CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse

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One of the foundational pillars of Western society has been the persistent belief in, and debate about, the end of the world. Whether conceptualized as imminent or remote, an event to be fervently hoped for or intensely feared, the future fulfillment of the end of time profoundly influenced elite and popular culture alike in ancient, medieval, and early modern Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. Within the monotheistic and Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the concept of the complete and universal destruction of all things living upon the face of the earth and final judgment of humanity was a familiar one. In premodern Europe, members of both the educated elite and the general populace of these religious communities knew that the manifestation of divine wrath could be both terrible and awesome, as many of them were aware of, to one degree or another, the account in Genesis of the universal destruction wrought by God upon a sinful population, sparing solely Noah, his family, and an ark full of animals.\(^1\) Despite God's promise to Noah that he would not destroy the world again by water, a pact made manifest by the appearance of a rainbow in the heavens, the implication was that God had not ruled out the possibility of doling out future forms of destruction upon a wicked populace whom he deemed meriting divine punishment.\(^2\) Furthermore, in the New

\(^1\) Gen. 7:1–4: dixitque Dominus ad eum ingredere tu et omnis domus tua arcam te enim vidi iustum coram me in generatione hac ex omnibus animantibus mundis tolle septena septena masculum et feminam de animantibus vero non mundis duo duo masculum et feminam sed et de volatilibus caeli septena septena masculum et feminam ut salvetur semen super faciem universae terrae adhuc enim et post dies septem ego pluam super terram quadraginta diebus et quadraginta noctibus et delebo omnem substantiam quam feci de superficie terrae.

\(^2\) Gen. 9:8–17: haec quoque dixit Deus ad Noe et ad filios eius cum eo ecce ego statuum pactum meum vobiscum et cum semine vestro post vos et ad omnem animam viventem quae est vobiscum tam in volucribus quam in iumentis et pecudibus terrae cunctis quae egressa sunt de arca et universis bestiis terrae statuum pactum meum vobiscum et nequaquam ultra interficietur omnis caro aquis diluvii neque erit deinceps diluvium dissipans terram dixitque Deus hoc signum foederis quod do inter me et vos et ad omnem animam viventem quae est vobiscum in generationes sempiternas arcum meum ponam in nubibus et erit signum foederis inter me et inter terram cumque obduxero nubibus caelum apparebit arcus meus in nubibus et recordabor.
Testament, Christ himself promised he would return to judge the living and the dead, an event graphically depicted throughout the final chapter of the New Testament the Revelation, or Apocalypse, attributed to his disciple John. The apocalypse, understood both as a genre of historical literature as well as an artistic and literary trope received within elite and popular culture alike, promised both enormous trauma upon the evil and ultimate redemption for the steadfast community of the persecuted faithful. Thus the twinned experiences of apprehension and expectation, of fear and hope, have characterized the advent, narrative, and aftermath of the apocalypse within premodern Western culture and society. Upon the closing of the ecumene in the late fifteenth century, however, and the arrival and establishment of the permanent presence of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to American shores, apocalyptic expectations and apprehensions, rooted firmly within this premodern European tradition, were applied in these new geographic venues and modified in response to local developments. Like all historical phenomena, movements, and discourses, apocalypticism adapts to the vicissitudes of time, geography, and the always evolving contours of culture and society.

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foederis mei vobiscum et cum omni anima vivente quae carnem vegetat et non erunt ultra aquae diluvii ad delendam universam carnem eritque arcus in nubibus et video illum et recordabor foederis sempiterni quod pactum est inter Deum et inter omnem animam viventem universae carnis quae est super terram dixitque Deus Noe hoc erit signum foederis quod constitui inter me et inter omnem carnem super terram.

3 The biblical and historical scholarship surrounding the composition, authorial attribution, historical context, and reception of John's Apocalypse is, in a word, extensive. For an accessible and general introduction to some of the larger themes within Biblical scholarship surrounding John's Revelation see Pagels (2012). John's Revelation was certainly the most important of all apocalyptic discourses, influencing all subsequent apocalyptic commentaries and glosses, within medieval and early modern Christendom. For more on medieval expectations of the end and its permutations (e.g., the end of the body, the end of the world, the end of time), see Bynum and Freedman (2000). The absolute starting point for any study on the apocalyptic, premodern and/or modern alike, is the magisterial three-volume edited collection by Collins et al. (1998).

4 For the purposes of this specific collection, we use “premodern” to describe roughly the large arc of time that covers the medieval and early modern periods of European history, framed roughly by the collapse of Roman political authority in the West in the fifth century to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century A.D. It bears mentioning, however, that those parameters are, of course, dependent upon what criteria one uses to define “medieval” and “modern.” Most of the essays in this collection fit squarely within that timeframe. For an example of the coverage of this sweep of centuries, see Katherine Olson's essay, “Earth and Sky Will Be Ablaze: The Apocalypse, Hell, and Judgment in Premodern Britain, Ireland, and Brittany,” below.

5 One of the most significant works to deal with this subject, particularly in the context of American history writ large, is Boyer (1994).