That most underrated of biblical scholars, Austin Farrer, begins his study of the Book of Revelation, *A Rebirth of Images*, with these words:

> The human imagination has always been controlled by certain basic images, in which man’s own nature, his relation to his fellows, and his dependence upon the divine power find expression ... in ages for which religion and poetry were a common possession, the basic images lived in the conscious mind ...¹

But do we live in an age of either poetry or religion? In what sense do the strong images of Revelation continue to live for us – in the Church’s liturgy, in our familiarity with scripture itself – in an age which is haunted by great, demonic images? The Book of Revelation, which has produced such an energetic, often bizarre, yet powerful history of interpretation, has, I contend exploded in our contemporary “apocalyptic” age, itself the literary progenitor of images in literature, screen and culture which do not simply undermine the legitimization of traditional religious structures, but actually run pessimistically counter to the great biblical apocalyptic vision.

We see how our argument is shifting, from the notion of a counter-coherence in the narratives and texts of scripture, to the way in which the scriptural genre of apocalypse may engender images in our postmodern world which, in their bleak pessimism, are far from the triumphant tenor of the concluding book of our canonical scriptures. It may be that this shift is of peculiarly modern date, and that in this most wildly interpreted of biblical texts we now need to recover, like Austin Farrer, a rebirth of images and a renewal of our literary and even, perhaps, theological heritage. In this chapter I want to trace the contrast between apocalypse “then” and “now”,

¹ D. Jasper, *Readings in the Canon of Scripture* © David Jasper 1995
and leave the question of recovery and revival to the subsequent chapter, drawing it there into a discussion of this book as a whole. I sense that our present, deeply pessimistic passion for apocalyptic images and ideas is a recent, twentieth-century phenomenon, a result of the disillusionment after the experiences of world war, totalitarianism, genocide, the nuclear threat, the Cold War. Hans-Georg Gadamer sums up our trauma, and the passing of an age, neatly:

With World War I a genuine epochal awareness emerged that welded the nineteenth century into a unit of the past. This is true not only in the sense that a bourgeois age, which had united faith in technical progress with the confident expectation of a secured freedom and a civilizing perfectionism, had come to an end. The end is not merely an awareness of leaving an epoch, but above all the conscious withdrawal from it, indeed, the sharpest rejection of it.2

Gone not only are Enlightenment beliefs in progress, but also from our imaginations, the joys of paradise, which in the nineteenth century remain so touchingly, if often naively, in religious vision. John Martin’s canvas The Plains of Heaven, a deeply romantic landscape of Revelation 21, was extravagantly praised in the nineteenth century, touring widely with its two companion “Judgement” paintings. Although it now hangs in the Tate Gallery, however, it was sold with its companions in 1935 for a mere £7, a comment, perhaps, on the shift in sensibility. The best description of The Plains of Heaven is in Mrs Henry Wood’s celebrated novel East Lynne (1861), evidence of the picture’s popularity and its effect upon a Victorian public:

“Oh, you should have seen it! There was a river, you know, and boats, beautiful gondolas they looked, taking the redeemed to the shores of Heaven. They were shadowy figures in white robes, myriads and myriads of them, for they reached all up in the air to the holy city; it seemed to be in the clouds, coming down from God. The flowers grew on the banks of the river, pink and blue and violet; all colours, but so bright and beautiful; brighter than our flowers are here.”3

Few artists have had the courage to envision such a scene. Let John Martin (1789–1854) stand, from his century of faith and doubt, before