

# The End of Days: Tales of Apocalypse Across Time and Space

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Since the beginning of mankind, there have been stories told of the end. These stories differ greatly across the globe, but almost every culture has some story to be told of the end of humanity. These myths most often follow one of two patterns: cyclical or linear. Cyclical stories of apocalypse are most often related to the mythology based origin tales of the culture, as the beginnings and ends of things are usually tied together. It is often believed that humanity has met an end before and was reborn and is bound to do again. Linear tales of apocalypse are often prophesized and state that there will be one end of the world after which there will be no return. Some of man's earliest tales tell of the end, or ends, of humanity in the same reverence and desire to know the unknown that can be found in origin tales and this desire can still be found today in all sorts of end of the world predictions and hysteria, proving that it is in human nature to want to know where we came from and where we are going.

One of the greatest universal themes amongst both cyclical and linear stories of apocalypse is that of the flood. Perhaps the best known of these stories is that of Noah in the Christian religion. There are multiple versions of the flood story in Mesopotamian mythology, which predate written history. Written in cuneiform, the "first" flood story of the region dates to 2,000 years before that in the Bible and is even 1,800 years older than *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is commonly known for being one of the first written stories of mankind (Newman 6). "The Myth of Atrahasis" as it is called, follows the same story line of that in the Bible, with a man, Atrahasis—later known as Utanapishtim, and equivalent with Noah—leading a group of survivors out of the first destruction of the world, a flood (Newman 5).

As with most flood myths, there is a direct connection to the origin tale of the culture. In the Mesopotamian myth, before mankind, there was a separation between the higher and lower gods. The higher gods would make the lower ones work for them, so they created humans to help carry the workload. They soon came to regret their decision, as the humans were often rowdy, loud, and quickly overpopulated. To be rid of their mistake, one of the higher gods, Enlil, sent a flood to wipe them out. He soon realized that even though it was quiet at last, they still needed people to work for them, so they allowed the few survivors to repopulate, with the promise that they would never repeat their act of massive destruction. To keep the humans in check, the gods gave them shorter lifespans and sent war,

beasts, and diseases to ensure that they would not get out of hand again (Newman 8).

Greek mythology also has a flood myth, which ties to its origin story that in its way, tells the end of mankind. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod details the multiple creations and destructions of the races of man that have come before humanity as we know it today, a story many may know as "The Five Races." It begins with the Golden Race, followed in succession by a Silver Race, a Bronze Race, a Race of Heroes, and ends with the Iron Race the one in which humanity currently resides (Buxton 54). There are a few accounts of the Greek myth concerning the creation of man, and in some of them it is said that Zeus sent a flood to destroy the Race of Bronze (Buxton 59).

As in both the Mesopotamian myth and the Biblical tale, the flood is sent by the Gods (or God), but there are survivors to the flood that are allowed to repopulate. In the Mesopotamian and the Biblical story, the human survivors build large arks in which they take animals with them to survive in the new world (Foster 26). In the Greek myth, it is only Deukalion and his wife, Pyrrha who survived the nine days and nights—compared to the Christians' forty—in a chest that he built. When the lands dried, Zeus allowed them to repopulate by throwing stones over their shoulders, which eventually became the glorious Race of Heroes (Buxton 58-59). In the other two myths, humans repopulate in the regular fashion.

As far as the Mesopotamians were concerned, the end of the world had already happened with the great deluge. There did not seem to be much mention of the world ending again, which is also true for the Greeks. For both cultures there did not seem to be an emphasis on the idea of another end, as the Gods had already taken their toll in the past. It is in this way that the Christian belief differs. God sent the flood and warned Noah so he could later assist in repopulating the earth and also promised never to do such a thing to mankind again, a promise he sealed with the gift of the rainbow. Despite this, the Christian religion tells of another end of the world, one that will be much more final and will leave no survivors.

The concept of a flood ending the world is not only for the past or just a bump in the road of a linear mythological timeline. The Hindu religion also has a story of a flood weaved into its cyclical tales of the end of the world. It is believed that we are in the fourth age of the world; each age being referred to as a *yuga*. Each end of the world is a Brahma day, called a *kalpa*, in which the world is created and destroyed (Michaels 300). Each Brahma day lasts about 4,320,000 years, further being divided into 1,000 *mahayuga*, which is made up of four *yuga*, with each *yuga* lasting 12,000 years (Newman 19).

The world is currently in the fourth age, *kaliyuga*, which is believed to have started on February 18, 3102 BC. Three others preceded this Day of Brahma. The first was *krta yuga*, a time when all beings were happy and

lived equally—not unlike the Golden Race of Greece. The next was called *tretayuga*, in which morals declined and mankind had to learn their duties and appeal to the gods (Michaels 300). Next came *dvaparayuga*, when humans became greedy and envious. The world is currently in *kaliyuga*, in which the rulers are known to be restless, there is much dishonesty and death, people take more than they give, power is short lived, money is too central, and bad character traits are rewarded rather than punished (Michaels 302).

It is believed that at the end of *kaliyuga*, a new avatar of the god Vishnu will appear as a white horse and save the good people from the end of days. The world will burn due to a 100-year drought and then it will rain for 100 years, creating a flood that will destroy the world (Michaels 302). After all of this, a new cycle will begin. Though cyclical in nature, the Hindu apocalypse myth has some connections to the linear tales of the Bible and the Greek flood myth. All tell the story of a flood that wipes out humanity, though in Hindu belief, it is set to happen in the distant future rather than having happened in the distant past. As far as the Christian belief goes, there is also a mention of a white horse appearing at the end of days in both apocalypse tales, one as the God of creation and destruction, Vishnu, and the other as an agent of God. The Hindu belief can also be compared to the Five Races in the Greek mythology. In both stories, there is a steady decline in the character and living of the human races as they are destroyed and regenerated. Though the Greek story does not tell exactly how the Race of Iron will end, the Hindu belief insists it will be in a great flood.

Undoubtedly, the best-known culture for its apocalyptic ideas more than anything else is that of the Mayans. They had a cyclical idea of the end of the world and believed that it had happened multiple times. Interestingly enough, they believed that the great flood ended the previous cycle of the world (which harkens back to the Greeks, Christianity, and the foretelling of the Hindus). The Mayans were diligent astrologers, and created multiple calendars from their studies. One of these calendars told the supposed date of the end of this cycle of the world to fall on December 21, 2012 (Newman 90). There is not much said beyond the date of the cycle's end. Rather than prophesize the possible ways in which the destruction may take place, the Mayans committed more of their time to blood sacrifice, which they believed kept the world from ending before the cycle was complete (Newman 94). In this way, they resemble the Egyptian culture.

The Egyptians did not necessarily believe in a predestined end of the world, even though it was believed that when the world did end, the god Nun—the primordial waters—would reclaim the earth. This alone sets them apart from many other belief systems. They believed that the world had once been balanced and this balance, *ma'at*, was disrupted when the god Seth killed his brother, Osiris (Newman 11). It was because of this

act that the pharaohs—the only ones believed to have the ability to communicate with the Gods directly—had to make offerings on a daily basis to the sun god, Ra. If they did not, the gods could die, and balance would be lost forever, resulting in the end of the world. The Mayans did not believe that their gods could die, but also made scheduled sacrifices to stave off the end of days (Newman 11). The Greek culture was also heavily inlaid with ritual and customs, most of which revolved around the happiness of the gods. A lack of respect for the Gods, such as was committed by the Silver Race of Greek mythology, led to their destruction by Zeus (Buxton 54).

Another culture with a cyclical concept of the end of the world was that of the Hopis. The Hopi emergence story says that mankind is currently in its fourth world, such as the Hindu belief states that the world is in its fourth Day of Brahma. The people of the third world sent a bird into the sky to find an opening to a world above once the one in which they lived became too unlivable and corrupt (Newman 250). Again, there is a theme of humanity slowly falling apart due to its own evils. The story of the Hopis somewhat inverts this pattern, due to the fact that they are reaching out of their world to another one to become better, not because of an annihilation and revival on the part of the Gods, such as it was in “The Five Races of Man.”

The people of the third world climbed a ladder into the sky and into the fourth world, but accidentally brought a witch with them. This was discovered through the death of the chief's child, as everyone knew that there would be no death and pain if there had been no evil brought up with them. As they are about to cast the witch back into the third world, the chief looks down and sees his deceased child far below. He decides not to close the hole, and so evil was allowed to come into the fourth world (Newman 251). There was no true description of how the world would end, but it was believed that it would be brought about by lack of respect for the planet (Newman 255).

More commonly expressed in religion than mythology is the idea of a linear state of the existence of the world: a beginning and an end without repetition. One mythology that did partake in the prophesizing of the end of days was that of the Norse. The Norse end of the world, Ragnarok, is complete chaos ended by a great battle between the gods and the giants. There are said to be several signs that Ragnarok is coming soon (McCoy “Ragnarok”). Midgard, one of the nine worlds of Norse mythology inhabited primarily by humans, will become gripped in three years of war, followed by three years of *Fimbulvetr*, the winter of winters. It is told that there will be great suffering, incest and other sexual depravities as well as endless bloodbaths (Grossley-Holland 173). Not long thereafter, Loki and his son, the wolf Fenrir will both break the chains in which the Gods imprisoned them, and will begin Ragnarok. Loki will descend upon the earth on the ship *Naglfar*, “The Ship of the Dead,”

surrounded by giants (McCoy "Ragnarok"). When the guardian of the realms, Heimdall sees this coming, he will leave his mountain home, Himinbjorg, and blow the horn Gjall, warning the Gods that Ragnarok is finally upon them (Grossley-Holland 174).

After this, the wolf Skoll will rise and eat the sun, followed by his brother, Hati, who will destroy the moon. At this point the stars will vanish, and earthquakes and tidal waves will rock the earth as people begin to rise from the underworld (Grossley-Holland 173). The Gods will rise and battle the giants and the undead. Many of the gods will die in this battle and the earth will eventually sink into the sea (McCoy "Ragnarok"). This bares some similarities to the Egyptian belief that one day the primordial waters of the universe will consume the world again.

The earth is then reborn out of the ocean as a paradise in which the remaining gods who had survived the battle will reside (Grossley-Holland, 176). Two humans, Lif and Lifthrasir, who had hidden themselves in Yggdrasil, the tree that connects all of the nine worlds, will join them. The two go on to repopulate the earth (Grossley-Holland 176). This is comparable to the story of the Garden of Eden and its tenants, Adam and Eve, in the Christian belief, although obviously inversed in the sense that they appear after the end of our world and not at its origin. Lif and Lifthrasir can also be compared to the survivors of the floods, such as Deukalion, Pyrrha, Noah and his wife Naamah, all of whom are given the task of repopulating the earth.

Zoroastrianism is a religion that also ends the world in a great battle. This religion centers itself on the constant fight between good and evil. In the beginning of time, the god of light, Ohrmazd created mankind to strengthen his power against the dark god, Ahriman (Newman 12). At the end of the world, the savior, Saoshyant, will rise and destroy the god of darkness and evil (Newman 17). This will take place in an epic battle; the victory of goodness will result in divine judgment and the reward of an eternal happiness (Amanat 2).

It is common in linear beliefs of the end of the world for saviors to appear, which help mankind overcome the great destruction and move into a different plane of existence. In the Zoroastrian religion, that savior is Saoshyant, the accidental progeny of Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism (Newman 17). In Hindu belief, Vishnu will return and save the good people on earth. Undoubtedly, the most well-known savior of end times is Jesus, who is destined to return to earth and save all of those who are deserving of Heaven. This act will be the break between the two ages of the world, the present era, overrun by evil and the presence of the Devil, and the "Triumph of God" (Brunel 86).

Despite the popularity of the belief in Jesus's Second Coming, there is some speculation as to exactly what occurs at the end of the world in Christian belief. There are many versions of the Bible, each lending itself a bit differently to what is said to happen at the end of

days. In the New Testament, the prophecies of apocalypse appear in the Book of Revelations, supposedly written by the apostle John (Browne 55). The Old Testament also has its own version of the Book of Revelations, written by Daniel, who was said to have been a seer, prophet, and dream interpreter for the Babylonian court (Browne 58). There was also Paul, or Saul, who claimed to have had a vision from God and believed that the world would end in the first century (Browne 62-63). This can be compared to the many oracles of the Greek culture, perhaps most popularly the oracle of Delphi, to who people traveled far and wide to hear prophecies of the future.

Even though there is a lot of controversy concerning who wrote what and when, as well as what may actually happen at the end of days, there are a few things that can be surmised in general about the Christian idea of the end of the world. At the end, all "good" Christians will be lifted from the earth and saved for eternity by Jesus. This is referred to as the Rapture. There will also be an Antichrist, whose reign of earth will bring untold suffering in many forms. This time of suffering is referred to as the Tribulation and it is said that it will last for seven years. At the end of the Tribulation, there will be a massive battle between the Antichrist and Jesus, which is known as the battle of Armageddon. By the end of this battle, the Antichrist will be beaten and Christ will ensure that the world is rid of all evil, pain, and death (Browne 51-52).

The changes caused by time and expansion of the Christian religion created an atmosphere for the blending of cultural and religious beliefs. One of the most interesting of these is the Apocalypse of Peter, a text created in an attempt to convince pagans of the Christian ideas of the world's end (Newman 42). This was combined with the Greek oracles of Sibyl at the end of the second century. In the text, the earth is destroyed after the angel, Uriel, opens the gates of the underworld, releasing the dead as well as the giants of the Biblical flood and the Titans of Greek mythology. God will then come down to earth, followed by Christ, the angels, Moses, Abraham, and the Hebrew patriarchs. There will be a great judgment in which the good will be rewarded and the wicked will be persecuted (Newman 43).

In the Norse, Zoroastrian, and Christian beliefs, as well as the Apocalypse of Peter, it is believed that the world will end in a great battle. This contrasts greatly to the cyclical nature of the other mythologies, including the Greek, Mayan, Mesopotamian, Hindu, and Hopi, in which the end of the world has already happened and may or may not happen again. Common themes among the cyclical patterns of mythology are the flood and a steady decline in humanity. The Greek, Mayan, Mesopotamian, and Hindu beliefs all included a great flood that has happened or will happen, and the Norse and Egyptian mythologies claim that whenever the world does end, it will be swallowed by the universal sea. In the Greek, Hindu, Mesopotamian, and Hopi beliefs,

humanity is often its own undoing, although in the case of the Greeks and the Mesopotamians, the gods stepped in, whereas the Hindu and Hopi beliefs left the change from one world to the next to the simple passage of time or the people themselves.

Mankind's obsession with the end of the world has continued into the present day. There are endless ideas of how the world may come to an end. There are sets of environmental concerns, which have arisen in the past few centuries and have led to panic among some groups of people. The most obvious is the issue of climate change. Due to the dense pollution created by mankind, there is a fear of the earth being plunged into another ice age or becoming too hot to be habitable. There is also the fear of some external force affecting earth, such as a meteor, asteroid, or comet, which could create a horde of terrifying affects. Among these is the creation of massive dust clouds that could block out the sun, turning the earth very cold and lifeless. The force of another celestial body hitting earth could also trigger previously unseen tectonic/volcanic activity and tidal waves. It is believed that a meteor wiped out the dinosaurs, so the fear of a repeat of that scenario feels real to many people (Newman 287-288).

All of the possible effects of a collision between earth and a foreign body, including the tidal waves, earthquakes, and supervolcanoes that could consume the planet and pump the skies too full of ash for sunlight, could also be caused by the earth's own plates shifting without an external force (Newman 288).

In the past few years there has been a stirring in the media concerning solar flares and the possibility of the magnetic poles shifting. Solar flares are primarily feared for their radioactive properties and their possible ill effects on electronics. One of the most recent ones happened in 2003 and as the world has not noticed any changes that it may have contributed to, it is unlikely that another will destroy the planet (Newman 290). The magnetic poles are constantly shifting, and the main concern is that they will flip completely; leading to difficulty for migrating animals and anything else that relies on the magnetism of the planet (Newman 289-290). No one knows for certain if either of these things will end the world, but they are on the list of possibilities.

There is also a large host of concerns attributed to the selfishness or ignorance of humanity. Overpopulation, a great famine, mass pollution, and nuclear war have also been stirring the minds of people concerned about the end of days. Examples of how such ideas can grip the minds of the masses include Y2K and 2012. It was believed for some time that the start of the new millennium would create untold chaos due to a computer malfunction, stirring people into the belief that it would be the end of the world as they knew it (Newman 275). This can perhaps be contributed to the age-old concern that man has held for technology, especially apparent during the times of the Industrial Revolution and has carried on ever since. The same cannot be

said for the near-hysteria that the world underwent as 2012 neared. Word about the Mayan calendar ending on December 21, 2012 got out and resulted in hordes of documentaries, academic articles, and news stories across America. This seems to lend itself to the fact that humans are drawn to the idea of the end.

The newest branch of the apocalyptic hysteria resides in a disease that may turn the living into the living dead. Stories of zombies have been around for ages, mentioned in ancient texts such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Norse myth of Ragnarok (the latter who sail on a ship out of the underworld) and became a focused concept in voodoo rituals. These zombies started as slave-like beings under the control of their creators (Skipp 10). The zombies that we know today are not created by a human or even a godly source, but by a disease. Diseases of all kinds have been a genuine fear of mankind, from the Black Death to the Spanish Influenza; millions if not billions have died in plagues that have swept across the globe. It seems that the zombie virus is no different in concept.

The myths and folktales of the past are the reality TV shows, webpages, and films of today. If there is a thought plaguing the general consciousness, it will appear on a screen somewhere and often, which also applies to the apocalypse. Today's media has latched on to the idea of the end of the world and has run with it in every direction possible. There are television shows such as *The World Without Us* and *Doomsday Preppers* in which ideas of how the world will end and what it will be like without humanity are given life. The latter series is a reality show, in which people called "preppers" share their ideas of how the world will end and the steps they are taking to prepare themselves. Most of them have hordes of weapons, stockpiled food, and often secluded bunkers and elaborate escape plans.

Hollywood has latched onto the revolving ideas of the end of the world, and has created massive amounts of post-apocalyptic experiences for the viewers of the modern age. As stated by Paul Harris in his article "Hollywood Searches for Escapism After the Apocalypse," "destroying the world has never been more in vogue" (Harris, "Hollywood Searches for Escapism After the Apocalypse"). There is an undeniable truth to that fact when one immerses him or her self in the films of today. *Armageddon* and *Melancholia* address the fears of a comet or planet hitting earth and ending all life. *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Interstellar*, and *After Earth* show us what it would be like if the world climate did change, either resulting in famine and drought, another ice age, or, as in the case of the latter two films, the total evacuation of the planet.

Films today also address age-old apocalyptic concerns, sometimes in a new way. In *This Is The End*, a group of comedians live out their last days after the Rapture. Though a heavy topic—full of death and demons—it is a comical film and brings a new light to the usually stuffy and terrifying views of the Christian

apocalypse. In the film *2012*, the earth is destroyed by every global catastrophe imaginable. This is a film that fed the dark part of humanity that enjoys seeing destruction.

Some of the most popular apocalypse stories of the modern age contain an element of the supernatural. For a while, a large concern was the invasion of aliens. *Independence Day*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Host* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* all portray the theme of an alien race invading our planet and either destroying mankind or worse, taking human bodies as their new homes. *The Watch* and *At World's End* also exploit this theme, but through the lens of comedy. This shows that the apocalypse is no longer as serious as it once was.

Lastly, by far the most popular theme of apocalypse today is that of the zombie plague. The modern zombie can be said to have started with *The Night of the Living Dead*, and has spread to *Dawn of the Dead*, *28 Days Later*, *I am Legend*, *World War Z*, and again into a more comedic light with films such as *Shaun of the Dead*, *Warm Bodies*, and *Zombieland* (Skipp 12). One of the most popular television shows of all time is *The Walking Dead*, which follows the stories of a group of people trying to traverse a world stuffed with the flesh-eating living dead, while trying to hold on to their humanity. It is not much of a surprise that zombies have invaded the media; after all, what is more terrifying than dying? Supposedly being reanimated to feed upon the living.

Of course, one must wonder why the modern world holds such an obsession over its demise. Harris believes that tales of apocalypse is a type of catharsis, in which the viewers can be terrified and overwhelmed by the ideas of apocalypse on the screen, but go home relieved (Harris, "Hollywood Searches for Escapism After the Apocalypse"). Then one may ask "why now?" Perhaps it is not a matter of just now, as there have been tales of apocalypse across time, spread by numerous prophets and myths. Perhaps it is change, the most basic fear of mankind, which has spurred the obsession, as we live in a time of constant change now as the world folds in upon itself and spreads further across the globe in more ways than it ever has in the past (Harris, "Hollywood Searches for Escapism After the Apocalypse"). No matter what the cause, it is clear to see that "the apocalypse is in fashion," and it does not appear that it will be falling to the wayside any time soon (Harris, "Hollywood Searches for Escapism After the Apocalypse").

The most obvious difference between tales of apocalypse of the distant past and those that have risen in the modern world lies in the switch from mysticism to science. Where there were once rituals and ceremonious magic to put a hold on the end of days, there now needs to be an emphasis on recycling and otherwise shrinking our carbon footprint to keep the temperature of the earth in check. Instead of offerings in temples to win the favors of the gods, people need to get their vaccines and shop organically. Of course, there are the exceptions to the

rule, as even the ideas of life and death are being molded into one stinking creature and the planets are all full of life bent on conquest. Either way, it seems that the focus has gone from the Gods to the planet and especially the role that humans actually play on it. Mankind will never stop dreaming up ways that the world may end. To us, as it is undeniable that we began somewhere, it should be just as much so that we will end.

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