In studies of ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, a few giants stand out who have shaped the direction of the field; Christopher Rowland is certainly one of them. This collection of his essays is part of the Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament series (WUNT 1), which encompasses works of high scholarly quality with “lasting merit” in the field of early Christianity and its Jewish and Graeco-Roman environment. The volume is not a complete collection of Rowland’s whole lifetime of published essays, but it does include forty-four of the best of his contributions to the study of early apocalypticism in the early Jewish and early Christian environments, as well as to the reception history of apocalypticism. The volume is a magnificent testimony to Rowland’s enduring influence in these areas, with outstanding examples of historical-philological and interdisciplinary methodologies applied with innovation and sensitivity.

Rowland’s primary focus has long been on the experiential, mystical, and revelatory dimensions of apocalypticism in the New Testament and in the reception history of apocalypticism. This description, however, does not do justice to the broad range of interests and expertise displayed in this collection. The heft (nearly 900 pages) and price of the volume (€229.00) may at first suggest that this is intended to be a “university library” type of volume that scholars and students might check out for a few essays on a particular topic, and it can indeed serve this function. However, let me suggest that lovers of apocalypticism and wisdom alike may wish to invest in
this collection, linger with it for a long while, and mark it liberally for ideas worth pondering further. The configuration is not without its problems, as I will discuss, but readers who wish to sit at the feet of a master in the field will be able to soak up informed insights on apocalypticism and visionary traditions ranging from Ezekiel to the twentieth-century theology of Dietrich Boenhoeffer, with many other sites of exploration in between, such as the fourth century Tyconius, seventh-century Venerable Bede, fourteenth-century Joachim of Fiore, fifteenth-century Albrecht Dürer, seventeenth-century English woman revolutionaries (e.g., Mary Cary, Anna Trapnel, and Anne Wentworth), and preeminently William Blake (1757–1827). Even seasoned scholars of apocalypticism will engage with new ideas here and find inspiration and delight.

Rowland himself states the major claim of the volume thusly: “The nature of apocalypticism is to be understood as a claim to ‘immediate revelation’” (14). The title of the collection derives from the seventeenth-century radical Anne Hutchinson’s description of her experience of “the voice of his own spirit to my soul” (14), and indeed this phrase is the coherent thread that ties together Rowland’s broad-ranging analysis of apocalypticism and its reception history. Again and again, Rowland turns his attention to the visionary experiences and revelatory forms found in apocalyptic texts, without discounting the importance of “authoritative appeals to scripture tradition and convention (‘Memory’)” (14), that is, the literary and historical aspects of apocalyptic texts. In fact, Rowland’s work has often served as an important corrective to those who would see eschatology as the defining feature of apocalyptic literature, an oversimplification of the evidence that does not represent the position of his scholar and friend John J. Collins (to whom he dedicates an essay, “Blake, Enoch and Emerging Biblical Criticism,” 720–38) but that has appeared in many examples of scholarship that overrelied on the pithy definition of “apocalypse” from Semeia 14, which Collins edited in 1979 (and on which he published important correctives in 2016).1 As is evident in this collection, Rowland’s consistent contribution to apocalypticism studies has been to draw relentless attention to “the revelatory form of apocalyptic literature and any visionary experience to which it bears witness” (180).

The volume opens with Rowland’s autobiographical essay, “Rationale and Retrospect” (1–26), which reflects on the academic influences that shaped his intellectual trajectory and body of work. He notes a profound, early interest in the relationship of merkabah mysticism to the New Testament,2 later cemented by reading Gershom Scholem on Jewish mysticism and 2 Cor 12:2–4.3 From his dissertation onward he would delve into the visionary prophetic corpus of the Hebrew Bible (especially Ezekiel), with its trajectories in Jewish pseudepigrapha and rabbinic

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texts (3), culminating in decades of publications exploring the complex interplay between Jewish mysticism, Hebrew prophets, visionary traditions, and apocalyptic texts, particularly as these traditions are found in the New Testament. Rowland also cites the profound influence of his visits to Latin America, starting with a 1983 visit that he calls “life changing” (1), as well as the period in which he codirected The Prophecy Project at the University of Oxford with Jane Shaw (ca. 2004–2014). The focus of this decade was “a veritable treasure trove,” the archive of what is now called The Panacea Charitable Trust (5–6), which furthered his interest in the reception history of apocalypticism. Most recently, his passion for reception history has taken him into deep explorations of the work and imagination of English poet-painter-visionary William Blake (1757–1827).

With forty-four essays included, a complete listing of the thesis of each one, or even of the topic, is neither feasible nor even desirable in such a review, but a description of each of the volume’s five sections will provide a reasonable suggestion of the contents. Section 1, “The Nature of Apocalypticism” (29–184), includes nine articles covering topics such as the influence of merkabah mysticism on Ezekiel’s throne-chariot vision and Revelation, attempts to define apocalyptic as access to divine wisdom through revelation, and the influences of prophetic scripture in apocalyptic texts. It also includes a retrospective of Rowland’s most influential work from 1982. “‘The Heavens Were Opened and I Saw Visions of God’: The Open Heaven—Nearly Four Decades On” (166–84). Section 2, “Apocalyptic, Eschatological, and Related Themes in the New Testament” (185–476), includes eighteen more articles examining apocalypticism, visionary traditions, angelology, and prophetic themes in texts such as Colossians, John 1:51, the Gospel of Matthew, Revelation, Paul, and Hebrews, as well as in the thought of Joachim of Fiore (364–80), Albert Schweitzer (449–60), and William Blake (461–76). Section 3, “The Reception of Apocalypticism and Its Significance” (477–630), includes eight essays that explore how a wide range of figures from the fourth to the twentieth centuries interpret apocalypticism in relation to violence, revolution, and antinomianism. The essay “Imagining the Apocalypse” (510–28) introduces Rowland’s interest in apocalyptic reception history in the work of various European artists and poets (526–27), preparing readers for the six essays in section 4, “William Blake, Apocalyptic Poet and Painter” (631–740).

Finally, section 5 is a coda containing just two essays (741–74) that appear to illuminate themes that matter deeply to Rowland personally. The first is his inaugural lecture as Dean Ireland’s Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture at Oxford University on 11 May 1992. Catalyzed by the lens of liberation theology (752), Rowland brings the Gospel of Matthew and Revelation into

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conversation with one another around their shared radical concern for the poor and marginalized. However, for Rowland this is no mere literary exercise; rather, the texts “may best be understood by living and praying them” (756). These concerns are apparent elsewhere, for example, in the insightful “The Apocalypse: Sensitivity and Outsiders,” which reads Revelation as a call to resist seemingly benign political governments and civilizational systems built on self-aggrandizement, exploitation, and abuse of power (81–95). The volume concludes with a tribute to Rowland’s friend Nicholas Lash, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, 1978–1999 (757–74), and again stresses that “Scripture is something to be performed, lived and acted upon and not just analysed” (757). This ending perhaps reveals what may be at stake for Rowland throughout his whole body of work: that apocalyptic texts must not be abstracted away in academic analysis of their contents; instead, their authors should be allowed to relay their experiential realities, imaginations, and concerns to those of us who are open to receiving such transformative and meaningful encounters.

The body of work captured in this volume demonstrates the rich capacity of biblical studies to illuminate widely ranging facets of history, culture, and the arts and to be relevant to pressing real-world concerns and theologies. Given the forty-year span of these essays and the caliber of the interdisciplinary methods employed, it feels petty to point out any deficiency, yet there is one that deserves mention. Whether owing to humility or oversight, the volume itself understates or underappreciates Rowland’s enduring legacy in shaping the field of apocalypticism studies in subsequent scholarship (although this has been addressed elsewhere). Indeed, a review of the massive bibliography (783–822) testifies to the relative scarcity post-2009 of works on ancient apocalypticism in favor of an emphasis on the reception history of apocalypticism. This observation is in no way intended as a critique of the direction that Rowland’s interests have taken, which is admirable! However, it does indicate a pressing need for further contextualization of the essays presented in the bulk of the volume (29–476). An introduction written by another scholar, for instance, might have helped readers to locate these essays within early debates in apocalypticism studies that have now settled mostly, if not decisively, in favor of many of the positions that Rowland proposes. Lacking such context, non-specialist readers would not know that Rowland, as well as other scholars (e.g., Michael Stone, George W. E. Nickelsburg, James VanderKam), did succeed in the 1980s and early 1990s in bringing attention to the importance of religious experience, revelatory forms, and sapiential themes in the study of apocalypticism, as a counterbalance to the emphasis on eschatology. The evidence of their success was manifest as early as 1994 in the voluminous work of the SBL program unit “Wisdom and Apocalypticism,” which is still ongoing, as well as in later program units such as “Religious Experience in
Antiquity” (2006-present) and the publication of the Experientia volumes, which expressly build on Rowland’s suggestions.5

Rowland’s seminal research helped to sway the arc of apocalypticism studies toward greater appreciation of the influence of Jewish mysticism on early Christianity and the New Testament, toward recognizing the centrality of the forms of revelation in which apocalyptic content is relayed, and toward understanding the experiential, visionary basis of apocalypticism. The deficiency of the volume as configured is only that a reader who is not already familiar with the impact these arguments have had in shaping the field of apocalypticism studies will not learn about it from the volume itself. However, this lacuna does not detract from the quality of the essays themselves, which remain impressive, stimulating, and well worth our sustained attention.