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# AN APOCALYPSE BY ANY OTHER NAME: JOHN WOOLMAN IN APOCALYPTIC CONTEXT, A RESPONSE TO ANGELL AND BIRKEL

JON R. KERSHNER

I want to start by thanking Carole Spencer and Christy Randazzo for organizing this session and for including my book in this discussion. And I want to thank Steve Angell and Michael Birkel for their care, humor, and insight, and the great questions they raise and comments they make. It is a humbling thing to have my work reviewed by two preeminent scholars of Quakerism, who are also mentors and friends.

As a framework for my approach to Woolman I fashion a historical and theological method that I call, “micro-theology,” a hyper-contextual, detailed and sustained analysis that understands subjects to act in ways that both confirm and contradict the teachings of their religious community. The micro-theological method assumes that subjects are also religious innovators who are actively changing the religious tradition that they are, ironically, upholding. By examining Woolman in this way I wanted to show his theological sophistication in a way that is as serious as studies of more traditional colonial American figures, such as Jonathan Edwards. I also hoped that a detailed look at Woolman would challenge the view of eighteenth century Quakers that lumps them all together as withdrawn from the world. And, finally, I thought that by examining Woolman with seriousness, a method for approaching lay colonists outside of the educated elite could be proposed. I can’t talk about all of these things here, so I will instead focus on the varieties of apocalypticism, and what they offer as a theological perspective.

Within the framework of Woolman’s theological coherence and his identification with the Quaker tradition and Hebrew prophetic tradition, I see a form of eighteenth century apocalypticism in Woolman’s theology. I think it may be important to say at the outset that, in keeping with my view on subjective individuality and agency, I favor broad definitions of apocalypticism that feature a core of ideas with many varieties and permutations.<sup>1</sup>

Michael Birkel is correct in playfully suggesting that John J. Collins is the alpha, if not also the omega, of apocalypticism. That the definitions of apocalypticism from Collins are of multiple lengths and have varying degrees of specificity is par for the course in the secondary literature on apocalyptic. In addition to the definitions already mentioned, I would add two others from Collins. First, Collins' seminal 1979 article in *Semeia*, in which he lays out what he calls the "master-paradigm" of apocalyptic, is an important starting point for identifying what is essential and non-essential to apocalyptic. Collins' "master-paradigm" has 39 characteristics, but in no example of apocalyptic literature are all 39 characteristics present.<sup>2</sup> Collins also notes that apocalyptic themes are often spread throughout a corpus of writing in a subordinate way; a piece of literature can be apocalyptic even though apocalyptic is only one of many themes in the piece.<sup>3</sup> This is how I see apocalypticism unfolding in Woolman's writings. The apocalyptic themes and preunderstandings are present from Woolman's earliest writings, but they intensify in the 1760s.

The essential core of Collins' definition does not include catastrophe, or the violent overthrow of evil, or eschatological timelines beyond a general sense of urgency, though those other features are subsidiary characteristics that can combine with the core definition.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Collins has refined the essential characteristics of apocalyptic into this definition:

the essential ingredients of [the apocalyptic] worldview were a reliance on supernatural revelation, over and above received tradition and human reasoning; a sense that human affairs are determined to a great degree by supernatural agents; and the belief that human life is subject to divine judgment, culminating in reward or punishment after death...which had far-reaching implications for ethical values and attitudes in this life.<sup>5</sup>

Collins argues that apocalyptic thought arises out of a sense of disjointedness with the prevailing ethic of the larger society: "The visionaries look to another world, either in the heavens or in the eschatological future, because this world is unsatisfactory."<sup>6</sup> Collins' definition here, in conjunction with his much longer, more exhaustive and nuanced 1979 definition, describe apocalypticism as characterized by a supernatural revelation involving other-worldly beings, the judgment of the present order and the emergence of a new world governed through supernatural means. This definition is generally accepted, but some scholars emphasize one characteristic over others.

For example, Walter Schmithals contends that the primary feature of apocalyptic is the role of the one who receives a revelation in standing between the community and eternity and interpreting history for the community with the meaning of eternity.<sup>7</sup>

Martinus de Boer complements Collins' analysis from the field of biblical studies by resisting interpretations of apocalyptic that look to particular expressions of apocalyptic literature as a golden ideal. For example, de Boer argues that "the book of Revelation is in many ways distinctive and cannot be taken as the measure of all expressions of an apocalyptic-eschatological worldview."<sup>8</sup> In fact, de Boer argues that Revelation is unique in ancient manuscripts: "The sheer quantity and richness of Revelation's symbolism and imagery are really without parallel in contemporary sources, whether Jewish or Christian..."<sup>9</sup> As such, he argues that "apocalyptic eschatology can be given expression in much less vivid, certainly less lurid, imagery and language..."<sup>10</sup> De Boer helpfully identifies the diversity of expression that can accompany apocalyptic, as well as the way cultural elements can shape the particularity of apocalyptic theology.<sup>11</sup> This nuance opens the door for analysis of Woolman's theology under the rubric of apocalypticism without necessitating that it be identical in language, symbolism and imagery to the book of Revelation.

The relationship between apocalyptic and prophetic is another helpful way of understanding Woolman and the genre of apocalyptic in general. Biblical scholar George Eldon Ladd's article, "Why not prophetic-apocalyptic?" argues that the eschatology of the Hebrew prophets was apocalyptic while still being prophetic. For Ladd the line of distinction is not between apocalyptic, on one hand, and prophetic, on the other, but between prophetic-apocalyptic and non-prophetic apocalyptic. The Hebrew prophets and Woolman, held that God's purposes would be fulfilled within history and these views reinforced ethical responses to temporal issues. This is the prophetic-apocalyptic Ladd identifies, which he also sees in the Kingdom theology of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

While my overall argument is that limiting apocalypticism to a field of specific allusions or literary ideals like the book of Revelation does not address the breadth of apocalyptic thought, this does not mean that Woolman did not make such allusions, nor does it imply that portions of Woolman's writings would not qualify as apocalyptic under that narrower definition as well. For example, Bruce Chilton's 2013 book, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Receptions of John's Revelation in Western Imagination*, uses Woolman as an eighteenth century

example of how the Book of Revelation could inspire confidence in one's experience of God while also promoting social change.<sup>13</sup>

As noted by Steve Angell, Catharine Wessinger makes a distinction between catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism. The former Wessinger contends is a synonym for apocalypticism and the latter is something other than apocalypticism, though the two terms are not mutually exclusive.<sup>14</sup> The scholarship on violence as a necessary condition of apocalypticism is divided. Wessinger and Bernard McGinn<sup>15</sup> view violent catastrophe as definitional to apocalypticism, but this appears to be a minority view. For example, Frances Flannery distinguishes two types of apocalypticism. What she identifies as the "apocalyptic formula" is peaceful. She distinguishes the "apocalyptic formula" from the "formula for radical apocalypticism," which is generally violent.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, in a recent study of American "alternative" religious groups often identified as apocalyptic – such as the Shakers, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh-Day Adventists – Stephen Stein denies the necessity of a violent, catastrophic end to history, as long as the current age is replaced with a new age.<sup>17</sup>

My view is that violence is not definitional. Rather, with Collins, and most others I've encountered, there must be a powerful dualism between the world as it is and the world as God wants it to be and that dualism should also bear the eschatological confidence that God will not sit idly by forever as the world festers; God will intervene in world affairs to bring about the new world foreseen by the apocalypticist.

However, Woolman did not eliminate cosmic violence from his theology. Divine judgement is one of the main components of Woolman's apocalyptic theology. God will be the perpetrator of violence, not Woolman, if the present injustice and alienation are allowed to continue. Woolman warns that Christ's "spiritual kingdom" will "subdue and break in pieces all kingdoms that oppose it, and shall stand for ever."<sup>18</sup> Or, later, Woolman warns that the "enemies of righteousness shall make a terrible rattle and shall mightily torment one another. For he that is omnipotent is rising up to judgment and will plead the cause of the oppressed."<sup>19</sup> For Woolman there were spiritual causes to natural events such as small pox, wars, and "tempests of hail."<sup>20</sup> These natural events were foretastes of the much larger and imminent judgments if humanity did not repent and God's will be established on earth as it is in heaven. No more mister nice guy God, indeed. It is accurate to say that Woolman did not dwell on

these judgments, which is probably why they have been overlooked by scholars.

In conclusion, while depictions of Woolman in the nineteenth and twentieth century have emphasized Woolman as a mild-mannered person whose primary contribution to social justice is as a model of purity and introspection, the Woolman I encounter is much more challenging than that. In his own day, Woolman criticized Quaker tribalism by wearing undyed clothing,<sup>21</sup> he boycotted imperial economics,<sup>22</sup> and criticized ministers who were accepted by their peers but who did not speak out of the revelation of God that he thought was the only adequate inspiration for ministry.<sup>23</sup> Woolman's own "unacceptance"<sup>24</sup> in segments of the Quaker world of his day suggest that subsequent heroic appropriations of Woolman by later generations of Quaker scholars should also be critically examined. The apocalyptic lens provides a way of understanding Woolman's view of divine immediacy and his confidence that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Woolman held this confidence strongly because he had already experienced a transformation of the self: a new self in Christ, a foretaste of the new world God was bringing about.<sup>25</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. For a more thorough engagement with scholarship on apocalypticism, see Jon R. Kershner, "The Government of Christ": John Woolman's (1720-1772) Apocalyptic Theology" (University of Birmingham, 2013), 32-45.
2. John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," ed. John J. Collins, *Semeia* 14 (1979): 8.
3. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," 8.
4. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," 9.
5. John J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 2003), 85; See also: John J. Collins, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins, 2014, 7.
6. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism," 86.
7. Walter Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement, Introduction & Interpretation*, trans. John Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 17-18.
8. M. C. de Boer, "Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins and Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 2003), 170.
9. de Boer, "Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology," 170.
10. de Boer, "Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology," 170.
11. de Boer, "Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology," 170.

12. George Eldon Ladd, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76, no. 3 (September 1957): 196, 199.
13. Bruce Chilton, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Receptions of John's Revelation in Western Imagination* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 104.
14. Catherine Wessinger, "Apocalypse and Violence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 425.
15. Thomas Robbins and Susan Palmer, "Introduction," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 5.
16. Frances Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (London: Routledge, 2016), 64–66.
17. Stephen Stein, "Apocalypticism Outside the Mainstream in the United States," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen Stein (New York: Continuum, 2003), 493.
18. John Woolman, "Journal," in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 48–49.
19. Woolman, "Journal," 160.
20. Woolman, "Journal," 102, 104–5; John Woolman, "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How It Is to Be Maintained," in *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia M. Gummere (New York: Macmillan Company, 1922), 456.
21. Woolman, "Journal," 121.
22. Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 152–53.
23. John Woolman, "Concerning the Ministry," in *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia M. Gummere (New York: Macmillan Company, 1922), 315.
24. Henry Cadbury, *John Woolman in England a Documentary Supplement* ([London]: Friends Historical Society, 1971), 18.
25. Woolman, "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How It Is to Be Maintained," 473.