Apocalypticism in Medieval Christianity

According to the book of Genesis, God originally created a harmonious earth in which everything was good, but, because of the Fall, God caused enmity between humans, the serpent, and the earth itself, so that humans would have to earn their food by harsh work from the hostile ground [Gen. 3:14-19]. Humans hunt, kill and devour animals because of the fall. Animals attack, slay and eat each other for the same reason. Until the twentieth century in Europe and America -- and still throughout much of the world -- farmers put in hard labor to produce small crops and nomadic pastoralists live in tents so that their animals can find sufficient forage in steppes where there is insufficient rainfall to permit agriculture or continuous grazing of the same pastures. In summary, according to Genesis the world, as humans have experienced it, was the result of sin, which disordered the harmonious relationships that God had originally intended. Some apocalyptic thinkers have envisioned the goal of history to be a "new heaven and a new earth" in which that original harmony is restored and even improved. In these instances nature has been allotted a significant role in apocalypticism.

Isaiah of Jerusalem, writing in the eighth century B.C.E., envisioned a messiah in whose days wolf and sheep, leopard and kid, lion and calf would live peacefully together [Isa. 11:1-9]. Isaiah or a later disciple envisioned the earth drying up and becoming sick, with only a few inhabitants left, but then God would prepare an immense feast for all the peoples, death would cease to occur and there would never again be sorrow or tears [Isa. 24:4-6, 25:6-8]. Another disciple of Isaiah, writing during the discouraging years after the exiles had been allowed to return from Babylon, but had come home to despair rather
than glory, summarized the earlier texts about the new heaven and the new earth in which the redeemed would live in harmony and abundance with all other species [Isa. 65:17-25].

Paul wrote to the Romans that the entire creation had been chained up and made subject to death until that time when God would unveil the coming splendor that would set all of creation free along with the elect [Rom. 8:18-21]. John of Patmos envisioned a resurrection of the martyrs who would reign on earth with Christ for a thousand years [Apoc. 20:1-6] and then be replaced by a new heaven and new earth in the middle of which would be a new Jerusalem, with a tree of life yielding twelve different fruits [Apoc. 21:1-22:5].

Two themes emerged from biblical apocalypticism: future harmony between humans and all other species and a transformed earth that would yield abundant food and drink effortlessly. Both of these themes are expounded in the millennium that the North African Christian Lactantius [c. 303-317] described in the seventh book of his *Divine Institutes*. Lactantius accepted the notion that history was divided into seven world-weeks, each of which would include a thousand years. The seventh or Sabbath world-week would begin about 500 C.E. Nature would bring forth abundant food and drink without human effort and peace would prevail between the different species of animals.

Asceticism, however, was sweeping the Roman World from the second century onward. Neo-Platonism taught its adherents to turn away from the material and sensible world toward the One, the source of all being, that could be known only by the mind. Physicians advised abstinence from sex. Monasticism spread rapidly from Egypt and Syria among Christians. Dualists thought that anything material was actually evil, while
Christians believed that the body was inferior to the soul and accepted the resurrection of the body only because it was clearly scriptural. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, [354-430 C.E.] came to Christianity by way of Neoplatonism, which satisfied his strongly ascetic bent. Augustine attacked both the world-week notion and the belief in an earthly millennium. He replaced the world-week with a scheme of seven ages, five of which preceded the birth of Jesus Christ, while the sixth represented the suffering of humans on earth between Christ and the end of history. The seventh belonged to those souls who had died in Christ and rested in heaven. Augustine spiritualized and individualized the Apocalypse. God had created humans in order to replace the fallen angels with elect, human souls. The City of God was made up of these souls and history would continue until the last one of these had died and been saved. On earth these elect souls were mingled with the much more numerous reprobate who were the City of Earth and after death the elect rested with God in heaven. Christians should focus themselves as much as possible on spiritual concerns. Material goods hindered spiritual concentration and, therefore, were to be used minimally. Any notion of earthly abundance was repugnant to Augustine. On earth the reprobate dominated and their greed led to incessant war and strife, which would continue as long as time lasted.

Not all Christians were as ascetic as Augustine. An anonymous fourth century author composed the Tiburtine Sibyl, which concluded by predicting the coming of an emperor whose name would be Constans and who would reign 112 years. Fruit, wheat and wine would be abundant and cheap during his reign, which would end with the arrival of the Antichrist. The Pseudo-Methodius, actually an anonymous eighth century author, inspired by the Arab Conquest, took up the notion of a final, all-victorious
emperor but omitted any mention of earthly prosperity. Adso, writing in the late tenth century in the Ardennes, transferred the role of messianic final emperor to the Frankish kings, again without the notion of material plenty. All three of these texts were widely circulated in medieval Europe after 1000, especially the later two.

Monastic authors found Augustine's thinking congenial. Often they believed implicitly, if not explicitly, that the elect included only monks. Augustine had postponed the end of history into the indefinite future. The *Tiburtine Sibyl* and similar texts focused primarily on the final generation before the end of time and the second coming.

Reformist apocalyptics applied the concepts and language normally associated with the end of history to the struggle to reform the clergy, a struggle initiated by Pope Leo IX and his successor, Gregory VII in the second half of the eleventh century. Reformists focused on their own contemporary era and the immediate future, not the distant end of time. One of the most prominent and innovative reformists was Hildegard of Bingen [1098-1179] who in her *Scivias*, [1141-1151] followed Augustine, but stated that the earth had entered the seventh millennium. Reformism appeared strongly in her *Book of the Divine Works*, [1163-1173] where Hildegard predicted that the lay princes would force the clergy to divest themselves of their temporal wealth and to give up simony, causing an era of unsurpassed material abundance, spiritual justice, and peace during which Christians would give up their weapons [Part 3, vision 5, chp. 20]. Hildegard's ideas were spread widely by a selection of key texts chosen by her disciple Gebeno in the thirteenth Century, which included the passage on reform of the clergy.

Abbot Joachim of Fiore [1135-1202], another reformist apocalyptic, used natural imagery, especially in the figures, which he drew to illustrate his notion of three historical
phases, the last of which placed Augustine’s seventh age within history. Just as the Son came from the Father and the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son, so the first phase belonged to the Father, the second predominantly to the Son and secondarily to the Spirit and the third predominantly to the Spirit. The third age had already begun with Bernard of Clairvaux [1090-1153] and would culminate soon after 1200 C.E. In one figure, the three periods are represented by two vines that grow and intertwine to form three circles, in the last of which the entire space is covered with foliage. Joachim, however, was thinking in terms of sweeping clerical and monastic reform accompanied by an unprecedented degree of holiness and spiritual understanding among Christians. The future era of the Holy Spirit would be more spiritual and ascetic than its predecessors. Hence, Joachim nowhere spoke of earthly abundance. Some scholars, however, interpret the era of the Holy Spirit as millennial, but that probably does not imply abundance and earthly prosperity.

Joachimism spread widely between the beginning of the thirteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth century as Marjorie Reeves has shown, but most apocalyptic texts focused on church reform. Thus, the Second Charlemagne prophecy, which was extremely popular in France, predicted the coming of another Charles who would conquer all the enemies of Christ and force all of them to convert.

Exceptions were few. Jean de Roquetaillade [c. 1310-c. 1366] believed that the millennium would begin in 1370 and endure for exactly 1,000 years. Jean quoted Isaiah 2:2-4 about all the peoples coming to the "mountain of the house of the Lord." Jean's primary focus was the conversion of the infidels to Christianity and a long period of peace under total Christian dominance. Roquetaillade, however, did briefly allude to
Isaiah. chp. 60, which hints at material prosperity. The prophecy of a new David in William Langland's fourteenth century *Piers Plowman* predicted a king in England whose reign would see all weapons destroyed, warfare ended and honest, fair justice prevailing [passus 3, lines 259-324].

As late as the seventeenth century most apocalyptics focused on reform of the church and the attainment of unprecedented levels of Christian spirituality. Despite a perceptible shift toward a more positive evaluation of the material world and of this life which began in the twelfth century, the ascetic outlook of the Late Antique world continued to prevail in Christian circles. Christians focused primarily on the salvation of individual souls. Nature, therefore, continued to play only a tangential role in western apocalypticism.

**E. R. Daniel, University of Kentucky**

**Further Reading**


