

If you're paying attention to A&E or the History Channel or other "educational television" outlets, it will come as no surprise to you that, just as it was supposed to at the turn of the millenium in 2000 (or January 2001 for those of us mathematically advanced enough to realize "zero" is not a counting number), the world is again coming to an end, this time during the holiday season or around the time of the winter solstice of 2012, according to many self-styled prophets.

Themes of apocalypticism have fascinated the human imagination for literally thousands of years. Though apocalyptic literature has been a part of many ancient cultures, including Chinese, Mesopotamian, Greek and Egyptian to name a few, what is most familiar to us today falls mostly into the area of Christian Apocalypticism.

So we might ask, where did Christian apocalypticism originate from?

The answer simply is that it grew out of Jewish Apocalypticism, just as Christianity grew out of Judaism.

So what is Jewish Apocalypticism?

That could be the topic of hundreds of scholarly texts and thousands of hours of graduate study at fine universities. But let's try it, as the rabbis would say, standing on one foot.

Ancient Judaism was a Covenant religion. A covenant with the one God the LORD God, Jahweh. Moses gave the law. And Jahweh said to the Jews -- we need each other apparently, so let's cut a deal. Obey my commandments, I will be your God. You will be my people and prosper. And for a period of time, the people did.

But eventually, they didn't prosper and have the rewards they expected to have from that covenant. In fact, they were becoming more and more decimated among nations. To be more blunt, they were getting their butts kicked -- conquered and hauled off into captivity.

And here we have an example of what socialiologists have termed "cognitive dissonance" when your expectation of something differs radically from your experience of it.

We've all experienced cognitive dissonance when walking into a room and turning on a light switch, but the room stays black. Now the human mind can not long endure cognitive dissonance without making adjustments -- or becoming seriously neurotic, or possibly both. There are two ways to respond: you either change the belief (or the expectation), or you change your interpretation of the contrary experience so that it conforms better to the belief you hold.

Example: we may hold a belief that parents behave lovingly toward their children. But in the case of children abused by their parents, they can either change their belief to some or most parents behave lovingly toward their children. Or they can change their interpretation of the experience of being abused. The abuse is their way of expressing that they love me. Or if they are abusing me, I must be bad and have done something to deserve it. Or no, it's not that bad, they are not really abusing me. -- You can see where neurosis begins to take hold.

This kind of cognitive dissonance is what happened among some, but certainly not all, Jews, during the time of the Maccabean Revolt in 168 BCE against the atrocities imposed on them by the emperor Antiochus the IV Epiphanes, who decided it was high time that pious, covenant observant Jews became Hellenized once and for all.

The temple of Yahweh was transformed into a temple of a Greek/Syrian God called Zeus Baal Shamayin, whose statue was erected on the altar of burnt offering. They then proceeded to sacrifice swine on the altar, which as you can imagine, desecrated the temple beyond all Jewish imagining -- somewhat on the par with serving a pork roast at a Passover seder. Antiochus imposed a violent policy of Hellenization, and began to slaughter Jews and seize valuable items from the temple, as accounted in the book of First Maccabees.

The pious Jews began a guerilla warfare revolt, led by Judas Maccabaeus (Judas the Hammer).

At this time a new philosophy of "apocalypticism" arose to compensate -- a new belief that Jahweh was permitting evil a brief upper hand for purposes of testing and strengthening his people (as he tested Job) but that their LORD God Jahweh would then intervene in human history and deliver them from their enemies.

A Messiah figure came to be expected -- meanings of messiah have changed...

Cyrus the Great referred to as "A messiah" A deliverer of the people.

Apocalyptic belief found expression in oral tradition and in Jewish Apocalyptic literary works. And there are many, many of these Jewish apocalyptic works.

Now what are some common characteristics of Jewish apocalyptic literature?

1. In general, this genre consisted of pseudonymous writings that narrated a revelation given by God through a heavenly mediator (e.g., an angel), in which the mundane realities of earth (e.g., current sufferings and future vindication) were explained in light of the ultimate truths of heaven.

2. In some of these apocalypses, a prophet is shown a symbolic vision that mysteriously describes the future fate of the earth, when the forces of evil will be overthrown and God's kingdom will come (such as in the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible).

3. In others, a prophet is taken up into heaven to see the heavenly realities that foreshadowed the ultimate triumph of God on earth (such as in the Book of Revelation).

4. Originally, these apocalypses were concerned with the fate of the earth and of people on it. God had created this world, and he would redeem it. These books, in other words, were attempts to explain how evil and suffering could exist in a world created and maintained by an all-powerful and loving God.

Like Messiah, another term that has a different connotation today than it did in ancient times is "Prophecy." A prophet was a human being who transmits a message from the divine realm. Now it has come to have the connotation of predicting the future. How did that happen?

The Old Testament Book of Daniel is a prime work of Jewish Apocalypticism from this era. It was a protest of the atrocities that sparked the Maccabean Revolt, couched in the metaphor of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews during the 6th century BCE.

Scholars realize now that Daniel was not written in the 6th Century BCE, but rather in the 2nd Century BCE. Giving the author a 400-year advantage on prophecy. This is another characteristic of these apocalypses -- a fictional prophetic "author" set in a more ancient time. This tends to give the prophet's predictions greater credibility -- until we perceive the literary trick.

As we came into the Roman era, Jewish apocalypticism continued. Roman rule was just a new envelope for the contents of the Greek world. And apocalypticism was a reaction against the status quo order of Greco-Roman-Jewish life.

But as in the time of the Maccabees, it came to be a dangerous reaction.

We were coming into a time of wide diversity of Jewish belief and practice within late Second Temple Judaism -- as evidenced by the Dead Sea scrolls, which have provided us a "living look" into one such divergent Jewish community (the Essenes) and what the other denominations or sects of Judaism were that they were reacting against.

Jews had a unique "deal" with the Romans, who respected their ancient culture, as they revered all ancient cultures. Though some less observant Jews enlisted anyway, Jews were exempt from military service. After all, what good are troops who can't fight or work every seventh day and are prohibited by purity laws from touching anything dead? In return Jews paid extra tribute to Rome. And a tax structure was already set up, whereby

Jews paid their temple tax, so the Roman's piggy backed onto that tax to collect their tribute as well.

For the Romans and the temple hierarchy, it was a pretty sweet deal. Until Jewish apocalypticists and Essenes came along, challenging the authority of the Temple, saying temple sacrifice was no longer what God wanted and generally stirring up trouble among Jews. John the baptizer told his follows they didn't need the temple, nor ritual purity baths which Jews took constantly. He would bathe them once with a baptism that would abrogate all need for sacrifices at the temple and ritual purity observances and baths. Period -- over and done with. And that spelled trouble for the Sadducees who ran the temple and for the Roman rulers who on pain of disgrace and possible death were trying desperately to keep the peace in Judea.

A likely disciple of John, a man named Jeshua, from Nazareth (known by his Greek name Jesus) had great familiarity with the Book of Daniel. He believed that the Son of Man, spoken of in Daniel, was soon coming on the clouds of heaven to establish God's physical political kingdom on earth, and that Jerusalem would be replaced by a New Jerusalem that would descend from on high -- as cities in those times tended to be built, one on top of the conquest demolished ruins of the previous one.

But instead of being a great conquerer -- the Son of Man, the perceived Messiah -- Jesus died, just as John the Baptizer and numerous other Jewish apocalypticists before him who threatened the Roman and Jewish order of things, died before him.

This brings us back to the term "cognitive dissonance". What do you do when kingdom come doesn't come. This was a problem faced by Paul and other followers of Jesus after he died. What you do is, you regroup and extend prophecy further and further into the future -- indefinitely.

It should come as no surprise that, just as early Christian worship was modeled on Jewish worship, early Christian literature was modeled on Jewish religious literature.

This is decidedly the case with the Book of Revelation -- also known as the Apocalypse of John the Divine.

Similar to in Judaism, there were also other early Christian Apocalypses (The very widely circulated Apocalypse of Peter for example) that were not canonized. John's Revelation was canonized due to church politics in the late 4th century and by an extremely narrow margin of concensus. It is probably the most controversial inclusion in the New Testament Christian canon. Martin Luther despised this book, felt it was false scripture, not divinely inspired, and classed it below even apocryphal works of Christian literature.

Concerning the Book of Revelation, Christian scholars are more and more discovering what Jewish scholars (unencumbered by Christian dogma) have been arguing and documenting persuasively for hundreds of years.

Since the time of the German biblical scholar Vischer's writings about John's Revelation, published in 1886, historical-critical biblical scholars have commonly held the opinion that the main apocalypse of Revelation (chapters 4 to 21-v6) actually belongs to Jewish apocalyptic literature. It appears to be a conflation of several fairly well known Jewish apocalypses that date to the earliest Christian era and are derived from a tradition of Jewish apocalypticism dating back to the time of the Maccabean Revolt in the early second century BCE.

Findings of additional examples of Jewish apocalyptic literature among the Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran between 1947 and 1979 have furthered this viewpoint.

As Daniel was actually a protest against Greek Hellenization at the time of the Maccabees, Revelation is a protest against the atrocities of Rome, including the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple there. It has relevance in the time of Nero and a short period of time after Nero, and as a work of literature should be viewed as a product of the times and circumstances out of which it emerged and having its most direct and fundamental significance to those times.

But again we encounter "cognitive dissonance" The beliefs of progressive generations of Christians about the prophecies of Revelation were not realized. Kingdom come ... hasn't come -- at least not in the literal sense some folks insist on. And this has led to a reformulation of beliefs and experiences to mean something progressively different with each passing Christian generation.

Since Jesus' time, some people have continued to believe that the world will end soon. Most of them have based their beliefs on the teachings of Jesus. Even though every single one of these prophets of doom, from the second century to the twenty-first century, has been incontrovertibly wrong about their predictions, the business of predicting the end of the age continues to be alive and well.

I would like to mention a couple of the more interesting figures, starting closer to our own time. [*Tribute source material of Bart Ehrman*]

The year 1988 was supposed to be the year the world ended. Proof was given in a widely distributed and remarkably influential booklet entitled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Occur in 1988* by Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA rocket engineer.

True to its title, the book enumerated biblical and logical reasons why 1988 would be the year that history would begin to end, and how.

Sometime during the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah, Sept. 11–13, 1988, Jesus Christ would return from heaven to remove his followers from earth (the “rapture”), before a seven-year period of cataclysmic disaster on earth (the “tribulation”).

The tribulation would begin at “sunset 3 October 1988,” when the Soviet Union invaded Israel and began World War III. The crises that ensued would lead to the rise of an agent of Satan who would lead millions away from God and declare himself to be divine.

He would then try to take over the world’s governments, leading to a thermonuclear war on Oct. 4, 1995, which would devastate the United States.

Even though the book may sound like a quaint bit of Christian science fiction, it was read as Gospel truth by a surprising number of sincere and devout Christians. Within months, over 2 million copies were sold.

When 1988 came and went, Whisenant did not retract his views, but simply argued that he had made a slight miscalculation. In a second book published soon after his predictions had failed, he argued that 1989 would be the year!

The end never did come, of course. Another example is an evangelical Christian named Hal Lindsay.

Lindsay may well be the most read author of the twentieth century. His most famous book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, was the best-selling work of nonfiction of the 1970s, with over 28 million copies in print.

Writing in 1970, Lindsay saw the world as the stage of God’s historical activities and the Bible as the blueprint.

Lindsay calculated that a world war would break out in the Middle East in 1989, leading to an invasion of the oil-thirsty Soviet Union, a nuclear counterattack of a ten-nation European commonwealth, and the invasion of an army of 200 million Chinese.

At the end of it all, only the European commonwealth would be left, headed by a charismatic leader who was none other than the anti-Christ. The commonwealth would unleash its nuclear arsenals, destroying the major cities of earth.

When there appeared to be no hope, God would intervene once and for all. Christ would appear from heaven to overthrow the forces of evil and set up his kingdom on earth.

The problem, of course, is that this claim has been made by every Christian doomsday prophet from the beginning. As always happens, when the predictions do not occur, the prophets must go back to the drawing board.

What is most intriguing is that the evangelistic fervor never dies down with each successive edition.

When it appeared to Lindsay that it wasn't going to happen as predicted, he wrote another book, 1980s: *Countdown to Armageddon*, arguing that everything was going according to plan. The book was on The New York Times bestseller list for 21 weeks.

Possibly the most well known American failed prophecy was experienced by the followers of William Miller. Miller was a New York farmer who predicted, on the basis of a careful study of his Bible, that the world would end in a cosmic blaze of glory in 1843. Some among his thousands of followers gave away everything they owned in expectation of the day.

Even more significant historically were the predictions of the Italian monk, Joachim of Fiore, who demonstrated that the anti-Christ would soon appear and the end of the age would arrive by the year 1260. These predictions played a major role in theological reflections during the later Middle Ages.

A thousand years earlier, we find an important group of Christians living in Asia Minor adhering to the teachings of a second-century prophet named Montanus, who claimed that the world was going to end in his own generation. One of the greatest theologians of early Christianity, Tertullian, belonged to this group.

These are just a few of the many, many prophets that we know about.

All these predictors of the end have two things in common: Every one of them was completely wrong, and every one of them could cite the words of Jesus in support of his or her views.

My point is not to stress the fact that Jesus got it wrong. Instead, I think that his earliest followers got something right.

My concern in this talk has been historical-critical and not theological. If someone were interested in theology, however, he or she might want to take heed of how the early Christians handled their traditions about Jesus.

One of the frustrations of the historian of ancient Christianity is that the early Christians did not preserve their traditions about Jesus intact, but modified them for new situations in which they found themselves. Remember "cognitive dissonance."

As we have seen, Christians had no qualms about making Jesus relevant for new situations, instead of trying to pretend that what was suitable in one context was suitable for another.

Their willingness, even eagerness, to do so creates problems for historians who want to know what Jesus actually said and did.

But what causes such problems for historians may create great possibilities for theologians—or even believers—who are interested in something more than the plain facts of history.

We can't pretend that Jesus lived in our context and interpret his words in light of what they might mean today. We also can't pretend that we live in Jesus' context and that his words are immediately relevant to a different situation.

That has always been the downfall of the doomsday predictors: They have taken the words of a first-century Jewish apocalypticist and pretended that they were directed to the context that the predictors themselves were living in. These words may have provided hope for a better day to their original hearers. When they are removed from their original context and used without remainder in new contexts, they simply become shallow and false.

I'll close with a poem by Robert Frost called Fire & Ice...

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.