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REDEFINING A MISNOMER: APOCALYPTICISM IN EARLY JESUS GROUPS¹

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A thorough consideration of early Christian apocalypticism reveals that this worldview is more complicated than ancient literature or modern interpretations suggest. Specifically, evidence suggests that the manner in which early Christians are remembered to have believed in an apocalyptic worldview does not reveal how these people actually conceived apocalypticism. Recent studies by Cameron, Smith, Ascough and Fairen demonstrate that a consideration of apocalypticism and eschatology is warranted because these terms have been engaged in theological rather than historical research. They suggest that popular genealogical interpretations do an injustice to historical research because they employ an ideological approach that does not examine an actual first century development.

Considering the challenges that these scholars raise against the traditional approaches to apocalypticism and eschatology as well as the terminology associated with such concepts, my research requires an evaluation of the methodological value of traditional approaches to end of the world expectations. As such, it is first necessary to explore; 1) the methodologies and theories used to approach this terminology and; 2) the socio-historical communities that many scholars argue came to hold eschatological and apocalyptic beliefs. Specifically, it is imperative to understand if and why this literature was popular and under which circumstances it developed. This exploration will determine how it is possible for “responsible scholars” to talk about apocalyptic beliefs and eschatology in reference to early and developing Jesus groups.

In its examination of end of the world expectations, this paper will explore the

¹ This research was submitted to my thesis committee on April 24th 2012.
² Recent studies by Braun and Arnal suggest that the concept of a first century Christianity was actually created in the second century. “This is not to say, of course, that nothing happened in the first century, but it is to say few Christian things happened and that what happened in the first century is massively mediated to us by what happened in the second century or later” (Braun, 16). Arnal aptly demonstrates that a united “Christian” identity was retroactively created to establish a shared tradition and identity where one did not previously exist (1-5). As such, when I use the word “Christian” or “early Christianity”, I do so with the recognition that these early Jesus groups were not united, had multiple identities and did not call themselves “Christian”.
possibility that traditional approaches and understandings of Christian apocalypticism are no longer sufficient. While not challenging the possibility that early Jesus people came to hold apocalyptic beliefs, I will challenge the assumption that Christian apocalypticism developed as a continuous movement from Jewish roots. Furthermore, I will lay the groundwork to challenge the assumption that apocalyptic beliefs only consisted of physical world upheavals and the return of a saviour figure. Specifically, I will suggest that either apocalypticism needs to be redefined as an immediate imaginative reinterpretation of contemporary beliefs or social structures or that this term should not be used as a category to explain the development of the earliest Jesus groups.

First, I will examine traditional methodological approaches to Christian apocalypticism found in modern scholarship. Specifically, I will explore the primary settings of the ancient literature as well as popular contemporary interpretations of the ancient data. Second, using 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians as test-cases, I will demonstrate that the earliest Jesus people were not consumed by redemption and retribution paradigms. Third, I will demonstrate that the categorization of early Jesus groups as apocalyptic is driven by modern scholars with a priori theological assumptions rather than ancient data. Finally, I will demonstrate the benefits of reconsidering, reconstructing or eliminating the misnomer of apocalypticism in early Jesus groups. Specifically, I will suggest that an interdisciplinary approach ungoverned by theological assumptions will help to reveal how early Jesus groups were formed by uncovering a direct relationship between the creation, maintenance and dismissal of imaginative interpretations and the negotiation of early Christian identities.

TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTICISM

Scholars who perpetuate the traditional approach to Christian apocalypticism insist that Jewish apocalypticism, as seen in the Hebrew Scriptures, explains Christian apocalypticism because it serves “as a transitional link between the salvation history of ancient Israel and nascent Christianity.”3 Accordingly, they argue that Jewish apocalypticism must be explored in order to appreciate the application of this worldview in Christianity.4 This first section of this paper will consider the primary settings under which this literature flourished as well as contemporary interpretations of the ancient data. Specifically, I will question what accounts for the popularity of this literature in antiquity and explore modern interpretations of Christian apocalypticism.

A COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

3 Fairen, 5.
In their examination of the economy and society in the Mediterranean world of the first century C.E., Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann demonstrate that social classes were based on social inequalities where money, property, power, privileges and prominence were held by few.\(^5\)

The members of a society hold different social positions, which in turn decide their esteem and their choices in life. [...] At the top of the societies of the Roman Empire there was apparently a small elite group that was distinguished in the consciousness of ancient authors by their noble birth, leadership in public office, wealth, and esteem. [...] The masses of the population [were] defined by the lack of the social traits that mark the elite.\(^6\)

Essentially, society was divided where physical or mental efforts required for survival were held in lower social regard than “the duties, businesses and capabilities that were reserved for the elite.”\(^7\)

The majority of both the rural and urban populations were increasingly impoverished, overtaxed, over indebted, worked in miserable conditions and were treated poorly.\(^8\) Not only were the living conditions of the lower social stratum poor, but the chances or opportunities to overcome such conditions were negligible. Stegemann and Stegemann describe the social classes as impermeable: there was little opportunity for economic or social mobility.\(^9\) “In societies with serious social difference, there is also unrest, conflict, and even rebellion.”\(^10\) As such, the general atmosphere of the first century C.E. was one of crisis. People who belonged to the earliest Jesus groups, potential converts as well as members of the greater society belonged to this community of crisis and would have felt an attraction to groups or literature that offered potential solutions or enlightenment to their contemporary economic, emotional and social plights.

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\(^6\) Stegemann and Stegemann, 57-58. The minority upper classes looked down upon the majority of the population (Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47).

\(^7\) Stegemann and Stegemann, 24.

\(^8\) Stegemann and Stegemann, 51-52. Roman society between the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E. was a slave based society. According to Bradley, roughly 33-40% of the population was slaves, a high percentage which was not seen in other Roman periods (Bradley, 30). In her recent study, Joshel acknowledges an intense debate surrounding the exact quantitative measurement of slavery in the Roman Empire, but suggests a number between 20-30% (Joshel, 7-8). Though the experiences of slaves differed and should not be considered as uniform, generally, the significant portion of the population belonging to the slave class were not treated as humans, but as objects or livestock, “devoid of human dignity” (Bradley, 53).

\(^9\) Stegemann and Stegemann, 93-94.

\(^10\) Stegemann and Stegemann, 95.
THE ATTRACTION

According to Meeks, it is possible to understand the socio-historical circumstances behind first century Jesus groups, and specifically Pauline communities, in terms of millenarian movements. “A millenarian movement looks forward to a series of events in the immediate future that will radically transform the existing relationships of power, prestige, and wealth.”11 Members of such millenarian groups normally imagine a future where their living circumstances are drastically changed and suffering is alleviated. Meeks suggests that individuals belonging to these groups “nurse strongly felt dissatisfactions.”12 Though members are described as deprived, one cannot limit their deprivations to economic status. “It is not their absolute level of poverty or powerlessness that counts, but the way in which they perceive their status relative to significant other groups.”13 As such, individuals who lack the opportunity to control their lives are more likely to be attracted to movements which offer an occasion to get ahead.

However, the attraction of millennial movements lies beyond real-life deprivations and an opportunity to gain control: the apocalyptic is not just a fantasy but an opportunity for individuals to make sense of their world in a symbolic way.14 Symbolism is an important part of the historical process where individuals are provided with the opportunity to deal with conflicts or confrontations.15 “[The] millennial myth provides not just fantasies or reversal, but also a comprehensive picture of what is wrong and why, and of how life ought to be organized.”16 Because of feelings of crisis, millennial myths are accompanied by a drastic reorganizing of leadership paradigms where the traditional is coupled with a new vision.

Meeks suggests that the Pauline Christians do not fit within the millenarian movement paradigm because early Jesus people were not socially or economically deprived.17 Though I am hesitant to accept this blanket generalization,18 Meeks makes an intriguing comment about the well-to-do Christians. He suggests that “although the evidence is not abundant, we may venture the generalization that the most active and prominent members of Paul’s circle (including Paul himself) are people of high status

11 Meeks, 172.
12 Meeks, 172.
13 Meeks, 172.
14 Meeks 172-173.
16 Meeks, 173.
17 Meeks, 173. In the second chapter of his book, Meeks examines at length the complexity and diversity of social stratification in the early Christian groups as well as the community at large. For example, specific references to individuals of wealth, including Prisca, Aquila, Chloe and Philemon suggest that Paul influenced individual from a variety of social and economic backgrounds (51-73). Evidence found in the Pauline letters suggests that members of all social levels were included in Jesus groups.
18 If we do accept that some Christians belonged to disadvantaged or impoverished social classes, it is plausible that such individuals did seek social and economic relief or hope for a future of reversal.
inconsistency (low status crystallization). They are upwardly mobile; their achieved status is higher than their attributed status.” In this case, the Pauline groups fit within the millenarian paradigm because the members perceived their relationship to other groups as problematic and inconsistent as well as sought advancement and consolidation of their worth. “We might guess that people who have advanced or declined socially, who find themselves in an ambiguous relation to hierarchical structures, might be receptive to symbols of the world as itself out of joint and on the brink of radical transformation.”

Scholars who subscribe to a traditional understanding of Christian and Jewish apocalyptic literature suggest that apocalypses were “written out of actual distresses”, though the distresses behind the texts may be significantly different. As such, these scholars are able to describe apocalyptic literature in general terms as crisis literature despite the fact that the underlying crisis behind the texts is different. Cohn describes individuals who subscribed to apocalyptic literature as a conquered people who used these texts to turn “to a distant past for strength to face a present and a future that they had no way of influencing.” Though Collins suggests that apocalyptic literature served as a tool for leaders to exhort and console its audience, he also implies that the audience needed to be exhorted or consoled. In an attempt to make sense of suffering and oppression as well as provide encouragement, apocalyptic literature insists that God would soon “reassert himself, destroying the forces of evil and [establish] his people as rulers over the earth.”

The texts present their revelations as received from God and indicative of a determined future where “there will be a final judgment. There will be an afterlife when human beings, including the resurrected dead, will receive

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19 Meeks, 73.
20 Meeks, 174.
22 For example, while this paper has considered a crisis of identity, poverty and lack of power that characterized the communities of the first-century, the Book of Daniel is often argued to result from a turbulent Israelite history where there was a growing opposition against foreign rule (Cohn, 166). This particular example also suggests that the Jewish people, though subject to the rule of others, were looking forward to a period when they would reign and all other kingdoms would be crushed. Arguably, evidence for a turbulent Israelite history can be found in Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s troubling dream. In response to Nebuchadnezzar’s concerns, Daniel claims that “in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44). Daniel’s interpretation of this dream suggests that apocalyptic literature reflects more than a literary style. This expectation of uncertainty and the hope of a future are arguably also present in the crisis of first century Jesus people.
23 Cohn, 167.
24 Collins, 22-23. Leaders or authors could use apocalyptic literature to “shape one’s imaginative perception of a situation and so lay the basis for whatever course of action it exhorts” (Collins, 41-42).
25 Ibid, 246.
their just rewards and punishments.”

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN CRISIS AND CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTICISM

Traditional approaches to Christian eschatology insist that as a daughter religion, it is natural that Christianity maintains models of prophetic Jewish apocalypticism. Scholars who accept this model insist that a consistent literary style proves continuity where Christian apocalypticism results as a final progression from Jewish apocalypticism. These scholars also hold that the period of crisis and hope experienced by the Christians further prove a relationship of apocalyptic continuity or transition with their Jewish forefathers.

In general terms, the traditional approach to apocalypticism argues that the Israelites “maintained that God had revealed to them the future, in which he would soon over throw the [oppressive] forces of evil, [...] establish his kingdom on earth” and ensue a period of redemption. These scholars argue that the major tenets of Jewish apocalypticism (namely future judgment, hope, redemption, vindication, dualism, the two-age doctrine and imminent expectation) can be detected, albeit somewhat

26 Cohn 164-165.
27 Cohn, 194. These scholars base their argument on the fact that Jesus and the first followers of the Jesus movement were Jewish and continued to follow the Jewish law or maintained Jewish customs. Scholars argue that examples of the influence of Judaism upon the Jesus movement can be found throughout the Gospels and the Pauline letters.
28 Vielhauer and Strecker, 558.
29 Philipp Vielhauer and Georg Strecker, “Apocalypses and Related Subjects,” in New Testament Apocrypha: Volume Two, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 543. It is important to bear in mind that the ideas and concepts presented by specific Jewish apocalypticism are not uniform or standardized: there are a variety of forms, subsets and characteristics (Vielhauer and Strecker, 554). Furthermore, the exclusion or non-inclusion of certain expected apocalyptical elements in literature should not preclude the text from the category of apocalypsis. In particular, the variations in the expected type of saviour among the Jewish apocalyptic texts are notable. Some apocalyptic texts describe a type of national Davidic king while others depict a redeemer figure or judge (ex: Isaiah vs. Daniel).
30 Ehrman, 244.
31 I began my research into the tenets of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism for my Master’s thesis at Concordia University. Angela Brkich-Sutherland, The Relationship Between Apocalypticism and the Status of Women in Early Christianity (Montreal: Concordia University, 2007).

1) Dualism or the doctrine of the two ages: There are two fundamental components to all reality. “The forces of good were headed by God himself, the forces of evil by his superhuman enemy” (Branick, 246). The concept of dualism also extends to the belief of a doctrine of two ages where history is dichotomized: the present age is deemed as evil and the future period where God will reassert himself is good. Vielhauer and Strecker elaborate on this idea and describe “this Age [as] temporary and perishable, [and] the Age to come [as] imperishable and eternal” (549). Furthermore, there is no continuity between the Ages: the new Age is transcendent and results from the complete annihilation of the present Age (Vielhauer and Strecker, 550).

2) Pessimism and hope for the beyond: Though God will rule again in the future and those who
modified, within early Christian literature. Those who supported God, accepted Jesus’ teachings, repented and endured would participate in the future kingdom of heaven while those who did not would be destroyed. Scholars determine that the prominence of these features in the literature prove that Christian apocalypticism is a progression or completion of Israelite apocalypticism.

CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTICISM

As has been just considered, scholars often claim that the earliest primary sources depict Jesus as an apocalyptic teacher who prophesies that evil will be overthrown in the near future and a good kingdom will reign. Many scholars also insist that early Jesus followers believed this message and expected an imminent end to their suffering. A brief consideration of Christian apocalypses will prove valuable to determine whether early Christian literature contains and supports this worldview.

Following the definition of apocalypticism and master-paradigm set forth by Collins in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Yarbro Collins determines that there are 24 early Christian texts that can be described as apocalypses. Though the texts side with him will benefit, the present world does not offer any reward because it is dominated by evil forces (Ehrman, 246). The authors of apocalyptic literature focus upon the devaluation of the present period, criticize current moral decay, predict the final catastrophe which annihilates the current world order and provide hope for the future (Vielhauer and Strecker, 550-551).

3) Vindication and universalism: God’s intervention entails a universal redemption where all people, living or dead, will be judged. This component of apocalypticism is greater than national eschatology because all humans, not only the Israelite population, will be required to prove their righteousness. Eternal reward will be given to those who had taken God’s side and eternal punishment will be given to everyone else (Ehrman, 248). The employment of this characteristic in a text offers the possibility that all individuals have the opportunity to escape destruction.

4) Imminence and determinism: God’s reassertion and the destruction of evil forces are expected at any moment. Because it was believed that the end of the world was imminent, people were encouraged to repent, remain faithful and endure sufferings (Ehrman, 248; Vielhauer & Strecker, 552-554). Furthermore, all events surrounding redemption and retribution are believed to be fore-ordained and proceed according to a fixed plan.

32 Vielhauer and Strecker, 57; Cohn, 195. For example, Ehrman, Vielhauer and Strecker and Branick.

33 Ehrman, 250-278; Cohn, 197.

34 Ehrman, 250. An example of such destruction and restoration can be found in 1 Corinthians 15: “Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15: 24-26).

35 “Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (Collins 1979, 9).

which Yarbro examines differ in the degree to which they subscribe to the master-paradigm, she determines that they share several common characteristics. All of the works studied contain heavenly revelation communicated by a heavenly mediator. Most of the texts have a visionary element either in the form of a simple vision account or in the form of an otherworldly journey. Most of these also contain revelation in the form of dialogue between seer and mediator or a discourse of the heavenly mediator. [...] The transcendent character of the revelation and the seer’s dependence on the heavenly world are often expressed by a description of the seer’s ecstatic reaction or by his or her requests addressed to the mediator. Temporal elements involve an interest in the past and contain expectations of the future. 37 Though the fashion in which the apocalypses depict future expectations differ, Yarbro Collins divides the literature into two main overarching categories; 1) those which subscribe to “both cosmic and personal eschatology” 38 and; 2) those which limit future hope to personal afterlife. 39 Again, while the texts differ, they all offer individual hope for an afterlife. 40

As stated by Collins, while Revelation is the only apocalypse included in the New Testament, “the Synoptic Gospels and the writings of Paul [...] are colored by an apocalyptic worldview to a significant degree.” 41 Cohn’s research also suggests that while the genre of the literature is not an apocalypse, apocalyptic themes play a prominent theme in the gospels. 42 According to Vielhauer and Strecker, the references to the “kingdom of God” and the “Son of Man” provide the strongest link to

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38 Yarbro Collins, 67.
39 Yarbro Collins, 68.
40 While Yarbro Collin’s examination of apocalypses offers insight into a literary genre, her paper does not examine apocalyptic teachings found in the New Testament as they fall outside of the task of her research.
41 Collins 1998, 256. The claim that Jesus was an apocalyptic teacher who prophesied the end of the current world order is substantiated through a genealogical interpretation of apocalypticism in Q, Mark, Matthew, Luke and the authentic Pauline epistles.
42 In his examination of Mark and Q, Cohn describes Jesus as “obsessed with the coming of the kingdom and the elimination of the forces that obstruct it” (Cohn, 194). Many scholars turn to Matthew and Q for evidence of the expectation of the imminent end of the world. In Matthew the author warns the Pharisees of the wrath to come: “every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3: 7-10). This warning of fire and destruction, which is likely borrowed from Q, becomes more violent: “his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3: 11-12). Those who do not subscribe to the appropriate beliefs or actions will be punished while those who do will benefit. Scholars who subscribe to the traditional approach to apocalypticism also often claim that Matthew makes reference to Isaiah when instructing on the kingdom of heaven. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out is the wilderness’” (Matt. 3: 2-3).
apocalyptic worldviews. Though this paper will evaluate the validity of traditional approaches to apocalypticism, it is worth noting that certain passages in New Testament literature could be interpreted as maintaining end of the world expectations.

Evidence for eschatological beliefs is most often drawn from Pauline literature. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians contains the most frequent references to the Parousia and has the most explicit reference to the end of the world.

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Ehrman argues that these repeated references suggest that the “most important belief about Jesus to the Thessalonians […] was that he was soon to return from heaven in judgment on the earth.” Though the nature of their eschatological expectations is debated, numerous scholars argue that this letter proves that the Thessalonians expected their current plight to end.

Meeks argues that while 1 Thessalonians is often used as a case study for eschatology, the use of apocalyptic language is found throughout the Pauline epistles. The consistent use of apocalyptic language and imagery in the letters indicates that the worldview was “intelligible and important to his followers.” Scholars also use 1 Corinthians as proof that Christians expected an imminent end and lacked concern for a long term future. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul describes the passing of the present world, the mystery of the Parousia and the requirements for salvation. “We will

Vielhauer and Strecker, 569. While the title “Son of Man” is most commonly found in Mark, it is also referenced in the other gospels. Examples of Mark’s reference to Jesus as the Son of Man can be found throughout the Gospel. A commonly referred to example of this usage includes Jesus’ instruction to the disciples “to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (Mark 9: 9-13). Jesus also foretells the coming of the Son of Man in Mark. “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13: 26-27). This reference is also made in Matthew 24: 29-31 and Luke 21: 25-28. Mark connects the title of Son of Man with a future period when he discusses Jesus’ return and the impact that such a return will have upon people. “Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of that one will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8: 38).

Though there are numerous examples which could be drawn to demonstrate that it is possible to interpret the New Testament as being littered with apocalyptic insights, for the sake of brevity only a few will be provided.


1 Thess. 4: 15-17.

Ehrman, 307.

Meeks, 171.
not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.”49 He also instructs the Corinthians to live their lives with an awareness that the current state of affairs would change.

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away.50

Though we are not able to draw any direct conclusions about the beliefs or activities of the communities from Paul’s instructions, the letters make us aware of that one leader engaged eschatological instructions or apocalyptic imagery to instruct his communities.

**TESTING THE HYPOTHESIS: WHERE IS THE APOCALYPTIC?**

Though the traditional approach to Christian apocalypticism is widely accepted, evidence suggests that the theory of a Jewish completion or transition does not accurately reflect the historical development of first century Jesus groups. This portion of my paper will use 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians as socio-historical test-cases to determine the value of the traditional genealogical approach to Christian apocalypticism.51 These test-cases will suggest that the Pauline communities of Corinth and Thessaloniki, though assumed to maintain apocalyptic and eschatological beliefs by many contemporary scholars,52 did not initially expect an imminent end of the world and the ensuing return of their saviour. Engaging the theoretical and methodological approaches set forth by J.Z. Smith, Burton Mack, Ron Cameron, Merrill P. Miller, William Arnal and Willi Braun, I will now consider whether we can consider these

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49 1 Cor. 15: 51-52; Charles, 446.
50 1 Cor. 7: 29-31.
51 Though numerous texts could have been selected for a socio-historical examination (see Yarbro Collins, 1979), for the sake of brevity and continuity with the remainder of my project, I have selected 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians.
52 While there is scholarly debate surrounding Paul’s apocalyptic theology and his application of this worldview, scholars who employ the traditional approach to Christian apocalypticism generally argue that Paul and his communities were indebted to the concept of the apocalyptic (Meeks, 171-172). Scholars who hold this traditional view of Christian apocalypticism argue that the Pauline communities came to accept the Jewish tradition of an imminent end where they would be saved from evil and began to prepare for an imminent future that included the coming of the Kingdom within their lifetime. The contemplation of the meaning of Paul’s apocalyptic worldview continues to be debated and interpreted in modern scholarly and theological works. “What Paul’s apocalyptic framework means two thousand years later remains an open field for theological reflection. Perhaps the apocalyptic images used by Paul will remain indispensable symbols directing us to the mystery” (Branick, 675). A majority of the debate surrounding Pauline apocalypticism centers on the issue of a realized eschatology versus future expectations of an imminent end of the world.
groups as historically apocalyptic.\textsuperscript{53} I will also utilize DeMaris’ methodological approach to re-examine Corinth and Thessaloniki.

The New Testament rarely speaks directly about ritual practice and reveals only slightly more indirectly, which necessitates a strategy for getting at those rites. Reading between the lines, whatever form that might take, is certainly necessary. To recover the early church’s ritual life, an interpretive model will be essential for teasing out a maximum of information from the data we have.\textsuperscript{54}

As such, I will not assume that descriptions and instructions provided by Paul in his letters accurately reflect actual circumstances in the Pauline communities but consider what purposes such instructions serve.

\section*{CORINTH IN CONTEXT\textsuperscript{55}}

Evidence, including the founding charter of Corinth, suggests that death and dying played an important role in the lives of Corinthians. Specifically, they held the fundamental belief that the living and the dead were divided, were obsessed with death and caring for the dead and fixated on the successful transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead.\textsuperscript{56} By examining the manner in which the Corinthians

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\begin{enumerate}
\item[53] Specifically, I will utilize Jonathan Z. Smith’s model of research into the history of religions, Burton Mack’s description of Jesus groups as social experiments, Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller’s theory of social formation and Willi Braun and William Arnal’s theses on social formation, mythmaking and retroactive descriptions.
\item[55] Though the Greek city of Corinth was dismantled, sacked and defeated by Rome in 146 B.C.E., archaeological records suggest that the city itself was not completely destroyed (G.D.R. Sanders, “Urban Corinth: An Introduction” in \textit{Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches} (ed. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 26; Bruce Winter, \textit{After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change} (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 7-8). “There was a partial and selective destruction of Greek structures and the city walls. As a result, Corinth was deprived of its civic and political identity” but did not remain vacant as squatters settled the area (Sanders, 26; Winter, 8). When the first settlers arrived in 44 B.C.E., Corinth was subject to the implementation of Roman design, the imposition of Roman culture, the use of Latin and the importation of various official and fringe religious beliefs and practices.Sanders, 27, 59; Winter, 8, 14, 21. Bookidis recognizes “three different simultaneous levels in the operation of religion in Early Roman Corinth” (163). Religious practices include official Roman cults, Greek cults that became part of Roman practices and fringe Greek cults. Walbank suggests that while we know that numerous religious practices and beliefs co-existed, it is not possible to determine how and when the ideas and practices coalesced (249). See Nancy Bookidis, “Religion in Corinth: 146 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.” in \textit{Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches} (ed. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). Also see Mark E. Hoskins Walbank, “Unquiet graves: Burial Practices of the Roman Corinthians” in \textit{Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches} (ed. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
\item[56] This is evident in the baptism of the dead and the use of Jesus in curse tablets (Walbank, 250).
\end{enumerate}
cared for the dead and engaged in ritual practices revolving around death and burial. We gain insight into their belief.

There is a substantial amount of archaeological evidence for burial practices at Corinth. While the manner in which individuals were buried and the tombs are varied, a few points of commonality are of interest. For example, many burial sites were accompanied with funerary offerings, personal effects, lamps and painted scenes. Walbank concludes that bowl and cup offerings suggest that food and drinks were provided for the dead and were believed to provide sustenance for the deceased. In one case, a pitcher was buried above the body to guarantee the reception of libations. Evidence also suggests that burial meal rituals were a continuous ordeal. The interpretation of these practices as expressing a “sense of continuity between the living and the dead” is supported by inscriptions found throughout the Mediterranean.

The relationship between the deceased and their family or friends was two-fold; 1) the survivors wished to guarantee their dead relative or friend a safe passage to the afterlife. Though dying was not believed to be unnatural, the transition to the afterlife was perceived as difficult and requiring assistance. Concern for safe passage to their afterlife is exhibited in the burial of coins in the deceased’s mouth or hand. The attempt to ensure safe travels or concerns for “liminality” is also evident in painted tombs which depicted the pleasures that were expected to be bestowed upon a person in the afterlife; 2) the living wished to protect themselves from people who had died. “The dead were considered to be a source of supernatural, and often malign, influences from which the living had to be protected.” Because death was believed to cause disruptions for the living, successful transitions were believed to regain stability. Furthermore, it was believed that dead individuals could be employed for personal

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57 Ibid, 249.
58 For an examination of various archaeological burial sites, see Walbank 249-280.
59 Walbank, 258, 272-273.
60 Ibid, 272.
61 In one tomb, vessels “suitable for both cooking and serving a meal” were found (Walbank 272-273). Archaeological studies suggest that such findings are consistent with “kitchen facilities” found in other tombs (Walbank, 273).
62 Festivals, private family occasions and anniversaries were established to offer food to dead relatives and friends (Walbank, 273)
64 Ibid, 274.
65 Ibid, 263.
66 Walbank, 265.
67 Walbank, 274; DeMaris, 1995, 675.
causes if honoured while they could cause fearful trouble if ignored. 68

1 CORINTHIANS IN LIGHT OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

With the acknowledgement that the Corinthians were concerned with death and burial rituals before Paul’s arrival, we must consider the extent to which his letter reflects a community that accepted an apocalyptic genealogical transition from Judaism to Christianity. Rather than assume the traditional approach, we need to recognize the possibility that the Corinthians were attracted to and adapted portions of Paul’s instructions that related to their contemporary beliefs and practices. Furthermore, we must also consider Paul’s use of apocalypticism and eschatological images and the possibility that he manipulated the Jesus message to make it more palatable to individual groups. This is supported by Paul’s inconsistent use of apocalyptic and eschatological images in his letters as well as his flexible theology which was adapted to the necessities of specific communities. 69 This test-case does not suggest that the Corinthians did not come to hold an apocalyptic worldview, but proves that the traditional paradigms that explain the circumstances under which they came to hold these beliefs are inadequate. Furthermore, it forces us to consider that the modern understanding of the category apocalyptic may be too narrow.

THESSALONIANS TEST-CASE70

68 Christine M. Thomas, “Placing the Dead: Funerary Practice and Social Stratification in the Early Roman period at Corinth and Ephesus” in Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches (ed. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 290. The use of the dead by individuals in the ancient world as safeguards is evident in the use of curse tablets. While the translation of 1 Cor. 12:3 is currently debated, it is not unrealistic to suggest that Paul’s statement, “no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’”, refers to the use of Jesus in curse tablets (Winter 173-176). As such, not only did the Corinthians placate their dead relatives and friends for assistance, but they also attempted to employ Jesus. It is also worth noting that some individuals in the Roman Empire who wished to establish their prominence would often resort to rich burials. “Very rich burials show the instability of the elite and their need to legitimate themselves vis-a-vis other classes that might aspire to power” (Thomas 292). As such, the obsession with death and burial practices in Corinth may also reflect concerns for social and political power.

69 Vincent P. Branick, “Apocalyptic Paul?” The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 47 (1985), 668. Parrish considers at length the use of language as a tool when he explores similarities between the Imperial cult and Paul’s “gospel”. Considering Horsley’s examination of Paul’s “gospel”, Parrish concludes that Paul instructed his communities systematically and places his message in direct competition with that of the Caesar (Parrish, 105-110). “Paul rather uses these terms to present Jesus Christ as the lord and saviour who has displaced Caesar as lord and saviour” (Horsley, 386). Though many scholars suggest that Paul’s instructions are spiritual, Parrish argues that Paul depicts Jesus as a “counter-emperor”: Paul provides an anti-imperial message with his use of eschatological terminology (Horsley, 385-386; Parrish, 109).

70 Richard S. Ascough, Forthcoming “Paul’s ‘Apocalypticism’ and the Jesus Associations at
Unlike Corinth, Thessalonica did not leave an abundance of archaeological evidence for burials. However, Ascough demonstrates that 44 inscriptions that provide evidence for participation in diverse voluntary associations are revealing. Specifically, with a detailed analysis of the relationship between the Christian community and professional voluntary associations, he demonstrates that the inclusion of eschatological images in 1 Thessalonians results from concerns about dead members rather than theological questions. I will briefly summarize Ascough’s findings and demonstrate how they relate to the study of apocalypticism and the previous Corinthian test-case.

Drawing from evidence of the working class nature of the Thessalonians and the prominence of voluntary associations in antiquity, Ascough astutely demonstrates that a more complete understanding of Thessalonica is achieved if the socio-historical circumstances under which specific worldviews develop, are maintained or manipulated are considered. Ascough determines that Paul maintains a positive outlook towards manual labour and exhorts his followers to continue with their travails: “work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.” Paul’s reference to his own arduous labour in 1 Thess. 2: 9 and his exhortations suggest that contact and candidacy for proselytizing was facilitated by participation in the same type of trade. Furthermore, the local shops where Paul encountered the candidates and “worked night and day” as to not “burden” them were likely linked with a professional voluntary association. Ascough argues that Paul’s use of verb *ργζομαι* (to work) when discussing both manual labour and the building of the religious community suggests that “it is likely that the leaders at Thessalonica continued with both kinds of activity, manual labour alongside community members and the labor of community formation. If so, the leaders of the Thessalonians are like the leaders of many voluntary associations.”

Though defeated in 168 B.C.E. by Rome, the city of Thessalonica did not lay in complete ruin. In fact, “[t]he city retained the right to govern itself according to its ancestral laws and to have its own officials” (Ascough, 156). As such, while Thessalonica was under Roman occupation, the city did not lose its’ Greek roots. Thessalonica, which became the capital of Macedonia in 146 B.C.E., benefitted from civic privileges and commercial successes (Ascough, 156). Many of the religious practices of the Thessalonian people were dedicated to indigenous gods, but by the Hellenistic and Roman periods, foreign deities were introduced and became popular (Ascough, 156-157). Like other ancient cities, Thessalonica honoured the Roman emperor, Roman patrons and Roman client rulers with honorifics and inscriptions. “Romans received honors at Thessalonica not because of who they were but rather because of what they did” (Ascough, 158).

71 Ascough, 158; Nigdelis, 14. According to Ascough, Thessalonica “provides the richest evidence for voluntary associations in Macedonia (2011, 158).

72 Ascough, 2004, 529.

73 1 Thess 4: 11.

74 Ascough, 2000, 314-315.

75 1 Thess. 2: 9, Ascough, 2000, 315.

76 Ascough, 2000, 318. In his final exhortations to the Thessalonians, Paul encourages the community “to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish...”
willingness to accept the association leaders as the religious community leaders demonstrates that he did not impose a pre-set leadership structure upon the Thessalonians and instructed his community as per their own specific local circumstances.

Ascough outlines three different types of voluntary associations in antiquity; 1) religious associations; 2) professional associations; 3) funerary associations. It is estimated that approximately one third of the Roman population belonged to voluntary associations with some individuals belonging to more than one group. “Although ancient voluntary associations were not formed solely for the purpose of burial of their members [and served social functions], it is clear that death, burial, and memorial figured prominently in the collective lives of association members.” The associations ensured the proper burial of its members, took part in actual burials, maintained tombs, set up inscriptions for the deceased and bestowed honours and organized annual commemorations for those that endowed such celebrations. These activities vocalized membership and provided individuals and groups with a sense of community and a distinct identity. “Funerary monuments, including inscriptions, ‘seem to speak the language of belonging.’ Funerary practices reflect a ‘strategy of social differentiation’ insofar as the type and extravagance of one’s memorial reflect one’s status. They are also a means of ‘cultural integration’ since they function as symbols that one has a place within the larger social context.”

By examining the fashion in which apocalyptic language in 1 Thessalonians functioned within its specific community, we can appreciate Paul’s use of on the spot mythmaking to address specific concerns regarding the inclusion of the deceased in the community. Ascough raises several important points; 1) despite the fact that the Thessalonians were not Jewish, the popular “apocalyptic” style of literature used by Paul would have made sense; 2) Paul used apocalyptic language because it was a valuable tool to convince them that Jesus was necessary. How better to instill superiority than to threaten destruction? When one announces a coming cataclysmic destruction and then promises ‘deliverance’ only to those who would align themselves with this god, and this god alone, it plays well in a

Ascough 2000, 318.
Ascough 2011, 160. The development of funerary associations developed after our period of interest in the second century (160).
Ascough 2011, 160.
Ascough, 151, 161.
Ascough 2004, 510-515; Ascough 2011, 162-166; Nigdelis, 29-33.
Ascough 2011, 168.
Ascough 2011, 172.
community already used to such discussions. This does not make them ‘apocalyptic’ or millenarian, just scared of destruction. No matter where Paul derived the seeds of this fledgling myth (e.g., Jewish apocalypticism), it plays in a somewhat distinctive way for his Thessalonian audience.

As such, the Thessalonians were not apocalyptic but were the subjects of an “identity forming stunt” and; 3) the concern about the dead is related to the prominent cult of the dead.

Ascough proceeds to reconstruct and redescribe the Thessalonian community as heavily influenced by the cult of the dead and having included deceased individuals in their living voluntary association. Because the dead had never ceased to be part of their community, the group was concerned about the status of deceased individuals in their new association. Their question about the dead is not theological but about who belongs.

I agree with Mack and Ascough that “we can almost see Paul working it out on the spot, desperately trying to find a way to answer the question about those who had died.” Paul uses apocalyptic and eschatological themes to address a specific community that had specific concerns, held hero cult tendencies and was formed like a voluntary association. His use of rhetorical tools allows him to present the Thessalonians with understandable and tangible concepts as well as social practices with which they can to redefine themselves and align themselves with a new deity. “Thus, although there are some similarities between the Thessalonian Christian community and the voluntary associations, Paul also reflects a desire for a community ethos different from that found in the associations. Yet it is still significant that Paul uses voluntary association language to produce this different community ethos.”

Essentially, Paul uses voluntary association language and eschatological images to pull a “switch-a-roo”. Paul also uses apocalyptic language to build his community, establish an identity and provide the Thessalonians with hope in an understandable context. The mythmaking and social formation that results from concerns about dead individuals helps us to understand not only how early Christian groups formed, but provides us with glimpses of how worldviews were used as tools to establish identities.

CONCLUSIONS

As has been demonstrated, the study of early Christian apocalypticism and

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84 Ascough 2011, 175.
85 Ascough 2011, 175.
86 Ascough 2011, 178.
87 Ascough 2004, 509.
89 Ascough, 2000, 322.
90 Ascough 2011, 178. In an attempt to demonstrate that there is still hope and that the dead are still full members of the community, Paul engages an apocalyptic theme which considers the dead to be sleeping: individuals who have died will not only resurrect, but will precede the living.
eschatology in early Jesus groups is not uncomplicated or straightforward. Specifically, the way that the earliest Christians are thought to have held apocalyptic beliefs does not accurately reflect their actual beliefs or practices. Cameron, Smith, Ascough and Fairen demonstrate that we need to redefine apocalypticism and eschatology because these terms cannot be used as an explanation of Christian origins. First, it is necessary to stop using theological assumptions or “extra-historical categories of uniqueness” as part of a historical task.\textsuperscript{91} Second, rather than using modern theological apocalyptic assumptions as explanatory categories to understand the development of first century Jesus groups, we need to identify why some groups held these beliefs and under what conditions these beliefs flourished.\textsuperscript{92} This approach considers historical contexts, human motivations and personal needs as well as provides us with the opportunity to explore the fashion in which rituals and literature can promote and establish group unity and identity.

This interdisciplinary approach will reveal that some early Christians adopted eschatological imagery and language for strategic purposes: “eschatological argumentation was an ordinary feature of mythmaking and social formation.”\textsuperscript{93} This approach challenges the assumptions that: 1) all of the earliest Jesus people held apocalyptic expectations; 2) that all of the early Jesus groups held the same apocalyptic expectations; 3) that apocalypticism was never used as a means to an end and; 4) that all Christian apocalypticisms are only generated from a genealogical connection with beliefs found in the Hebrew Scriptures rather than contemporary worldviews. Finally, this research challenges us to question the category apocalyptic of apocalyptic itself. While the majority of scholarship examines a narrowly defined category of apocalyptic beliefs, we must be prepared to accept that other practices or beliefs while not traditionally accepted as apocalyptic might in fact better describe some early Christian worldviews or practices. Perhaps it is the ability of a person to re-imagine understandings of the current world order that should be considered as “apocalyptic”. As such, it would be more beneficial to consider the circumstances under which individuals feel empowered to redescribe contemporary structures than assume that they do so because they expect the world to end.

\textsuperscript{91} Smith, 42.
\textsuperscript{92} Cameron, 240.
\textsuperscript{93} Cameron, 241.
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