CHAPTER ONE

APOCALYPTIC MELANCHOLIA AND THE TRAUMA OF HISTORY

While there has been a rich and steadily growing body of work that uses the theories and interpretive strategies of the field of psychology to enhance our understanding of Biblical texts, such application still strikes many as a kind of foreign intrusion, an exercise for interlopers and dilettantes at best, an invasion of conquest at worst. Certainly the reputation of ‘psychological Biblical criticism’ has suffered from misguided and ill-prepared efforts by even some of the founders of the field, including Freud and his protégé Carl Jung. Charges of ‘reductionism’ and ‘psychologizing’ are often fair to levy against projects that appear to treat religious belief, experience, and history in ham-fisted ways.¹ Some would even reject outright the notion that modern, Western psychological categories could be applied to peoples of ancient cultures, or that Biblical texts are somehow amenable to psychological interpretation in the same way that a person with an actual mental life is, especially considering all of the questions of redaction, transmission, and cultural borrowing that complicate Biblical scholarship in general.

Yet, as Wayne Rollins and D. Andrew Kille address the point in their respective hallmark works in the field, the enduring spiritual power of the Bible is the best evidence itself of its psychological relevance across time, culture, and literary artifice. Biblical exegesis inherently requires a belief in the continuity between people of a current time and the subjects of Biblical narrative; Christians and Jews alike have turned to scriptural figures as guides in a troubled world for this very

reason. In the apocalyptic literature addressed in this study, this is all the more true. Even if most of these texts did not achieve the level of embrace and influence as the Book of Ezekiel, or the Books of Daniel and Revelation for that matter, the explosion of apocalyptic texts and movements at certain times and places (including the early Jewish Diaspora) and the persistence of the apocalyptic mentality through millennia attest to its enduring appeal as a model for comprehending the actions and motivations of others or inspiring one’s own. But which features of apocalypse make this identification possible?

Kille indicates three elements of Biblical texts that provide starting points for psychological interpretation: “symbols and archetypal images, psychodynamic factors represented in narrative and discourse, and depictions of biblical personalities.” All three of these elements are crucial for explicating the psychological dimensions of loss and mourning that we find in the apocalyptic texts. Certainly, they would be justly famous for their startling, uncanny images if nothing else; their enduring power begs them to be taken seriously as creative products that resonate—and motivate—beyond their literal signification or historical referent. Therefore they reflect the work of the unconscious as much as any conscious creative or literary effort. As for narrative, many of the standard features of apocalyptic narrative in general and aspects of them in these texts specifically convey unconscious dynamics of revealing and concealing information, restructuring the memory of the past to address anxieties about the present and future, positing a alternate reality where disappointments and failures are rectified in a kind of wish-fulfillment, and a moving the apocalyptic seer in a healing arc from trauma to recovery. Finally, so much of the value of apocalyptic literature for its readers through the ages has been in not just what has been revealed but to whom, and in what circumstances, and how the seer responded. For the prophet Ezekiel as well as the apocalyptic texts following the destruction of the Second Temple, the seer’s emotional life is laid bare and scrutinized in ways that are noticeably acute for the Hebrew Bible, closer to the searing experiences of Job and Jeremiah than to the acquiescence of Abraham or the reluctant obedience of Moses or Isaiah. Divine revelation in Biblical narrative, prophecy,

2 Kille, Biblical Criticism, 14; Rollins makes the therapeutic purposes of the Biblical canon a central focus of psychological Biblical interpretation (see especially Soul and Psyche, 179–81).
3 Kille, Biblical Criticism, 14.