

**Eschatological Visions**  
**Or: Everything Gonna Be All Right**  
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The Book of Revelation. What is the liberal Christian, or the non-Christian, supposed to *do* with Revelation? Perched there at the end of the Bible, it is an acid trip filled with strange beasts, apocalyptic horsemen, and fanatically-worshipping angels. Bearing almost no stylistic resemblance to any of the books preceding it, Revelation is so phantasmagorical in its imagery that not even biblical literalists can read it literally. This is attested by the fact that a cottage industry has arisen around its interpretation, or “de-coding.” More distressingly, after Jesus has spent the entire Gospels preaching love and forgiveness, then Paul and the other apostles have gone out to start spreading this message of hope, Revelation dives into an orgy of vengeance and violence rivaled only by the bloodiest passages of the Old Testament. So what is this book *doing* at the end of the Bible, and what are we supposed to make of it?

In fact, biblical scholars tell us Revelation fits squarely within an ancient literary genre that was well-established by the time its author, Saint John the Divine, wrote it: the eschatological vision. Eschatology concerns the end of the world, or at least the end of *this* world, and its transformation into a radically different order. What does this new order look like? The Book of Revelation gives us surprisingly little detail in this regard, for in fact, the vast majority of the book is devoted, not to the emergence of the new order, but to the violent tribulations leading up to it. Only in Chapter Twenty-One of the book’s twenty-two chapters does John finally give us this striking image:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

In the new Jerusalem, God will not be absent in some distant heaven, but rather dwell right here with us. He will wipe away those tears still left in our eyes from the old order. But then, there will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, for these former things have passed away.

Unfortunately, even at this point in the narrative, when John has just given us a beatific vision of the future, he is not done describing the violence that will lead up to it. He immediately goes on to add:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

Indeed, this final line gives us a fairly good summary of the first twenty chapters of Revelation, in which God is portrayed as visiting all manner of plagues, natural disasters, warfare, and death upon the earth, singling out for reprieve only those who have been exceptionally faithful. When, in Chapter Twenty-One, God finally presents the world with a new Jerusalem, he must wipe away all, not just our tears, but also a river of blood.

So, granting that Revelation fits within an established tradition of eschatological literature, this still leaves us with the question, “What are we to make of all this?” Contemporary Christians of a more conservative or fundamentalist bent have had little trouble answering this question. They may debate about how specific passages found within Revelation should be interpreted, but they agree that the book offers a prediction of events that will literally come to pass at some point in the future, quite likely some point in the very near future. When “the rapture” begins, they maintain, true believers will be taken up in the clouds with Jesus, where they will have a front row seat for the thousand-plus years of tribulation that will plague the earth, before they are invited to dwell for an eternity of bliss and comfort in the new heaven-on-earth, while those who have not been faithful are slaughtered and cast into hell. Indeed, the new heaven will be a paradise precisely *because* it has been cleansed of all things evil. With everyone bearing any evil within them having been thrown into the lake of fire, there will be no more *need* for warfare or suffering or tears—the new Jerusalem will be occupied only by the righteous, who can have no quarrels between them.

For those of us who are not conservative Christians, this reading of Revelation is not compelling. For one thing, it is simply not believable. According to several passages in the New Testament, the new Jerusalem was supposed to come within a generation of Jesus’s death. If the end times did not come then, nor have they come in the intervening two thousand years, can we really believe that our own generation is so special that we would be chosen to undergo the rapture? In fact, I would argue that there is something spiritually abusive about promising the imminent

arrival of a utopian order when this new order seems always to disappear just over the horizon. Can it lead to anything but disappointment and despair when people spend their entire lives waiting expectantly for the coming of the new kingdom, yet the kingdom never comes? Or can it lead to anything but anger and violence when a state of perfect goodness is promised, yet evil continues to creep in on all sides, ruining paradise for everyone? And when you consider that the main narrative of Revelation is not even a description of the new Jerusalem, but rather a violent account of the ways in which God will visit death and destruction upon those who are not among the elect, can this do anything but feed into the violent “revenge fantasy” of those who feel they have been promised heaven, but are trapped in a hell-on-earth by the forces of evil that are surrounding them and dragging them down?

But if that is not how we are going to read Revelation, this brings us back once again to the question of what we are supposed to do with this strange book. Before addressing this question head on, I would like to throw out a few preliminary suggestions. First, I think it is helpful to remember that the author of Revelation frankly tells us that what he is relating is a vision. He does not say whether this vision came to him as a dream, as visions are wont to do, but it is surreal enough that I think we can assume it did. When we dream, we do not worry about events having the same logical continuity that we demand in waking life. Rather, we just ride along with the disjointed flow of one image into the next, often absorbing more of the *feeling* of events than their specific content. And the images presented in Revelation are so fantastical, sliding into one another with so little narrative flow, that we can only hope to follow John’s account through to the end if we give up our waking demand for coherence and just ride the waves of emotion and imagery. Otherwise stated, if we are trying to place Revelation within the context of the larger Bible, we should not group it together with historical books such as Exodus or Acts, which present us with series of events that are claimed to have actually happened. We should probably not even try to read Revelation like one of Jesus’s parables, stories that everyone knows to be fictitious, but which are nonetheless coherent narratives that contain clear allegorical meanings. We do better to group Revelation with such books as the Song of Solomon or Ecclesiastes, which utilize the emphatically non-literal, non-linear vehicle of poetry to simply bathe us in images and ideas and emotions.

Second, when reading Revelation, we need to keep some historical context in mind. Most scholars now agree that the book was likely written around the year 96 of the Common Era. Its

purported author, John, was from Ephesus, a city in Asia Minor that was both an early center of Christianity and a Roman imperial capital. Some twenty-five years before, Roman forces had violently crushed a widespread Jewish rebellion, sacking Jerusalem and destroying its venerable temple. As John wrote, the emperor Domitian was trying establish Ephesus as a new center of imperial cult worship, with his own family as the gods to be worshipped. We do not know exactly how violently Christian Ephesians were persecuted, but those who refused to worship their Roman occupiers doubtless faced some intimidation, and quite possibly even torture or execution. Hence, for John's first readers, the images of death and destruction that he spins out would not have been as fantastic and distant as they are for us today. This was rather the stuff of everyday life for John's community; this was the early Christian world. So while it may seem to us—living in the prosperous, well-ordered, relatively safe world of twenty-first century America—that some sort of radical cataclysm would need to take place for the thousand years of tribulation to be ushered in, for John and his readers, the tribulation—seemingly interminable, feeling like a thousand years—had already begun.

This last observation points us toward the final, and I think the most important, point that we need to keep in mind if we are to draw something spiritually meaningful out of Revelation. When this book is given a fundamentalist reading, its readers invariably assume they are among the elect who will be taken up in the clouds with Jesus. Accordingly, the perspective they take on the tribulation John describes is that of observers looking down on the suffering of others. At best, this perspective evokes a sense of relief, along the lines of, "There but for the grace of God goes I." At worst, it can stoke a sadistic delight in the spectacle of one's adversaries finally getting what they deserve. Neither attitude, I would argue, is either indicative of, or conducive to, spiritual health. I would therefore suggest that we try to read Revelation from the perspective of John and his original readers. They were not sitting up in the clouds watching others suffer. They were already living the tribulation; they were the ones suffering. As we might now say, they were the ones who were "left behind." On this reading, John's vision does not depict some future binary struggle between good and evil in which "the good" will ultimately triumph by driving "the evil" from the world. It is rather a poetic account of our present day world, of our lives here and now. On this reading, we cannot return to paradise simply by eliminating all of those who participate in darkness, since darkness weaves its way in and out of all our lives. Indeed, on this reading, we can never "return" to Paradise, at all, since a Paradise devoid of conflict and sorrow and tears never really existed; the thousand years of tribulation has always been our world.

But once again, on this sober note, what do we *do* with all of this? Why even read Revelation rather than throwing the book down in horror? To begin answering this last question, I think it is useful to jump a couple of thousand years past first-century Christian Ephesus to consider another community that has suffered intense and prolonged persecution, the black community in America. In particular, I would like to consider two distinctive forms of music that emerged in the black American south around the beginning of the twentieth century: gospel music, or “Negro spirituals,” and the blues. Within the African-American community of the time, these two forms of music were seen as diametrically opposed: one was the Lord’s music, the other the devil’s. But I believe these two genres are tied together, not just by a similar history, but by the strong connection they bear to eschatological literature. In fact, I think both forms of music can help us to make sense of the eschatological vision found in Revelation.

In technical musical terms, blues is defined by a particular chord progression that repeats itself every sixteen bars. The more popular association with blues, however, is its content. As we discussed with the children, blues songs are typically about suffering; they are stories telling us why the singer “has the blues.” Many of these stories revolve around love and its dissolution, with perhaps the most common lament being, “My baby done left me.” This is partly because love and its loss truly are universal themes that we all experience at some time or other. But it is also because love was one of the “safe” topics that African-Americans in the early twentieth century could sing about and still be allowed to perform or get recorded. Singing about more overtly political or social topics was taboo; it simply could not be done. It goes without saying, however, that the existing socio-political order was *precisely* what was making life such an extreme struggle for southern blacks in the early twentieth century. Forbidden from singing publically about Jim Crow, blues musicians turned to other, safer topics, by means of which to express their pain. And artistically expressing pain, I believe, can have a spiritually healing effect. As risk of over-analyzing an art form that flowed organically from the hearts of a suffering, persecuted people, I believe the blues accomplishes this healing in a three-stage manner.

First, there is the mere vocalizing of the pain. For purposes of illustration, let us assume my baby really *has* left me—something that really does hurt. To speak aloud what has just happened, or to sing it, does not suddenly make this pain go away. It is still a kick in the ribs. Nonetheless, the

vocalization does create just the slightest bit of reflective distance between myself and my pain. To be sure, I still feel the pain subjectively, and it still hurts intensely. At the same time, however, I am viewing the pain objectively; it is a “something” that I have now put out there in the world before me. We might think here about what is taught in meditation. In everyday life, when you are sitting for a long time and a muscle starts to cramp up, you simply change positions and stretch the muscle out. Given that one of the goals of meditation is to remain motionless, however, what is taught is neither to give into the pain and shift positions, nor to try to ignore the pain and hope it goes away. The novice is taught, rather, to make the pain the object of focus: to study it, turn it over in one’s mouth, pick up the rhythm of its throbbing. The pain does not thereby disappear, but it does become objectified, to the point that the advanced practitioner may almost forget that this is *my* pain, and that it *hurts*. The pain almost becomes a thing out there in the world like any other object, there for consideration. Almost, but not totally. It still comes back. It still hurts. But the pain is perhaps lessened just a bit, or at least made more bearable, through having been objectified.

In blues music, however, the artist’s suffering is not just spoken. It is sung, typically accompanied by instrumental music. And for the gifted artist, this does not just objectify the pain, but it adds a layer of beauty on top of it. Indeed, the beauty of blues music derives not from covering up pain, but from expressing it in its rawest, most authentic form. When a gifted blues vocalist like Billie Holiday sings, you can just hear the pain dripping from her voice. Let’s listen to *My Man*, a song about a man whom the singer loves. A man who two-times her, who beats her, but to whom she cannot help returning.

*Musical Interlude: My Man*

Clearly, Billie Holiday did not use her music to escape from the suffering that really did plague her personal life. Rather, she sang that suffering with her whole, broken heart. And that is the source of her music’s beauty. By taking personal suffering and laying it out there for all the world to see, yet doing so using a beautiful mode of expression, the music draws out the beauty inherent to the emotion of anguish itself. This is the second stage of blues-induced healing. Once again, the healing is not complete enough to make the pain disappear. It still hurts that my man doesn’t love me, or that I don’t have any money, or that people are lynching my neighbors. But now the very thought of this anguish is overlaid with a poignant beauty. Does this make the suffering worth it? Do I take so much pleasure from singing the blues, or listening to it, that I am glad that my baby left me? Probably not. If I get transported by beauty at one moment, the pain

will revisit me the next. But the fact is that suffering will always be part of human existence; we are not given the option of choosing a life without it. And with the blues, the pain at least stands some chance of being moderated through its objectification and beautification. Moreover, the cathartic relief that can come from these first two stages of healing may open up just enough emotional space for the third stage of healing to occur: transcendence.

When something devastating happens, I am often so overcome with grief that I cannot see a future beyond it. When my lover leaves me, I cannot believe I will ever be happy again, much less that I will ever fall in love again. It literally feels like the end of the world has come. By speaking this pain, however, by infusing it with some beauty, I may go far enough towards making peace with the present situation that I can look beyond the immediate circumstances and see that my current suffering is not all there is. Things will eventually get better. They may never become perfect, but they will get better. Indeed, notwithstanding that the blues is a genre defined by expressions of pain and sorrow, the most frequent concluding line to a blues song is, “Everything gonna be all right.” A blues song that closes with this line is *not* glossing over the reality of pain. On the contrary, the song has spent its first twenty or thirty lines uncompromisingly detailing the fact of pain. But this very expression of suffering, and its transformation into something beautiful, shows that the pain is not all-powerful. The singer can take some command over it. And this spiritual transcendence of the pain can make it possible to believe that one day the pain will be literally transcended—that the cause of the pain will disappear and the pain will fade. This vision of a future, where the present suffering has been overcome, possesses a beauty all its own, and it is a beauty that is made all the more poignant by the fact that the present suffering has been so intense, and it has been acknowledged as such.

For me, the transcendent power of blues is perhaps best illustrated by the Otis Redding song, “I’ve Got Dreams to Remember.” In this song, the singer’s baby has, of course, left him. Their relationship seems to have still been in its early stages, but the singer was clearly convinced she was “the one.” He no doubt had all sorts of dreams about how they would be happy together forever. But then, he stumbles across her kissing another man. The first wave of emotion the singer hits us with is utter desolation:

Nobody knows what I feel inside.  
All I know, I walked away and cried.

When the singer then launches into the chorus, “I’ve got dreams remember,” he seems to be wailing, “I’ve got *nothing* but dreams to remember. I was on the brink of perfect happiness, but now she’s gone, and now I’m left with nothing, nothing but empty dreams.” As the song continues, the actual narrative does not get any better. The singer’s lover does not return; he is still left alone. And yet, as the horn section surges and the backup singers join in on the chorus, the music itself begins to lift the emotional tenor of the song through its sheer, swelling beauty. “I’ve got dreams to remember,” the singer intones, again and again. And as his own voice surges, we start to realize he is no longer saying, “I have *nothing* but dreams to remember,” but rather he is proclaiming, “*I have dreams* to remember, and they are beautiful dreams, and my life is richer because of it.” This does not obliterate the pain of the original dream having been crushed. It still hurts. But the singer is nonetheless defiantly proclaiming a vision of life beyond the pain, a life in which the beauty of love eclipses the pain that love can bring in its wake. And this will perhaps be enough to get the singer through the night. This will perhaps be enough to get him through this difficult time, until finally the pain does start to fade and new possibilities for the future begin to emerge. Until, perhaps, he falls in love again.

I became a serious fan of the blues in my young twenties, not only because I enjoyed the music itself, but because its transcendent philosophy helped me to work my way through various struggles of my own. At the time, I firmly believed blues to be a superior art form to its sacred counterpart, gospel. I knew that the two genres shared common musical roots in African rhythms and the call-and-response field songs of the slave days. And I realized that both forms of expression sought to transcend oppressive material conditions through music. I felt that gospel was compromised, however, by a sort of escapism that the blues refused to entertain. Consider the traditional spiritual, “I’ll Fly Away.”

Some glad morning when this life is o'er,  
 I'll fly away.  
 To that home on God's celestial shore,  
 I'll fly away.

I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away.  
 When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,  
 I'll fly away.

When I die, things will get better. Well, hallelujah... Of course, when you live under extremely repressive conditions and it is unrealistic to think those conditions will change in your lifetime, it probably is quite natural to hope that things will change *after* your lifetime—that there is an



afterlife in which all of the pains and injustices of this life are reversed. And given that white slave owners had forced their slaves to adopt a religion which teaches exactly this, it is not surprising that the early black church should have embraced the more eschatological aspects of Christianity. Although I could therefore understand the impetus behind early gospel music, and I found many of its songs to be strikingly beautiful, I still found blues superior because the blues takes life's suffering, looks it squarely in the eye, then achieves a transcendence purely through the music itself. "I've got *nothing* but dreams to remember," becomes, "*I've got dreams* to remember," through nothing but the song itself, through nothing but the singing out of the pain. Gospel, on the other hand—it seemed to me—achieves transcendence only by denying that this world is all there is, or by saying that everything's only gonna be all right only when we have died and gone somewhere else. A person may or may not find talk of an afterlife persuasive—I do not—but at best this stance fails to achieve a full transcendence in the here and now, and at worst it risks slipping into a denial of the reality of suffering by locating the highest reality in another world from which suffering has been banished.

As I have grown older, I have come to believe that I was selling early gospel music short by rating it inferior to blues. For the fact is that this music does achieve a transcendence within this world. For one thing, in the early twentieth-century south, the obvious, overwhelming source of suffering in the black community was the white community. And even back in slave days, the one place blacks were allowed to congregate and have a certain degree of autonomy without their white masters looking over their shoulders was in church. (This was probably not so much charity on the part of whites as the fact that they did not want their own church experience sullied by the presence of blacks.) In any case, church became the one place where the black community could be itself. And the black church did take on an identity all its own. White churches, still dominated by their European roots, were almost universally stiff and formal affairs. Spontaneous expressions of emotion were viewed as unseemly in church—there were other venues for that. Black people, on the other hand, were expected to keep themselves under control at all other times, so church was the one place where they could unleash all of the emotions that had been pent up over the week, no doubt including frustrations stemming from their conditions of oppression. So what emerged was an ecstatic, emotional form of worship that would have been utterly unrecognizable to white church-goers. And much of this worship—particularly the ecstatic, emotional parts—revolved around music.

As I came to realize, moreover, most gospel music does not deny the reality of suffering, but rather—like blues—faces it head on. Many gospel songs are *about* suffering; they make no sense without it. “Go Down Moses” is a song about slavery. Granted, it is a song about slaves being freed, but slaves can only be freed if they are first enslaved. So this song does the same thing a good blues song does: it acknowledges the reality of suffering, but then uses the music itself to infuse this suffering with a degree of beauty. And then, working within the emotional space that has been created, it throws out an image of hope. “Go Down Moses” does not end with the words, “Everything gonna be all right,” but through the story it tells, this is the message it proclaims. Moses, after all, goes down to Egypt and tells old Pharaoh to let his people go, and it *works*. It worked in the Bible, so who is to say it could not work again? To be sure, even the biblical story invoked does not suggest that *everything* will be all right, everywhere and for all time. For Moses and his people, making it out of Egypt was just the beginning of their trials; they still had forty years of wandering through the desert to endure. Still, the escape from slavery was a moment of liberation for Moses and his people, and it is a story that gave the black church one of its great visions of hope. This vision of hope, in turn, helped to keep many African-American going through the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement, until finally the black community did begin to achieve some objective success in changing its present reality, not to a literal paradise free from all suffering, but to something better than it was.

Another gospel song that is unsparing in its depiction of suffering is “Poor Pilgrim of Sorrow.” Let’s listen to it, as sung by Albertina Walker.

*Musical Interlude: Poor Pilgrim of Sorrow*

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow  
 I'm lost in this wide world alone  
 No hope have I for tomorrow  
 I'm trying to make Heaven my home

Sometimes I am tossed and driven  
 Sometimes I don't know where to roam  
 But I've heard of a city called Heaven  
 And I'm trying to make Heaven my home.

This song brings us, through its imagery, back around to the Book of Revelation, and to eschatological literature more generally. This singer has obviously suffered, and she makes no attempt to minimize the reality of her suffering. On the contrary, she lays it all out in the starkest possible terms. But then it’s out there; the suffering has been spoken. And it has been spoken in

wrenchingly beautiful words. When these words are sung by a talented singer like Albertina Walker, they are enough to rip your heart out. But then comes the glimmer of hope; then comes the, “Everything gonna be all right.” Echoing the invocation of the new Jerusalem in Chapter Twenty-One of Revelation, the city where God will wipe away the tears and there will be no more sorrow, the singer tells us, “I’ve heard of a city called Heaven, and I’m tryin’ to make Heaven my home.”

When you read Revelation as cryptically describing events that will literally come true someday, you are committed to believing that once the new Jerusalem has been built, it will last for all eternity, and that all suffering will literally be eliminated forever. And this commits you to banishing everything, and everyone, from the city who might possibly screw things up. Hence the violence of the end times—the chaff must be burned. And hence the perpetual disappointment when the end times do not come, and “those people” keep ruining things for the rest of us. But when you read Revelation as you would listen to “Poor Pilgrim of Sorrow,” or as you would listen to a blues song, the question of eternity does not come up. Nor does the question of whether the end times are “really” coming someday. On this reading, the tribulation is already here. Nor are we observing it from some safe vantage point up in the clouds. Rather, we are all right down here in the muck. On this reading, the first twenty chapters of Revelation do not function as a prediction of future plagues, wars, and slaughters. Rather, they portray the evils and sources of suffering that plagued the first-century world in which John lived, and which still plague our world today. If this does not qualify as a frank acknowledgement of the reality of suffering, I do not know what does. But John is not defeated by the misery that he sees, that he lives. He rather puts this suffering into poetic form, complete with elaborate imagery and complex literary devices. The result may not strike modern readers as beautiful—with our short attention spans, his story does get a little ponderous—but surely this was John’s intent, and surely many of his original readers must have been taken by the beauty of his account, given that it did survive. But John does not stop with a poetic description of the suffering his community was undergoing. Then, finally, after twenty chapters of tribulation, John puts forward one final vision. It is the vision of a city, a new city. And what happens in this city? God wipes away our tears. This is not a vision of pure lightness, where all of the darkness has been banished. This is a vision full of tears! God can only wipe away our tears if we have tears! God can only offer up a new city in which there is no more sorrow if the old city is overflowing with sorrow.

This new city is not a prediction. It is a vision. It is just a vision. It is something we can catch a glimpse of, as if in a dream. The old city will still always be here; it is the city we live in. Even after John has described the new Jerusalem, he jumps right back into more death and destruction. Even when we somehow manage to transcend one set of sorrows, other sorrows will strike us. We will still need God to wipe away our tears, because more tears will come. And yet, we will also always have this vision. I personally doubt we will ever reach a city where our tears are wiped away forever, and where suffering is perpetually banished. But we do not *need* to believe in this. For we do not need to overcome our suffering forever. All we need to do is make it through the night. Let tomorrow worry about tomorrow; all we need to do is survive the suffering we are experiencing right now. We can try to do this by ignoring our suffering, by attempting to deny its reality. Or we can lash out at others, whom we believe to be the cause of our suffering. But any of this is unlikely to work. Alternately, we can look our suffering dead in the eye, acknowledge its reality but also assert our own ability to express it, to infuse it with beauty, and to lay out the hopeful vision of something beyond it. We will have to do this once again when the suffering reasserts itself, or when other sorrows take its place. But the vision will still be there before us, to guide us, to help us make it through the night. This vision is the new Jerusalem. This is the place where everything gonna be alright. This is the city called Heaven.

And I'm trying to make Heaven my home.