

# *Martin Rist's Prolegomena to Apocalypse*

HAROLD R. WILLOUGHBY

**I**N 1957 Volume XII of *The Interpreters' Bible*, the final volume of the series, was published promptly on schedule. Almost immediately the conviction became general among serious users of the volume that, pre-eminent among the most scholarly commentaries included in the series, was the interpretation of the Apocalypse of John by Martin Rist of Iliff. The few years that have intervened since the publication of *The Interpreters' Bible*, have brought full confirmation of this comparative estimate. This is not by any means the solitary judgment of the present writer. It is the general consensus of preachers and teachers and students, who have made most use of the Introduction and Exegesis by Professor Rist, and for whom, chiefly, the commentaries in this great series were written. If the truth were told, even Associate Editors of the series have autographed in personal letters substantially the same evaluation of commentator Rist's work that is here expressed.

In the present year 1961, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Martin Rist's continuing service on the faculty of Iliff School of Theology, the related conviction is currently emerging that probably, among all the published writings of Professor Rist, his Introduction and Exegesis of the Johannine Apocalypse will be by far the most read and used sections of his authorship, by Biblical students in the immediate future. This possibility seems distinctly the more probable because of the firm status that *The Interpreters' Bible* has established for itself, as the most usable and dependable Biblical commentary produced to date on the

American side of the Atlantic Ocean. Also Rist's own growing reputation, as the outstanding American scholarly authority on the apocalyptic type of religious experience and on the apocalyptic writing of Judaism and of early Christianity particularly, seems to point in the same direction. Furthermore, we do well to keep in mind that the published interpretation is immediately to be supplemented by *The Modern Readers' Guide to Revelation*, also by the Iliff librarian, currently in process of production—and in paperback (New York: Reflection Books, 1961).

There are yet other publications by Professor Rist that are presently available for consultation, to aid in the better understanding of his commentary on Revelation. These are a series of preliminary studies of significant and problematic aspects of the Johannine Apocalypse, written by the Iliff scholar through some thirteen years or more antecedent to the publication of his commentary. They represent, in carefully devised first-draft form, his initial and tentative conclusions regarding the several important issues involved. Since these problems concerned such matters as the structural and ideational make-up of the Johannine Apocalypse, the special meaning of distinctive terminology running all the way through it, the singular character of its world view and conception of history, and the nature of its sources, whether traditional or definitely literary; the really crucial importance of these preliminary studies can at once be appreciated. Certainly they received far less attention than they deserved to have, when they were separately published in long and scattered sequence in a scholarly journal some years ago.

One of the chief purposes of the present article is to call emphatic attention once more to this series of Ristean pro-

---

HAROLD R. WILLOUGHBY is Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago. He was formerly Professor of Christian Origins on the Federated Theological Faculty. The Iliff School of Theology is among the schools he has served as Visiting Professor.

legomena to his meritorious commentary, and further to emphasize that taken together as a catena, they have meaning and importance that no one of them by itself alone can possibly possess. For the reader's convenience, then, here is the list of the series by separate titles, with each investigation bibliographically located in time and place:

1. "The Apocalyptic Pattern," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. I, No. 1 Winter 1944, pp. 15-21;

2. "Revelation: A Handbook for Martyrs," *ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 3, Fall 1945, pp. 269-280;

3. "Varieties of Historical Interpretation," *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 3, Fall 1950, pp. 98-105;

4. "The Common Source of Revelation 16:17-22:5 and the Apocalypse of Elijah," *ibid.*, Vol. XII, No. 1, Winter 1955, pp. 27-34.

It does not need to be specially noted that it is most happy and appropriate and convenient that all these preliminary investigations found publication in the well-reputed *Iliff Review*, to which Martin Rist and his Denver Colleagues have contributed so challengingly and in such forward-looking fashion through nearly two decades. Moreover, one who is familiar with the intellectual habits of the inquisitive Rist will quickly recognize that the pre-publication of exploratory statements prior to definitive affirmations on problematic issues is most typical of this factual-minded author. Repeatedly during his graduate student days he had this serious injunction dinned into his heedful ears by his great master, Edgar Johnson Goodspeed: "Gentlemen, when you become educators, do not neglect to make your own students personal sharers with yourself in your own researches!" The Ristean habit of tentative, trial prepublication—one is gratified to observe—continues to be one of the ways in which this Iliff pedagogue puts this Goodspeed injunction into active practice, with his own colleagues and students today. Thus most concretely he invites their participation in the solution

of problems on which he is himself alertly engaged at the time.

Having indulged in this much of explanation for the series of prolegomena to the commentary on Revelation, it is high time that we should immediately turn to a resume of one of the preliminary essays in the series itself. If this summary abridgement of what was originally a prolegomenon is truly and well rendered, it should demonstrate, or at least illustrate, the peculiar worth of these antecedent studies in making plainer and more intelligible the ultimate positions taken by the interpreter in his Introduction and Exegesis.

It is almost inevitable that we choose for such abridged rendering the very first essay in the series, the one entitled "The Apocalyptic Pattern," which was published in the very first number of the first volume of *The Iliff Review* itself (Vol. I, No. 1, Winter 1944, pp. 15-21). Thus both in meaning and in purpose the paraphrase is accorded the introductory character that Professor Rist himself intended for this initial essay when he wrote it.

Face to face with the proposition of composing a commentary on the Apocalypse, of John, the author formulated at the very outset these initial, searching questions: "What is an apocalypse; what are its distinguishing characteristics?" In the earnest endeavor to provide the answer to his own interrogations, he wrote his essay entitled "The Apocalyptic Pattern."

The questions seemed to call at once for a comprehensive survey of the numerous ancient writings, most familiarly Jewish and Christian, popularly and generally classed as "Apocalypses" and usually accepted as such; and for an analysis of them as to content and literary form. To his dismay and confusion, librarian Rist found that this unitary, classifying category was applied very indiscriminately to writings of the most diverse subject matter and pattern, such as the Book of Joel in the Old Testament, and Jubilees in Intertestamental Literature.

ture, and the Shepherd of Hermas among the Patristics.

A further survey of definitions of the term "Apocalypse" seemed indicated. This was carried out in the Iliff Library (Old Style) in the abundant reference volumes there available. The results were quite as disillusioning. The definitions encountered varied as extensively as did the contents of the alleged "Apocalypses" themselves.

What the author was in search of—though his consciousness of it was none too clear at the time—was a distinctive overall ideological schema, framed in a realistic world view and including a definite diagram of history, so presented as to accentuate the obligations and expectations of religious people at a particularly critical juncture in human experience. That was a rather large and complicated order to expect fulfillment on. Nevertheless, within the turn of several centuries from times B. C. to times A. D. he found a considerable nucleus of resemblant writings that approximated the specifications, most numerous among late Jewish and early Christian books. Classics among them were the canonical books of Daniel and Revelation in the Old and New Testaments and the Enochian strata among the inter-Biblical writings. With time and recognition he came to include certain earlier and later gentile compositions as well. With unnecessary apologies for clumsiness, here is Rist's own narrative description of "The Apocalyptic Pattern" as he summarized it in Vol. I, No. 1, of the *Iliff Review*: "Apocalypticism is the eschatological belief that the present evil and corrupt world, now under the control of Satan, will soon be ended and destroyed along with Satan and his demonic and human agents, by the direct intervention of God, heretofore transcendent; who thereupon will establish a new and perfect age and a new and perfect world, both under his immediate control, in which the righteous from among the living and the resur-

rected dead will enjoy a blessed, righteous existence without end."

Having summarised the distinguishing characterizations of apocalyptic writing, the author at once turned to the inviting task of analyzing and evaluating the important factors and elements involved. First of all he stressed that apocalyptic concern was primarily focused on matters eschatological. Aiming at a literal rendition of the Greek term *eschaton*, he became an extremist and a rigorist in his understanding of the word. It had to do with **last** things, rather than with **first** things; with ends rather than with beginnings; with death rather than with life and its cognates. It was concerned with the uttermost and the outside matters in the bad direction, rather than with the opposite and in the good direction. In his judgment, apocalypse was so typically and dominantly eschatological, that all non-eschatological writings should be debarred from this classification. On these grounds he would rule out therefrom much Old Testament prophecy and the derived teaching about the Kingdom of God, as "concerned with this life and not the next, with this present age and not the future." So indispensable to his apocalypse pattern did Martin Rist consider the eschatological factors to be, that he was willing to assert that apocalypticism was always eschatological, though he could not and did not affirm the reverse to be the case.

In the next place he was equally willing to affirm that apocalyptic was invariably dualistic. This was not a spirit-matter dualism of soul and flesh, such as Gnostic and Orphic groups cultivated. Rather it was a supernaturalistic dualism of controlling powers and forces conceived at once in cosmic and personal ways, and rated as good and bad respectively. God was at the head of the forces of good and righteousness; as Satan or his equivalent was at the head of the demonic hosts of evil. Rist noted with apparent satisfaction that the cosmic dualism of apocalyptic writings was less

closely and evenly balanced than was the Persian scheme that had preceded it. Satan accordingly was more definitely inferior in power and lasting qualities to the God of Jews and Christians, than the despicable Ahriman had been in relation to the shining and admirable Ormazd.

In the apocalyptic ordering of things moral and ethical demands and associations were not indeed neglected or ignored, nor were they particularly emphasized, for that matter. Rather the response expected from the righteous loyalist was personal fidelity and loyalty to the power that was, expressed mainly in cultic conformity to his worship, and in the avoidance of the idolatrous practices of heathenism, which were palpably Satanic.

With cosmic and supernaturalistic dualism in control and conditioning all things, it was inevitable that human ideas of time and of the circumstances and conditions of existence should be conceived and represented correspondingly. Hence the author was not surprised to observe that, in the apocalyptic scheme, all time and all existence was thought of inclusively in terms of two contrasting aeons: the present age or current period of existence, and in antithesis to this, the age to come in the impending future. The character of each age was thought to correspond exactly, bad or good, to the traits of the supernatural power in control at the time. As to the present age the consensus was that things were bad, indeed very bad. Accordingly Satan, the power of evil, was believed to be in control; and God was thought to be transcendent, far removed from the world of men, gloriously enthroned in highest heaven. Then, by antithetical contrast, would come the age of the future. God would get complete control of affairs. He would eradicate Satan and all his minions, and establish a new age and a new order of existence and society, entirely different from all that had been before. This would be a supremely good and an everlasting time. All these imaginary anticipations Rist found crammed into the

conflate two-age mythology of the apocalyptists.

One surely cannot deny the utter seriousness and urgency of the religious difficulties that impelled to this formulation of the double two-age and two-world mythologies of apocalyptic seers. On the one side there was the problem of the origins of evil, or rather of the endless varieties of concrete evils to which humankind was constantly subjected. On the other side was the colossal problem of how most effectively evils could be nullified *en toto* for the benefit and glorification of humankind. Characteristically apocalyptists were sure that present evils were so multiplied and exaggerated that they were quite beyond the capacities of mere humans to cope with. Under such circumstances the only thing that could be done was throw oneself over with abandon to faith only, and in complete dependence on the power and goodness of God alone, await with patience and confidence his determination to intervene, and act, and straighten everything out. One can be very sure that a serious religionist like Dr. Rist, who has invested a twenty-five-year-long professional lifetime making his own best contribution to untangle such a nexus of difficulties as this, is the last person around to look down his nose, with ungenerous contempt, for the loyal but wishful thinking of apocalyptists, be they ancient or modern.

Thus far we have underscored the primary importance of eschatological factors and of dualism in the inclusive scheme of apocalypticism. This was the main predilection of Rist himself in the first half of his prolegomenon on the distinguishing characteristics of an apocalypse. To him these elements were so important that he valued them as essentials, no less. By the time he came to write his Introduction to the Exegesis of Revelation he was prepared to add a third primary factor, fully coordinate with these first two features. This was determinism. The choice was truly made. It is difficult indeed to conceive a com-

position more deterministic in character than the Johannine Apocalypse. The God of Revelation was completely and fully an autocrat. All that had happened in his cosmos, had occurred as he had willed it to be. The main periods of time specified: the Present Evil Age, the Millennium, the Gog-Magog Era, and the Eternal Age to Come, were so definitely determined that the author could diagram them and date them in terms of A. D. chronology! The numbers of righteous people designated for salvation were specified, as were also the numbers already counted out for martyrdom. Even the measurements of the New Jerusalem yet to be were exactly recored. Really, one must indicate regret that Martin Rist did not write a paragraph on determinism in his initial essay on "The Apocayptic Pattern!"

Having placed primary stress on eschatological and dualistic concepts in analyzing the apocalyptic plan, the Iliff essayist turned next, in his prolegomenon, to a consideration of secondary and more formal elements involved such as purported visions or the pretense of pseudonymity. Here was a curious circumstance. In general estimation, these formal literary arrangements were more frequently than not considered to be indicative and important. As the word apocalypse itself suggests, both anciently and recently a vision was estimated to be the appropriate manner in which to transmit the religious teachings to be disclosed in writings of this kind. Martin Rist, to the contrary, regarded visions as a secondary and less important characteristic of apocalypses. He was quite prepared to cite major examples of apocalyptic writing that made no use of the vision expedient. The seventh book of Lactantius' "Divine Institutes" was a favorite instance with him. Also he recognized the familiar and misleading habit of labelling a book as an apocalypse because of the visions it included. The visions of Ezechiel were extended examples in point. Moreover, as the Exegesis of Revelation amply demonstrated,

he had plenty of good psychological and literary reasons for questioning the actuality of many of the visions and vision sequences there delineated.

The Iliff investigator found that much the same situation was the case with the literary practice of pseudonymity. Very many ancient apocalypses were self-alleged to have been composed by some more ancient seer or prophet or patriarch, other than the real author himself. In the corpus of writings entitled "Pseudepigrapha" by R. H. Charles, approximately one half of the total number of books included were also classed as "Apocalypses" by the eminent editor. Yet again Rist had no difficulty in citing outstanding examples to the contrary; and once again Lactantius of the "Divine Institutes" was a favorite witness. In clear cases of pseudonymity, it was quite patent that the literary device served well the practical purpose of attributing to the apocalyptic subject-matter an authority and influence that otherwise it might not have had. Admittedly pseudonymity was a tricky device to manipulate. There are cases aplenty where one just cannot be quite sure whether or not this is the real explanation. The Apocalypse of John is usually and probably rightly accepted as genuinely the work of John of Patmos. Yet one cannot be indubitably certain of this. In any case, Rist was right in rating pseudonymity as a minor, rather than as an indispensable feature of the apocalyptic pattern.

Messianism was yet another factor, usually reckoned as very important and considerable, that the prolegomenon author found it necessary to cut down to size. To be sure, the towering figure of Christ was the eponym and the certain identification of Christian apocalypses. But this was not the case in Jewish books. There the Messiah and his role were less frequent and less prominent than is usually presumed. Sometimes, in one and the same work, now he was active there, and once again he was not there at all. II Baruch presented contrary arrangements in conjunction. One chief source portrayed

the Messiah in action. Another source left him out of it altogether. Professor Rist remarked dryly of the contrast: "This antithesis did not disturb the author, but it serves to make II Baruch difficult reading (today)!" When the investigation got on to Neo-Hebraic examples, the researcher found two Messiahs operative, as we have seen to be the case in the Qumran literature. On the other hand, several very familiar instances of Jewish Apocalypses could be cited where the Messiah was missing altogether. With the Messiah was associated the chronological conception of the Millennium or 1,000 years when Christ and his martyrs would reign—so Christians phrased it. The exact length or shortness of the period, and its presence of absence from the plan, were varying phenomena. The term "millennialism" gives a too definite, an exaggerated, and a misleading impression of this feature.

Also associated with the Messiah was the Anti-Messiah, the anti-Christ of Christian compositions, a very disagreeable personage indeed! He was the anti-type, the completely irreconcilable opponent of the cosmic savior. Ill imagination and perverse fantasy were unrestrained when it came to caricaturing him. Gog and Magog were a malignant pair of doubles of him whom Rist found destructively in action at the very end of the old, Satanic order of things in Revelation. He recognized in them a duplication of the traditional Gog from the land of Magog, lately emergent from Ezekiel 38-39. To his credit be it noted that he paid the very least attention to them in his discussion of the "Apocalyptic Pattern." They were the last and the least of evil incidents, quite unessential to the full plan of Revelation.

It goes without saying that there were plenty of other secondary and realistic details that Martin Rist simply ignored and left unconsidered in his preliminary essay; mainly because they were relatively unimportant and in fact were non-contributory to the wholeness of the apocalyptic construct. These decidedly

minor matters included such features as angelology and demonology, animal symbolism and monstrous fantasies, astrology and numerology, stereotyped listings of Messianic woes and final rewards, judgment scenes and agonizing punishments, etc., etc., etc. In fact the chief service rendered by this first prolegomenon was not in a careful re-presentation of apocalyptic spectacles—quantitatively overwhelming as such a massing of data might have been—but instead in the thoughtful differentiation between what was necessary and what was non-necessary to the total plan, and in the clear accentuation on what was primary, with corresponding devaluation of what was relatively secondary and definitely non-essential. In rendering thoughtfully weighted estimates of this kind, the author was very helpful and most effective.

Now, at last, a summary postscript is required. The main content of this article has been a resume of the Rist essay on "The Apocalyptic Pattern." If readers have found that to be of interest in giving them a vivid and realistic impression of how a thorough scholar goes about preparing to undertake a huge and supremely difficult piece of research, then it is appropriate to remind them again that other essays are waiting their attention it relation to yet other equally important themes. These are the prolegomena that historian Rist published on Martyrology and Historical Interpretation and Sources Traditional and Literary—each in relation to apocalyptic—in later numbers of *The Iliff Review*, and in the following very even sequence: Vol. II, No. 3 (1945); Vol. VII, No. 3 (1950); Vol. XII, No. 1 (1955).

These studies have continuing value today. Merited attention should be given to them at the present time. They remain and continue to be essential sections of the whole process that was summarized in finished fashion in Martin Rist's unexcelled commentary on the Apocalypse of John.

#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.