Preface

This book is a study of the poetics of ancient Jewish apocalypses. As I make final adjustments to the manuscript I am reminded, however, that the relevance of apocalypses and apocalypticism for the field of Religious Studies and the Humanities more generally is hardly limited to ancient history. A few months ago a former student (thanks Mark Lettney) alerted me to an evangelical Christian group based in Oakland, CA that was traveling across the United States to warn people that the judgment day would occur on May 21, 2011.¹ When I realized that the group planned to stop for several days in Jackson, MS I could not resist making contact and setting up an interview. On Monday, March 14ᵗʰ James Bowley (a colleague at Millsaps College) and I sat down to interview two of the group’s leaders. While there are incalculable differences between Hellenistic Jews and 21ˢᵗ century American evangelicals, many of their beliefs and exegetical methods are not dissimilar. For example, their repeated emphasis on a fixed, periodized (i.e., dispensationalist), and imminently complete history of the world immediately stood out. Those responsible for texts such as Daniel 2, 7, the Animal Apocalypse, the Apocalypse of Weeks (as well as several Sibylline Oracles and Testaments) attempted to remain faithful to traditional practices and beliefs of Judaism by insisting that behind the thin veil of an apparent history in which chaos, suffering, marginalization, and persecution defined them, time functioned according to the perfect order established and guaranteed by YHWH. For a variety of reasons, sometimes self-constructed and sustained, modern American evangelicals also view themselves as marginalized and attempt to re-narrate time in order to see themselves fully enfranchised in God’s time and space.

Even more interesting from the perspective of this study is the way Familyradio.com representatives use language to construct identity. In both our interview and their stock literature, they frequently used a set of special sobriquets to define themselves and others – often emphasizing difference and exploiting a kind of dualism. For example, their primary moniker for themselves is “true believers.” The expression is intriguing because it does not set them apart from non-believers (e.g., atheists, Buddhists, etc.) so

much as it does from other Christians who are mistaken or disingenuous in their beliefs. The founder, owner, and primary bible teacher of the Family-radio.com, Harold Camping, left the Reform Church in 1988 over theological differences. Since then, he has taught his listeners that the “church age” ended in 1988 and that they should no longer have anything to do with any traditional Christian church since all churches are now under the dominion of Satan. This circumstance helps to underscore why the language they use to describe themselves helps specifically to set themselves apart from other Christians. It conforms to Harold Camping’s articulation of time (a set and limited number of ages) and provides some psychological tools to cope with estrangement from what has been for most of them a defining socio-cultural institution: church.

Other sobriquets used by familyradio.com listeners include “the unregenerate” (a term that can apply to any non-member but is most often used to describe Christians who are not “true-believers”), “the authority” (any organization of Christians with a hierarchy or eldership, i.e., this is their word for “church” and they are commanded not to be subject to “the authority”), “understanding” (a gift God imparts to the few who are able to interpret correctly the true meaning of scripture), and “watchmen” (a term borrowed from Ezek 33 to describe the particular familyradio.com listeners who tour the country in RV’s warning of the impending apocalypse). After the interview, we found in their online journal that they even had a sobriquet for us: those “with letters after their name.” The expression is one of derision, not respect. Indeed, they contrasted our “unlearned questions” with the insights of a truck driver they met on the same day. The truck driver was suspicious of churches, believed in the concepts of election and predestination, and, most importantly, agreed with their concept of “understanding” (exegesis): “Most people don’t realize that God has to open your eyes to understand what the Bible really teaches.”

The types of sobriquets used by Familyradio.com representatives are similar to the kind of language used in some of the historical apocalypses analyzed in this study. For example, expressions like המטבילים “the wise,” and אלהים ידועי עם בני אלוהים “the people who know their [its] God” from the Book of Daniel, קריאי “the elect” from 4QPseudo-Daniel a–b ar, and המצותקים וברית מראני “those who lead to righteousness” from the Apocryphon of Jeremiah C seem to serve precisely the same rhetorical purposes as familyradio.com’s “true believers.” Similarly, expressions like מראני ברית|[ “the violators of the covenant” from the Book of Daniel and עבדי נאם “servants of the foreigner” from the Apocryphon of Jeremiah C seem to serve rhetorical pur-

2 This information was removed from [http://www.familyradio.com/caravan/ms_letters.html](http://www.familyradio.com/caravan/ms_letters.html) on May 23rd, 2011. Indeed, an entirely re-vamped website was launched.
poses similar to familyradio.com’s “the unregenerate.” The sobriquets establish linguistic boundaries – often binary relationships – that help to define and even construct the contours of the group identity.

I begin this study of ancient texts with an interlude into the modern world not merely to illustrate the ongoing cultural and religious potency of apocalypticism, but to make a methodological point. Those of us who study ancient Jewish apocalypses can reap rewards from the anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, religionists, and literary critics who delve into the worlds of the Millerites, John Nelson Darby, the Scofield Reference Bible, Hal Lindsey, Edgar Whisenant, the Branch Davidians, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Marian Kech, Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins, Aum Shinrikyo, John Hagee, Familyradio.com, the Christian Identity movement, Jonestown, the Solar Temple, etc. In sketching the theoretical framework of this study below, I draw on thinkers both ancient and modern in order to best contextualize the language of Jewish historical apocalypses. While the primary audience of this study is specialists in Second Temple Judaism and the Dead Sea Scrolls, I hope that it can be of use to the larger field of Religious Studies and other disciplines who examine apocalypticism. There are portions of this book that are technical and will be of limited use to non-specialists. But it is my hope that the robust theoretical framework constructed in the chapter one will place this study within much broader intellectual conversations and make it intelligible to those attempting to understand apocalypses and apocalypticism from a variety of vantage-points.

In this study I analyze the language of ancient Jewish historical apocalypses. I investigate how the *dramatis personae*, i.e., deities, angels/demons, and humans (both individuals and groups) are described in the Book of Daniel (2, 7, 8, 10–12) the *Animal Apocalypse* (1 En. 85–90), 4QFourKingdomsa–bar, the *Book of the Words of Noah* (1QapGen 5 29–18 70), the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah C*, and 4QPseudo-Daniela–bar. The primary methodologies for this study are linguistic- and motif-historical analysis and the theoretical framework is informed by a wide range of ancient and modern thinkers including Artemidorus of Daldis, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, Leo Oppenheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Umberto Eco, and Michael Barkun. The most basic contention of this study is that the data now available from the Dead Sea Scrolls significantly alter how one should conceive of the genre apocalypse in the Hellenistic Period. This basic contention is borne out by five primary conclusions. First, while some apocalypses employ symbolic language to describe the actors in their historical reviews, others use non-symbolic language. Some texts, especially from the Book of Daniel, are mixed cases. Second, among the apocalypses that use symbolic language, a limited and stable repertoire of symbols obtain
across the genre and bear witness to a series of conventional associations. Third, in light of the conventional associations present in symbolic language, as well as the specific descriptions of particular historical actors, it appears that symbolic language is not used to hide or obscure its referents, but to provide the reader with embedded interpretative tools. Fourth, while several apocalypses do not use symbolic ciphers to encode their historical actors, they often use cryptic sobriquets that may have functioned as a group-specific language. Fifth, the language of apocalypses appears to indicate that these texts were not the domain of only one social group or even one type of social group. Some texts presume large audiences and others presume more limited and ones. In other words, apocalypticism was not the exclusive domain of a small fringe group even if several small fringe groups appear to have internalized the ideology associated with the genre apocalypse.