

## THE TRIBULATION IN REVELATION AND ITS LITERARY-THEOLOGICAL MILIEU

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Ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings that expected great suffering before the end of the world typically came out of circumstances that were already difficult. The function of the gloomy predictions in these writings, such as *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch* (Jewish reactions to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE) or *The Apocalypse of Peter* (a Christian response to Bar Kokhba's messianic revolt in 132 CE), was to incorporate the current hardship into a framework of divine purpose that would ultimately bring punishment upon the wicked and reward for the righteous. Conversely, when an apocalypse did not arise out of a specific historical occasion of suffering, it ordinarily would not predict how history might run its course but instead would direct the reader to contemplate the advantages of the life beyond earthly history by means of an otherworldly journey or tour. From the early centuries CE, *The Testament of Levi* and *The Testament of Abraham* are Jewish examples, and *The Ascension of Isaiah* and *The Apocalypse of Paul* are Christian ones. As John J. Collins writes, apocalypses with otherworldly journeys 'show less concern with historical crises and more with the transcendence of the individual'.<sup>1</sup> Excluding the Revelation to John, of those Jewish and Christian apocalypses or writings with apocalyptic eschatology written by the second century CE that mention a great earthly tribulation, it is rare to find an otherworldly journey (I have discovered only the Jewish *Similitudes of Enoch* and *Apocalypse*

1. John J. Collins, 'The Jewish Apocalypses', in John J. Collins (ed.), *Semeia 14: Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Missoula, MT: SBL, 1979), pp. 21–59 (41).

*of Abraham*). In short, apocalypses without otherworldly journeys tend to reflect anxiety about the present life, while apocalypses that include otherworldly journeys do so largely in the absence of such an immediate concern. My purpose is to establish that reading the Revelation to John within the context of this literary and cultural apocalyptic milieu greatly clarifies how its first readers might have understood its much debated perspective on suffering, specifically the messianic tribulation.

Writing under house arrest and anticipating conflict on a large scale between church and empire, the prophet of Patmos was less concerned with the layout of heaven than with the immediate future of the faithful on earth. Correspondingly, most of the details of John's predictions came to him through visions (for example, 1.11-20; 10.1; 12.1; 13.1; 14.1; 15.1; 18.1; 21.1) and not otherworldly journeys. Adela Yarbro Collins points out that this does not rule out the otherworldly journey motif entirely;<sup>2</sup> so in 4.1, a voice commands John, 'Come up here', and in 17.3 and 21.10, John is 'carried away in the Spirit' to view the harlot of Babylon and the bride of the Lamb respectively. Yet Revelation's 'primary mode of revelation, nevertheless, is the vision supplemented by auditions and John is not led from region to region in the beyond as is typical in works of the journey type'.<sup>3</sup> Ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses that did not focus on otherworldly journeys usually had more immediately pressing earthly concerns.

The Revelation to John does, in fact, belong among a number of apocalyptic writings that deal primarily with contemporary turmoil, and as it corresponds to their general type, it further corresponds to the particular characteristics of that type, as I hope to show. The comparative material consulted for this essay includes both apocalypses and what Mitchell G. Reddish calls, in his *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*, those 'related works' which have been acknowledged by John J. Collins and the scholarly community as containing passages with apocalyptic eschatology (the specific apocalypses and related works are identified in the next paragraph).<sup>4</sup> Thus, certain passages from documents that are not full-blown apocalypses on the whole deserve consideration because they have sustained apocalyptic sections and

2. Adela Yarbro Collins, 'The Early Christian Apocalypses', in John J. Collins (ed.), *Semeia* 14, pp. 61-121 (71).

3. Yarbro Collins, 'Early Christian Apocalypses', p. 71.

4. Mitchell G. Reddish, *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

thus participate in and contribute to the milieu of ancient Middle Eastern apocalypticism. To narrow the field of comparison between Revelation and other apocalyptic writings, only those texts that explicitly predict a great tribulation (as opposed to the general ‘everyday’ suffering of the righteous) before the eschaton are evaluated; citations of other ancient writings, both apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic, appear occasionally when relevant for comparative purposes.

The Jewish apocalypses to be surveyed, ranging in date from the second century BCE to the first or second century CE, are the canonical Daniel; the so-called ‘Animal Apocalypse’, *1 En.* 85–90; the ‘Apocalypse of Weeks’, *1 En.* 91–93; the ‘Similitudes of Enoch’ (= *1 En.* 37–71); *4 Ezra*; *2 Baruch*; and *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Reference is also made to later Jewish apocalypses, *2 Enoch*, *Hebrew Apocalypse of Enoch* (= *3 Enoch*), and *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra*, although it should be noted that these works, which come from the fifth through ninth centuries CE, show a combination of otherworldly journey and tribulation that was rare before the first century CE. Including related works with apocalyptic sections—the *Testament of Moses* and, from the Qumran community, the *Community Rule* 3–4 and the *War Scroll* 1, 15–19—the total of Jewish works under consideration as belonging to the apocalyptic milieu is thirteen. Christian apocalypses considered, ranging from the first to the fifth century CE, include the *Apocalypse of Peter*; *Shepherd of Hermas* (Visions 4, 5; *Sim.* 3, 4, 6); and the (*First*) *Apocalypse of James*, section V.<sup>5</sup> Related works with apocalyptic sections are the *Apocalypse of Thomas*; the *Sibylline Oracles* 2; *6 Ezra* (2 Esd. 15–16); *Apoc. Elijah*. 4–5; *Apoc. Dan.* 7–8; the *Didache* 16; and from the New Testament, Mark 13 and 2 Thessalonians 2.<sup>6</sup> After Revelation is added, this brings the total of Christian texts drawing from an apocalyptic

5. While it must be acknowledged that this work is Gnostic and therefore contains what the ecumenical councils would have deemed a heretical Christology, that should not disqualify it from consideration here, for this essay is a historical account of what was ‘in the air’ among a number of apocalypses from the early centuries that predicted a tribulation. The deviant Christology of (*First*) *Apocalypse of James* was a supplement to an apocalypse with otherwise typical features.

6. Though some portions of *Sibylline Oracles*, *6 Ezra*, *Apocalypse of Elijah*, and *Apocalypse of Daniel* may be ‘Jewish’ in origin, I follow the arrangement of materials by Charlesworth and Reddish in treating the selected passages from these works as Christian.

milieu and dealing with a tribulation period to twelve. Revelation itself is generally considered to date from the middle years of the last decade of the first century CE.

While some could argue that other apocalyptic writings perhaps intimate a tribulation, this total of 25 texts is surely representative of the worldview in which Revelation was composed.<sup>7</sup>

Again, of great significance in all these apocalypses is the expectation that present suffering will harden into a great ‘tribulation’ before God will intervene with retribution and/or reward. Ancient apocalypses that expected a period of tribulation shared four basic concerns: (1) the identification of those who will endure the tribulation; (2) the identification of a divine purpose for the tribulation; (3) the identification of the form of the tribulation, and (4) the identification of how to endure the tribulation. John of Patmos raised these same issues. Comparing Revelation with other writings of its milieu reveals that Revelation’s answers to these questions are routinely consistent with theirs and, indeed, that its answers are best understood only in light of theirs.

### *Who May Expect to Endure the Tribulation?*

#### *Jewish*

Among Jewish apocalyptic writings that describe a great tribulation, most indicate that the suffering will be felt universally. Daniel 7.14; 4 Ezra 5.1-3, 13.30; 2 Bar. 29.1; *Heb. Apoc. En.* 45.5-6; *Gk Apoc. Ez.* 2.11-16; *Sim. En.* 37.2, 47.2; and *T. Mos.* 9.6, 10.3-7 each indicate that the tribulation will affect believers and non-believers alike. The latter two books do not say in one breath that all people will experience the tribulation, but they nonetheless treat separately the expected suffering both of the righteous and of the wicked. Of the other Jewish apocalyptic passages that predict a tribulation, three are concerned exclusively

7. Unless otherwise noted in the text, citations are from the NRSV (biblical texts and *6 Ezra*); James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. I. Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) (Jewish non-biblical texts other than the two from Qumran); Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1987) (the two Qumran texts); and Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Edgar Hennecke (eds.), *New Testament Apocrypha, II* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959) (non-biblical Christian texts). Many of these texts can also be found edited for classroom use in Mitchell Reddish’s anthology.

with the suffering of the righteous and three with the suffering of the wicked. The *Animal Apocalypse*, 1 En. 90.4, speaks only of God's people, 'the sheep', and how, typologically speaking, they will be devoured by 'dogs, eagles, and kites'; the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 29–49 predicts the slaughtering of innocents and burning of the Temple; the Essene *War Scroll* 1.12 likewise predicts a 'time of distress' solely for Israel (although Israel's enemies, the 'Kittim', will be annihilated in the final eschatological battle). Interestingly, another Essene document, *Community Rule* 3.12-14, predicts plagues only upon the wicked, indicating that within the same settlement, some were more concerned about the endurance of the righteous in the time of suffering and some about the just desserts of the wicked. The *Apocalypse of Weeks*, 1 En. 91.11, also predicts the destruction of sinners but does not mention any suffering by the righteous.<sup>8</sup> 2 Enoch 65.11 says that the righteous will escape the tribulational judgment and attain to the 'great age'.

Thus, among Jewish apocalyptic writings that describe a tribulation period, most expect that tribulation to be universal, while the others are evenly divided in allotting the brunt of the tribulation either to the righteous or to the wicked. D.S. Russell notes that there was an increasing preoccupation with the punishment of the wicked in Jewish apocalyptic works after the capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE.<sup>9</sup> 4 Ezra 13.11 is characteristic: 'All these were mingled together, the stream of fire and the flaming breath and the great storm, and fell on the onrushing multitude which was prepared to fight [against the Messiah], and burned them all up'.

### *Christian*

As in Jewish apocalyptic thought, most Christian apocalyptic texts believe that a period of great tribulation will affect all humanity. *Shepherd of Hermas* 4.II.4-5; *Apoc. Thom.*; *Sib. Or.* 2.252-60; 6 Ezra 15.40-41; Mark 13; 2 Thessalonians 2, and *Did.* 16.5 each indicate a universal testing of humanity. Apocalypses that do not predict universal suffering uniformly believe that suffering will be for the *righteous only*. *Apocalypse of Peter* 2, 10 speak exclusively of deaths and persecution of the *righteous*; *Apoc. Elijah*. 4.21-23 speaks in gruesome detail of the

8. Cf. *Pss. Sol.* 15.8; R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 195.

9. D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 BC–AD 100* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 303.

killing of the saints; and *Apoc. Dan.* 7–8 pronounces eschatological woes upon Christians, particularly as dealt from the hands of Jews. (*First*) *Apocalypse of James* 15.33 records a prediction of suffering for a particular Christian individual, James.<sup>10</sup> All early Christian discussions of a tribulation anticipate that believers will have to confront it.

### *Revelation*

Modern dispensationalism holds that believers will be ‘raptured’ out of the great tribulation. David G. Winfrey speaks representatively for this view, which cannot allow that God’s character would permit believers to face the full horror of the great tribulation: ‘If in fact the church will enter the great tribulation, it would seem that the Lord would provide something more [than verbal encouragement] in the way of protection for the church as she faces the most terrible period of persecution in history’.<sup>11</sup> One can read Revelation with Winfrey’s disbelief that God would allow believers to endure tribulation, or one can read Revelation in the context of the thought world that informed its composition and the composition of other similar documents. To put it another way, one can approach the text with a preconception that determines how the story must play out, or one can attempt to understand by studying the author’s environment how he himself understood the images he used to convey his message.

When evaluating the scope of the tribulation in Revelation, one must distinguish the tribulation from eternal judgment. Judgment comes at the conclusion of the present age and its sentence will be in effect for eternity; the tribulation takes place in this world prior to the culmination of history. The tribulation is alternately described as ‘birth pangs’ or ‘messianic woes’. Because it is a historical event, the tribulation will be of finite length. Thus, its purposes are not altogether the same as eternal judgment, and so one should not expect that only those who will be judged in the future should necessarily undergo tribulation in the present.

Revelation 3.10-11, chs. 6–9, and 12.12 anticipate calamity for the whole earth. For unbelievers, the suffering will be τῆς ὥρας τοῦ πειρασμοῦ, ‘the hour of trial’ (3.10). In the cycle of the seven

10. James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

11. David G. Winfrey, ‘The Great Tribulation: Kept “Out Of” or “Through”?’,  
*Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982), pp. 3-18 (11-12).

trumpets, 8.2–9.21, the woes of plagues and death are, in fact, particularly directed toward those who ‘do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads’ (9.4). However, even though the tribulation is necessitated by the actions of those who are godless and wicked, the primary concern of John of Patmos is still the perseverance of *believers* during this period. Revelation ‘pictures the persecution that Christians will suffer at the hands of Roman imperial power because they do not participate in the cult of the emperor’.<sup>12</sup> It further expects that Christians will face the full brunt of the messianic woes. In so doing, it is typical of early Christian expectations, for there are no extant Christian writings that teach any differently.

Although Revelation anticipates that the whole world will be subject to the tribulation, the large majority of references to specific sufferers regard believers. The first such reference is in 1.9, where John claims to be a sharer with his Christian audience ἐν τῇ θλίψει (‘in the tribulation’) that one should expect from knowing Jesus. This means that John believes he already lives at the beginning of the tribulation period. Tribulation will be the ‘constant context’ within which Christian believers will live from John’s time forward.<sup>13</sup> As Ray Summers points out, the term θλῖψις makes etymological reference to ‘the grinding of wheat in the mill or the crushing of grapes in the wine press. It is outside pressure which appears at first sight to crush and ruin, but it proves to make the grain (as flour) and the grapes (as wine) to be of greater service.’<sup>14</sup> In Lk. 22.31, Jesus warns Peter that the devil desires to sift him as wheat; in Revelation, the same caveat is true for all Christians. Hence, 2.9 notes awareness of the present θλῖψις of the church at Smyrna; 6.11 predicts a number of impending martyrdoms (cf. 1 En. 47.4; 2 Esd. 2.41), and 7.14 pictures in white robes victims of τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης (‘the great ordeal’ or ‘the great tribulation’). The beast that serves Satan kills two witnesses of God in 11.7–8. The dragon himself pursues the people of God in 12.15.

Revelation also gives special attention to Christians whose dedication has wavered. They have practised the immorality of Jezebel (2.20) and taken the mark of the beast (13.14). Thus, as Jesus promises the

12. Charles H. Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 59.

13. M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), p. 91.

14. Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb: An Interpretation of Revelation* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), p. 103.

church of Thyatira, they will be thrown into a great tribulation ( $\varepsilonἰς θλῖψιν μεγάλην$ ) that will ‘strike her children dead’ (2.22). As for ‘the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted’, says 21.8, along with murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters and all liars, ‘their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death’. The language is similar to that of *4 Ezra* 14.11.

Faithful Christians must endure the tribulation because they are still on earth awaiting the *parousia* and final judgment when God sends the messianic woes to elicit repentance from doubters and idolaters. Therefore, most of Revelation’s energies in reference to the tribulation are spent preparing the faithful for enduring it:

For Christians this tribulation, besides being a threat to their physical safety, will also be a further test of their faith, which, by the Lord’s help, they will be able to withstand. For the enemies of the church, however, whether Jews or gentiles, it will come as the deserved punishment for their wickedness.<sup>15</sup>

Avoiding the tribulation was a possibility wholly alien to the author of Revelation. This should come as no surprise for those who understand that it was equally alien to the whole of early Christian apocalypticism.

### *What Form Does/Will the Tribulation Take?*

#### *Jewish*

In the Jewish apocalyptic passages, one learns that wars (Dan. 9.26; *War Scroll* 15.1; 2 *En.* 70.6; *Heb. Apoc. En.* 45.5; *Gk. Apoc. Ezra* 3.13), fire (Dan. 11.33-34; *T. Mos.* 8.4; *War Scroll* 17.1), the sword (Dan. 11.33-34; *T. Mos.* 8.4; 1 *En.* 91.11) and even torture (*T. Mos.* 8.4) await the righteous. The wicked are also singled out by plagues in *Apoc. Abr.* 29.15 and *Community Rule* 3.12-14. Many of God’s people will be killed (e.g. *Sim. En.* 47.2), and *4 Ezra* 14.16 and *2 Bar.* 32.5-6 specifically mention that matters will only grow worse between the present time and the end of the age (as do Mk 13.8 and possibly *6 Ezra* 16.38-39 among the Christian apocalyptic texts). An elaborate periodization of the tribulation, divided into 12 distinct stages, is depicted in *2 Bar.* 27.1-15 and alluded to in *Apoc. Abr.* 29.2. However, most of the other writings also predict that the suffering has definite length—a

15. Schuyler Brown, ‘The Hour of Trial’, *JBL* 85 (1966), pp. 308-14 (314).

prediction born of confidence that a vindicating God is in control of history.

### *Christian*

Little variation exists on the Christian side of the ledger, although *Apocalypse of Thomas* and *6 Ezra* are the most detailed in their descriptions. Again, the faithful are warned of the sword (*Apoc. Pet.* 2; *Apoc. Thom.*; *6 Ezra* 15.15, 19), fire (*Sib. Or.* 2.252-60), war (Mk 13.7-8) and death (*6 Ezra* 16.18; *Apoc. Elij.* 4.22). Forewarnings of famine and hunger (*Apoc. Thom.*; *Sib. Or.* 2.152-59; *6 Ezra* 15.49), earthquakes (*Apoc. Thom.*; *6 Ezra* 16.9-15; Mk 13.8), hail (*6 Ezra* 15.40-41), the destruction of churches (*Apoc. Dan.* 7.8) and false prophets (Mk 13.21; 2 Thess. 2.3-4; *Did.* 16.3) are also common.

### *Revelation*

Each of the motifs common to ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses and related works also finds expression in the Revelation to John. The vision of the seven seals (6.1–8.1) alone brings the four horsemen—first mentioned in Zech. 6.1-3—of pestilence (6.1-2), sword (6.3-4), famine (6.5-6) and death (6.7-8), as well as an earthquake (6.12) and the falling of the stars from the sky (6.13; cf. Joel 2.20-31; Mk 13.25). Jürgen Roloff notes the realistic tone of 6.5-6: ‘In the event of war and internal unrest, which cut off the import routes, a shortage of wheat was especially to be feared. Because it [wheat] provided the basic staple for the poorer population strata, it [shortage] would be particularly disastrous.’<sup>16</sup> Christians should develop a strategy of survival, not an expectation of escape.

Whereas the Romans prided themselves on the maintenance of imperial-wide peace, the vision of John foresees rampant destruction as the inevitable end of a kingdom whose peace is based upon enforced conformity to pagan religion.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in Rev. 18.16, John envisions the beast (Roman imperial power) turning against the harlot (Rome itself) in what amounts to civil war. But God is that war’s ultimate strategist. Even the promise of more martyrdoms serves to establish the rule of the Lord, for the promise assumes that God is sovereign over human affairs.

16. Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary* (trans. J.E. Alsup; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 86.

17. Roloff, *Revelation of John*, p. 87.

Death is, in fact, a common expectation of how the tribulation will affect Christians—for example, 2.8-11; 6.7-8,11; 11.7. In 14.13, a voice from heaven even declares, ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth’. David Aune notes that Revelation shares the belief that martyrs enter immediately into the presence of God with *4 Macc.* 16.25<sup>18</sup> (cf. Rev. 7.19; 10.15; 13.17; 17.4, 18; 18.23) and R.H. Charles has determined that the bypassing of Sheol for the righteous was an innovation of Alexandrian apocalypses like *4 Maccabees*, the Book of Wisdom and Philo.<sup>19</sup> Other symptoms of the tribulation in Revelation include ridicule and ostracism (1.9; 2.8-11); imprisonment (1.9; 2.8-11); poverty (2.8-11); sickness (2.20-23); plagues reminiscent of those that afflicted Egypt (8.7-9.21); demonic wrath (12.10-12); flooding (12.13-18) and false prophets (16.14). Persecution is expected from both Jewish and Roman quarters. In 2.9, Jesus’ letter to Smyrna expects tribulation to come from the hands of Jews who actually comprise a ‘synagogue of Satan’ (cf. 3.9; *Mart. Poly.* 17.2, written in the middle of the second century, implicates Jews in the execution by burning of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna). Notwithstanding, the Roman threat predominates: the Roman ‘harlot’, who is Babylon reborn, becomes ‘drunk with the blood of the saints, and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus’ (17.6).

### *Why Must there Be a Tribulation?*

Not all Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings explain the purpose of the tribulation, nor are their answers uniform. This suggests either that not all apocalypticists writing about a tribulation were personally interested in the reasons for its coming or that such a search yielded elusive results at best.

#### *Jewish*

According to Dan. 9.24, ‘Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting

18. David Edward Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), p. 162.

19. R.H. Charles, *Eschatology: The Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, Judaism and Christianity: A Critical History* (London: A. & C. Black, 1913; repr. New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 300.

righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place'. In this apocalyptic text, the assumption is that only so much evil may be perpetrated on the earth before the earth can no longer contain all the evil, and a new world must begin.

Among other explanations, *4 Ezra* 7.14 says that one must endure the tribulation in order to deserve God's eschatological reward. *2 Baruch* 78.6 states essentially the same message in a negative way by declaring that the final suffering is for Jews' own good so that they will not be condemned in the end. The Essene *War Scroll* 17.1 compares the tribulation to being tested in a crucible; those who endure the test will be allowed to participate in God's eschatological destruction of the wicked nations (cf. *1 En.* 1.9). *Testament of Moses* 10.8 also permits Israel to 'trample upon (their) necks' in the end, for the martyrdom of those faithful to the Torah will arouse a divine, eschatological vindication against the wicked (9.6-7). Those who live through the last mighty upsurge of evil will do so to one of two ends, says Dan. 12.10: 'Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise shall understand'. In Jewish writings, the great tribulation will be a time either of refinement and purgation or of condemnation, depending on whether one acts righteously or wickedly.

### *Christian*

Even as not all the Jewish apocalypses under consideration offer explicit explanations for the tribulation, neither do the Christian ones. *6 Ezra* (found in the RSV as *2 Esdras*) 15.6-7a sounds much like Dan. 9.24: "For iniquity has spread throughout every land, and their harmful deeds have reached their limit. Therefore", says the Lord, "I will be silent no longer concerning their ungodly deeds which they impiously commit, neither will I tolerate their wicked practices". God's people will prepare for that time as for battle and so will be saved (16.40), but as for the wicked, 'They will not turn from their iniquities, nor be always mindful of the scourges' (16.20).

Three Christian apocalypses or related works share the purification language of the *War Scroll*. *6 Ezra* 16.73 says, 'Then the tested quality of my elect shall be manifest, as gold that is tested by fire'. *Didache* 16.5 teaches, 'Then shall the creation of mankind come to the fiery trial and "many shall be offended" and be lost, but "they who endure" in

their faith “shall be saved” by the curse itself.<sup>20</sup> *Sibylline Oracles* 2.252-54 predicts, ‘And then all will pass through the blazing river and the unquenchable flame. All the righteous will be saved, but the impious will then be destroyed for all ages, as many as formerly did evil.’

It is, thus, typically unusual for a Christian apocalyptic passage to offer an explanation for the great tribulation (other than that it is a part of the great eschatological timetable). In 2 Thess. 2.9-12, the tribulation has the purpose of singling out those who are to be damned:

The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.

Few Christian apocalypses or related works explore the purpose of the great tribulation. When one assumes that God is in control of history, then one trusts that the divine reason for bringing about certain events must be good and just. When the Christian apocalyptic writers attempt an explanation for the tribulation, they typically compare the tribulation to a fiery crucible (cf. Mk 9.49; 1 Pet. 1.6-7) by which individuals are either refined or destroyed.

Christian apocalyptic thought appears to be somewhat more compliant with the lot of suffering than does Jewish thought, in that no Christian apocalyptic passage singles out the enemies of God alone for hurt in this life, and fewer Christian writers appear concerned with understanding the cause of their own suffering. It is simply an expected repercussion of faithful living in a hostile world.

### *Revelation*

In John’s outlook, the great tribulation has a double agency—it is the simultaneous activity both of God and of Satan. The devil is active in the tribulation for the intention of doing harm to the people of God (2.10). He ‘accuses them day and night...because he knows that his time is short!’ (12.10,12; cf. 2.10, where the time of tribulation is but ‘ten days’). He also makes war on the people of God because he is

20. Kirsopp Lake (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 333.

angry that the Christ has been born from among them (12.17). Yet, the satanic rage serves the divine purpose and is allowed to persist only for so long as it continues to do so.

That purpose, in turn, is also twofold. First, as the seven trumpets announce (8.2–9.21; cf. angelic trumpet blasts in *Apoc. Zeph.* 9–12), the great tribulation begins the process of destroying the earth for all the wickedness therein. Hence, even as the tribulation produces martyrs, it is at the same time the beginning of the martyrs' vindication against the world that would not tolerate their single-minded devotion, for the tribulation is a punishment on unbelievers. It is 'a judgment at the end of, but still within, history that is a prelude to the final judgment'.<sup>21</sup> In 9.3–6, for instance, while God's people receive a seal on their foreheads to preserve them, locusts that have the power and sting of scorpions torture the wicked. For those who have become apostates (2.20–23), the tribulation provides a final warning about the urgency of repentance (2.5; 3.19; 9.20; 16.9,12), even as did the miracles of Moses and Elijah.

On the other hand, the tribulation functions as proof of election for those believers who are caught in it. To those in Laodicea who endure as Jesus did on the cross, Jesus promises the right to sit with him on his throne (3.21): 'Be faithful until death', he says to the Smyrnans, 'and I will give you the crown of life' (2.10). To the Philadelphians he adds, 'I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown' (3.11). For these believers, writes G.B. Caird,

it is not the threat of physical death which constitutes the great ordeal, so much as the grim conflict of loyalties, in which a Christian may well be in genuine doubt where his duty lies, unless he keeps tight hold on the central affirmation of his faith, that the whole truth of God is to be found in Christ and him crucified.<sup>22</sup>

Although entrance into heaven while others are eternally damned is the ultimate vindication for the faithful, that victory is ironically evident already during the tribulation. In the words of Leonard Thompson,

According to the seer's formulation of the Christian message, victory and kingship are disclosed through suffering and crucifixion... A life of

21. Talbert, *Apocalypse*, p. 59.

22. G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St John the Divine* (London: A. & C. Black, 1966), p. 101.

tribulation and social oppression express *how* Christians reign with their crucified king and *how* they participate in the power and glory of God.<sup>23</sup>

Thus did the writer of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* say approximately 60 years after John's Revelation: 'We love the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord'.<sup>24</sup>

### *How Can One Endure the Tribulation?*

#### *Jewish*

There is no standard answer for how to endure the tribulation among ancient apocalyptic Judaism, and the books that do pursue this question give different answers. Daniel 12.1 leaves the rescue in God's hands alone, for only those whose names are written in a special book will be delivered. One might conceivably think of the ascension of Baruch in 2 *Baruch* as a subtype of divinely orchestrated escape, but this one example obviously does not apply to people in general. 2 *Baruch* 29.2 does promise protection 'for those who are found in those days in this land'. *Testament of Moses* 9.7 encourages faithfulness to the Torah during persecution, but not for the purpose of escape: 'For if we do this and die, our blood will be avenged before the Lord'. In 2 *En.* 65.7, those who 'preserved their heart' (61.1) do indeed escape.

#### *Christian*

While only a few verses from the Jewish apocalyptic documents we have examined give instruction on how to weather the onslaught, several Christian documents do. Three of those Christian writings, *Shepherd of Hermas*, (*First*) *Apocalypse of James* and Mark 13, offer a way of escape without raising the question of purpose at all. For them, perseverance *through* the tribulation is more important than understanding its *cause*. Faith and endurance are the common themes of Christian provisions for escape from the tribulation, although there is one mention of divine intervention in order to spare the elect (Mk 13.20) and another isolated case in (*First*) *Apocalypse of James* in which a docetic Jesus tells James to flee from Jerusalem, the exact opposite of the

23. Leonard Thompson, 'A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John', *Semeia* 36 (Decatur, GA: SBL/Scholars Press, 1986), pp. 147-74 (151, 169).

24. Cyril Richardson (ed.), *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1970), p. 155.

injunction found in *2 Baruch*. The resistance of this Gnostic apocalypse to Jerusalem is likely attributable to Gnosticism's aversion to 'materialistic' Jewish customs.

*Shepherd of Hermas* is much more typical of Christian apocalyptic thought. In 4.II.4b-5, Hermas learns from the woman who represents Christ's Church:

You have escaped great tribulation through your faith, and because you were not double-minded when you saw so great a beast. Go then and tell the Lord's elect ones of his great deeds, and tell them that this beast is a type of the great persecution which is to come. If then you are prepared beforehand, and repent with all your heart towards the Lord, you will be able to escape it, if your heart be made pure and blameless, and you serve the Lord blamelessly for the rest of the days of your life.

Anyone who heeds Hermas's admonition discovers, 'If you will it shall be nothing' (4.III.6). Blamelessness is also the message of *6 Ezra* 16.74-76:

'Hear, my elect', says the Lord. 'Behold, the days of tribulation are at hand, and I will deliver you from them. Do not fear or doubt, for God is your guide. You who keep my commandments', says the Lord God, 'do not let your sins pull you down, or your iniquities prevail over you'.

*Didache* speaks of the actual salvific value of enduring the 'fiery trial' in 16.5, and in 16.2 warns, 'But be frequently gathered together seeking the things which are profitable for your souls, for the whole time of your faith shall not profit you except ye be found perfect at the last time'. Mark 13.13 echoes, 'The one who endures to the end will be saved'. Although the advice of *2 Thess. 2.15* is not phrased in terms of weathering tribulation, it nonetheless might be applicable to that context: 'So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter'.

In summation, Jewish apocalyptic texts are more concerned than Christian ones to explain why the tribulation must come, while Christian apocalyptic texts, on the other hand, are more likely to accept the fact of the tribulation but to provide for the possibility of shelter or escape.

### *Revelation*

Revelation reflects the variety of answers given in ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses and related works as to how believers might

escape a tribulation which they have done nothing to deserve. Some texts speak of the tribulation as *unavoidable* for believers—for example, 2.10 ('The devil is about to throw some of you into prison'); 6.11 (more martyrs are to be added) and 11.5 (the killing of the two witnesses; cf. the 60 martyrs mentioned in *Apoc. Elijah*. 4.30)—and certainly so for the wicked (9.4-6). However, numbers of texts also offer the prospect of some type of protection for the faithful. This is sometimes called the 'oracle of assurance', or *Heilsorakel* (cf. Mt. 1.20-21; Acts 27.24). Aune points out that in both Jewish and early Christian literature, the oracle of assurance is a standard component of apocalypses with dreams or visions, as in the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3.<sup>25</sup> In the letter to Philadelphia, for instance, those who keep the word of God (cf. Taxo in *Test. Mos.* 9.7; *6 Ezra* 16.74-76) will be kept 'out of' (ἐκ) the hour of trial. This means that the messianic woes will not be for believers the hour of πειρασμός (trial) that condemns but instead the θλῖψις (tribulation) that refines. It does not mean that they will endure no adversity at all. The strategies for perseverance are as varied as are John's seven visions.

Insofar as it introduces the concern over the church's fate that dominates the rest of Revelation, the first cycle (6.1–8.1)—particularly ch. 7—is the crux of the entire book in Martin Kiddle's opinion.<sup>26</sup> Here, the seal of the living God is applied to 12,000 people from each tribe of Israel (7.2-8). Those 144,000 sealed are protected from the 'harm' that will come upon the earth, the sea and the trees (cf. *Ezek.* 9.4-6; *4 Ezra* 6.5; *2 Tim.* 2.19). While Gerhard A. Krodel suggests that 'the eschatological sealing [of believers] would seem to suggest God's reaffirmation of their baptisms',<sup>27</sup> R.H. Charles<sup>28</sup> and G.R. Beasley-Murray disagree. Beasley-Murray explains, 'The idea is purely pictorial and has no reference to any sacramental action in the church, e.g., baptism. The action is set strictly in the last time, immediately prior to the impending

25. David Edward Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 117.

26. Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St John* (New York: Harper, 1940), p. 107.

27. Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), p. 182.

28. Charles, *Revelation of St John*, I, p. 197.

tribulation.’<sup>29</sup> Boring speculates that while the sealing is not baptism itself, it gives new meaning to baptism in that ‘those who bear the mark of God are kept through (not from!) the coming great ordeal’.<sup>30</sup>

Charles says of cycle one that ‘if preservation from physical evil had been intended by our author, the sealing should have taken place before the first seal and not in the midst of the cosmic catastrophes of the sixth’.<sup>31</sup> If Charles is correct, then the effect of the seal is qualitatively different from the lamb’s blood of Exodus, for while there the Israelites are spared from death by the blood, in Revelation believers are left vulnerable to physical harm but are ‘tagged’ so as to be claimed by God in the resurrection. Charles believes that the symbolism of the sealing is of a repellent against demonic forces and points to 2 *Baruch* as a possible parallel.<sup>32</sup> 2 *Baruch* 12 describes 12 stages of the tribulation upon the earth, one of which is attacks by demons. In Lk. 10.17-20, as well, the faithful are given ‘authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you’.

In Revelation’s second cycle (8.2–11.18), while the locusts that come up out of the bottomless pit may not harm the grass or the trees, they may afflict ‘those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads’ (9.4). This makes sense only in the context that *others*—God’s people—*are* sealed and protected. God also promises in 9.5 that the torture will only last for five months (= a short time; cf. 2.10, where the tribulation is expected to last but ten days). This is reminiscent of Mk 13.20 and parallels, where a shortening of the days of the tribulation is necessary to preserve the righteous. Even this short period should obviate any speculation that Revelation supports the notion of a ‘rapture’, particularly one that bypasses the tribulation.<sup>33</sup> Robert H. Mounce writes,

Believers will endure the tribulation that comes from a world controlled by a different set of values, but they will never be touched by the wrath of God. Their protection is not physical but spiritual. Locusts from the

29. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 143.

30. Boring, *Revelation*, p. 129.

31. Charles, *Revelation of St John*, I, p. 195.

32. Charles, *Revelation of St John*, I, p. 198.

33. Talbert, *Apocalypse*, p. 113; Boring, *Revelation*, p. 125; Krodel, *Revelation*, p. 344; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1977), pp. 103, 147.

Abyss will be unable to harm them, and the life-destroying cavalry will sweep by, leaving them intact.<sup>34</sup>

In this second cycle, there are yet two further references to a short time of turmoil: 11.2, where the wicked are said to be allowed to ‘trample over the holy city for forty-two months’ (cf. Dan. 7.25; 12.7; Josephus, *War* 6.3.122), and 10.6, in which an angel pronounces ‘no more delay’ before the ‘mystery of God...should be fulfilled’. God’s people are also compared to a temple whose dimensions are measured (11.2). The hope of the temple’s restoration is common in Jewish apocalyptic thought,<sup>35</sup> while the comparison of the people of God to a spiritual house is common among early Christians—for example, 1 Cor. 3.10; Gal. 2.9; 1 Pet. 2.5.

This measuring suggests that there is a definite number of the elect and that there is a definite demarcation in God’s sight between them and the rest of the world. The same thought is also in Revelation’s contemporary, *I Clem.* 59.1-2:

If...there be some who fail to obey what God has told them through us... we, for our part, will not be responsible for such a sin. But we will beg with earnest prayer and supplication that the Creator of the universe will keep intact the precise number of his elect in the whole world, through his beloved Child Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup>

In the third cycle (11.19–13.18), when the great red dragon, Satan, desires to devour the woman who gives birth to the Messiah, the woman finds a haven in the wilderness, ‘where she has a place prepared by God’ where she can endure the 1,260 days (= 42 months = 3 1/2 years) of the dragon’s fury (12.6). The desert is a place of refuge and divine encounter in Gen. 21.15-21; Exod. 3.1; 1 Kgs 19.4; Mt. 3.1-2, 4.1-11. D.S. Russell also notes a similarity in the birthing image to *Hymns* 3.7-10 of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the personified community describes its wait for a Messiah as ‘distress like a woman in travail with her first-born, when her pangs come’.<sup>37</sup>

The same idea is expressed a different way later in Revelation 12. This time, when the dragon closes in on the woman, ‘the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the

34. Mounce, *Book of Revelation*, p. 199.

35. Krodel, *Revelation*, p. 362.

36. Richardson (ed.), *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 70.

37. Russell, *Method and Message*, pp. 272-73; cf. Isa. 26.17-18.

serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time' (12.14). The dragon is not deterred, however. He pours a flood of water out of his mouth to try to drown the woman, 'but the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth' (12.16). A flight into the wilderness, protection on eagle's wings, and deliverance from mighty waters each invoke God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery in Exodus.

These suggestive images anticipate the fifth cycle, where Exodus imagery comes into full force. In between in the fourth cycle (14.1-20), one again hears of 144,000 who have the Father's name written on their foreheads (14.1; cf. 7.2-8). They are pictured at the throne of God for having demonstrated spiritual chastity, 'and they sing a new song' (14.3).

Then, in the fifth cycle (15.1–16.21), seven angels pour out seven bowls of divine wrath upon the earth, and the bowls contain plagues that invoke comparison to the events that led to the Israelites' escape from Egypt: sores (16.2), bloody seas and rivers (16.3-4), fire (16.8-9), darkness (16.10-11) and the drying up of the river (16.12). The means of protection here are subtler. In 15.1, John reveals that with these plagues, 'the wrath of God is ended' (cf. 16.7), which corresponds to the notion found elsewhere of shortening the time of the tribulation. As with the plagues of Egypt, these plagues appear to fall only on the wicked; an angel and the altar of heaven itself observe with satisfaction that those who are assailed fully deserve this punishment (15.5-7; cf. *Test. Mos.* 10.8; *1 En.* 1.9). Unlike the woes of cycle one, presumably these plagues do not touch the righteous directly. This is likely a function of the fact that the focus of cycle five is more on this-worldly judgment than of tribulation, and since believers are not judged, they do not feel the plagues. The Lamb protects his own, and they praise him in return for his great and wonderful deeds (15.3-4). The emphasis here is on divine guardianship. The only word directed *to* believers is the parenthetical note of 16.15: 'Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame'.

In the sixth cycle (17.1–19.5), the sealing of the righteous reappears by implication in 17.8:

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the

foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

Believers receive a warning similar to what was found in cycle five: ‘Come out of her [Babylon/Rome], my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues’ (18.4). This escape is spiritual since it is from sin; it is not physical. In (*First*) *Apocalypse of James*, salvation can be found by escaping Jerusalem. Here, it is found by fleeing Rome.

### *The Meaning of the Millennium*

The first six cycles of visions in Revelation give a variety of possibilities for how believers will be able to endure the tribulation. This variety reflects Revelation’s Jewish and Christian apocalyptic milieu in that there is no single predominant way in these writings to describe the means of such perseverance. Revelation is different from these other writings in the amount of attention it gives to the matter. Some Jewish and Christian apocalypses and related works do not contemplate a strategy for forbearance at all; Revelation offers at least one contingency in each of its first six visions.

The most prevalent method of preservation is the sealing of the forehead; this is mentioned in cycles one, two, four, and six. Another common image of protection is that of limiting the tribulation to a short time. This occurs in cycles two, three and five, resembling Mk 13.20 and parallels. Standing alone in vision two is the measuring of the people of God as though they were the sanctuary of the temple. Measurements of an eschatological temple are also found in Ezekiel 40–47 and *The New Jerusalem* of the Qumran literature. There is no exact parallel between them and Revelation, however, since in Revelation the measuring of the temple is only figurative of God’s protection of his people. In John’s perspective, there is no literal temple in the heavenly city, ‘for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ (21.22). Revelation remains typical of Christian apocalypses in that it has greater concern for deliverance from the tribulation than do Jewish apocalypses, and uses a variety of images to convey that hope.

In each of the first six cycles of Revelation, the besieged church on earth is offered hope not of exemption from suffering but of protection in the midst of suffering. If the theme of John’s vision is ‘repetition

with variation',<sup>38</sup> then one also expects to find an image of protection in cycle seven (19.6–22.5). The promise there that 'those who conquer...will be my children' (21.7) is similar to Mk 13.13; the reward given to those whose names 'are written in the Lamb's book of life' (21.27) sounds like Dan. 12.1b. Not to be overlooked as a possibility, however, is the millennial reign of Christ in 20.3, during which time Satan is sealed in a pit from which 'he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended'.

In ancient apocalyptic thought, various options are found for the duration of a temporary messianic kingdom on earth that precedes the final translation of the faithful to heaven. Charles dates the emergence of a belief in a temporary messianic kingdom to the beginning of the first century BCE with *2 En.* 32–33, where 6000 years of world history are expected to correspond to the six days of creation (there are 6000 years between the Deluge and the eschaton in *T. Adam* 3.5), and an earthly kingdom of 1000 years to correspond to God's day of rest.<sup>39</sup> Among other Jewish writings, *4 Ezra* 7.28 expects the length to be 400 years, while *2 Bar.* 30.1 gives no time table:

And it shall come to pass...when the time of the presence of the Messiah (on earth) has run its course, that he will return in glory (to the heavens): then all who have died and have set their hopes on him will rise again.

Charles Talbert documents rabbinical projections ranging from 40 to 7000 years.<sup>40</sup> A Christian expectation of 1000 years is found in *Apoc. Elijah*. 5.38-39 and *Apoc. Paul* 21. From the variety of times given, one can conclude that a literal understanding of the exact length of the temporary messianic kingdom was not a very important concern of the ancient apocalypses. There is *not* uniform consistency. Revelation simply adopts the most commonly given answer.

If the length of the millennium is not to be taken literally, what is its function in Revelation? Talbert concludes that if Satan is able to deceive the nations even after a long period of being restrained (20.7-10), 'the millennium proves, then, that humans cannot blame their sinfulness on their environment or circumstances'.<sup>41</sup> Surely this is so, but

38. Talbert, *Apocalypse*, p. 37.

39. Charles, *Eschatology*, pp. 315, 408.

40. Talbert, *Apocalypse*, p. 93.

41. Talbert, *Apocalypse*, p. 95.

cannot the millennium also function as a temporal equivalent to the spatial means of protection found in the previous six visions? The millennium effectively removes the righteous from Satan's grasp, even as eagle's wings bear the woman away from the dragon in cycle three. After the millennium is over, Satan deceives 'the nations' ( $\tau\alpha\ \xi\theta\nu\eta$ ; 20.8), a term that designates non-believers in 10.11; 11.2, 9, 18; 14.8; 17.15; 18.3, 23; 19.15; and 20.3. John does not anticipate that *believers* will falter after Satan is released, but those of 'the nations' will, even though they have benefited from the peaceful rule of Christ and the saints. True believers, who reign with Christ during the temporary kingdom, are distinct from 'the nations'. These believers include both martyrs and those who did not succumb to the pressure to worship the beast of Roman power.<sup>42</sup> They are not left alone to face the diabolical deceptions that are unleashed after the millennium because they are not of 'the nations' but of the kingdom of Christ.

John is not concerned with the question of why it appears that none convert to true faith while Christ and the saints reign over them with peace (20.5)—why all are led astray. He is instead concerned with informing beleaguered Christians of his own day and his immediate future how they will be able to outlast the persistent attacks of the devil. In the first six cycles, he does so primarily with spatial images—sealing and measuring—although he also uses the temporal image of shortening the time of the tribulation. In cycle seven, he uses the temporal image of the millennium to inform believers that they are co-regents with Christ and that while 'the nations' are never ultimately safe from Satan's rage, the saints indeed are. The saints may for a time live among unbelievers, but they will not be handed over to Satan as those of 'the nations' will. This is not to answer the question of whether or not John expected a literal messianic reign on earth. It means that while the millennium is mentioned but in one vision of seven, images of protection and perseverance through tribulation pervade them all.

### *Conclusions*

After comparing Revelation to other ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses and related works, the following conclusions about the treatment of the tribulation in Revelation emerge.

42. Talbert, *Apocalypse*, p. 91.

First, almost invariably, ancient apocalyptic texts that describe a great tribulation do not also have an otherworldly journey. Predictions of a tribulation, like apocalypses without an otherworldly journey in general, usually arise out of a concrete historical plight and so are less inclined to be concerned with a glimpse into heaven. Revelation is written by someone who believes himself to be at the beginning of a period of tribulation (1.9). Not surprisingly, then, his focus is largely on impending earthly events and how Christians should respond to them. For the most part, glimpses into heaven are subordinate to the purpose of revealing what is to happen on earth.

Secondly, usually, when an apocalyptic passage predicts a tribulation, it does so without exception for the entire human race. Only three apocalyptic selections, all Jewish, predict a tribulation exclusively upon the wicked. Of Christian apocalyptic selections, it is the unanimous verdict that believers should prepare themselves for the worst. Again, Revelation is no exception. Although John expects an hour of trial for the entire world, he expends most of his pastoral energy in preparing the faithful with a strategy for survival.

Thirdly, images of the tribulation remain fairly constant throughout Jewish and Christian apocalypses and related works. They include, among others, wars, desolation, famine, sword, plagues, earthquakes and, in the Christian works, false prophets. These are precisely what one finds in Revelation.

Fourthly, in Jewish apocalyptic writings, the significance of the tribulation is mostly to prove whether believers are worthy of God's reward. Among early Christian writers, the same idea is also present, although the tribulation also serves to begin judgment on those who are not faithful. Revelation retains both emphases, holding that the tribulation is a preliminary judgment of the wicked while it is a refining of the righteous.

Finally, Jewish apocalypses and related works that have a tribulation are less concerned about how one might escape its distress than with the purpose of the tribulation. Christian apocalypses and related works are more interested in finding possible means of deliverance, usually by perseverance in faith and morals. Revelation is typical of early Christian apocalyptic thought in this matter. John anticipates the pressure to worldly conformity to be so intense among his audience that he devotes space in each of his seven visions to describing a 'safety valve'.

This does not mean that John expects Christians to be physically undisturbed by the tribulation. R.H. Charles misses the point when he says that the flight of the woman into the wilderness in 12.6 is inconsistent with images of widespread martyrdom elsewhere in Revelation.<sup>43</sup> Krodel writes, ‘This tension can be maintained only if we keep in mind that for John, as well as for other New Testament writers (for example, Mk 8.34-35), martyrdom equals victory and vindication because God raised the Messiah Jesus from the dead’.<sup>44</sup> Thus, John’s expectation of the tribulation is born of his theology of the cross.

43. Charles, *Revelation of St John*, I, p. 321.

44. Krodel, *Revelation*, p. 251.