian's quest.

The Apostles and the Early Church

Following the ministry of Jesus, which is described in the four Gospels, the religious movement he had launched came under the leadership of the 12 men he had chosen to be his apostles. Most of the Twelve faded into obscurity and legend, but three of them are mentioned as continuing leaders: James, who was killed by Herod Agrippa I sometime before 44, the date of Herod's own death; John, his brother, who apparently lived to old age (see John 21:20-24); and Peter, who was an early leader of the Jerusalem church but also made several missionary journeys and, according to tradition, was martyred in Rome in the mid-60s. In addition to these three, James, called the brother of Jesus, was

prominent in the Jerusalem church until he was killed by mob violence in 61. Before the Jewish revolt against Rome erupted in Jerusalem in 66, the Christians left the city and were not involved in the violence that destroyed Jerusalem in 70. Major attention in the record provided by the Acts of the Apostles is focused on Paul, a Jew from Tarsus, who became a convert to Christianity near Damascus about 33-35. After 14 silent years, Paul began to write his Epistles, marking a missionary career that took him through Syria, Galatia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and Rome. Apparently his life ended in Rome in the early 60s. Paul's Epistles and the Acts offer the reader some understanding of the life of these early Christian communities and their relationship to the larger cultures. The remaining books of the New Testament provide little historical information and almost no basis for exact dating. Generally, they seem to have been written for a second- or third-generation community. In these documents, the immediate followers of Jesus are dead, early enthusiasm and high expectation of the final return of Christ to end history has now waned, and the need for preservation, entrenchment, and institutionalization is evident. Heretics and apostates are identified and attacked, and the membership is called to a tenacity of faith adequate for the persecution soon to come. The second Epistle of Peter, probably the last of the New Testament books to be written, makes a vigorous effort to rehabilitate the earlier expectancy of an imminent end to history. This attempt to recover the zeal and conviction of a former era is itself an indication of the end of an age.

Major Themes in the New Testament

Like the theological themes of the Old Testament, those of the New Testament are varied and rich in content.

God

Nowhere is the continuity of the New Testament with the Old more clearly or more consistently presented than in its teaching about God. Any view that the God of Jesus or of the early church was different from the God of Judaism was rejected as heresy. The God of the New Testament is creator of all life and sustainer of the universe. This one God, who is the source and final end of all things, takes the initiative to seek with love all humankind, entering into covenants with those who respond, and behaving toward them with justice and mercy, with judgment and forgiveness. God has never left himself without witnesses in the world, having revealed himself in many times, manners, and places; but the New Testament claims in Jesus of Nazareth a unique revelation of God. The person, words, and activity of Jesus were understood as bringing followers into the presence of God. In the days of its beginning within Judaism, the church could assume belief in God and focus its message on Jesus as revealer of God. Beyond the bounds of Judaism, however, faith in the one true God became basic to the proclamation of Christianity.

Jesus

The New Testament presents its understanding of Jesus in titles, descriptions of his person, and accounts of his word and work. In the context of Judaism, the Old Testament provided titles and images that the New Testament writers used to convey the meaning of Jesus for his disciples. He was portrayed, for example, as a prophet like Moses, the

Davidic king, the promised Messiah, the second Adam, a priest like Melchizedek, an apocalyptic figure like the Son of man, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and the Son of God. The Hellenistic culture provided other images: a preexistent divine being who came to earth, accomplished his work, and returned to glory; the Lord above all caesars; the eternal mediator of creation and redemption; the cosmic figure who gathers all creation to himself in one harmonious body. The Gospels present the ministry of Jesus as the presence of God in the world. His words revealed God and God's way for his people; his actions demonstrated the healing power of God bringing wholeness of body, mind, and spirit; his sufferings and death testified to God's relentless love; and his resurrection was God's sign of approval of Jesus' life, death, and message. St. Paul and others developed views of Jesus' death as sacrifice and atonement for sin and of Jesus' resurrection as guarantee of the resurrection of his disciples. Documents written during persecution (see 1 Peter, Revelation) interpreted Jesus' suffering as the model for Christians in the hour of martyrdom.

Holy Spirit

Some of the prophets of Israel had characterized the "last days" as a time when God would pour out his Spirit on the whole of humanity. The New Testament claims that promise was fulfilled in the days of Jesus. The Spirit of God, an expression representing the active presence of God, is therefore used throughout the New Testament; this entity is variously referred to as the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of Christ, or the Spirit of truth. The Spirit empowered Jesus, and it enabled the church to continue what Jesus had begun to do and to teach. Within the individual disciple, the Spirit produced the qualities appropriate to that life and equipped the person to work and serve the good of the community. Understandably, the category "Spirit" was subject to a wide range of interpretations and created problems in many churches. The New Testament reflects the struggle to find clear criteria for determining if a congregation or a person really was influenced by the Holy Spirit.

Kingdom of God

According to the New Testament, the central message of Jesus was the kingdom of God. He called for repentance in preparation for the kingdom that was "at hand." The kingdom of God referred to the reign or rule of God, and in Jesus' ministry that reign of God was announced as present. The presence of the kingdom, however, was not full and complete, and, therefore, was often referred to as a future event. Students of the New Testament have argued over whether Jesus and his followers expected the kingdom of God to be fully present in their generation. The unresolved state of that debate is registered in the two expressions often used to characterize the New Testament teaching about the kingdom: "already" and "not yet." Salvation The kingdom of God seems not to have survived as the central subject of the church's message. According to the New Testament, the church did not identify itself as the kingdom, and in its preaching it began to speak more of salvation. The term generally referred to a person's reconciled relationship to God and participation in a community that was both reconciled and reconciling. In this sense, salvation was a present reality—but not completely. The consummation of salvation would be in a fullness of life beyond the struggle, futility, and mortality that mark this world. Paul believed that in the ultimate fulfillment of God's purpose, salvation

would be cosmic in scope. The realm of redemption would be coextensive with the realm of creation. This meant that finally even the hostile spirit powers that, according to the New Testament, inhabit the heavens, earth, and subterranean regions would be brought into harmony with the benevolent plan of God. This final vision differs from that of the Book of Revelation, in which the end is characterized by the vindication and reward of the saints and the damnation of the wicked.

Ethics

In the meantime, the followers of Christ are to manifest in their conduct and relationships that they have been reconciled with God. This is the instruction of the entire New Testament and a legacy from the Old: the inseparable connection between religious belief and moral and ethical behavior. The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings had insisted on it, and the New Testament continued that accent. This life is variously referred to as righteous, sanctified, godly, faithful. The books of the New Testament are filled with instructions about this life not only in an inward sense but in relation to neighbors, enemies, family members, masters, servants, and government officials, as well as in relation to God. These instructions draw upon the Old Testament, the words of Jesus, the example of Jesus, apostolic commands, laws of nature, common lists of household duties, and ideals from Greek moralists. All these sources were understood as having one source in a God who expects his own faithfulness to be met with faithfulness in those who have been reconciled as the family of God.

The Bible in English

The history of the English Bible is the history of the movement of the Bible from its possession and use by clergy alone to the hands of the laity. It is also the history of the formation of the English language from a mixture of French, Anglo-Norman, and Anglo-Saxon. Even though Christianity reached England in the 3rd century, the Bible remained in Latin and almost exclusively in the hands of the clergy for a thousand years. Between the 7th and 14th centuries, portions of the Bible were translated into English, and some rough paraphrases appeared for instructing parishioners. In literary circles, poetic translations of favorite passages were made. Interest in translation from Latin to English grew rapidly in the 14th century, and in 1382 the first complete English Bible appeared in manuscript. It was the work of the English reformer John Wycliffe, whose goal was to give the Bible to the people.

Translations of the Reformation Period

In 1525 the English reformer William Tyndale translated the New Testament from the Greek text, copies of which were printed in Germany and smuggled into England. Tyndale’s translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew text was only partly completed. His simple prose and popular idiom established a style in English translation that was continued in the Authorized Version of 1611 (the King James Version) and eventually in the Revised Standard Version of 1946-52. In 1535 the English reformer Miles Coverdale published an English translation based on German and Latin versions in addition to Tyndale’s. This was not only the first complete English Bible to appear in printed form, but unlike its predecessors, it was an approved translation that had been

requested by the Canterbury Convocation. Shortly thereafter, the English reformer and editor John Rogers produced a slightly revised edition of Tyndale's Bible. This appeared in 1537 and was called Matthew's Bible. In 1538 the English scholar Richard Taverner issued another revision. At about the same time, Oliver Cromwell commissioned Coverdale to produce a new Bible, which appeared in six editions between 1539 and 1568. This Bible, called the Great Bible, in its final revision in 1568 by scholars and bishops of the Anglican church was known as the Bishops' Bible. The Bishops' Bible was designed to replace not only the Great Bible, which was primarily a pulpit Bible, but also a translation for the laity, produced in Geneva in 1560 by English Protestants in exile, called the Geneva Bible. The Bishops' Bible was the second authorized Bible.

The Douay and Other Roman Catholic Versions

The Douay or Douay-Rheims (spelled also Douai-Reims) Bible, completed between 1582 and 1609, was commonly used by Roman Catholics in English-speaking countries until the 1900s, when it was considerably revised by the English bishop Richard Challoner. The Douay Bible was translated from the Latin Vulgate, primarily by two English exiles in France, William Allen and Gregory Martin. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Douay and Challoner Bibles were replaced with other translations by Roman Catholics. In the United States, one of the most widely used is the New American Bible of 1970, the first complete Bible to be translated from Hebrew and Greek by American Roman Catholics.

The King James Version and Its Revisions

In 1604 King James I commissioned a new revision of the English Bible; it was completed in 1611. Following Tyndale primarily, this Authorized Version, also known as the King James Version, was widely acclaimed for its beauty and simplicity of style. In the years that followed, the Authorized Version underwent several revisions, the most notable being the English Revised Version (1881-85), the American Standard Version (1901), and the revision of the American Standard Version undertaken by the International Council of Religious Education, representing 40 Protestant denominations in the U.S. and Canada. This Revised Standard Version (RSV) appeared between 1946 and 1952. Widely accepted by Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic Christians, it provided the basis for the first ecumenical English Bible. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989) eliminated much archaic and ambiguous usage. The New King James Bible, with contemporary American vocabulary, was published in 1982.

Other Modern Translations

In the first half of the 20th century many modern speech translations, mostly by individuals, appeared: Weymouth (1903); Goodspeed and Smith (1923-27); Moffatt (1924-26); Phillips (1947); and others. Since 1960, major translation projects have been underway to produce English Bibles that are not revisions of the Tyndale-King James-RSV tradition. The more significant among these are the following: the Jerusalem Bible (1966), an English translation of the work of French Dominicans (1956); Today's English Version (1966-76) in idiomatic English by the American Bible Society; the New English Bible, commissioned in 1946 by the Church of Scotland and designed to be neither stilted