

An Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature



Illustration 1: Gustave Doré, *The Vision of John on Patmos*,
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8c/Zjeven%C3%AD_Janovo.JPG, PD

The book of Revelation is also known as the Apocalypse (Roman Catholic Bibles often prefer this title). “Revelation” comes from the Latin *revelo*, which refers to showing or making known something that has been hidden or not known. “Apocalypse” comes from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*), which means to remove the cover or wrapping from something, or to bring something out in the open. In each case, the “something” has not been known before.

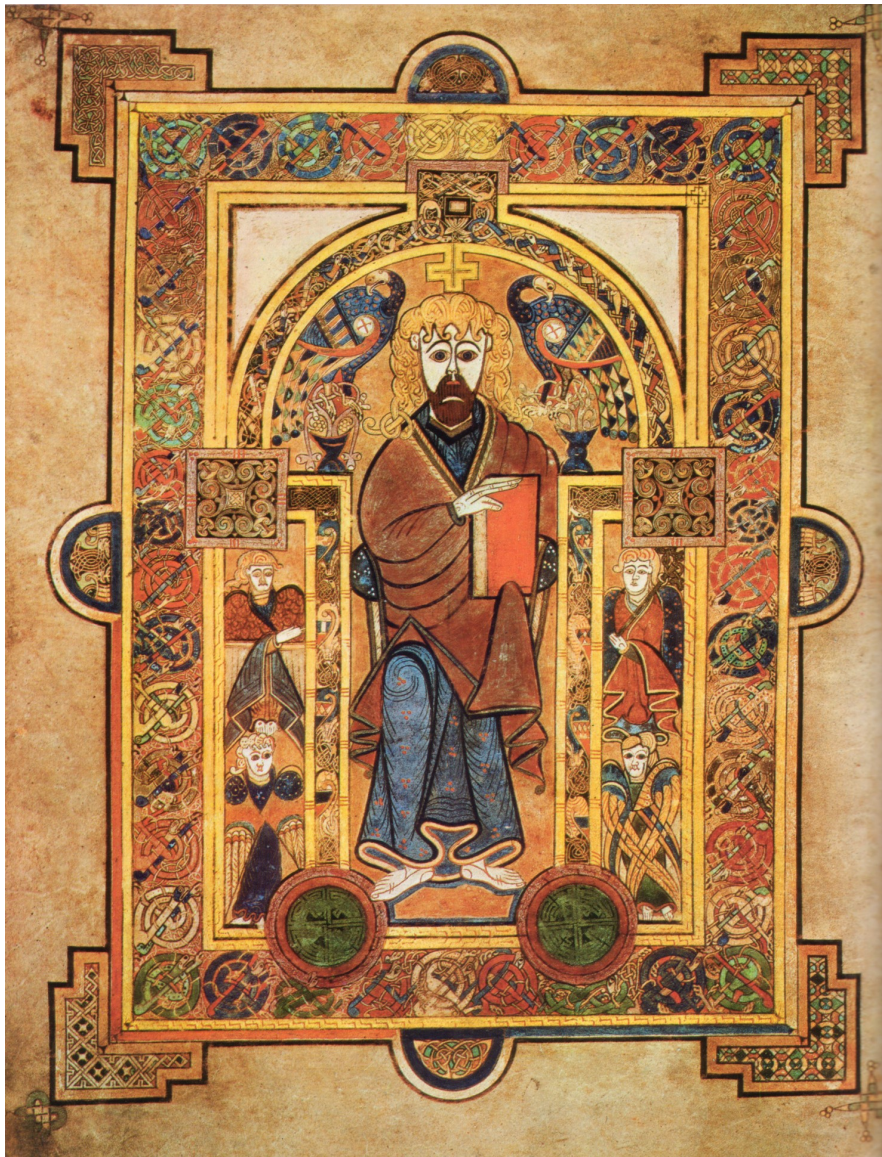


Illustration 2: Christ enthroned, Book of Kells v32, PD

Two related points, and terms that should be clarified, are mystery and eschatology.

“Mystery” comes from the Greek μυστήριον (*mysterion*), and refers to something that is beyond the understanding of finite human minds. The Apostle Paul often refers to various aspects of Christianity as a mystery: 1 Corinthians 2.1; Ephesians 3.3-4, 5.32; Colossians 1.26. A mystery, or at least what can be comprehended of it, is known to humans, whereas the content of an apocalypse was hidden until it was revealed.

“Eschatology” comes from the Greek ἔσχατος (*eschatos*). In Attic (classical) Greek this adjective refers to the furthest, farthest out, or most extreme. By the time John wrote in Koine (common, business) Greek, it generally referred that which was last or least important. Eschatology is used today to refer to the study of end-time or final events, such as the return of Christ.

Every known apocalypse promotes some sort of eschatological viewpoint.



Illustration 3: Sultan Muhammad, *Miraj*, ca. 1539,
<http://www.mirror.org/greg.roberts/MirajB1.jpg>, PD

Although John's is the first such work to call itself an apocalypse, many others followed, and many earlier works share its characteristics. The term "apocalyptic literature" is often used to refer to writings which share this viewpoint. The worldview which comes from devotion to the ideas of this literature is generally called "apocalypticism." Although there is no single feature that one could say is *always* shared by apocalyptic literature, some features stand out.

First, as we might surmise from our definition, an apocalypse describes some secrets given to a human being by a heavenly being. This person typically either travels to a heavenly realm, as in the case of the prophet Mohammad's Night Journey (Qur'ân 17, sura Al-Isra), or has a vision on earth that reviews history and ends with an eschatological event.

Aside from the eschatological conclusions, only small part, if any, of such a work is typically predictive. The world is divided into "now" and "not yet," but "now" predominates.



Illustration 4: Jan Lebenstein, stained glass in Pallottine chapel, Paris, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JanLebenstein-vitrail2.JPG>, CC-SA

Second, apocalypses generally use symbolic language. The images described with this language are usually bizarre. They often use mythological or symbolic elements. One of the purposes of this imagery is to obscure the meaning to “outsiders.” This is often considered necessary by the writer because an apocalypse often delivers an uncomplimentary view of powerful people.

Because these images are often disturbing, people often seek an explanation, along with assurance that they are on the correct side. Thus there is a certain amount of appeal to many from those who have claimed to have figured out what they mean, and who undertake the explain what they believe to be foretold. As we will see in our study, the interpretation of these “predictions” have varied widely over time.



Illustration 5: illuminated Apocalypse, Erfurt, 1315-1317, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Great_famine.jpg, PD

Apocalypses are intended to produce a reaction. The first reaction is to respond to the warning that they generally contain: we might say, “be faithful or else.” To those who are faithful, they contain hope.

Only two books in the Bible are considered apocalypses: Daniel and Revelation. However, there are many apocalyptic passages in other books: Ezekiel 40-48, 1 Enoch 14, Isaiah 24-27 and portions of the third section, the discourse of Mark 13 – Matthew 24-25 – Luke 21; 1 Thessalonians 4-5, and 1 Corinthians 15.50-57. The widespread appearance of such passages indicates that the genre had wider influence than we might think just because there are only two apocalyptic books in the Bible.

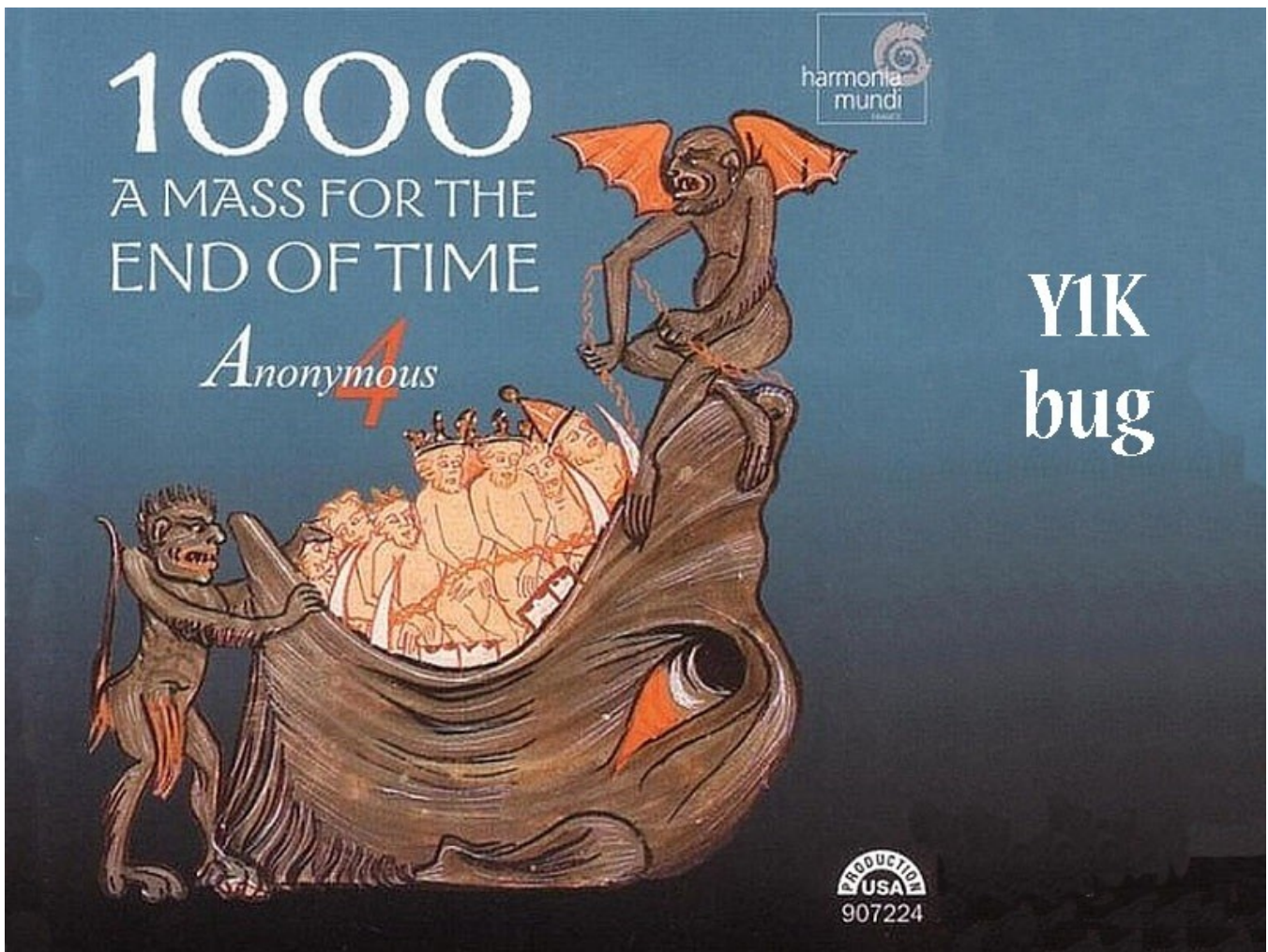


Illustration 6: *A Mass for the End of Time*, Harmonia Mundi 907224, illustration from National Library of Russia. Modified by Tim Vermande for a World Civilizations lecture.

Apocalyptic literature has had a lot of influence around the world, and through the ages. Here is one example: as the year 1000 approached, many people expected the end of the world. Thus this illustration of a demon-monster swallowing the inhabitants of earth.

As a prelude, an eclipse in 968 was interpreted by many as the beginning of the “end times.” In 992, Good Friday fell on the same day as the Feast of the Annunciation, and a tradition (perhaps invented for the event?) stated that this would mark the rise of the Antichrist. Popular legends recorded a number of unusual celestial events, such as the sun and moon fighting. There is a story that the body of Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperor, was exhumed in 1000 in anticipation of his resurrection to fight the battle of Armageddon.

When 1001 arrived, the hysteria didn’t end. A famine in 1005 was seen as the beginning of tribulation. Then, 1033 was viewed as the 1000th anniversary of the crucifixion and resurrection, and thus the correct year for the end. In 1147, Gerard of Poehle claimed that the millennium had begun in 306, under Constantine, so the correct end would be 1306.



Illustration 7: Little Rock, Arkansas, 1959, John T. Bledsoe for USN&WR, LoC LC-U9-2908-15

A new wave of interest broke out with the approach of the American Civil War. There was a widespread feeling among some groups that “Manifest Destiny” had placed the discovery of America by Columbus at a providential point—just as the Reformation had begun to cleanse Europe of religious corruption, thus allowing the New World to be settled by true Christians. In this scenario, the Civil War was a cleansing of the last sins of the nation, and the millennium was at hand.

Since that time, there have been periodic, and often spectacular announcements of the end of the world. This list contains only a few of the more important ones:

- 1843: William Miller predicted the return of Jesus on March 21. When it didn’t happen, he recalculated and came up with October 22, 1844.
- 1850: Ellen White begins predicting the end of the world. This is the beginning of the Seventh-Day Adventist movement. Her last prediction was in 1856, which allowed for some of those living at the time to live until the Rapture.
- 1914: working from Daniel, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (a.k.a. Jehovah’s Witnesses) announce the imminent start of Armageddon. When this did not occur, they revised the event to be the rule of Jesus. Some continued to predict Armageddon, with various dates from 1914 to 1994, especially 1925, 1975 (the 6000th anniversary of Creation).
- 1948: establishment of Israel leads many to predict the imminent return of Jesus. In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey re-calculated it for 1988, 40 years afterward.
- 1982: Pat Robertson predicts the end of the world in the fall.

Sources

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http://www.religioustolerance.org/end_wrl2.htm