Apocalyptic Narratives as an Integral Part of Political Imagination - An Analysis of Ancient Biblical Myths and their Evolution

The idea of the apocalypse, both by referring to the biblical myth of the Apocalypse in its various forms, but also by referring to the idea of the end of the world, is a fundamental part of this paper and of my doctoral thesis. In this paper I will analyze how the idea of the apocalypse has emerged throughout history, how it has been transformed according to the social, economic and political developments of the different communities responding to their political and spiritual needs.

This work is built on the idea that the end-of-the-world narratives that arose in antiquity were the answer that certain communities or groups within them tried to understand the world in which they lived and what its purpose might be. I intend to look at the forms of apocalyptic thinking and how it responds to social and political concerns.

Keywords: Revelation, Apocalypse, Political Imaginary, Political Narratives

The idea of the end of the world, in a total or particular sense depending on the representations of a specific social group, can be found in most human cultures and societies over time. Obviously, the imaginary of the end varies according to the context in which it appeared and, above all, according to the existential, spiritual and material concerns it reflects. Starting from Abbas Amanat’s thesis, which explains that narratives related to the end of the world (the purpose or simply the way the world ends) capture a process opposite to the one captured by the myths of creation (Amanat, 2002, p. 2) it can be argued that the two classes of narratives are opposite and in some cases even complementary. More precisely, an end to the world laying the foundation for a new existence.

In this article I want to explore how apocalyptic or end-of-world narratives have been and continue to be part of the political imaginary, how it forms and how it transforms. It should be pointed out that in this article, the term end of the world and apocalypse tend to overlap, being often used interchangeably in certain contexts. However, I would like to point out that I am starting from the premise that Revelation, understood in the sense of the book in the Bible that speaks of the end of the world, the context in which it will take place, the judgment of humanity and the narratives it has produced over the centuries in the Western space, it represents only a part of the forms that stories, myths and speeches can take about the purpose of existence. The analysis I propose combines the historical perspective, focused on important stages in the evolution of Judeo-Christian apocalypticism, but also the analysis of its function and how it is used.

Before I speak of the end narratives, apocalypticism, Apocalypse, and the contexts in which they arose, I want to define briefly the idea of a political imaginary and explain how it is to be included in this work. This concept is defined by Charles Taylor in the book Modern Social Imaginaries. He argues that the political imaginary represents how human societies imagine social existence, how their members relate to each other, and how events of any kind are interpreted (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). This approach to the concept can also be extended by adding to the observations made by two authors (Browne & Diehl, 2019, p. 394), in a way that allows me to study apocalyptic narratives. More specifically, the two talk about a “collective structure” that allows the organization of imagination and symbolism in the political space and wich organizes the processes of political life.

In the Western cultural space, the idea of the end of the world is in most cases associated with the Apocalypse of John, one of the most influential and controversial texts in the Christian canon, and with the narratives and myths it has generated or influenced over time. However, in order to respect the historical approach and to have an overview of the apocalypse, I want to start from the period of antiquity. I must point out that the term “apocalyptic” is used in this paper in the form proposed by Greg Carey, that of the historical and social context that leads to the formation and evolution of apocalyptic eschatologies, but also of the narratives they produce. For these reasons, I believe that my discussion must start from Zoroastrianism and how the worldview proposed by this religion was a fundamental transformation from the myths that had previously appeared. More specifically, Zoroastrianism proposed an idea of an imperfect, even chaotic world that would eventually be replaced by a new, perfect world (Cohn, 1999, p. 31). He preached his apocalyptic ideas in a pastoral society, relatively stable, but facing profound social transformations. Norman Cohn argues in Cosmos, Chaos & the World to come: The Ancient roots of apocalyptic faith that the “world” in which Zoroaster lived and preached was in a state of relative tranquility for centuries, in which human groups were divided into two large groups: the tribes of shepherds, who lived from animal husbandry, and the “warrior” tribes, the prophet identifying with the first. The technological military developments that led to profound social transformations: The emergence of the warrior class and their dominance over the groups they were part of, starting an era of chaos, imbalances (Cohn, 2001, pg. 94-95).

Based on the political and social realities of the world in which he lived and his message, Zoroaster can be called “the first millennial prophet,” Cohn points out. Thus, he preached a violent end to the physical world, followed by a state of balance and harmony between human beings, but also between humanity and divinity (Cohn, 2001, pg. 95-100).

“What lies ahead, at the end of time, is a state from which every imperfection will have been eliminated; a world where everyone will live for ever in a peace that nothing could disturb; an eternity when history will have ceased and nothing more can happen; a changeless realm, over which the supreme god will reign with an authority which will be unchallenged for evermore.”, acording to Cohn (Cohn, 2001, p. 99).

The evolution of Zoroastrianism as the state religion of the Persian Empire has led to a profound transformation of the practitioners apocalyptic millennial visions, so that the doctrines of the end of the world and its change do not conflict with the imperial idea and the political imaginary built around it (Marlow, Pollmann, & Noorden, 2021) (Cohn, 1999, pg. 43-44).

Despite the similarities between the modern apocalyptic imaginary and the one proposed by Zoroastrianism, most historical approaches to the former take as their starting point the apocalyptic visions produced by the ancient Jews and the context in which such narratives were born. As Alison McQueen explains, when we talk about the apocalypticism in ancient Palestine, its spiritual and religious side cannot be separated from the political one, from the way those communities imagined their limits, their relationship with the rest of the world and especially the situation they were in. This author calls this situation “political theodicy” (McQueen, 2018, p. 26) and points out that those who first produced the end-of-the-world narratives were trying to create a form of rhetorical balance between official religious dogmas, namely the covenant with divinity, and the objective political reality of the world in which they lived. In accordance with this approach, some prophets such as Isaiah or Amos built a worldview of a spiritual nature and with profound political implications in which the political problems of the Jews ultimately represented a punishment from God for their sins (McQueen, 2018, p. 26).

The connection between apocalyptic myths and the political imagination can also be seen in the way in which the former were used by the political and religious elites of ancient Palestine to explain or even support the relationship between their communities and the surrounding empires that exercised their hegemony over their. More specifically, George Ricker Berry argues that in addition to the explanatory role, apocalypticism was more or less surprising to offer consolation to those who suffered (Berry, 1943, p. 9). Thus, texts of this kind spoke of a better world that would replace the present one. As far references to immediate political realities go they tend to be sporadic and hidden in metaphors. However, in general, they indicated that the end of the world, here with the sense of its profound transformation, would be the result of direct intervention by the divinity.

In parallel with the idea of offering conformt to those who suffered, apocalyptic texts were used to create and justify the need for resistance in the political imagination of Jewish communities. In general, this leads to two planes in which this resistance to external influences and violence can take place: Social transformation, coupled with liberation from political domination; plus a cultural approach that involves preserving one’s own culture and narratives about the past (Harlow, 1985, pg. 6-7).

It should be stressed that there is no absolute consensus on how apocalyptic narratives were integrated into the political imagination of ancient Jewish communities. More specifically, some researchers, including William Lamont, argue that they were used to reinforce the status quo at a given time and even the hegemony of foreign powers over the groups that produced such narratives. The relationship of Jewish apocalypticism with the political imagination can also be understood by reference to its authors. Commonly, common knowledge and many researchers argue that such narratives originate at the fringes of societies, among those with limited social and political influence. However, John Reeves and William Adler argue that it originated in some cases within the political and religious elites, benefiting from their influence on public perceptions (Adler, 1996, p. 6) (Reeves, 2005, p. 3).

As I explained above, I start from the idea that the political imagination is one of those factors that allows a community to represent its position in the “world” and its relations with people and groups outside it. Some authors propose interpretations of how apocalyptic narratives created in ancient Palestine were used that capture this function. Specifically, apocalyptic has provided patterns for understanding social and political reality, but also a framework for acting or, on the contrary, not doing so in certain contexts(Portier-Young, 2014, p. 156).

Historically, Christian apocalypticism can be considered an extension, at least in the first decades and centuries, of the Jewish one. However, the different theologies, but especially the social and political contexts in which the two religious traditions developed, have made the end-of-the-world narratives constructed from different concerns. Discussions about the end of the world in Christianity mistakenly start with the Apocalypse of John, the last book in the Bible. However, as some biblical scholars point out, such debates should start from Jesus Christ and the message attributed to him. Among them is Albert Schweitzer, an author who proposes a historical analysis of the doctrine of this prophet, rather than theological or spiritual. Thus, he argues that Christ may be considered an apocalyptic prophet of the first century of our era who would not have expected the material world to continue its existence until the 21st century. (Schweitzer, 1978).

With the spread of Christianity and the rise of the first Christian communities around the Mediterranean Sea, the first translations of the Gospels and other books of the New Testament began to circulate, including the Apocalypse of John, accepted into the Christian canon around the year 200 of our era (Talbert, 1994, p. 1). These groups read this text as a warning about the collapse of the Roman Empire, a natural approach given the apocalyptic substratum of the doctrines they adhered to, and their initial position as fringe of Roman society. Over time, with the political imagination, interpretations of apocalyptic narratives have also transformed, including the events described in the original text, along with interpretations linking the end of the world to the possibility of nuclear war or the effects of global warming (McQueen, 2018, pg. 22-23)

The role that Christian apocalyptic play in the political imagination can also be understood by interpreting biblical narratives as political myths or at least as starting points for them. More specifically, as Henry Tudor argued, the early Christian communities did not see the end of the world as a distant future event. On the contrary, for them, it was a phenomenon that was taking place in their own time, although this end did not come, eschatological scenarios were “rewritten”, being brought back to the public attention by various natural disasters (Tudor, 1972, pg. 94-95). With the stabilization of Christianity’s position in the Roman Empire, a process of limiting the eschatological approach took place, in which the Church tried to support the reading of the Book of Relevation only in a spiritual key (Tudor, 1972, p. 98). I believe that this process has ultimately led to the marginalization of concerns about the end of the world and how it could be related to the everyday problems/crises in the Western political imagination. However, it can also be argued that even allegorical interpretations of a spiritual nature can have political implications, especially in those cases where apocalyptic narratives that refer to divinity eventually reach the point of view. question the authority of political institutions that oppose social change (Pocock, 2003, p. 46).

With social, cultural, scientific and technological developments, apocalyptic narratives have diversified, resulting in two broad categories: sacred Apocalypses and secular Apocalypses. If in the case of sacred apocalypses, events occur as a result of divine intervention, in the case of secular ones, the underlying crises are controlled/caused by humans or by nature, not to mention the intervention of divinity (Jones, 2022, p. 45).

One of the premises from which I start in this paper and on which I build my doctoral thesis is that apocalyptic narratives are and can be analyzed as political myths, or at least these or only elements of them can be integrated into political myths. Thus, assuming this premise allows me to argue that apocalypticism has always been included in the political imagination and to briefly analyze the implications of this conclusion.

Richard Kyle argues that apocalyptic narratives of a secular nature have their roots in a “naturalistic” worldview, which often referred to what we might call “environmental factors” such as climate or problems caused by the use of nuclear weapons. Apocalypticism has been brought back to the public’s attention by world wars, the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Fears about nuclear weapons, environmental catastrophes, or public health issues have captured the Western political imagination and beyond (Kyle, 2012). Based on this argument, Simon Dein argues that the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived in apocalyptic terms, its impact on the political imagination being that of profound changes in societies (Dein, 2020).

In conclusion, I believe that biblical apocalyptic myths have been an important part of the Western political imagination, by referring to the social and political contexts in which they were born, but also by the way in which over the centuries and communities have managed to adapt, to produce new variants. They were used to build the worldview of various social groups and to establish the relationships within them, but also that they had with otherness.

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