

ESSAY	Visions of Apocalypse: What Jews, Christians and Muslims Believe about the End Times, and How Those Beliefs Affect Our World
AUTHOR	Robert Leonhard
PUBLICATION	The Johns Hopkins University: National Security Analysis Department; 2010

1. INTRODUCTION

Eschatology is the study of last things—specifically the end of human history, including the final judgment of mankind. Many faiths feature beliefs about the end times, but the three eschatologies we shall examine in this work are of special note because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have strong and enduring effects in the United States, Israel, and the Islamic world, respectively, and because they are related to each other—often overlapping or violently clashing in their dogmas. (p. 10)

Jerusalem is the epicenter of eschatology—the focal point of the apocalyptic scenarios of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three faiths think of the city as their own. All three faiths gave rise to prophecies that the end of human history will occur there. (4)

All three beliefs—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—claim descent from Abraham. It should not surprise us, then, that all three beliefs contain compelling and controversial visions of how human history will end, because according to the record in Genesis, God’s promises to Abraham included universal and eschatological dimensions. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12: 2, 3 [NIV]) All three faiths believe they are the heirs or benefactors of those promises... (8)

2. JUDAISM: THE END-TIMES

A prominent theme among many of the [Hebrew] prophets is their description of the “Day of the Lord”. As described in the sacred texts, the “day” is an era or age in which the Lord will act decisively first to punish Israel and the Gentile nations for their disobedience, but then to redeem the faithful remnant of Israel, re-establish the kingdom, and rule Israel and the world in the [human] person of the Messiah. (25)

The prophecies thus indicate that the Day of the Lord will feature unprecedented violence, destruction, and despair—especially for those who have rejected the true faith. But the prophecies also agree that although Israel will not escape her just punishment, God will use His judgment program to rescue the Jewish nation. He will gather the Jews from across the world, resettle them in the Promised Land, and re-establish their nation. From Jerusalem, He will protect and provide for the faithful remnant of Israel which He has redeemed. (27)

Directions: Produce a packet of infographs/diagrams that present the key ideas from sections 2-5.

Once God has restored Israel, the Messiah—the anointed king—will rule both the nation and the world. The Gentile nations will become tributary to Israel, and the Messiah will miraculously bless the entire world by ending war, eliminating disease, removing the ferocity of animals, and causing the earth to become much more fruitful. (29)

TWO JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MESSIANIC TIME

Unlike Christian and Islamic beliefs concerning the end times, Jewish apocalyptic beliefs concentrate on one specific issue: the Messiah. Will he come? If so, when? Can faithful Jews speed his arrival somehow? Or did the ancient prophecies mean that a messianic Golden Age would come, rather than a person? If so, will God work through mankind to achieve that blessed reality, or will it happen miraculously? (34-35)

[There are two main interpretations of the Messiah's coming in Judaism. The first eschatological interpretation focuses on the coming of a literal Messiah, a savior who will fulfill God's promise to Abraham by establishing a Jewish state. Among Jews of this interpretation – who expect a literal human savior – there are two camps. On one hand are Jews who] actively pursue their plans to possess the biblical land of Israel... Their beliefs include the notion that through their settlement—however provocative others may view it—they are hastening the arrival of the Messiah. [On the other hand are Jews who] believe that only God can restore Israel through the person of the Messiah, and that any attempt by Jews to establish their own state in advance of his arrival is rebellion against God. (42-43)

[The second eschatological interpretation believes less in the coming of an actual Messiah, and more in the coming of an age of a kingdom-focused age on Earth in which God's people create the world that God intended. Jews of this interpretation] believe that a “messianic” [Golden Age] will come, and most believe that Jews and others will have a hand in creating it. (46)

3. CHRISTIANITY: THE END-TIMES

Paul, the [follower] of Jesus, explained that even though the nation of Israel did not recognize Jesus when he came to them, he was, nevertheless, the long-awaited Messiah. Instead of immediately establishing the kingdom as called for in the Jewish prophecies, he first had to atone for the sins of Israel and the world by dying on the cross. Having thus accomplished God's salvation program, Christ was resurrected, ascended into Heaven, and seated at the right hand of God the Father to await the end times. (55-56)

The prophetic storyline[of the end-times] thus anticipate[s] a period of Tribulation followed by the return of Christ, but the precise (or even general) timing of these events was left a mystery. (56)

After the Tribulation Christian prophecy describes the return of Christ in glory, followed by his reign on the earth for a thousand years. [This] “Millennium” corresponds to the Golden Age predicted in the Hebrew scriptures—a time of blessing, prosperity, peace, and joy. After the Millennium, which is punctuated with one final rebellion against God, prophets foresaw the final judgment [by which those with faith in Jesus Christ would earn salvation and those of un-belief would receive the punishment of eternal damnation in Hell]. (59)

Directions: Produce a packet of infographs/diagrams that present the key ideas from sections 2-5.

CHRISTIAN PREMILLENNIALS VS. CHRISTIAN POSTMILLENNIALS

The most fundamental question in Christian eschatology has to do with the timing of Christ's return. . . . Specifically, will Christ return *before* the Millennium or *after* it? The two major schools of thought on this issue are called "premillennialism" and "postmillennialism"... Basically, premillennialism states that Christ will return to the earth in the future, intervene into human history in a dramatic episode, and then set up his kingdom and bring about the Golden Age. Postmillennialism, on the other hand, states that Christ's return to the earth will be after the Golden Age and that, rather than an episodic future intervention, Christ is active on the earth now through the agency of his Church. (60-61)

Premillennialism... insists that evil is alive and well—indeed, it is on the rise and will culminate in the Tribulation. Individual believers and churches can certainly act to bring good to the world, but only in a temporary way; ultimately mankind and the Church will fail to redeem the devil's world. Christians can lend a hand in cleaning up pollution, fighting disease, and suppressing crime, but a premillennial approach to prophecy insists that only the Messiah will truly solve these issues. (74-75)

[The] premillennial interpretation is not about masses of humanity joining together to achieve [the Golden Age]. Instead, it anticipates one human being—the God-Man Jesus Christ—as the one who ushers in the Millennium. Indeed, as Christ arrives to supplant the Devil's kingdom with his own, he has to fight and destroy much of humanity in the process (79)... [No] government, except that of Christ's millennial kingdom, will ever be able to solve poverty, pollution, crime, or war. (81)

[In contrast] Postmillennialism insists that God will lead mankind toward accomplishing the Golden Age in a sort of natural, historical evolution... The postmillennial vision of the future envisions a world in which all mankind (especially Christians) work together toward the goal. It is not, strictly speaking, *apocalyptic*, because it does not anticipate a violent intervention by God, but rather a gradual process of reform and progress. (79)

The postmillennialist expects to see the gospel in action in the curing of poverty, crime, pollution, and war. The end result of the gospel message is a better world. (81)

4. ISLAM: THE END-TIMES

Almost all Muslims believe in the future arrival of Al-Mahdi al-Muntadhar, the Awaited One, and they anticipate an apocalyptic resolution of history resulting in God's victory over evil. (103)

Islamic eschatology revolves around the final judgment, al-Qiyamah, in which Allah will punish sinners and bless the faithful. Just prior to this, the Mahdi (the "rightly guided One") will reign on the earth following a cataclysmic battle (equated with Armageddon) between the faithful Muslims and ad-Dajjal [the force of Evil]. Jesus [whom Muslims consider a prophet] also figures prominently in Islamic eschatology, because he descends to earth in advance of the Mahdi in order to encourage the faithful, demonstrate to Christians and Jews that they have erred, and kill ad-Dajjal...

The Mahdi will be one descended from [the holy Prophet] Muhammad... and his name will be the same as his famous ancestor. He is regarded as the final and greatest caliph. In that role he is destined to rule the entire world and defeat all other religions—some through conquest, others through peaceful assimilation. What follows is a period of worldwide justice and righteousness, and the Mahdi will distribute great wealth to all. He will excavate and bring out for the world to see lost copies of the Torah and the Gospels, and he will also find the original Ark of the Covenant. With these sacred items he will demonstrate the falseness of Judaism and Christianity... (106-107)

Directions: Produce a packet of infographs/diagrams that present the key ideas from sections 2-5.

MUSLIM FUNDAMENTALISTS VS. MUSLIM MODERATES

As with both Judaism and Christianity, there are fundamentalists who believe and preach that the faithful can affect the timing of the apocalypse. Indeed, some [fundamentalist] scholars have pointed to al-Qaeda's actions to provoke the West as an outgrowth of this idea: by inflicting extreme violence on infidels and their regimes, faithful Muslims can... jump-start the end times. (108)

More moderate Muslim scholars reject this notion and the violence it begets. (108) Moderate clerics focus their teachings on other aspects of Islam—principally ethics and morality. Believing in the essential eschatology of the Qur'an and hadith literature, they do not hold to the idea that Muslims must have a hand in altering the timetable through violence. [It is the belief of moderates that the apocalypse will come as it will come.] (119)

5. CONCLUSION

The three Abrahamic faiths include eschatologies that impact our world. All three religions birthed prophecies that predicted an end to human history. All three likewise foresaw the arrival of God's agent who will bring about a Golden Age on earth. (121)

In a general sense, the multifarious descendents of Abraham—Jew, Christian, Muslim—today organize themselves into two opposing camps. One focuses on improving the world [by fixing the] circumstances of poverty, war, disease, crime, and hatred. The other despairs of the world and clings to the hope of divine intervention, foreseeing the inevitability of heavenly violence to eradicate unbelief...

As a general rule, those nations, states, and religious groups that experience success tend toward a *moderate* and optimistic way of interpreting prophecy. They see God at work in a gradual...operation that capitalizes on evolution and patience. They view teamwork—among the faithful, among communities, and ultimately among mankind—as the essential dynamic for God's work to be done. (122)

Believers in those nations, states, and religious groups that face foreign domination, marginalization, or failure tend toward a *fundamentalist* interpretation of prophecies. The [present circumstances are] neither acceptable nor likely to improve, and so the prospect of a dramatic divine visitation is welcome. They see the devil at work in the world today, while God patiently waits for the day of his wrathful intervention. (123)