

Apocalypse Across Contexts:
Reactions to Sudden, Unwanted, and Comprehensive Change

By

Patrick Morrison

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of History

Union College

June 2022

Abstract**Apocalypse Across Contexts:
Reactions to Sudden, Unwanted, and Comprehensive Change**

Patrick Morrison
(Advised by Professor Brian Peterson)

For much of human history, people have maintained a fascination with the end of the world. The apocalypse refers to the final moment in human history, with apocalyptic thought focusing on questions of how and when this will occur. The apocalypse is among the most durable transhistorical phenomena, adapting to changes in technology, social structure, and theology. Apocalyptic thought often arises from conditions of “relative deprivation,” where subjugated members of society envision the apocalypse as deliverance from their present hardship. The Biblical works of Daniel and Revelation, among other notable apocalypses, fueled the anxieties and imaginations of Europeans during the Renaissance and Reformation. The Second Great Awakening revamped the prevalence of an imminent end and led to the rise of Adventism in the United States. The twentieth century saw the continued development of apocalyptic thought, with new religious movements, environmental concerns, and Y2K continuing a multi-millennia history of apocalyptic expectations. This thesis will examine the roots of apocalyptic thought and literature, examine the role religion played in its development, and how religion has modified eschatology to meet new societal concerns. It will comment on the broader idea of the world ending, hopefully capturing why it has fascinated and frightened humanity for so long.

Table of Contents

a. Abstract.....	i
1. Introduction.....	1
A. <i>In the beginning</i>	1
B. <i>Scientific and Divine Creation</i>	3
C. <i>Apocalypse Before the Written Record</i>	7
D. <i>Structure of the Thesis</i>	9
2. Early Apocalyptic Thought and Literature.....	11
A. <i>Defining Apocalyptic Literature and Thought</i>	11
B. <i>Apocalypse in Mesopotamian and Zoroastrian Traditions</i>	12
C. <i>Revelation, Daniel, and 4 Ezra</i>	15
D. <i>Apocalypse in Early Islam</i>	24
3. Apocalypse During the Renaissance and Reformation.....	28
A. <i>Y1K: the End of the First Millennium</i>	28
B. <i>Art and the Renaissance: Rebirth of Apocalyptic Anxiety</i>	30
C. <i>The Reformation as an Apocalyptic Movement</i>	34
D. <i>The German Flood of 1524</i>	36
4. Innovating Doomsday: Industrialization and American Protestantism.....	41
A. <i>Industrialization, the Millennium, and the First Great Awakening</i>	41
B. <i>The Second Great Awakening</i>	47
C. <i>Millerism and The Great Disappointment</i>	53
5. New Religious Movements and the Modern Apocalypse.....	58
A. <i>The Rise of New Religious Movements</i>	58

B. <i>Modern American Apocalyptic: Heaven's Gate</i>	60
C. <i>Y2K</i>	66
D. <i>Are We Nearing the Apocalypse?</i>	68
6. Conclusion.....	70
A. <i>The Beginning of the End</i>	70
B. <i>The Cold Death of the Universe</i>	73
C. <i>The End. (of the World?)</i>	74
b. Works Cited.....	77

I. Introduction

A. In the Beginning...

The apocalypse is a concept that has persisted throughout history. Defining apocalypse proves challenging, as its meaning and shape resemble those grappling with it across time and societal contexts. Broadly, the apocalypse refers to a coming upheaval to the present order of things. The word apocalypse derives from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, meaning to uncover or reveal. Apocalyptic prophecies are often referred to as ‘revelations’ such as in the Biblical Revelation of John. In modern terms, ‘apocalypse’ is used colloquially to refer to destruction on a massive scale or a secular world-ending event. Throughout this text, ‘apocalypticism’ will be used synonymously with the phrase ‘apocalyptic thought’ to describe the belief and attitude that the end of the world is imminent.

Apocalyptic thought is an important aspect of the human experience. The end of the world provides a compelling source of material for religious thought, art, literature, and individual understanding of one’s place in the world. The concept has existed and survived multiple millennia, asserting its influence as a transhistorical phenomenon. Unsatisfied with merely surviving, apocalyptic thought adapts to changes in the structure of society and technology that increasingly affects daily life. One’s view about the world’s end is inherently linked to their mortality, convincing many that the apocalypse will occur within their lifetime. When adapted to a religious context, this worldview promotes widespread evangelism in pursuit of “saving” those without knowledge about the coming eschaton. Many view the apocalypse as a source of salvation, rather than punishment, linked to hopes about delivering the suffering individual from the strife they face. Technological and industrial advancements have allowed

humanity to produce the apocalypse without divine intervention, modifying apocalyptic thought to reflect the tenuous nature of the modern day.

This thesis will seek to accomplish the following:

- (1) Describe the historical roots of the apocalypse and trace the concept's development across multiple millennia.
- (2) Show the adaptability of apocalypticism to new conditions, ultimately showing that a firm belief in the end of the world is among the most durable historical phenomena.
- (3) Identify some common themes in apocalypse movements and explain why these themes are amenable to apocalyptic traditions across time and culture.
- (4) Comment on the broader idea of the world ending, capturing why it has fascinated and frightened humanity for so long.

This thesis will examine the history of apocalyptic thought across time and place, utilizing a case study approach to create an approximate image of the development of apocalypticism and its role in Western history. Conceptually, the apocalypse affects everyone, with religion and culture engaging in a marked preoccupation with the destruction of their world. Throughout history, people have maintained imminent apocalyptic expectations, likely inspired by the immediacy of their mortality. Apocalyptic beliefs do not appear randomly and consistently occur as a reaction to sudden, unwanted, and comprehensive changes to the status quo. Changes to communication technology often catalyze intense apocalyptic fear, including the printing press and the internet. This thesis is primarily a religious history, as developments in theology often emerge from general societal conditions and influence secular beliefs about the apocalypse. In particular, the thesis will focus on various Christian denominations and sects, though certainly, many other religious traditions appear.

One framework for understanding the formation of imminent apocalyptic expectations is relative deprivation theory. This theory postulates that movements arise from real or perceived ‘deprivation,’ that is, the removal of desired living conditions. Charles Glock developed this theory in the sociology of religion in 1964, with sociologist Lorne Dawson laying out five subjective forms of deprivation,

(1) ‘Economic deprivation,’ related to the unequal distribution of income; (2) ‘social deprivation’ related to the unequal distribution of social status, prestige, and other markers of power; (3) ‘organismic deprivation’ related to the unequal distribution of mental and physical health; (4) ‘psychic deprivation,’ relating to unequal distribution of various kinds of psychic rewards, like love and affection; (5) ‘ethical deprivation,’ related to an individual’s feeling that the dominant values of society no longer provide a sufficiently meaningful way to live.¹

Regarding its application to apocalypticism, Robert Wilson writes, “According to relative deprivation theory, apocalyptic religious groups are made up of people who are on the periphery of society. They lack political, religious, and social power, and have little social status.

Furthermore, they *know* that they are on the periphery.”² This definition certainly applies, at varying times, to Jews, Christians, Muslims, Protestants, cults, and essentially every group that has developed an apocalyptic worldview at some point.

B. Scientific and Divine Creation

When examining the concept of apocalypse, or ‘the end,’ it is perhaps most appropriate to begin with creation. By mimicking a person’s life cycle, creation implies an eventual end, similar to how one’s birth implies death. One’s understanding of their creation indicates their expectations about life and death. Thus, examining scientific understanding and creation myths will contextualize the thesis. First, this section will discuss the mainstream scientific explanation of universal origin. In particular, the most prominent (and factually supported) theory of

¹ Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007.

² Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 59.

universal creation is the Big Bang. The Big Bang Theory suggests that the universe originated from a single point, smaller than the size of an atom.³ Stephen Hawking writes, “In fact, all solutions to Einstein’s equations in which the universe has the amount of matter we observe share one very important feature: at some time in the past (about 13.7 billion years ago), the distance between neighboring galaxies must have been zero.”⁴ This finding implies that the entire universe was concentrated into a single, dimensionless point. With infinite density, energy, and matter, this point contained the entirety of the universe. Suddenly, this point began expanding, and chemical reactions occurring in these extremely hot and dense conditions created most of the elements currently found on the periodic table. Technically speaking, it is unknown if events occurred before the big bang, but under current scientific understanding, time began at that moment, 13.7 billion years ago.

Interestingly, the theory was first proposed by the Belgian priest and astronomer Georges Lemaître. The idea of the universe originating from an all-powerful source of essentially incomprehensible energy at incredibly fast speeds evokes a godlike overtone. A common refrain from those who believe a god created the universe asks, “what or who caused the conditions for the big bang?” Hawking writes, “Events before the big bang can have no consequences and so should not form part of a scientific model of the universe...this means that questions such as who set up the conditions for the big bang are not questions that science addresses.”⁵ Thus, modern science leaves many disappointed, failing to articulate a satisfactory answer. Of course, science answers questions of how the universe formed, but the decidedly non-scientific question of *why* it formed remains unanswered.

World religions offer explanations regarding creation as a result of divine intervention.

³ Michael Greshko. “Origins of the Universe Explained” [National Geographic](#). January 2017.

⁴ Hawking, Steven W., and Leonard Mlodinow. *A briefer history of time*. Bantam Press, 2020, p. 68.

⁵ Hawking, Steven W., and Leonard Mlodinow. *A briefer history of time*. Bantam Press, 2020., p. 69.

In part, apocalyptic thought exists as a reaction to the surprise of creation. Our origins came about in seemingly impossible circumstances, so it stands to reason that our end would be equally unlikely. The fact that, to our knowledge, Earth contains the only sentient life forms in a vast universe underscores the improbability of our existence. The Abrahamic religious tradition explains the creation in the Biblical Book of Genesis. This book explains the formation of the world in seven days, with the standard week following from its precedent. The first day in Genesis 1:1-5 reads,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

First, we observe that in the Judeo-Christian worldview, the entire universe was contained within two spheres, the heavens and the earth. Although the stars, sun, moon, and other astrological phenomena were plain to see in the night sky, this text suggests that these belong to the heavens, presumably where God resides. The text then creates a moralistic distinction between light and darkness, suggesting that the former is good and the latter, by extension, is evil.⁶ This begins a theme seen throughout the Bible of the dichotomy between good (as defined by God) and evil (as promoted by Satan). The first day passes on this formless Earth, and God continues to create over the next five days. In each case, he identifies his creation as ‘good,’ culminating in the creation of human beings on the sixth day. Traditionally, God rested on the seventh day, the basis for the sabbath.

The Babylonian creation myth offers another interesting example. The *Enuma Elish*, dating to at least 1750 BCE, recounts the creation of the universe, gods, and humans.⁷ Joshua

⁶ Or, whatever the technical opposite of ‘good’ is.

⁷ Joshua Mark. “Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text” World History Encyclopedia. May 2018. Accessed May 2022.

Mark describes, “In the beginning, there was only undifferentiated water swirling in chaos. Out of this swirl, the waters divided into sweet, fresh water, known as the god Apsu, and salty bitter water, the goddess Tiamat. Once differentiated, the union of these two entities gave birth to the younger gods.”⁸ This beginning represents the dichotomy of good and evil, together creating balance, as in the Chinese conception of Yin and Yang. The younger gods kill Apsu, enraging Tiamat and causing her to wage war against them.⁹ The god Marduk kills Tiamat and, from her eyes, derives the Tigris and Euphrates.¹⁰ He created the heavens and the earth from her corpse, with human beings created from the remains of the conflict’s instigator.¹¹

Across the globe, myriad religious traditions have attempted to explain the origin of humanity in inventive and symbolically rich ways. Explanations of creation are related to expectations of the apocalypse for a few reasons. First, creation implies an eventual end, in the same way that a person’s birth implies inevitable death. The expectation of an imminent apocalypse discussed throughout this thesis relates to the knowledge that one’s personal eschaton will play out within a single lifetime. Second, the method of the world’s creation logically relates to its end. In Genesis, God’s independent decision to create the heavens and earth suggests that he can decide to end it without warning. Whether humans can influence how and why this happens is a matter of theological difference. Similarly, the mainstream scientific explanation of the end of the universe, discussed in the conclusion, exists as a process beginning with the Big Bang.

⁸ Joshua Mark. “Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text” World History Encyclopedia. May 2018. Accessed May 2022.

⁹ Joshua Mark. “Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text” World History Encyclopedia. May 2018. Accessed May 2022.

¹⁰ Joshua Mark. “Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text” World History Encyclopedia. May 2018. Accessed May 2022.

¹¹ Joshua Mark. “Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text” World History Encyclopedia. May 2018. Accessed May 2022.

C. Apocalypse Before the Written Record

Lest we assume that the concept of apocalypse is contained within the imaginations of modern thinkers, only starting in the centuries before the first millennia, this section will discuss the topic of apocalypse prior to a written record. This section will present some challenges, as the lack of a written record precludes written primary source material—eliminating our ability to directly read how people felt about the prospect of the world ending. However, our framework for understanding apocalyptic thought should not begin with the first written records of the apocalypse because these notions did not appear randomly.

Evidence suggests that humans began shifting to agricultural subsistence around 9600 BCE in response to decreases in the supply of big game animals and an increase in the population.¹² Between 10000 BCE and 5000 BCE, the global population grew from an estimated four million to five million, a paltry increase.¹³ James Scott writes, “One likely explanation for this paradox of apparent human progress in subsistence techniques together with long periods of demographic stagnation is that, epidemiologically, this was perhaps the most lethal period in human history.”¹⁴ Although disease seldom leaves clear archeological evidence, numerous examples of population centers being suddenly abandoned exist—proximity to animals allowed for the proliferation of zoonotic diseases, creating the first outbreaks of epidemics.¹⁵ There is ample evidence of epidemic disaster once the written record appeared, so one can assume that this held for preceding millennia. The mechanisms of disease were unknown and were likely attributed to divine forces, creating apocalyptic expectations and underscoring the instability of civilization.

¹² Scott, James C. "Against the grain." In *Against the Grain*. Yale University Press, 2017: pg. 95.

¹³ Scott, James C. "Against the grain." In *Against the Grain*. Yale University Press, 2017: pg. 96.

¹⁴ Scott, James C. "Against the grain." In *Against the Grain*. Yale University Press, 2017: pg. 97.

¹⁵ Scott, James C. "Against the grain." In *Against the Grain*. Yale University Press, 2017: pg. 97.

Cataclysmic events, mainly stemming from environmental disasters, have beset communities throughout history. For example, in 2200 BCE, the Akkadian Empire controlled large portions of modern Syria and Iraq. Archeological evidence shows that a lasting drought began around this time, with historians suggesting that the drought led directly to the empire's demise.¹⁶ Indeed, by 2150 BCE, most inhabitants had evacuated the area, leaving for better land. Today, a region historically known as the fertile crescent has a decided lack of arable land. Neighboring civilizations would have been keenly aware of destructive events like this happening. This example is only one of numerous sudden, unexpected upheavals to the present order. Importantly, though the world did not literally cease to exist, an uncontrollable event that destroyed their way of life is an apocalyptic event. The relative deprivation of environmental damage, killing many and forcing the exile of others, serves as a basis for thinking about all aspects of life. A civilization keenly dependent on an unpredictable environment for its survival must develop an understanding of security as temporary, existing at the whim of unknowable forces.

One can view religion as a response to the stresses of a life that led Thomas Hobbes to say, "... and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."¹⁷ Anxiety over one's death is endemic to human beings and protects against unnecessary risk-taking. Coping with this fear is challenging, resulting in the formation of a series of beliefs to assuage this fear. Religion explains the incomprehensible by attributing destructive or unfortunate events to unseen malevolent forces. Many religious traditions offer rewards to those who follow their practices and endure the hardships associated with life. Religion also offers explanations about what happens when the individual dies, and

¹⁶ Marshall, Michael. "Did a mega drought topple empires 4,200 years ago?." *Nature* 601, no. 7894 (2022): 498-501.

¹⁷ [Oxford Reference](#). "nasty, brutish, and short." Accessed 11 May. 2022.

many religions comment on the ultimate fate of the universe. The development of this coping mechanism since the written record is the focus of this thesis.

D. Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis will proceed as follows. Chapter 2 will examine the origins of apocalyptic literature and thought, creating a basis for the remainder of the work and familiarizing the reader with the most important aspects of apocalypticism in Judaism, Christianity, and to a lesser extent, Islam. The primary source documents are the Biblical works of Daniel and Revelation, along with the Jewish apocalypse 4 Ezra. Chapter 3 will explore the role of apocalypticism in the Renaissance and Protestant Reformation, commenting on how changes to communication technology and social dynamics created increased anxiety about the apocalypse. Primary source materials include mass distributed artwork by Albrecht Dürer, and the primary case study is the German flood of 1524. Chapter 4 will consider the rise of Fundamentalist Christian thought and its effect on modern apocalyptic fears, using the Millerites as its primary case study. Chapter 5 will focus on apocalypticism in the twentieth century, especially as it pertains to new religious movements, religious extremism, and Y2K. The Heaven's Gate cult will provide the primary case study, with primary source documents from their website supplementing the analysis. Finally, chapter 6 will conclude the analysis and connect the various chapters thematically while opining about the reason behind the apocalypse as a transhistorical phenomenon.

All quotes from the Bible derive from the New International Version. This version combines historical accuracy and readability well, making it ideal for this thesis. Each chapter will utilize a case study approach and accompanying sections to give a broader scope of the surrounding context. The thesis is primarily about religious history, discussing the development

of Western religious understandings of the apocalypse, in line with my concentration in European history. The thesis follows the development of religious thought in the United States, as the histories of religious innovators traveled there as well. Further, the thesis tends to focus primarily on Christian apocalyptic thought. In particular, the tradition of reformations and innovations of Catholicism means that Christianity offers a diverse number of viewpoints arising from a common tradition.

II. Early Apocalyptic Literature and Thought

A. Defining Apocalyptic Literature and Thought

Apocalyptic literature has origins dating back to the Mesopotamian and Zoroastrian traditions. Imprecisely, apocalyptic literature is written by individuals who subscribe to an apocalyptic worldview, often informed by their religion.¹⁸ Apocalyptic literature is heavily influenced by the context in which it was written, so when interpreting these works, one must remain aware of the social and political conditions experienced by its author. A work of apocalyptic literature can be referred to as an ‘apocalypse’ or a ‘revelation.’ Some notable examples of apocalyptic literature include the Revelation of John, Daniel 7-12, and 4 Ezra. Daniel and Revelation are books of the Bible, with Daniel and Revelation representing the most recently written books of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, respectively. 4 Ezra was among the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran in 1947 and represents “an acute formulation of a theological problem.”¹⁹ It is difficult to ascertain the exact years these works were written, but roughly speaking, Daniel was composed around 164 BCE, Revelation at the end of the first century, and 4 Ezra anywhere from the end of the first century to the beginning of the third. Together, these works will serve as primary source documents in this chapter, as they are among the most famous and influential works of apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic thought is a broader concept than apocalyptic literature and, in this work, represents a worldview contingent on the belief that a massive upheaval to the current social order is inevitable and imminent. Apocalyptic thought has existed in various forms throughout history, explored in later chapters of this work. However, during the period discussed in this

¹⁸ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 61.

¹⁹ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 84.

chapter, apocalyptic thought was primarily based on religious conflict, with adherents developing apocalyptic attitudes in response to real or perceived threats. The concept of ‘relative deprivation’ encapsulates this idea. Robert Wilson writes, “According to relative deprivation theory, apocalyptic religious groups are made up of people who are on the periphery of society. They lack political, religious, and social power and have little social status. Furthermore, they know that they are on the periphery.”²⁰

Apocalyptic thought is associated with eschatology, the branch of theology relating to the ‘end.’ Eschatology exists at two levels. First, personal eschatology represents religious interpretations of what happens to the individual after death. Second, universal eschatology represents beliefs about the ultimate fate of the Earth and the universe. Generally, apocalyptic thought focuses on universal eschatology in that the apocalypse predicts an upheaval to the current world (if not its destruction) beyond the individual’s experience. However, personal eschatology still informs apocalyptic thinking and literature because one’s expectations about the apocalypse influence their conception of the afterlife. Then, the expectation of imminent apocalypse can be characterized as the intermingling of these two levels of eschatology. The related term ‘eschaton’ refers to the final event that sets the world's end in motion.

B. Apocalypse in Mesopotamia and the Zoroastrian Religion

Perhaps surprisingly, no clear indication of apocalyptic thought appears in Mesopotamian writing until the last few decades of the sixth century BCE. Foster writes, “The evidence of eschatology in Mesopotamia...dates to the periods of Achaemenid and Macedonian domination.”²¹ Mesopotamia maintained a written record for multiple millennia before the initial

²⁰ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 59.

²¹ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 25.

evidence of eschatology, so this late development presents a puzzle. As in Foster's writing, the most probable explanation is domination by a foreign power promoting apocalyptic thought via the 'relative deprivation' of foreign conquest. There is an evident connection between deprivation and apocalyptic literature in the Christian and Jewish traditions, discussed later in this chapter.

In any case, Mesopotamian apocalyptic literature reflects their religious beliefs. Destiny played a prominent role in Mesopotamian eschatology, and people believed their fate was preordained. However, destiny was amenable to change through ritual ceremony and sacrifice.²² The Mesopotamian conception of death did not herald a heavenly promise and instead speculated that the afterlife offers a miserable, empty, and dark existence.²³ This version of the afterlife promotes an attitude toward life that emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure. The fact that these writings only appeared after conflict threatened Mesopotamian society supports the idea that apocalyptic thought develops as a response to an upheaval in the present order of things.

Zoroastrianism is important to the history of apocalypticism, in no small part because of its thematic connections to Christianity and Judaism. The Zoroastrian religion developed a system of ethics dependent on the consequences of human choice.²⁴ Consequently, the afterlife will contain rewards or punishments corresponding to one's conduct while alive. At the Bridge of the Separator, one must safely cross to enter a blissful afterlife, with the bridge's width corresponding to the amount of good attributed by the divine to the crosser.²⁵ This idea of a final judgment, where one's pathway to bliss (heaven) or torment (hell) depends on virtue, parallels

²² Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 29.

²³ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 29.

²⁴ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 35.

²⁵ Buyaner, David. "The Myth of the Bridge of Separator: A Trace of Shamanistic Practices in Zoroastrianism?." *Journal of IndoEuropean Studies* 35, no. 3/4 (2007): 6.

the Jewish and Christian ideas of the Last Judgment, where God separates the righteous from the sinners.

As for universal eschatology, the Zoroastrian tradition also parallels the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity, and its treatment of the messiah. In describing the Zoroastrian idea of the end, Philip Kreyenbroek writes, “when the world has almost fulfilled its function as an arena and evil will be sufficiently weakened, the process leading to the ‘Renovation’ will begin... That term denotes a renewed non-dynamic, timeless and ideal state, but one in which evil has been eliminated from the world and all men will be restored to physical life.”²⁶ Interestingly, this conception of a perfect, idealized world does not exist in a non-dimensional paradise but instead is created on Earth, where the dead shall be raised to a perfect life. Even more in line with Christianity, Zoroastrianism provides for a messianic figure, Saoshyant, who is born of a virgin. His birth begins the apocalypse, whereas the *parousia* initiates the apocalypse in Christianity.

Though brief, this summary of apocalypticism in Mesopotamia and the Zoroastrian tradition reminds us that apocalyptic thought is not contained to the Abrahamic religions, nor did they formalize their thinking on these issues in a vacuum. Similarly, apocalyptic thought existed before a written record, with calamity, destruction, and upheaval (whether or not placed into a religious context) defining large swaths of human history. Understanding these two traditions helps contextualize how apocalypticism developed before the Abrahamic religions and allows for a broader view of the inherent nature of apocalyptic thought. The following section will examine three major works of apocalyptic literature in the Jewish and Christian traditions, developing a framework for understanding the next millennia of apocalyptic thought.

²⁶ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 36.

C. Daniel, Revelation, and 4 Ezra

Building upon the existing tradition of apocalyptic literature, Jewish and Christian writers created some of the world's most influential works of apocalyptic literature. This section will examine three of these works in particular:

1. The Book of Daniel from the Hebrew Bible, in particular, Daniel 7:12, has been identified by scholars as one of the few clear examples of Biblical apocalyptic literature.
2. The Revelation of John, which concludes the Christian New Testament, represents possibly the most influential work of apocalyptic writing in world history.
3. 4 Ezra, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran, provides insight into Jewish apocalyptic literature's partially "lost" tradition.

Together, these works will provide the primary source material for this chapter and serve as essential case studies to develop the argument that apocalyptic literature (and by extension, an apocalyptic worldview) derives from the presence of an external threat which creates a sense of 'relative deprivation' for the author and their community.

1. Daniel

The Book of Daniel (which we will call 'Daniel' for simplicity's sake) was written around 164 BCE during Seleucid control of Jewish autonomy and represented one of the first clear examples of apocalyptic literature.²⁷ Jewish peoples enjoyed relative autonomy under Antiochus III, who affirmed their right to practice the Torah's laws.²⁸ However, his descendent, Antiochus IV, did not continue these rights. Antiochus IV Epiphanes was Daniel's primary antagonist, as he enacted laws that disrespected the Temple of Jerusalem and banned the practice

²⁷ Norman Cohn. "Apocalypticism Explained: The Book of Daniel." [PBS Frontline](#).

²⁸ Himmelfarb, Martha. "The apocalypse: A Brief History". John Wiley & Sons, 2010. p.14.

of certain traditions, such as circumcision.²⁹ The text of Daniel is set during the reign of King Cyrus of Persia, around the year 536 BCE. However, the story's chronology does not imply that Daniel was written during this time, nor that its message criticizes events some four hundred years prior. Instead, Daniel should be read as a social commentary criticizing Antiochan rule. Daniel 11:21 demonstrates this clearly, "Then there will arise in his place a despicable person to whom the royal honor has not been rightfully conferred. He will come on the scene in a time of prosperity and will seize the kingdom through deceit." This prediction, presumably conferred by the angel Gabriel, shifts the focus from the sixth century BCE to an unnamed (but almost undoubtedly second century BCE) time to come. Jewish people at this time struggled under the relative deprivation of religious oppression, creating the conditions necessary for the author(s) of Daniel to develop a sufficiently apocalyptic worldview to create this initial work of apocalyptic literature.

One notable passage in Daniel is his vision of "one like a son of man" descending from a cloud. The text reads, "And with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man was approaching. He went up to the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him. To him was given ruling authority, honor, and sovereignty. All peoples, nations, and language groups were serving him. His authority is eternal and will not pass away. His kingdom will not be destroyed." It is tempting to read this passage as a prediction of the coming of a messiah, namely Jesus, in the near future. However, most scholars dispute this interpretation. The phrase "one like a son of man" essentially means 'one in human form' or 'one who looks like a human.' The framing of this human-like figure as appearing in a cloud implies that he is not mortal, and indeed, this

²⁹ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 91.

characterization is more likely an attempt to contrast him with the four beasts of the sea described previously in Daniel.³⁰

One notable feature of Daniel is its attempt to estimate the timing of the apocalypse. The so-called Prophecy of Seventy Weeks appears in chapter 9 and is delivered via the angel Gabriel. Daniel 9:24-25 reads, “Seventy weeks have been determined concerning your people and your holy city to put an end to rebellion, to bring sin to completion, to atone for iniquity, to bring in perpetual righteousness, to seal up the prophetic vision, and to anoint a most holy place...From the issuing of the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until an anointed one, a prince arrives, there will be a period of seven weeks and sixty-two weeks...” Scholars tend to agree that the “seventy weeks” refers to a period of four hundred and ninety years.³¹ Compared to the long history of Judaism, this is a relatively short wait until the end of the world.

John Collins writes, “Daniel is the only Jewish apocalypse that tries to calculate the time of the ‘end,’ or divine deliverance. We can readily understand why. The more extreme the crisis, the more urgent the need to know when it will end.”³²

Daniel stands out as a crucial work of apocalyptic literature for several reasons. First, it exemplifies the relationship between relative deprivation and apocalypticism. Jewish people suffered under Antiochan rule and expressed a clear desire for deliverance from present conditions. Daniel’s prediction of a not-too-distant apocalypse emphasizes the severity and urgency of his prophecy. Daniel was set around 563 BCE, meaning that the 490-year prediction would place the apocalypse around 73 BCE. Given that scholars believe that Daniel was written around 164 BCE, his prediction was expected to play out within a couple of generations. Second,

³⁰ Himmelfarb, Martha. “The apocalypse: A Brief History”. John Wiley & Sons, 2010. p. 37.

³¹ Ice, Thomas D. "The Seventy Weeks of Daniel." (2009), p. 3.

³² Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 75.

Daniel's image of "one like a son of man" gained prominence through its seeming prediction of a coming messiah. This interpretation is likely flawed, and as Martha Himmelfarb has suggested, the characterization of a heavenly being in the form of man serves to contrast this being from the four monsters discussed in the previous chapter rather than to predict the coming of Jesus.³³

2. The Revelation of John

Canonically, the Revelation of John is attributed to the apostle John, also credited with writing the Gospel of John. This name is a pseudonym for the author, an unidentified man living on the Greek island of Patmos—referred to as John of Patmos. Revelation is likely the most important work of apocalyptic literature to come from the Abrahamic tradition and has retained a prominent focus in modern religious movements and throughout the history of Christian apocalypticism. Several aspects of Revelation are crucial and will be discussed in this section. Perhaps the most important, though, is likely the concept of the millennium, a one thousand year period occurring before or after the *parousia*. The Catholic Church interprets this span symbolically, the reasons for which this section will also explore.

Revelation begins with the assertion that the entire prophecy comes directly from Jesus Christ, who received it from God. An angel delivers the message to "[God's] servant John." Revelation 1:3 contains the warning, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." By framing the work with the claim that the "time is near," Revelation takes on an explicitly apocalyptic tone from the outset. Its inclusion of Jesus as an agent of the eschaton assigns Revelation to the tradition of messianic apocalypses, a theme appearing in late Jewish works such as 4 Ezra, discussed later in this chapter. Martha Himmelfarb writes, "It is also clear from

³³ Himmelfarb, Martha. "The apocalypse: A Brief History". John Wiley & Sons, 2010. p. 37.

his book that John was Jewish, and even as a follower of Jesus he appears to have remained loyal to Jewish ritual law.”³⁴ His conflicted religious adherence was not unheard of in the first century, with many Jewish peoples deciding whether Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies.

The narrator of Revelation claims to witness these events through “A door standing open in heaven” (Revelation 4:1), contrasting with apocalyptic works where the narrator physically enters heaven. The first apocalyptic event to occur is the opening of the seven seals, where “a slain lamb” (Rev 5:6) took the scroll containing the seals, causing fearful reactions from the “twenty-four” elders in the throne room (Rev 5:8). The elders say, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). This slain lamb represents Jesus, who the author believes made a sufficient sacrifice to open the seals, effectively beginning the apocalypse. Each seal opening begins a new catastrophe, with the first releasing a rider upon a white horse, representing conquest, disease, and potentially the Antichrist.³⁵ The second seal releases a rider upon a red horse carrying a sword, representing war. Next, a rider upon a black horse, carrying scales, brings about famine. Fourth, a rider upon a pale horse represents death, with Hades following behind (Rev 6:1-8). Together, this quartet creates the four horsemen of the apocalypse, a popular image in art and culture. The fifth seal released the souls of martyrs. The sixth seal brought about a massive earthquake, turning the sun black and the moon red, among other catastrophic events (Rev 6:9-14). Finally, the seventh seal is opened, the so-called “seal of the living God” (Rev 7:2), and begins a half-hour silence in heaven. This action leads to seven trumpets sounding, triggering even more apocalyptic events.

³⁴ Himmelfarb, Martha. “The apocalypse: A Brief History”. John Wiley & Sons, 2010. p. 69.

³⁵ Though, some suggest it could be Christ himself.

One of the most memorable images from Revelation is the beast. Several aspects of the beast are interesting and continue to fuel apocalyptic thought to the present day. First, the “mark of the beast” or “number of the beast,” namely 666, with which he marks his followers. This number is not arbitrary, with scholars suggesting that it is a gematria for Emperor Nero, an oppressor of early Christians.³⁶ The beast is often associated with the Antichrist. Revelation 13:11 reads, “He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon.” The beast’s resemblance to a lamb implies that he is mistakable for Jesus, who was characterized as a lamb previously. The beast's voice sounds like a dragon, implying that he is evil and suggesting that he is the Antichrist. Otherwise, he could be characterized as the devil, with Revelation 19:20 referencing, “But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf.” This “false prophet” refers to an Antichrist, making the “beast” the devil. Ultimately, they share the same fate. After leading an army against Jesus and the martyrs, both are thrown into a lake of fire (Rev 19:20).

Many aspects of Revelation have influenced modern Christian thinking, but the concept of the millennium, outlined in Revelation 20, might be the most important. The millennium refers to a one-thousand-year span occurring before or after the *parousia*—depending on one’s interpretation. However, Catholicism interprets the millennium as a symbolic period, in line with a general interpretation of Revelation as a symbolic work reflecting historical circumstances. Revelation 20:2-3 reads, “He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.” This passage has inspired intense eschatological debate, especially among modern Protestant

³⁶ Gray-Fow, Michael JG. "Why the Christians? Nero and the great fire." *Latomus* 57, no. 3 (1998): 596-7

denominations. The two other mainstream schools of thought are postmillennialism and premillennialism, discussed in Chapter 5.

Revelation is full of richly symbolic imagery that has sustained the artistic vision of many throughout history and into the modern-day. Beyond its artistic influence, Revelation has sustained a heightened sense of anxiety among Christians, with its meaning and relevance hardly diminishing as time progresses. Throughout the remainder of this work, there will be ample references to Revelation, and new interpretations of its meaning have been the foundation of religious sects and new religious movements. Nearly two thousand years have passed since John of Patmos composed Revelation, and despite its command, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near” (Rev 22:10), the apocalypse has not occurred, nor has the *parousia*. It may be surprising that Christians have not turned away from Revelation to explain end times and still maintain a lively fascination with its predictions. It is a common theme that religions adapt themselves to present conditions, including reinterpreting the meaning of prophecy to meet the realities of human history.

3. 4 Ezra

The last work of early apocalyptic literature examined in this chapter is 4 Ezra, the work of a Jewish sect living near Qumran, discovered along the Dead Sea in 1947. 4 Ezra is considered a ‘lost’ work of the Hebrew Bible and presents a clear example of apocalyptic literature resulting from persecution. The work, found along with the apocalypses 2 Baruch and 3 Baruch (among other works), dates to around the end of the first century CE.³⁷ Unlike Daniel, which serves as a call to action in the context of the Maccabean Revolt, Ezra addresses a theological problem. Namely, despite being God’s chosen people, why does tragedy continuously

³⁷ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 83.

befall the Jewish people? He questions the Angel Uriel, “What tribes have so believed thy covenants as these tribes of Jacob? Yet their reward has not appeared and their labor has borne no fruit” (Ezra 3:32-33). Then, Ezra seeks to understand if another nation has kept God’s covenant better, and if failing that, suggests, “Thou mayest indeed find individual men who have kept thy commandments, but nations thou wilt not find” (Ezra 3:36). Here, Ezra proposes that God has held the Israelites to an impossible standard, creating a sense of doubt about the ultimate salvation of the Jewish people in general.

The angel responds angrily, “Your understanding has utterly failed regarding this world, and do you think you can comprehend the way of the Most High” (Ezra 4:2)? The angel proceeds to ask Ezra a series of rhetorical questions designed to highlight the mysterious ways that God works and remind him that, though conditions are presently poor, the end of the world is fast approaching. Unsatisfied with this, Ezra continues questioning the rationality of God’s behavior but is redirected by the angel back toward eschatological thinking (Ezra 6:18). 4 Ezra is unique among apocalypses in that its narrator continually questions God and his representatives, even after the angel repeatedly tells Ezra that this is the truth. This suggests that Jewish eschatological thinking had reached a crisis point. Continuous suffering and the absence of a messianic figure left Jewish writers questioning whether their faith was worthwhile or if salvation would ever come. Given that 4 Ezra was written in the century following the ministry of Jesus, Ezra’s questioning of God (and thus his faith) exemplifies the fear that his aspirations may have been misplaced.

Another notable element of 4 Ezra is his encounter with the woman. Following a dialogue with the angel, Ezra is instructed to “go into a field of flowers where no house has been built, and eat only of the flowers of the field, and taste no meat and drink no wine, but eat only

flowers.” (Ezra 9:24). In the field, Ezra encounters a grieving woman who explains that after remaining barren for thirty years, she bore a son, who tragically died on his wedding day (Ezra 9:43-47). Ezra is unimpressed, stating, “You most foolish of women, do you not see our mourning, and what has happened to us? For Zion, the mother of us all, is in deep grief and great affliction” (Ezra 10:6-7). However, at this moment, the woman undergoes a radical transformation, taking on the form of a grand city (presumably Jerusalem). The Angel Uriel explains in detail:

This woman whom you saw, whom you now behold as an established city, is Zion. And as for her telling you that she was barren for thirty years, it is because there were three thousand years in the world before any offering was offered in it. And after three thousand years Solomon built the city, and offered offerings; then it was that the barren woman bore a son. And as for her telling you that she brought him up with much care, that was the period of residence in Jerusalem. And as for her saying to you , 'When my son entered his wedding chamber he died,' and that misfortune had overtaken her, that was the destruction which befell Jerusalem. And behold, you saw her likeness, how she mourned for her son, and you began to console her for what had happened. For now the Most High, seeing that you are sincerely grieved and profoundly distressed for her, has shown you the brilliance of her glory, and the loveliness of her beauty. (Ezra 10:44-50)

This passage saves both Ezra and the text's readers the need to interpret the meaning of this scene. Though rather explicit in its meaning, the passage remains one of the most memorable to come out of 4 Ezra and the Dead Sea Scrolls. As a reward for his treatment of the woman, Uriel agrees to show Ezra what will occur at the end of days.

Evidence suggests that the writer of 4 Ezra was keenly aware of other apocalypses and rewrote some of their interpretations. First, we see a reinterpretation of the fourth beast from Daniel’s prophecy of the four kingdoms. To Daniel, the fourth kingdom represented the empire of Alexander the Great and its successors. However, by the time of Ezra’s writing, it was apparent that this was not the final kingdom to rule over the Jewish people. Ezra receives a vision of an immense eagle, with various wings representing different oppressors of the Jews,

followed by a lion who explains that this is indeed the fourth beast that Daniel had written about (Ezra 111:37). Martha Himmelfarb writes, “the use of the eagle on the standards of the Roman army made it an unmistakable and threatening symbol of the Roman empire. In other words, Ezra’s vision updates Daniel’s prophecy of the four kingdoms much as the interpretation Daniel receives from Gabriel updates Jeremiah’s prophecy of seventy years of punishment.”³⁸ Similarly, Revelation combined the likenesses of the four kingdoms to create its famous beast.

Daniel, Revelation, and to a lesser extent, 4 Ezra form the basis for the tradition of apocalyptic literature and, consequently, apocalyptic thought in the religious context. Entire religions have formed behind the belief that their adherents possess a unique understanding of these prophecies, unknown to the wider world. The three works are interconnected, building off each other and the pre-existing religious tradition they all are indebted to. Understanding the context in which these works were conceived and how modern thinkers have adopted these works to modern contexts is crucial to understanding the role that eschatological thinking still has in our society. Later chapters will reference these works, showing how later thinkers expanded on these texts to cope with changing societal conditions.

D. Apocalypse in Early Islam

Apocalypse has been associated with the Islamic faith since its origins. Consider this statement from Muhammad, “I am Muhammad, and I am Ahmad and I am the resurrector—the people are resurrected upon my steps— and I am the final one—there is no prophet after me.” Said Arjomand suggests that equating the Danielic “Seal of the Prophets” and the claim of being the final prophet is a persuasive argument.³⁹ He argues, “The rise of Muhammad in Arabia,

³⁸ Himmelfarb, Martha. “The apocalypse: A Brief History”. John Wiley & Sons, 2010. p. 61.

³⁹ Arjomand, Said Amir. “1 Origins and Development of Apocalypticism and Messianism in Early Islam: 610–750 ce.” In *Sociology of Shi‘ite Islam*, pp. 21-41. Brill, 2016.

whatever else it may have been, was a revolution by any reasonable definition of the term. It was sustained by a strong apocalyptic vision, and it claimed to be the realization of messianism.”⁴⁰

This revolution in religion was apocalyptic because it was predicated on the expectation of an irreversible and imminent transformation of the world.

The Sunni and Shi’ite branches of Islam have differing eschatological visions of the apocalypse. Sunni eschatology uses a literal understanding of destiny and the individual’s fate.⁴¹ God determines the moment of death, signaled by a leaf falling from a tree beneath God’s throne, bearing the dying person’s name.⁴² The tradition relates closely to the Christian model, utilizing an Antichrist, Gog and Magog, and the Last Judgment, among other tropes.⁴³ A minority in Islam, the Shi’ite branch tends toward grander apocalyptic expectations, likely due to Sunni dominance. Some Shi’ites believe that the 12th Imam, who entered occultation in the ninth century, will reappear as the Madhi, a messianic figure. Jesus will appear with him, converting Jews and Christians to Islam and defeating the Antichrist.⁴⁴

Given that Islam is the third of the Abrahamic religions, it is not surprising that its conception of the apocalypse owes a debt to the works discussed in the previous section. However, one might miss the connection between Daniel and Islam because Daniel is never explicitly mentioned in the Quran.⁴⁵ According to Said Arjomand, “The influence of the Book of Daniel is especially marked in the idea of Muhammad as the Seal of the Prophets. There can be

⁴⁰ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 108.

⁴¹ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 186.

⁴² Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 187.

⁴³ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 188.

⁴⁴ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 331.

⁴⁵ Arjomand, Said Amir. “1 Origins and Development of Apocalypticism and Messianism in Early Islam: 610–750 ce.” In *Sociology of Shi’ite Islam*, pp. 21-41. Brill, 2016: p. 5.

little doubt that the notion of Seal is apocalyptic.”⁴⁶ The Danielic idea of the Seal of the Prophets essentially means that the book of prophecy would be permanently sealed at the end of time. As mentioned above, Muhammad’s proclamation that he is the final prophet implies that the book of prophecy has been sealed with his arrival and that the apocalypse can begin. Islam, then, was framed as the fulfillment of this aspect of Daniel’s prophecy, a connection that would have been apparent to Jewish and Christian figures at the time.

Christianity influenced apocalyptic thought in early Islam via its provision of a messianic figure and a framework for messianism. Although Jesus exists as the messiah in Islam, the religion lacked a messianic figure to meet the hopes and expectations of Muslims in the faith’s early years. However, Arjomand writes, “Within half a century of Muhammad’s death, the position was filled by the figures of the Qa’im and the Mahdi.”⁴⁷ Consequently, the development of political messianism in Islam has come to be known as Mahdism. In line with relative deprivation theory, the rise of Mahdism to prominence came out of the Second Civil War at the end of the seventh century.⁴⁸ Continuously, conflicts have provided a breeding ground for apocalyptic thought, with the heightened anxieties and threats to existence creating the need for new messianic figures and conceptions of the end.

One fascinating aspect of early Islamic apocalypticism is its use of the ‘king asleep in the mountain’ trope. In the early eighth century, following the death of the childless ruler Abu Hashim, many denied his death and said that he was an incarnation of the Mahdi, like his father, Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya. Denying his death, followers claimed that he was instead asleep in

⁴⁶ Arjomand, Said Amir. "1 Origins and Development of Apocalypticism and Messianism in Early Islam: 610–750 ce." In *Sociology of Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 21-41. Brill, 2016: p. 7.

⁴⁷ Arjomand, Said Amir. "1 Origins and Development of Apocalypticism and Messianism in Early Islam: 610–750 ce." In *Sociology of Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 21-41. Brill, 2016: p. 14.

⁴⁸ Arjomand, Said Amir. "1 Origins and Development of Apocalypticism and Messianism in Early Islam: 610–750 ce." In *Sociology of Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 21-41. Brill, 2016: p. 16.

the Rawa mountains.⁴⁹ At the time when he was needed most, he would awake from his exile in the mountain to return and deliver the people from their present hardship. This folkloric trope of “the king asleep” in the mountain appears across numerous contexts, discussed in later chapters. The story appears in numerous variations. It need not involve a king or a mountain but a heroic figure hidden away until a time of need. One example is Jesus’ crucifixion and burial in a cave where, after three days, he returns to complete his work on Earth.

⁴⁹ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 114.

III. Apocalypse During the Renaissance and Reformation

A. Y1K: the End of the First Millennium

Following the collapse of Rome, Europe entered into a period of developmental stagnation, often referred to as the medieval period. Early Christians believed in the imminence of the *parousia*, or Second Coming, of Jesus. Consequently, as time progressed without any indication of his return, Christians developed new beliefs concerning the timing of this apocalyptic event. Christian thinkers, such as Augustine of Hippo, interpreted the events of Revelation as moral symbols but stopped short of denying that at least some of the events described therein would occur.⁵⁰ Notably, he denied that the second coming would come at the beginning or end of a millennium, a theological stance called amillennialism. Joachim of Fiore, another prominent theologian, denied the coming of a literal millennium. He posited that the events of Revelations represent a history of past events and a prediction of the future.⁵¹ However, anxieties about the *parousia* increased as the first millennium approached its conclusion. The scare can be divided into two parts, occurring around 1000 and 1033 CE, relating to the one thousand year anniversary of the birth and death of Jesus, respectively. When addressing the scholarship about this era, one must ask: was there indeed a substantive doomsday panic related to the turn of the first millennium?

The Roman Catholic Church was the supreme authority of Christian theology at the turn of the first millennia. Amillennialism was the status quo, so fears that the approach of the year 1000 or 1033 would trigger apocalyptic events were heretical. R. I. Moore writes, “It is common ground, of course, that the anticipation and the terror of the Last Judgment were central to

⁵⁰ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 154.

⁵¹ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 154.

Catholic teaching, and that while any attempt to calculate its date in terms of earthly time was regarded as potentially a dangerous heresy, the church's general interests were best served by the view that it was neither imminent nor impossibly distant."⁵² Dangling the proverbial carrot on the stick of the apocalypse served to maintain popular fascination with Christian doctrine while avoiding the mistake of guaranteeing the timing and method of a world-ending event.

Given that predicting the beginning of the millennium was heresy, reports of heresy trials provide a valuable source for understanding the prevalence of apocalyptic fear. Crucially, the tenth century saw zero recorded cases of heresy, whereas the eleventh century saw a small but decidedly larger number of cases.⁵³ This increase demonstrates that the beginning of the eleventh century led to an outpouring of heretical beliefs in response to the fear of the coming apocalypse. Accusations of heresy were often employed as a political tool, with the 1022 Trial at Orleans providing a prominent example. R.I. Moore writes, "The most famous incident in the resurgence of the heresy accusation as a political device...is the trial at Orleans in 1022 which resulted in the burning of a large number of people...including several canons of the cathedral"⁵⁴ Given the prominent social status of these "heretics," we can conclude that an increase in apocalyptic anxiety existed among the social elite, though proving that this fear was endemic to eleventh-century Europe is a more challenging, and presently unverifiable, claim.⁵⁵ However, we know that the common people took direction from their local preachers and religious leaders, so if their messaging focused on the apocalypse, so would the people's imagination. Overall, evidence that a particular apocalypse panic occurred in the eleventh century is faulty but not

⁵² Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 141.

⁵³ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 137.

⁵⁴ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 139.

⁵⁵ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardtsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 137.

wholly unsubstantiated, with Moore writing, “It seems likely enough that in the years around 1000 and 1033 people were preaching that the end of the world was nigh. They usually are.”⁵⁶

B. Art and the Renaissance: Rebirth of Apocalyptic Anxiety

The Renaissance is characterized by a societal transformation that brought Europe out of the medieval period and into a new cultural paradigm that would set Europe toward the modern-day. Lost in this focus on the Renaissance as a rebirth of society is the reaction of those living in this new social order. From 1300 to 1600, Europe was rife with anxiety about the apocalypse, and again, an apocalyptic worldview developed as a reaction to rapid changes in the world around them. New printing technologies allowed for the rapid dissemination of materials (including the Bible) at a pace hitherto unseen. During the Renaissance, a large portion of artists made a living via the patronage of the Vatican and other Christian benefactors. Consequently, much of the art produced at the time had a decidedly religious tilt. This section will examine a few prominent works of apocalyptic art from this period and how they relate to Revelation and general sentiments about the apocalypse.

The combination of wider access to religious texts and high levels of art patronage meant that artists had the funds to create art and more material to draw on in their work. This combination allowed artists to express their feelings about the apocalypse in greater complexity and volume. Notably, the political and social turmoil produced by the Renaissance’s effect on society created a proliferation of apocalyptic works. Two works will serve as the foundation for this analysis: the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the Whore of Babylon. These are

⁵⁶ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 146.

woodcuts created by Albrecht Dürer from the same series in 1498, which attempted to illustrate Revelation. These images are reproduced below.⁵⁷



"The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." c. 1498



"The Whore of Babylon" c. 1498

1. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Dürer's image of the Four Horsemen is among the most iconic images inspired by the Book of Revelation.⁵⁸ The Four Horsemen are as relevant today as ever, with numerous references appearing in popular culture, art, and literature. Although Revelation does not mention it, Dürer took the liberty of introducing humans being trampled beneath the horsemen. This addition helps personalize the image to its observer, causing them to identify themselves

⁵⁷ Public Domain. [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#).

⁵⁸ O'Hear, Natasha, and Anthony O'Hear. *Picturing the Apocalypse: the book of revelation in the arts over two millennia*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2015: p. 79.

with the plight of these sufferers. This image would have been distributed widely along with pamphlets forewarning apocalyptic events. Nor does the image target a particular group of people. Natasha and Anthony O’Hear write, “The egalitarian nature of the apocalypse is also being emphasized here by Dürer, for it is not just commoners who are trampled by the horsemen but a bishop too.”⁵⁹ The bishop can be seen in the bottom left-hand corner of the image being eaten by a dragon. This dragon can be interpreted as the “beast” from Revelation.

Three horsemen appear in relatively typical fashion as powerful and determined harbingers of the apocalypse. However, the fourth horseman appears ragged and weak, suggesting that he represents death. His horse stands above the bishop figure, again emphasizing the universality of the apocalypse. Dürer’s evocative depiction of the fourth horseman has inspired a fascination with the image of death, a figure in art throughout centuries to come.⁶⁰ Above, an angel appears to be participating in the foray, suggesting that God’s consent is present. The entire scene suggests that the apocalypse will be violent, frightening, and all-encompassing. Despite the havoc shown in the image, one must assume that Dürer generally supported Revelation and the Church’s messaging around the apocalypse.

2. The Whore of Babylon

The second image features the so-called Whore of Babylon. She represents one of the more complex aspects of Revelation, with the term Babylon referring to either a city or a particular woman from that city at alternating times. She receives a harsh judgment. Revelation 17:5 reads, “This title was written on her forehead: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH [original

⁵⁹ O’Hear, Natasha, and Anthony O’Hear. *Picturing the Apocalypse: the book of revelation in the arts over two millennia*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2015: p. 80-81.

⁶⁰ O’Hear, Natasha, and Anthony O’Hear. *Picturing the Apocalypse: the book of revelation in the arts over two millennia*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2015: p. 81.

emphasis].” The depiction of Babylon prompts two questions. First, what is the historical significance of Babylon to warrant its inclusion in Revelation? Second, who is the “Whore of Babylon?”

Babylon, the capital city of the Babylonian Empire, acts as something of a scapegoat in the Bible. Genesis 11:1-7 reads,

“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

The Bible’s treatment of the Babylonians hardly improves following this initial punishment for their prideful attempt to reach heaven. Their negative designation traces back to the Babylonian Captivity when the Babylonian Empire conquered (and enslaved) the Jewish people and destroyed the temple in 587 BCE.⁶¹ Readers of Revelation would have readily connected Babylon with Rome, which destroyed the (reconstructed) temple in 70 CE.⁶² Thus, Babylon warrants inclusion in Revelation as a symbolic representation of the Roman Empire.

The Whore of Babylon is distinct from Babylon. To interpret her meaning, we look to Dürer’s representation above. First, we look at the “whore” herself. She rides atop a beast (perhaps the same beast that represents Satan?) and wears fine clothing and jewelry, suggesting opulence. The beast has seven heads, explicitly representing the seven hills of Rome. The angel interprets this for John; Revelation 17:9 reads, “This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits.” Therefore, the Whore of Babylon undoubtedly

⁶¹ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 53.

⁶² Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 53.

refers to the city of Rome. Dürer's representation is tailored to concerns facing Europe at the end of the fifteenth century, with the men surrounding the Whore of Babylon dressed in Eastern garb. The influence of the East became an increasing concern, especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.⁶³ Natasha and Anthony O'Hear write, "In the Western European imagination it took on a particular resonance fuelled by the burgeoning apocalyptic expectation that surrounded the half-millennium year of 1500."⁶⁴ This combination of a prominent image from Revelation and specific fears about the safety of Christianity at the end of the fifteenth century shows the adaptability of apocalyptic thought to current societal problems. Fear about the half-millennium is further exemplified in section D, later in this chapter.

C. The Reformation as an Apocalyptic Movement

The Protestant Reformation created a fundamental shift in the religious landscape of Europe. When discussing the Reformation, the focus tends to be on the particular reasons behind the split and the Vatican's response. However, as this section will demonstrate, apocalyptic thought played a crucial role in the Reformation, guiding the philosophy of key figures like Martin Luther. In modern times, Protestant eschatological thinking has focused on the millennium, the period before or after the *parousia* that accompanies the Last Judgment and apocalypse. In the postmillennialist view, the *parousia* can only occur after humans create lasting, uncorrupted conditions for Christianity's message on Earth. Consequently, this section will endeavor to contextualize how Luther and other Protestant reformers envisaged their movement in apocalyptic terms. This section will not examine the effects of the Protestant Reformation at large and instead focus only on its connection to apocalyptic thought.

⁶³ O'Hear, Natasha, and Anthony O'Hear. *Picturing the Apocalypse: the book of revelation in the arts over two millennia*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2015: p. 166.

⁶⁴ O'Hear, Natasha, and Anthony O'Hear. *Picturing the Apocalypse: the book of revelation in the arts over two millennia*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2015: p. 166.

Martin Luther wrote two prefaces to the apocalypse in his translation of the Bible in 1522 and 1530.⁶⁵ He takes issue with John of Patmos' assertion that his writing comes directly from Jesus and threatens God's punishment to those who do not follow its message.⁶⁶ In line with some general values of Protestantism, Luther took issue with a work claiming to speak for God or Jesus without proof. Given Revelation's particular condemnation of Rome and the present struggles of Christians at the time, it stands to reason that John of Patmos took certain liberties with the word of God, at least stylistically.⁶⁷ Although Luther rejected Revelation for its apparent lack of credibility, the work did not lose all value to Protestantism. In particular, its commentary on the Antichrist, whom Reformation theologians increasingly identified as the Pope, was considered valuable.⁶⁸ Luther softened on Revelation and wrote a more positive preface in 1530.⁶⁹

Protestant reformers understood the villain of Revelation differently than Catholics. Rome was the villain of John's apocalypse, so when Constantine legalized Christianity, eventually becoming the state religion, they backed away from this symbolic historical interpretation, focusing on other aspects of its prose. However, for Protestant reformers, Rome was the seat of the Vatican and where the Antichrist (Pope) lived. Thus, the Whore of Babylon was the Vatican (within the city of Rome), and Babylon was the Roman Catholic Church. By connecting Babylon, and its prominent role in the Second Coming, to the Catholic Church, Protestant reformers framed their movement in apocalyptic terms. In line with a postmillennialist

⁶⁵ Backus, Irena. *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg*. Oxford University Press, 2000: p. 6.

⁶⁶ Backus, Irena. *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg*. Oxford University Press, 2000: p. 7.

⁶⁷ That's of course assuming that Revelation is divinely inspired, rather than worldly prose. I have no particular stake in that debate, and instead seek to describe these works as their audience would have.

⁶⁸ Backus, Irena. *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg*. Oxford University Press, 2000: p. 7.

⁶⁹ Backus, Irena. *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg*. Oxford University Press, 2000: p. 8.

understanding of the *parousia*, the Reformation could create the conditions necessary for Christ's true message on Earth to prosper.

Today, many Protestant denominations are at the forefront of apocalyptic thought. The next chapter will explore this in detail, but it warrants mention in this section. The most important factor promoting apocalyptic thought within Protestantism, rather than in Christianity, is their interpretation of the millennium. Amillennialism was the default stance of the Catholic Church, essentially disregarding the significance of a literal millennium and instead focusing on the centrality of the *parousia* itself rather than the conditions that bring it about. This interpretation is absent from most Protestant denominations, with premillennialism and postmillennialism dominating their vision of the *parousia*. Premillennialism, in particular, promotes a catastrophic view of what the apocalypse will entail. The turn of the half-millennium in 1500 heightened these fears, likely a contributing factor to the primary case study in this chapter, discussed in the next section.

D. The German Flood of 1524

We must not forget that the fear of an imminent apocalypse was a nerve-wracking reality for large numbers of people throughout history. Today, the discussion of doomsday centers around human-made destruction via nuclear weapons, climate disasters, disease, meteor strikes, or other sinister causes. Indeed, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and the like provided constant anxiety for societies that typically survived off of what they could produce from the environment. The critical difference is the interpretation of causation. Today, we understand that a natural disaster is an expected outcome of a vast weather system, though their increasing frequency is likely the result of human (in)action. However, in the past, these devastating events were typically interpreted as a divine punishment, or at minimum, the result of the

incomprehensible machinations of the divine. Cosmological interpretation also played an important role, as astrology was a widely respected method of understanding future events.⁷⁰

This context may help explain, in the spirit of the Biblical character Noah, when rumors of a massive flood ran rampant in the early sixteenth century, why at least one man chose to build an ark while others sought higher ground. Understanding how this occurred will provide insight into how changes in 16th century Europe renewed fears of the apocalypse and the relatively small occurrences that initiated a panic about the end of the world. This section will also explore how changes to communication technology helped perpetuate this scare.

The scare began when Johannes Stöffler, a German astrologer and mathematician, and Jakob Pflaum printed their work *Ephemerides* in 1499.⁷¹ In this work, Stöffler claimed that a ‘Grand Conjunction’ would occur in the water sign Pisces, initiating widespread, disastrous flooding. He wrote, “[The Grand Conjunction] will show an indubitable transformation, change, and reversal over nearly the entire world, the climate zones, empires, countries, cities and classes, in insensible creatures, the creatures of the sea, and everything born on earth, as forsooth has not been heard of for many years, neither by historians nor by the forefathers.”⁷² He did not suffice to merely predict a flood but instead framed the purportedly coming flood in apocalyptic terms, claiming a radical upheaval to the world environment. Stöffler and Pflaum cannot accept all of the blame. Their document lacked specificity and only tangentially suggested that the cataclysmic event would be a flood.

The primary mechanism that spread Stöffler’s prediction of upheaval to the present order of things was the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1439. The printing

⁷⁰ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. ‘The Flood’ of 1524: “The First Mass-media Event in European History.” *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 167.

⁷¹ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. ‘The Flood’ of 1524: “The First Mass-media Event in European History.” *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 169.

⁷² Gustav-Adolf Schoener. ‘The Flood’ of 1524: “The First Mass-media Event in European History.” *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 169.

press changed the long-standing dynamic of communication technology, with the messages of scholars, religious leaders, and artists amplified to an extent previously unseen in human history. Images like Albrecht Dürer's woodcuts spread apocalyptic thinking across Europe. These popular works primed individuals for an imminent destructive event, so the concurrence of Stoffler's publication in 1499 allowed for rampant apocalyptic fears to take hold. It is doubtful that his predictions would have produced such anxiety without the confluence of updated communication technology and heightened anxiety resulting from the social upheaval of the Renaissance.

The panic began slowly mainly because Stoffler's prediction lacked specificity regarding the location and manner of destruction, receiving attention primarily in academic circles.⁷³ This changed after the intervention of Luca Gaurico, an Italian astronomer who sent the Reichstag of Trier a warning of cataclysmic environmental events accompanied by social turmoil, offering a more specific interpretation of Stoffler's prediction.⁷⁴ Although other astronomers, including Stoffler, rebuked his sensationalist interpretation of the coming Grand Conjunction, the damage had been done. Utilizing the new printing press technology, a firestorm of pamphlets spread across the region, accompanied by apocalyptic imagery, such as Dürer's wood carvings. Despite efforts from government officials and astronomers, the impact of these pamphlets was immediate and immense. David Pankenier writes, "For many, especially the illiterate peasantry, the garish woodcuts on the title pages of these pamphlets rather than the astrological prognostics in the text had the most unsettling impact. Notwithstanding the frightening images, however, the message of many of these pamphlets was a hopeful one, looking forward with anticipation to the new

⁷³ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. 'The Flood' of 1524: "The First Mass-media Event in European History." *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 169.

⁷⁴ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. 'The Flood' of 1524: "The First Mass-media Event in European History." *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 170.

beginning following the cataclysm.”⁷⁵ Local preachers emphasized the most outlandish of apocalyptic ideas to gain influence among the largely illiterate population, utilizing fear to expand their platform.

Pankenier reminds us that, although apocalyptic predictions are frightening, Christians believed that the apocalypse was linked to the fulfillment of God’s plan for the earth, a decidedly positive event. The influence of art on a largely illiterate population cannot be overstated, and although the writing in the pamphlet was largely positive, the images still evoked fear. The threat of the “impending” flood, with its Biblical overtones, adapted nicely to apocalyptic thought. As time progressed, the timing of the flood was specified as 1524, with the imagery in pamphlets increasingly emphasizing the destructive nature of the flood and the social unrest that would accompany it.⁷⁶ Perhaps this prophecy was self-fulfilling. Pankenier writes, “But that it was precisely in 1524-1525 that mass insurrection erupted in Germany is certainly in no small part due to the apocalyptic nature of the astrological predictions in anticipation of the planetary grouping.”⁷⁷

Pamphlet production accelerated as the supposed flood approached. From 1519 to 1523, over 160,000 pamphlets about the flood were distributed, reaching a wider audience than almost any other contemporary written work.⁷⁸ This inundation of pamphlets would have been impossible without the recent invention of the printing press, leading Gustav-Adolf Schoener to declare it “the first mass media event in European history.”⁷⁹ This “mass media event” had real

⁷⁵ Pankenier, David W. "The planetary portent of 1524 in China and Europe." *Journal of World History* 20, no. 3 (2009): 369-370.

⁷⁶ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. ‘The Flood’ of 1524: “The First Mass-media Event in European History.” *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 171-173.

⁷⁷ Pankenier, David W. "The planetary portent of 1524 in China and Europe." *Journal of World History* 20, no. 3 (2009): 372.

⁷⁸ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. ‘The Flood’ of 1524: “The First Mass-media Event in European History.” *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 174.

⁷⁹ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. ‘The Flood’ of 1524: “The First Mass-media Event in European History.” *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 168.

consequences, with regular people and nobles alike fleeing toward higher ground and building an ark in at least one instance.⁸⁰ The flood failed to materialize, but the social consequences that widespread apocalyptic thinking caused were entirely present. The German Flood of 1524 demonstrates the power of changes in technology in creating an apocalypse scare and how apocalypticism adapts to the present state of science, art, and literature.

⁸⁰ Gustav-Adolf Schoener. 'The Flood' of 1524: "The First Mass-media Event in European History." *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007): p. 176.

IV. Innovating Doomsday: Industrialization and American Protestantism

A. Industrialization, the Millennium, and the First Great Awakening

1. Industrialization and the United States

This thesis has focused on developments in apocalyptic thought before the beginning of industrialization. The advent of industrial production significantly affected labor, a significant element of human experience. This change meant that processes that required several hours of work could be automated. The Malthusian population trap could be circumvented with technologically induced increases in the food supply.⁸¹ These increases in leisure time and food security allowed more time for religious thought, particularly innovation to existing religious traditions. Further, innovation alleviated some of the relative deprivation experienced by members of society, forcing their apocalyptic beliefs to adapt to a comfier existence. A concurrent shift in the organization of Western society was the introduction of capitalism as the medium of economic exchange. Adam Smith, an 18th-century philosopher from Scotland, describes the theory behind free-market capitalism in his seminal *Wealth of Nations*.⁸² In this work, he describes ‘the invisible hand,’ his proposed mechanism for how markets respond to changes in the overall economy to achieve the most efficient outcome. Of course, especially in the modern context, this understanding of capitalism is limited, but it more accurately describes conditions at that time. In reality, this shift was progressive, theorizing that free-market capitalism would maximize the benefit of all in a utilitarian sense.

Although it had many benefits, industrialization came with several costs. Most notably, pollution created by factories and the wastefulness promoted by a consumption-based capitalist

⁸¹Agarwal, Prateek. "Malthusian theory of population." *Intelligent Economist*, January 20 (2020).

⁸²Hayes, Adam. "Adam Smith and ‘The Wealth of Nations’" *Investopedia*, April 28 (2021).

economy has caused significant damage to the environment. Initially, people could hardly have predicted that industrialization would have such significant environmental consequences, especially given the amount of time necessary for negative externalities associated with production to appear. Today, many still deny the effects of climate change, implying that few changes would be made even if they had known its consequences. The potential damage of climate change is hardly cosmetic, threatening to cause widespread drought, famine, and cataclysmic natural disasters. In this way, self-imposed environmental destruction has apocalyptic overtones, for the first time introducing the possibility of human-made doomsday. An obsession with economic growth is shortsighted, discounting the future damage of climate change.⁸³

Industrialization was not met with uniform enthusiasm. For example, a group called the Luddites revolted against the rising influence of industrialization by destroying the machinery that was replacing their jobs. Appearing during the economic hardship of the Napoleonic Wars and motivated by an insurmountable threat to their livelihood, their movement interrupted the production capacity of a newly Industrialized Britain. The message of the Luddites remains relevant, with computer technology and robotics replacing a vast number of jobs, especially in developed countries. Although today the word “luddite” is typically used in derogatory terms, one can empathize with their movement and the rather illogical bravery of rebellion against the mechanization of their professions.

The settlement and founding of the United States occurred parallel to these developments in industrialization and capitalism, positioning the fledgling nation in a unique position to adopt capitalist principles of entrepreneurship, industry, and the freedom of choice. The United States became a breeding ground for religious innovation, with religious movements influenced by

⁸³ Stiglitz, Joseph E. "Is growth passé?" Project syndicate 9 (2019).

these founding capitalist principles. This chapter will examine several critical aspects of American apocalypticism from colonial settlement through the Second Great Awakening. The development of apocalyptic thought in the United States should be viewed as continuing its development in Europe, explored in previous chapters. The nation's ethos developed rapidly throughout this period, and the process of adaptation practiced by American Protestant movements reflects this rapid change.

One prominent example of an early religious movement combined with the developing ethos of the new settlement in North America comes from John Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill" sermon, written aboard the *Arbella*, which is a classic example. A relevant segment reads:

The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.

The final two sentences are crucial. Since its origin, the colonies and later the nation have been vastly influenced by religious thought. The phrase "city upon a hill" comes from Matthew 5:14, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden." Essentially, Winthrop's words beckon the idea of American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States is inherently different from other nations and destined to play a major role in global issues. This idea can be applied religiously to the supposed centrality of the United State's role in the *parousia* and, consequently, the apocalypse.

1. The Millennium

As mentioned in previous chapters, the millennium refers to a one-thousand-year period related to the *parousia*, first referenced in Revelation 20:1-7. This passage reads,

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison.

Associated with the millennium are three primary schools of thought: amillennialism, premillennialism, and postmillennialism.

- (1) Amillennialism is the belief that Revelation 20:1-7 does not refer to a literal one-thousand-year period but rather the spiritual influence of Jesus through the church.⁸⁴ His victory over Satan (described immediately after this verse) is interpreted as having occurred during his first resurrection, occurring immediately after his death around 30 CE. St. Augustine's influence on early Christian thinking provided this theory in his seminal *City of God*.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 4.

⁸⁵ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 5.

- (2) Premillennialism is the belief that Jesus will return to reign on earth for a literal one-thousand-year period before the Last Judgment and was popularized during the Second Great Awakening, discussed later in this chapter. John Nelson Darby expanded this idea into an interpretation of history called ‘Dispensationalism,’ which asserts that religious history is divided into seven distinct periods where God interacts differently with humans. Premillennialism is often associated with a pessimistic view of the future.
- (3) Postmillennialism asserts that Jesus will return only after a one-thousand-year period of peacetime brought about by the actions of evangelism. This belief implicitly assumes that peace can be created through the actions of humans without the influence of God. This belief became popularized during the First Great Awakening. Postmillennialism is optimistic compared to premillennialism, and over time, the latter overtook the former as the preferred interpretation of the millennium. The destruction and horror of the United States Civil War, First World War, and Second World War indicated to many that humanity is irredeemable, shifting attitudes toward a pessimistic view.⁸⁶

2. The First Great Awakening

The milieu of religious diversity and innovation created the conditions for the First Great Awakening, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. In particular, the First Great Awakening refers to a revival in evangelical denominations where charismatic preachers emphasized the value of a personal relationship with God and, consequently, personal salvation.⁸⁷ One notable preacher in this movement was Jonathan Edwards. He provided perhaps the most famous sermon from this period in 1741 called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” a portion is quoted here:

⁸⁶ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 284-285.

⁸⁷ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 154.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours...But, alas! instead of one, how many is it likely will remember this discourse in hell! And it would be a wonder, if some that are now present should not be in hell in a very short time, before this year is out. And it would be no wonder if some persons that now sit here in some seats of this meeting-house, in health, and quiet and secure, should be there before tomorrow morning!⁸⁸

This quote consists of his sermon's first and final verses and features a distinct condemnation of all people. The first half explains that God vehemently loathes all people and controls your eternal fate, promising that the afterlife will only bring suffering. In the final verse, Edwards suggests that Judgment Day is imminent for members of this congregation, coming by the end of the year or even the end of the day. His sermon shows that the Great Awakening's focus on salvation saw itself as a "last chance" for sinners to repent and thus was an apocalyptic movement.

Edwards was a postmillennialist who believed that there would be four comings of Jesus Christ before the Last Judgment.⁸⁹ His emphasis on the necessity of immediate repentance shows that Edwards felt ushering forward the Last Judgment was unlikely without a widespread change in society. In line with an optimistic view of humanity's ability to reform and create the conditions necessary for the *parousia*, Edward's believed that Jesus would return as soon as the year 2000. This timing is no accident, with the end of the second millennia providing a logical

⁸⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "The Works of President Edwards", vol. 6 (1817; New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), pp. 458, 461–62.

⁸⁹ cite?

time for a one-thousand-year span to begin or end. The Y2K scare of 2000 relates to this fear, discussed in the next chapter.

B. The Second Great Awakening

Following the nation's founding in 1776, a rapid conquest of native lands westward meant that religious figures had vast new areas to bring their message. This revival in religious thought also arose out of a sense of moral decline in the United States. In 1800, only 5-10% of citizens were active church members.⁹⁰ Given the westward expansion and a quickly rising population, religious leaders felt that the fledgling nation was in jeopardy of widespread indifference to Christianity. The First Great Awakening was primarily an intellectual movement targeting well-educated and wealthy members of society.⁹¹ Their mistake, then, was dismissing the majority of the population, leading to the relative lack of religiosity at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By targeting the common people, the Second Great Awakening transformed the religiosity of newly founded states and succeeded in reviving faith in the United States. By 1850, 25% of the population attended church regularly, despite a roughly 18 million person increase in the population.⁹² A back-of-the-envelope calculation indicates that the total churchgoing population went from approximately 265,424-530,848 people in 1800 to approximately 5,797,969 by 1850.

In 1850, the religious composition of the country broke down as follows:⁹³

⁹⁰ Gaustad, Edwin Scott. *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. Harper & Row, 1974: xiii.

⁹¹ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 154.

⁹² US Census Bureau. "[1800 Fast Facts](#)." Accessed April 2022.

⁹³ Gaustad, Edwin Scott. *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. Harper & Row, 1974: xiii.

Roman Catholic	3,000,000
Methodist	1,250,000
Baptists	1,000,000
Presbyterians	1,000,000
Lutheran	250,000
Congregationalists	250,000
Episcopalians	100,000

Notably, the Baptist and Methodist denominations had a far greater number of churches than the others, with smaller congregations serving remote areas in the south and along the frontier.⁹⁴

These smaller, intimate places of worship match the Second Great Awakening's message of personal salvation and an intimate relationship with God.

The election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 was viewed as a victory for the common people. His election illicit fear among entrenched political leaders, outgoing President John Quincy Adams took comfort in Psalms 1:1, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."⁹⁵ According to his journal, he took comfort in his self-appraised righteousness despite his view of a national turn toward barbarism.⁹⁶ He was not alone in this view, with Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story claiming that his election was an example of the "King Mob."⁹⁷ A fervent optimism matched the pessimism of the old guard's political loss among Jackson's supporters, who won him the

⁹⁴ Gaustad, Edwin Scott. *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. Harper & Row, 1974: xiii.

⁹⁵ Gaustad, Edwin Scott. *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. Harper & Row, 1974: 1.

⁹⁶ Gaustad, Edwin Scott ed., Winthrop Hudson. "The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America". Harper & Row, 1974: 1.

⁹⁷ Gaustad, Edwin Scott ed., Winthrop Hudson. "The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America". Harper & Row, 1974: 2.

election with 55.5% of the vote and a 178-83 electoral vote advantage over the incumbent Adams.⁹⁸

Charles Finney was one of the most influential leaders of the Second Great Awakening. His and Jackson's movements ran parallel, acting as the religious corollary to Jackson's political success.⁹⁹ Winthrop Hudson writes, "Jackson's election in 1828 has been depicted as the victory of the backwoodsmen of the West in national political life, and Finney's revivalist activity which began to peak in the same year likewise has been portrayed as an invasion of the East by the uninhibited revivalism of the West." In reality, their movements were not an "invasion" and instead demonstrated the ethos of a young nation built upon values of opportunism and democracy. Finney came from New York, called the "burned over district" for the numerous "revival fires" in that area. The northern states cultivated more radical and innovative religious movements, whereas the southern states were associated with fundamentalist religious thought. William Miller came from the same region and tradition as Finney, discussed in the next section.

As mentioned previously, a prominent theory emerging from the Second Great awakening was Dispensationalism, the belief that history is divided into several distinct eras characterized by differing relationships between humanity and God. John Nelson Darby was a pastor from England who traveled to the United States to preach and spread his interpretation of God's relationship to humanity.¹⁰⁰ In particular, his writings were popularized by C.I. Scofield during the Bible Conference Movement from the 1870s to 1910.¹⁰¹ His seminal *Scofield Reference Bible* featured extensive commentary and connected each section to dispensationalist

⁹⁸ 270towin. "[1828 Presidential Election](#)." Accessed May 2022.

⁹⁹ Gaustad, Edwin Scott ed., Winthrop Hudson. "The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America". Harper & Row, 1974: 1.

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 109.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 109.

thinking.¹⁰² Nathan Saunders writes, “Scofield authored perhaps the most influential Bible study tool among 20-th century fundamentalists.”¹⁰³

Darby and Scofield’s ideology popularized premillennial Dispensationalism in the United States and another gripping apocalyptic concept, the rapture. The rapture refers to the belief that the faithful will meet Jesus in the air during the eschaton and ascend to heaven, happening without warning. Although this event is related to the Second Coming, it is distinct in that during the rapture, Jesus never technically reaches Earth. The word rapture does not appear anywhere in the Bible, and the justification for this belief appears only once.¹⁰⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 reads, “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Despite its scant support in the Bible, belief in the rapture dominates apocalyptic thought in several Protestant denominations and appears widely in popular culture.

1. Mormons

Before delving into the primary case study of this chapter, the Mormon religion warrants a brief discussion. Mormonism traces its roots back to Joseph Smith, a man in his early twenties from upstate New York. He experienced a series of visions during the 1820s, culminating in the vision that directed him toward a series of golden plates written by ancient prophets. These

¹⁰² Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 110.

¹⁰³ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 297.

writings served as the foundational source for the *Book of Mormon*, published in 1830.¹⁰⁵

Following its publication, the movement organized into a new religion and incorporated itself as the ‘Church of Christ,’ with Smith taking the mantle of prophet.¹⁰⁶ He served as the first president of the religion.

Mormonism is alive and well today in the United States, with 1.7% percent (~5.6 million people) of the population belonging to its membership, making it the sixth-largest denomination.¹⁰⁷ The religion is concentrated in Utah, where 58% of members reside.¹⁰⁸ Young, a carpenter by trade, converted to Mormonism in 1832 following an encounter with Smith’s brother and began preaching immediately after his baptism.¹⁰⁹ He said, “[After I was baptized] I wanted to thunder and roar out the Gospel to the nations. It burned in my bones like fire pent up, so I [commenced] to preach...Nothing would satisfy me but to cry abroad in the world, what the Lord was doing in the latter days.”¹¹⁰ Smith died at the hands of a violent mob in June 1844, and after a brief succession struggle, Young ascended to the presidency of the church.¹¹¹ After being driven out of Illinois, Young led the settling of Salt Lake City, and thousands of converts arrived to populate this new home and numerous other colonies around it.¹¹² Millard Fillmore appointed him governor of the territory in 1851. In 1857 James Buchanan replaced him, utilizing the US Army to accomplish this.¹¹³

Mormonism is a uniquely American religion, not only for the location of its founding but for its idealistic views on the place of the United States in world history and the ultimate fate of

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 110

¹⁰⁶ The church was later renamed ‘The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

¹⁰⁷ Pond, Allison. "A Portrait of Mormons in the US." In *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Pond, Allison. "A Portrait of Mormons in the US." In *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan, 1992: p. 1602.

¹¹⁰ Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan, 1992: p. 1602.

¹¹¹ Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan, 1992: p. 1604.

¹¹² Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan, 1992: p. 1607.

¹¹³ Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan, 1992: p. 1501.

the earth. Mormons believe that the United States is divinely blessed and serves as the “New Jerusalem,” which will “play a pivotal role in important events of the Restoration and the Last Days.”¹¹⁴ They assert that the entirety of the United States’ founding was the byproduct of divine guidance and will, from the continent's discovery until the founding of the Church of LDS. Further, they believe that the country is protected from other nations via their ‘righteousness,’ strongly evoking the American exceptionalism first echoed by John Winthrop.¹¹⁵ The Declaration of Independence and Constitution are revered as resulting from God’s will and framed by ‘wise men,’ aligning the nation’s founding principles with their religious views.

Mormonism warrants study for its unique combination of apocalypticism and the role of the United States. Their view of the US as a “New Jerusalem” is not merely rhetoric but serves as a guiding mission for the entire church. They believe that the apocalypse cannot occur if the guiding principles of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution are not upheld. The Mormons have aligned themselves with conservatism, and particularly after FDR’s New Deal, have actively opposed liberal policies.¹¹⁶ This connection between politics and apocalypse has notably affected the American political landscape, with followers believing that failures by conservatives equate to failures to bring about the eschaton. Although there are Mormons worldwide, their concentration in this country and the unique ways that their theology has appropriated ideals of American exceptionalism, liberty, and conservatism, means that they have created perhaps the only distinctly American religion. The Mormons show the centrality of religion to US politics through the modern-day and demonstrate the adaptability of apocalyptic thought to something as seemingly unrelated as the machinations of the US political scene.

¹¹⁴ Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan, 1992: p. 1495

¹¹⁵ Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan, 1992: p. 1495.

¹¹⁶ Powell, Randal Louis. “The Day Soon Cometh”: Mormons, the Apocalypse, and the Shaping of a Nation. Washington State University, 2020.

C. Millerism and The Great Disappointment

On October 22, 1844, thousands of believers, concentrated in the Northeast United States, awaited the imminent *parousia* of Jesus. William Miller was responsible for this millenarian movement, which swept across varying denominations of Protestantism. Miller was a farmer from New York State without formal religious education and was not particularly religious until 1816.¹¹⁷ Miller based his prediction of the world's imminent end on the Book of Daniel, particularly the prophecy of the seventy weeks.¹¹⁸ This section will explore how it is possible that a decidedly ordinary person like Miller could single-handedly create a national religious movement, culminating in the advent of several prominent religions in the modern-day.

Miller's beliefs came as a direct product of apocalyptic prophecy and a widespread sense that the millennium was approaching. Global events, such as the French Revolution in the 1790s, showcased the potential for wide-scale political and social tumult to arise from the actions of humans, affirming the postmillennialist belief that the millennium would be ushered in by the actions of people.¹¹⁹ He connected two disjointed passages in his interpretation. First, Daniel 8:14 reads, "He said to me, 'To 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be put right again.'" He connected this with the prophecy of the seventy weeks. An excerpt from Daniel 9:24-9:27 reads, "Seventy weeks have been determined concerning your people and your holy city...there will be a period of seven weeks and sixty-two weeks...now after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one will be cut off and have nothing...he will confirm a covenant with many for one week." This prophecy has already been discussed in Chapter 2, but it set a date for the

¹¹⁷ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 157.

¹¹⁸ Knight, George R. "Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism." Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 16.

¹¹⁹ Knight, George R. "Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism." Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 15.

parousia as October 22, 1844, making the next day, October 23, the day of the great disappointment.

Often, leaders of apocalyptic or millenarian movements are charismatic, attractive men who combine their message and appearance to reach as many people as possible. However, Miller did not meet the image of a well-dressed gentleman with a magnetic personality.¹²⁰ Part of what makes Miller's movement unique is that his message was powerful enough to overcome his lack of pedigree. After one pastor invited Miller to speak to his congregation, "Miller lectured daily for a week and came back the next week and came back the next month for a second series of meetings. A successful revival followed in which [the pastor] baptized forty...[the pastor] became a convert to Miller's views on the nearness of the second advent."¹²¹ One can only assume then that Miller's fervency overcame any cosmetic shortcomings and that he did not employ charisma to trick others into believing him. Miller honestly believed that the world would soon end.

Beyond his apocalyptic message, Miller held many mainstream views common among American Protestants in the nineteenth century. He believed that the Pope was the Antichrist and that his imprisonment in 1798 signaled that his reign was over, paving the way for the second coming.¹²² Contrary to the norm among religious innovators, Miller did not form a church and instead convinced members of various denominations to adopt his apocalyptic worldview. These followers called themselves Millerites¹²³ and were concentrated in the northern United States and midwest.¹²⁴ Contemporaries also called them "Adventists." The movement was populist,

¹²⁰ Knight, George R. "Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism." Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 46.

¹²¹

¹²² Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 157.

¹²³ Sorry geology majors, not *that* kind of Millerite.

¹²⁴ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 157.

revivalistic, and democratic and grew quickly, with a clear “plan” for the fruition of followers’ religious expectations. In this way, Millerism resembles the programmatic nature of salvation found in many “cults,” discussed in the next chapter.

Eventually, the date was set for October 22, 1844, not by Miller or another leader of the movement but by a recent convert who figured that the *parousia* would occur during Yom Kippur.¹²⁵ The Millerites had grown in number (estimates vary, but as many as one million were associated with the movement) and attracted considerable criticism from religious leaders. Thus, the entire nation watched as the date approached, with Millerites quitting their jobs, selling belongings, and making amends in preparation for their ascent to heaven.¹²⁶ The day passed without incident, save for the anxieties of tens of thousands expecting their lives on Earth to end. The day of the proposed apocalypse is less interesting than what came after, the so-called “Great Disappointment.”

The immediate reactions were as one might expect. One leader, Hiram Edson, wrote,

I mused in my own heart, saying, my advent experience has been the richest and brightest of all my Christian experience. If this had proved a failure, what was the rest of my Christian experience worth? Has the Bible proved a failure? Is there no God—no heaven—no golden home city—no paradise? Is all this but a cunningly devised fable? Is there no reality to our fondest hopes and expectation of these things? And thus we had something to grieve and weep over, if all our fond hopes were lost. And as I said, we wept till the day dawn.¹²⁷

The day’s disappointment led Edson and many other Millerites to question their faith. Others reported that they did not have the energy to get out of bed for several days following the incident, so crushed and humiliated by their disappointment.¹²⁸ Many scattered believers kept the

¹²⁵ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 159.

¹²⁶ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 159.

¹²⁷ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 218.

¹²⁸ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 218.

faith quietly, gathering and beginning to put their lives back together.¹²⁹ Millerite publications like the *Advent Herald* and *Midnight Cry* resumed production, though this critical wound to their movement meant that they reduced evangelical activity and focused on retaining current membership.¹³⁰

William Miller, devastated by his mistake, stopped leading the movement and, after a brief period of denial, accepted that Jesus did not return.¹³¹ He continued to believe that the *parousia* was imminent and withdrew to seclusion for the remainder of his life, haunted by the Great Disappointment.¹³² The new leaders suggested other dates for the second coming, but none came to fruition, each lacking the expectation aroused by the initial prediction. The Millerites faced severe criticism, with some leaders like Joshua Hime accused of intentionally misleading the community and disturbing the peace—arrest warrants were issued.¹³³ Himes defended himself publicly and avoided arrest, living to the age of ninety-one.¹³⁴

The movement became increasingly fractured as time progressed, and doctrinal disagreements threatened the group's theological coherence.¹³⁵ George Knight writes, “By March 1845 the initiative was definitely in the hands of the fringe groups. Moderate Adventism, under the leadership of Himes, was fighting desperately to hold the movement together, but the

¹²⁹ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 219.

¹³⁰ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 220.

¹³¹ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 160.

¹³² Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 160.

¹³³ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 221.

¹³⁴ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 293.

¹³⁵ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 267.

struggle seemed to be one that the moderates were losing.”¹³⁶ In a local connection, Himes convened a large conference in Albany, NY, on April 29, 1845. Even William Miller attended. The gathering severed the fanatical and fringe components of the movement, resulting in their reorganization as distinct denominations. Today, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Church of God, and numerous other sects splinter from these and other denominations.

¹³⁶ Knight, George R. “Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism.” Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993: p. 267.

V. New Religious Movements and the Modern Apocalypse

A. The Rise of New Religious Movements

An obvious first question is: “What are new religious movements?” In short, they are what one might commonly refer to as a “cult.” Indeed, “cult” is a loaded term, evoking images of brainwashing, abuse, violence, and secrecy. This characterization has not materialized out of thin air. The term forces memories of the Jonestown Massacre (918 dead), Waco standoff (76 dead), Heaven’s Gate (39+ dead), Solar Temple (53 dead), and several others.¹³⁷ Of course, reactions to these tragedies fall victim to selection bias, and the news does not report on the acts of peaceful religious groups. Experts estimate that as many as 3000-5000 cults are operating worldwide today, primarily concentrated in the United States.¹³⁸ Following sociological standards, the remainder of this section will refer to “cults” as “new religious movements” to minimize the strongly negative connotations associated with that word.

Religion has shown remarkable adaptability to changing circumstances, with adherents adjusting or developing their beliefs to align with present conditions. Consequently, religions undergo a constant process of reimagining, with their current set of beliefs not necessarily reflecting their origins. In light of the rapidly changing conditions since the industrial revolution, major world religions are changing faster than ever. Increased globalization has allowed the influence of Eastern religions to further influence religious thinking in the West. When a given church is unwilling to adapt its tenants to an increased demand for a more modernized religion, the potential responses are revival or innovation.¹³⁹ Lorne Dawson writes, “[We] associate the

¹³⁷ Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007: 143.

¹³⁸ Clark, C. S. (1993, May 7). *Cults in America*. *CQ Researcher*, 3, 385-408. <http://library.cqpress.com/>

¹³⁹ Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007: p. 23.

innovation option with the formation of cults. Sects tend to be splinter groups from mainstream traditions that are seeking to revive what they think to be the original or pure spirit of the religious tradition they are rebelling against. Cults signify the introduction of a more unconventional mode of religious expression, one that tends to depart altogether from the dominant traditions of the churches that are being secularized.”¹⁴⁰

While sects are an interesting aspect of religious thinking, new religious movements have captivated the attention of our collective imaginations, largely due to media sensationalism and the aforementioned catastrophic events associated with a few infamous cults. In reality, new religious movements (NRMs) are primarily tame, fulfilling a desired, though often small, niche of religious life. The remainder of this section will address several aspects of new religious movements in preparation to discuss the apocalyptic thinking behind Heaven’s Gate, the primary case study for this chapter. First, consider the following characteristics that Lorne Dawson believes most NRMs exhibit: (1) NRMs are usually centered around a charismatic leader, often the religion’s founder. If this leader dies or fails to motivate their followers properly, the group will often fall apart. Consequently, most NRMs do not exist for a long time. (2) NRMs claim to possess an enhanced understanding of the world than is widely available or offered by other religions. Often, NRMs claim to culminate in a major transformative experience for the adherent. Heaven’s Gate is an excellent example. (3) NRMs are usually loosely organized and primarily focus on adherents’ experiences. (4) NRMs offer a more straightforward path to salvation or transformation, obtainable within one’s lifetime, than traditional religions.¹⁴¹ Exceptions to all of these characteristics exist.

¹⁴⁰ Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007: p. 23.

¹⁴¹ Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007: p. 29.

Contrary to popular belief, people who join new religious movements are young, well-educated, and were not necessarily raised in a religious tradition. Though, curiously, a disproportionate number of Jewish Americans join NRMs.¹⁴² ‘Brainwashing’ is often cited as a means of finding new converts, but this is mostly fiction. Most former members of NRMs repeatedly claim that their choice to join and exit was voluntary, with 67% claiming that they were “wiser for the experience.”¹⁴³ However, the aspect of NRMs that most scares the public is that, in some cases, they turn inwardly or outwardly violent. The following section focuses on the story of Heaven’s Gate, an NRM that operated peacefully for two decades before engaging in a shocking mass suicide.

B. Modern American Apocalyptic: Heaven’s Gate

In the decades following the aftermath of the Second World War, apocalypticism transformed. The Cold War created heightened tensions, undoubtedly convincing many in the years from the 1950s to the 1990s that the world faced the threat of imminent end. Recent advancements in research into outer space, especially related to the US-Soviet “Space Race,” helped spawn a renewed interest in the cosmos. The combination of fear over a catastrophic attack from an outside force and improvements to space flight capability created ripe dynamics for interest and fears in UFOs and aliens. Together, these conditions gave rise to a new age brand of apocalypticism and infamously contributed to creating the Heaven’s Gate cult. This group shocked the United States when, in 1997, they engaged in the largest mass suicide to ever occur on US soil. Thirty-nine people took their lives.

¹⁴² Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007: p. 86.

¹⁴³ Wright, Stuart A., and Helen Rose Ebaugh. "Leaving new religions." *Religion and the social order. The handbook on cults and sects in America* 3 (1993): 127.

NRMs are an interesting (though sometimes disturbing) aspect of twentieth-century American apocalypticism for several reasons. First, multiple NRMs engaged in widespread murder and suicide within a few decades. Some notable examples include the Manson Family, People's Temple (Jonestown), Branch Davidians (Waco), and the present case study, Heaven's Gate. Second, these cults utilized some aspects of mainstream Christianity while reinterpreting (or merely falsifying) other aspects. This blending of the Christian apocalyptic tradition with the radical beliefs of the NRM's charismatic and domineering leaders created a unique situation where a group went beyond fearing or preparing for an apocalypse and instead brought it about themselves. Heaven's Gate is perhaps the most emblematic of this dynamic, particularly because they were apocalyptic from the outset, believed that they were living out the events of Revelation, and did not pivot from their belief in the imminence of a worldwide apocalypse until the very end when they chose to bring about the end themselves.

Heaven's Gate was started by Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, who went by varying names during their time as cult leaders: the Two, Bo and Peep, and Ti and Do were the most common variations. The Two first met in Texas in 1972 when Applewhite was hospitalized following a psychiatric episode, and Nettles convinced him that they were destined to complete a divine assignment together.¹⁴⁴ Applewhite was the son of a well-known Presbyterian minister and had a keen interest in religion—though his interests were not confined to mainstream Presbyterianism. Nettles was a nurse at the hospital where she met Applewhite. She was an astrologer and spiritual medium who believed that she had been in contact with alien beings.¹⁴⁵ The Two absconded together, abandoning their old lives, and traveled the country in search of what their divine mission would be.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 169.

¹⁴⁵ Citation needed, rephrasing needed.

After a multi-year search for their purpose, the Two concluded that they were the two witnesses described in Revelation 11:3, “And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” They traveled extensively, recruiting new adherents, primarily from the American West. Their messaging focused on self-transformation, emphasizing that members would transform into extraterrestrial beings once the appropriate time came. Membership ebbed and flowed, peaking in the late 1970s with several hundred active members.¹⁴⁶ The strict rules and discipline associated with group membership eventually turned many away from the cult. At this juncture in the group’s history, they believed they would physically board a spaceship to enter the Next Level. At that point, they would biologically transform into a higher being.¹⁴⁷

This messaging changed in 1985 when Bonnie Lu Nettles died of complications from cancer. The emphasis on literally boarding a spacecraft to begin their transformation to the Next Level suffered from this development, as her premature death challenged one of the predominant beliefs of the group. The focus shifted from a physical transformation of the self into an understanding of the self as nonphysical and thus capable of transformation without the accompaniment of their physical bodies.¹⁴⁸ Further, as the years wore on, group membership dwindled by the mid-1990s until only a few dozen members remained.¹⁴⁹ Looking for a sign, the group ultimately decided that the passing of the Hale-Bopp comet in 1997 was their opportunity.

On March 26, 1997, local police discovered the bodies of thirty-nine individuals, dressed identically with most wrapped up in plastic bags. Initially, the media reported that all of the

¹⁴⁶ People Magazine. “Heaven’s Gate, 25 Years Later: Remembering 38 People Who Died with Cult Leader.” March 2022. Accessed April 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. “End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions.” ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 170

¹⁴⁸ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 171.

¹⁴⁹ Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. “Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America.” IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001, p. 171.

victims were male due to the ambivalence of their dress and hairstyle, but in reality, it was a mix of men and women across several age groups. As the largest mass suicide on US soil, their actions brought significant attention from media and culture. Indeed, Saturday Night Live satirized their tragic end in a sketch.¹⁵⁰ The timeline of events struggles to make sense of what happened. How is it possible that a group that remained benign for decades became radicalized into such extremism? Do their apocalyptic beliefs reflect an aberration or a continuity from the norm?

Applewhite approached Heaven's Gate earnestly, suggesting that he was not intentionally deceiving the group. Witness testimony suggests that group members were allowed to leave and rejoin at their leisure, with others being asked to leave for failing to live by Applewhite's numerous rules.¹⁵¹ Not long before their suicide, many group members visited family for the first time in years, but only one chose not to return.¹⁵² The suicides occurred in shifts, with members administering the lethal cocktail of barbiturates and alcohol in shifts without any clear indication of coercion.¹⁵³ The original plan was not suicide, but an aging Applewhite combined with the apparent mortality of Nettles created pressure for Applewhite to see the realization of his apocalyptic vision within his lifetime.

Among the most chilling elements of the story of Heaven's Gate is what they left behind. Their website www.heavensgate.com left behind a plethora of materials that explain both their belief system and some insights into the "why" aspect of their decision.¹⁵⁴ On the home page, a paragraph reads, "If you study the material on this website you will hopefully understand our joy and what our purpose here on Earth has been. You may even find your "boarding pass" to leave

¹⁵⁰ For the curious, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeGjdSSFLMA>

¹⁵¹ Clay Tweel. "Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults." Atlanta, *HBO Max*. 2020

¹⁵² Clay Tweel. "Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults." Atlanta, *HBO Max*. 2020

¹⁵³ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 171.

¹⁵⁴ The website is strange, and deeply unsettling given the implications of its message. Fair warning.

with us during this brief ‘window.’”¹⁵⁵ At the top of the page, the phrase “RED ALERT” repeatedly appears with some rather dated design elements. A link titled “Our Position Against Suicide” grabs one’s attention, given the eventual outcome. The passage explains their worldview rather well and serves as a valuable primary source indicating the worldview of an apocalyptic group on the precipice of a destructive end.

The statement begins, “We know that it is only while we are in these physical vehicles (bodies) that we can learn the lessons needed to complete our own individual transition, as well as to complete our task of offering the Kingdom of Heaven to this civilization one last time.” First, we notice that the group consciously separates their physical bodies from themselves, viewing their body as a temporary “vehicle.” The statement also emphasizes their mission to spread their apocalyptic message, aiming to redeem as many as possible before their supposed exit. Suicide was their original plan, as this following quote demonstrates, “We fully desire, expect, and look forward to boarding a spacecraft from the Next Level very soon (in our physical bodies). There is no doubt in our mind that our being “picked up” is inevitable in the very near future.” They expected that a UFO, carrying Nettles, would come and bring them to the “next level.” They attached hopes to the passing Hale-Bopp comet and its alleged “companion,” which turned out to be a hoax.¹⁵⁶

Heaven’s Gate was also aware of other apocalyptic NRMs that received violent endings. After discussing the possibility of more members dying of natural causes, they write, “Because of the position we take in our information, we could find so much disfavor with the powers that control this world that there could be attempts to incarcerate us or to subject us to some sort of psychological or physical torture (such as occurred at both Ruby Ridge and Waco).” Comparing

¹⁵⁵ Author unknown. www.heavensgate.com, it is unlikely that Applewhite created or wrote the site content given his age. The site was created only briefly before the group’s collective suicide and is maintained by former members.

¹⁵⁶ Clay Tweel. “Heaven’s Gate: The Cult of Cults.” Atlanta, *HBO Max*. 2020

themselves to the Branch Davidians and Ruby Ridge standoff suggests that the group understood their beliefs were radical and expected a similar outcome as these other groups.

Because the group had no interest in outward violence and wanted to avoid a deadly clash with the authorities, suicide became an increasingly viable option. The statement reads, “

We have thoroughly discussed this topic (of willful exit of the body under such conditions), and have mentally prepared ourselves for this possibility (as can be seen in a few of our statements). However, this act certainly does not need serious consideration at this time, and hopefully will not in the future. The true meaning of "suicide" is to turn against the Next Level when it is being offered. In these last days, we are focused on two primary tasks: one - of making a last attempt at telling the truth about how the Next Level may be entered (our last effort at offering to individuals of this civilization the way to avoid "suicide"); and two - taking advantage of the rare opportunity we have each day - to work individually on our personal overcoming and change, in preparation for entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

Interestingly, the author claims that the group had not seriously considered suicide and indicates that, if anything, it was a last resort. Their messaging indicated that turning against the group and its beliefs was the real suicide. In their final days, they remained committed to spreading their message (including producing the website) and continuing their mission of self-improvement in the hopes of transforming into a being greater than humanity.

This document provides critical insight into several aspects of their belief system. However, despite the group's connection to Christian thought, no element of Christianity appears in this message. Applewhite and Nettles believed they were living out the events of Revelation and that Heaven, in the traditional sense, was reached via spaceship and self-improvement. The death of Nettles created a sense of urgency for the group and made them further dependent on the aging Applewhite for direction. Following their suicide, public debate centered around the question of culpability—had they been coerced like at Jonestown, or did they genuinely desire to end their lives for their religion?

C. Y2K

Unlike many topics discussed in this work, Y2K had a decidedly secular cause. However, as usual, religious groups adapted their beliefs about the apocalypse to the present situation. Y2K provides a valuable case study for a few reasons. First, its recency allows for many readers to readily identify with the anxieties that the end of the second millennium and the onset of the third created. Second, this event demonstrates the importance of the millennia in apocalyptic thinking. The mere shift from a '1' beginning the year to a '2' was sufficient to create a worldwide scare. Third, Y2K again shows that a secular event such as a computer malfunction could be appropriated to a religious context. This section will explain why the Y2K scare occurred and explore how apocalyptic thinking adapted itself to present changes in technology.

The trouble began when, as the third millennium approached, some computer experts warned that a glitch with the dating system in computer programs could cause widespread glitches in technology. In the interest of saving valuable memory space, early computer programmers coded years using two digits rather than four, presuming that the first two would always be '19.'¹⁵⁷ This potential glitch led to speculation that widespread computer failures would occur, affecting governments, hospitals, airplanes, banking, and essentially every industry in a freshly computerized world. Congress estimated that the damages from the glitch could cost 600 Billion dollars to repair prophylactically.¹⁵⁸ Many religious and non-religious people felt that the new millennium would significantly affect society. Y2K was particularly primed for apocalypticism because of its combination of the millennium and fears surrounding the rapid societal changes associated with the introduction of the internet and computerized infrastructure.

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 339.

¹⁵⁸ Committee on Government Reform and Oversight. "The Year 2000 Problem." United States Congress. October 26, 1998. Accessed May 2022.

The years leading up to the new millennium saw a rapid increase in apocalyptic fears, perhaps best exemplified by the spurt of modern apocalyptic literature appearing in the late 1990s. First published in 1995, the best-selling *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins provided a fictional version of premillennial Dispensationalist apocalypticism following the events of the rapture.¹⁵⁹ Although the series continued after Y2K, the premillennial theology of the series primed readers to consider when this challenging millennium would occur, with the year 2000 providing an obvious start date. Other works, such as Michael Hyatt's *The Y2K Personal Survival Guide*, forewarned of a coming breakdown of society. Its description reads, "The Y2K Personal Survival Guide offers the vital advice, essential data, hard facts, and necessary resources ordinary Americans will need to meet the extraordinary problems that will come when the Millennium Bug strikes."¹⁶⁰ This description helps capture the mindset of many at the time, a newly computerized society preparing for the "extraordinary problems" of a computer glitch that would never come. These books demonstrate a fundamentalist Protestant belief that it is one's responsibility to warn society of the coming apocalypse, protecting them from doomsday in the same vein as Noah's ark.¹⁶¹

When New Year's Day 2000 came, the overhyped millennium bug came to pass without much incident. Planes did not fall from the sky, and nuclear missiles did not launch themselves, as some had feared. Religious believers who expected radical changes brought about by the millennium were left disappointed but undeterred from their eschatological visions of the *parousia*. Y2K demonstrated how apocalyptic thought adheres to new conditions, latching expectations about the apocalypse to a decidedly secular cause. Further, Y2K shows that rapid

¹⁵⁹ Johnson, Wendell G., ed. "End of Days: an Encyclopedia of the Apocalypse in World Religions." ABC-CLIO, 2017: p. 341.

¹⁶⁰ [Google Books](#). "The Y2K Personal Survival Guide: Everything You Need to Know to Get from This Side of the Crisis to the Other." Accessed May 2022.

¹⁶¹ McMinn, Lisa. "Y2K, the apocalypse, and evangelical Christianity: The role of eschatological belief in church responses." *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 2 (2001): 218.

changes in society result in fearful reactions about the implications of this shift. It is not a coincidence that Y2K centered around the widespread failure of computer technology that had begun a permanent change in most people's way of life.

D. Are We Nearing the Apocalypse?

A cursory glance at the news headlines gives one the impression that we live in the end times. Embroiled in a lengthy global pandemic, COVID-19 has created a sense that, somehow, the world is being punished. Diseases have an intriguing relationship with apocalyptic thought. For one, in some interpretations, the first horseman of the apocalypse is pestilence, an image that has influenced art and culture since its creation in Revelation. Second, like the influence of a god, diseases are invisible—like an earthquake or a flood, we see its effects rather than its causes. Further, diseases are a global occurrence, affecting everyone. In the case of a pandemic, the same disease is affecting us all simultaneously. Apocalyptic thought began developing in earnest after humans settled into cities with animals, spreading zoonotic diseases. Google search trends show a sharp increase in google searches for the word 'apocalypse' in March 2020, showing people's readiness to adapt to new conditions in an apocalyptic framework.¹⁶² March 2020 also saw the peak of searches for "Revelation" since data began being tracked in 2004.¹⁶³

Meanwhile, Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, a sovereign democracy, has sparked further apocalyptic notions. Dozens of nations are involved in the conflict, providing aid and supplies to Ukraine while sanctioning the Russian economy. With the United States supporting Ukraine and China sympathetic to Russia's cause, the three largest nuclear arsenals are linked to the conflict.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Russia has placed nuclear missiles near Ukraine in ready

¹⁶² [Google Trends](#). Accessed May 2022.

¹⁶³ [Google Trends](#). Accessed May 2022.

¹⁶⁴ World Population Review. "[Nuclear Weapons by Country 2022](#)." Accessed May 2022.

position, and although it seems unfathomable that the first nuclear warhead since Nagasaki would be used in combat, the world waits as enough nuclear missiles to annihilate humanity are set to launch—at the push of a button. Interestingly, the second horseman of the apocalypse is war. If the third horseman, famine, appears, say your prayers because the fourth is death.

Conflict and suffering exist all around, with new events readily identified as signs of the imminent apocalypse. However, the world has not ended.¹⁶⁵ Multiple millennia have passed since the first works of apocalyptic literature. However, their influence, and the influence of everyday fears of our mortality and the ultimate fate of reality, remain strong, sustained by an apocalyptic vision adaptable and malleable to changing circumstances. When Jesus was crucified, his followers, suffering under Roman rule, expected the *parousia* and apocalypse to relieve them from their deprivation. However, Jesus did not come, and the world did not end. Conditions improved under Constantine, and suddenly, it was not their focus anymore. The immediacy of the current events and the real anxiety that they produce primes people to believe that conditions have not been worse, and looking for an explanation to explain this suffering, find a readily available apocalyptic framework to help them cope. As this thesis has done, thinking across time and location reminds us that perceiving the imminence of the apocalypse is not a unique condition and, in reality, is something of a historical norm. With this in mind, there is no reason to believe that the present world's troubles are uniquely apocalyptic.

¹⁶⁵ Not to state the obvious, or anything.

VI. Conclusion

A. The Beginning of the End

This thesis' tour of apocalyptic thought and literature throughout history has concluded. It has covered large swaths of time and space (even outer space, to some extent) to compare developments in apocalyptic thought and trace its history. A few notable themes have emerged throughout this study that warrant renewed examination.

- (1) Technological change is a catalyst for apocalyptic thought. This theme is readily apparent in several case studies examined. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century directly led to the German flood scare of 1524 and allowed for a largely illiterate society to engage with modern ideas about religion through mass-distributed art. Industrialization is also linked to renewed apocalyptic anxiety, with mechanization increasing the time to ponder theological concerns. In the modern context, technological change has created the threat of a human-made apocalypse via nuclear destruction or environmental damage. The internet has entirely changed the structure of communication and increased globalization, culminating in the reactive fear of Y2K.
- (2) Landmarks on the calendar such as a millennium or centennial are associated with apocalypse panics. In Christianity, the Revelation of John foretold a one-thousand-year reign of Jesus in relation to the parousia. Consequently, substantive apocalyptic scares occurred around the years 1000, 1500, and 2000, each discussed in this thesis. Similarly, the centennial in the Islamic Calendar is linked to revolutionary events and apocalyptic expectations, as discussed in this thesis.
- (3) We are experiencing a shift from expectations of a divine apocalypse to a human-made apocalypse. For much of history, people connected cataclysmic events with the

machinations of unknown and powerful divine forces. Developments in science and technology shifted this relationship in two critical ways. First, scientific inquiry has explained many events that would have otherwise been interpreted as “acts of God.”¹⁶⁶ This creates a theological need to adapt their messaging to objectively factual scientific premises. The next section will describe the scientific explanation for the destruction of the earth and the “death” of the universe without human intervention. Second, technological advance has also contributed to the negative externality of climate change and the development of increasingly destructive weapons. Given that divine forces do not cause the end of the world,¹⁶⁷ humans are more than capable of causing their demise. Though this increasingly likely aspect of apocalyptic thought is not the focus of this thesis, it helps contextualize the later chapters and points to the direction of future developments in apocalypticism.

- (4) Apocalyptic thought and prophecy adapt to changing conditions and develop as a response to change. When Daniel was written, the author(s) was commenting on contemporary issues. His prophecy of the seventy weeks was intended to occur within a few generations. However, two millennia later, William Miller reinterpreted the same words and concluded that the world would end in the 1840s. Similarly, Christianity guaranteed that the *parousia* would occur right after Jesus’ ministry. Matthew 24:34 reads, “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Clearly, this did not occur, but an imminent expectation of the apocalypse has remained a pressing expectation for many people. Each chapter

¹⁶⁶ Strangely enough, the insurance industry still uses this term to refer to natural cataclysms that reasonable preparation could not mitigate.

¹⁶⁷ Assuming that divine forces are (1) real, and (2) willing to end the world. Both premises are questionable.

showcases the amenability of apocalyptic thought to changing conditions, the primary message of this thesis.

The apocalypse affects everybody, whether they are religious or not. The expectation of sudden cataclysmic events and the subsequent desire to explain, mitigate, and endure them is endemic to the human experience. One day, as a young child, you find yourself newly aware of your surroundings and, quickly, your mortality. You realize that the world is a vast and complicated place, where much of what occurs is beyond comprehension. You struggle to categorize and organize these phenomena into logical structures but fail to arrive at a satisfying conclusion. The probability of existence is so astronomically low and so *unexpected* that it makes sense that it will disappear suddenly. Human birth implies an eventual death, so it follows that the creation of the universe results in an eventual, unexpected end—expectations about the apocalypse mirror one's expectations about their life. Religion, in part, serves to help us cope with the senselessness of our existence and eventual death. Therefore, the apocalypse is the byproduct of a worldview that explains the incomprehensible by imagining a being *so* incomprehensible that they could have created us. We call them God.

When the scientific method began uncovering the underlying laws that govern the universe, it presented a challenge to religion. Phenomena previously only explainable through the influence of the divine now had alternative explanations. Breakthrough discoveries, such as the heliocentric model of the solar system, challenged religion's hold on the foundations of existence. A second consequence appeared. Technological development and industrialization have created the capacity for humans to go extinct without an apocalypse in the traditional sense. Ironically, the process that began discrediting religious explanations about the apocalypse created the conditions necessary for it to occur. Incidents like Y2K show the combination of religious

views about the apocalypse and secular technological developments. In a constant state of improvisation and adaptation, this transhistorical phenomenon has persisted without signs of slowing down. Science has also provided explanations for the demise of the earth and universe apart from human or divinely caused disaster.

B. The Cold Death of the Universe

While apocalyptic literature and thought have captivated imaginations for millennia, their explanations for the ultimate demise of the earth and the universe may never come to pass. As this thesis approaches its conclusion, this section will take a step back to consider how an apocalypse could occur naturally. First, we consider the end of the earth itself. Assuming that humans could prosper on the earth indefinitely, humanity will nevertheless face an extermination event. First, a meteor strike could eliminate most living beings, including humans. However, it is unlikely that such a catastrophic event would destroy the planet.¹⁶⁸ Another unlikely possibility is instability in the orbit of planets, causing the earth to collide with another planet in the solar system, destroying the earth.¹⁶⁹ Failing these or other unforeseen events, the sun will eventually overtake the earth as it transitions into a red giant in about 7.59 billion years.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, even though an eventual apocalypse is guaranteed scientifically, it is so far away as not to warrant concern.

Scientific models of the universe's expansion provide the best explanation for the universe's eventual demise. First, modern models of the universe's growth reveal a surprising, counterintuitive fact. If the universe began from a single point and exploded outward from that

¹⁶⁸ Alastair Gunn. "If Humans don't Finish it when will the World Actually End?" Science Focus. Accessed May 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Alastair Gunn. "If Humans don't Finish it when will the World Actually End?" Science Focus. Accessed May 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Alastair Gunn. "If Humans don't Finish it when will the World Actually End?" Science Focus. Accessed May 2022.

point, one would expect that its expansion would gradually slow down until its velocity equals zero. At this point, the universe would either achieve a steady-state and remain static or would begin to collapse inward, effectively reversing the process of expansion. However, the universe's rate of expansion is *increasing* as time progresses.¹⁷¹ This insight implies that time will continue forever as well, meaning that, in some regard, the universe is eternal. If the most accurate models are correct, the matter that originated during the big bang will continue spreading out in a rapid race to enlarge the boundaries of existence.

One problem remains. The first law of thermodynamics tells us that energy cannot be created nor destroyed, suggesting that there is a finite amount of energy. Thus, if the universe is ever-expanding and accelerating in its expansion, energy (and matter) will inevitably become so widely dispersed that there will be a negligible amount of energy and matter in any given location of the universe. With so little matter and energy, the universe will become exceedingly cold, approaching absolute zero, the temperature at which particles cease to move.¹⁷² The only cosmological objects remaining would be black holes, which are inhospitable locales for life to continue. This state is the death of the universe and the cessation of time, though time would continue in a trivial sense. However, this would take trillions of years to occur. This state leaves the question: if no life or consciousness exists to experience the universe, does it still exist?¹⁷³

C. The End. (Of the World?)

From creation to apocalypse, this thesis has explored numerous aspects of apocalyptic thought throughout history, especially as it relates to Christianity. The adaptability of apocalyptic thought to changes in the status quo underscores the universality of its influence, shaping both

¹⁷¹ Hawking, Steven W., and Leonard Mlodinow. *A briefer history of time*. Bantam Press, 2020: p. 67.

¹⁷² 0 Kelvin, -273 Celsius, or -459.67 Fahrenheit.

¹⁷³ Somewhere, a silent tree falls...

culture and society. As the previous section demonstrated, the world will eventually end despite every effort humans could make. However, this event is predicted to occur in the distant future, and given the relatively brief existence of humankind, several billion years may as well be never. The modern world has more pressing concerns than the sun's eventual death, given that extinction occurs in millions of years rather than billions.

The environment is in crisis, and war constantly looms, especially in light of the war in Ukraine. In reality, human extinction is likely to occur far sooner than several million years from now unless substantial environmental action is taken. However, recent years have shown marked apathy toward fixing this pressing issue, placing the danger of an environmental apocalypse at the forefront while removing it from the international list of priorities. Donald Collins writes, "the loss of biodiversity [is] leading us to a post-human planet. It is comforting to hear the optimistic solutions offered by many...but these solutions require political action not even discussed by the candidates from either party...real action will require totally out-of-the box thinking and action by our elected officials."¹⁷⁴ Humanity is approaching a tipping point, past which there will be no way to reverse the effects of climate change. Apocalyptic thought will likely take on an increasingly environmental tilt as the catastrophic effects become more apparent.

The nature of apocalyptic thought is also likely to undergo a radical transformation. Traditionally, apocalypticism has been a "top-down" worldview, deriving from religious leaders, messianic figures, and writers of materials propagating an apocalyptic worldview.¹⁷⁵ However, the internet and improved literacy have changed communication dynamics by allowing billions

¹⁷⁴ Collins, Donald A. "Heading for a World Apocalypse?" *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*; Washington Vol. 35. Iss. 2 (Summer 2010): 252.

¹⁷⁵ DiTommaso, Lorenzo. "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture." In *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*. 2014.

of people unprecedented access to a platform for sharing ideas. The 2012 Mayan Apocalypse scare has already demonstrated this principle, with some calling it the first “public apocalypse,” reimagining esoteric knowledge of an ancient calendar as a prediction of a specific apocalyptic event.¹⁷⁶ Lorenzo DiTommaso writes, “Apocalyptic speculation can now be instantaneously uploaded to freely accessible websites, blogs, and other social-media platforms, enabling real-time public discussion in a global forum that is unrestricted by the usual theological firewalls.”¹⁷⁷

Apocalyptic thought is among the most durable transhistorical phenomena, surviving each fundamental change to the structure of society seen in the last few thousand years. The world continues changing at seemingly breakneck speed, creating a relationship in which apocalyptic thought changes the world and simultaneously adapts to the world as it changes. Religious people view the apocalypse as salvation, the final moment in God’s grand plan for the universe and humanity, or as punishment for humanity’s shortcomings. Secular individuals remain similarly concerned about the implications of a human-made apocalypse, making this concept extraordinarily universal. Altogether, this thesis has endeavored to explain the development of apocalyptic thought throughout history. I hope that the reader finds themselves with a better understanding of why so many people believe in an imminent apocalypse and how it affects their lives. I know I have.

¹⁷⁶ DiTommaso, Lorenzo. "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture." In *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*. 2014.

¹⁷⁷ DiTommaso, Lorenzo. "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture." In *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*. 2014.

Works Cited

Adas, Michael. "Prophets of rebellion: Millenarian protest movements against the European colonial order." UNC Press Books, 2012.

Alastair Gunn. "If Humans don't Finish it when will the World Actually End?" Science Focus. Accessed May 2022.

Amanat, Abbas, and Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson. "Imagining the end: Visions of apocalypse from the ancient Middle East to modern America." IB Tauris & Company, Limited, 2001.

Andregg, Michael. "ISIS and Apocalypse: Some Comparisons with End Times Thinking Elsewhere and a Theory." *Comparative Civilizations Review*, no. 75, International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, 2016, p. 89–.

Arjomand, Said Amir. "Origins and Development of Apocalypticism and Messianism in Early Islam: 610–750 ce." In *Sociology of Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 21-41. Brill, 2016.

Backus, Irena. *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Clark, C. S. (1993, May 7). *Cults in America*. *CQ Researcher*, 3, 385-408.
<http://library.cqpress.com/>

Collins, Donald A. "Heading for a World Apocalypse?" *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, Council for Social and Economic Studies, 2010, p. 242–252

Collins, John. 2019. "Not One World but Two. The Future in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature." *Religions* Vol. 10

Committee on Government Reform and Oversight. "The Year 2000 Problem." United States Congress. October 26, 1998. Accessed May 2022.

Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007.

DiTommaso, Lorenzo. "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture." In *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*. 2014.

Down to Earth. "Is an Environmental Apocalypse Approaching India?" New Delhi, India, HT Digital Streams Ltd, 2020.

Gaustad, Edwin Scott. *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. Harper & Row, 1974.

Gray-Fow, Michael JG. "Why the Christians? Nero and the great fire." *Latomus* 57, no. Fasc. 3 (1998): 595-616.

Gustav-Adolf Schoener. 'The Flood' of 1524: "The First Mass-media Event in European History." *Esoterica*, Vol. 9 (2007)

Hawking, Steven W., and Leonard Mlodinow. *A briefer history of time*. Bantam Press, 2020.

Himmelfarb, Martha. "The Apocalypse: A Brief History". John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

Hirosue, Masashi. "The Batak Millenarian Response to the Colonial Order." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Singapore), vol. 25, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 331–43,

Ice, Thomas D. "The Seventy Weeks of Daniel." (2009)

Johnson, Wendell G., ed. *End of days: an encyclopedia of the apocalypse in world religions*. ABC-CLIO, 2017.

Joshua Mark. "Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text" *World History Encyclopedia*. May 2018. Accessed May 2022.

Knight, George R. *Millennial fever and the end of the world: a study of millerite adventism*. Pacific Press Publ. Ass., 1993.

Latour, Bruno, Isabelle Stengers, Anna Tsing, and Nils Bubandt. "Anthropologists are talking—about capitalism, ecology, and apocalypse." *Ethnos* 83, no. 3 (2018): 587-606.

Leahy, Terry. "Facing the apocalypse: environmental crisis and religion." *Religion and Society* 4 (2013): 182-188.

Marshall, Michael. "Did a mega drought topple empires 4,200 years ago?." *Nature* 601, no. 7894 (2022): 498-501.

McMinn, Lisa. "Y2K, the apocalypse, and evangelical Christianity: The role of eschatological belief in church responses." *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 2 (2001): 205-220.

Michael Greshko. "Origins of the Universe Explained" *National Geographic*. January 2017.

Myscofski, Carole A. "Millenarian Movements." In *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Christianity*. 2020.

Norman Cohn. "Apocalypticism Explained: The Book of Daniel." *PBS Frontline*.

O'Hear, Natasha, and Anthony O'Hear. *Picturing the Apocalypse : the Book of Revelation in the Arts over Two Millennia*. First edition., Oxford University Press, 2015.

People Magazine. "Heaven's Gate, 25 Years Later: Remembering 38 People Who Died with Cult Leader." March 2022. Accessed April 2022.

Powell, Randal Louis. "The Day Soon Cometh": Mormons, the Apocalypse, and the Shaping of a Nation. Washington State University, 2020.

Scott, James C. "Against the grain." In *Against the Grain*. Yale University Press, 2017.

Schaefer, Nancy A. "Y2K as an Endtime Sign: Apocalypticism in America at the Fin-de-Millennium." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 38, no. 1, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 82-105.

Stiglitz, Joseph E. "Is growth passé?" *Project syndicate* 9 (2019).

Clay Tweel. "Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults." Atlanta, HBO Max. 2020

Wright, Stuart A., and Helen Rose Ebaugh. "Leaving new religions." *Religion and the social order. The handbook on cults and sects in America* 3 (1993): 117-138.