

THE APOCALYPSE ACCORDING TO JOHNNY CASH:
EXAMINING THE 'EFFECT' OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION ON A
CONTEMPORARY APOCALYPTIC WRITER

William John Lyons

1. *Introduction*

Most of my thinking about the Bible (or any of its components) as an object (or objects) moving through history has been predicated on a view of that material as being almost wholly passive. Readers have constructed 'it', used 'it', abused 'it', but, strangely, appeared to have been little changed by their interaction with 'it'. That this is in fact a fairly accurate depiction of what has happened in the examples that I have previously studied, however, should not have blinded me to the possibility that the Bible may also function as an active agent, influencing and altering those who encounter it.¹

Reading Heikki Räisänen's essay, "The "Effective History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship",² has set me to considering these things more rigorously, however. He begins by describing his embarrassment at being unable to answer the lay-person's 'very reasonable' question, 'what effect has the Bible had?' His basic problem is that the Bible's influence has been assumed rather than critically demonstrated.³ But compounding that problem has been our failure to adequately define our terms. Here I want to note three of his distinctions before building on them later.

1. Most of this work has centred on the reception of the Gamaliel the Elder portrayed in Acts 5.34-41, with an article ("The Words of Gamaliel [Acts 5.38-39] and the Irony of Indeterminacy", *JSNT* 68 [1997], pp. 23-49), and current essays discussing the way that the figure in the text has been seen in a number of different ways by modern exegetes and the early Church.

2. In Heikki Räisänen, *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991-2001* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 263-82 (originally published in *SJT* 45 [1992], pp 303-24).

3. Räisänen, 'Effective History', p. 263.

First, for Räsänen, 'effective history' is not the same as the 'history of interpretation'.⁴ Allegorical readings, for example, are not generally important for 'effective history' but are fundamental for the 'history of interpretation'.⁵ Allegory permits promiscuous 'use' of texts to back up pre-existing views, but for Räsänen, effective history's object of study can only be 'a (new) *consequence* of [a] reading; mere justification of something with the Bible will not qualify'.⁶ Effective history is thus being defined as 'an actual history of empirical effects',⁷ albeit with the caveat that the line between effect and use is 'hazardous and subjective'.⁸

Second, Räsänen argues that the 'Bible' of effective history cannot be restricted to the text as originally 'meant'.⁹ He suggests instead that '[t]he Bible is an effective factor when something results from a reading which is plausible in the circumstances'.¹⁰ This clarifies an earlier comment that 'it would be impossible to exclude the allegorically understood Bible when we consider the influence of the Bible on medieval and Renaissance art and literature'.¹¹ In that context allegorical readings *were* also plausible readings.¹² As a general rule, however, readings that appear contrived should be peripheral to the concerns of effective history.

Third, Räsänen notes the sheer complexity of effective history's object of study – the Bible's influence may be uneven, is always augmented and sometimes deeply compromised by other influences, and is often disturbingly widespread on both sides of any argument.¹³ Nevertheless, he is obviously of the opinion that its influence may be critically discussed, and offers a number of 'effect-types': (i) the impact of specific words or passages (e.g. Origen's self-mutilation); (ii) the impact of general religious and moral ideas; (iii) the impact on the emotions – both positive (e.g. hope) and negative (hell); (iv) the impact of exemplary figures as persons to be imitated; and (v) the impact of the idea of a 'holy book'.¹⁴ Significantly for our purposes here, he also notes 'the Bible has

4. Räsänen, 'Effective History', pp. 269-71.

5. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 270.

6. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 271.

7. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 265 n. 12.

8. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 270.

9. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 271.

10. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 271.

11. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 270.

12. Räsänen's distrust of allegory is further diluted by his statement that '[i]f it can be shown that a particular allegorical interpretation had actually brought about a new idea or a new practice, and not just legitimated an existing one, that would belong to effective history' ('Effective History', p. 270).

13. Räsänen, 'Effective History', pp. 267, 272.

14. Räsänen, 'Effective History', pp. 273-79.

often exerted its influence indirectly'.¹⁵ Materials affected by the Bible's influence may be said to propagate that influence, albeit indirectly.

With these distinctions in mind, I want to ask about the 'effect' of the book of Revelation on a specific 'interpreter', the American songwriter and vocalist, Johnny Cash. I want to suggest that his description of the process involved in writing his 2002 song, 'The Man Comes Around', is an illustration of a different 'effect-type', one in which the end-result of the Bible's impact upon the interpreter is the production of an explicit admission of what may be loosely termed, 'readerly inadequacy'.¹⁶ In other words, I am suggesting that Cash's explicit acknowledgement of his own interpretive limitations with regard to Revelation is the visible marker of an encounter with his own Bible rather than evidence for his having simply adopted the standard expositions of the tradition(s) in which he stands.¹⁷

If the Bible has influenced Cash's song, it also follows that subsequent impact of the latter must be considered part of the Bible's indirect influence. Whether any of this counts as something 'new' in Räsänen's sense, however, is something that we will return to later.

2. *The Early Years of Johnny Cash*

Johnny Cash was born J.R. Cash on 26 February, 1932, in Kingsland, Arkansas, the fourth of six children.¹⁸ Raised a Southern Baptist, his early years on the family cotton farm were physically hard and had their share of trauma. He had a strained relationship with his father, who shot his dog dead when the boy was five.¹⁹ In May 1944, his beloved older brother Jack took a week to die after a horrific saw accident, only months after Cash had been baptized.²⁰ Cash also remembered good times, however,

15. Räsänen, 'Effective History', p. 267.

16. Though this may perhaps be considered a sub-variant of Räsänen's third 'effect-type', the 'impact on the emotions', it obviously also possesses a significant intellectual aspect.

17. The idea of seeing a reader's lack of comprehension as evidence of interaction and effect arose from reading Christina G. Rossetti's comments on the Laodicean Church of Revelation 3 and seeing her explicitly acknowledge her failure to understand the text (*Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* [London: SPCK, 1892], p. 133). Such a move struck me as an unusual one for someone writing within the modern traditions that I am most familiar with, and indicative of someone who was being personally influenced by the Bible they were reading.

18. Johnny Cash, with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography of Johnny Cash* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 5-6.

19. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 257-58; cf. p. 55; cf. also Dave Urbanski, *The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003), pp. 9-11.

20. Johnny Cash, "'Fork in the Road'" from *Man in Black* (1975)', in Michael

many involving music – his mother sang gospel songs and he sang them too, around the house and in the cotton fields.²¹

Following a period in the Army (1950–54),²² Cash married a catholic, Vivien Liberto,²³ started a family, and began his recording career alongside Elvis Presley at Sam Phillips's Sun Records.²⁴ He wrote hit after hit and his popularity and prosperity grew.²⁵ Following Phillips's refusal to allow him to record a gospel album, Cash signed with Columbia Records, and recorded the first of many such albums, *Hymns by Johnny Cash* (1959).²⁶ Alongside Gospel, however, Cash was also penning darker lyrics: 'I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die' (from *Folsom Prison Blues* [1956]).

Streissguth (ed.), *Ring of Fire: The Johnny Cash Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), pp. 25-34; Cash, *Cash*, pp. 25-32; Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash: The Authorised Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 29-33; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 13-21. On Cash's feelings about his early decision to undergo baptism, see Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 7-9.

21. Cash, *Cash*, p. 57; cf. also Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 23-29.

22. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 65-67; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 39-56; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 31-35.

23. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 156-57; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 36-37.

24. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 81-83; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 64-66; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 41-44.

25. Cash's enduring popularity as musician is described by Urbanski:

Johnny Cash's musical accomplishments are storied and staggering. He occupies spots in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Songwriter's Hall of Fame, and the Country Music Hall of Fame – he, in fact, was the first living person inducted into the latter. He sold 50 million albums, recorded more than 1500 songs, boasted fourteen number one hits, won scads of awards – including eleven Grammys – and is mentioned in the same breath as the Beatles when it comes to musical impact. (Indeed, Cash even outsold the Beatles – and everybody else – in 1969, ringing up 6.5 million album sales at the registers.) (*Man Comes Around*, pp. xiii-xiv).

26. Cash, *Cash*, p. 317. Cash, with Marshall Grant and Luther Perkins (who would be his backing group for many years to come) started out singing gospel (initially he tried to sell himself to Sam Phillips as a gospel singer):

We performed a mixture of material, most of it gospel oriented: 'Peace in the Valley,' some of Red Foley's songs, 'He'll Understand and Say Well Done,' sometimes black gospel blues songs like 'I've Got Jesus and That's Enough,' and always 'I Was There When It Happened,' the sacred song Jimmie Davis had made a hit [...]. Often I sang what was then my favourite among my own songs, 'Belshazzar' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 79).

Later gospel albums include *Hymns from the Heart* (1962), *The Holy Land* (1969), *Precious Moments* (1975), *A Believer Sings the Truth* (1979), and *My Mother's Hymnbook* (2004).

The three albums, 'Love', 'God', and 'Murder' released in 2000, showcase what would become the major elements of the Cash songbook,²⁷ each set against a background of southern working-class experience.²⁸

Touring life held many temptations for Cash. During the 60s, his behaviour became increasingly destructive; numerous car wrecks,²⁹ damage to hotels and venues,³⁰ addiction to amphetamines (from July 1957 onwards),³¹ and several one-off nights in jail followed.³² Already distanced from his wife and four daughters by his touring life-style, his long-term relationship with June Carter also contributed in part to the breakdown of his marriage.³³ In the divorce papers Cash was accused of 'extreme cruelty'.³⁴ Looking back from the perspective of the 1990s, Cash concluded that he was now 'about as far away from God as I had ever been'.³⁵ In late 1967, he tried to 'lose himself' in Nickajack Cave, near Chattanooga.³⁶ His deity, however, had different ideas.³⁷

Although Cash repeatedly said that he had always been a Christian,³⁸

27. On the eventual contents of Cash's songbook, see Frederick E. Danker, 'The World according to Johnny Cash: Lyrical Themes in his Music', in Melton. A. McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote my Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (Cultural Perspectives in the American South, 11; Yverdon, Switzerland: Gordon & Breach, 1992), pp. 131-54; and Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 291-92.

28. On the class background of Cash's music, see Richard A. Peterson, 'Class Unconsciousness in Country Music', in McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote my Life*, pp. 35-61; and Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church and Working Americans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 69-78.

29. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 161-66, 178-81.

30. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 103-105.

31. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 153-55; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 90-92; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 53-55.

32. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 60-61; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 151-53; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 63-64.

33. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 123, 129-31; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 45-46, 55, 64-65.

34. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 146; cf. Cash's own account of his marriage difficulties, *Cash*, pp. 157-61.

35. Cash, *Cash*, p. 184.

36. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 150-51; Cash, *Cash*, pp. 183-86; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 67-71; Nick Tosches, 'Chordless in Gaza: The Second Coming of John R. Cash', in Streissguth (ed.), *Ring of Fire*, pp. 221-46 (241-42).

37. In 1997 Cash was quite clear that God had not spoken to him directly — 'He never has, and I'll be very surprised if He ever does' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 185) — saying instead that he 'became conscious of a very clear, simple idea: I was not in charge of my own destiny. I was going to die at God's time, not mine' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 185).

38. Cf., for example, his comment in 1997 that 'I've been a Christian [...] all my life' (Cash, p. 256). Of himself and Carl Perkins during the early 60s, Cash said that '[n] either of us was walking the line as Christians, but both of us clung to our beliefs' (Cash, p. 107)

there is little doubt that his personal commitment was strengthened by the Nickajack experience, with Bible study becoming 'an important part of my life.'³⁹ His public persona was increasingly marked by an evangelical tinge. Following the critical success of his prison concert albums in 1968–69, Cash hosted his own TV show (*The Johnny Cash Show*) until, in response to audience questioning, he decided on the 18th November 1970 to declare his faith on national TV, a decision that, in part, led to the show being cut.⁴⁰ Following some persuading by Jimmy R. Snow, pastor at Evangel Temple in Nashville, Cash made a public profession in the church on 9th May, 1971.⁴¹ Such exposure meant that his ongoing struggles with temptation and his occasional fall back into 'bad behaviour' would all be played out in public.⁴² And, as the notorious picture of Cash raising his middle finger to the camera at the 1968 Folsom Prison concert shows, he was often far from being a 'safe' Christian.⁴³

3. *Cash and the Bible*

Cash was certainly aware of the Bible before his evangelical turn. Church attendance was sporadic on the road,⁴⁴ but both the Gospel songs he knew and a number of religiously-minded family members formed

39. *Cash*, p. 211. On p. 249, Cash describes this period as the time 'when I was most intensely involved in Bible Study'.

40. *Cash, Cash*, pp. 220-25; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 171-79; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 90-91.

41. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 184; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. 99.

42. In his earlier autobiographical writings, Cash did not mention the Nickajack cave experience, instead describing his night in jail in Lafayette, Georgia, on the 2nd November 1967, and the attitude of the Sheriff to his drug-taking as his 'crisis point'. As Turner points out, this suggests that Cash's resolve after Nickajack did not last very long (*Man Called Cash*, pp. 151-53). Cash also lapsed back into drug addiction in the late 1970s, a period culminating in course of treatment in the Betty Ford Clinic in 1983 (Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 208, 220-22; cf. *Cash, Cash*, pp. 189-99; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 122-25).

43. Cf. e.g. online: http://www.basementbar.net/uploaded_images/johnny%20cash%20finger-737393.bmp, no pages, accessed on 29 September, 2006). This gesture has become widely known in American slang as a 'Johnny Cash', and the image in some ways serves as a suitable symbol for the man once described by his daughter, Rosanne, as 'a profoundly spiritual man', who also 'readily admits to a continual attraction for all seven deadly sins' (on the televised *All-Star Tribute to Johnny Cash*, TNT, 1999; cf. Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. xx).

44. Urbanski notes some contact that Cash had in the early 60s with a non-denominational church, the Avenue Community Church in Ventura, California, and its pastor, Floyd Gressett. Though Cash and Gressett became friends, the singer did not stay with the church for long (Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. 59-60; cf. also Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 119-20).

important avenues of influence on him.⁴⁵ In the early 70s, however, Cash became increasingly involved with a Pentecostal church and befriended both his own pastors and some well-known evangelical preachers, notably Billy Graham.⁴⁶

According to biographer Steve Turner,

Cash admired Graham's resoluteness and quiet confidence in God. Graham had met and advised some of the most powerful men in the world, and yet the most striking thing about him was his humility and his integrity. Graham, in turn, was intrigued by Cash's ability to be candid about his faith and yet find acceptance with sections of society that traditionally were cynical about Christianity.⁴⁷

The two became friends, the singer appearing at a number of Graham's rallies, and the evangelist and his wife taking holidays with Cash and his family.⁴⁸ Though both agreed that Cash was no evangelist—he was unwilling to force his beliefs on anyone who did not wish to hear about them—the singer is remembered by some as an important element in their own conversion stories. One such is Larry Butler, who in the early 70s had worked in Israel on the Cash-funded, produced, and scored Jesus film, *The Gospel Road*, and then been baptized in the River Jordan.⁴⁹ The film was subsequently purchased and widely used by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.⁵⁰

45. For example, June Carter's parents, Maybelle and Ezra Carter, and Cash's sister, Joanne—who later gained a Master's Degree in Bible Studies—and her husband, the Rev. Harry Yates, are all described as influential figures in Cash's 1997 autobiography (*Cash*, pp. 145-51, 304).

46. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 226-29; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 181-85; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. xix-xx, 101-103.

47. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 180.

48. Graham published the following comments after Cash's death:

Johnny Cash was not only a legend, but was a close personal friend. Johnny was a good man who also struggled with many challenges in his life. Johnny was a deeply religious man. He and June came to a number of our Crusades over a period of many years. Ruth and I took a number of personal vacations with them at their home in Jamaica and in other places. They both were like a brother and sister to Ruth and me. We loved them. We are praying that God will comfort his family and staff at this critical time. I look forward to seeing Johnny and June in heaven one day (online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/136/52.0.html>, no pages, accessed on 29th September 2006).

49. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 290-91.

50. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 248-51; Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 185-90; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp 109-17; cf. also Billy Graham, *Just as I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 436-37.

Cash's view of the Bible was deeply influenced by the evangelicalism and dispensationalism that Graham represented.⁵¹ In 1986 the man whose stage attire had gained him the name, 'The Man in Black', published a novel about St Paul entitled, *The Man in White*.⁵² In the introduction Cash wrote:

I believe the Bible, the whole Bible, to be the infallible, indisputable Word of God. I have been careful to take no liberties with the timeless Word. Where the Word is silent and for my story's sake, I have at times followed traditional views. Other things, some characters, some conversation, and some occurrences are products of my broad and at times strange imagination.⁵³

As Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have noted, however, for 'much of the American experience [...], it was the book of Revelation that placed its stamp upon the whole Bible'.⁵⁴ According to Frederick E. Danker, this

emerges most fully in [Cash's 1973 song] "Matthew Twenty-Four" [...]. Here is a full array of phraseology associated with premillennialist worldviews: rumours of war (Armageddon), earthquakes, signs of the times, 'one more day could be the last,' and even the image of the 'great bear from the northland.' That last phrase echoes the common view among radical evangelicals that the northland can be equated with Russia.⁵⁵

In a personal letter to Cash in 1975, Graham remarked about 'Matthew 24', that 'I have a feeling this could be a big hit'.⁵⁶ In 1983 he published his own book about the end-times, *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.⁵⁷

51. A classic account of this sub-culture's attitude to the Bible can be found in Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Sub-culture in America* (3rd edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 31-47.

52. San Francisco: Harper & Row. The gestation of the book was a difficult one, however. On the one hand, Cash was struggling to write the book and deal with his addiction, while, on the other, Billy Graham was telling the crowds at his rallies about his great expectations for Cash's novel about Paul (Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 209).

53. Cash, *The Man in White*, p. 12. As Chris Rowland pointed out at the Colloquium, however, America's 'book of Revelation' was already itself being viewed through the 'Pauline' lenses supplied by Protestant and Puritan theology.

54. *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 53.

55. 'The World according to Johnny Cash', pp. 149-50.

56. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 197.

57. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983. Graham's dispensationalism can be seen in his own works, but is perhaps exemplified by his choice of 'researcher' for his autobiography, Jerry B. Jenkins, the co-writer (with Tim LaHaye) of the phenomenally successful 'Left Behind' series (cf. Graham, *Just as I Am*, p. 732). On Jenkins's web-site, his biography notes that he spent thirteen months working on Graham's autobiography, beginning

Cash was no mere 'reproducer' of dispensationalist exegesis, however. Over the years, he was to prove himself a keen student of the Bible, avidly reading not just that text, but also many books about it.⁵⁸ From 1975 to 1977 he took correspondence courses in Bible Studies at Bill Hamon's International Christian School of Theology in Texas, reading widely and gaining proficiency with technical aids before first graduating and then subsequently being ordained by Hamon at his own request.⁵⁹

He continued his reading while writing *The Man in White*, explicitly listing the following among his reading:

Everyday Life in Jesus' Time; Fox's Book of Martyrs; the History of the Earliest Church; the Twelve Apostles, the Twelve Caesars; the Jewish Encyclopaedia; and the writings of the Romanized Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus.⁶⁰

Many of these books were already in Cash's personal library, with a number of volumes being given to him in the late 60s by June's father, Ezra 'Pop' Carter, a man described by as Cash as a 'Bible scholar, a self-made theologian'.⁶¹ Cash writes:

They're in the spirituality section of my library, next to my history and Americana shelves: *The Life of Christ* by Fleetwood and the same title by Farrar; *The Life and Acts of Paul the Apostle* by Conebere and Howsom [sic]; Lang's whole set of Bible commentaries, about thirty volumes; various books on various aspects of the Holy Land – its history, its archaeology, its horticulture – and many others in a similar vein.⁶²

Notably, Cash had a particular penchant for classic nineteenth-century works, such as the oft-mentioned *The Life and Acts of Paul the Apostle*, first

in 1993 (online: <http://www.jerryjenkins.com/bio.html>, no pages, accessed on 20th September, 2006).

58. Cash, *Cash*, p. 247.

59. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 203-204.

60. Cash, *Man in White*, p. 2.

61. Cash, *Cash*, p. 149. Pop Carter's influence is clearly discernible from this more extended description of him by Cash.

Pop Carter was the one who really got me going on Bible study. I liked him a great deal, and learned a great deal from him in the days after I came out of Nickajack Cave. A self-taught theologian and dedicated scholar, he was also a warm and caring man with a lot of good common sense, and he made a great instructor and discussion partner, feeding and stimulating the hunger for spiritual truths that led me after a while into more formal Bible scholarship through correspondence courses (Cash, *Cash*, p. 245).

62. Cash, *Cash*, p. 244. Cash also read historical novels such as '*The Robe, Quo Vadis, The Silver Chalice, Pillar of Iron*' set in the period (Cash, *Cash*, p. 248).

published by W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson in 1852.⁶³ In a 1995 interview, the music journalist Nick Tosches thought Cash's reading material sufficiently antiquated to query him on his knowledge of a more modern work of biblical scholarship (Michael Grant's *Jesus: A Historian's Review of the Gospels* [1977]—Cash was unaware of it) before concluding that

his hunger for and love of the history of the period is impressively sincere, strong, and in his own self-schooled and rough-hewn way, erudite; and, in the end, I'm sure his grasp is no more unsure, perhaps less so, than my own.⁶⁴

In his 1997 autobiography, Cash described Bible study as something approaching a disciplined form of enquiry: 'I start most of my mornings with coffee, CNN, and then the Bible, and that sets me up for a good day'.⁶⁵ His methodology is clear.

What I really enjoy is the Bible. I love to set myself a test, give myself something to study. I find a passage I don't quite understand and chase it down in the concordance and the chain references until I learn what it means, or at least what the best-versed scholars have been able to interpret it as meaning.⁶⁶

This hint of limitation echoes again when Cash reminisced about his formal studies in the 1970s.

June and I enrolled in a study program and for three years we spent much of our time on airplanes, in hotels, and on the bus doing our lessons. We both graduated. I can't speak for June, but for me the experience was both

63. Cf. also Cash, *Man in White*, p. 5; and in his 1995 interview with N. Tosches ('Chordless in Gaza', p. 226). In *The Man in White* this work is closely linked to his final course—on St Paul—at Hamon's International Christian School of Theology, but in his 1997 autobiography *Cash* he lists the work as one that was given to him by Pop Carter (p. 244). If, as seems likely, both statements are true, then it suggests that Cash was happily using his own 'old' books during his correspondence courses in the mid-70s.

64. Tosches, 'Chordless in Gaza', p. 226.

65. Cash, *Cash*, p. 247. 'On the road', he continues, 'the habit is harder to keep, but usually I have a King James by my side on the bus, and wherever I am I have my Franklin Electronic Bible in my briefcase. That's a wonderful tool—just punch in what you are looking for, hit "Enter", and there's the scripture you want [...]. At home my most-used tool is the Thompson Chain Reference System' (Cash, *Cash*, p. 247).

66. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 204-205. From Cash's 1997 autobiography, it is obvious that certain individuals have also continued to provide him with stimulating discussion. The Reverend John Colbauth is mentioned as 'a close friend and anchor in the storm during the first years in Hendersonville', while Jack Shaw, a minister from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and Cash's sister Joanne's husband, Harry Yates are mentioned as present sources of 'advice and inspiration' on scripture (Cash, *Cash*, pp. 247-48).

exciting and humbling; I learned just enough to understand that I knew almost nothing.⁶⁷

It is perhaps no surprise that Cash's view of the Bible was also being expressed differently in 1997: 'Once I learned what the Bible is—the inspired word of God (*most of it anyway*)—the writing became precious to me, and endlessly intriguing'.⁶⁸ Those four bracketed words—'most of it anyway'—are highly significant when uttered by someone with Cash's background in evangelicalism and dispensationalism!⁶⁹

4. 'The Man Comes Around' (2002)

As the 80s ended, Columbia Records dropped Cash after twenty-eight years. Musical salvation came in the form of producer Rick Rubin and his 'American Recordings' label.⁷⁰ The first of six albums—each containing mostly covers of other writers' songs, sung with only a guitar for accompaniment—was released to critical acclaim in 1994. The Nashville establishment that had thought him finished were suitably rewarded when Cash and Rubin published a full-page 'thank you' for their support, with Cash's Folsom Prison 'middle digit' photograph as the backdrop.⁷¹

'The Man Comes Around' is the title track of the fourth album, released a year before Cash's death in September 2003.⁷² Recorded in the 'unplugged' style of the previous Rubin-produced albums, Cash is accompanied by a single guitar playing an up-beat tempo, with occasional appearances by a piano during the chorus. Turner comments

[t]his track could never have been as effective had he recorded it as a young man. Cash's cracked and sometimes breathless voice sounds both urgent and compassionate. It's not the voice of youthfulness zealotry or sheltered naiveté. It's the voice of the pilgrim at the end of his journey.⁷³

67. Cash, *Cash*, p. 245.

68. Cash, *Cash*, p. 247—emphasis added.

69. Cash demonstrates a number of other traits in his 1997 autobiography that seem to be—to an English academic anyway—difficult to reconcile with much of American Evangelical Christianity. For example, he discusses the presence of ghosts in his house in Jamaica (pp. 37-38), and his attempt to become a mason (pp. 241-42). He also describes his use of a Tibetan singing bowl (p. 205), and his possession of a Navajo dreamcatcher, used with a St Bridget's Cross, as a guard 'in the world I can't see' (p. 52).

70. Cash, *Cash*, pp. 274-77; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 137-43, 191.

71. Cf. online: <http://greenehouse.net/img/cash.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September 2006.

72. Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 278-82.

73. Turner, *Man called Cash*, pp. 266-67.

Given Cash's own beliefs, the song is undoubtedly one of hopeful expectation.⁷⁴

The story of Cash's writing of the song is told in the liner notes and has been extensively repeated in reviews and in recent biographies.

The initial idea for the song came from a dream I had seven years ago. I was in Nottingham, England and had bought a book called "Dreaming of the Queen." The book talked about... people... who dream that they are with Queen Elizabeth II. I dreamed that I walked into Buckingham Palace, and there she sat [...]. As I approached, [she] looked up at me and said, "Johnny Cash! You're like a thorn tree in a whirlwind." Then, of course, I awoke. I realised that "Thorn tree in a whirlwind" sounded familiar to me. Eventually I decided that it was biblical, and I found it in the book of Job. From there it grew into a song, and I started lifting things from the book of Revelation. It became "The Man Comes Around".⁷⁵

According to Cash, the song is 'based, loosely, on the book of Revelation, with a couple of lines or a chorus, from other biblical sources'.⁷⁶

Some comment is first needed on the generative phrase 'thorn tree in a whirlwind'. Cash said that he found it in Job, and many have simply repeated this. But that phrase does not appear in Job, nor does the reversed version – 'the whirlwind is in the thorn tree' – that appears in the song. Instead of repeating the claim, Cash's 'spiritual' biographer, Dave Urbanski, instead sought an explanation in the imagery of the whirlwind, writing in brackets:

Interestingly, the Bible typically characterizes whirlwinds as a sweeping, destructive force that overtakes the wicked – and thorns are typically the emblem of the wicked.⁷⁷

Whatever the merits of this generalising move as an explanation for Cash's linking of the phrase with Job, it nevertheless confirms that the phrase is not itself biblical.

But much of the song undeniably is. It opens and closes with Cash reading Revelation 6.1-2 (the 'white horse') and 6.7-8a (the 'pale horse'). The texts in between mostly reflect eschatological judgment. Explicit in the man's coming is the division of humanity by 'name' (cf. Rev. 3.5; 13.8; 17.8; 20.15; 21.27) into two groups, those to free and those to blame (cf. Ezek. 9.2-10.7).⁷⁸ Freedom is for the righteousness (cf. Rev. 22.11),

74. Urbanski describes the song thus: 'Unabashedly fire and brimstone theologically speaking, Cash nevertheless conveys a convincingly happy tone via simple, major chords and an upbeat tempo' (*Man Comes Around*, p. 166).

75. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV* (2002).

76. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV* (2002).

77. Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, p. 167.

78. I am grateful to Chris Rowland to the pointer to 'the man' of Ezekiel 9.

those who drink of the 'last offered cup' (cf. Mt. 26.27-28). They are to be gathered by the 'father hen' and taken 'home' (cf. Mt. 23.37), and the golden ladder coming down is for them (cf. Gen. 28.12).⁷⁹ Blame, however, is for the unrighteous and the filthy (cf. Rev. 22.11) and they disappear into the 'potter's ground' (cf. Mt. 27.3-8). With this 'Armageddon' (cf. Rev. 16.16), true peace – shalom – appears, and the deity is acknowledged by the wise (cf. Rev. 4.4, 10). The 'whirlwind' and 'thorn tree' are combined in the chorus with Matthew's parable of the virgins with their trimmed wicks, awaiting the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. e.g. Mt. 25.7), here called 'Alpha and Omega's kingdom' (cf. Rev. 1.8,11; 21.6; 22.13), and Jesus' comment to Paul on the Damascus Road, that 'it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks' (Acts 26.14 κν). Completing the song are various phrases and ideas that could be either biblical or traditional.

Cash's account of the song's origin involves various stages: (i) the reading or possession of an originating text – Cash's 'dream' book – initiates the process, followed by (ii) a personal dream in which a 'word' is given. The 'word' is located in the Bible – to Cash's satisfaction at least – and (iii) developed, with other scriptures, over seven years. Finally, Cash says that he 'must have written three dozen pages of lyrics', before he (iv) 'painfully weeded it down' to (v) the final song.⁸⁰

At this point, I am tempted to wonder how comparable is this process to that employed by John of Patmos in producing the book of Revelation. Or, to put it in a different way, how comparable is Johnny Cash as an interpreter of Revelation to John of Patmos as an interpreter of texts such as Ezekiel and Daniel!

5. *Incomprehension as an Effect of the Bible – A New Thing?*

Cash's account continues:

'Revelation' by its mere interpretation says that something 'is revealed'. I wish it were. The more I dug into the book the more I came to realise why it's such a puzzle, even to many Theologians [sic]. Eventually I shuffled my papers, so to speak, drew out four or five pages, and wrote my lyrics.⁸¹

79. The ladder's composition and colour are not specified in Genesis itself, but the idea of it being 'golden' was certainly developed early on in the Christian tradition (cf. e.g. Perpetua's vision of a 'golden ladder' in Tertullian's *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*) and is standard fare today.

80. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV*.

81. Cash, Liner notes, *American IV*. This suggests that the development stage should be understood as also involving enquiries being made of other theological authorities.

These words could, of course, be a rhetorical move, an admission of ‘interpretative inadequacy’ without any real content. But the dispensationalist tradition itself is certainly not noted for such admissions of fallibility with regard to the book of Revelation. Even for Cash, it is ‘many theologians’ who are puzzled, not every single one of them.⁸²

It seems remarkable that the man who wrote ‘Matthew 24’ and counted Billy Graham as a personal friend could express what amounts to a vote of no confidence in the dispensationalist account of Revelation. Instead he seems to have been practicing the more open-ended – and more humble – type of Bible study that he described in 1997. In other words, his puzzlement seems genuine. That this result – partial incomprehension – did not lead him straight back to the total comprehension proffered by the tradition behind ‘Matthew 24’ is obviously intriguing. Whatever level of understanding he had gained, however, his admission of its incompleteness clearly shows that neither the original selection of material for his song nor its final editing were the results of Cash’s fully coming to terms with the book of Revelation itself.⁸³ His incomplete view was encapsulated in the song and left to stand on its own merit.

Returning to Räisänen’s ‘hazardous’ distinction between use and effect,⁸⁴ I suggest that Cash’s admission of defeat precludes him from being simply regarded as a ‘user’ of Revelation. This is not to say that he could not have used the parts of his text to do an old thing. Nor is it to say that his understanding of those parts that he did use might not have been deeply informed by his own Christianity, dispensational or otherwise. But it is to say that there is a significant possibility that his partial understanding of Revelation has directly influenced his song. Using verses from the Apocalypse without a full appreciation of their potential implications, especially when loosened from their canonical moorings, may well have opened up a range of ‘meanings’ for the song that Cash could not have anticipated and, perhaps, would not have appreciated. While it is true that

82. This is certainly not to suggest that the dispensationalist tradition had been consistent in its interpretations of the text and the contemporary events in which it has found itself, but rather that the tradition usually shows a high degree of confidence in its interpretation at any given point in time (compare, e.g., the details of Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970) with those of Tim LaHaye’s and Jerry B. Jenkins’s *Left Behind* series (1996–present). Cognitive dissonance over time about the numerous changes in detail seems to have very little impact on the confidence held by dispensationalists in their overall schema, however.

83. In a private communication, John Carter Cash, Cash’s son, has written that the verses not included in the recorded version of the song were in fact all written as additional verses, thus making the final song also the original song. This would suggest that the ‘weeding’ that Cash refers to was more akin to an exercise in pruning.

84. Räisänen, ‘Effective History’, p. 270.

even well understood texts are effectively 'orphaned' once published and may be interpreted against the original author's wishes, the production of a text which includes elements that are not fully understood would seem to make this process easier to carry out and hence more likely to happen. Maybe what is new here is that a culturally significant item now exists that gives the 'meaning' of Revelation according to Cash, and yet is tainted by unforeseen and potentially dangerous ambiguity.

6. *Indirect Biblical Influence through the Cash Apocalypse*

If we want to begin to consider recent appropriations of the song, we could do worse than begin with its impact on the on-line video site, YouTube (www.youtube.com). Founded in February 2005 and bought eighteen months later by Google for \$1.65 billion, the concept of YouTube is simple – private individuals simply create their own videos and upload them onto the site for the perusal and comments of others.

As of 16 September 2006, no fewer than sixteen of these 'videos' featured Cash's song as a musical soundtrack.⁸⁵ The oldest – dating from 28 November, 2005 – features what the originator, 'matt26', describes as 'a set of World War I clips set to the Johnny Cash classic, "The Man Comes Around"'.⁸⁶ This imagery of carnage in warfare sets the tone for a number of these videos: Rip1984incombat's nuclear explosions,⁸⁷ donaldp1939's 'September 11th 2001',⁸⁸ drumrun's 'the Kennedy assassination (with 9/11)',⁸⁹ Kakihara1988's murderous tale,⁹⁰ and HonkyTonkMan2's general scenes of anarchy and destruction.⁹¹ Others have created videos using images from films such as the Final Destination trilogy (W1LDCAT),⁹²

85. A year later, this number had more than doubled.

86. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEl2mC6DcOU>, no pages, accessed on 16th September, 2006.

87. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU0VMCPVL-s>, no pages, posted by on February 3rd, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

88. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra6eQ4pJaFY>, no pages, posted on August 25th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

89. Online, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTq6v2UFZC8>, no pages, posted on March 25th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

90. 'Because I Could Not Stop For Death' (online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwP6valVCrk>, no pages, posted on February 28th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006).

91. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtK-QCiD-FE>, no pages, posted on August 11th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

92. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0naNF86-IYc>, no pages, posted on August 7th, 2006 and accessed on 16th September, 2006. This video collects the many gory teen deaths in these three films and runs them one after another – its

the animated series, Scar (licketysnicket),⁹³ and even a promotional video for the 'Gamecock' soccer team (cfallow).⁹⁴

A comic streak runs through others: axel56's 'The cat comes around',⁹⁵ Jorge21789's 'Riders for Christ',⁹⁶ Lefaikone's 'In memoriam of friday with jore?',⁹⁷ HellSlayer23's 'Abspann von "tote Zombies sterben nicht"',⁹⁸ and chemical 32's 'Great moments in human history'.⁹⁹ Finally, an explicitly Christian eschatological scenario is also portrayed (e.g. seraphim1983's Left Behind films compilation¹⁰⁰ and smpfilms's somewhat philosophical 'what if' film, 'Until The End').¹⁰¹

The range of these videos clearly demonstrates a general and ongoing impact for the song, while also suggesting a certain versatility in its range of applications (though of course, not all would be judged as being of equal 'quality' in their appropriation of the song). Significantly, there is a noticeable divergence between those videos which continue to see hope for humanity and those which focus solely on the hopelessness of the destructive side of human nature and activity.

a. *Hopelessness*

The song had already made the jump to mainstream cinema soundtrack before YouTube was launched. The first half of the song, without Cash's opening recitation of Revelation 6.1-2 but ending with his reading of

message: 'The Grim Reaper can be anywhere, and when your turn is up and the man comes around, say your prayers cause it's all over.'

93. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqPPFqux7XI>, no pages, posted on April 18th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

94. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHc9banaQbA>, no pages, posted on August 1st, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

95. 'A tribute to Johnny Cash introducing my cat, Zorro' (vii) Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQ74n5Wrf84>, no pages, posted on June 19th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006).

96. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRR5y2A6pNc>, no pages, posted on April 10th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006

97. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87tF2TuTNwY>, no pages, posted on July 30th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

98. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbodzzMrUAA>, no pages, posted on August 31st, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

99. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qT4OM-SkjE>, no pages, posted on August 30, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006. This video is a compilation of what might be termed human idiocy, often on motorized vehicles and with many seeming to involve injury to those involved.

100. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7taNKI9HbA0>, no pages, posted on August 19th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

101. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmAWxWhkekIU>, no pages, posted on August 28th, 2006, and accessed on 16th September, 2006.

Revelation 6.7-8a, is played over the opening credits of Zack Snyder's 2004 zombie film, *The Dawn of the Dead*.¹⁰² '[A] better mating of music to subject matter I have never seen before in a horror movie' wrote one critic,¹⁰³ while another noted resonances with the imagery of 9/11.¹⁰⁴ There seems little doubt that *The Dawn of the Dead*'s use of the song has been an influence on at least some of YouTube's amateur video-makers – the film ends with everyone dead. There is no upside in Snyder's vision of the future, no morality, no salvation.¹⁰⁵ 'The man' is not Cash's Christ, but only an undefined bringer of doom. Though the dark side of the apocalypse remains, Cash's song has been effectively stripped of the hope that he himself would have seen in it.¹⁰⁶

Why is Cash's song so susceptible to this 'hopeless' interpretation? No doubt the equation between Revelation's apocalyptic imagery and death so evident in the popular imagination plays some role here. But a further possibility is that the lyrics of Cash's 'apocalypse' may actually *invite* such an interpretation. For the interpreter without Cash's strong personal convictions, the song may naturally appear hopeless.

The source of this invitation to hopelessness is flagged by the disagreement that exists between various web-sites about the actual lyrics of the song. Some render the lines that talk of a 'last offered cup' as a

102. The opening credits from Snyder's film are themselves now on YouTube as a 'video' (Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdPWvAMXGGo>, no pages, posted by toeneee90 on 27 February 2006, and accessed on 20 September 2006). The song was also used in William Friedkin's *The Hunted* (2003), playing over the closing credits. Its significance here is hard to gauge because the film is a strangely uninvolved one in which a psychologically damaged rogue American serviceman (Benicio Del Toro) is hunted down by the instructor who had trained him (Tommy Lee Jones). Quite what Cash's version of 'the man comes around' signifies in such a context is difficult to understand, except in general terms of 'the man' once again being equated with a death.

103. Online: <http://www.tranquility.net/~benedict/dawnofthedead2004.html>, no pages, accessed on 13th July, 2006.

104. Online: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?=/c/a/2004/03/19/DDG3F5MRTP1.DTL>, no pages, accessed on 13th July, 2006.

105. On the DVD of the film, however, a hint of salvation for some perhaps appears with the short feature 'The Lost Tape: Andy's Terrifying Last Days Revealed' being described as a videotape found at a store called Andy Gun Works by 'survivors travelling through Everett, Wisconsin'.

106. The genre of the horror film, of course, puts serious qualifiers on what such 'hopelessness' would mean to the audience of a film like *The Dawn of the Dead*. The film industry's over-arching desire is presumably to create and retain their paying audience for the long term, and not to convince them of the hopelessness of their existence *per se*. The YouTube videos that promote hopelessness as a response to the song may therefore provide a purer form of that particular strand of interpretation.

question, 'Will you partake of that last offered cup?',¹⁰⁷ whereas others make them a statement, 'For you partake of that last offered cup'.¹⁰⁸ The one contains an invitation to drink, the other merely states the situation and makes no call to 'partake of that last offered cup'. On Cash's *American IV* album, the song is difficult to make out at this point. In an e-mail exchange, Cash's son, John Carter Cash, has confirmed that the question form is the official version, but it is noteworthy that the band *Knife in the Water* performed the lines in the alternative statement form in their 2004 cover.¹⁰⁹ The 'unofficial' version now has a significant life of its own.¹¹⁰

The importance of these versions relates to the meanings of two verses that Cash has lifted directly from the New Testament. Acts 26.7 — 'It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks' — is a fairly obscure phrase, reportedly spoken by Jesus to Paul on the Damascus road. Its meaning appears to be something like 'it is impossible to oppose what God has planned'. Though Paul has a choice to make, there is already a hint of inevitability here.

Cash's inclusion of Revelation 22.11 with its exhortation to the unrighteous and filthy to continue in their evil ways suggests even more strongly that no choice needs to be made. This theologically difficult verse — the deity exhorting the wicked to carry on being wicked — is usually understood by Christian exegetes as being related to a future situation in which it is already too late to change one's mind. Perhaps Cash also thought something like this. As the song's audience has grown and become inevitably less biblically literate, however, the effect of the verse, especially in a version in which choice is already being sidelined, is simply to reinforce the hopelessness of the present. Wickedness is to go on in the here and now. Of course, even in this version there does remain some hope for 'the righteous', but it has increasingly become a meagre hope, offered to an unknown and distant few. It certainly cannot compete with the hopelessness now being offered to the many.

107. E.g. online: <http://www.geocities.com/wabasso/lyrics.html#The%20Man%20Comes%20Around>, no pages, accessed on 27th February, 2007, and http://www.lyricwiki.org/Johnny_Cash:When_The_Man_Comes_Around, accessed on 27th February, 2007.

108. E.g. online, <http://www.hit-country-music-lyrics.com/johnnycashlyrics-mancomesaround.html>, no pages, accessed on 27th February, 2007, and <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/dawnofthedead/themancomesaround.htm>, accessed on 27th February, 2007.

109. *Cash Covered* (Mojo).

110. Two additional versions of the song by Cash were subsequently released on the Cash: *Unearthed* five CD set in 2004 (Mercury). On the version on disc 5, the wording is similarly obscure, but on the disc 3 recording Cash clearly use the question form. Such clarity clearly came too late for *Knife in the Water*, however.

b. *Christology*

The identification of 'the man who comes around' with an unspecified 'bringer of doom' seen above exemplifies another popular but no doubt unintended appropriation of 'The Man Comes Around' – the replacement of Cash's Christ with some other individual. Perhaps the most surprising 'replacement' can be seen in Dave Urbanski's 2003 'hagiography', *The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash*. Urbanski's title appears to implicitly identify Cash with 'the man who comes around', a move also made by one obituary writer.¹¹¹ For Cash, the 'man' who would come around was undoubtedly Jesus, but the name is not explicitly mentioned in his song. Perhaps Cash thought he did not need to do so. Perhaps he was wrong.

Since his death in 2003, the iconic status of the Man in Black has never been higher. A feature film, *Walk the Line*, was released to critical acclaim in 2005. Joaquim Phoenix, playing Cash, was nominated for an Oscar for best actor, and Reese Witherspoon won the best actress Oscar for her portrayal of June Carter. Online, the searcher can find all kinds of memorabilia, ranging from a seven inch tall Johnny Cash action figure¹¹² to photographs of the many Cash images that individuals have had tattooed on their bodies.¹¹³ Rubin's *American Recordings*, and the ongoing re-issuing of some of Cash's huge back catalogue, have effectively sealed Cash's place as a significant piece of Americana.

Perhaps most significantly, Cash is being increasingly depicted in mythical terms. In Turner's biography, U2's lead singer, Bono, is quoted as saying the following about Cash.¹¹⁴

Johnny Cash was a saint who preferred the company of sinners. It's an amazing thing. I've seen the Bible he read from. I've seen his life from various different quarters, and what I was left with was the feeling that I'd met someone with the dignity of an age we don't know. I feel as though I'm reading about Jacob or Moses. He was so not twentieth century. He was a

111. Steve Beard, 'The Man Came Around: Johnny Cash's Search for Heaven', online, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-beard091503.asp>, no pages, accessed on 5th July, 2006.

112. Online: <http://actionfiguresbygofigure.com/product4759.html>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006; and online: <http://www.starstore.com/acatalog/johnny-cash-figure-o.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006.

113. E.g. online: <http://www.tonsoftattoos.com/wp-content/images/gallery/cash/cash1.jpg>; <http://www.tonsoftattoos.com/wpcontent/images/gallery/cash/cash5.jpg>; and <http://www.tonsoftattoos.com/wp-content/images/gallery/cash/cash6.jpg>, both no pages and accessed on 23rd September, 2006.

114. On Cash and U2, see Turner, *Man Called Cash*, pp. 240-42; Urbanski, *Man Comes Around*, pp. 132-35.

mythical figure. I don't know how that happens. Elvis, Johnny Cash – they were mythical figures and they lived mythical lives.¹¹⁵

In his oft-quoted liner notes from Sony's *The Essential Cash* (2002), Bono also valorizes Cash's Christianity and his masculinity.

Not since John the Baptist has there been a voice like that crying in the wilderness. The most male voice in Christendom. Every man knows he is a cissy compared to Johnny Cash.¹¹⁶

Cash's decision not to identify 'the man' explicitly effectively leaves the song with such a weak christology that his own mythical persona as the 'Man in Black' can usurp his Christ.

c. *Secularization*

The primary effect of the removal of both hope and the person of Jesus has been an increasing 'secularization' of Cash's song. This was given vocal form when *Knife in the Water* omitted the opening and closing quotations from Revelation 6 from their cover of the song.¹¹⁷ Though much that is biblical obviously remains, the removal of such well-known elements of Revelation as the 'white horse' and the 'pale horse' tends towards rendering Cash's 'apocalypse' as a little less biblical, as a little more secular.

Inevitably perhaps, the song's apparent susceptibility to 'secular' readings has made it available to political interests. Despite meeting several presidents, Cash was not himself a political animal.¹¹⁸ He certainly loved America and, given his current status as an almost mythical American male, is seen as embodying significant aspects of Americana. Significantly, however, many also remember him for his interest in aspects of American

115. *Man Called Cash*, p. 241 (presumably in a private interview; cf. p. 333). Cash had earlier been compared with Moses by the music journalist Chris Dickinson (1994). She wrote about his performance during a show:

Throughout the show audience members gathered at the edge of the stage, shaking his hand, passing him flowers, getting closer. There was truth in Cash's image; gone was the carefully fashioned golden calf that graces the cover of American Recordings, replaced by an even more awesome image that was personal and nakedly human. Kinda like Moses carrying those tablets down from the mountain and dealing with the folks at the bottom who'd taken to worshipping a false god ('Cash Conquers', in Streissguth [ed.], *Ring of Fire*, pp. 251-54 [254]).

116. Cf. 'Tributes', in Urbanski, *The Man Comes Around*, pp. 187-92 (p. 192).

117. *Cash Covered* (Mojo, 2004).

118. Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush Snr, and Bill Clinton are all mentioned in Cash's 1997 autobiography (*Cash*, pp. 229-34).

culture that could be considered unfashionable, or even positively counter-cultural:¹¹⁹ his early interest in native American rights,¹²⁰ his 'opposition' to America's war in Vietnam,¹²¹ and, perhaps most of all, for his claim, immortalized in the 1971 song *The Man in Black*, that he wore black 'for the poor and the beaten down, livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town'; 'for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, but is there because he's a victim of the times'; 'for the sick and lonely old'; and for 'the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold.'¹²²

During the Republican National Congress of 30 August–2 September 2004, an exclusive 'celebration' of Cash was organized for the Tennessee delegates at Sotheby's¹²³ in New York City and sponsored by the American Gas Association.¹²⁴ This event drew protests under the rallying banner,

119. Cf. especially the political comments in Cash's 1975 interview with Larry Linderman in *Penthouse* ('Penthouse Interview: Johnny Cash', in Streissguth (ed.), *Ring of Fire*, pp. 143-60).

120. His 'protest' album, *Bitter Tears*, was released in 1964 (Cash, *Cash*, p. 214).

121. Cash was hardly a radical opponent of the war, but while playing at the Nixon Whitehouse he expressed publicly his opposition to war as such and his hope that Nixon would soon end the war in Vietnam (Turner, *Man Called Cash*, p. 195).

122. Like most of Cash's songs, these lyrics are available on-line (e.g. http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/27703/Johnny_Cash/Man_In_Black/, no pages, accessed on 29th September, 2006).

123. Sotheby's were due to auction some of the effects of Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash on the 14–16th September, and those items were already on display in their premises in New York.

124. In response to concerns about the political use of Cash's name at the upcoming event at Sotheby's, his daughter Roseanne issued the following statement on her weblog on the 27th August, 2004 (online: <http://www.rosannecash.com/monthly.html>):

The Cash family has NOT approved the usage of the name or likeness of Johnny Cash for the purposes of the Republican Party, or any political agenda or event [...]. The Republican Party and/or convention cannot and has not co-opted the name or likeness of Johnny Cash for their purposes. What HAS happened is that Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, an old family friend of Dad and June, has asked to have a private party at Sotheby's for some members of the Tennessee delegation. Sotheby's rents out space for parties to many, many diverse groups, and this was approved by both Sotheby's and the estate lawyers for my father, based on the personal relationship between our family and the Senator, NOT as a show of support for the Republican agenda. What was a little more murky was a second party, unrelated to the Senator, and whose intent was somewhat confusing, which seemed to play rather fast and loose with the image of my Dad on their invitations and party plan. As soon as we found out about this, it was stopped. With a resounding thud. There is no need to 'defend' my Dad against the Republicans, or against anyone, for that matter, as some

'defend Johnny Cash', from a group of opposition activists calling itself, 'The Man in Black Bloc'.¹²⁵ One poster advertising the protest had the title 'No Cash for the Rich', and read in part, 'Johnny, we won't let the greedy, war-hungry Republicans exploit [sic] your memory by throwing a party affiliated with your good name'.¹²⁶ Placards subsequently carried by the black-clad protesters included one stating that 'Johnny Cash opposed the right wing. So did Jesus. So did the American Revolutionaries.' Another placard read, 'Johnny Cash is coming from heaven to kick your ass!'¹²⁷ Not surprisingly, some of the republican attendees protested that they too liked Johnny Cash!¹²⁸

During the run-up to the presidential election held on 2 November 2004, 'The Man Comes Around' was also brought into the political arena. A George W. Bush supporter using the pseudonym, 'Bommer', created an on-line slide-show of Bush 'moments', sound-tracked with Cash's song.¹²⁹ 'The man' was now Bush himself. Though no longer available on-line, the following description from a critic ('Christian Libertarian Anti-War Conservative') gives an idea of its contents:

The [...] video repeatedly shows images of 9/11 and Islamic terrorists when the apocalypse [sic] is mentioned, and displays pictures of Bush when the scriptures referring to Christ and His return are referenced. The creator of the video also manages to vulgarize the words of Christ Himself to make a crude joke.¹³⁰

over-zealous types would have you believe. You can rest assured that if anyone needs to 'defend' my Dad against improper usage of his name or image, that we, the family and the estate lawyers, are on the case, usually long before the rest of the world finds out about it. It is our honor and our duty to protect the legacy of my father, and we all take this very seriously, and we are empowered to the nth degree to do so (no pages, accessed on 26th September 2006).

125. Online: <http://www.defendjohnnycash.org> (now defunct).

126. Online: <http://images.indymedia.org/imc/nyc/image/13/DefendJohnnyCash.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006.

127. Online: <http://www.lalutta.org/lilalee/cashprotest.jpg>, no pages, accessed on 23rd September, 2006. A larger image of the 'kick your ass' placard has unfortunately been removed from the web since I began researching this essay.

128. A radio report of the protest can be found online: <http://www.youneverknowradio.com/johnny-cash-protest-at-the-republican-national-convention-2003-2/14>, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

129. Online: http://pages.sbcglobal.net/bommer/When_The_Man_Comes_Around.html (now defunct).

130. Online: http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/mt/mt-comments.cgi?entry_id=5016, no pages, accessed on 26th September 2006.

Many appreciative comments for Bommer's movie remain on-line from Bush supporters,¹³¹ but the sentiments of this subsequent comment from 'Christian Libertarian Anti-War Conservative' were also echoed by a few Republicans.

Let me spell it out: when you take a song that was written about Jesus Christ and attach it to your pro-Bush video, you are either insulting Christ by equating Him with a sinful, mortal politician, or exalting your favorite politician to the level of the Son of God. Either way, it's called 'blasphemy'. Johnny Cash, a devout Christian, would not be pleased.¹³²

Bommer's video only lasted a month or so on-line. Its maker, now using the name IronBob2004, wrote the following on 12 November, 2004:

You've reached the former page of When The Man Comes Around. Unfortunately [sic] the lawyers for the Cash estate forced me to take the movie down. Rather a shame since it probably generated more sales and interest in the American IV CD, (which I highly highly [sic] recommend that you buy!) then [sic] when it was used in that garbage of a movie 'Dawn Of The Dead!' Fantastic CD; one of his best and unfortunately [sic] his last CD. I appreciate all the support and the incredible outpouring of love for the movie. Thank you very much!¹³³

Legal muscle – at least in 2004 – achieved what charges of blasphemy apparently could not, but Bommer's removal of the song certainly did not signal a recognition that the equation drawn between Bush and 'the man' was beyond the pale.¹³⁴

With no explicit Christology and a tendency towards secular appropriations, the song's relative openness to politicization means that the creation of a link between the man and a politician was perhaps always going to be a possibility. But the actual wording of the song may also make such moves inevitable. Jewett and Lawrence's description of 'Zealous Nationalism' notes its dualism, good versus evil, and its ready willingness to use violence.¹³⁵ Certain ideological undercurrents in Cash's *Revelation*, especially in the material drawn from 22.11, means that his song also apparently legitimizes a dualism of righteous/unrighteous, a

131. For example, online: <http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=13209>, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

132. Online, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/mt/mt-comments.cgi?entry_id=5016, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

133. Online: http://www.perspectives.com/forums/view_topic.php?id=18128&forum_id=5, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

134. Cf. e.g. the Republican defenders of the piece against charges of blasphemy, online: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1250832/posts>, no pages, accessed on 26th September, 2006.

135. Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, pp. 55-78, 245-72. On its use of extra-legal violence, see Seymour M. Hersh, *Chains of Command* (London: Penguin, 2005).

dualism that can be understood as offering no redemption for the wicked. It is deeply ironic that Cash should have produced a song in which 'the man' who comes around could be seen, not as Jesus Christ, but rather as a secular super-hero, George W. Bush as Jewett and Lawrence's 'Captain America'.

7. Conclusion

The cultural impact of 'The Man Comes Around' is really only just beginning. But what already seems apparent is that Cash's apocalyptic text is able to act as a conduit of influence for the Bible in a number of different ways. It may function as Cash probably intended it to—as a hopeful (at least for those who are already saved!) and potentially evangelistic text, focused on the figure of Jesus Christ. Releasing the already problematic Revelation 22.11 from its canonical home and inserting it into a text about 'the man' rather than a text explicitly about Jesus, however, has opened up the possibility of a text that can now be understood as promoting a radically different vision of an apocalyptic humanity. Though the 'righteous' do always remain, access to their ranks is either denied to most of the song's audience, resulting in a doom-laden existence, or else is appropriated by those for whom the term 'righteousness' really only serves as a label for their own ideological stance. Neither option seems particularly likely to have appealed to Cash himself. But his transformation of a partially understood Revelation now has a life of its own, a life that allows some of the biblical material to impact the wider culture, cut free from its textual, traditional, and ecclesial moorings. Indirectly, Cash's Bible did this. And it will go on doing it as long as the song is being played.

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