



Angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28). *Fortean Picture Library*.

It is in the book of Revelation, with its vivid descriptions of the final battle between good and evil, that angels are given their most ambitious tasks. Virtually everything that happens on earth during the culminating time of human history is carried out by angels. They receive letters dictated by God, release God's wrath, deal with the armies of the antichrist, accompany Jesus when he returns to earth, and carry out his judgments when it comes time to punish the wicked and welcome the redeemed.

Walter Wink has written a series of three important books about the language of power in the New Testament. His thesis is that early writers intuitively grasped spiritual realities present in the human condition, labeling them "angels." In Revelation 2 and 3, for example, letters are addressed to the "angels of the seven churches." Wink suggests that human institutions develop spiritual realities. In other words, when churches, schools, corporations, and even governments exist long enough, a spirit of tradition, perhaps even a metaphysical reality, forms that becomes bigger than the institution itself. What is the "spirit of America?" Why are soldiers ready to die for it? Why can we fire an entire corporate board of directors, hire new people, and still see no substantial change in the organization? Why does it

not seem to matter much to average people when Republicans replace Democrats? Do power and tradition combine to form a spiritual but tangible reality? By this he doesn't imply that an organization attracts or becomes possessed by a passing spirit who happens to be flying by. Instead it actually develops a "spirit" or tangible tradition of its own. This is what was intuitively recognized by the early authors, who labeled it an "angel."

In the case of the seven angels of the book of Revelation, the author was implying that for substantial change to occur, the very "angel" or spirit of the church had to be changed, a far-reaching implication for governments and corporations today.

Angels are popular. Many recent movies and television shows have featured them. But perhaps the most valuable advice comes from the author of the book of Hebrews. In chapter 13, verse 2, we are reminded, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

Sources:

Bridger, David, ed. *The New Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York: Behrman House, 1962.

Buttrick, George A., ed. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 4 vols. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.

Douglas, J. D., ed. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974.

The Holy Qur'an. Trans. with a commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. Beirut: Dar Al Arabia, 1968.

May, Herbert G., and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Wink, Walter. *Naming the Powers*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

ANOINTED ONE

In the Hebrew Bible, the name "Anointed One" was first used in reference to the king of Israel. Later in Jewish history it began to be used to designate the future Messiah who would come in good time to set the world straight on the path God had intended. Still later, Christians used the term to describe Jesus: the Greek *christos*—Christ—literally means "anointed one." They believed this was a proper title for the one who will return to earth at the end of the battle of Armageddon, overthrow the antichrist, destroy the devil, and usher in a new, triumphant age (see Revelation).

Source:

Buttrick, George A., ed. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 4 vols. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.

ANTICHRIST

For all the coverage in movies, television shows, books, and sermons, the antichrist gets surprisingly little space in the Christian New Testament. Popular conservative/evangelical theology paints a detailed picture of the mysterious being who will appear at the end of time to mimic and challenge Jesus Christ before his Second Coming. According to an evangelical reading of the Bible, the antichrist is the "man of sin" who, along with his sidekick the "false prophet," will rule over a ten-

kingdom federation of nations that will introduce worldwide governmental control, forcing all who wish to “buy or sell” to receive the “mark of the beast” on their hand or forehead. His mystical number is 666 (see 666).

Although the antichrist will eventually be corralled at the battle of Armageddon and the return of Christ, many conservative students of prophecy believe that he will first deceive the nations of the earth. This deception will occur during the seven-year period of tribulation following the “Rapture,” or “snatching away,” of the faithful who are still living “at the sound of the trumpet” of God (see Rapture). Following their disappearance, the antichrist will deceive the nations, causing three and a half years of peace, followed by three and a half years of deception and warfare called the Great Tribulation (see Great Tribulation). Then Christ will return at the Second Coming (see Second Coming) and destroy him and the false prophet. Satan, the power behind the antichrist, will be imprisoned for a thousand years—the “Millennium,” during which the earth will be recycled for use during a time of peace when, according to Isaiah 11:6, “the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat ... and a little child will lead them” (see Millennium). Although his destruction is predetermined, Satan will be given a brief time to live following his release. But, along with the antichrist and his false prophet, the devil is doomed to failure (see Revelation).

This view of coming attractions begins with only four short verses in the Bible, all found in 1 and 2 John, in which the antichrist is depicted as “a spirit [that] shall come.” This spirit will “deny the Father... and is a deceiver.” John even says that “there are many antichrists.” These verses are the only ones in which the word *antichrist* appears in Christian scripture. The rest of the story comes from interpretations based on differing opinions coaxed out of the book of Revelation, perhaps the most disputed book in the New Testament.

Although he wasn’t the first, Hal Lindsey was certainly the most popular exponent of antichrist lore. His book *The Late Great Planet Earth* sold millions of copies and led the way for the best-selling *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which occupied the top of the fiction charts beginning in the mid-1990s.

Antichrist lore is a modern phenomenon. There is no tradition of antichrist legend, except for the occasional labeling of perceived enemies as “antichrist” when disagreements arose (Martin Luther, for instance, called the pope “antichrist”). This fact does not deter modern writers. They point to Daniel 12:9–10: “these things will be sealed up until the time of the end... but those who are wise will understand.” Because “those who are wise”—that is, conservative/evangelical Christians—are beginning to understand the “truth” about the antichrist, that is proof that we are living in “the time of the end” when “all these things must come to pass.”

People have long tried to decipher the mysterious sign of the antichrist, the number 666. Some, using a form of numerology called *gematria* (see Revelation), have assigned numerical values to letters to derive the number 666 by adding up the values of the letters in certain words, names, or phrases. For example, the Greek word *Lateinos* for “Latin Kingdom,” referring to the Roman Catholic Church, adds up to 666 using this formula. During the 1970s, when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger



Antipapal broadsheet, late sixteenth century, depicting the birth of the antichrist. *Fortean Picture Library*.

was engaged in his “shuttle diplomacy” between Egypt and Israel, it was discovered that his last name, through a formula in which $A = 1 \times 6$, $B = 2 \times 6$, $C = 3 \times 6$, etc., added up to 666. This conclusion was presented by some as “proof” that Kissinger was designing the Middle East peace treaty that would usher in the prophesied time of

deception and prepare the way for antichrist and one-world government. Later, some observers wondered if the birthmark on the forehead of Mikhail Gorbachev, general secretary and president of the USSR, was the “mark of the beast,” which might point to him as a potential antichrist candidate.

Since then new candidates have appeared from time to time. When Ronald Reagan was president of the United States, for example, some wondered if his legendary communication skills might mask an evil purpose. They pointed out that his name, Ronald Wilson Reagan, consisted of three sets of six letters. Was he the legendary 666? His death, which has not yet been followed by a resurrection, seems to have quieted most of the speculation.

Following the field of eschatology (endtime theology) requires a breadth of biblical knowledge. Some popular Bible teachers such as Hal Lindsey string together events from Genesis to Revelation. Single verses from separate books of the Bible are placed out of their local context into a bigger scheme. Because many people don't have extensive biblical knowledge, it is sometimes easy to persuade them of the truth of the story without mentioning that the only references to the antichrist by name are found in 1 John 2:18, 2:22, and 4:3, and in 2 John 7.

Sources:

Buttrick, George A., ed. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 4 vols. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.

Douglas, J. D., ed. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974.

May, Herbert G., and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Strong, James. *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1890.

Willis, Jim. *The Religion Book: Places, Prophets, Saints, and Seers*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2004.

APOCALYPSE

(See also Apocalyptic Writing)

The word *apocalypse* comes from a Greek word meaning a disclosure, a revelation, or a vision of the future. It is usually used within a context of telling the future or describing what the future holds. But its use implies a certain kind of thinking. If someone discloses an apocalypse, especially in the Western world, steeped as it is in the traditional thought patterns of monotheism, it is easy to get caught up in the vision itself without questioning the underlying cultural baggage.

Basic Assumptions of Apocalypse

1. Apocalypse assumes duality. Good is at war with evil. You are on either one side or the other. One camp is presided over by a God who made everything good, only to see it, for one reason or another, go wrong. The other camp is presided over by a created being who was once good but, for whatever reason, decided to rebel and enlisted enough support from his created counterparts to recruit an army that followed him in his attempted coup. (Masculine pronouns are used in this case because in all dualistic traditions, the devil, Satan, Iblis, or Ahriman is always personified as masculine.)

The monotheistic dualistic system is thus an attempt to explain why evil exists in what is otherwise a good world. How could a good God create a world of suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the innocent suffer while the guilty prosper? Monotheism places the original sin and rebellion within a historical time. In the Bible, that time is solidly anchored in the Garden of Eden (see Adam and Eve). “Original sin” is not a particular kind of sin so much as the beginning of a pattern of sinfulness. In this tradition, there was a time when humans were innocent. In Genesis 3 they willingly threw away that innocence and became sinners after being tempted by the evil one. Before Genesis 3 there was no sin in the world. After that, “sin entered the world through one man, and death by sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

2. The Apocalypse is the final battle between good and evil, so it is eschatological in nature. Eschatology is the study of the end. So apocalyptic thinking assumes that time is a river flowing inexorably to a fixed destination, a final duel between good and evil. In Christian thinking this duel takes place at the battle of Armageddon (see Armageddon, Battle of.) So prevalent is the Christian system that “Armageddon” has become an almost universal synonym for the violent, all-encompassing, total end of something.

Secondary Assumptions of Apocalypse

1. Apocalypse involves a seer and a vision. A prophet, whether Saint John the Apostle, Nostradamus, Joan of Arc, or Edgar Cayce, catches a glimpse of the future, a vision of the culminating battle and the events surrounding the final duel between good and evil. Because this great confrontation takes place in a future world, not experienced by the seer, the vision is often cloudy, presented in symbolic language.

2. Apocalypse involves a messiah figure. The good God will not enter his (again—note the masculine pronoun) creation, either because he will not sully himself or because the creation cannot physically survive in the radiance of his presence. So a substitute is sent. A representative, a son or a transformed beloved former prophet, will return.

The good God has an army, usually consisting of angels (the created beings who did not succumb to sin). The evil devil has an army too, consisting of those who, like him, were once angels but, again like him, sinned and fell from grace (see Angels).

For some reason, most apocalyptic visions include symbolic imagery using animals and mystical numbers. Lions and eagles, bears and lambs abound throughout the literature of every tradition. And the numbers three, four, seven, and forty appear with almost monotonous regularity. One thousand is always popular, especially in relation to century and millennium markers. Stars and other signs in the heavens appear at every turn. Astral predictions are almost universal in apocalyptic visions.

Finally, the end always comes with events of great woe and tribulation. Those who have remained faithful according to the tradition of the seer are usually spared, even if just barely. But punishment always accompanies the final victory of the good God.

It is difficult to escape apocalyptic thinking in today’s society. During the Persian Gulf War, the leaders of Saddam Hussein’s Muslim forces called upon Allah to aid them

in the “mother of all battles” against a country the Iraqis labeled the “Great Satan.” Meanwhile, in the United States, the faithful were urged to pray for their troops and political speeches commonly ended with the injunction “God bless America.”

Apocalyptic language has even invaded that most religious of events in American life—baseball. In April 2004, the fans at Boston’s Fenway Park were cheering for their beloved Red Sox against the hated New York Yankees. The Sox held a slim lead and the Fenway faithful were beginning to believe they might defeat the sport’s equivalent of the Great Satan when, in the ninth inning, New York’s newly acquired Alex Rodriguez came to the plate. Without missing a beat, the Red Sox general manager, Theo Epstein, turned to the person sitting next to him and recited in a holy timbre, “The apocalypse is upon us. The tying run is coming to the plate in the form of A-Rod, right field is on fire, and apparently we’re all going to die. This is the end of the world.” (It turned out to be yet another example of unfulfilled prophecy. Rodriguez did hit safely, but the next batter struck out. Sox 5, Yankees 4.)

Like it or not, whether we consider ourselves to be religious or not, apocalypse has become a part of our thought process, and it is difficult to break out of it. But if we question the assumptions underlying apocalyptic thinking, if we question dualism and linear eschatology, if we question the idea of messiahs and angels and ask why certain numbers are intrinsically more important than others, *Apocalypse Now* is left with little ammunition other than its tantalizing power to produce wonder, fear, and dread.

Sources:

Buttrick, George A., ed. *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. 4 vols. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.

Horrigan, Jeff. “Sox Scorch Yankees.” *Boston Globe*, April 20, 2004.

APOCALYPTIC WRITING

One of the biggest differences between the Eastern thought of Hinduism and Buddhism and the Western thought of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is the concept of time. Monotheistic religions tend to view time as linear, with a beginning and end, and often have difficulty even imagining another way of thinking. It just seems obvious that everything started at some time in the past and will end at some time in the future. How else but as a straight line could time be imagined? Even our vocabulary assures us that “time marches on” as we conceive our “timelines.”

In religions arising out of Eastern thought, however, time is circular or cyclical, repeating itself endlessly. A good exercise to free oneself from Western thinking is simply to ask, “If time and space began with the Big Bang, what happened before that?” Or, “If space is expanding, what is it expanding into?” (These questions both begin with an assumption of linear time but move the mind into a different dimension of thinking. The scientist’s answer to both questions, by the way, is “nothing.”) It is difficult to imagine, but for most of humankind’s existence linear thinking was not even an option.

One theory currently afloat suggests that God may not be a human invention, but time is. Because we are born, grow old, and die, we think in terms of the passing of