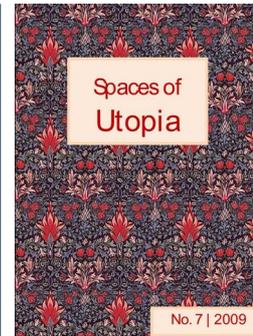


Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism in the Poetry of E. P. Thompson

Roland Boer

University of Newcastle, Australia



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*Nothing will alter because a child is born.
That was a fable.*

E. P. Thompson

There is a little-known collection of poems by Edward Palmer Thompson called *Infant and Emperor: Poems for Christmas*. These poems reflect a lesser-known Thompson, one who was fascinated by the revolutionary possibilities of biblical stories and Christian theology.¹ My argument is that Thompson manages to recover the subversive edge of Christianity precisely through – and not despite – his debunking of spiritual and reverent interpretations of the Christmas stories.

However, before making that argument a few preliminary comments are in order. First, it is necessary to distinguish between different senses of the terms 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypticism': between a genre of literature, a worldview and a social movement. The word 'apocalyptic' functions as a noun and an adjective and refers either to a genre of literature or to a worldview. As a genre, it is well known from the Bible where there are two works that belong to the apocalyptic genre:

Daniel and *Revelation* (also known by its Greek title, the “Apocalypse”). The original Greek word, *apocalypso*, means the revelation of a truth, but since that truth refers (in the biblical books) to knowledge about the end of the world, the term apocalyptic came to refer to the end times. Apocalyptic also refers to a particular worldview which views the world as full of signs of the end, waiting everyday for the final cataclysm. By contrast, apocalypticism designates a movement, often gathered around a leader, which anticipates and tries to predict when the end time will come. Such movements have come and gone throughout history, but in Christian circles they have often arisen during times of social unrest and economic crisis. We may picture it this way: apocalypticism is the social movement which has an apocalyptic worldview and which reads and attempts to interpret apocalyptic literature. However, an apocalyptic worldview and apocalyptic literature are not restricted to such movements, for anyone may read such literature or take on such a worldview. For the sake of clarity in what follows I use the terms apocalyptic literature, apocalyptic worldview and apocalypticism (sometimes apocalyptic movement). Second, Thompson’s poems arose over some three decades from the 1950s onwards in response to important moments of his involvement with the nuclear disarmament movement. Thompson was, after all, not merely a scholar but also a communist activist. Only in the early 1980s did he gather them together, add one or two extras and produce a cycle of poems. Third, they come under the heavy influence of Thompson’s British hero, William Blake, who stands beside Marx within Thompson’s own pantheon (see Thompson 1978: 316). Apart from the obvious connection with Blake’s poetry, there is a strong millenarian or – preferably

– apocalyptic feel about these poems. In what follows then, I begin with a discussion of the poems before considering the wider question of the role of apocalyptic and apocalypticism in his work.²

Poetry

The poems gathered under the title *Infant and Emperor: Poems for Christmas* (1983)³ put various moments of the infancy stories of Jesus in touch with political events – such as the Suez invasion and the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the atrocities of the Korean War in 1951, or the activities of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to which Thompson dedicated much of his energy. Or rather, these events were the initial reasons for writing some of the poems in the first place. They run through the well-known moments of the Christmas myth, moving through the Annunciation to Mary, the search for lodgings at the inn in Bethlehem, the birth itself, Herod's murder of the innocents and the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Part of the popular narrative of Christmas, they are actually an amalgam of the different stories found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (the only two Gospels that have such infancy narratives). Three things fascinate me about this collection. First, when faced with events of global significance, Thompson resorts to biblical language and themes, melding apocalyptic and Christmas themes. Second, he recovers a revolutionary side of Christianity that is less known than it should be. Third and somewhat paradoxically, he can do so because he doesn't buy into the belief structure; he takes it as fable. Let me take each in turn.

Myriad images meet in these poems, but the major ones deal with apocalyptic themes and the dual interplay between Herod and the child of the poor. As for apocalyptic and millennial imagery, we find “fabulous holy armies” (*idem*, 1), Herod assuming “his hour” (Thompson 1983: 2) Leviathan, the Beast, the inherited kingdom, the perpetual threat of “Horsemen and Eagles, Emperor, Wolf and bull” (*idem*, 10), and the massacre of the innocents. But there are also two poems that are more explicitly apocalyptic literature – “Scenario for the Flight into Egypt” (*idem*, 15-17) and “Prayer for the Year’s Turning” (*idem*, 18-19). The first is modernised a little too much, with its “Heaven’s Angel” winging in like a bikie, directions for camera use (zoom in, fade out, extras, cut, etc.), and the “rival holy armies” using fighter-bombers, snipers and grenades, and with marines crawling up beaches and massive civilian casualties. By contrast, “Prayer for the Year’s Turning” is much better, for it weaves together the natural cycles of earth (winter solstice and spring), the hope of Christmas, and the very human threat of self-inflicted annihilation. It takes a few stanzas to realise that the various constellations and heavenly bodies – Mars, Trident, Poseidon, Polaris, Vulcan, Hades and the Neutron Way – are a mix of warlike ancient ones and the new hardware of surveillance and nuclear warfare. But the poem itself turns from heaven to earth, calling on people to watch below, to “search about the planet’s floor / For the nativity of hope”. At that moment the solstice with which the poem begins, the winter festival of Christmas (at least in the northern hemisphere), becomes the “arrested solstice” of the “boreal” Cold War. Just as the earth turns from the midst of winter’s Christmas, so also Thompson calls for a “soft apocalypse of Spring”. It

is of course the major drive of anti-nuclear campaign in which Thompson was involved, but with a brilliant inversion: the apocalypse of nuclear destruction must give way before a very different apocalypse that averts the former.

The second group of images clusters around two symbols: Herod and the child as a sign of the poor. William Blake peers from behind much of the imagery, with its Leviathan and Beast, the gate of a woman's womb, the seed and a pervasive antinomianism.⁴ While Herod becomes the symbol of oppressors (at one point merging with the Roman Emperor [*idem*, 10]) who march their holy armies through history, the child becomes the symbol of hope for the oppressed "walking and walking down the centuries" with the "stubborn stamina of God's forgotten poor" (*idem*, 16). Thus, in the excellent poem "Nativity" (*idem*, 2-3) the Christmas story becomes an "arctic legend" in which kings, angels and mysteries are all frozen ... except for two who escape: one is the brutal Herod "on the high horse of power" who continues to send his soldiers and magistrates to attack, arrest and beat the innocent. The other is the child who passes "through the only gate / No magistrate may guard" and to whom the poor gather in assistance to drive back the guards so that the "seed" may grow. The oppressor and his armies may still be with us, but so is the collective hope of the poor.

At times Thompson puzzles over why the birth of a child should bother the Herods of history so much. Is it the assertion of independence from Mary, the deception that hints of love, innocence and peace, as the poem "Annunciation" (*idem*, 1) suggests? Is it because a sleeping new-born challenges the corruptions of power, drawing upon almost forgotten qualities of human life?

Frost-bitten mercy, hope pulling off her gloves
Crusted with ice, benighted company
Numb from the cold. And even at the inn
They stir the failing fire, long for release –
Will no-one bring the kindling of love,
A sprig of innocence, a twig of peace? (*idem*, 5)

Is it because innocence, hope and love nurtured in a mother's womb or arms are the first stirrings of "insurgent provinces, revolt within the State" (*idem*, 10)?⁵ Is it because the poor will not be put down to remain submissive? They – like the shepherds and wise men who have become beggars in "Visitor at the Inn" (*idem*, 6) – have a knack of knocking on the window while the "feast of the banknote" rages on inside.

I have already slipped into my second point – the revolutionary edge of these poems – but it is difficult to separate that element too sharply from the language itself. What Thompson has done, perhaps unintentionally, is give voice to the scandal of these infancy narratives from the Gospels. Over against the syrupy celebrations of Christmas everywhere around us he has pinpointed the political challenge that lies barely concealed in these stories. Perhaps it is something that can be done these days only by one who openly confesses that he is not a believer, that the theological mumbo-jumbo makes little sense to him. So the "Holy Roman Church" becomes a deluded venture – "cross-natured Christendom" that built a "world of faith" out of Mary's "faithlessness" (*idem*, 1). He is all too aware that the Church has had a very cosy relationship with the Herods of this world, blessing and praying for them.⁶ In an excellent section of "Lamentation in Rama",

he has heaven become an informer: “The gracious powers above / Keep watch on the little streets?” (*idem*, 13)

This down to earth scepticism comes not a moment too soon, for at times Thompson risks getting a little too sentimental about innocent babies as symbols of love and hope during millennial crises. He is much more forceful when he reminds us that much of what the Church has made of Christmas is pious clap-trap. For example, when he takes head-on the myth of the birth of the son of God in “The Infant” (*idem*, 7) he suggests “some seraph goofed” and accidentally teleported “Him” as a puny baby, a “helpless sod” full of wind and unable to save himself. Or, in Mary’s “Lullaby”, she calls Jesus “Master Egotrip”, “Mister Big” and “prince of Pandemonium”:

Windy boring preacher
Wrapped in a shawl –
Stop bawling your commandments
Shut up and rest,
And sleep full of the sermon
Of your saviour’s breast (*idem*, 9).

Much of it is excellent poetry and far better than his novel, *The Sykaos Papers*. Yet the question remains as to how Thompson pulls it off – giving the Christmas stories a radical political edge. The paradox is that whereas Thompson probably thought he was undermining the stories themselves, he has in fact brought out their radical tendencies. I have already mentioned one reason, namely that he doesn’t believe all the high claims made by the Church and can thereby dispense with the theological twaddle. Another is that he is far more interested in the human and earthly elements of the stories. Less interested in angels “coming

to” (Luke 1: 28) virgins, or a pious Joseph trying to do the right thing by God, shepherds directed by a singing choir of angels to visit the baby (the voices they heard turned out to be only the wind), or pagan magi following a star, or even the claim that this is the birth of the son of God, Thompson focuses on what is all too human in the stories – illicit sex, discomforts and pains of pregnancy, mothers who take no bullshit, the ever-present police, magistrates, armies and tyrants.

Yet, there is a far more important reason why Thompson touched on the radicalism of stories of infant and emperor: they are nothing less than fables:

Nothing will alter because a child is born.
That was a fable (*idem*, 1).

The “fable” in question is both Mary’s made-up story to cover up an “illicit” pregnancy – about a divine child announced by some angel known as Gabriel – and the birth narratives as a whole (they appear only in Matthew and Luke in rather different forms). They are indeed fables; no serious biblical scholar takes them as anything else. I would go one step further and suggest that they are necessary fables. Any political movement needs its fables, or political myths as I prefer to call them (Boer 2008). In drawing upon this stock of images, symbols and stories in order to bring out their radical possibilities, Thompson has managed to recover these stories in the form of political myth. The reason: “It was the other part that the poor understood – Herod, the Roman magistrates, the cross” (Thompson 1983: 1).

Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism

It would seem that Thompson has brought out a radical political side to the Christmas fable, particularly through his juxtaposition of apocalyptic themes, the themes of tyrannical oppression and resistance, and their connection with political events contemporary with him. There are, however, two items that call for further comment: the nature of apocalypticism in Thompson's work and his involvement in the nuclear disarmament movement.

As far as apocalypticism is concerned – which designates a social movement and is more precise term than Thompson's own usage of millenarianism or chiliasm – he deals with it extensively in both his treatments of the Methodists (Thompson 1966: 375-400) and William Blake (Thompson 1993). In each case his assessment shifts tellingly from one side to the other: while the Methodists exhibit an inauthentic apocalypticism, the radical Dissenters like Blake tap into an authentic version. As far as the Methodists are concerned, Thompson argues that the apocalypticism was the result of counter-revolution, especially during the Napoleonic Wars between England and France. When the revolutionary hopes of social change have been disappointed, when the police and spies and army move in to capture, imprison and execute the leaders, then where do those radical energies and hope go? They may go underground, to be nurtured until another time (the work of the radical Dissenters), or they may find expression in fervid outbursts of religious revival. This second form of apocalypticism becomes a desperate and dismal picture, especially when it is one of the reasons (in Thompson's opinion) for the success of his loathed Methodists. With their

emotional meetings, damnation of sin, calls for conversion and millenarian imagery, the Wesleyans were able to give an outlet to these frustrated hopes of the poor. Thompson even hints that the Methodists preyed on the dashed hopes of social change. All of the outward manifestations of the Methodist meetings – groaning, crying out, fainting, shouting, weeping, paroxysms and even mass hysteria – become a sign of the psychic process of counter-revolution, the “chiliasm of despair” (Thompson 1966: 388)⁷ and not revolution itself. And so he designates it an inauthentic millenarianism in contrast to the Jacobin agitations of the late 18th century.

But when he comes to radical Dissenters like Blake he changes his tune. Now he resists dismissing apocalypticism as the raving of lunatics (a dismissal one hears all too often today in “learned” circles). So we find him countering the caricature of chiliasm as the terrain of disturbed individuals, suffering from paranoia and megalomania, by arguing that it is a language, an imagery of the poor and oppressed. Or rather, while there may indeed be the occasional deranged individual (or Methodist), the biblical imagery of the Whore of Babylon, the Beast and the New Jerusalem has consistently provided the language of opposition by minority groups (Thompson 1966: 48-50).

It takes little guesswork to notice that such language is drawn directly from the Bible, especially the two explicitly apocalyptic books, *Daniel* and *Revelation*.⁸ Not a little has been written in biblical studies on the matter. Technically, apocalypse means a revelation (*apocalypstein*), usually of what is to come in history with a specific focus on the end of the world, or at least the end of oppression.

While earlier studies drew upon anthropological literature to argue that apocalyptic literature is characteristic of severely oppressed and disempowered groups (see Wilson 1980), more recently it has been argued that we need to distinguish between apocalyptic as a literary genre and as a world-view, and apocalypticism as a politico-religious movement. In light of this distinction, Thompson is interested in the second and third features. The movements are of course his favoured sectarian Dissenters, as well as the whirlwind followings of various prophets, while the worldview was both informed by the Bible and expressed their deep opposition to the corrupt status quo. For those who flocked to hear and follow Mother Jane Wardley (the Shakers) or Richard Brothers in 1793-4 and “Zion” Ward in 1829-36,⁹ their worldview was steeped in the Bible and the traditions of Radicalism. It was a time “when men’s psychic world was filled with violent images from hell-fire and Revelation, and their real world filled with poverty and oppression” (Thompson 1966: 801). But they were also those who flocked to Robert Owen’s version of communism in the early 19th century that Engels was to praise so much. This is the apocalyptic worldview that Thompson finds in William Blake. The fact that the apocalyptic worldview “touched Blake with its breath” (Thompson 1966: 50), that it runs deeply throughout his poetry and painting, that Blake cannot be understood without its imagery is enough for Thompson to give it some space.

What are we to make of this sharp difference between condemnation of apocalypticism (Methodism) and approval of an apocalyptic worldview and literature (Blake)? Rather than a clear case of misguided dislike of the Methodists and zeal for Blake, I would suggest that Thompson is onto something, namely the

political ambivalence at the heart of apocalyptic literature and worldviews and even apocalyptic movements. We might approach the issue through what that great champion of apocalyptic literature Ernst Bloch calls the “discernment of myths” (Bloch 1972: 34-58; 1970: 41-58), for apocalyptic literature deals in the language and imagery of myth. Thompson’s criterion is the same as Bloch’s: how is that apocalyptic imagery used on a political level? In Thompson’s judgement, the Methodists used it for reactionary and escapist reasons, while radical Dissenters like Blake found a more politically revolutionary use. But I would go further than Thompson on two counts. First, since a good deal of millenarian frenzy today emanates from the vast numbers of fundamentalist Christians in the United States,¹⁰ and since this is by no means the preserve of those excluded from power and oppressed, we need to cast a very sceptical eye over this type of apocalypticism. It becomes a means for the powerful (religious and political) Right to assert its historical “mission”, as well as express the fear that their own political might is crumbling (See Runions 2004a, 2004b). Second, it is not merely a matter of the use to which apocalyptic imagery is put, for it also bears within itself a political ambivalence. In other words, apocalyptic literature, worldviews and movements give voice to a tension between reaction and revolution that one so often finds with Christianity. It may go one way or another, or, as is more often the case, it reproduces that political ambivalence within the groups that appropriate it. Thus, the imagery of the Beast and the Whore become a potent polemic against a corrupt state of oppression (in the hands of a Blake or a Daniel), but the anticipation of the Last Judgement can also become a justification for the self-

righteous agenda of reaction (as has so often been the case for the Church). This means that I find Thompson's argument that the Methodist's millenarian tendencies were a result of counter-revolution less than persuasive; rather, that counter-revolutionary direction comes out of the ambivalence internal to apocalyptic and apocalypticism.

The apocalyptic Blake also runs in Thompson's veins in other ways. I think of the approving nods towards a chiliastic Blake at the end of *Witness Against the Beast*. Thus, with his affirmations of "Thou Shalt Love" and "Thou Shalt Forgive", Blake provides "a plank in the floor upon which the future must walk" (Thompson 1993: 228). But the final item of apocalyptic I wish to pick up here is Thompson's anti-nuclear campaigning – the context for the poems contained in *Infant and Emperor*.

The story of Thompson's involvement in the disarmament movement has been told often enough. Beginning spasmodically in the 1950s, it became almost a full-time pursuit in the 1970s and 80s, especially during the time of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Both the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and END, The European Nuclear Disarmament, and the Campaign for Nuclear, a vast popular movement with its connections across Europe, both East and West, demanded so much in terms of travel, meetings, talks and popular publications, that he put his other writing on hold (see further Bess 1993). Rather tellingly, *Witness Against the Beast* was much delayed as a consequence, and the planned book on Romanticism never eventuated.¹¹ In a sense, we might see the Blake book as a belated justification of his disarmament work.

But was the Nuclear Disarmament Movement an apocalyptic movement and are the writings Thompson produced during this time apocalyptic literature? Here are some of the titles of the works he wrote: *Beyond the Cold War: A New Approach to the Arms Race and Nuclear Annihilation* (Thompson 1982); *Star Wars: Self-Destruct Incorporated* (Thompson / Thompson 1985); *Extremism and Cold War* (Thompson 1982); *The Heavy Dancers* (Thompson 1985); *Zero Option* (Thompson 1982); *Protest and Survive* (Thompson / Smith 1980); *Prospectus for a Habitable Planet* (Thompson / Smith 1987). I would add to these doomsday scenarios in the chilling conclusion to *The Sykaos Papers* (Thompson 1988). In this rambling and overly clever attempt at science fiction, the best part is the heroine's final account of the nuclear Armageddon from her vantage point of the moon. In one sense, the novel – with its alien visitor trying to make sense of Earth – all leads to this final cataclysm. Further, this struggle for disarmament was both a distinct movement based on a feared end of the world and it made use of the full range of apocalyptic language – both apocalypticism and apocalyptic. And it was a struggle that informed the actions and writings of E. P. Thompson for some two decades.

Now, we can disapprove and say that Thompson was getting carried away, that the world did not end and that all this was millenarian fantasy. Or we can point out that the fear of nuclear annihilation, or for that matter, global warming and environmental destruction, are displaced fears and anticipations of the end of capitalism. But I remember at the time, when I became deeply aware of the threat of an all-out nuclear war in the 1980s, that these prospects were real. Human

beings had the capacity for the first time in that species' history to make a swift end to it all. Some human beings, animals and plants would probably have survived, but not in any way that was known at the time (perhaps there is some truth in that anticipation of the end of capitalism). Of course, the Cold War came to a swift end, there were revolutions all across Eastern Europe, communism "lost" and the capitalist West "won". Since then it has been calm sailing ...

There is, however, a distinct difference in the way the anti-nuclear movement made use of apocalyptic themes. It was not that they welcomed such a cataclysm, calling on the Russian and US leaders to press their fatal buttons. They used the threat of a nuclear conflagration to bring an end to the arms race, to bring a groundswell of opposition to the policy makers and warmongers. In other words, they sought to avert Armageddon and bring about what Thompson calls in his poetry a "soft apocalypse". But is this not a call to repentance in its own way? It reminds me of the little fable of Jonah in the Bible. Jonah is called by God to pronounce doom on Nineveh, which he does after some fishy persuasion. But the people of Nineveh repent, go around in sackcloth and ashes, and God spares them. All to Jonah's profound chagrin, for he had wanted their end. This is not a call to repentance so that one may be among the Elect at the Last Judgement; it is a call that seeks to avert that judgement and take a radically different path.

Conclusion

What Thompson has done with these poems, written in the context of his involvement in the nuclear disarmament movement and under the influence of

William Blake, is (re-)discover and give voice to a radical element within Christianity, contained even in the Christmas fable.

Yet there is a lurking question, and with that I conclude this essay: has Christianity been misinterpreted by the Church itself, by Enlightenment anti-clericalism and by many of Thompson's Marxist comrades? Surely it is a conservative, if not reactionary movement that is all too comfortable with the rich and the powerful. Indeed, the Church in all its many branches has been more often than not one of the rich and powerful. What are we to make of this radical and revolutionary side of Christianity?

I would suggest that it is one side of a deep political ambivalence or tension within Christianity. It may go one way or the other, towards reaction or revolution. If various pieces of the Christian Church have all too often carried on a dirty little relationship with the odd Roman Emperor from the time of Constantine onwards, or with the lords and kings of the Middle Ages, or indeed the political Right wing in our own day (and here there is little difference between conservative popes or evangelical Protestant Christians), then other elements have tapped into a deep revolutionary current, such as Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in 17th-century England, or Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' Revolt in 16th-century Germany, or the guerrilla priests of liberation theology like Camillo Torres in the 20th century. In fact, this ambivalence may also be found in the Bible, where the murmuring and rebellious Israelites in the myth of the wilderness wanderings challenge Moses time and time again, or some of the prophets call for an end to exploitation, or the rebel Jesus who is put to death by the Romans as an agitator, or the perpetual

theme of revolutionary chaos that threatens the order the ruling class desperately tries to assert, or indeed that curious message of grace in the letters of Paul, something that irrupts unexpectedly undeservedly into the everyday run of life to change all the coordinates of our existence (See further Boer 2007). My point here is not that one take on the Bible or Christianity is closer to the truth and another a misinterpretation; rather, both are perfectly valid: the Bible may very well be read as a friend of the rich and powerful, but it may equally well be an inspiration for revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow their rich and powerful oppressors. Ernst Bloch's two comments on the Bible sum it up rather well: while it is "often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich", it is also "the Church's bad conscience" (Bloch 1972: 25 and 21; 1970: 34 and 25). What Thompson has done in his poems for Christmas is recover the radical side of the equation.

Notes

¹ He is of course far better known as the great proponent of “social history” from the bottom up. This approach was first presented with *The Making of the English Working Class*, a work that fundamentally changed the way history was written. It is history from the side of the losers, the silenced, from those who left few records barring the ones of their opponents – the labourers, peasants, the poor without any work, the barely literate or illiterate and their clubs, friendly or benefit societies, illegal trade unions, occasional insurrections, religious groups and sects.

² To my knowledge there is no secondary literature on *Infant and Emperor*. There is a small collection of material on Thompson and religion (Dreyer 1986; Jaffe 1989; Currie / Hartwell 1965: 640-1; Gilbert 1979; Heathorn 1998; Taylor 1995), which I have consulted with benefit, but it does not compare to the vast amount of secondary literature on Thompson’s main historical work, especially *The Making of the English Working Class*.

³ Along with his re-conception of revolution as peaceful, these poems added fuel to those who accused his of “socialist humanism” and “utopian socialism” (see Bess 1993: 23).

⁴ See Thompson’s study of Blake, the last one he wrote (Thompson 1993; see also Boer forthcoming)

⁵ See also the “stirring in the womb” that “alerts the testy police” (*idem*, 13).

⁶ See “The Massacre of the Innocents”, which really has the spirit of Marx’s own satire against the seamless connection between corrupt power and religion (*idem*, 11-12).

⁷ See also Jaffe’s treatment of the issue in light of subsequent debates (Jaffe 1989).

⁸ Outside the canon there are far more, such as the *Apocalypse of Adam and Eve* or the writings from Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls).

⁹ Not, however, Joanna Southcott of the early years of the 19th century. The reason: she too arrives in a time of political reaction and reveals the truth of the Methodist appeal, for large numbers of Methodists followed her for a time.

¹⁰ As one example among many, see the “Rapture Index” at <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html>. Everything from a Democratic victory through to possible failure of the war in Iraq sends the index climbing.

¹¹ What we have a collection of odd pieces edited by Dorothy Thompson (Thompson 1997).

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