

Two Takes on God's Unfolding Apocalypse, American Style

Colleagues,

A week ago yesterday I trotted a class through the Book of Revelation in an hour and a half. I felt like an insect must when it tries to comprehend a ten-acre pond by touching down on the surface in a few places here and there. May it be that the folks in attendance went their way with at least two things firmly in mind. First, that "revelation" is the more English of English ways to render the Greek word "apokalypsis." Second, that Jesus wins. The latter, of course, is the Bible's last and greatest promise, to be trusted with a great joy that God invites already now. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain," etc.

Joy is not on American minds these days, though God's apocalypse is. Franklin Graham has been [crusading through California this week](#) to rouse the faithful against the godless lefties who are out to crush them—shades of the beast, and all that. Others of the same evangelical tribe (small "e," American) are wondering how Graham can imagine that Christ's current champion is the beastly occupant of the Oval Office—their point of view, and not just mine. A group of these folks, styling themselves as [Red-Letter Christians](#) ("we take the words of Jesus seriously"), held a [revival in Lynchburg, Virginia](#) on the weekend after Easter. Lynchburg is the home of Liberty University, now run by Jerry Falwell, Jr. Falwell, who shares Graham's delusion, took steps to keep the heretics off his campus. Their heartfelt pleas to meet with him in Jesus' name got no response.

Were I an end-times enthusiast, I think I'd take that episode at Lynchburg as a sign to start stocking up on Bibles and bottled water. "Then many will stumble, and they will betray one another

and hate one another” (Matt. 24:10), brothers and sisters at each other’s throats to say nothing of children and parents, and all refusing to talk (cf. Mk. 13:12). Thus Jesus. It seems a fair-enough summary of the politicized American church at the moment.

Still, “been there, seen that, done it too. *Kyrie eleison*. Jesus wins.” That’s the tape that’s replaying day after day in my own head right now, no matter the news. What else would you expect of a thoroughly un-enthusiastic Lutheran with an addiction to the externals of Word and Sacrament? So no, the question of the day is not what Amazon is charging for bottled water delivered in bulk, but rather, which neighbor to love tomorrow with [the apple tree I plant](#). Tis ever thus until Christ comes.

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This is not to suggest that apocalyptic musings are out of order. I ran across a remarkable one yesterday morning (May 30) in the *New York Times* of all places. The author is Russ Douthat, one of that organization’s regular columnists, and by its own standards, at least, a flagrant conservative. He is also a gladly uncloseted Roman Catholic, which doubtless drives some *Times* readers nuts. What drives me nuts is his [open dislike of Pope Francis](#), whose passion for putting the benefits of Christ into general play in the church strikes Douthat as reckless, if not heretical. Gospel is not his strong suit, in other words. Good writing is, though, and so is clear and considered thinking on matters other than the Gospel.

Both these gifts were on vivid display in yesterday’s essay, entitled “The Baptist Apocalypse.” I can’t recall when last I saw so strong a piece of theological reflection in a decidedly secular forum, so I pass it along as Item One for your own digestion this week. Those of you with a bent for Crossings

lingo will recognize it instantly as a “tracking” of an uncited text, Romans 1:18: “God’s wrath is being revealed...” The verb in Paul’s Greek is *apokalyptetai*. Douthat shows his awareness of this, and he explicates the matter with skill and concision for his untutored audience. Better still, he applies a twist to the idea of revelation that Bob Bertram would award him an “A” for. What’s popping up for all to see these days is not so much who God is, but rather who we are. That’s what God’s apocalyptic activity aims in the first place to reveal, and no, it isn’t pretty.

I don’t suppose Douthat fancies himself a prophet in the genuine Biblical sense, but that’s the role he’s playing, at least in this piece. Enough said. [Read for yourselves](#). Weep when you’re done, or gnash your teeth as the case may be.

After that, and for still more tears or worn enamel, move on to Item Two for this week, published below. I got it from Ed Schroeder some months ago. It’s a letter he wrote to an old seminary classmate in the week after the 2016 election, with some paragraphs added a day ago when I told him I would run it in conjunction with my pitch for Douthat’s piece. Those of you who have followed Ed for years will recognize much of it. He laid out the basics a number of times in the course of his 700 posts as Thursday Theology editor. It bears a revisit in 2018. Ed digs deeper than Douthat—of course he does. Readers foggy on the details of Belshazzar’s Feast ([Daniel 5](#)) should refresh themselves on that story before plunging in, with special attention to verses 24-28.

When done with all of it, repent. Remember, that is, the point of points of Revelation: Jesus wins. And for that thank God.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

"Apocalypse Now"

Ed Schroeder to a Seminary Classmate in November, 2016

with a May, 2018 addendum

November 2016–

I won't respond to the many items you have so extensively assembled in the post I just received. Their primary focus is on Nov. 8. And on Hillary and Obama and the liberals allegedly running the show before that. My Biblically-tinted lenses for reading our country's history is that it is "Apocalypse Now in the U.S.A." By virtue of this prehistory-reading, for me Nov. 8 was to be expected. I was not surprised, for theological reasons. To wit, God is (for me, patently) at work in the Decline and Fall of the American Empire. He's been at it for a good long while. But, as in the days of the Old Testament prophets, hardly anyone in the U.S.A. believes that this is true. Or even thinks about it. The national agenda is Make America Great Again.

So my conviction about the "apocalypse now" unfolding in the U.S.A. is not focused on Nov. 8, 2016. Neither candidate's campaign rhetoric changed that conviction. Nor would either candidate's victory have done so.

That conviction is a composite. A mosaic. Pasted together over the past several decades. Bits and pieces—beginning perhaps with the Vietnam war and those 50,000 body bags that came back home to become those 50K names on the Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C.. A war we lost. First one! (Well, the Korean war we didn't win either. It's still an armistice. But in Vietnam we got whacked by "little people" who should have been piece-of-cake

for Big America with all our military might to defeat. And we haven't won a war since then. The Middle East has been more of the same. But who has reflected on that divine retribution, our nation's failure, in public discourse—in either church or state?)

I was triggered into labeling our nation's demise Apocalypse Now after viewing Francis Ford Coppola's movie of the same name. How many years ago was that movie? He saw what Vietnam really was. Defeat for the U.S.A. Not only in the jungle over there, but also in the jungle here back home. Our super military power patently illusory. Our Goliath-complex felled by the little "stone" of the Vietcong. I used the movie as one of the class assignments in a Crossings course I taught, "crossing" the U.S.A.'s Apocalypse Now with the Apocalypse of St. John. (That last book of the NT, full of conundrums, I expect to be a major faith-resource for us Christ-confessors in the days to come.)

Some of my view of America today as empire—and crumbling empire—have been fleshed out from the exposure Marie and I have had in our decade of ELCA "mission volunteering" that has taken us to all continents on the planet except Antarctica. We've talked with people who love us Americans, but suffer from what America's empire, especially our economic empire, does to them. Though long-suffering himself, God finally does do "just deserts-justice" on the earth, also to empires. All the past empires in the world have crumbled, several of them in your and my lifetime. Ours is the only one left. And our nation divided is a clear sign to me of our demise.

The voters who put Trump in the White House in a sense agree with me in this diagnosis. America is crumbling. *Their* America is crumbling. Mistakenly many of them apparently think the basic reason for that is the nasty elites—among whom you and I with our doctor's degrees and life-achievements are co-villains—have

cheated them out of their desired and deserved goodies. Ironic for me is their Goliath hero, whose billions make him the elitest of the elites in the U.S.A. Therefore their oppressor. But irony is one of God's frequent mechanism for his left-hand work. Similar to Luther's irony-observation about politics: "God often uses one thief to punish another thief."

So at first level diagnosis, we elites (well, the liberal elites) may indeed be called the villains. But to stop the diagnosis there is literally superficial. Just on the surface. Deeper (level two in Crossings lingo) is the faith in capitalism (coupled with the hubris of our national greatness, our exceptionalism, "elite" in a way no other nation is) that has taken over in our nation, a complex "ism" that has assumed "soteriological pretensions"—Bob Bertram's term—in American public (and personal) life. And as soon as faith in some "ism" becomes Messianic, God's handwriting starts scrolling across the wall. Some see it, some don't. Even for those who do see it, some can comprehend the language, some can't.

Which leads to the deepest diagnosis: In response to false faiths God himself shows up at the final diagnosis, stage 3 ala the Crossings matrix. The root of our national problem is a "God-problem." God-the-critic now confronting us—in, with, under all the gosh-awful things folks complain about—both conservatives and liberals. A voice that apparently few hear, but some do: "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin." (Actually Aramaic, not Hebrew: "numbered, numbered, weighed, divided": the miraculous writing on the wall interpreted by Daniel as foretelling the destruction of Belshazzar and his Babylonian empire. Dan. 5:25–31.)

God is at work crumbling our empire. And until that Final Critic is addressed, addressed in the only salutary way God-the-Critic can be addressed, our Humpty-dumpty will continue to fall. "And

all the king's horses, and all the king's men..." (you know how the nursery rhyme ends).

Both Hillary's and Donald's proposals to rescue America are dead-ends by virtue of their superficial diagnosis of our nation's problem. Repentance is the last thing to expect from our president-elect. Either for anything in his own life, or for that of our nation. Band-aid therapy for mortal wounds are his proposals.

Make America Great Again? When God is saying: "My agenda with you is the exact opposite: Mene, Mene"

Joshua's words come to mind: Choose ye this day ...

Not only "whom you will serve," but who is going to win in that contest.

And a segment of God-the-critic, patently our nemesis, in action, I think, was his giving us two options on Nov. 8, neither of whom could make America great again. Both of whom showed themselves to be deaf and blind to the depth diagnosis of what's going on in America.

This isn't pessimism in contrast to your optimism. To my mind and eyes this is Biblical realism. Crossing America 2016 with the Word of God. All the kingdoms of this world pass away. For reasons of God's left-hand operation of executing his law. This time it's our turn.

How the president-elect will aid and abet that decline and fall of our empire I can't predict. But for this Law/Gospel Lutheran, that is what I expect. And had Hillary won, I'd expect the same. Unless

Unless, as Luther opined (1529) when Suleiman's "Turks" (Muslims) had surrounded Vienna, unless a few Christians did

repent—performing “surrogate repentance” for the entire Holy Roman Empire! For which Luther’s Bible-story precedent was Abraham “arguing God down” on the number—the very small number—of righteous people necessary for Sodom/Gomorrah’s survival.

And then there are Luther’s last uttered words: Wir sind Bettler; das ist wahr. We are beggars. That is true. So is the president, any president, of the U.S.A.

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May 2018—

Back to Luther for one more item.

In that 1529 essay on “the Turks” Luther was applying Augustine’s “theology of empires,” present in his work *The City of God*, to the Holy Roman Empire of his day. In that work Augustine seeks to interpret the fall of the ancient Roman Empire to his readers. Initially he addresses an alternate interpretation of that day which claimed it was the Christians, now widespread in the Roman Empire, who brought about its downfall. For with their “new religion” they had fractured the unity the empire enjoyed under the guardianship of the ancient gods of Roman and Greek religion.

Not so, argued Augustine. The one true God of the Christian faith is the God of all human history, Roman empire included. And that one true God metes out debit/credit equity on persons, nations and empires. Here was Augustine’s core conviction about empires, any empire: no empire can exist without being unjust to the other peoples which that empire dominates. Empires, by definition, are entities of injustice. Rome may have called what they brought to conquered peoples “pax romana,” but the peoples under that “pax” umbrella saw it as oppression, even

tyranny, i.e., patent injustice. Best evidence of that for Christian readers was the Roman Empire's domination of Jewish territory at the time of Jesus. Destruction was the end of the story.

Empires can never pass the righteousness test for administering justice to conquered peoples, Augustine concluded. They are self-preservation entities—"incurvatus in se," constitutionally curved into themselves. When God weighs them as his agents, they come up wanting. Therefore, when God wills that their time has come, they crumble. God eventually metes out retributive justice. The collapse of the Roman empire is just that. Yes, Rome may have lasted a thousand years, but for God a thousand years are like but a day—and vice versa.

Will the "pax americana" of the American empire pass the Mene-mene-tekel test? Substantive evidence for that is hard to find. So is it "apocalypse now" for our empire? If not that, then what is an alternate theological reading of our past and now present history?

And if it is Apocalypse Now, the final book of the New Testament—complex though much of it is—may well have articulated the Gospel for crossing our time too with the Word of God. Its opening words in Greek are "Apokalypsis Jesou Christou." ("Apokalypsis" literally = "take the veil away.") In the chapters that follow the apostle John offers Jesus Christ's own "unveiling"—both of himself and of the chaotic history of the apostle's time—and, no surprise he "crosses" the two, showing how Christ's personal unveiling nourished his disciples as the world around them was unravelling. Sounds like our agenda today.