

Foreword

The apocalyptic imagination has many mothers and many children, as the far-reaching essays in this volume demonstrate. Searching for the origins of apocalyptic thought takes one back into the second millennium BCE, into the cultures of the ancient Near East and the memorable mythic narratives and images that were forged in the Bronze Age and that continued to fund the religious imaginations of peoples and cultures for many centuries after that. But even as we recognize the deep roots of many of the characters, plots, and tropes of apocalyptic literature in earlier myths and images, we also recognize that the emergence of a distinctively apocalyptic imagination represents something new, something unprecedented in the life of the cultural west.

Like all cultural births, the birth of the apocalyptic imagination is not so much a defined point in history as it is a gradual materialization of a cluster of ideas, schemata, notions of time, conceptualizations of evil, senses of the structure of history, and so forth. Scholars are divided as to when and where they would locate its origins. Most, however, would see the apocalyptic imagination as first taking shape within the cultural milieu of the Jewish diaspora that settled in Babylon and its environs after the Babylonian destruction of the kingdom of Judah and the exile of many of its leading citizens to Mesopotamia in the sixth century BCE. That context, perhaps as much by accident as by design, became an extraordinary melting pot of civilizations. Peoples from all across the Babylonian empire were relocated into

villages in close proximity to one another. Many aspired to enter into the Babylonian administrative and military bureaucracies. In such contexts, cultural mixing flourished. Thus the scribal culture with its high regard for books and the written word, for knowledge that was marked as restricted and mysterious, for curiosity about heavenly mysteries, and for attempts to master the logic of political change became the province not just of Babylonian elites but also of the educated among their subject peoples, who used these new approaches toward knowledge to reflect upon their own place in history.

At this same time, a decisive new set of concepts was introduced when the Persians conquered the Babylonian empire and extended their control throughout the ancient Near East. Many scholars would identify some of the most distinctive ideas of apocalypticism—its pronounced dualism, the notion of strongly marked temporal periods culminating in the victory of good over evil—as derived from Persian Zoroastrian ideas. But although Zoroastrianism continues to this day as a small religious community in Iran and India and in diaspora, it is through the appropriation and transformation of these ideas in Judaism and then subsequently in Christianity that apocalypticism has come to be one of the most formative intellectual constructs of western thought.

But what exactly is the apocalyptic imagination? The problem of definition bedevils attempts to study apocalypticism. And for good reason. It is important to remember that concepts are labels of convenience that we use to organize information. They are not categories that identify unchanging essences, such as we would expect if we were asking about the chemical composition of salt or fructose. Furthermore, the use of terms changes over time. So, we have two related problems when we want to talk about “apocalypse” and “apocalypticism.” First, we often form concepts by thinking of a prototype example that we use as a point of reference. Because of the dominance of Christian culture in the west and the familiarity of people with the book of Revelation in the Christian canon, the book of Revelation often serves as the prototype of what we think of as an

apocalypse—a revelatory vision in which the events of the end times are described in vivid detail. These events are highly catastrophic, both politically and cosmically, and they are framed in a dualistic struggle between personified figures of evil and good. They eventuate in a definitive defeat of evil and the establishment of an eternal future of peace and well-being for a transformed elect. As most scholars of ancient Christianity and Judaism will attest, however, the book of Revelation is actually a fairly anomalous example of the genre apocalypse. In particular, its focus on visualizing destruction is far more intense than one finds in most other apocalypses. Nevertheless, one has to recognize that, culturally speaking, it has had an outsized impact on the imagination of subsequent generations within the Christian and secular West.

If the first problem is that of recognizing the impact of prototypes in shaping our sense of apocalyptic literature, the second is recognizing that changing cultural concerns undercut the normative force of earlier definitions. Especially in the modern period, some of the earlier notions that attached to the idea of apocalypse fall away. This is particularly true as apocalyptic moves from being a concept of the religious imagination to being a concept within the secular cultural imagination. No longer is the focus so much on mysteries revealed. The emphasis is more on the dualistic struggle between sharply defined good and evil and on the destruction of all that is familiar and cherished. In the contemporary imagination, “apocalypse” is almost equivalent with “disaster” or “catastrophe.” This is a shift that requires some reflection. In traditional religious apocalypses, even those that are strongly dualistic, the struggle between good and evil is highly stylized. But the structure of the plot is known in advance. Good will triumph over evil. Indeed, the moral satisfaction of reading or hearing an apocalypse is the experience of feeling the danger of evil, imagining it vividly, even while knowing that it is already doomed, and that good will be established forever. In this sense, the genre of apocalypse is close to the modern genre of the thriller. In those novels and films, a dualistic struggle between good and evil takes place. It is usually

between two political civilizations or cultures (e.g., Communism and the “Free World,” Islamic Terrorism and the West, the Mafia and the FBI), but any strongly dualistic struggle will do. The plot is one of increasing menace, anxiety that evil will triumph, and then a decisive defeat of evil and the establishment of peace and security.

In modern contemporary culture, however, “apocalyptic” novels and films distinctively deviate from this model. That is to say, “apocalypse” has been redefined. The modern apocalyptic imagination is more focused on the destruction of those structures that constitute civilization—the climate, the infrastructure, the social bonds. The evil that provokes this collapse is of equal interest. Sometimes it is from without—aliens or objects from another planet, for example. Sometimes it is from within—technology gone awry, human greed run amok. Although there is some variety, most of the popular apocalyptic fictions cannot do without some element of hope. In contrast to the apocalypses of antiquity and the medieval period, when the eschaton was the moment for the inbreaking of direct divine rule, the aftermath of apocalyptic destruction in modern secular apocalypses is a time of tentative rebuilding, without any hope of external support. Though these apocalyptic imaginings tend to be resolutely nonreligious, they do ask ultimate questions about the nature of human being.

The sketch I have given of the flexibility of the phenomenon of the apocalyptic imagination is woefully inadequate, of course. Even as I have gestured to its variability, I have radically oversimplified it. And that is precisely why one needs volumes like the one Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler have produced. Its three sections delineate three key movements in apocalyptic. Part I, *Apocalypticism in the Ancient World*, takes the reader back into the complexities of the origins of apocalyptic (chapters 2 and 3, by Christopher B. Hays) and into the origin of some of the most fundamental tropes that persist in the apocalyptic imagination up to the present day (chapter 4, by Jackie Wyse Rhodes). Although modern readers may tend to distinguish between religious and political modes of thought, the two were thoroughly enmeshed in antiquity, and chapter 5, by Robert

Williamson Jr. and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, explores the political dimensions of apocalyptic thought in anti-imperial resistance, a function that has continued to the present day. It is only because of the dominance of Christianity in the West, of course, and subsequently in much of the globe, that the apocalyptic imagination has become such a definitive presence. The last three chapters of Part I (by Greg Carey, Joshua Jipp, and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler) explore how apocalyptic thought patterns pervade the thought world of early Christianity.

Part II, *Apocalypticism throughout the Ages*, traces the complex ways that the apocalyptic imagination funded a variety of different cultural and spiritual needs throughout the succeeding centuries. Although Christianity had a range of relations with the Roman imperial power throughout the first three centuries of its existence, the periods of persecution left a decided impact on its self-concept, and the confluence of apocalyptic ideas and narratives of martyrdom were an important way of thinking about this identity (chapter 9, by Karl Shuve). But as Christianity embraced apocalypticism, why did Judaism reject it? The history of the failed revolts of 66-70 CE and 132-135 CE turned Judaism toward ways of understanding its religious identity that were incompatible with apocalypticism (chapter 10, by Shayna Sheinfeld). Thus, ironically, the history of Jewish apocalypticism was preserved only because Christians found it vital to their own self-identity. And yet, when Rome embraced Christianity as the religion of the empire, apocalypticism, with its anti-imperial sub-text, had to be reinterpreted in ways that would make it compatible with the new relation to empire (chapter 13, by Brennan Breed).

As one might already expect from the ways in which the apocalyptic imagination morphed in order to address new cultural contexts in antiquity, the medieval period brought new transformations. The notion of the “millennium,” anchored in the book of Revelation, created expectations of some transformative events either in 1000 CE (the anniversary of the incarnation) or 1033 (the anniversary of the crucifixion and resurrection). There was, not surprisingly, an upsurge in apocalyptic expectations. But no such transformation of the world

occurred. Although scholars continue to debate the cause and effect, there was a striking transformation of piety in the decades that followed. More strongly effective forms of identification with the suffering of Jesus became the focus of piety, and some argue that the intensity of apocalyptic expectation was re-channeled into a kind of realized eschatology in the suffering and exaltation of Christ (chapter 11, by Travis Ables). It is important to remember, however, that apocalypticism, though born in Judaism and most prominent and culturally definitive in Christianity, also plays a significant role in Islam, as chapter 12, by Mohamed A. Mohamed, shows.

The presence of the apocalyptic imagination in contemporary culture might be best described in terms of an explosion. If one attempts to trace its effects, one is, by necessity, tracing fragmented patterns of impact. Even within Western secular culture, for example, the philosophical tradition and popular conceptions of progress indicate that the ghost of apocalyptic conceptualizations continues to have an impact, no matter how thoroughly the experts debate its extent (chapter 15, by Thomas Fabisiak). That explosion is well documented in the varied chapters in Part III. Although it is difficult to see any common core to the apocalyptic imagination that informs these contemporary expressions, perhaps one might focus on the relative interplay of focus on disaster and dissolution and on a possible future. Only in the cultic movements—whether they are formed out of traditional Christian elements, non-Christian ones, or some odd amalgamation—is there an expectation that bliss follows the trials of the eschatological woes (chapter 19 by Robert von Thaden Jr., and chapter 20, by Joe Laycock). But the apocalyptic imagination also serves in contemporary times to articulate the acute sense of the breakdown of assumed structures of civilization (chapter 14, by Michael Thate; chapter 16, by Matthew Rindge; chapter 17, by Ingrid Esther Lilly; and chapter 18, by James Perkinson). What is distinctly different about these apocalyptic imaginings is the lack of confidence in a plot in which the ills are only transitory woes on the way toward a glorious future. The most recent envisioning of apocalypse, the Zombie

apocalypse (chapter 21, by Kelly J. Murphy), may seem just a bit of cultural camp. But the images with which it works—the living and the dead, the turning of the dead upon the living, the breakdown of civilization and its tentative reconstruction—these things bespeak profound disquiet and anxiety about the fundamental bases of our life together.

This volume brings together an extraordinary conversation about the apocalyptic imagination as it has informed western civilization for the past 2,500 years. It asks us to find those elements that persist and to ponder why they have been so resilient in our cultural imaginations. But it also asks us to identify the ways in which changing historical and cultural situations have called forth striking transformations of the apocalyptic imagination and to ask why those might be and how they have identified and addressed new anxieties and hopes. And finally, it asks us to look at our contemporary culture and to ask whether and how apocalyptically inspired forms of thought are framing our perceptions of our contemporary situations and whether or not we wish to endorse those ways of interpreting our contexts or to seek different frames of understanding.

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