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CHRISTOPHER STAR, Apocalypse and golden age: the end of the world in Greek and Roman thought. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2021. IX + 320 pp. – ISBN 978-1-42144163-4.[1]

• ANDRÁS KRAFT, University of Vienna (andras.kraft@univie.ac.at)

Eschatological thought is closely associated with revealed monotheistic religions. But eschatology, or thinking about the end times, appeared far and wide also outside the Abrahamic religions. The book under review is a welcome addition to the ever-expanding library on non-Abrahamic eschatological traditions. It offers a chronological survey of Greco-Roman eschatology from Hesiod to Marcus Aurelius. The book is divided into two roughly equal parts. Part one, consisting of the first three chapters, surveys authors from ancient Greece until the age of Augustus. The second part, comprising chapters three through six, discusses pagan authors from the early Roman Empire. C. STAR sets the stage with a quote from Marcus Aurelius, who gives a sort of "mini-apocalypse" in his *Meditations* 6.4 (p. 1). Marcus Aurelius succinctly predicts the eventual destruction of the natural world, either through a cosmic fire, as taught by the Stoics, or through the dissolution of its constituent elements, as held by the Epicureans. These two options marked the dominant conceptual paradigms not only for Marcus Aurelius but also for most of the pagan Roman authors surveyed in the book. Philosophers and poets subscribed to either one of them, or to a hybrid of both. This review begins with an appraisal of STAR's terminology, proceeds with a synopsis of each chapter, and closes with some key insights of the book.

## TERMINOLOGY

In the introduction, the author explains that he understands "apocalypse" to be largely synonymous with cosmic catastrophe and destruction (pp. 5–6). That is, he sees apocalyptic literature to correlate with "political instability" (p. 11). This limited definition of "apocalypse" ignores the fact that apocalyptic literature can also be 'optimistic'; it can, for instance, legitimize the existing order by stressing that there is no alternative to it lest

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a cosmic catastrophe will unfold. Assuming that apocalyptic literature is intrinsically 'pessimistic' in outlook has the benefit of limiting the scope of inquiry. But it comes with two restrictions. First, it may tempt the reader to overestimate the extant sources. Most literary productions of antiquity have been lost. This is particularly true of writings that deal with forecasting the future since the powers to be always have an interest in censoring criticism. And what could be more critical than to predict the abolition of the *status quo*? Imperial censorship may have inhibited or actually purged many an eschatological work. The well-known burning of Cremutius Cordus' history under Emperor Tiberius is duly noted by STAR (p. 134), but the potential significance of Roman censorship with regard to the transmission of eschatological literature is not explored. Authors, such as Vergil and Horace, may have come down to us because they were "literary converts to monarchy"[2] and refrained from overtly challenging the early Roman emperors. We should assume that many authors who situated their criticism about the current regime in an eschatological context have not come down to us. Thus, the sources that we have may be far less critical and gloomy than they appear at first glance. Moreover, many an 'optimistic' work may have vanished because it supported a regime or faction that did not prevail. Correlating eschatology with catastrophe may thus tempt us in overestimating our sources and in presupposing that eschatological thought did not range widely, stretching from vigorous endorsement and tacit accommodation to cautious criticism and outright rejection of the *status quo*. Second, the assumption that eschatological thought is inadvertently pessimistic may cloud the ambiguous, if not hopeful, perspective of some sources. Lucretius, for instance, is quoted to have felt "a certain divine *pleasure* and horror" (p. 59; my emphasis) when writing about the world's end. The world's finitude can lead to appreciating its uniqueness and value, and it can foster moral fortitude (cf. p. 8).

Another terminological issue is whether pagan eschatology can be properly called "apocalyptic", given the fact that it is admittedly (pp. 5, 50) devoid of the key aspect of revelation. STAR tries to justify his use of the term "apocalypse" by asserting that pagan eschatology derives from the same cognitive dissonance that spurred Christian apocalypses, namely the discrepancy between a starkly changing world and the inability of the (pagan) authors to define their places therein (p. 11). To this end, the book is

2. I borrow the term from FREDERICK H. CRAMER, Bookburning and censorship in ancient Rome: A chapter from the history of freedom of speech. Journal of the History of Ideas 6/2 (1945) pp. 157–196, at p. 157.

replete with cursory references to Judeo-Christian apocalypticism (pp. 3–4, 15, 20, 49–50, 81, 85, 132, 145, 157, 173, 191, 194, 197, 208, 218, 224). In most instances, no direct borrowing from Judeo-Christian apocalypses is assumed; and where it is assumed, the author does not prove any direct influence but merely highlights conceptual parallels. The reader is left wondering whether the application of the term "apocalypse" upon ancient Greco-Roman sources is merely heuristic and exploratory or whether it serves any implicit agenda.

STAR weaves a number of modern comparisons into his chronological survey. He compares Seneca's literary viewpoint in his *Moral Epistles*, *Natural Questions*, and *Thyestes* with contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions (pp. 154–155) and disaster movies (p. 160); he juxtaposes Lucan with Tocqueville (p. 178) and Ovid with Nazi mythology (pp. 114–115). These comparisons are as refreshing as they are inconsequential for the study. The emphasis lies again on conceptual commonalities rather than on historical dependency. The fascination with eschatology is seen as an anthropological constant (pp. 6–7, 21, 167, 185) and the ancients' end-time accounts as "thought experiments" (pp. 5, 12, 225) that can be used in conceptualizing our current struggle with cosmic catastrophe (p. 227). In this context, STAR's survey of late ancient pagan eschatology reads like an anthology for constructing serviceable eschatological scenarios today. That said, the precise agenda of the book remains vague and inexplicit.

## SYNOPSIS

The first chapter (pp. 13–46) discusses the ancient Greek foundations of Roman-era pagan eschatology. Hesiod with his myth of the five metallic races is said to have initiated the expectation of an eventual cataclysm that would end the current age (p. 15). Hesiod's prediction was followed up by Pre-Socratic philosophers. Empedokles, Herakleitos, and the atomists taught that the world would be mechanically destroyed as part of the everlasting cycle of cosmic generation and corruption. Plato further elaborated on this thought in his *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and *Laws*, offering different scenarios for the relationship between global catastrophe and human history (pp. 25–39). STAR suggests that Aristotle, too, may have initially subscribed to the cyclical destruction of the physical world, but this has to remain speculation, as there is no such hint in his extant writings (pp. 41–42). In contrast to Plato and Aristotle, the Hellenistic schools of Epicureanism and Stoicism did not limit destruction to the physical world but extended it to the whole cosmos. Epicurean atomism necessitates that the

universe will eventually collapse and be randomly generated anew. Similarly, Stoic cosmology requires the world's repeated destruction through a cosmic conflagration (ἐκπύρωσις). However, they insisted that the current (and not a randomly other) order will be renewed (παλιγγενεσία). A characteristic trademark of the Hellenistic schools is their holistic approach that develops ethical implications from cosmological principles. Thus, STAR is correct in highlighting the moral repercussions of these theories. While the Epicurean notion seems to be designed to diminish the fear of death and the obsession with worldly affairs, the Stoic scenario may be intended to direct "our attention to the present moment" (pp. 45–46, cf. p. 49); *carpe diem* on cosmological grounds.

Chapter two (pp. 47–74) moves the focus from classical Greece to Republican Rome. Lucretius' Epicurean poem *De rerum natura* and Cicero's Platonic dialogue *De re publica* present the concordant motif of future destruction. Lucretius rejects non-atomist cosmologies and refutes the eternity of the world (p. 60). He points to recent novelties in science and culture, which show that the world is not everlasting. He also observed the advanced age of the world by noting that the earth had become less productive (pp. 55–56). Just like man ages and dies, so does the world. Furthermore, Lucretius argues that if cataclysms can destroy civilizations, then they can also destroy the world itself. He holds that the whole cosmos is at war with the four elements (p. 62); an idea that recalls the modern concept of entropy. Lucretius tries to refute the common criticism that considers Epicureans to be subversive to traditional religion, as the corruptibility of the world can entail its imperfection and, concomitantly, the deficiency of its divine design (p. 60). But the typically Epicurean dissociation of worldly affairs from the gods may have hardly satisfied his critics. In fact, Cicero lashes out against the Epicureans, whose ostensibly hedonist lifestyle is said to result in a protracted delay in the afterlife (qualified as "a form of purgatory" by STAR, p. 66). Drawing upon Plato and Polybios, Cicero holds that the soul is immortal and able to transcend the corruptibility of the material world. He sees political service as the fastest way to ascend to the heavenly realm (p. 66), which contradicts Lucretius' insistence that wealth, power, and political standing are ultimately in vain (p. 64). Cicero's imperative for the soul's timely ascent is buttressed by the prospect of a global destruction (p. 73). Thus, notwithstanding their differences, Cicero and Lucretius agree that the terrestrial world in general and Rome in particular will not continue perpetually.

Chapter three takes the reader to the age of Augustus (pp. 75–126) and

discusses how Vergil, Horace, and Ovid described poetically world catastrophe and the related theme of the golden age. Eschatology and protology are properly presented here as two sides of the same coin. In his *Eclogues* 4 & 6, Vergil anticipates a return of the golden age and alludes to a cosmic cataclysm but shies away from making it explicit (p. 87). In dialog with Vergil's poem is Horace's *Epode* 16, which focuses not on the timing but on the location of the golden age (p. 89). The golden age is said to have never ended; it merely migrated from Rome to a certain island in the west. Horace admonishes his readers to seek out this blessed island and to flee the civil war (p. 91). Ovid, too, drew upon the idea of the golden age and cosmic catastrophe (p. 101). He uses the Hesiodic corpus and Near Eastern traditions in describing – with surprising detail – the destruction and suffering (pp. 108–109). While ancient authors were reticent to describe the actual destruction at the end, Ovid marked the exception that makes the rule. He was the first (but not the last) classical author to elaborate the destruction of the world and its impact on mankind (p. 124). He was emphatic that the end of Rome would signify the end of the world; an idea that later developed into an ideological principle during the Byzantine period (pp. 125–126).

The second half of the book (chapters three through six) explores Seneca's and Ps-Seneca's visions of ultimate catastrophe. Chapter four (pp. 127–156) shows that worldwide destruction is a common theme throughout the early work of Seneca the Younger. His *Consolation to Marcia* adopts a vision of global destruction (p. 134), while his *Consolation to Polybius* asserts that the whole universe will be destroyed one day, recalling the Epicurean (Lucretian) theory of complete cosmic destruction (p. 138). Most importantly, his *Natural Questions* presents "the age of Neo in apocalyptic terms" (p. 128) and gives a detailed account of a global deluge. Seneca is said to have favored Stoic cyclicity and the notion that the annihilation of mankind will be followed (again) by its rebirth (p. 146); but his statements are ambiguous and leave room for interpretation. What is certain is that Seneca follows Ovid in giving detailed accounts of the future cataclysm, which he uses as a rhetorical device for consolation (p. 137).

Chapter five explores Seneca's *Thyestes* and Lucan's *Civil War* (pp. 157–190). Both authors have been called "poets of the apocalypse" – a designation that STAR dismisses, as none of their works is solely devoted to the end, nor is there any connection with the Judeo-Christian tradition (p. 157). Moreover, they are not really about the future but about "natural philosophy, myth, or Roman history" (p. 158). In his *Thyestes*, Seneca abandons

the hope for a golden age under Nero and voices fears about the end of the world (p. 160). Similarly, Lucan envisions the collapse of the Republic and the end of the world (p. 177), although he does not seem to have expected the end to come any time soon. It is shown that he draws upon Ovid and Seneca when describing the primal flood (p. 182). For Lucan the world began with a flood and will end with fire (p. 187). STAR notes that Lucan endorses the Stoic cosmic conflagration (ἐκπύρωσις) without explicitly adopting also the cyclical renewal (παλιγγενεσία), assuming that the Roman poet advances a "hybrid Stoic and Epicurean end" (pp. 172, 192).

Chapter six examines three pseudepigrapha attributed to Seneca (pp. 191–219). Following Emperor Nero's death in 68 AD, only writers influenced by Seneca are said to have written about the end of the world. STAR surveys the Ps-Senecan *Epigrams* 1, *Octavia*, and *Hercules Oetaeus*. Most attention is paid to the tragedy *Octavia*, which anticipates the near end. Much like Judeo-Christian apocalypses, it is a work of "resistance literature" (p. 209), which is anti-imperial in orientation, seeing Nero's tyranny as the ultimate abyss of history (p. 194). Nero is presented as a cosmic beast worse than the mythological monster Typhon, which is seen as yet another parallel with Judeo-Christian apocalypticism (p. 197). The *Octavia* presents a hybrid end-time prophecy that combines several apocalyptic scenarios including the motifs of flood, fire, and rebirth (p. 200). This reshuffling of motifs is viewed as a common denominator between Judeo-Christian and pagan Roman eschatology: both strands conceived of visions of the end as a "textual practice" (p. 218), in which literary motifs and text-blocks are rearranged and recontextualized.

## INSIGHTS

The six chapters give a broad survey of the eschatological views that Greco-Roman pagan philosophers and poets espoused (or at least toyed with). The strength of the book is the adroitness with which the author navigates the various textual genres and the ambiguities of the prose (e.g., p. 174). In view of the many ambiguities, STAR argues in favor of the candor of the authors under examination. He dispels doubts regarding the sincerity of the ancient voices by postulating "differing levels of belief and anticipation" (pp. 217–218), thus blurring the distinction between genuine belief and rhetorical posturing. Furthermore, the monograph presents a number of key insights. It establishes that no ancient Greek or Roman text was solely devoted to describing the end of the world; eschatology appeared only spo-

radically, most often near the start of the narrative (pp. 15, 62, 141, 170, 217). Unlike Judeo-Christian apocalyptic, Greek and Roman end-time narratives were not anonymous (p. 4), even though a series of pseudonymous works was produced during the early imperial period (pp. 191–219). Ancient authors generally chose between the Epicurean (cosmic collapse and random regeneration) and the Stoic (cosmic conflagration and identical renewal) paradigm; they endorsed either a gradualist (slow) or catastrophist (immediate) view upon the eventual end (pp. 20, 40, 52).

In view of the flexibility and topical variety of the Greco-Roman authors under discussion, it is surprising that STAR concludes his study with the assertion that the ancients' cosmology and eschatology was to "a large degree (…) predetermined" (p. 227). This seems at odds, among others, with Marcus Aurelius' mini-apocalypse – quoted at the start of the book – which is explicitly undecided about how the end will come about. The ostensible predetermination of pagan eschatology is not substantiated. Instead, a contrast is drawn up between late ancient determinism and modern free will, whereby we are said to be "determined to a large degree by human choice" (p. 227). The reader is left wondering what motivates the vindication that our contemporary eschatologies are characterized by a freer and more open-ended mindset than the ancient pagan ones. It is such seemingly incoherent (or at least insufficiently explained) digressions that diminish the value of the book. While STAR's survey of pagan eschatological thought is insightful and rewarding, it is based on a terminological vagueness and methodological indecision that appear to reproduce some of the poetic ambiguity presented in the ancient sources.

**Keywords**

ancient Roman poets; cosmic catastrophe; Latin literature; pagan eschatology; Seneca