

Perspective

Unveiling Apocalypse: Reflowering the Tree of Life (Part I)

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ABSTRACT

In this three-part article, the author will survey and discuss the wider, deeper backdrop of apocalypse as part of our existential condition over the last two thousand years and extending into the next century. Apocalypse is an expression of a sense of future-shock, of political domination by corrupt world powers, of military turbulence and genocide on a vast planetary scale. In many ways this has been a burgeoning reality ever since the agricultural revolution. It was certainly the case around the time Revelation was written. Today we are facing a much huger planetary apocalyptic crisis, in which we have gained the powers to effectively destroy much of life on Earth and ourselves through nuclear holocaust and are having impacts which are leading to irreversible changes in the climate, ocean levels and biological and genetic diversity, diminishing our own survival prospects as a species in the process. The author argues that apocalypse is a motif in every person's existential consciousness in the sense that we seek to understand the ultimate mystery of existence and come face to face with it before we pass away into oblivion. The author also argues that the 'unveiling' of reality is also absolutely central to the scientific revolution. As we have progressed from the first wave of Greek science through to the Renaissance and the flowering of the Western scientific tradition, the covers have well and truly been thrown off reality. With our own generation, "apocalypse now" has become an even more potent planetary reality - nuclear weapons of mass destruction, overpopulation, mass extinction of genetic diversity and climate change. We are thus literally facing planetary apocalypse, if we don't get a grip on our own folly and the impacts of business-as-usual on the planetary future.

Part I of this three-particle includes: 1. The Dilemma of Apocalypse; 2. The Deeper History of Apocalypse; and 3. Planetary Apocalypse Now.

Key Words: Unveiling, apocalypse, tree of life, religion, science, God.

1. The Dilemma of Apocalypse

An apocalypse (ἀποκάλυψις *apokálypsis*, from ἀπό and καλύπτω meaning "uncovering" or more directly "unveiling"), translated literally from Greek, is a disclosure of knowledge, i.e., a lifting of the veil, or revelation. In religious contexts it is usually a disclosure of something hidden.

The word apocalypse is both a beacon and a plague to the human consciousness. It is our destination in the final awakening in the end of days and it is the feverish fantasy that leads countless people to commit violence and genocide in the name of the rule of God, from the

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Muslim Caliphate to the Heavenly Jerusalem, with the Jewish Mashiach, the Parousia of the Second Coming of Christ and the Mahdi of the Shi'ities playing the role of healing, or avenging, hero in the piece.

We can love it and hate it. We can try to ignore it, but it keeps creeping up on us as a fascinating and terrifying vision, no matter how much, in the interests of common sense, protecting the sanctity of life, we try to set it aside, so here is an attempt to come to terms with it and understand its roots in our existential condition and how we can turn the tide of misfortune and the tumult of genocide into a new epoch of paradise under the banner of the Tree of Life - hidden since the foundation of the world.

Apocalypse in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all share to varying degrees the apocalyptic vision and sense of prophecy in terms of the Day of Judgment, promulgated by Zoroaster in terms of the victory of Ahura Mazda - light and wisdom over Angra Mainyu - the source of ignorance and confusion. All of these three have adopted the central elements of Zoroaster's cosmology of renovation, taking it for their own in claiming to be the one true religion of God and, in the cases of Christianity and Islam, turning into more inexorable forms of punishment without redemption.

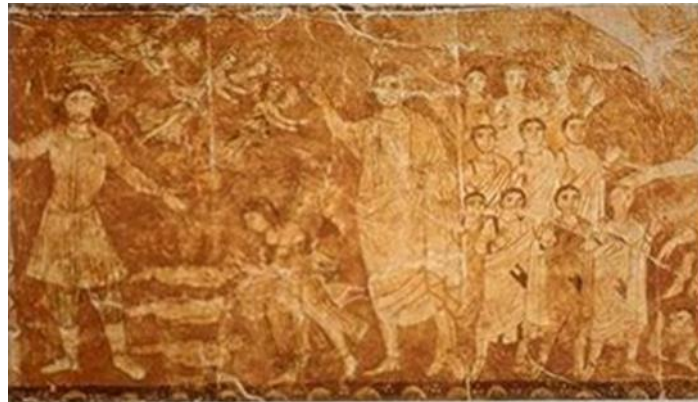
Apocalypticism arose gradually in Hebrew history as a consequence of the cross-transference of ideas. The underworld of the dead of Sheol, which we can still see in passages of the Old Testament, gave way to a heaven and hell and with the exile into Babylon and then the takeover by Cyrus the Mede, who is regarded as a messiah anointed for his support of the Jews' return to the 'holy land'. The notion of the Zoroastrian renovation became absorbed into Jewish apocalypticism in works like The Book of Enoch and then into Christian eschatology as well, culminating in the Book of Revelation.

Enoch's "Apocalypse of Weeks" (c 170BC) sets out such a world history with the future climax in the seventh part of the tenth week, but far less gratuitously violent than Revelation:

*And after this, in the tenth week in the seventh part,
There shall be the great eternal judgement,
In which He will execute vengeance amongst the angels.
And the first heaven shall depart and pass away,
And a new heaven shall appear,
And all the powers of the heavens shall give sevenfold light.
And after that there will be many weeks without number for ever,
And all shall be in goodness and righteousness,
And sin shall no more be mentioned for ever.*

According to Jewish tradition, the messianic era will be one of global harmony, a future era of universal peace and brotherhood on earth, and one conducive to the furtherment of the knowledge of God. Although Judaism concentrates on the importance of the Earthly world, all of classical Judaism posits an afterlife - the "world to come", עולם הבא, *olam ha-ba*, the Heavenly Garden of Eden, and Gehenna its dark opposite. According to religious Judaism, any

non-Jew who lives according to the Seven Laws of Noah is regarded as a righteous gentile, and is assured of a place in the world to come, the final reward of the righteous.



Resurrection of the dead, fresco from the Dura-Europos synagogue

In Judaism, beliefs vary about a last day of judgment for all mankind. Some rabbis hold that there will be such a day following the resurrection of the dead. Others hold that this accounting and judgment happens when one dies. Still others hold that the last judgment only applies to the nations and not the Jewish people. In Rabbinical literature for example we find the following:

The Messianic age is when the Jews will regain their independence and all return to the land of Israel. The Messiah will be a very great king, he will achieve great fame, and his reputation among the gentile nations will be even greater than that of King Solomon. His great righteousness and the wonders that he will bring about will cause all peoples to make peace with him and all lands to serve him.... Nothing will change in the Messianic age, however, except that Jews will regain their independence.

Nevertheless Zechariah (520-518 BC) does have an apocalyptic climax, anticipating the triages and tumults of Revelation in the Christian tradition:

And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God. ... And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south (Zech 13-14).

Pivotal to our concept of apocalypse is the Revelation of John, the culminating chapter of the Christian bible. It is the most extraordinary book of eschatological religious vision ever written. It is literally bursting with tumultuous battles and cataclysms, from the beasts of belial, to the avenging Lord, amid tumult and destruction, resulting in the triage of all life and impossibly a triage of the Sun, Moon and stars:

The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: And the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed. ... And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise. (Rev 8). And the four angels were loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men. By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths (Rev 9).

Later we see the pregnant woman clothed with the Sun standing on the Moon, who is an apotheosis of the Queen of Heaven, Inanna-Ishtar but also identified by Christians with Mary. Her boy-child, the warlord-to-come, is attacked by a dragon, and taken up to God, precipitating the war in heaven:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne (Rev 12).



The woman clothed with the sun and the dragon (William Blake).

On the other side of the cosmic battle we find the great whore of Babylon, the dark manifestation of the same Inanna-Ishtar Goddess figure:

I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead was a name written, "mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the Earth". And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration (Rev 17).

The cosmic Christ appears as an utterly feudal dictator-Lord of mass destruction:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God (Rev 19).

Unmitigated death and destruction is cast on the unbelievers:

And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great. ... And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. ... And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh (Rev 19).

As gratuitous violence, Revelation reigns supreme, but as a model for planetary apocalypse, it is profoundly dangerous, deceptive and misleading - an unmitigated disaster. Yet it contains two pivotal elements – the Tree of Life entwined around the throne of the Lamb, giving its Twelve monthly fruit for the healing of the nations – and the notion of the sacred marriage, or *hieros gamos*.

However the sacred marriage here is not that of the true fertility between woman and man that generates the passage of the living generations, but in the corrupted form of the Lamb and the Heavenly Jerusalem, Christ and his Church, falling in the shadow of the dysfunctional marital relationship of Jehovah and the whoring bride Israel, whose ultimate Holy of Holies is sequestered in the metaphor of unrequited love in the Song of Songs:

Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready (Rev 19). And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ... And there came unto me one of the seven angels ... and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife (Rev 21).

Finally we come to the Tree of Life itself hidden since the foundation of the world in Eden still beckoning to our living futures:

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Rev 21).

The feeling of the covers being thrown off reality is well-captured by Paul of Tarsus in 1 Corinthians: βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἑσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι - "For now we see through a glass, darkly."

*When I was a child, I spake as a child,
I understood as a child, I thought as a child:
but when I became a man, I put away childish things.
For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face:
now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

The implication is that in the current epoch we act like children and cannot see the essential nature of reality, but in the unveiling we will come of age and see reality intimately as it actually is.



The Zoroastrian and the Muslim Day of Judgment derived from it contain the same motifs, including a razor-thin bridge the human souls have to cross and a welcoming heavenly maiden. Although both contain fiery torments, the Zoroastrian version has more emphasis on cleansing of ignorance rather than eternal damnation.

Despite absorbing the prophetic figures of the Jewish tradition, from Adam, through Moses to Solomon, and the Deuteronomic diabolical punishments of stoning for adultery, discontinued

centuries before by the Jews, Islam has taken up the Christian and Zoroastrian notions of the Day of Judgment as a moral punishment cosmology, central to the ideas of violent martyrdom, in which one will see the face of al-Llah and be entertained by black eyed virgins made anew every day in paradise:

*Surely those who guard (against evil) are in a secure place, In gardens and springs;
They shall wear of fine and thick silk, (sitting) face to face;
Thus (shall it be), and We will wed them with houris - pure, beautiful ones (44:51).*

Conscious life is described as a mere shadow of the events on the Day of Judgment:

O mankind! Have fear of your Lord and fear that Day when no father shall avail his son nor a son his father. Surely the promise of Allah is true. Let not the life of this world deceive you, nor let the Deceiver (Satan) deceive you concerning Allah. Surely Allah Alone has the knowledge of the Hour (31:33).

Jesus is also a central actor in the Day of Resurrection:

And there is not one of the followers of the Book but most certainly believes in this before his death, and on the day of resurrection he (Isa) shall be a witness against them (4:159).

*He (Isa) is surely a knowledge of the hour. ... And when Isa came with clear arguments he said:
I have come to you indeed with wisdom, and that I may make clear to you part of what you differ
in (43:61).*

There are also clear indications of the Zoroastrian Judgment woven into the Quranic account. The Chinvat Bridge is likewise in the Quran, and even more explicitly in the hadith, as the Sirat Bridge, which is sharper than the edge of sword and thinner than a hair:

We will call them to account in the company of all their Satans and set them on their knees around the Fire of Hell; then from every sect. We will certainly drag out its stoutest rebels against the Compassionate (Allah). Certainly We know best who deserves most to be burned therein. There is not a single one of you, who shall not pass over it [the Sirat Bridge], this absolute decree of your Lord is unavoidable; then We will deliver those who were pious and leave the wrongdoers therein humbled on their knees (19:68).

In a description reminiscent of Revelation, the angel Israfil [the Burning One] will sound the trumpet and all living creatures, mankind, angels and jinn then living, will die. Another blast and all will be raised to life. Allah's throne will appear in the clouds, carried by eight angels. Believers will receive a book of their deeds in their right hand, and unbelievers their left hand. The books will be opened and men's works weighed on scales (*mizan*) as in the Zoroastrian description. In fear, men will look for someone to plead with Allah. They will go to Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, but find no help. At last they will turn to Muhammad and Allah will judge, as in the Earthquake:

When the earth will be shaken to her utmost convulsion, and the earth shall bring out all her inner burdens, man shall say: "What is happening to her?" On that Day she shall report whatever had

happened on her, for your Lord shall have commanded her to do so. On that Day men shall proceed in sorted out groups to be shown their 'Book of Deeds.' Then, whoever has done an atom's weight of good shall see it there, and whoever has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it there (99:1).

The Quranic Day of Resurrection also has signs in the form of an eclipse:

"When will this Day of Resurrection be?" Well, it will come when the sight shall be dazed, the moon becomes dark, and the sun and the moon are brought together (75:6).

Consistent with Revelation's astronomical triages we witness the splitting of the Moon, although this supposed astronomical calamity has little enough effect on the Earth for the unbelievers to think it a mere magic trick:

*The hour drew nigh and the moon did rend asunder.
And if they see a miracle they turn aside and say: Transient magic.
And they call (it) a lie, and follow their low desires (54:1).*

This is consistent with an archaic view of the heavens in the Quran as a firmament with lamps erected on it, as in the original sabbatical creation of Genesis 1:

Blessed is the One Who has decked the sky with constellations and placed in it a lamp and a shining moon (25:61).

Paradoxes of Christian Parousia

Christians remain just as transfixed in their belief of the return of Christ, despite the second millennium having passed without any signs of the four horsemen of Revelation's apocalypse appearing. This itself is an unbelievable situation, because Jesus, according to the gospels, made specific statements that his return would be in the lifetimes of those present during his own life, although he entreated them to be ever ready:

*Jesus said unto them, 'Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that **stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power**' (Mark 9).*

And this know, that if the goodman of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and not have suffered his house to be broken through. Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not (Luke 12).

In Luke Jesus invokes a full apocalyptic spectacle of the pangs of the messiah, insisting it will come in the same generation:

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your

*redemption draweth nigh. And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. Verily I say unto you, **This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.** Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away. And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth (Luke 21).*

Jesus was a unique creative genius who brought together the currents of Pharisaic Judaism of the time, with the more firebrand end-of-days vision of John the Baptist's followers and the Qumran community, complementing them with other more feminine elements of nature religion, reaching a cultural climax at the time in neighbouring Nabatea, otherwise referred to as Edom in the Bible.

Nature religion motifs abound. Jesus was anointed to his sacrificial doom by a woman who is variously claimed to be a sinner, or Mary Magdalene, whom Gnostic tradition claims was his lover. He was supported by the women of Galilee "out of their very substance". John the Baptist was likewise sacrificed in a beheading in a dance of the seven veils - an enactment of the Descent of Inanna after which Dumuzi (Tammuz in the Bible) is sacrificed - at the behest of Herodias when her daughter Salome danced to delight the generals who were defending Machaerus at the border, because Herod Antipas had insulted the Nabateans by divorcing the Princess of Nabatea, who had had to flee in fear of her life. Herod had then taken as wife Herodias, his cousin and wife of his brother Herod II (Philip), as decried by John, precipitating his ritual demise. This theme occurs likewise in the sacrifice of Haman in Esther (Ishtar) in saving Mordechai (Marduk), having persuaded her husband King Ahasuerus to offer 'half his kingdom', just as Herod did at Machaerus. Jesus crying "*Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthanei*" on the Cross is likewise a reference to the cry of Mot, the Canaanite God of the sterile season to his father El, when defeated by Ba'al the God of rain and fertility who has now become El's favourite in the spring, aided by Anath.



Moon and Sun deities surmounted by the Eagle. Al-Uzza as Moon Goddess commands the Zodiac surmounted by the moon and carrying a moon staff. The temple of Manatu at Petra. Dionysian tragic mask with dolphins. Grape freeze (centre). Coinage of Aretas IV King of the Nabataeans, Friend of his People and Shaqilat II in joint reign in the time of Jesus (Glueck).

Jesus adopts a miraculous style of faith healing characteristic of Dionysus and his Nabatean reincarnation Dhushara, whose tragic mask gave the gift of immortal life. Jesus' water into wine and nature miracles are classic Dionysian fare, as was the carefully staged passion play, with the palm king and turning the tables, leading up to the Crucifixion (Schonfield). The Talmud referred to Jesus as "Balaam the Lame" specifically stating his acts as being in the traditions of Edom. His lameness is indirectly acknowledged in his own statement "Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself" at the synagogue, before he was nearly thrown off the cliffs for blasphemy.

When one comes up close to his miraculous acts, they become harder to realize, indicating they thrived on distance and rumour, rather than the harsh light of day:

'A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.' And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6).

His brethren said: 'If thou do these things, shew thyself to the world.' For neither did his brethren believe in him. Then Jesus said unto them, 'My time is not yet come: but your time is always ready. (John 7).

The same applies to the vision of the disciples crossing Genessaret, because it states clearly that they didn't believe in the 'miracle' of dividing the loaves even though they were present:

For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened (Mark 6).

The walking on water is again classic Dionysian fare, as the miraculous god of storm and darkness.

Nevertheless Jesus was a genius who presented two conflicting personalities in the Gnostic and Synoptic versions of his account.

The Synoptics have him saying "Whom do men say that I am?", with Peter replying that he is the (anointed) Christ Messiah:

"Whom do men say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others, One of the prophets". And he saith unto them, "But whom say ye that I am?" And Peter answereth and saith unto him, "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 18).

But the Gospel of Thomas, which contains several foundation sayings in older from than the synoptics, has Jesus say he was not their master:

"Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a righteous angel." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like." Jesus said, "I am not

your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out" (Thomas 13).



A figure believed to be one of the earliest representations of Jesus discovered in 2014 in a buried underground crypt in the ancient Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus. Right: An Oxyrhynchus papyrus of the Gospel of Thomas.

Likewise his vision of the Kingdom in Thomas is far from an apocalyptic late planet Earth rapture:

His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" Jesus said, "It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'here it is' or 'there it is'. Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it" (Thomas 113).

If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you (Thomas 3).

The date of writing of The Gospel of Didymos Judas Thomas, is considered to be between 40 and 140 AD, with the core sayings coming earlier than the completed work. Thomas Didymos, meaning "twin" in Aramaic, was considered to be a twin brother of Jesus, so his word should hold good. The Oxyrhynchus Papyri date to between 130 and 250 AD. By comparison, Mark was probably written around 66-70 AD, during Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome or the Jewish revolt, as suggested by internal references to war in Judea and to persecution, and a fragment found in a mummy is claimed to date before AD 90. Luke dates to 80-100 AD and John reached its final form about 90-100 AD. This effectively dates Thomas before John because the "doubting Thomas" passage is a clear reference to the more firebrand Gnostic position of the author of John disputing the more accommodating Gnostic sayings of Thomas and his following, which were already in circulation:

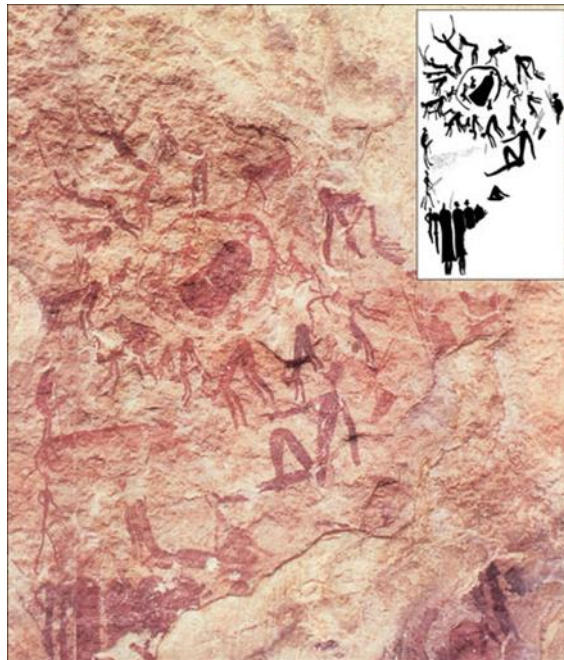
But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came... And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: [then] came Jesus ...

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust [it] into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God (John 20).

The Christian church was originally conceived as a steward to guard the Earth until the immanent return of the Lord, not to assume perpetual power. For the first few centuries this remained a feverish belief, with Christians such as Perpetua (Pagels 1988) determined to throw themselves to the lions rather than repent their beliefs in the conviction that they were facing an immanent end of days anyway. But the Second Coming never arrived. By 313 Constantine had in one fell swoop converted a religion of refugee zealots into the state religion of Rome and Christianity continued a chequered career of domination through Crusade and Inquisition until the Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment toppled it from exclusive temporal power in Europe. The Christian church now continues in perpetuity in violation of its founding principle.

2. The Deeper History of Apocalypse

We are all conscious sentient beings and have a huge amount of trouble coming to terms with what the relationship is between our conscious experience, our biological mortality in the natural world around us, and the mystery of being itself, which remains enigmatic, even in the scientific era. Belief in transcendent deities and spirits is an evolutionary feature of human consciousness that has existed for tens to hundreds of thousands of years.



Fulton cave drawing 1000 BC celebrating a San girl's menarche, Drakensberg Mountains, Natal (van der Post).

One of our oldest founding cultures, the [San Bushmen](#), whose genetic history dates back 130,000 years, have a creator deity, a lesser god of misfortune and notions of the afterlife not dissimilar

from those in major world religions, although they regard these gods philosophically rather than in fear and supplication:

≠Gao!na, the !Kung Great God, using one of his seven divine names, created himself: "I am Hishe. I am unknown, a stranger. No one can command me. I am a 'bad' thing. I follow my own path." Then ≠Gao!na created a Lesser God who lives in the western sky where the sun sets; and after this two wives for himself and for the Lesser God. ≠Gao!na, tallest of the Bushmen, was in his earthly existence a great magician and trickster with supernatural powers, capable of assuming the form of an animal, a stone or anything else he wished, and who changed people into animals and brought the dead back to life. But as the Great God who lives beside a huge tree in the eastern sky, he is the source and custodian of all things. He created the earth with holes in it where water could collect and water, the sky and rain both the gentle 'female' rain and the fierce 'male' rain thunder and lightning, the sun, moon, stars and wind. He created all the plants that grow on the earth. He created the animals and painted their individual colours and markings, and gave them all names. Then came human beings, and he put life into them; and gave to them all the weapons and implements they now have, and he implanted in them the knowledge of how to take all these things for themselves. Thus their hunting and gathering way of life was ordained from the very beginning and ≠Gao!na ordained that when they died they should become spirits, //Gerais, who would live in the sky with him and serve him. He set the pattern of life for all things, each in accordance with its own rules.

But the idea of Apocalypse ultimately stems from the beginnings of agricultural civilization, as we emerged from the gatherer-hunter 'paradise', in the fall into the tumult of future shock, with ever more cycles of facing grim reality, as one civilization after another struggled for dominance. In a sense it is woven into our existential condition. We can see in Eden the very origins of apocalypse in Adam and Eve being thrown out into a world of diaspora by the sweat of their labours, in an ongoing contratemps with God, evoking a dysphoric epoch lasting throughout biblical history. The Shekhinah of Jewish mythology, representing the indwelling feminine face of God's presence on Earth in matrimonial concord, was said to have retreated in the Fall, only to return in shards, or 'sparks', which will reunite in the end of days.

Joseph Campbell in his works on mytho-poetry and comparative religion has expanded the horizon of founding themes shared by major religions into the diverse cultures that preceded them and subtended the collective doctrines they established. Thus we can see precursors of figures such as Jesus in the heroic quests of many earlier culture heroes and demi-Gods, from Tammuz, through Adonis and Dionysus to Melkarth and the struggle of Marduk with Tiamat as an archetype of the war of Dark and Light. These comparisons are grounded in universals of the human condition - awakening a sense of awe before the mystery of being, explaining the nature of the universe and world around us, validating and supporting the existing social order and guiding the individual through the stages of life.



Marduk as civic order, battles the underworld chaos of the old mother goddess Tiamat.

As religions evolved with the cultures that sustained them, a transition occurred from civic deities that stood fairly transparently for the national order, or agricultural deities related to the power of the weather and seasons to more abstract notions of a god acting in history, which wasn't simply represented in iconic form as statues or carvings, which ultimately became cursed as idolatry. Ironically, Christian and particularly Catholic churches, display the most ornate iconography one could imagine. However idolatry was superseded by bibliolatry, which has plagued the three Abrahamic religions ever since, so that today fundamentalists commit grievous crimes against humanity on the basis of ancient revealed scripture.

Ironically the old deities of founding cultures like the San already possessed many of the abstract features, augmented by later major world religions developing a form of transcendent 'protection racket' in which a punishing moral deity, who can see right into your very soul, but remains elusively invisible succeeds in frightening the faithful into more moral forms of behaviour that reduce intra-social strife and strengthen inter-social dominance. Thus the principal power and sheer population size of major world religions stems not from transcendental insight but fearsome moral and frequently physical punishment.

3. Planetary Apocalypse Now

But what I am interested in here is the wider, deeper backdrop of apocalypse as part of our existential condition over the last two thousand years and extending into the next century. Apocalypse is an expression of a sense of future-shock, of political domination by corrupt world powers, of military turbulence and genocide on a vast planetary scale. It is dealing to currents deep in our collective subconscious that we have brought about an epoch of tumultuous change in which the future looks like coming to a 'high noon' in which everything will be revealed in a final reckoning. A hard planetary landing.

In many ways this has been a burgeoning reality ever since the agricultural revolution. It was certainly the case around the time Revelation was written, when it is said that over a million people died in the siege of Jerusalem in a world whose population was only around fifty million. Jesus was aware of this and events shortly after his death led to a holocaust, resulting in the Jewish diaspora, so it is very understandable that perspectives took an apocalyptic turn, but today we are facing a much huger planetary apocalyptic crisis, in which we have gained the powers to effectively destroy much of life on Earth and ourselves through nuclear holocaust and are having impacts which are leading to irreversible changes in the climate, ocean levels and biological and genetic diversity, diminishing our own survival prospects as a species in the process.

Apocalypse is a motif in every person's existential consciousness in the sense that we seek to understand the ultimate mystery of existence and come face to face with it before we pass away into oblivion. This is a fundamental theme of Eastern religion, which places its emphasis on an individual attaining enlightenment, in union with the cosmic self, albeit with varying degrees of moral responsibility for the welfare and enlightenment of all sentient beings, in the greater Mahayana.

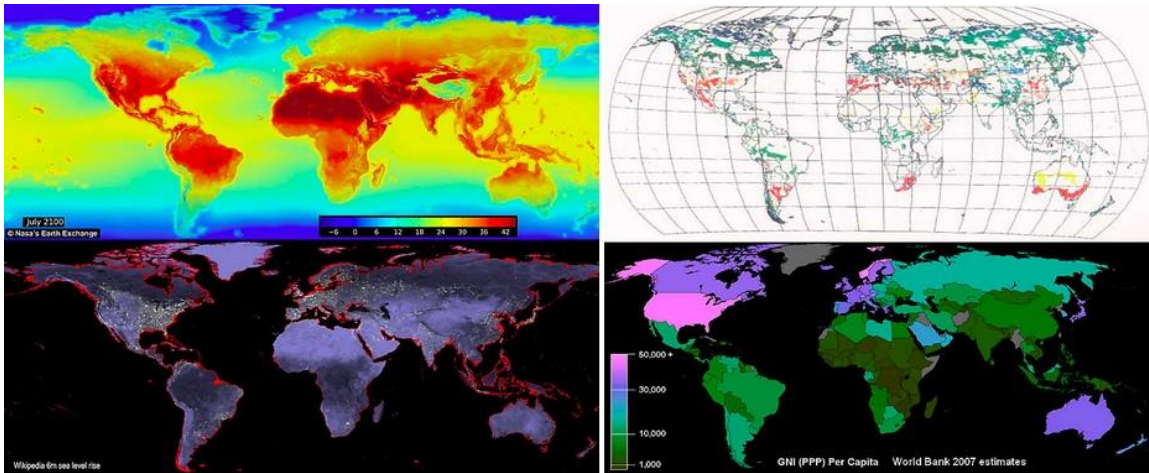
The 'unveiling' of reality is also absolutely central to the scientific revolution. As we have progressed from the first wave of Greek science through to the Renaissance and the flowering of the Western scientific tradition, the covers have well and truly been thrown off reality, from end to end of the description of nature, confounding all our preconceived notions and religious doctrines, from the flat Earth and the centre of the cosmos, to the existence of the human ovum. We now have a model of the universe from the putative theories of everything through the standard model of particle physics, to molecular dynamics, biogenesis, and with the human genome project, the decoding of human genetic evolution and that of a rich diversity of our sister species, rendering the naïve endearingly quaint notion of the sabbatical creation of Genesis 1 no more than a beautiful impossible poetic fantasy, where the plants are created before the Sun and Moon.

Nevertheless the grip of affirmative religion dies hard and clings to the scriptures like a drowning man clings to life flashing before one's eyes, right up to the moment of death in the final expose. We still find Christians and Muslims alike somehow rationalizing that the revealed scripture is somehow truer than physical reality itself, that we are all destined for the Day of Judgment and that evolution is just some kind of corrupt sleight-of-hand invented by atheistic humanists to undermine our faith in the one true God.

This again affirms to us that apocalypse is not just a figment of religious doctrine, but is a deep current in our existential consciousness induced by the paradox of subjective existence in a biological body in a culture in a continual state of flux towards an endpoint, which has throughout been one of crisis on a grand scale.

With our own generation "apocalypse now" has become an even more potent planetary reality. At their climax during the Cold War nuclear weapons of mass destruction rose to 40 times overkill, with arsenals poised to a hair trigger. We have an exponentiating world population which is consuming vast areas of the planet's natural habitable systems for human production,

causing the depletion of non-renewable resources such as oil which have taken hundreds of millions of years to accumulate, irreversible mass extinction of genetic and biological diversity and climate change which could submerge major areas of the planet and lead ultimately to a 50 metre ocean rise with the under-melting of the Antarctica and Greenland ice sheets, as well as catastrophic storms on a scale never previously recorded by humanity. We are thus literally facing planetary apocalypse if we don't get a grip on our own folly and the impacts of business-as-usual on the planetary future.



Four global scenarios requiring urgent long-term solutions, clockwise from top left: (1) Predicted world average July temperatures, indicating loss of crop production due to temperature and rainfall changes (NASA). (2) Biodiversity zones surviving four different global warming scenarios (Groombridge). (3) World gross national income per capita shows spread of world poverty and affluence. (4) Loss of land area in a 6m sea level rise (Wikipedia). Because of the long response time, it has been estimated that we are already committed to a sea-level rise of around 2.3m for each degree of temperature rise within the next 2,000 years. A temperature rise of 3 degrees would lead to a 6.9m rise, but up to 50m if the Antarctic ice sheets melted from below.

Into the middle of this toxic mix, we find that apocalyptic religions, and particularly Islam, and its divided camps, are entering ever more feverishly into an end of days struggle, in which the entire Middle East is now enmeshed in a religious war between Sunni and Shi'ite elements, amid calls from either side to the apocalyptic final solution in martyrdom and effective genocide driven by religious scripture. Both of these have end of days assumptions, with Shi'ites anticipating the return of the Mahdi the figure of the end of days who Jesus is believed to accompany to the Ka'aba in the final judgment and the Caliphate of Islamic State which seeks to return the world to a totalitarian monolith of seventh century Arabia, in which all who are perceived to have different views are taken into sexual slavery or summarily beheaded, or crucified, and minorities of other beliefs are committed to genocide, in the shadow of Muhammad's own genocide of 700 Jewish men in Medina.

Again one can see this in even deeper time as an evolutionary phenomenon of humans developing language and culture over tens of thousands of years as gatherer-hunters, only to explode as we left Africa and migrated to every "corner" of the globe. The culture of agricultural civilization then set the paradigm for reproductive expansion amid the rise and clash of cultures,

amid genocidal wars of ascendancy, accompanied by instances of natural disaster from flood and famine and the growth of epidemic plagues caused by human mobility and the density and marginal living conditions of urban populations. This became incorporated in turn into the religious dialogue as cultures sought more convincing and more universally cohesive ways of giving expression to moral and physical dystopia with a utopian expectation.

Apocalypse is in many ways a global archetype of the vision quest to find transformative meaning in an existence caught in the mortal coil, where there seems no alternative to the eventual decay of time and age and no respite from the ultimate fate of death we all face. The one way we could perhaps 'turn the tables' on reality is to discover the visionary roots of existence and convey it back to our fellow beings in a redemption of existence that includes us all in the fabric of meaning through love and the fertility of life itself. Perhaps all conscious organisms in the universe experience the apocalyptic condition and the messiah is simply an archetype of the discovery process any one of us could take to the absolute limit and return illuminated with the wisdom to weave the threads of existence to a coherent bundle of life.

(Continued on Part II)