**Apocalypticism as a Worldview in Ancient Judaism and Christianity**

John J. Collins,

Yale

The phenomenon of apocalypticism takes its name from the literary genre apocalypse, and ultimately from the Apocalypse of John, the last book of the New Testament, usually dated to the last decade of the first century CE.[[1]](#endnote-1) This is not to say that the canonical apocalypse should be considered normative for the genre, but is simply an historical fact; this is in fact the way the genre came to be identified. Revelation itself stood in a literary tradition, that had developed in Judaism in the centuries before the turn of the era. The most obvious precedent is found in the visions of the Book of Daniel, which dates from the Maccabean era (about 164 BCE). A few other apocalypses in the Danielic tradition, attributed to Ezra and Baruch, are roughly contemporary with Revelation. A different, but related, strand of apocalyptic tradition is in books attributed to Enoch, a patriarch who supposedly lived before the Flood, but only started to publish in the Hellenistic period.

*A distinctive phenomenon*

The writings which we call apocalyptic literature represented a new phenomenon in Judaism in the Hellenistic period. They were revelations, and as such might reasonably be regarded as a development of biblical prophecy. All of these books are in fact classified as prophecy in Christian tradition.[[2]](#endnote-2) They differed, however, from the prophecies of Isaiah or Jeremiah in significant respects.[[3]](#endnote-3) The older prophets typically pronounced oracles in the name of the Lord. Such prophetic speech is rare in the apocalypses, which present their revelations in visual form. Of course, the prophets also had visions, and there are clear lines of continuity between prophecy and apocalypses in this respect. But the apocalyptic visions are more elaborate, or, as Susan Niditch has dubbed them, “baroque.”[[4]](#endnote-4) They are always mediated to the human visionary by an angel, or other heavenly figure, who explains the mysterious symbols of the vision, or takes the visionary on a tour of places beyond the range of normal human experience. The visionaries are typically pseudonymous, famous worthies such as Enoch, who were supposed to have lived centuries before these books were actually written, although the Apocalypse of John is an exception in this regard.

But the novelty of the apocalypses was not just a matter of literary form. In this case, at least, the genre bespoke a worldview, which I shall call apocalypticism. By worldview I mean a distinctive set of assumptions about the way the world works and the destiny of human beings within it. In the case of apocalypticism, the novel aspects of this worldview concerned the way history was conceived, the role of superhuman agents, angels and demons, in human affairs, and expectations relating to the end of history and a life beyond this one.

*History*

Two subgenres may be distinguished in the corpus of ancient apocalypses that has come down to us.[[5]](#endnote-5) One focuses on the course of history, the other on the order of the heavens, or in some cases the nether regions. Many of the better-known apocalypses, such as Daniel and Revelation, are of the historical type. There is some overlap between the two subgenres. In Revelation, for example, the visionary ascends to heaven, although he is not given a tour (Rev 4:1-2).

The more elaborate historical apocalypses include a review of the whole course of history, or of a large portion of it, in the guise of prophecy by an ancient figure. In Daniel chapter 2, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar sees a statue composed of four metals: the head of fine gold, the chest and arms of silver, the middle and thighs of bronze and the legs part of iron and partly clay.[[6]](#endnote-6) Daniel interprets these so that the head of gold is Nebuchadnezzar, and the other metals represent other kingdoms inferior to him. In the context of the Book of Daniel, it is clear that these are the kingdoms of the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks. (The division of the Greek kingdom admits of various explanations: Alexander’s kingdom was divided among his successors, and two of the resulting dynasties intermarried). In the end, the whole statue is destroyed by a stone that becomes a mountain. This represents the kingdom of God. For a Jewish reader, the mountain clearly signifies Mount Zion, although this point is not elaborated for Nebuchadnezzar. Other overviews of history from the Babylonian era forward are found in Daniel 7, again in the form of four kingdoms, and Daniel 9, where Jeremiah’s prophecy that Jerusalem would be desolate for 70 years is reinterpreted as 70 weeks of years. Other apocalyptic visions offer even more elaborate overviews of history. Enoch, who supposedly lived before the Flood, sees the whole history of humanity inscribed on heavenly tablets, and divided into “weeks” (*The* *Apocalypse of Weeks*; 1 Enoch 93; 91:11-17). Another section of 1 Enoch, known as the *Animal Apocalypse* (1 Enoch 85-90) describes a vision of Enoch in which all biblical history, beginning with Adam, is told allegorically, with all the characters depicted as animals.

Paul Kosmin has recently suggested that the long view of history in the apocalyptic literature was a reaction to the ideology of the Seleucid kings.[[7]](#endnote-7) Traditionally in the ancient Near East, dates were calculated by reference to the reigns of individual kings. The Seleucids, however, introduced the dynastic era, by dating everything from Seleucus 1. The Seleucid system of dating was certainly remarkable in the context of the ancient Near East, and was a striking affirmation of imperial power. It set the scene for other later totalizing claims of historical significance. Whether it can be used to explain the apocalyptic idea of “total history,” however, seems to me doubtful. There were at least some earlier precedents, most notably Hesiod’s *Works and Days* which encompassed all of history in a grand scheme of ages, symbolized by metals. The apocalyptic view of history is also attested in Persia.[[8]](#endnote-8) The relevance of the Persian material is perennially disputed. The main Persian sources, such as the Bundahishn and the Zand-I Vohuman Yasn, date from the early Middle Ages. They very probably preserve much older material, but the dating of that material is difficult. Even the biblical tradition, however, preserves grand sweeps of history, even if it is not organized as neatly as it is in the apocalypses. I would argue that the attempt to comprehend the totality of history was not only, or primarily, an act of political resistance, although it was sometimes used for that purpose. It was primarily an intellectual exercise. It occurs more frequently in the Hellenistic period than at any earlier time, and one may suspect that it was related to the increasing unification of the world, from Greece to India, that followed the conquests of Alexander.

*Determinism*

These overviews of history are significant in several respects. Since the course of history was already known, before the Flood in the case of Enoch, or in the Babylonian Exile in the case of Daniel, it would seem to be fixed in advance. In most of the Hebrew Bible, the course of events is determined by human actions. This is the logic of the covenant in Deuteronomy: if Israel kept the covenantal laws it would prosper, if not it would be punished. In the apocalypses, however, the course of events cannot be altered. Daniel 9 contains a prayer by Daniel in which he confesses Israel’s sin and implores God to have mercy and restore them. The revelation he receives at the end of his prayer, however, explains that the duration of Israel’s punishment and its eventual restoration are already decreed. Seventy weeks of years, or 490 years, must pass before the deliverance: “Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity” (Dan 9:24). History has its own momentum, and is not subject to random intervention, even on the part of the deity.

While the course of history may be determined, however, this does not mean that the destiny of individual human beings is determined in advanced. On the contrary, the inevitability of certain events sharpens the decisions that individuals must make. Typically, the extended reviews of history are presented as prophecies, uttered long ago. Most of the duration of history is already past by the time the reviews are actually written. The actual time of the author can be recognized because at some point the predicted history no longer corresponds with recorded events. So, for example, the Book of Daniel, chapter 11, provides an accurate “prediction” of history for most of the Hellenistic age, down to, and including, the suppression of the Jewish cult by Antiochus Epiphanes in the Maccabean era.[[9]](#endnote-9) It goes on, however, to predict that the king would die “between the sea and the holy mountain,” that is, in the land of Israel (Dan 11:45). This did not happen. (The king died in Persia, after a failed raid on the temple of Artemis in Elymais in December 164 BCE).[[10]](#endnote-10) On the basis of this observation, the pagan philosopher Porphyry was able to infer that the predictions had not been composed in the Babylonian era but rather shortly before the death of Antiochus.[[11]](#endnote-11) We can appreciate, however, the purpose of the fiction. The fact that so much of history had ostensibly been predicted accurately inspired confidence in the actual prediction of the death of the king and the vindication of the righteous. The apocalyptic vision could thus encourage the persecuted Jews to endure, in the conviction that the remaining time was short.

*Cosmogonic myth*

The vision of Daniel, however, was not only concerned with the events of the Maccabean era. It professed to disclose the meaning of history, from creation to the final judgment. One of the most effective ways of unifying history was by taking ancient myths that were originally designed to describe the creation of the world and projecting them into the eschatological future. In Daniel chapter 7, the visionary sees four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts coming up out of it.[[12]](#endnote-12) These are eventually explained as four kings or kingdoms. In the context of Daniel, they correspond to the four kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in Daniel 2 – Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece. The fourth beast here is the most terrible. The vision of the beasts is followed by a heavenly vision of an ancient figure seated on a throne, surrounded by thousands of attendants. He is approached by another figure riding on the clouds. Then there is a judgment and the fourth beast is consigned to the fire, while the figure on the clouds receives an everlasting kingdom. Similarly, in the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos sees a beast rising from the sea, and another rising from the earth.[[13]](#endnote-13) Eventually the beasts are thrown alive into a lake of fire, in Rev 19:20. Similar visions, directly influenced by Daniel, can be found in the apocalypse of 4 Ezra at the end of the first century BCE.

At the end of the 19th century, a great German biblical scholar named Hermann Gunkel perceived the affinity between these apocalyptic visions and old Near Eastern myths that had recently come to light.[[14]](#endnote-14) The main exemplar of this kind of myth, often called the combat myth, that was available to Gunkel was the Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish. That myth described a dramatic battle between the young hero-god Marduk and Tiamat, who was at once the mother goddess and source of life and a monster threatening to devour her offspring. Marduk prevails in the battle, and constructs the universe from Tiamat’s carcass. Gunkel recognized that the name Tiamat was cognate to the Hebrew *tehom*, the word for the primeval deep waters in the opening chapter of Genesis. He also recognized the affinity between Tiamat and the stormy sea from which the beasts emerge in the book of Daniel. This led him to perceive a fundamental axiom of apocalyptic thought: *Urzeit gleicht Endzeit:* the primeval time of beginning is like the eschatological end-time.

Closer parallels to the biblical apocalypses came to light a few years before Gunkel’s death at Ugarit in northern Syria.[[15]](#endnote-15) These were Canaanite myths about struggles for the kingship of the gods. In Canaanite tradition, the high God was El, father of the gods, who also appears in the Bible and is identified with the God of Israel. In the Canaanite stories, however, El is a venerable, aged figure, who retains symbolic authority but cedes the exercise of kingship to a younger generation. The prime contender is the god Baal, a storm-god, who is called “rider of the clouds,” and is well known from the Bible. He is opposed by turbulent rivals. One is the Sea, *Yamm*, which is associated with sea-monsters, notably *Lotan* or Leviathan. The other is *Mot* or Death. Baal defeats *Yamm* in battle, and splits him with a club. *Mot* is a more formidable enemy. At one point, he swallows Baal: he opens his mouth, “one lip to earth, one lip to heaven,” and Baal goes down into him like an olive cake. Then the rains fail, wadis dry up, and everything withers. Fortunately for Baal, he has a redoubtable sister named Anath, who rescues him from the maw of Death, and restores his vitality by copulating with him. Then the rains return, the wadis run, and fertility is restored.

The Canaanite myths are especially helpful for understanding the symbolism of Daniel, and later of Revelation. One of the puzzles of Daniel’s vision is the juxtaposition of two divine figures, one an “ancient of days,” and the other, one like a human being, riding on the clouds. Jewish tradition was monotheistic, at least from early times. Yet the imagery of riding on the clouds is most often associated with YHWH, the God of Israel, and here there is another god above him.[[16]](#endnote-16) The imagery makes perfect sense in the Canaanite tradition, where El is the supreme deity but Baal is the dynamic ruler who brings fertility. (In the Jewish context, the rider on the clouds is reinterpreted as Michael, the patron angel of Israel).[[17]](#endnote-17) The Baal myth was well known in Israel, and to a great degree it was adapted in the Israelite cult so that YHWH rather than Baal was the hero. Already in the later prophetic books, the battle with the chaos monster was projected into the future. Isaiah chapters 24-27, a late insertion in the Book of Isaiah, were written at some time after the Babylonian exile, at a low point in Israelite or Judean history.[[18]](#endnote-18) Like many of the prophecies of this period, it seeks consolation in the future. So, we are told, the Lord, at some undetermined time, will make a feast on Mount Zion, and “he will swallow up death forever,” in effect, doing to Death or *Mot*, what *Mot* did to Baal in the Canaanite myth. By swallowing Death, the Lord “will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth.” (Isa 25:8-9). In effect, he will set right everything that is wrong with this world. Again, “On that day, the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea” (Isa 27:1). This imagery is continued in Daniel and Revelation. In the beginning, the creator God brought order to the world by defeating a monster that signified chaos, everything that threatens human life and flourishing. In the course of history, it often seems as if chaos has gained the upper hand. The apocalyptic vision affirms that in the end the good God will prevail. In Revelation 21, the visionary sees that “the sea was no more,” and hears a voice proclaim that Death will be no more, eliminating the enemies of Baal in the old Canaanite myths.

*Dualism*

The evocation of the old combat/creation myths unifies, and simplifies, history by suggesting that it is essentially reducible to a conflict of opposing principles. The negative, chaos, principle can be specified in many ways. It may refer to the untamed forces of nature, or to moral evil, or just to political opposition. But the myth asserts that life is an arena of conflict, and that the good will prevail. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the conflict is between forces of light and darkness, in terms drawn from Zoroastrian dualism.[[19]](#endnote-19) This is a more balanced conflict than we usually find in the apocalypses. But dualism of some sort is intrinsic to the apocalyptic worldview. This is not a worldview that encourages moderation. Rather, in the words of Revelation, “I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth (Rev 3:15-16). Dualism encourages intransigence and extremism. One can understand the attraction of dualistic worldviews, but they are often problematic.

Besides the implicit dualism, the evocation of ancient myths expresses a sense that human affairs are beyond human control. Daniel’s visions deal with political struggles of the Hellenistic age, especially the conflicts between Seleucids and Jews in the Maccabean period. But this is only surface appearance. The angel Gabriel explains to Daniel that the real conflict is between angelic “princes,” the “prince” or patron angel of Greece and the archangel Michael, “prince of Israel” (Dan 10: 13, 20) The conflict is resolved, not by the arms of the Maccabees but by Michael, who arises in victory in Daniel 12:1. Similarly the kings of the various kingdoms are beasts that rise from the sea, embodiments of primordial chaos. On the one hand, this suggests a sense of powerlessness: the course of events is beyond human control. On the other, it actually suggests a sense of security, since the victory is assured.

*Heavenly beings*

The sense that life on earth is subject to higher powers is also reflected in the increased prominence of angels and demons in apocalyptic texts. The idea of a heavenly council, where the supreme god was surrounded and supported by other divine beings, was prevalent in the ancient near east, and is often attested in the Hebrew Bible.[[20]](#endnote-20) The heavenly world was understood by analogy with the earthly. Divine councils in heaven reflected royal councils on earth. This is as true of the early apocalyptic literature as it had been for the older myths.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The role of these heavenly beings in apocalyptic literature differs from the older divine council in the degree of their activity in human affairs. It is in the apocalyptic literature that angels are first given names: Michael and Gabriel in Daniel, several others in the Enoch literature (Raphael, Reuel, Sariel, Remiel, Uriel).[[22]](#endnote-22) The Watchers, or fallen angels are also given names in 1 Enoch, most notably their leaders Asael and Shemihazah. In earlier times, God fought directly on behalf of Israel. In Daniel, this role is delegated to Michael. This phenomenon is part of what James Kugel has called “the great shift” in the way God is encountered in biblical times.[[23]](#endnote-23) In the early books of the Bible, God converses in familiar ways with Adam, Abraham and Moses. In the later, postexilic books, divine communication is mediated through human-sized angels who could communicate with prophets and sages by addressing them face to face.[[24]](#endnote-24) This phenomenon first appears in late prophecy, in the books of Zachariah and the later part of Ezekiel. In Daniel and Enoch, it is standard. It undoubtedly reflects the changing political circumstances of the Persian and Hellenistic ages, where rulers were increasingly distant, and administration was increasingly delegated to the imperial bureaucracy.

*Access to the heavens*

But if heavenly beings under God were assigned a greater role in human affairs in apocalyptic literature than they had enjoyed in earlier times, human beings were also granted an unprecedented level of access to the heavenly regions.[[25]](#endnote-25) There were, of course, precedents. Gilgamesh had journeyed to the world beyond. Enoch and Elijah had been taken up to heaven. In the development of Jewish apocalypticism, the figure of Enoch was pivotal. He had “walked with *elohim*,” and had been taken up to heaven at the end of his life. In the writings attributed to Enoch in the Hellenistic period, *elohim* was understood as angels rather than God: “his works were with the Watchers, and with the holy ones were his days.” (1 Enoch 12:2). The *Book of the Watchers* (1 Enoch 1-36) describes Enoch’s transportation to heaven, and a tour of places beyond the normal range of human experience[[26]](#endnote-26). These include the foundations of the earth, the prison of the fallen angels, the chambers where the dead are kept for judgment, the place prepared for the final judgment, and paradise. In later apocalypses, this heavenly tour is stylized, so that the visionary ascends through a set number of heavens – three in older works such as the Aramaic Levi Apocryphon, later seven, or even ten.[[27]](#endnote-27)

All the heavenly tours in Jewish apocalypses are ascribed to legendary figures from the distant past – Enoch, Levi, Abraham etc. It is unclear whether they at all reflect a mystical practice in Second Temple Judaism. At the least, it is apparent that some Jewish authors imagined ascent through the heavens, and did so in great detail. Whether there was any tradition of mystical practice or not, the idea that such ascents were possible evidently gained currency.

But another aspect of the permeability of the heavens was even more important. This was the ascent of the soul, or spirit, of the righteous dead, and conversely, the idea that the souls or spirits of the wicked would be condemned to punishment in the hereafter. The Hebrew Bible offers little hope to mortals in the fact of death:

Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;

Death will be their shepherd

Straight to the grave they descend

And their form shall waste away;

Sheol will be their home. (Ps 49:14).[[28]](#endnote-28)

Occasional exceptions might be made, but for the common lot of humanity there would be no inquiry about life in Sheol. The Book of Daniel, the latest book of the Hebrew Bible, is the only one to hold out hope of a resurrection of the dead:

At that time, your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the land of dust shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever (Dan 12:1-3).[[29]](#endnote-29)

This early formulation does not envision universal resurrection, only the very good and the very bad. The scope would be extended in later apocalypses. It does not suppose that the dead will return to earth. The location of the resurrected life is specified only in the case of the “wise,” many of whom are said to lose their lives in the time of persecution. They will shine like the stars, which, in apocalyptic idiom, means that they will become companions of the angelic host. The point is clarified in the *Epistle of Enoch* (the last section of 1 Enoch, where the righteous are told:

You will shine like the luminaries of heaven;

You will shine and appear,

And the portals of heaven will be opened for you . . .

For you will be companions of the host of heaven (1 Enoch 104: 2,6).[[30]](#endnote-30)

What is involved here is not the restoration of life on earth but the transformation of human life to a higher level.[[31]](#endnote-31) Similarly, according to the Community Rule from Qumran, the destiny of the children of light is “everlasting blessing and eternal joy in life without end, a crown of glory and a garment of majesty in unending light”[[32]](#endnote-32) These formulations assume that the resurrected dead will have some kind of body,[[33]](#endnote-33) but not a body of flesh and blood, although the idea of a physical resurrection would eventually take hold in both Judaism and Christianity. One of the most detailed discussions of the resurrected body is provided by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain . . . So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable . . . It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44).

The apocalyptic hope for resurrection pertains to what has been called “the discovery of transcendence” in the so-called axial cultures of the second half of the last millennium before the turn of the era. The idea of an axial age is, to my mind, problematic, but it is undeniable that profound cultural and intellectual shifts took place in the eastern Mediterranean world and the Middle East, and that these entailed “a sharp distinction between this world and the transcendent realm of truth and normativity.”[[34]](#endnote-34) I am inclined to attribute these shifts to cultural factors in the Hellenistic age, rather than to evolutionary biology. The idea of an immortal soul had been developed in Greece around the middle of the first millennium BCE, by the Pythagoreans and Orphics, and spread especially by Plato.[[35]](#endnote-35) The conception of the immortal spirit or soul in Jewish apocalypticism is unlikely to be derived directly from Platonic philosophy, but it represents a kindred development in a neighboring culture, in the great melting-pot of cultures in the Hellenistic age.

*The Christian appropriation of apocalyticism*

It was through the rise of Christianity, however, that the apocalyptic worldview would have its greatest impact.[[36]](#endnote-36) Paul promised the Corinthians:

We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Cor 15:52).

The belief that the end of history and the resurrection of the dead were at hand is what enabled the belief that Christ had been raised, “the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20).[[37]](#endnote-37)

The main difference between Jewish and early Christian apocalypticism lay in the foreshortening of history in the New Testament.[[38]](#endnote-38) Rather than looking back to the time of Enoch or Daniel, the New Testament writers focus on the period inaugurated by Jesus. This intensifies the sense of imminent expectation. The Book of Revelation is concerned with “what must soon take place” (Rev 1:1). This sense of imminent expectation is, of course, difficult to maintain over the long run, but it has recurred periodically throughout Christian history.

The early Christian appropriation of apocalypticism is also colored by the paradigmatic importance assigned to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Revelation, Jesus is the Lamb that was slaughtered, and redeemed the saints by his blood (Rev 5:9). Satan is conquered by the blood of the Lamb and the testimony of the martyrs (Rev 12:10). Those who died in time of persecution already had a prominent role in Daniel. Their role is intensified in Revelation. Revelation promises the transformation of this world in a new creation, but a central emphasis of the work is on the transcendence of death. Indeed, in the new creation, as in the so-called Apocalypse of Isaiah, “death will be no more . . . for the first things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

Even in Revelation, however, the emphasis on individual salvation is integrated in a comprehensive vision of the world, which is profoundly indebted to the ancient myths. Michael fights with the Dragon in heaven, beasts rise from sea and land, and there is a great climactic battle followed by a new creation. The vision of the world is one of a fragile place, constantly beset with crises that seem beyond human control. Anarchy is repeatedly loosed on the world. This vision acquires much of its power from the symbolism through which it is expressed. The fact that Revelation speaks of beasts and dragons, even if John of Patmos had specific referents in mind, means that these symbols can be reapplied, and the referents updated, to interpret new crises throughout history. The appeal of apocalypticism arises from the fact that such crises are always with us. The surplus of meaning in the ancient texts is in no danger of being exhausted.

*Modern apocalypticism*

Apocalypticism, in one form or other, is still very much with us in the modern world. In the English speaking world, it was given a distinctive cast by the Dispensationalist movement led by John Nelson Darby in the 19th century.[[39]](#endnote-39) This way of reading the apocalyptic tradition is narrowly focused on identifying modern referents for the symbols and using them to predict political events in the modern world. The classic apocalyptic work of this kind is Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, originally published in 1970, which became the best-selling non-fiction book of the decade, and eventually sold more than 28 million copies, and identified signs of the end-times in the founding of the state of Israel and the development of the European Union.[[40]](#endnote-40) A similar worldview was more recently popularized by the *Left Behind* series, authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.[[41]](#endnote-41) These books have promoted a conservative social agenda and unquestioning support for the state of Israel. Despite their popularity, they have been singularly lacking in literary merit, and have led to the widespread assumption that apocalypticism entails a doctrinaire, fundamentalistic view of the world. The fact that Islamic extremism is also fueled by beliefs about imminent divine intervention and a dualistic view of the world, have added to the disrepute of apocalypticism, at least in academic circles and among people who are politically progressive. In its modern form, apocalypticism often seems to promote extremism and intolerance. Can the same charges be legitimately brought against the classic apocalyptic worldview?

Lorenzo DiTommaso, one of the leading authorities on Jewish and Christian apocalypticism at the present time, thinks they can.[[42]](#endnote-42) Amos Wilder, long time professor of New Testament at Harvard and brother of the playwright Thornton Wilder, argued that the ancient texts, in contrast to their modern appropriations, testify to “genuine transcendental apocalyptic.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Di Tommaso denies that there is any such thing. He argues that apocalypticism is an unhealthy worldview, particularly in its biblical form. It is inimical to a mature vision of human destiny, or any social order founded on humanistic ideals.”[[44]](#endnote-44) The negative judgment extends to the apocalyptic simplification of history. DiTommaso sees it as a totalizing worldview, akin to Marxism, unable to accept historical causality based on the interaction of circumstance, happenstance, and human decision. It relies on “the revelation of unimpeachable knowledge, imparted by a transcendent reality.”[[45]](#endnote-45) As such, it is incompatible with a pluralistic approach to reality and the compromises that pluralism requires.

Apocalypticism is surely not a worldview for all seasons.[[46]](#endnote-46) As Wilder already noted, classical apocalypticism presupposes a situation characterized by anome, a loss of ‘world,’ or erosion of structures, psychic and cultural.”[[47]](#endnote-47) It works best when the world is truly out of joint, and not amenable to reasoned dialogue. Even in such situations, it is likely to exacerbate rather than to ameliorate conflict. Even though apocalyptic texts seldom exhort their readers to violence explicitly, they are often complicit in violence because of their polarized and uncompromising view of the world.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that the classical apocalypticism of ancient Judaism and Christianity is far more nuanced than its latter-day dispensationalist progeny. The writings of Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye are virtually devoid of symbolism. The mythic images of Daniel and Revelation, in contrast, are inherently multivalent, and can never be adequately decoded into prosaic language. They are essentially poetic visions of a world in disarray. In this sense, the poems of Yeats or T. S. Eliot are more faithful to the classic apocalypses than the *Left Behind* series.

When Wilder contrasted ancient and modern apocalypticism, however, it was not the Dispensationalists that he had in mind, but the secular appropriation of apocalypticism in some strands of modern literature.[[48]](#endnote-48) It was well represented in Eliot’s poem, the *Wasteland*, and even more vividly, long after Wilder wrote, in the writings of Cormac McCarthy, such as *The Road*, which are sometimes described as “post-apocalyptic.”[[49]](#endnote-49) What Wilder missed in this kind of literature is “the phase of miraculous renovation and that world affirmation which has gone through the experience of world negation.”[[50]](#endnote-50) A catastrophic imagination alone is not genuinely apocalyptic. McCarthy, to be sure, provides a glimmer of hope in a single flower that blossoms in his post-apocalyptic landscape. Classical apocalypticism was more robust in its hope. To be sure, the hope of salvation in another world, whether conceived as a new creation in the future or as a heavenly world of eternal life, is not without its problems, as it lends itself to displacement of human endeavor. But at the least we should give it credit for its indomitable hope, which is not always supported by rational analysis of human affairs, but may well be indispensable to human flourishing.

1. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination. An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI, 2016) 3-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hindy Najman, “The Inheritance of Prophecy in Apocalypse,” in John J. Collins, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (New York,, 2014) 36-51. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John J. Collins, “Apocalypticism and the Transformation of Prophecy in the Second Temple Period,” in idem, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy. On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2015) 54-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Susan Niditch, *The Symbolic Vision in Biblical Tradition* (HSM 30; Chico, CA, 1983) 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John J. Collins, ed. *Apocalypse. The Morphology of a Genre*, *Semeia* 14(1979) 1-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For commentary, see John J. Collins, *Daniel. A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, 1993) 162-71. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Paul Kosmin, *Total History: Time, Empire, and Resistance from Alexander the Great to the End of the World* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Anders Hultgård, “Persian Apocalypticism,” in John J. Collins, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism. Vol. 1. The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (New York, 1998) 39-83; Domenico Agostini, “On Iranian and Jewish Apocalyptics, Again,” *JAOS* 136.3(2016) 495-505. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Collins, *Daniel*, 377-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Polybius 31.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. As reported in St. Jerome’s preface to his commentary on Daniel. P. M. Casey, “Porphyry and the Book of Daniel,” *JTS* 27(1976) 15-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. John J. Collins, “Stirring up the Great Sea: The Religio-Historical Background of Daniel 7,” in idem, *Seers, Sibyls, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (JSJSup 54; Leiden, 1997) 139-56. I find singularly unpersuasive the suggestion of Carol A. Newsom, “The Reuse of Ugaritic Myhology in Daniel 7. An Optical Illusion,” in Christopher G. Frechette, Christopher R. Matthews, and Thomas D. Stegman, SJ eds., *Biblical Essays in Honor of Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, and Richard J. Clifford, S. J. Opportunity for No Little Instruction* (Mahwah, NJ, 2014) 85-100, that the perception of mythic allusions is an optical illusion. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula, MT, 1976) 157-206. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen, 189); English translation: *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton. A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12* (trans. William Whitney; Grand Rapids, MI, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA, 1973) 112-20; John Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1985). For the texts see M. D. Coogan and M. S. Smith, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. John A. Emerton, “The Origin of the Son of Man Imagery,” *JTS* 9(1958) 225-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Collins, *Daniel*, 304-310. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. John J. Collins, “The Beginning of the End of the World in the Hebrew Bible,” in idem, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy*, 34-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. John J. Collins, *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London, 1997) 41-51; 93-109. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. E. T. Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Missoula, MT, 1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Philip F. Esler, *God’s Court and Courtiers in the Book of the Watchers. Re-interpreting Heaven in 1 Enoch 1-36* (Eugene, OR, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. On the names of the angels, see Saul Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands Served Him. Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in ancient Judaism* (Tübingen: 1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. James L. Kugel, *The Great Shift. Encountering God in Biblical Times* (New York, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. 235-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. John J. Collins, “Journeys to the World Beyond in Ancient Judaism,” in idem, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy*, 178-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Kelley Coblentz Bautch, *A Study of the Geography of 1 Enoch 17-19. ‘No One Has Seen What I Have Seen’* (JSJSup 81; Leiden, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Seven Heavens in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses,” in eadem, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (JSJSup 50; Leiden, 1996) 21-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. John J. Collins, “Death and Afterlife,” in John Barton, ed., *The Biblical World* (London, 2002) 357-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Collins, *Daniel*, 391-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, MA 2006) 141-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. C. D. Elledge, *Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism. 200 BCE – CE 200* (Oxford, 2017) 130-49, argues that the Book of the Watchers envisions an earthly resurrection. If this is so, it is exceptional in the early apocalyptic literature. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. 1QS 4:7. John J. Collins, “The Essenes and the Afterlife,” in idem, *Scriptures and Sectarianism* (WUNT 332; Tübingen, 2014) 212-26, especially 220-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, 1995) 104-36, especially 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Matthias Jung, “Embodiment, Transcendence, and Contingency. Anthropological Features of the Axial Age,” in Robert N.. Bellah and Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA, 2012) 77-101 (here 77). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (London, 2002) 11-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. On the influence of Jewish apocalypticism on the New Testament see Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, eds., *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought* (Minneapolis, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See further Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston, eds., *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination* (Minneapolis, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. John J. Collins, “The Christian Adaptation of the Apocalyptic Genre,” in idem, *Seers, Sibyls, and Sages*, 115-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More. Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1992)86-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Hal Lindsey, with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1970). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. A 16 volume set of novels, beginning with Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind. A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Carol Stream, IL, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Lorenzo DiTommaso, “The Apocalyptic Other,” in Daniel C. Harlow, Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Joel S. Kaminsky, eds., *The ‘Other’ in Second Temple Judaism. Essays in Honor of John J. Collins* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2010) 221-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Amos N. Wilder, “The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalyptic,” *Interpretation* 25(1971) 436-53 (440), [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Di Tommaso, “The Apocalyptic Other,” 236 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid. 237 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. John J. Collins, “The Legacy of Apocalypticism,” in idem, *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, 2005) 155-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Wilder, “The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalyptic,” 440 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. See Frank Kermode, “The Modern Apocalypse,” in Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford, 1967) 93-124. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Wilder, “The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalyptic,” 451. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)