

Introduction—From Before the Bible to
Beyond the Bible

Apocalypses throughout History

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KEY TERMS:

SEER

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CIPHER

CATHARSIS

CONTEXT

GENRE

Introduction

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word “apocalypse?”

Armageddon.

Catastrophe.

Devastation.

The End.

The likelihood that such things immediately spring to your mind has a lot to do with the fact that you have lived most of your life in the last half of the twentieth century CE and/or the first couple of decades of the twenty-first century CE. In many facets of (especially American) culture, “apocalypse” and “apocalyptic” have become synonymous with doomsday scenarios and the harrowing drama they entail. Apocalyptic doomsday scenarios can take all sorts of shapes and appear in all sorts of popular media. Few of us were alive when Orson Welles famously read a fake news report of an alien invasion on live radio in 1938, which prompted listeners of the show—many of whom did not realize the report was fake—to react hysterically. This fake account of an apocalyptic event was based on H. G. Wells’s 1898 novel, *The War of the Worlds*, a text that can be characterized as apocalyptic insofar as it depicted the invasion of earth by extraterrestrials (one of the first of its kind), which results in all kinds of catastrophes and a radical upheaval of the world as we know it.

Familiar apocalyptic scenarios in contemporary popular culture abound, and include an entire **genre** of Hollywood movies that depict “The End” (whether of the world itself or society). Some depict the world as it is ending, either from some kind of extraterrestrial threat or ecological disaster, as in *Deep Impact* or *2012*, or after the disaster has taken place, as in the most recognizable post-apocalyptic thrillers *Mad Max*, *Zombieland*, and *Interstellar* (to name only a few). On screens inside our living rooms, various apocalyptic shows keep us company in

the night, such as *The Walking Dead*, which depicts life after a **zombie apocalypse**. So, too, are apocalyptic plots popular in literature, as in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, Stephen King's *Cell*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* books, or Justin Cronan's *The Passage* (again, to name only a few).

Apocalyptic doomsday scenarios are not limited to the world of popular entertainment. In fact, apocalyptic scenarios—and, just as importantly, the apocalyptic mindset that produces them—are plainly evident in contemporary politics, religion, international affairs, and climate change debates. As recently as April 2015, former US Rep. Michele Bachmann claimed the rapture could happen within our lifetimes, blaming President Barack Obama's policies on Iran and the Marriage Equality Act. In a different vein, climate scientists predict the end of the environment, as we know it, if humans fail to make substantive changes in CO2 emissions; many religious practitioners continue to count the days until the (next) predicted end of the world and their own ascension to heaven; politicians look to events in the Middle East as signs of “The End Times.” The list could go on and on—and does, from serious considerations to the use of “The End” in tongue-in-cheek disaster survival guides, such as the “Zombie Apocalypse Preparedness Guide” found on the Center for Disease Control's website. Even the Pentagon has a (humorous) “zombie plan” in place in the case of a zombie apocalypse. According to one report, “In an unclassified document titled ‘CONOP 8888,’ officials from U.S. Strategic Command used the specter of a planet-wide attack by the walking dead as a training template for how to plan for real-life, large-scale operations, emergencies and catastrophes.”¹ A real-life worldwide zombie apocalypse is not necessarily expected, but the training scenario that imagines such a situation provides opportunities for educating students for how to act in the case of mass panic.²

While such end-of-the-world scenarios are clearly “apocalyptic” in terms of the most common contemporary use of the term—that is,

1. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/16/politics/pentagon-zombie-apocalypse/>.

2. <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/05/16/dod.zombie.apocalypse.plan.pdf>.

meaning some sort of global catastrophe that somehow “ends” the world or radically changes society as we know it—the word “apocalypse” meant something quite different than this until very recently. If you happened to live, say, in the first several years of the first century CE—during which time the Roman Empire was just taking shape and Jesus walked the face of the earth—you would have had a very different understanding of the term. So, too, if you were living during Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the beginning of the Modern Period. So what did the word “apocalypse” mean in the first century, and how and why has its meaning changed over time?

The Importance of Genre

The word “apocalypse” derives from an ancient Greek word *apokalyptein*, which, quite literally, meant to “uncover, disclose, or reveal.” One of the most common uses of this word in everyday Greek was to describe the process by which a husband lifted the veil covering the bride’s face at a wedding ceremony. A common ritual—which, of course, still occurs in many cultures to this day—had the effect of *revealing* the bride to the husband. The process of unveiling the bride’s face, which was initially either entirely or partially covered by the veil, allowed the bride’s face to be seen clearly and in plain view of everyone present. The act of *uncovering* constitutes the essence of an *apocalypse*, and it provides a starting point for considering a body of ancient literature by the same name.

Though the building blocks for the group of ancient texts called *apocalypses* are evident in much earlier Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian, and Hebrew literature, the very first apocalypses *per se* appear to have been written by Jewish authors, beginning sometime in the third century BCE. You are likely familiar with some of these texts, most famous among them is the book of **Revelation** from the New Testament. However, the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament book of Daniel, which includes an apocalypse in chapters 7–12, is also an example of this genre of text. There are many other extant apocalypses (i.e., those

which have been preserved for us to read today) with which you may be less familiar, but which were, no doubt, very popular among various Jewish groups in antiquity. 1 Enoch was among the most popular. It is a compilation of five originally distinct texts featuring Enoch, a figure from the book of Genesis (see Gen 5:18–24), as the central character. 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Zephaniah, Apocalypse of Abraham, and the Testament of Abraham are additional examples of Jewish apocalypses that circulated widely in the third to the first century BCE. The list goes on. Despite the fact that what most Christians consider the “Bible” contains only two apocalypses, dozens of other apocalypses from that period still survive, indicating how popular the apocalypse was as a literary **genre**—a kind or form of literature—in antiquity.

This genre of literature continued to be popular amongst various Jewish groups into the first century CE and beyond, and importantly, among an emerging Jewish sect of “Christians.” The last book in the Christian Bible, the book of Revelation (alternatively, the *Apocalypse of John*), may be the most recognizable, but a number of non-canonical apocalyptic texts were also produced by some of the earliest Christians and attributed to early Christian apostles, including, e.g., the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*.

Such texts depict all kinds of violence and destruction, to be sure. For example, 4 Ezra (sometimes called 2 Esdras) reveals in no uncertain terms the utter desolation that God will bring upon those who have forsaken God and God’s commandments:

Now concerning the signs: behold, the days are coming when those who dwell on earth shall be seized with great terror, and the way of truth shall be hidden, and the land shall be barren of faith.

And unrighteousness shall be increased beyond what you yourself see, and beyond what you heard of formerly. And the land which you now see ruling shall be waste and untrodden, and men shall see it desolate.

But if the Most High grants that you live, you shall see it thrown into confusion after the third period; and the sun shall suddenly shine forth at night, and the moon during the day. Blood shall drip from wood, and the stone shall utter its voice; the peoples shall be troubled, and the stars shall fall. (NRSV 4 Ezra 5: 1–5)

No doubt authors and audiences of ancient apocalypses would have recognized the kind of grand-scale destruction that presages the “end of the world” depicted in modern-day apocalyptic doomsday scenarios. In fact, they envisioned (quite literally) the “end of the world” and the annihilation that it entailed in all kinds of ways. But the impending and/or manifested End was only one constitutive element of the apocalypse proper. Just as important—and perhaps more so—were the *revelations of the present circumstances* that were giving rise to the doomsday scenarios. Just as the bride’s veil, once removed, revealed her fully to her husband, so, too, apocalypses revealed a previously obscured reality to their audiences.

Let’s look at one example in order to begin to understand this important phenomenon. In the book of Dan 7–12, the protagonist Daniel is said to receive a series of **visions** of various phenomena, including four great beasts coming out of the sea:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea. The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it. . . . (Dan 7:2–4)

The vision continues with descriptions of the second and third beasts, and finally, the fourth beast:

After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns. (Dan 7:7)

At the conclusion of this vision, Daniel reveals his anxiety surrounding the contents of these visions, which he does not immediately understand. So, he asks an unknown figure—a heavenly intermediary, we are later told—to interpret the visions:

He gave me this explanation: “The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and

will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.” (Dan 7:24)

The description of Daniel’s first vision reveals several related elements of this apocalypse and the genre of apocalypses, generally speaking. First, we observe that Daniel is a somewhat unintentional—or at least unsolicited—recipient of a vision, the origins of which are not further specified, other than that they occur in a dream. Insofar as Daniel is the witness to the dream, he may be characterized as a **seer**. In an apocalypse, a seer is required to mediate the vision, though the circumstances surrounding the reception of the vision vary somewhat. At times, the seer is carried up to the heavens to witness the vision; at other times, the seer experiences visionary dreams while asleep. The authenticity of the vision experience is a matter of some debate, with some scholars arguing for the credibility of the visions (analogous to other “mystical experiences” in the ancient and modern world), and others suggesting that the vision sequence is simply a literary convention designed to impart a specific message to the intended audience of the apocalypse.

A second constitutive element of apocalypses is that their contents are very often presented in symbolic imagery and language. Given the inherently cryptic nature of symbols, the contents of these visions, taken at face value, are often ambiguous and/or unintelligible. Oftentimes, animals appear to represent human figures or otherworldly entities; at other times, people receive strange visions, such as the bowls of God’s wrath (Rev 16). As such, the visions (or at least parts of the visions) are often interpreted for the seer—and thus, the audience of the seer’s vision—by a divine mediator or a heavenly angel.

It is precisely the symbolic nature of the visions that make them appear esoteric to modern-day readers, which in turn attracts rampant speculation about who or what lies behind the symbols. The “number of the beast” (666), which appears in the book of Revelation, is one conspicuous example of this. Perhaps you’ve heard speculation as to the person, or entity, believed to lie behind “666.” A quick Google

search reveals that all sorts of people have been identified as the referent: Barack Obama, Saddam Hussein, and Bill Gates, to name just a very few. Others have concluded that the number actually refers to a particular entity: the Social Security administration, the Council on Foreign Relations, or Monster Energy Drink (no, we are not kidding!). The power of **symbolology** can be quite stunning. For example, when Ronald and Nancy Reagan moved into their Bel-Air retirement home in 1989, they changed the address from 666 to 668 St. Cloud Road—a change based solely on readings of the book of Revelation that claim that “666” is the mark of the beast. (In reality, the earliest manuscripts of the book of Revelation attest that the number of the beast is 616, not 666.)

In fact, if you take a look further back in history, you will find that very, very many people have been identified with this number, as well as many other symbols in the book of Revelation (e.g., the Great Prostitute, the marks on the forehead, the battle of Gog and Magog, etc.). The number of possible contemporary referents to the symbols in the book of Revelation and in other apocalypses testifies to the popularity of understanding such symbols as **ciphers**, or *codes*, for contemporary events and figures. Indeed, the practice of interpreting symbols in these apocalypses as codes for contemporary events is nearly as old as the apocalypses themselves.

The Importance of Context

The irony is that specific figures and entities *do* lie behind the symbols. However, it is our contention (and the view of the vast majority of biblical and religious scholars today) that the symbolic contents of the vision reveal something, first and foremost, *about the present circumstances of the author and the author’s community*. That is, the common denominator among ancient apocalypses is that they attempt to *reveal* some aspect (political, social, religious, etc.) of the order of things as they were in their own **context**—namely, in the time(s) and place(s) in which the apocalypse was written and/or edited to receive its final form.

Our previous example of the vision of the monstrous fourth Beast in Daniel 7 perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. Within the text itself, the heavenly angel interprets the Beast as “a fourth kingdom on earth that shall be different from all the other kingdoms; it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces” (Dan 7:23). Though the historical referent to whom the Beast refers may remain a bit of a mystery to the twenty-first-century reader, who stands more than 2,000 years removed from the events being described in the text of Dan 7, the original audience would have surely recognized its identity (through the thinly veiled imagery) as the Seleucid Empire, which ruled over the land of Judea. (The evidence for this conclusion is conclusive and will be revealed in chapter 2.) Thus, in cloaked symbolic language, the vision *reveals* to Daniel the true identity of the Seleucid Empire and its rulers as monstrous entities who devour the earth and its inhabitants. Revealing that the Seleucid Empire and its rulers are indeed evil, and intent on decimating the peoples over whom it rules (including the author and audience who are stationed in Judea), is precisely the point of this apocalypse. In other words, the destruction that will ensue as a result of this evil Empire, as well as some of the mechanisms by which this will occur, is but one piece of a larger clarion call of the author(s) of the book of Daniel: “Beware! Your rulers are corrupt and they will eventually lead to your own destruction.”

As sure as the author(s) of the book of Daniel may have been about the depravity of the Seleucid Empire and its rulers, this view constituted only one perspective among many about the true nature of the Seleucid Empire. In fact, there is evidence that some Jews living under Seleucid rule viewed the situation in much more favorable terms. So, this apocalypse, like all others, attempts to uncover a reality that may be *obscured or unrecognized by others*. The purpose of the apocalypse is, in other words, to alert the audience to a view of reality that they may not yet comprehend, or that may be in some dispute. At any rate, a common denominator among ancient apocalypses is that they view the present order of things as somehow dysfunctional and/or corrupt, and the purpose of the apocalypse is to make this known.

Reading an ancient apocalypse in its context—in other words, in terms that would be recognizable, first and foremost, to the author(s) and audience(s) of the original text—constitutes an interpretive approach that is quite different than the one most readers take today. As we saw above, and as we will see throughout this volume, the most popular method for reading ancient apocalypses instead consists of reading the symbols of ancient apocalypses as saying something specifically about the *present circumstances of the modern reader*. The reason why so many figures have been associated with the number “666,” for example, is because people so often read these symbolic texts as ciphers for people and events in their own times and places. By contrast, when scholars ask, “To what does the number ‘666’ refer?” or “Who are the Beasts in Daniel 7?” we begin by exploring the conceptual worlds of the original author(s) and audience(s), not those in the twenty-first century. Yet, outside of the scholarly world (and sometimes even within it), we often do not read the ancient texts in this way because *we are* too distant from the text’s original contexts.

With these introductory comments in view, we can now consider a well-known definition of *apocalypse* as defined by a group of international scholars. Here, “apocalypse” is defined as

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages **eschatological** salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.³

This definition highlights an extremely important aspect of ancient apocalypses that has not yet been considered: the purpose of *revealing* something about the present circumstances of the Seer and his community—i.e., serious deficiencies with the present order of things—is both to be aware of their present and impending consequences, and perhaps more importantly, to convey a message of

3. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 5.

salvation for those living under them. The example above from Daniel is again illustrative:

The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times, and half a time.

But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, power, and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him. (Dan 7:23–27)

Central to Daniel’s revelation is that while the “holy people” (read: the community of authors and audience of Daniel) may be suffering now under the policies of Antiochus IV, his rule will soon come to an end, at which point, power will be transferred to God and God’s “holy people” will prevail. This is just one example of how apocalypses envisage both “eschatological salvation” (a temporal aspect) and a “supernatural realm” (a spatial aspect), and it is necessary to note that apocalypses envisage salvation in a myriad of ways. For example, sometimes the audience is tasked with certain behavior in order to bring about their salvation.

This seemingly soothing element of apocalypses has led many scholars to conclude that such literature was intended primarily to evoke **catharsis**. That is, through an imaginative uncovering of the current sociopolitical order, and the subsequent graphic display of their humiliating defeat, apocalypses provide comfort for their audience in the face of current hardships. But there may be a more obvious intended effect than this. Left unsaid in the technical definition of apocalypse (and absent from this particular example in Dan 7) is a scenario in which those who do *not* recognize the dangers of the present circumstances are under threat to be destroyed by them.

Put another way, failure to heed the warnings of the apocalypse, and failure to recognize the current deficiencies of the present social, economic, religious, and/or political order, often leads ultimately to absolute destruction.

Why the Apocalypse Matters

In the first season of AMC's *The Walking Dead*, one of the main characters, Andrea, is searching frantically through the RV of another character, Dale, looking for something to wrap a birthday gift in for her sister. She turns to Dale and says, "Wrapping paper, colored tissue, anything? How can you not have any?" Dale responds, "Well, if I'd been informed of the coming apocalypse I'd have stocked up" (*The Walking Dead*, Season 1, Episode 4).

In this case, the apocalypse is of a particular kind: the so-called zombie apocalypse. But the apocalypse is all around us today—on our televisions, in our theaters, crowding the bookshelves of libraries. At times, the apocalypse is fantastical and imaginary, as is the case in *The Walking Dead*. At other times, however, contemporary notions of the apocalypse have real-life, and often tragic, implications. For example, in 2011, a series of Family Radio Billboards dotted the American countryside, proclaiming, "He is Coming Again! May 21, 2011." Though Harold Camping, the leader behind the California-based church, had made (failed) predictions of the end of the world before, his announcements about the end of the world and Jesus's imminent return nevertheless resulted in a significant following. Followers donated their savings to Family Radio and sometimes left their families to travel across the United States and spread Camping's apocalyptic message. Of course, May 21, 2011, came and went, and the world did not end. Nevertheless, Camping's failed prediction profoundly impacted the lives of real people.

Fast forward to January 2015, where Utah police finished investigating the September 2014 deaths of the Strack family: Kristi and Benjamin Strack, a married couple, and the three Strack children, all found dead in their Springfield, Utah home. The police eventually

concluded that the parents' deaths were suicides. It seems likely that the couple killed the youngest two children, but the death of their 14-year-old child remained "undetermined." According to police reports, the couple had been in contact with an imprisoned man named Dan Lafferty up until at least 2008; Lafferty self-identifies as the prophet Elijah. In Christian tradition, Elijah is often thought to be the herald of the Second Coming of Christ. Various news reports suggested that the couple committed suicide because they believed in a "pending apocalypse."

Yet, despite cultural fascination with The End—and the ways it shows up on our favorite television shows or in our most watched movies—what seems ordinary (oh, yes, another zombie show) becomes profoundly tragic in light of empty bank accounts, broken families, and suicides. Moreover, such tragic events remind us of the many ways that ancient texts continue to live on all around us, in both overt and implicit ways. This ongoing legacy of ancient apocalyptic texts is continually relevant, and not only to biblical and religious scholars. The litany of names is long: William Miller, Hal Lindsay, David Koresh, Harold Camping, Kristi Strack, Benjamin Strack. . . . All of these people are associated with (sometimes multiple) wrong predictions and assumptions about the end of the world. If, in their original contexts, books such as Daniel or Revelation functioned cathartically for their audiences, providing comfort in the face of then-current hardships, then how did these texts become linked with so many failed, and often tragic, predictions of the End of the World?

The questions we ask when we read literature are important, and it seems that readers such as William Miller and Harold Camping failed to ask the right kind of questions. Ancient apocalyptic texts are not handbooks to the end of the world, but they matter. At times, ancient texts determine house numbers (no 666 St. Cloud Road for Nancy and Ronald Reagan), while at other times they contain hidden messages, as in *The Walking Dead*. For example, in one episode, Rick walks into the church and a series of Bible verses are on the board that would normally contain the hymnal passages for the day's service (including

Rom 6:4; Ezek 37:7; Matt 27:52; Rev 9:6; Luke 24:5). Looking up the passages, readers discover each of them sound “zombie-esque”: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4); “So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone” (Ezek 37:7); “The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Matt 27:52); “And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them” (Rev 9:6); “The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen’” (Luke 24:5). In their original contexts, of course, none of these texts had anything to do with zombies. Nevertheless, for the dedicated *The Walking Dead* fan who takes the time to look up the passages, it’s hard not to think “zombie” when reading these passages out of context. Sometimes, ancient apocalyptic texts make for funny retirement stories about everyone’s favorite Republican president. Other times, ancient apocalyptic texts are hidden, somewhat humorous, messages on our favorite television shows. And then, there are the times when apocalyptic texts are misread, and tragedy is the result.

In short, these ancient texts and their long history of interpretation *matter*. Both the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation reveal the earliest Jewish and Christian worlds. They help us to discover what people desired, feared, and yearned for *in their lifetimes*. As you will see in the following pages, many readers and interpreters have used the books of Daniel and/or Revelation in a number of ways throughout history—and continuing up to the present—without trying to predict the end of the world. These books are more than useless relics or failed predictions of the end of the Seleucid or Roman Empires.

Likewise, the many ways that the apocalypse plays out in our contemporary culture—from climate debates to art to film and beyond—also matter. Apocalyptic texts and their many afterlives

reveal to us information about ourselves and about being human. Apocalyptic texts and their afterlives ask profound human questions that unite the past and the present, especially the following: What does it mean to be human? Why does history matter? Where are we headed?

In a recent work, Collins returned to the definition of apocalypse outlined above, writing, “Definitions are by nature synchronic and static. Genres, in contrast, evolve and are constantly changing” (Collins, 15). The following pages are interested precisely in the afterlives of the genre of apocalypse, and not only in its definition. What, if anything, connects ancient texts such as Ezekiel or the book of Revelation to current climatological crises and television shows such as *The Walking Dead*? How has the genre of apocalypse evolved over time? How does it continue to change? How has it stayed the same?

The volume you are about to read addresses this question while exploring what “apocalypse” has meant to different people in different places and at different times. Context, as you will see, continues to matter, as much as, if not more so than, official genre definitions. Part I consists of chapters on ancient apocalyptic texts and movements. Part II consists of chapters that explore the way that ancient apocalyptic trajectories continued through Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, Reformation, and the Early Modern period. Part III consists of chapters that demonstrate the continuing prevalence and ongoing importance of apocalyptic thinking and the afterlives of ancient apocalyptic texts in the contemporary world.