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Premillennial themes remain popular, and their presence in media actually implies a new adaptation of these ideas.
"The End is Near": Pop Culture Adaptations of Premillennial Themes

Kelsey Samuelsen

March 1997: Thirty-nine people poison themselves, committing suicide in order to board an alien spaceship allegedly trailing the Hale-Bopp Comet. December 2009: A failed cure for cancer sparks a pandemic which immediately kills most of the population and leaves the rest ravaged and cannibalistic. January 2000: The turn of the century threatens to crash the world’s computers, wreaking havoc on civilized society. These scenarios, a mixture of fabricated and factual, represent the variety of apocalyptic myths in American culture. The popularity of end-of-the-world themes has risen in recent years. Numerous depictions of such events in well-known books, films, and music, both reflect and perpetuate the prevalence of this theme in American culture. Movies like 2012, books like the Left Behind series, and songs like Bob Dylan’s “I’d Hate to Be You on that Dreadful Day” focus on what happens when the modern world ends. The stories of the apocalypse range from the ridiculous to the dramatic and, as many critics have noted, from the religious to the secular. Conrad Ostwalt, a prominent analyst of pop culture apocalypse depictions, has written on this last phenomenon, saying that popular media “has captured and fostered the secularization of the apocalyptic tradition.” Yet Ostwalt and others who share his opinion have overlooked the prevalence of religious themes even

in contemporary end-of-the-world media, especially as they relate to the teaching of premillennial dispensationalism, the nineteenth century movement popularized by John Nelson Darby. Darby’s ideas centered on the worsening of society until cataclysm and redemption at Jesus Christ’s second coming, all concepts which appear both overtly and subliminally in modern depictions of the apocalypse. Their prevalence in twentieth and twenty-first century culture reveals the pervasiveness of traditional apocalyptic ideals in American society.

**Brief History of Premillennial Dispensationalism**

In order to properly view the themes of premillennial dispensationalism and to trace the fluctuating presentations of its core doctrines, showing its adaptability over time, it is necessary to briefly examine the history of the movement. At the turn of the nineteenth century, rumblings of apocalyptic movements already existed in American culture. The Second Great Awakening fostered an attitude of optimistic postmillennialism, in which the world ends, but as a result of human progress and perfectability.² Though optimism prevailed in popular Protestant sermons at that time, the massive bloodshed and religious strife of the Civil war era caused “much of the optimism about society’s perfectability . . . to dissipate.”³ Additionally, an influx of foreign immigrants threatened the hegemony of evangelicals, causing non-evangelical Protestants to revisit their eschatology and make it more selective.⁴ They found as their guide the Anglo-Irish theologian John Nelson Darby and his doctrines of premillennial dispensationalism. Darby taught of seven worldly dispensations, his time being the dispensation immediately preceding Christ’s second coming. In his dispensation, the world would progressively worsen, giving power to the Anti-christ and ultimately culminating in Christ’s return, a destructive Armageddon, the salvation of the righteous, and establishment of God’s kingdom.⁵ Darby’s ideas were popularized primarily through the publication of Cyrus I. Scofield’s Reference Bible which, by including footnotes explaining passages of the Bible according to Darby’s view, “provided a dispensational template through which

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³ Ibid., 421.
⁴ Ibid.
evangelicals read the scriptures." His religious postulation spread through Protestantism like the proverbial wildfire. The rapid growth of the idea was due in large part to its mode of appeal. Author Amy Frykholm states that "the dispensationalists ... staked the power of their story with the people. They did not defer to institutions ... but instead fostered the story of rapture and tribulation among popular belief." In other words, "they ... offered their story to laypeople who enthusiastically embraced it." Darby's new ideas, grounded in literal interpretation of the Bible, popular typology, and numerology suited the mood of nineteenth century evangelicalism, because people no longer saw a society careening toward redemption, but rather toward judgment. Premillennial dispensationalism as preached by Darby and believed by early evangelicals evinced that shifting perspective. In the face of diminishing Protestant power, premillenialists taught division of the saved from the unsaved. In response to growing social degradation, it preached a destructive, punishing end time to remake society. By the end of the nineteenth century, Darby's interpretation—vengeful and selective—was steadily becoming the standard national narrative of the end of the world.

As the movement grew, so did its variable interpretations, often reflecting contemporary concerns. During World War II, worldly destruction seemed not only possible but inevitable. With the advent of nuclear warfare, the apocalypse assumed a certain imminence and people began to apply current events to their apocalyptic expectations. Books like The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon connected apocalyptic signs to world events, sparking broader interest in end time beliefs. Increasingly, the apocalyptic appeal expanded beyond its denominational bounds into other religions. Historian Catherine Albanese affirms this


8 Frykholm, Rapture Culture, 18. She says that dispensationalism “emphasized evangelism over institutionalization and cast their lot with popular belief rather than church leaders,” which made the movements successful on a grassroots level.

9 Balmer, “Apocalypticism in America,” 422.

idea of growth, writing that "millennialism began in Protestantism, but non-Protestant religious movements came to share the millennial fervor" in the early twentieth century.\(^\text{11}\) Because the movement then no longer denoted a single denomination or even religion, in order to unite the movement, emphasis was placed on the overarching "Americanness" of the idea, infusing it with a sense of patriotism. Pop culture historian Mervyn Bendle writes: "beliefs about the special role and destiny of the U.S. [are] associated with the long-standing civil religion underpinning American civilization with its historical associations and with millennialist ideas."\(^\text{12}\)

Subsequently, apocalyptic attitudes became increasingly central to American religiosity.\(^\text{13}\) But American apocalypticism still centered on traditional religious ideas of growing sin, Christ’s return followed by Armageddon, and the righteous establishing God’s new kingdom.\(^\text{14}\) The only difference was that, in their iteration, Americans led the cause of righteousness. After the war, new fringe groups emerged, shifting the definition to include numerous supernatural ideas. In 1946, with the sighting of the first recorded UFO, religious movements like the Cosmic Circle of Fellowship and Heaven’s Gate sprang up.\(^\text{15}\) They introduced popularly the doctrine of rapture or salvation of the righteous before tribulation—a belief espoused by some dispensationalists—in a way that cited alien abduction rather than God’s direct hand as the means of rescue. These movements instilled in apocalypticism an element of technology and neomysticism. Since then, belief in the technological apocalypse has also manifested itself in fear of incidents like Y2K. The technological aspect of millennial beliefs

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12 Bendle, “The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture.”


14 Susan J. Palmer and Thomas Robbins, "Introduction," in Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhems: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements, ed. Susan J. Palmer and Thomas Robbins (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6–7. Palmer and Robbins here discuss each of these traits. Historicism denotes that it is a collective end, the culmination of the world’s existence, the climax of history. It is dualistic in its nature of good versus evil. It is pervasive in that the entire world explodes with it.

15 Lewis, Doomsday Prophecies, 106, 156, 193. He details numerous movements, including both the two mentioned above and Raelianism. Each of these stories includes some sort of idea of aliens representing a higher power, and a course of them freeing humans from their bodies through various methods. Raelianism even included prophets like Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus as offspring of an alien figure and a mortal woman. For greater detail on these, see Lewis.
took the deconstruction of contemporary earth to a new level, recasting ideas of space, time, and communication between earth and heaven. These restructurings became an important part of pop culture apocalyptic dialogue but did not displace Darby's foundational ideas of cataclysm, salvation, and creation of a new world, implicit in premillennial dispensationalism. These concepts simply expanded to accommodate new concerns. From the turn of the century to the modern day, apocalypticism seems to have superseded what Darby taught, replacing it with increasingly secular interpretations. However, each new development simply introduced a more inclusive appeal. This era has been one of broadening and politicizing the idea of end time, not secularizing it.

Popular culture is a gauge of public belief. This is certainly true for popular media on the apocalypse. Literature, cinema, and music exhibit varied views of apocalypticism, implying an increasingly evolving view of the end of the world, while still maintaining the traditional themes of premillennialism. As Norman Cohn outlines in his book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, traditional apocalypticism often includes a collective, terrestrial, imminent, total, and miraculous narrative. These characteristics originate in Darby's ideas: the world will worsen in sin, Christ will come, good will face evil in a final battle, and good will win. No matter the specific definition, end time belief always maintains punishment of evil, salvation of good by a Messiah figure, and some form of renewal. Though modern apocalypse stories range from war to terrorism, science fiction, horror, and drama, all hold meaning beyond just catastrophe. The variety shows that not only is the apocalyptic mode "infinitely adaptable," but that "the images and themes from the biblical apocalyptic writings permeate secular apocalypse, demonstrating a lasting legacy and congruence with the visions in the Bible." Surface-level divergences in plot, characters, or dialogue aside, the trend in modern apocalyptic presentations remains tied to premillennialism.

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**Premillennialism Present in Popular Literature**

Popular apocalyptic literature began with Hal Lindsey, author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Published in 1970, this book uncovered eschatological signs of the Millennium in current world events and developed ideas of what earth’s inhabitants could expect in the future. It made a splash, appealing first to an evangelical audience, but slowly growing more popular among the non-evangelical Christian audience. University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Robert Glenn Howard states that the book “courted a large non-denominational audience by playing its emphasis on an overtly emotional personal relationship with the divine and simple relatively literal interpretations of the Bible . . . this evangelical media spread a coherent narrative interpretation of Biblical prophecy across institutional lines.”

The *Late Great Planet Earth* sold over ten million copies to religious and non-religious readers in only its first seven years and became the bestselling non-fiction book of the decade, paving the way for popular understanding of end times. But the credit for making Christian end time perceptions an explosive literary phenomenon goes to Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the authors of the extremely popular series *Left Behind*. These books stepped away from nonfiction commentary and into the apocalyptic imagination with their story of the people left on earth after the righteous are raptured.

The book certainly benefitted from the popularity of Hal Lindsey’s work, but the power of the *Left Behind* story is in its wide allure. The book has sold millions of copies to Christian evangelicals, but it has also sold millions outside of evangelicalism. Even though it intersperses plot with a religious message that “has in no way been blunted,” its success asserts that American premillennialism is by no means dead or dying. The *Left Behind* movement disproves statements that

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21 Ibid., 202–3.


23 Ibid., 162.

24 Ibid., 151.

modern American millennialism is marginal, instead proposing that it prompts all who recognize it “to re-evaluate the ways in which [they] think and speak about popular culture, religion, and the complex and often fraught relationship between the two.”

But even beyond how this book intertwines faith and popular culture, the book reshapes the nation’s premillennial leanings, broadening interpretations beyond fringe conservatives to fit mainstream culture.

Despite the runaway success of Left Behind, American apocalypse literature reaches beyond the overtly religious, while still exuding religious themes. Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer-winning book The Road (2006) explores scenes of post-apocalyptic desperation that fit traditional themes. This book and others, such as young adult author Susan Beth Pfeiffer’s series The Last Survivors, confront fears of the end of the world, intermingling themes of biblical cataclysm. The science fiction genre in particular picks up these themes. For example, tales of alien invasion and abduction imply traditional belief in rapture, since they denote narratives of the end time where humans “commune with other worlds, even to the point of being physically transported there.” But the apocalyptic story has embedded itself in the science fiction genre on an even broader scale. Roslyn Weaver, analyst of popular culture and apocalypticism, writes that “the basic plot of science fiction disaster literature follows the sequence of events in Revelation, with four stages: first, dystopia; second, the warning or experience of a disaster; third, life post-disaster; and finally, the establishment of a new world.” She argues that even secular science fiction writers with no interest in divine entities adapt this sequence, simply because the events of Revelation are malleable, even without theistic foundations.

A book like Ender’s Game (1985), for example, includes Ender’s disturbed early life, conscription into earth’s army of military geniuses, annihilation of an entire alien species, and the subsequent political and personal turmoil, ending in Ender’s departure for a new world. Examining the sequence, the book displays dystopia, threat of disaster, life after genocide, and the political renewal, all the traits Weaver lists. Though the references in this and other books are not obvious, they still evoke apocalyptic sequences, showing...
how easily the narrative fits varied genres. Apocalyptic fiction spans multiple sub-genres, including extending into new technological forms of writing, such as websites and blogs. These media illustrate the ubiquity of the premillennial apocalypse, imparted in every form from alien to zombie.

**CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF PREMILLENNIALIST THEMES**

The most visual vehicle of pop culture, as well as arguably the most popular, is the field of cinema. Apocalyptic films tackle numerous ways of treating the end of the world, first among them movies with themes of nuclear warfare. Several films concern themselves with threats of nuclear annihilation because it is "a convenient impetus for end-of-the-world scenarios." Movies like *On the Beach* (1959), *Threads* (1984), and *The Day After* (1983) explore this take on the millennium. In these films, Mervyn Bendle says, "the principal notion . . . is that the present world is facing imminent destruction, anarchy, and violence." He links these ideas to religious premillennialism, which argues the same thing. These films came out in the Cold War era, when nuclear fallout threatened more imminently, but as the technological age developed, stories of warfare became less global and more interplanetary, involving not just earth, but civilizations beyond it. Revisiting the themes of science fiction literature, movies like *Dune* (1984), *War of the Worlds* (1953, 2005), and *Signs* (2002) highlighted this fear. This last film took on a particular eschatological tone, because of its emphonic emphasis on the perception and interpretation of signs, a sort of prophetic warning. Additionally, *Signs* is "an emblematic case study of apocalyptic dread, because it brings together the nuclear family, religion, and a feeling that the world is about to end." But even beyond *Signs*, the Heaven's Gate type

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31 Howard devotes several pages to these resources, 205–213.


33 Bendle, “The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture.”


35 Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, 128. In the film, the main character, Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) is a lapsed reverend who lost his faith after his wife died in a freak car accident. The film interweaves his religiosity with an alien invasion, and results in the restoration of his belief, as well as the salvation of the world.
of doctrine of aliens as divine harbingers of destruction displays a sense of an otherworldly power which ultimately controls the fate of the planet—a central premillennial theme—as well as an Armageddon-like battle and victory for the righteous. In all of these films, cataclysm caused by the evil of war recreates society, reiterating Darby’s themes.

Aside from war or invasion narratives, apocalypse movies employ numerous other plots to show that the end is near. The film The Seventh Sign (1988) focuses on a plotline where the interpretation of signs forces intervention to prevent the world’s end. By interpreting the seven seals discussed in the Biblical book of Revelation, pregnant Abby Quinn (Demi Moore), sees the imminent end of the world and realizes that her own unborn child will play a tragic role in it. She races to stop the signs, but at the last moment, must sacrifice her own life to save her son and, vicariously, the planet. This film deals with Biblical themes overtly, incorporating scripture and Christian history, even though the narrative of dispensationalism approaches Armageddon and final renewal differently. In other films, the message is more hidden. In the movie Pale Rider (1985), Clint Eastwood plays a man called “Preacher” who returns from the grave to confront a group of thugs persecuting a small mining town. Throughout the movie, “Preacher” demonstrates his strength and wisdom, which finally culminates in a last battle where he defeats the evil gang and then leaves the town, finally achieving tranquility. Though the title is a direct reference to the Book of Revelation 6:8, the rest of the movie deals with apocalypse more subtly, displaying themes of Armageddon and a community of the righteous without centering the plot on grand catastrophe. It still develops Weaver’s themes of dystopia, threat of destruction, life after the end, and final renewal, simply on a smaller scale.


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36 Ostwalt, “Hollywood and Armageddon,” 59–60; Thompson 15–26. Ostwalt points out that various other Biblical representations exist in this movie. The character David (played by Jurgen-Prochnow) symbolizes Jesus, and Father Lucci (Peter Friedman) becomes the mythical Cartaphilus, the Jew who struck Jesus and was doomed to wander the earth eternally.

37 Ibid., 56–7.

38 This verse reads “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.” (King James Version).
influences, delve into the panic of earth-wide calamity. These films demonstrate both the traditional apocalyptic narrative of good battling evil with good winning, while also including contemporary concerns. For these reasons, they achieved great popularity. *Waterworld* features conflict between the hero and villain, resulting in the villain’s demise and hero’s finding of a Utopia, but also turn-of-the-century anxieties over global warming. *I Am Legend* shows themes of post-apocalyptic resurrection, both physical and metaphysical, but displays concerns about experimental medicine and its global reach. Technologically-oriented films like *Terminator 2* presents ultimate salvation, but only after the threats of modern science are destroyed. This last theme has become uniquely central to apocalypse movies within the last couple of decades, particularly as the year 2000 approached. In films with strong elements of premillennialism, such as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *On the Beach* (1959), science and technology resolve cataclysms, but they are more commonly also the causes. Thus, even in narratives where salvation is modern, the message of rapture and tribulation is often antimodern. Scholars see this as a continuing trend from the era of premillennialism’s inception. Mervyn Bendle assures that it is the pattern of premillennialism to exhibit such ambivalence about technological progress. He says that the shift “involved the eclipse of progressivist Postmillennialism and the victory of ultra-reactionary Premillennialism, while . . . it entailed a shift from . . . faith in humanity and the values of progress, reason, and technology towards a darkly pessimistic view that deeply distrusts humanity.” These films, which blend action, horror, and disaster, ushered in what cinematic connoisseur Geoff King calls, “the millennial fear of Judgment Day [in] the high-tech present.” They represent a new foray into adapting the apocalypse narrative to an audience that identifies itself first not as evangelical or even religious but as part of the technological age. They capture modern fears, feeding them back in recognizable, Biblical, apocalyptic form.

One of the most prominent ideas of premillennialism is that of a Messiah who saves the world at the last moment through the forces of good. In some


40 The zombies in the film represent in a horrific fashion the belief in physical resurrection. The more spiritual side comes in as Will Smith’s character attempts to revive or cure the zombies, resurrecting them to their previous state of humanity. The fact that the protagonist also must wash away his tracks with water also evokes a sort of daily baptism, which is symbolic of resurrection.

41 Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, 34.

42 Bendle, “The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture.”

films, the Messiah figure is one person (like Abby in The Seventh Sign) easily identified by their saving role. The Messiah type in these movies "is usually a hero figure who rises to the occasion by preventing the end from coming or by defeating the forces of evil."44 However, the messianic role has changed over time. Ostwalt states that "in a . . . contemporary world, we have difficulty conceptualizing world destruction from the hands of a sovereign God." As a result, he says that humanity has raised itself to the sovereign level in popular apocalypses.45 Herein lays the centerpiece of the shifting Messiah of modern apocalypses. Instead of earth's salvation being in the hands of one person, modern people wish to see themselves as determiners of the future. They then, with qualities of good, can become saviors. Savior people fight for the righteous causes of family and community and are typically the outcasts or fringes of society, and thus are types of Christ, the Messiah of the Biblical narrative.46 Part of the messianic work includes redemption of society. So, while apocalypse films often begin by depicting people as misanthropic, by the end, society is improved. Films like Deep Impact (1998) and The Postman (1997) display that overarching goal.47 In America, where premillennialism took deep root, societal redemption is "notably nationalistic," displaying yet another theme of American premillennial dispensationalism.48 Independence Day (1996), The Day After Tomorrow, and even the recent film 2012 (2008) portray strong, American heroes. Due to the nation's unique emphasis on the tradition of end-time belief, this variation is hardly surprising and shows the premillennial leanings of cinema. Overall, the belief in judgment, but also in redemption with the help of righteous forces supports the idea that modern film has not done away with traditional modes of apocalyptic beliefs, but has simply altered them to fit a broader narrative and a world with new concerns. Looking at several depictions of the end of the world in American film, this theory can be upheld.

45 Ostwalt, "Visions of the End."
46 Bendle, "The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture."
Apocalyptic themes in music are different from those in literature and film. The media of the latter two lend themselves to development of a long narrative, whereas the former has typically under four minutes to send a message. Instead of expanding a number of themes or doctrines, apocalyptic music asserts quick emotion. Many artists’ music invokes a redemptive narrative of the apocalypse. This type of music first appeared in the wake of nuclear warfare. The music of the Cold War era evoked powerful apocalyptic imagery in the dropping of nuclear bombs, but also preached faith at the last day. The Buchanan Brothers, a group of 1950s country artists, sing these sentiments in their song “Atomic Power,” saying that “Atomic power, atomic power/It was given by the mighty hand of God” and directly quoting scripture with the words “On that day of judgment when comes a greater power/We will not know the minute and we’ll not know the hour.” The song is only one of many which pairs piety with millennialism. Lowell Blanchard’s “Jesus Hits like an Atom Bomb” laments that “everyone’s worried about the atom bomb/but nobody’s worried ‘bout the day my Lord will come.” Bradley Kincaid’s “Brush the Dust from that Old Bible” preaches that the atom bomb itself will usher in Judgment Day. All of these use the narrative of dispensationalism, complete with sin, impending destruction, and Christ’s coming. Other songs delve further into Darby’s premillennial beliefs by mentioning Rapture. Dexter Logan and Darrell Edwards sing “The Song of the Atom Bomb” in which they are raised up before the bombs fall, and the Louvin Brothers “Great Atomic Power” explicitly says that “God will save His children from that awful, awful fate.” Clear doctrines of premillennialism are expounded, namely apocalypse involving warfare, triumph of the righteous, and rapture. Additionally, these artists call the world to repentance, serving a prophetic function. They are not simply storytelling, but advocating adherence to their beliefs, demonstrating the power and popularity of the premillennial message.

49 Fred Kirby, Atomic Power, performed by the Buchanan Brothers, RCA Victor, 1946.
50 Lee V. McCullum, Jesus Hits like an Atom Bomb, performed by Lowell Blanchard, 1950.
51 Bradley Kincaid, Brush the Dust from that Old Bible, performed by Bradley Kincaid, Capitol 1276, 1950.
Popular artists later reiterated these doctrines. One such premillennial musician is Bob Dylan. In the 1970s, following a decade of inner turbulence, Dylan became a born-again Christian. His music reflected his new-found faith and began invoking religious symbols and themes. Out of this era came several songs with apocalyptic messages. His piece “I’d Hate to Be You on that Dreadful Day” included numerous references to the tribulations of the wicked at the last day. “Are You Ready?” asked its listeners about their own preparedness, posing the questions “Are you ready for the judgment? Are you ready for that terrible swift sword? Are you ready for Armageddon? Are you ready for the day of the Lord?”

Even the song “All Along the Watchtower” evokes Isaiah’s millennial imagery and warnings. Many have written that Dylan’s music has “a universal provenance that connects with his audiences.” They maintain that he adapted apocalyptic references to a general public, thus popularizing the evangelical message without excluding non-evangelical fans. Put in other words, “Dylan’s apocalypse might make specific allusions to biblical eschatology, but it [was] as likely to be used generically.” Dylan’s adaptation of apocalyptic doctrines increased the popularity and expanded the reach of basic premillennial dogmas.

Dylan’s popularization of millennialism was felt in other areas of music. Surprisingly, and demonstrative of the message’s adaptability, one of the other musical movements to include the doctrine was reggae. Christopher Partridge, apocalyptic music expert, comments that “like much Christian premillenarian discourse, reggae, especially during the 1970s and the 1980s, focused on biblical signs of the end.” As the civil rights movement desegregated black and white Protestant congregations, the doctrines of premillennialism which featured strongly in white congregations seeped into African American racial identity. Reggae reflected that change. Bunny Wailer’s piece called “Armagideon


56 Baines, “Songs of Fate, Hope, and Oblivion,” 10.

"Armageddon"") includes mention of spiritual battle, fulfillment of signs, and rhetoric of redemption, all of which is based in Darby's premillennial teaching and Protestant scripture.58 While staying on doctrine, this genre's version of the end time also incorporated racial sentiments. For African Americans as a group, "while the white, Christian God was the African's eschatological hope, the white people of the world were destined for destruction."59 Thus, whites would be the harbingers of the end. Deejay Prince Far I's song "Armageddon" exhibits this, hailing his black skin and saying that "black skin lead the way" amid Biblical calamity.60 An interesting song by Johnny Clarke titled "None Shall Escape the Judgment" speaks to all mankind, but then switches voices to say "Arise black man, Jehovah has come." Clarke goes on to depict the consequences of Armageddon and says that he will be saved because he always lives to serve "Lord God JahRasTafari."61 Millennialism in these examples is infused with African-Jamaican nationalism and simultaneously with white Protestant conceptions of the end of the world. Though reggae as a popular musical movement has suffered a degree of decline in recent years, its influence still lingers, showing how millenarianism easily adapts to numerous cultures, taking on new developments while maintaining its theological foundations.

While Bob Dylan and Bunny Wailer show the apocalyptic mindset as a mode of encouraging human goodness, many artists went a different route. Particularly in rock and roll, lyrics and music assume an overtly antagonistic, "eat, drink, and be merry" attitude toward the end of the world. Yet, even in rebelling against the repentance doctrine and asserting their own condemnation, these musicians support premillennial beliefs of end time. For some, rock and roll embodies apocalyptic fear. As one writer put it, "rock and roll music is part of man's attempt to drive from his mind the consequences of his evil living ... to divert man's attention from the nearness of the second coming of Jesus Christ."62 This view, though quite conservative, brings up the question of the genre as a backlash against traditional religion. This backlash spreads into apocalyptic depictions in rock, which are frequently more pessimistic than in other genres. There are a few examples of this. The song "Blackened" by Metallica talks about the death of the world in premillennial terms: "Smoldering decay/Take your breath away/Millions of our years/In minutes disappears." Slayer's "Raining

58 Partridge, "Babylon's Burning," 60.
61 Johnny Clarke, None Shall Escape the Judgment, performed by Johnny Clarke, Total Sounds, 1974.
Blood” continues the vivid description by singing that the sky will turn red and bloody as the Millennium opens. The song “Number of the Beast” by Iron Maiden mentions the end’s imminence with the lyrics: “Woe to you oh Earth and Sea/for the Devil sends the beast with wrath/because he knows the time is short.”63 These examples showcase the progression of belief that the impending Millennium is not necessarily a reason for hope, but that even in dread the same doctrines of calamity and salvation of the righteous appear. This evidences that “apocalyptic terms of reference are so deeply ingrained in Western culture that they have taken on an archetypal function” and that though the mode and even the sentiment toward the end of the world has changed, the fundamentals of the belief in it remain.64

In the quest to measure the popularity of premillennial themes in media, one of the best places to look is economics. Apocalyptic books and films have sold incredibly well since the second half of the twentieth century. The Late Great Planet Earth has sold over fifteen million copies and its author was named the 1970s bestselling author by The New York Times.65 The Left Behind books have sold over 50 million copies and spawned three movies, each of which has made millions of dollars.66 Tyndale House, the books’ publisher, saw an annual sales increase of $135 million between 1998 and 2001,67 while its spin-off products like CDs, comics, and computer games, have placed author Tim LaHaye on the list of Entertainment Weekly’s “most powerful entertainers.”68 To many, the popularity of this series shows that “interest in the End Times is no fringe phenomenon . . . . There is a broader audience of people who are having this conversation.”69 This is true not just of Left Behind, but of apocalyptic literature in general. The revenues of apocalypse movies also support that statement. The movie Signs made over $408 million in opening weekend, Terminator 2: Judgment Day has brought in $519 million, and even the relative flop that was the film 2012 has made about $769 million dollars worldwide.70 Looking at these statis-

63 Jeff Hanneman and Kerry King, Raining Blood, performed by Slayer, Def Jam, 1986; Steve Harris, Number of the Beast, performed by Iron Maiden, EMI, 1982; James Hetfield, Jason Newsted, and Lars Ulrich, Blackened, performed by Metallica, Elektra, 1988.
64 Carey, “The Apocalyptic Imagination,” 270.
65 Balmer, “Apocalypticism in America,” 423.
66 Bendle, “The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture.”
67 Monahan, “Marketing the Beast,” 818.
68 Ibid., 817.
tics, the answer to the question of how widespread these ideas are is relatively simple to answer. When evaluated economically, this type of media draws huge revenues, showing that it is certainly powerful enough to be drawing people to shell out money for it. There is clearly something to be said for these statistics showing the power of the apocalyptic imagination in popular culture.71

CONCLUSIONS

Modern emphasis on traditional ideas of premillennialism represents a shift back to tradition that both elucidates the present and counters secularization. Conrad Ostwalt pointed out that “the apocalyptic model allows us to make sense of our lives by providing a means by which to order time. By placing the life drama in relation to a beginning, a middle, and an end, the apocalypse provides coherence and consonance.”72 Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer agree, saying that “present events and tensions are seen as an image or prototype of the ultimate decisive struggle between good and evil and its final resolution at the end for time.”73 Many find solace in premillennial teachings, because they express the fear and misery found in the modern world.74 Moreover, end time discourse makes sense of current events, so even people who consider themselves non-religious may ascribe to the doctrines. Threats of terrorism and war have especially taken the warnings of the Book of Revelation into the mainstream by making them more plausible than before.75 As theologian Catherine Keller


71 Even outside of the purely product-oriented proof of apocalypticism’s popularity, a significant group of people believe in a premillennial apocalypse. Scholars of Christian fundamentalism indicate that a belief in an imminent apocalyptic cataclysm is held by 50 million U.S. citizens. This view is not limited to theological expression. Quinby, “The Days are Numbered,” xxi.


73 Palmer and Robbins, “Introduction,” 5. They say that “sensational current news events such as the recent Middle East war... refuel apocalyptic prophecy. Since a pre-apocalyptic gathering of the Jews in Israel is alleged to have been prophesied by Jeremiah 29:14, the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 has been viewed by Lindsey and other prophecy writers as a sign of approaching endtimes. The Middle East, which is now a strategically significant source of vital oil supplies, is also the site of original biblical prophecies... Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein contributed to the apocalyptic salience of the Middle East by overtly identifying with the ancient Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar...” Palmer and Robbins, “Introduction,” 3.

74 Quinby, “The Days are Numbered,” xiv–xv.

phrases it, "We are in apocalypse: we are in it as a script that we enact habitually when we find ourselves at an edge, and we are in it as the recipients of the history of social and environmental effects of that script." This view of being involved in the apocalypse seems obvious to the religious and has become more apparent to the public through modern depictions of the apocalypse, bringing the words of the Book of Revelation to a new light.

Of course, there are many divergences in American apocalyptic belief, and many argue that this is secularizing the axioms of the end time. There are certainly examples where the movement has become more a point of mockery than of serious consideration. For example, famed talk-show host Stephen Colbert aired a segment entitled the "Four Horsemen of the A-Pop-Calypse," joking about apocalyptic predictions, and the popular show Parks and Recreation aired an episode called "The End of the World" in the wake of the Harold Camping millennium prediction which not-so-subtly marked his followers as cultic and simple-minded. Yet the fact that these jokes are comprehensible demonstrates that these ideas are pervasive. Others believe in different methods of secularization. Liverpool’s Dr. John Walliss argues that modern displays of the apocalypse allow for human intervention, eliminate a savior, and save the world by use of technology, not by a miracle. While the critics argue that this broadening encapsulates that lack of theology which threatens religious eschatological belief, they forget that modern perspectives of many religious concepts are the result of changes over time, particularly changes caused by an ever-shifting society. The presentations of a typical Messiah, of God’s reestablished kingdom, and even of Armageddon are not precise illustrations of Biblical doctrine, but they cannot be in order to grab a large audience. Instead, premillennialism must be deftly crafted to strike modern chords of fear and rid the doctrine of its denominational associations, thereby expanding its pull. By sublimating its religiosity, "premillennial dispensationalism exceeds the boundaries of the religious communities in which it was conceived and becomes a part of widespread popular belief." Part of this expansion involves the blurring of the boundary between secular and religious. There is a growing intermingling of these categories, so

77 Anne Rehill, The Apocalypse is Everywhere: A Popular History of America’s Favorite Nightmare, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 20.
79 Walliss, "Apocalypse at the Millennium," 74–75.
80 Ostwalt, "Visions of the End."
81 Fykholm, Rapture Culture, 28.
much so that secularists "can adopt apocalyptic imagery and ideas to frame their belief and actions . . . and religious movements can adopt secular ideas by interpreting current events through the prism of the classical myth that Revelation, for example provides." For those who take this approach, secularization is a myth, a narrative for people too caught up in literality to realize that the message of premillennial dispensationalism is thriving by adaptation, and who are unable to see that modern depictions of the apocalypse are simply a new development, not a fundamental shift.

Writer Catherine Keller tells this story: "Waiting for a train in the third week of a record-breaking heat wave, I noticed a headline among the cheesier papers: 'Bible Predicts Worst-Ever Weather—Scriptures Forecast Dark Days Before World Ends' . . . Edified by the prophetic perspective on my perspiration, I thumbed through the paper, only to come upon a quite different application of the apocalypse—the pastor of the new First Church of Elvis, Presleyterian, predicting that 'Elvis will make his second coming at the end of the millennium.' Keller's tale humorously epitomizes the adaptability of the apocalypse narrative, a doctrine that has changed its depictions over time, though its fundamentals remain unchanged. Its ideas proceeded from ancient eschatology and reached full force in Protestant preacher John Nelson Darby's nineteenth century teachings. Since that time, the apocalypse has fluctuated, both in its popularity and in its vehicle, proceeding from a warning of the dangers of nuclear warfare to a commentary on mankind's ability to self-destruct, and to a fear of technological disaster. But while the plots of the apocalypse have changed, the premillennial doctrines of the nineteenth century linger, infusing all of the narratives with forms of cataclysm, assistance, salvation, and renewal. These themes have increased in popularity because they encapsulate contemporary fears about the downward spiral of society, and demonstrate that, though long thought to be dead or even designated as part of "the lunatic fringe," evangelical prophecy continues to make inroads in the "mainstream," altering the very nature of the definition of what "mainstream" is. The doctrines of premillennialism continue to define American perceptions of the end of the world, particularly through popular media, showing that even in a world that considers itself the height of inventive modernity, tradition can still be the basis of belief.

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