

# THE LION/LAMB KING: READING THE APOCALYPSE FROM POPULAR CULTURE

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It was called Judgment Day. On that day and with one blow the entire human race was brought to the verge of extinction. To make matters even worse, the remnants of human life were continuously threatened by monstrous parodies of human intelligence.

The only hope of saving the world lay in the hands of a woman and her unborn child. Without warning a monstrous being was sent on a mission to destroy that mother so that her child would never be born. Failing in that mission, the forces that were trying to destroy the human race turned their relentless fury against her son. After a harrowing escape, the son directs a great war to rescue the human race from total annihilation. Ultimately, humanity is delivered from fiery destruction by two actions; 1) the willing self-sacrifice of one whose death makes life possible for all of humanity, and 2) the destruction of evil in a huge cauldron of molten metal and fire.

Devotees of action/adventure movies in general and Arnold Schwarzenegger movies in particular will immediately recognize in the above scenario the basic theme of *Terminator* and *Terminator 2*, a violent pair of cinematic action thrillers that set new standards for suspense and special effects.<sup>1</sup> The continuing evocative power of the two *Terminator* movies lies in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Terminator 2*, by itself, cost an unheard-of 94 million dollars to make. See Stuart Klawans, "Terminator 2: Judgment Day," *The Nation*, September 9, 1991, 278; no author listed, "Hasta la Vista, Babies," *The Economist*, July 13, 1991, 68; Richard Corliss, "Terminator 2:

emotional chords that they touch in today's world.<sup>2</sup> The human race does indeed feel itself at peril, and the concept of runaway computers and intelligent but malevolent robots is at least plausible.

What may slip by most action-movie buffs is the fact that the above scenario is not a new one. Nearly 2000 years ago an isolated man on a distant island penned his dream of great and imminent peril to the human race, of horrific and relentless beasts that sought to destroy a woman and her child, of a salvation of the human race that was achieved through death, and of the final destruction of evil in a lake of fire. That dream was recorded in a book called the Apocalypse, and that book (also called the Book of Revelation) found its way (in spite of protest) into the Christian Bible, which still influences society today.<sup>3</sup>

### **An Influential Book**

I have been unable to determine whether the authors of the Terminator concept themselves intended allusions to the Apocalypse in the two movies.<sup>4</sup> The director of the pair (James Cameron), however, has shown considerable interest in biblical scholarship and may

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Judgment Day,” *Time*, July 8, 1991, 56; David Ansen, “Terminator 2: Judgment Day,” *Newsweek*, July 8, 1991, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hirschorn declared the original *Terminator* movie the most important film of the 1980s in *Esquire* 114 (3, September, 1990), 116-117. The great popularity of *Terminator 2* is evidenced by its \$204 million dollars in theater receipts in North America alone.

<sup>3</sup> An excellent summary of the interaction of the *Terminator* movies with the Apocalypse is found in Roland Boer, “Christological Slippage and Ideological Structures in Schwarzenegger's *Terminator*,” *Semeia* 69/70 (1995): 173-174.

<sup>4</sup> I am not the first to notice the spiritual nature of the film series, and its allusions to Mary and Jesus, among other Biblical characters. See Klawans, 278, and Corliss, 55-56.

well have intended to build on the themes of the Apocalypse. In any case, the Apocalypse is far more influential in current popular culture than most people realize.

The very term “Apocalypse,” for example, has become a synonym for “Doomsday,” a reference to the end of the world, whether by violence, economic catastrophe or natural disaster. For a movie dramatizing the “horror” of war and what it did to those Americans who fought in Vietnam, Francis Coppola chose the title *Apocalypse Now*. A speech on the fiscal irresponsibility of American policy by noted New York City economist Felix Rohatyn was reported in the *New York Daily News* of May 29, 1987 under the headline “Rohatyn: Apocalypse Soon!” The term “apocalypse” has been used even more recently with regard to global warming,<sup>5</sup> the health effects of proximity to electric power lines,<sup>6</sup> urban population growth,<sup>7</sup> increased traffic on the Internet,<sup>8</sup> welfare reform,<sup>9</sup> and even alpine snowboards!<sup>10</sup> The term was also used as a title for recent novels,<sup>11</sup> for a musical recording by, of all things, a

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<sup>5</sup> Michael D. Lemonick, “Heading for Apocalypse?” *Time*, October 2, 1995, 54; cf. review of *Earth First!: Environmental Apocalypse* by S. Hollenhorst in *Choice*, July-August, 1996, 1816.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Palfreman, “Apocalypse Not,” *Technology Review* 55 (3, April, 1996), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Pearce, “Urban Apocalypse Postponed?” *New Scientist*, June 1, 1996, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Overton, “Internet Apocalypse,” *PC World*, July, 1996, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Jill Nelson, “Apocalypse Now,” *The Nation*, August 26, 1996, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Dana White, “Rip rides,” *Skiing* 44 (February, 1992), 91.

<sup>11</sup> *The Apocalypse Watch*, by Robert Ludlum; and *Night of the Apocalypse*, by Daniel Easterman. In the book *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Lois Parkinson Zamora surveys more than a dozen recent “apocalyptic” novels. See the review by John Mowat in *Journal of American Studies* 28 (2, August, 1994), 301-302.

Moroccan folk band,<sup>12</sup> and with reference to court congestion and delays,<sup>13</sup> the demise of the sun,<sup>14</sup> overpopulation in general,<sup>15</sup> AIDS,<sup>16</sup> and the unfortunate events in Waco, Texas back in 1993.<sup>17</sup>

Speeches by President Reagan called attention to the battle of Armageddon. Also drawn from the Apocalypse, the battle of Armageddon is the name given to the final battle involving all the nations of the earth resulting in the end of history as we know it. Note also the pleading of General Douglas MacArthur at the close of the Second World War:

A new era is upon us . . . The utter destruction of the war potential, through progressive advances in scientific discovery, has in fact now reached a point which revises the traditional concept of war.

Men since the beginning of time have sought peace . . . military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war.

We have had our last chance. If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, *Armageddon* was adopted as the title of a science-fiction movie about a runaway asteroid that threatens earth.

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<sup>12</sup> See the review of “Apocalypse Across the Sky,” a CD recording by the Master Musicians of Jajouka in *The New York Times*, July 12, 1992, section 2, H23.

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, “Apocalypse When?” *The National Law Journal*, January 9, 1995, A20.

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm W. Brown, “New Look at Apocalypse,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1994, 85.

<sup>15</sup> “Apocalypse Soon,” *The Economist*, July 23, 1994, A25.

<sup>16</sup> “African Apocalypse,” *Time*, July 6, 1992, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Woodbury, “After the Apocalypse,” *Time*, January 17, 1994, 17; “Children of the Apocalypse,” *Newsweek*, May 3, 1993, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 276.

The rock star, formerly known as Prince, was raised in a Seventh-day Adventist home where the beasts of Revelation are often daily fare in reaction to the latest news from Dan Rather or CNN.<sup>19</sup> Along with voracious sexuality,<sup>20</sup> the themes of his music are often laced with images from the Apocalypse. Note the lyrics from the hit song "7."

All seven and we will watch them fall  
They stand in the way of love  
And we will smoke them all  
With an intellect and a savior-faire  
No one in the whole universe will ever compare  
I am yours now and you are mine  
And together we will love through all space and time  
So don't cry-- one day all seven will die  
(repeat)

And I saw the angel come down unto me  
In her hand she holds the very key  
Words of compassion and words of peace  
And in the distance an army's marching feet  
But behold we will watch them fall

And we lay down on the sand of the sea  
And before us animosity will stand and decree  
That we speak not of love only blasphemy  
And in the distance six others will curse me  
But that's alright for I will watch them fall

CHORUS:

All seven and we will watch them fall  
They stand in the way of love  
And we will smoke them all  
With an intellect and a savior-faire  
No one in the whole universe will ever compare

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<sup>19</sup> Steve Turner, *Hungry for Heaven* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 193.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 193-194. While Prince has felt that the closest one can come to a feeling of transcendence lies in promiscuous sexuality, his religious beliefs seem fairly typical of evangelical Christianity on the whole.

I am yours now and you are mine  
And together we will love through all space and time  
So don't cry-- one day all seven will die

And we will see a plague and a river of blood  
And every evil soul will surely die in spite of  
Their seven tears-- but do not fear  
For in the distance twelve souls from now  
You and me will still be here

There will be a new city with streets of gold  
The young so educated-- they will never grow old  
And there will be no death for with every breath  
The voice of many colors sings a song  
That's so bold  
Sing it while we watch them fall

#### CHORUS

Further images which have their source in the Apocalypse include the concept of Antichrist (a terrifying end-time tyrant based on the descriptions of the beast of chapter 13), the falling star Wormwood (a demonic figure in *The Screwtape Letters*, by C. S. Lewis), the four apocalyptic horsemen (applied tongue-in-cheek to a highly-successful backfield on the Notre Dame football team), the end-time millennium (a Latin term for the thousand year period that comes at the close of earth's history in the Apocalypse), and the horrifying nothingness of the Abyss (a bottomless pit which is both the source and the destiny of all evil in the world). Even more images that have influenced one element or another of contemporary society include the idea of a mystic Babylon,<sup>21</sup> a New Jerusalem, the Alpha and the Omega, the Mark of the Beast,<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Pat Frank, *Alas, Babylon* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1970). This novel explores a scenario of nuclear war and the nature of the life after.

<sup>22</sup> Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series is notable here.

and the cryptic number of the Antichrist, 666.

Due to the tremendous influence of the Apocalypse in today's world, there has also been a resurgence of scholarly interest in the book at major centers of learning such as Harvard, Notre Dame and the University of Chicago and in scholarly societies such as the Society of Biblical Literature and the Chicago Society for Biblical Research. The book you hold in your hand is a product of this interest.

### **A Believable Scenario**

But the scholarly interest in Revelation is not dry and dusty, it has raised many issues that are relevant today. As a way of thinking about the world, apocalyptic seeks to understand the successive human ages and their culmination in a catastrophic struggle between the forces of good and evil. Apocalyptic seems to help people make sense of the universe and where they stand in it.<sup>23</sup> This is a major reason why we are seeing such a great resurgence of interest in apocalyptic in the latter half of the Twentieth Century.<sup>24</sup>

Like John, the author of the Apocalypse, people today think of themselves as living, at least potentially, in the last generation of earth's history. It was over two decades ago that the Club of Rome (a group of scientists) predicted that within thirty years civilization would collapse under the weight of increasing population and the lack of food. Since that time a multitude of survival-threatening problems have come to our attention. In 1973-4 and 1979 major energy

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>24</sup> O'Leary, 7.

shortages raised world consciousness to the fact that natural resources are limited. The “Greenhouse Effect” (a gradual warming of the earth due to the effects of pollution) threatens to melt the polar ice caps and inundate coastal areas. The destruction of the world's last sizable rain forest in Brazil raises questions about the earth's ability to maintain the necessary supply of oxygen in its atmosphere to sustain animal and human life. The movie *Independence Day* raised the specter of hostile alien invasion. Alien objects, such as giant meteorites, comets, and asteroids are also considered a factor.<sup>25</sup> The threat of germ and chemical warfare, toxic waste dumps, the destruction of the earth's ozone layer, terrorism and such new diseases as AIDS and Ebola have made everyone well aware of human mortality.<sup>26</sup>

As I write, the awesome horror of nuclear war between nations has taken a temporary back seat to the suicidal madness of a handful of terrorists. While the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has maintained a constant warning of the end with its famous "minutes to midnight" clock, the threat posed by that clock has been scaled back in the last decade because of developments in the former Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> But while optimism regarding the dangers of nuclear war may now reign in some quarters, the nuclear arsenals in the former Soviet Union remain largely intact, while the systems controlling them have become increasingly unstable. The

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<sup>25</sup> See the cover story in *Newsweek*, November 23, 1992. Toward the close of the 90s the movies *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* focused on the danger to earth of large celestial objects.

<sup>26</sup> The anthrax scares in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (September 11, 2001) brought the specter of biological warfare firmly into public consciousness. Anthrax, fortunately, is treatable and non-communicable. If terrorists were to find a way to reintroduce smallpox, on the other hand, the consequences could be catastrophic.

<sup>27</sup> This nuclear optimism was reversed in 1998 by the addition of India and Pakistan to the list of nuclear Powers. See Bill Joy, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us,” *Wired*, April, 2000, 254.



chances of former Soviet weapons getting into terrorist hands, or of some “paria” nation developing its own arsenal seem less a matter of “if” than of “when.” There is even the Terminator-like specter of a programming malfunction on the part of one or more computers that run the world's nuclear arsenals. So the apocalyptic threat that still poses the most terror for modern civilization is the awesome power embedded in the nucleus of the atom.

The threat of “terrorist nukes” has led President Bush to call for the scrapping of the ABM (anti-ballistic missile) treaty of 1972. He feels that the nuclear threat from terrorists or rogue nations is far greater than the threat from China or the Soviet Union ever was. He and others believe that the ability to counter an isolated missile threat (carrying nuclear warheads, of course) is one of the top priorities for civilized nations at the turn of the millennium. So nuclear apocalypse will likely remain a recurring theme in both the sciences and the arts.

Not long ago, it was the awareness of the nuclear threat that caused children in many places to question whether they would ever reach adulthood, and to make life decisions on that basis. Note the poem of a 13-year-old Russian student who wrote:

The entire Earth will become  
a wasteland. All buildings  
will be destroyed . . .  
All living things will perish--  
no grass, no trees, no greenery.<sup>28</sup>

That the survival of humanity is now in question is amply illustrated in the arts. Robert Morris, a New York City artist, has become famous for sculptures which illustrate piles of human body parts, as if torn apart by a nuclear holocaust. Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar stunned the art world with their painting “Scenes from the Future--the Guggenheim.” This

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas Davis, “Nuclear Visions,” *Vogue*, November, 1984, 202.

painting depicts a broken-down Guggenheim Museum in New York surrounded by a nuclear desert.<sup>29</sup> Movies such as *The Day After* and *The Road Warrior* not only depict the horror of nuclear destruction, but explore the nature of life afterward, if such can be imagined. Thus a recent philosophical trend is “post-apocalypticism” which all but considers nuclear destruction inevitable and seeks to understand what kind of future humanity has in the light of that impending reality.

As the Apocalypse makes clear, this generation is not the first to perceive that it could be the last. The difference is, this is the first generation that has perceived that the end could come without reference to God.<sup>30</sup> Somehow the idea that God could bring about the end allows for the possibility that He could save as well. But the secular apocalypse faced by this generation could be the result of an accident of history, even the random madness of a terrorist with a “Doomsday Machine.” Thus we face the end as potentially an “abyss of meaninglessness.” Perhaps the human condition was best expressed in the words of the Terminator itself, a computer-generated being, part human and part machine, “It's in your nature to destroy yourselves.”

At the eve of the new millennium, the Terminator thesis got a big boost from an unexpected source.<sup>31</sup> A warning about the dangers of technology came from none other than Bill Joy, chief scientist at Sun Microsystems and the creator of Java, a software application that helped make the internet what it is today. While Joy is certainly no Luddite, he argues the perils

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<sup>29</sup> Davis, 197-199.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 199.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Joy, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us,” *Wired*, April, 2000, 238-262.

of technology on the grounds of “unintended consequences.” Just as the widespread use of antibiotics and DDT have had unforeseen and potentially disastrous consequences, Joy argues that “Murphy’s Law” is an inevitable part of technological advances in computing as well.<sup>32</sup>

Building on the work of Ray Kurzweil and Dan Moravec, Joy notes that computer systems are very complex, involving interaction among and feedback between many parts. Any changes to such a system will cascade in ways that are difficult to predict. If Moore’s Law of hardware advancement (doubling computer performance every 18 months at no increase in cost) continues to operate, by 2030 we could be able to build machines that rival human beings in intelligence. When such “robots” exceed human intelligence and become able to self-replicate, the extinction of the human race becomes conceivable, perhaps as early as 2050.<sup>33</sup>

Joy sees the danger in genetics, nanotechnology and robotics (GNR) as even greater than the dangers of nuclear, chemical and biological warfare. The reason is that the latter are military weapons that remain under human control. The dangers of GNR, on the other hand, are grounded in their commercial and economic benefits. They will, therefore, be promoted and developed by the marketplace, with unintended consequences that will be outside governmental control. He concludes, “This is the first moment in the history of our planet when any species, by its own voluntary actions, has become a danger to itself—as well as to vast numbers of others.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 240, 243. Joy sees the possibility of “enhanced evolution” through the interchangeability of human and machine, but he is obviously not optimistic about the outcome of such evolution.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 248. Joy cites the philosopher John Leslie as estimating the risk of human

A distinguished list of readers supported and/or interacted with Joy's thesis,<sup>35</sup> providing legitimization for even greater eschatological anxiety than before. A counter-thesis finally appeared a few months later.<sup>36</sup> Jaron Lanier, a specialist in virtual reality systems, argued that Joy and his supporters have confused "ideal" computers with real computers. While we can conceptualize ideal computers, we only know how to build dysfunctional ones. Real computers break for reasons that are often less than clear, and they seem to resist our efforts to improve them, often due to legacy and lock-in problems.<sup>37</sup> While Moore's Law continues to work for hardware systems, software seems to be getting worse and worse as systems become more complex.

While in theory, therefore, the hardware could become sophisticated enough to exceed human intelligence, Lanier notes that human beings themselves don't seem able to write software that would make such a superior machine possible. If anything Moore's Law seems to reverse when it comes to software. As processors become faster and memory becomes cheaper,

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extinction at 30 per cent. Joy believes that the only solution to this danger is to consciously limit the development of potentially dangerous technologies, "by limiting our pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge (page 254)." He cites Thoreau as saying that we will be "rich in proportion to the number of things which we can afford to let alone (page 258)."

<sup>35</sup> See the "Rants and Raves" section of the July, 2000 issue of *Wired* magazine, 61-80. The fact that the article triggered scores of responses from some of the world's top thinkers shows that Joy hit a raw nerve in current human consciousness.

<sup>36</sup> Jaron Lanier, "One-Half of a Manifesto: Why Stupid Software Will Save the Future from Neo-Darwinian Machines," *Wired*, December, 2000, 158-179.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

software becomes correspondingly slower and more bloated, using up all available resources.<sup>38</sup> So Lanier conceives Joy's eschatological nightmare to end as follows: "Just as some newborn race of superintelligent robots are about to consume all humanity, our dear old species will likely be saved by a Windows crash. The poor robots will linger pathetically, begging us to reboot them, even though they'll know it would do no good."<sup>39</sup> Thus the human race will be saved from extinction by "stupid software."

Regardless of the outcome of this debate, it is clear that John's Apocalypse speaks to fears and possibilities that are just as real in today's world as they were in his.

### **Parallels Contemporary Genre**

A further reason our generation finds the Apocalypse both weird and attractive is because apocalyptic as a genre is very much alive and well in popular culture today. At first glance, for example, the cartoon movie, *The Lion King* seems to be a simple animal story. Why then did more than seventy million people go to theaters (and millions more buy or rent the video) to see a cartoon? Because *The Lion King* isn't really about animals. It is about people and groups of people and how they interact with each other; it is about taking risks, developing relationships, avoiding conflict, and confronting issues that make a difference in everyday life.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 170-174.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 172. A helpful analogy: Trips on Manhattan streets were faster a hundred years ago than they are today. While cars are faster than horses (hardware advances) the bottlenecks caused by the utility of the advance (software issues) has slowed traffic to a crawl. Result: in Manhattan horses are faster than cars (page 174). Today most gigahertz computers seem slower than the 20 megahertz "giants" of a decade ago!

But *The Lion King* is even more than a sociological treatise in disguise. It is based on an African version of apocalyptic. It involves the ruin and restoration of a paradise wherein all have a place and all function in happiness and prosperity. It is about the destruction of the environment because of evil that arises out of the animal kingdom from a dark place at the edge of paradise. It is about the hope for the future that can arise when a redeemer figure seizes his destiny with courage. And sales figures indicate that *The Lion King* struck a chord in the American consciousness that few movies have.

That's what makes the Apocalypse so powerful. Although it reads like an animal story (Rev 11:7; 12:1-17; 13:1-18; 17:1-18), it's not really about animals. It is a cartoon fantasy about people and their relationships, about interactions among groups of people, both good and evil, about the relationship between God and the human race, and how the course of human history is going to turn out. In other words, it is a cartoon about the same kinds of issues we all wrestle with from day to day.

Movies tend to be successful when they intersect with the basic struggles, conflicts and tensions within a society.<sup>40</sup> They function as a reality check and intersect with that society's popular myths and fears. Movies like *The Lion King*, *Independence Day*, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix* and *Terminator 2* show that apocalyptic genre is as popular today as it was when the Book of Revelation was written.<sup>41</sup> The credibility of apocalyptic movies depends on whether the way they portray present trends playing out into the future is believable. The same was true of

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<sup>40</sup> Scott, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 193.

ancient apocalypses.<sup>42</sup>

Apocalyptic's value in today's world, therefore, lies not primarily in its predictive power, but in its diagnostic ability.<sup>43</sup> Apocalyptic helps us to understand ourselves, both as individuals and in terms of humankind as a whole. It mirrors reality in a way that bypasses our psychological and emotional defense mechanisms, and strikes home with powerful force where we least expect it. Since genuine self-understanding is an essential pre-requisite of productive change, this role of apocalyptic, both ancient and contemporary, continues to make a difference in the world as we know it.

When reading the Apocalypse in conjunction with contemporary efforts like the *Terminator* movies, one increasingly comes to the conclusion that both strands of apocalyptic agree on the trends in their respective societies. They agree that society is headed toward catastrophe and chaos unless some extraordinary intervention should occur. They also agree on the diagnosis: The inhumanity of human beings toward one another. In enslaving or abusing other human beings, we set ourselves up as false gods acting out our own distorted version of reality.<sup>44</sup> Apocalyptic helps us see the self-deception that lurks within.

### **Why Bother?**

Does it make sense to study the Apocalypse in the Age of Information, when there are so many choices to make? I would suggest that the above realities argue for the importance of such

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 198-199.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 201, 213.

study. The book has been highly influential in today's world, you will miss the meaning of many popular allusions if you are unfamiliar with its content. The scenario of the Apocalypse is increasingly believable in a nuclear age. And the apocalyptic genre is an important window into how people think and feel about the future.

But there are other reasons why a book like the Apocalypse is deserving of study. For one thing it comes at the end of the Christian Bible, which for millions of people functions as a source of authority for their life and worldview. For many it is even a source of vital information that affects political, moral and ethical decisions. Whether or not one buys into such a reading of the book, it wields an influence in today's world far out of proportion to its level of recognition within contemporary society.

But such authoritarian readings have a dark side. It has been said that the Apocalypse “either finds a man mad or leaves him mad.” Most of us have, at one time or another, encountered somebody who drew up some nutty scheme about when the world would end, or how the Middle-East peace process would work itself out from the Apocalypse. And although we may not have known what to do with the scheme, we sensed that there was something or other loony about it.

There is nothing new about this kind of reading of the Apocalypse. It has been used in the past to support many movements of dubious character. In the Middle Ages, many groups in Western Europe, particularly in France, saw in the concept of the millennium (1000 years) a prediction that the end of the world would come around the year 1000.<sup>45</sup> This excitement was

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<sup>45</sup> Although the excitement surrounding 1000 AD was not as great or as widespread as is generally held in the popular consciousness, it is now recognized to have taken place in parts of Europe at least, contrary to earlier scholarly opinion expressed in Jacques Barzun and Henry F.



relatively small compared to that caused when the Franciscan followers of Joachim of Floris interpreted the repeated references in Revelation to a period of 1260 days or 42 months as a prediction that the end of the world would come around 1260 AD. Considerably more bizarre was the movement in Muenster, Germany in 1534 which declared that the city of Muenster was the New Jerusalem of the Apocalypse. The leaders of the movement sought to establish this earthly utopia by force of arms.

Other more or less bizarre interpretations of Revelation have continued to abound up to the present day. Antichrist has been identified as various emperors and popes of the Middle Ages, Napoleon III of France, Hitler, Mussolini and even President Reagan (after all there are six letters in each of his three names--Ronald Wilson Reagan). Armageddon has been associated with World Wars I and II as well as the infamous World War III. Babylon the Great has been applied to the Common Market, the Roman Catholic Church and the communist system. The Mark of the Beast has been associated with the new bar coding system used in supermarkets and credit cards utilizing the number 666.

More frightening yet were the developments in Waco, Texas in 1993. Misapplication of the Apocalypse by David Koresh resulted in the deaths of scores of innocent people, including four federal agents. Apparently, in the wrong hands the Apocalypse can be as dangerous as a terrorist attack. Sober and careful exegesis of the Apocalypse is not just a game, it can be a life and death matter. If the people deceived by David Koresh had been schooled in the kind of

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Graaf, *The Modern Researcher* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957), 104-106. See Henri Focillon, *The Year 1000* (NY: Unger Publishing Co., 1970; Richard Erdoes, *A. D. 1000: Living on the Brink of Apocalypse* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); Jon Paulien, "The Millennium is Here Again: Is It Panic Time?" *AUSS* (2, 1999): 167-178.

sober approach to the Apocalypse that you will find in this book, they would have rejected his demagoguery and many of them would be alive today.

There is one final reason to study the Apocalypse. Mysteries and puzzles are fun. People enjoy hunting for clues and wrestling with problems. The Apocalypse is like a Nintendo game where you keep getting stuck at a certain spot until you figure out some secret clue or solve a problem that permits you to continue past that point. It feels great every time a new piece of your understanding of Revelation falls into place. It is exciting to discover new mysteries that need to be investigated and solved. Studying the Apocalypse can be just plain fun!

## **Conclusion**

In light of the powerful influence of the Apocalypse, it is imperative that we understand the true nature of its influence. This book is dedicated to helping students wrestle with the fertile variety of meanings available in the Apocalypse without making the kind of blunders that led to Muenster and Waco. There is much to be lost, both from ignoring the book and from reading it in speculative and unhealthy ways.

At the conclusion of *Terminator 2*, there is hope, an optimistic view of the end. The maternal savior figure offers a voice-over, “For the first time I face the future with a sense of hope; if a machine, a Terminator, can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too.”

No one knows if a movie series like the *Terminator* will become a classic, a turning point in the evolution of human thought. But in the Apocalypse we have a guaranteed classic, a book that has stood the test of time. Facing the same basic issues that the human race faces today, the Apocalypse offers both a warning of doom and a promise of hope. It sees in the human race an

infinite value worth the sacrifice of an infinite God. Perhaps we can learn from an author who, like us, faced the prospect of an imminent end, yet faced it with a confidence that many of us have lost.