The Apocalypse

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As the twelfth year of the third millennium draws to a close, fear of an impending apocalypse weighs heavily on the Earth’s population. Billions wonder what will happen on the ill-fated day, projected to be December 21, 2012. The word apocalypse refers to a revealed future; usually having to do with last days.¹ Not many realize that this cycle of apocalyptic prediction is one that has been repeated time again over the past few hundred years. These myths spawned from a belief held by many cultures that involved succeeding stages of cultures or eras, and that at the end of this pattern of successions the world would come to an end. Nearly each culture has its own apocalyptic myth, but one of the most widespread myths involving the apocalypse is that of Christianity. The last chapter in the bible, The Book of Revelation, is exclusively dedicated to describing the second coming of Jesus and the destruction that the Earth will face upon his return. We will explore the mythologies created about the apocalypse, the cults that tried to avoid the predicted doomsdays, and the extent to which these past beliefs have influenced the modern belief of a coming apocalypse.

Creation myths are seen in every mythology across the world. These myths often involve some supreme being creating the world out of his surroundings, a random change, or development in the natural order of things. The creation myth tells of a beginning; where there is a beginning there must be an end. This end is explained using eschatology², which is a branch of mythology that seeks to explain things such as death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Apocalyptic myths were created through eschatology. One archetype commonly seen in creation myths is the cyclical worlds. These mythologies seek to explain the struggle between creative order and destructive chaos³; they do so by formalizing the struggle in terms of continuous cycles of

² Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, 125
creation and destruction. In these cycles each successive cycle is morally inferior to the last. In most myths there were either four or five cycles that succeeded each other. Symbolism can be seen in the use of the numbers, four and five, by such a vast amount of cultures. Four is the number of order in the universe. The number four represents the four elements, the four cardinal points, the four seasons, and the four stages of the moon. This explains the repetition of four because the cyclical worlds are put in place to keep order in the universe. The number five symbolizes the human life because it is the sum of the first even and odd numbers; two representing the female and three representing the male. This explanation of the number five explains the use of five for the cyclical worlds because these worlds are specifically focusing on human life and its degradation.

The Hopi Indians devised a mythology that told of four worlds: the first world was destroyed by fire, the second by freezing, the third world was destroyed by flood, and we are currently in the final world which is near its end. The Hindu Puranas tells of the Four Ages of Man. The Puranas is comprised of Hindu texts that contain mythology, legends, and ritual instructions. The Four Ages of Man Mythology tells of eons being made of four ages, each taking its name from essential dice throws: the Krta, Treta, Dvapara, and the Kali. The Krta is known as the golden age, or the age of truth, and each following age marked a deterioration of values. Given this, the Kali Age – our age – has such low morality that it must be destroyed by fire and submerged into the primal waters. After this sacrifice a new eon is prepared for

5 Ibid.
6 Willis, *World Mythology*, 19
7 Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, 138
8 Ibid.
Another religion that told of a four cyclical world was Zoroastrianism. A cosmic drama was established in four 3,000 year acts, where the god of light struggles against the spirit of dark and evil. The fourth trillenium begins with the birth of Zoroaster, and the end of each of its millennia is marked by the appearance of savior figures. The last of these savior figures is a son of Zoroaster, and this man would usher in the new creation; destroying the world with fire. This destruction was followed by the final battle between good and evil.

Though the Greek Mythology tells of five successive ages, it does not strictly speak of world destruction. The ages that are told of are: the golden age, the silver age, the bronze age, the heroic age, and the age of iron. The golden age was a time of paradise. In this age old age, work and pain were not known. Brought in by the Olympians, the silver age was marked by pride and violence and parental dependence. Zeus destroyed the people of this age. Next, Zeus created the people of the bronze age. These people used metal to make weapons and war; because of this they died off. The Greek poet Hesiod told of the heroic age; an age in which the offspring of mortal women and immortal gods performed heroic deeds. These heroes were sent to the Elysian Fields after their death. Finally, the fifth age, the age of iron, is ours and it is told


9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Willis, *World Mythology*, 19
to be marked by hard work and problems. Another culture that sees the world as a cycle of five is the Aztecs. They tell of the ‘Five Suns’; basing creation in terms of five suns, or successive worlds. What is interesting about this Aztec belief is that they ended the cycle with themselves, as opposed to other mythologies that predicted that the last world was farther away. The first world was ruled by the high god Telcatlipoca; it was destroyed by Quezzalcoatl and the Jaguars. The second world was destroyed by a hurricane, while the third world was destroyed by fire. The fourth sun was swept away by a flood. The fifth world was created when Nanahuatzin leapt into a fire and became the sun. The Aztecs foretold that the fifth sun, their world, would be preserved by blood sacrifices, and would end in earthquakes.

Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

The cyclical world beliefs had a large impact on humans of all times and they spurred an increase in apocalyptic predictions. One of the more popular beliefs was that the apocalypse would occur during an epoch, which is a particular period of time marked by distinctive features, events, etc. This belief often caused people to turn to the end of the century or the end of the millennium, expecting an apocalypse, but the end of an epoch “does not necessarily coincide

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
with the end of a hundred-year span". This is not to say that apocalyptic predictions were confined to these dates; speculation was wide and varied as to when an apocalypse would occur. Some of these speculations were a result of religious and cultural beliefs, while others were made by attempted scientific calculations. The predictions made by religious leaders for the date of the world's end were often based off of natural happenings. Bishop Gregory of Tours suggested a timeframe between 799 and 806, but an earthquake in September of 589 and a flood in November of 589 caused the succeeding Pope Gregory I to predict that the world would end far sooner than Bishop Gregory of Tours predicted. In 1556, a medical student in Switzerland predicted the end of the world would be July 22 of the same year. The great astrologers of the time expected an apocalyptic event to occur between 1556 and 1562 because the Earth would be affected by ill-omened dominance of the moon. Rumors of a destructive comet caused panic in 1773. Apocalyptic predictions struck again in 1816, 1832, 1857, and 1861, and though none of them occurred, the predictions continued; always “explained away but never put to rest”.

In effort to avoid the horrible events that were predicted, the 20th Century saw some groups of people take matters into their own hands. In 1984, a failed herbalist retreated to the Himalayas for enlightenment. This man, Matsumoto returned and changed his name to Asahara and created a nonprofit group known as Aum, USA. Asahara had a small group of followers and with their support he ran for the Japanese Parliament. Upon his losing, Asahara began referring to himself as Jesus Christ, the last Messiah. With his new proclamation Asahara

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18 Weber, Apocalypses, 17
19 Ibid., 48
20 Ibid., 69
21 Ibid., 70
22 Ibid., 120
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 219
25 Ibid., 220
forced his cult to kidnap and murder innocent people. Asahara did not stop there, he orchestrated bioterrorist attacks; spraying a Tokyo subway with sarin gas. In 1993 David Koresh, recognized as the prophetic seventh angel, as well as the eschatological Lamb destined to open the seven seals of Revelation, led a group of followers on a siege for 51 days. After this siege he, his followers and several federal agents died in a holocaust. This incident happened in Waco, Texas. In 1994, forty-eight followers and their Messiah, Luc Jouret, died; the majority of suicide, others however, were brutally murdered. Before his death Jouret identified a three-month old boy as the Antichrist. The child was slain and had a stake driven through his heart. In March of 1997 thirty-nine members of a computer-related cult died in a mass suicide, believing that a spacecraft would carry them to heaven.

Though every culture has its own particular apocalyptic myth, they all share similarities; whether these similarities are seen in the reason for Armageddon or they are seen in the way that the world ends, there is a connection. Three of the most well-known apocalyptic myths are from the Hindu, Nordic, and Christian Mythologies; these works are the Mahabharata, Ragnarok, and Revelation. Each tale tells of an extraordinary end to the world as it is known in order to bring in a new stage of life.

The Mahabharata is the longest literary work in the world. It is an epic that essentially tells of the war between the descendants of the original Hindu people – the Bharatas – the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The epic begins with the earth goddess being oppressed by demons and evil spirits; this oppression establishes the necessity for sacrifice in order for true

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26 Ibid., 221
27 Ibid., 216
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 217
30 Ibid., 217
31 Leeming, The Oxford Companion to World Mythology, 248
prosperity to be restored to the world. Vishnu descends to help the earth, but to do so he must ensure that a battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas takes place.\textsuperscript{32} The war is the “war to end wars”, and though it results in the victory of the Pandavas, almost everyone is killed. It is this universal sacrifice that completes Krishna’s mission and brings an end to the world. Through this destruction prosperity is returned to the world and the kali age is brought into existence.\textsuperscript{33}

The Ragnarok tells of the end of the Nordic world. The high god Odin requested a seeress from the world of the dead to tell him how the world would begin, as well as how it would end. The seeress told Odin that the beginning of the end would see humans at war with each other, relatives fighting each other, fathers killing their children, and an increase in incest. Next there would be a three-year winter and the wolf, Skoll, would swallow the sun while his brother Hati destroyed the moon. Loki and Fenrir would escape their bonds and run rampant. Yggdrasill, the world tree, would be shaken by an earthquake that would destroy the world. Floods would rise as the Great Serpent, Jormungand, made his way towards the Earth. Loki would captain the ship of the dead from Hell and Hrim would lead a host of giants; all while Fenrir ate through Asgard and Midgard, and Jormungand spat poison in every corner of creation. The fire demons would be lead across the Rainbow Bridge, shattering the bridge as they crossed. The enemies of the gods

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 249
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
would gather on the plains of Vigrid. The gods gathering eight hundred strong, would march through the doors of Valhalla and meet their enemies on the plains of Vigrid. Thor would defeat Jormungand, but would in turn die from his poison. Loki and Heimdall will kill each other. Odin will be swallowed by Fenrir, but Fenrir’s jaws will be ripped apart by Odin’s son Vidar. Finally, Surt will send his fire through the the three levels and nine worlds of creation and all living beings will die. Through the death of Ragnarok a new earth will rise: green and blossoming, crops blooming, and a new sun shining. Some of the gods will return to Asgard, led by Balder. Lif and Lifthrasir will survive to renew the human race.

One of, if not the most influential Apocalyptic stories is found in the Holy Bible – the Book of Revelation – this book, told by Saint John, tells of the Second Coming of Jesus. John tells of Jesus sitting on a throne and holding a scroll in his right hand. The scroll was written in and sealed with seven seals. A lamb with seven eyes and seven horns opens the seals of the

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34 Ibid., 334
35 Ibid., 335
When the first seal is removed a horseman appeared on a white horse; the horseman had with him a bow and he was given a crown. This horseman was the conqueror. The second seal released a red horse; his rider was given a sword and told that he should take peace from the earth and that people should kill each other. This horseman was the bringer of conflict. Next the lamb opened the third seal, bringing forth the black horse. Aboard this horse sat a man with a pair of scales. This man was told, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the wine.” This horseman represented scarcity. The fourth seal brought forth a pale horse; his rider was Death, and he was followed by Hell. The four horsemen were given power over a fourth of the Earth to kill; to kill with the sword, hunger, death, and the beasts of the Earth. Once the fifth seal was opened the souls of the dead were allowed to rise. The sixth seal brought cosmic destruction: earthquakes, a blackened sun, a blood red moon, the stars dropped from the sky, the sky receded, and the earth shifted. When the seventh seal was opened silence struck the Earth and the Heavens, until the seven angels each played their trumpet. When the first trumpet sounded hail, fire and blood rained down on the Earth. One third of the trees were burned and all of the grass was burned. Next the second trumpet sounded. A meteor was flung into the ocean and one third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third trumpet followed. A star, Wormwood, fell into a third of the rivers and springs, turning the water into

37 Ibid., 5:6
38 Ibid., 1580 6:1
39 Ibid., 6:4
40 Ibid., 6:6
41 Ibid., 6:8
42 Ibid., 6:9
43 Ibid., 1581 6:12
44 Ibid., 8:1
45 Ibid., 8:7
46 Ibid., 8:8
wormwood. Many died from the bitterness of the water. Then the fourth trumpet sounded. A third of the sun was struck, as were a third of the moon and the stars. A third of the day ceased to shine, and the night followed suit. With the sounding of the fifth trumpet a bottomless pit of locust opened. The locusts were ordered to attack the men that did not have the Seal of God on their foreheads, attack but not kill. The men were to be tormented for five months. Next the sixth trumpet sounded and the four angels were released form the Euphrates River to kill a third of mankind. The seventh trumpet sounded and the Kingdom of Heaven was proclaimed.

Unlike so many other apocalyptic myths the myth of Revelation tells of a new spiritual world; a world for the followers of Jesus Christ; a Kingdom.

We have associated December 21, 2012 with the newest prediction for the end of the world because of what many people have labeled as a warning from the Mayans. The Mayans

47 Ibid., 8:10
48 Ibid., 8:12
49 Ibid., 9:10
50 Ibid., 9:15
51 Ibid., 11:15
had a very accurate calendar system known as the Long Count. There were 13 cycles and the end of each creation cycle was followed by a Day Zero. Zero marking the beginning of a new creation cycle.\textsuperscript{52} The Long Count began with Day Zero, which was August 11, 3114 B.C. for the Mayans;\textsuperscript{53} the Count ends on December 21, 2012. The date December 12, 2012 is followed by Day Zero; this has caused some disturbance because the Mayans were known to be extremely accurate astrological predictors. They were able to predict solstices and eclipses, among other events. It is a popular belief that because their Long Count system ended with December 21, 2012 the world will meet its end on December 21, 2012.

The biggest question that is left unanswered is: “How will the world end?” There is no conclusive answer, but based in some of the recurring themes in the previously discussed myths we could synthesize a few possible situations. The world could be enveloped in warfare, most specifically speaking nuclear warfare. This destruction relates to the red horseman – war; but it also serves the archetype of destruction by fire that has popped up so frequently during the discussion of these eschatological myths. Flooding is a theme that is seen throughout nearly all

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\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
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cultural destruction myths. This type of destruction would serve as a parallel to a Mayan drawing depicting gushing streams of water; water flowing from the sun, the moon, and deities. Just as popular as destruction by flood are the threats made involving solar bodies: the sun blacking out, the moon being destroyed, and even the stars falling out of the sky. Using modern technology, we have begun to explore our surrounding solar system and we have found black holes. If we were consumed by these holes we would indeed lose sight of our sun, moon, and stars; in effect the sun would be blackened, the moon would be destroyed, and the stars would be destroyed.

“All ages are marked by perils, lawlessness, social disorders and upheavals, breakdown of morality and family, perils, turbulence and troubles that serve as signs and stimulate expectations”; these stimulated expectations are similar from culture to culture. Whether the myth be born of Hindu, Nordic, or Christian myth, the similarities between them are undeniable. Even more breathtaking is the repetition seen between the beliefs and fears for today’s world and the worlds of the past. We must ask ourselves if the connection between modern times and the past are stronger than we would initially think; regardless of a belief in the apocalyptic myths of ancient and modern culture there is one thing that is certain: when the world came into existence it was at its beginning and everything that has a beginning must have an end. The end may not be December 21, 2012, but this world cycle must be expected to end someday.

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54 Ibid.
55 Weber, Apocalypses, 33


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