



Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith

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All over the world people look forward to a perfect future, when the forces of good will be finally victorious over the forces of evil. Once this was a radically new way of imagining the destiny of the world and of mankind. How did it originate, and what kind of world-view preceded it? In this engrossing book, the author of the classic work *The Pursuit of the Millennium* takes us on a journey of exploration, through the world-views of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India, through the innovations of Iranian and Jewish prophets and sages, to the earliest Christian imaginings of heaven on earth.

Until around 1500 B.C., it was generally believed that once the world had been set in order by the gods, it was in essence immutable. However, it was always a troubled world. By means of flood and drought, famine and plague, defeat in war, and death itself, demonic forces threatened and impaired it. Various combat myths told how a divine warrior kept the forces of chaos at bay and enabled the world to survive. Sometime between 1500 and 1200 B.C., the Iranian prophet Zoroaster broke from that static yet anxious world-view, reinterpreting the Iranian version of the combat myth. For Zoroaster, the world was moving, through incessant conflict, toward a conflictless state—"cosmos without chaos." The time would come when, in a prodigious battle, the supreme god would utterly defeat the forces of chaos and their human allies and eliminate them forever, and so bring an absolutely good world into being. Cohn reveals how this vision of the future was taken over by certain Jewish groups, notably the Jesus sect, with incalculable consequences.

Deeply informed yet highly readable, this magisterial book illumines a major turning-point in the history of human consciousness. It will be mandatory reading for all who appreciated *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith **Details**

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Sally says

Arresting, well-written; an exceptional book. It is a consideration of where the idea of the millennium or end of history came from (the Zoroastrians are the culprits).

Elfie says

I like Norman Cohn a lot (unfortunately he is no longer with us) - always excellent scholarship presented in an easily comprehensible, well structured way. This book was of course particularly relevant when we were waiting to ring in the new millennium, but it has not lost its value now that we are in it!

Cooper Cooper says

Norman Cohn, Oxford historian and author of the fascinating *In Pursuit of the Millenium*, in this more recent book attempts to sort out the origins of the ideas behind apocalypse. In his words:

This book is concerned with a major turning-point in the history of human consciousness: it tries to describe how the destiny of the world and of human beings came to be imagined in a new way, and how these new expectations began to spread abroad.

He starts by examining the religious beliefs of the ancient world's earliest civilizations—Egyptian, Indo-European (Vedic) and Mesopotamian. These posited a troubled static universe, which went on forever without changing or passed through endless repetitive cycles, and in which the champions of order were always (and would forever be) at war with the forces of chaos. Cohn then addresses Zoroastrianism, which introduced a radically new view of the world, Judaism (especially the apocalyptic sects), and finally Christianity, which added a wrinkle of its own.

Cohn sees Zoroaster as the most influential (and most grossly underappreciated) of religious innovators:

Some time between 1500 and 1200 BC Zoroaster broke out of that static yet anxious world-view. He did so by reinterpreting, radically, the Iranian version of the combat myth. In Zoroaster's view the world was not static, nor would it always be troubled. Even now the world was moving, through incessant conflict, towards a conflictless state. The time would come when, in a prodigious final battle, the supreme god and his supernatural allies would defeat the forces of chaos and their human allies and eliminate them once and for all. From then on the divinely appointed order would obtain absolutely: physical distress and want would be unknown, no enemy would threaten, within the community of the saved there would be absolute unanimity; in a word, the world would be for ever untroubled, totally secure.

It appears that Zoroaster invented the ideas of: one dominant god (Ahura Mazda); an adversary of almost equal power (Angra Mainyu); a battle on earth between the forces of good and evil, with human beings having to choose sides; a fixed period of time during which this struggle would go on; a final, great battle in which the good guys would (just barely) defeat the bad guys; a Saosyant (Messiah) who would appear in time to swing the battle; a Final Judgment, in which the good thoughts, words, and deeds of every angel and

human would be weighed against the bad, and after which the good guys would be rewarded with happy immortality in paradise and the bad guys plunged into the Abyss, to be eternally punished for their transgressions.

Sound familiar?

Judaism introduced the importance of divine Law, including of course the commandments, and gave us the Jewish Bible. And perhaps more important, Judaism greatly strengthened the notion of The One and Only God—the “Yahweh only” tradition that pitted a jealous monotheism against the then-prevalent (and more tolerant) polytheism. The apocalyptic sects of Judaism (of which Christianity was only one of many) modified and refined many of Zoroaster’s ideas.

Early Christianity adopted and tailored almost all of these ideas—in the second century AD the Book of Revelation, which puts its own spin on much of Zoroaster, was more frequently cited than any other book of the New Testament. The early Christians did, however, add one big new idea: the unique notion of Christ dying for mankind—“That Jesus’ death on the cross was a redemptive act, by which God offered mankind the possibility of salvation from the consequences of sin—this was something wholly new...”

The basic ideas in this book are extremely interesting. I came away with a new awareness of Zoroaster’s genius, and a renewed awareness of the degree to which religions of the Near East pirated ideas from each other. Also Cohn describes the contexts, social and political, out of which these ideas grew: the common denominator seems to have been people compensating for their oppression and impotence by phantasizing dramatic rescues by patron gods who attack and utterly destroy their enemies.

As for Cohn’s writing, he has to justify his interpretations to other scholars, so some of the chapters are very detailed and even, at times, tedious, especially explanations of the myriad gods and their interrelationships. But people with a deep interest in the origin of current religious ideas will find the book fascinating.

David says

More accessible for me than his "Pursuit of the Millennium" Cohn here explores the connection between Zoroastrianism and the western concept of the End of the World, Judgment Day, etc. Sounds a little dry from my description but trust me, an excellent read from an author with deep knowledge of the subject and a talent for sharing it.

Paul says

A dense, authoritative survey of the development of the myth of the millennium and a future paradise. Awaiters of the Rapture take note.

I have long been fascinated by millenarianism, and have felt inspired to build stories around this idea. The notion of a profound revolution resulting in a permanent utopia is hypnotically seductive to many of us. When I learned back in 1986 that the Jehovah's Witnesses are a millenarian cult of this kind, I was actually attracted to their organization. In Switzerland a young JW pressed a little book into my hand: *Survival into a New Earth*, published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, and I read it while making a train journey to visit CERN, the nuclear research facility outside Geneva. According to the book's copyright page, its first edition ran to 4 million copies, and I bet they were all put into somebody's hands. I really enjoyed the book. If you accept its premises of the reality of Jehovah as God and the infallibility of the Bible, then the book makes a strong case. We are at the threshold of a massive revolution in Earthly life that

will culminate in a paradisiacal existence for a blessed and immortal elite--an elite that anyone can join by professing this faith.

The book was logical and well written, but what made it seductive was that it addresses itself forthrightly to the most important questions, and answers them confidently and authoritatively. We all want to be happy, and we all fear death. We also want to understand a confusing world, and to lead a good life within it. We want to feel that our life has meaning, and that living it has been worthwhile. This book addresses all of these things head on. If I accept the book's teaching, then I will have all the things I seek: happiness, freedom from death, a good and meaningful life. I will enjoy peace and love permanently, and I will do that very soon, for the upheavals that are to bring these things about are imminent. Indeed, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the change will happen before the generation that was alive in 1914 has passed away--and the number of people over 104 years old is dwindling fast.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are just one flavor of millenarian cult; there have been countless others. And a respected longtime student of that field was Norman Cohn (he died in 2007). His book *Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* appeared for years in the bibliography of any book that made mention of millenarianism. I remember getting his book out of the Vancouver Public Library when I was in my 20s, and starting to read it, but I never got through. I think it was, in part, because I found his writing style dry.

I'm afraid I still think that. *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* is an excellent and authoritative book, but the author's prose style, while perfectly serviceable and readable, is calmly factual rather than exciting or interesting. It was this fact that caused me to leave off reading the book when I first picked it up in 2007 (gosh, I realize that Mr. Cohn was still alive when I started reading his book). Now, 11 years later, I had reason to dive back in, my researches having returned me to this fascinating topic of millenarianism, and the book too being a key reference for Harold Bloom's intriguing *Omens of the Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams & Resurrection*. The fact that a scholar of Bloom's standing regarded Cohn as such an authority boosted Cohn's stock in my eyes. In fact, I thought, "I must get that book," and came to my computer to buy it, but something niggled at the back of my mind. I made a scan of my shelves and found that I already had it. Whew!

Cohn's book is not long, but he covers a tremendous amount of ground. This, to me, is a sign of the depth of his knowledge. The book's title is a summary of how he develops the topic, for the author starts out by showing how ancient civilizations, beginning with Egypt, conceived of the world as an orderly place, a cosmos, made that way by powerful gods who then had the task of preserving that order against forces that would disrupt it--the forces of chaos. He goes on to show how similar ideas were developed in ancient Mesopotamia and Vedic India. In doing this he demonstrates great knowledge of these disparate ancient cultures, but presents and emphasizes only what is germane to his theme.

A turning point came with the rise of the sage Zoroaster and the revolution he brought to Iranian religion. For he was apparently the first to see the world in terms of an ongoing struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, a struggle not just between gods but one involving every living thing, and most especially every human being, regardless of nationality, gender, or station. He prophesied that good would eventually triumph, and that the world would be transformed into a wonderful, bounteous, and peaceful place, where the victors over evil would enjoy endless happiness. This beatific future paradise is the world to come; it's the future we can look forward to if we sign up with the prophet's program.

Cohn shows how this idea percolated out to suffuse Canaanite, Jewish, and finally Christian thinking. Indeed it goes beyond that, underlying any kind of future-oriented utopian program, such as that of Marxism. Whoever envisions a bright, utopian future, especially one that comes about through an abrupt cataclysm, and most especially one that is reserved for the good and the pious, is living out this ancient Zoroastrian myth. It's a vision that offers solace and inspiration to the persecuted and the martyred.

I found that this book kept getting better as it progressed and as the author's grand scheme came more clearly into view. He offers a clear and penetrating story of how this fascinating and seductive idea made its way into the spiritual tradition of the West, where it has formed such an important component of the way we look at the world.

Joshua says

While I really wanted to give this five stars, there was just too much that annoyed me. And I'm not talking about the fact that the whole premise of the book seems to be that modern Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are essentially off-shoots of Zoroastrianism. Personally, I think that has little bearing on my faith in general. Also, to deny an influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism, Islam, and Christianity would be ridiculous; however, that does not mean, as he heavily implies throughout the book, that those religions are now debunked or that Zoroastrianism is the one true religion. But again, that is not my complaint, and might not even have been his intention. My frustration with the book is this: there are many times in the book when he will say something, often in passing, that he expects us to assume is widely accepted as true, will give no notes on it, and then, whenever I look it up, I find that it's highly debated with solid arguments on both sides. I realize his point is not to give every side to an argument, but he could give a reference for where he got his information, or, at least, say that the position is held by only some scholars. One example that comes to mind is when he briefly mentions 2 Thessalonians, and then mentions that we now know it was not written by Paul. That was news to me, so I looked it up. As it turns out, we don't "know" that at all. There's a lot of evidence on both sides of the argument, and frankly, I think the opposite of his view has a lot better arguments than his view.

Ignoring that, the book was highly informative and interesting. It was intelligently written, despite some of his assumptions, and easy to read. I would just suggest to do some fact checking and research of your own. Don't just rely on his word, which should be the number one rule in all scholarly reading anyway.

Edit: I've come to appreciate this book more since I've read more by Cohn, and have revisited parts of it. My complaint still remains though. Also, I would recommend his work Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages.
