



Apocalypticism

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Background

In popular usage, 'apocalypticism' refers to a belief in the likely or impending destruction of the world (or a general global catastrophe), usually associated with upheaval in the social, political, and religious order of human society. Historically, the word has had religious connotations and the great destruction it is thought to bring has traditionally been seen as part of a divine scheme, though today it is increasingly used in secular contexts.

The ideas associated with 'apocalypse,' 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypticism' owe much to early Jewish and Christian texts, including the book of Revelation (late first century CE), otherwise known as the Apocalypse of John (or the Apocalypse to John). This is not to say that these texts were the origins of such ideas. Scholarship has long analysed influences from, overlaps with, and parallels in, Persian dualism, Israelite and ancient near eastern traditions of wisdom and prophecy, and Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman thinking. Furthermore, the ideas we associate with apocalypticism are not restricted to the contexts of Judaism and Christianity, and themes of divinely ordained catastrophe and judgement are to be found across many other traditions.

Much of the critical study of apocalypticism has come from scholarship on early Judaism and Christianity but they can be used as examples of how apocalypticism can be understood more broadly. In the study of early Judaism and Christian origins, different overlapping categories relating to apocalypticism are used. We can begin with the Greek word itself, *apokalypsis* ('revelation,' 'disclosure' or 'appearance'), and its most famous use at the beginning of the book of Revelation:

The revelation/apokalypsis of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. (Revelation 1:1-3, New Revised Standard Version)

This passage is an example of how *apokalypsis* refers to the otherworldly revelation John claimed to have

received and ‘apocalypse’ understood as a disclosure or vision is an important use of the category in critical scholarship (Rowland 1982). Based on Revelation 1:1–3, *apokalypsis* can also refer to the contents of the book itself and all its language concerning the future. Thus, we can see why the book is alternatively called Revelation or the Apocalypse of/to John and we can begin to understand why this book has been so influential in understandings of, and assumptions about, apocalypticism.

It is possible that the opening words of Revelation also suggest that ‘apocalypse’ could be a genre—that is to say, it may be an example of a type or style of writing known elsewhere in its historical and cultural context. The extent to which there was a known, distinctive genre called an ‘apocalypse’ in the ancient world is still not clear. As John Collins (2016, 3) notes, there is no known example of the term being used with reference to a genre prior to the circulation of the book of Revelation, but after that point ‘apocalypse’ did become a label for broadly similar types of literature. Regardless of whether we can strictly use ‘apocalypse’ as a label for a genre, there was a range of texts predating and postdating Revelation that have a number of shared features, as discussed by various experts in a landmark edition of the journal *Semeia* 14 (Collins, 1979) and developed further in the influential work of Collins himself. This approach understands ‘apocalypse’ as a type of literature in which a divine or transcendent revelation is given to a human recipient, presented in a narrative framework, and often cast in symbolic or allegorical language. This kind of writing can look to eschatological salvation or transformation of the world, including the assistance of a messianic or supernatural figure, and judgment on or the destruction of the wicked, as well as cosmological revelations. Such themes with differing emphases can be seen in parts of other biblical texts such as the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible book of Daniel and other early Jewish texts which are not found in some biblical canons such as 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra.

Debates and disagreements over genre and labels relating to apocalyptic literature continue, including with reference to the book of Revelation itself (Fletcher 2017). As Collins has stressed throughout his work, these are necessarily loose definitions, and such traits turn up in literature that would not ordinarily be classified as an ‘apocalypse’. It is therefore also helpful to think about ‘apocalyptic’ ideas and beliefs in broader terms. Visions, transcendent revelations and pronouncements about eschatology and judgment are found outside the literature conventionally understood to be apocalypses. It is for such reasons that early Christianity is regularly called an apocalyptic movement, irrespective of whether it produced a written ‘apocalypse’ prior to the book of Revelation.

Apocalypticism in History and Culture

The ideas associated with early Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, and similar ideas in different religious traditions, have formed the basis for the way such language has been employed and understood across cultures and across the centuries, both popularly and by academics (cf. DiTommaso 2014). Apocalyptic themes of divine destruction and judgement can be found across religious traditions, where their rhetorical effect and eschatological significance are just as potent even if expressed within different frameworks. Thus, early Islamic traditions refer to the Day of Judgement, the appearance of the Antichrist, and the return of Jesus, amongst other themes (Cook 2011; Wessinger 2011). And Dharmic religions express apocalyptic themes within their cyclic conceptions of cosmic time with cycles of ‘cataclysmic change, eschatological destruction, and a radical remaking of the world’ in Hinduism, for example (Urban 2011). The Buddhist tradition inherited the cyclic conception of cosmic time and the idea of gradual decay and

dissolution (in Hinduism the *Kali yuga*). In Buddhism this end time is called *Mò Fǎ* in Chinese (摩訶) and *mappō* in Japanese and it denotes the idea of the decline of civilization as well as loss of public understanding and implementation of Buddhist teachings and values. The classic rendering of this within the Theravāda Pāli canon is in the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 26) or the Sutta on the 'Wheel-Turning Monarch who Roars Like a Lion'. In this text the Buddha outlines a future time when social strife, warfare and reduced lifespans are the norm and also heralds the time of the next Buddha Metteya (Sanskrit: *Maitreya*).

Ideas and motifs have, of course, been copied, transformed, ignored, re-emphasised, re-contextualised, and even secularised in painting, philosophy, literature, politics, TV and film, video games, music, and so on, with different (or seemingly different) emphases emerging, such as averting the apocalypse or a zombie takeover (see, e.g., Collins, McGinn, and Stein 1998; Collins 2014; Murphy and Schedtler 2016; Baker 2020). Even the term 'apocalypse' has taken on different (albeit related) meanings from its associations or possible associations with otherworldly revelation and genre, and now regularly refers to some great cataclysmic event. And there is no obvious social context which has a monopoly on producing apocalyptic thinking; from revolutionaries to reactionaries, from pacifists and quietists to advocates of violence, apocalyptic ideas have been found useful for any number of given causes. We already see such differing social contexts in the early receptions of the first sustained apocalyptic text in the Bible: Daniel. Daniel may have come from the scribal elite, but it was a popular book and was to be read and heard beyond such circles (e.g., Daniel 11:33), and it was interpreted in new and different ways as it moved from its original context in the second century BCE to be popularly used to predict the fall of the Roman Empire (e.g., Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 10.209–10). Constant reapplication to a wide range of social and historical settings up to the twenty-first century (and counting) would be the fate of books like Daniel and Revelation.

Thus, over time, and up to the present day, the term 'apocalypse' has likewise developed a broader application in academic and popular thought that goes beyond its more limited theological reference. Perhaps the most notable evolution has been its separation from ideas of the revelation of transcendent or divine truth and its increasing use as a term for general and cataclysmic change in human life and culture. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies an early form of this usage, for example, in John Swinton's *Striking for Life* in 1894: 'In these times there are [...] prophecies of approaching apocalypse', and a similar, later usage, closer to its colloquial sense today, in the American periodical *Common Sense* in 1940: 'Washington is preoccupied with the threat of apocalypse across the Atlantic' (*OED Online*, 'apocalypse, n.'). Kathryn Banks has observed of the term 'apocalypse' that 'more generally today it is used predominantly to refer not only to revelation but rather only to the end of the world, or at least to the end of civilization as we know it,' adding that 'the end envisaged is usually one brought about not by God but rather by man or by nature' (Banks 2012, 361). While this might be understood as the emergence of two different forms of the term, it is clear that there is an intellectual lineage linking the two usages—although themes of revelation of transcendent truth and prophecy in the newer forms are less explicitly stated. For example, as Simon James has noted, the professed atheist H. G. Wells frequently used the inherited Jewish and Christian tropes of the end of the world, 'Performing as a secular kind of hellfire preacher' (James 2012, 459). A similar educative (even, revelatory) intention is identifiable in Cold War discourse and present-day reporting on climate change, as it is in a wide range of pressing recent issues understood as having existential significance for humanity.

Definition

Definitions are always slippery and contested, and the basic definitional guidelines for the *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements* (CDAMM) reflect this. As a working definition of ‘apocalypticism,’ CDAMM has proposed the following:

Belief in the impending or possible destruction of the world itself or physical global catastrophe, and/or the destruction or radical transformation of the existing social, political, or religious order of human society—often referred to as the apocalypse. While the primary focus of articles will be on accounts of apocalypses which are understood in religious terms, or initiated by divine or supernatural forces, secular uses of the term (especially when these implicitly draw on or encode religious/supernatural themes) will also be included. As a secondary aspect, the definition includes implicit reference to revelation and prophecy, thus the definition includes belief systems in which the idea of destruction of the world/societal order is understood to be attained by communication from divine or supernatural sources.

Of course, ‘apocalypticism’ overlaps with other categories referred to in CDAMM, notably ‘millenarianism’. We note that different cultural and historical contexts will have their own specific features which are highlighted by individual entries, and examination of these is encouraged. Nevertheless, as with ‘millenarianism’, what unifies all the entries is that they are implicitly or explicitly working with this loose and imperfect definition of ‘apocalypticism’ and related phenomena.

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