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If Jeremiah Is Going to Stay, He Needs to Change His Tone:

Reframing Apocalyptic Discourse

[BERNARD KONDENAR]

Coming soon to a neighborhood near you, the main event that is the end of the world has truly become an immanent presence in our modern lives. As calamities go, we have been promised quite the show, and this in spite of the fact that its approach is being heralded by some in a fastidiously mundane fashion—very much unlike the biblical prophet Jerimiah (from whom the term jeremiad derives its namesake), who vehemently warned his fellow citizens that their sins would invoke the wrath of God and assuredly lead to their destruction. Not to be confused with imminent, immanence refers to something that permanently dwells within us, remaining there, while being utterly and without qualification knowable to us as human beings. We blithely regale each other with narratives of our own collapse and extinction to such a degree that many of these tales have become ossified into inflexible fatalistic beliefs. Though usually reserved for more theistic venues, the immanence of the apocalypse has found new purchase in the hearts and minds of the masses. This uptick in a more secular fascination with our perhaps untimely end comes as no great surprise to some. In fact, “Today, about 41 percent of Americans believe that Jesus will either ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ return by 2050, and comparable numbers of Muslims expect the world to end in their lifetimes.”¹ While these numbers are stunning, prophecy is no longer relegated to the purely theological. A case in point, there are Singularitarians in Silicon Valley who believe a quasi-utopian state will occur by or before the year 2045, thereby adding their voices to the growing chorus who warn that the singularity (the emergence of self-aware artificial intelligence) may be a greater existential threat than any we have ever faced before.² However,

1 Guy P. Harrison, “Exploring Our Endless Obsession With the End,” *Psychology Today*, February 17, 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/about-thinking/201602/exploring-our-endless-obsession-the-end>.

2 Ibid.

before we can contend with whatever potential admonitions our fearsome robot overlords might have in store, there is an even more contentious issue to deal with—namely, climate change.

Polluters pollute, environmentalists swoon, and the politicians wail, but still the band plays on. There is certainly no paucity of apocalyptic discourse when it comes to the problematic matter of climate change. On the subject of environmental awareness in particular, we can mark the diaspora of this type of rhetoric—from the pulpit to the public sphere—by looking at one of the most influential environmental writers in recent history: Rachel Carson. Since her jeremiad about the dangers of pesticides, *Silent Spring* (1962), portents of the apocalyptic have served as a common rhetorical foundation for many environmental writers, journalists, scientists, and politicians—purportedly, in order to educate and foment their audiences into repenting of their evil ways and changing their behavior before it is too late. In the case of Carson, her haunting portrayal of a lifeless rural town struck down by the effects of environmental toxins would have made even the most puritanical practitioners of the jeremiad very proud indeed. However, as we will explore, our fascination with our own doom and the powerful rhetoric that goes along with it has its own set of unintended consequences. Nevertheless, we find that this fascination is deeply rooted in the human psyche and, as history will teach us, the jeremiad is very likely here to stay. Ultimately, (and hopefully before The End), what we hope to show is that we need to unreservedly spur people into action concerning the mitigation of climate change. In short, we need to reframe the apocalypse.

While we certainly employ a panacea of apocalyptic rhetoric and imagery in relation to climate change, the question remains: why does it persist? Despite a lack of evidence that it has directly inspired much meaningful action on behalf of the climate, a variety of disciplines have chimed in on why we, as human beings, are still so receptive to it. For example, Stanford political scientist Allison McQueen fully understands the temptation to use this kind of epistemological reductionism when explaining complex events or concepts that stymie a more conventional path of discourse.³ In her book, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, McQueen focuses on several centuries of political realists that criticized, but nevertheless to some extent embraced, apocalyptic rhetoric. Drawing on examples from as far back as Machiavelli and writing during the violent political upheavals of sixteenth-century Florence, McQueen builds her case that we use such rhetoric because “we have a need to understand events like war, natural disasters, economic collapse and looming nuclear

³ Kate Chesley, “Stanford Political Scientist Studies Apocalyptic Political Rhetoric,” *Stanford News*, December 29, 2017, <https://news.stanford.edu/2017/12/29/political-scientist-studies-apocalyptic-political-rhetoric/>.

conflagration. The causes of these things are complex. Apocalyptic rhetoric makes them easier to understand.”⁴ For Machiavelli, the use of apocalyptic rhetoric was a radical departure from an often measured and rules-based analytical style of events, and, in McQueen’s estimation, he only resorted to it due to an apparent failure to render the course of those events intelligible under a more conventional framework.

While McQueen chooses to recognize the correlation between turbulent historical events and the pursuant proliferation of apocalyptic rhetoric, she ultimately characterizes it as a dangerous tool, only begrudgingly used in order to help people who are seeking to understand these threats. However, professor of English and South African Studies Michael Titlestad elucidates on a slightly more ignoble motivation. In “The Logic of Apocalypse: A Clerical Rejoinder,” he concludes that “The hyperbolic inures us; the rhetoric of extremity, intended to defamiliarize a world obscured by complacency, has become routine. Horror, fear, and repulsion all induce a momentary affective turn, seducing us into longing for their reiteration. The truth of late modernity is that we love the apocalypse.”⁵ Here, Titlestad is referring to the countless reincarnations of apocalyptic rhetorical themes that have flooded theaters, inundated library shelves, and replaced that Old Testament fire and brimstone with incendiary political critique.⁶ Frankly, anyone who dares turn on the television at around five o’clock runs the risk of being habituated into this fantastical world of zombies, war, conquest, and ecological disaster—and that is just the evening news! Both Titlestad and McQueen call into question the efficacy (as a call to action) and warn of the dangers inherent in the usage of apocalyptic language, but they also both recognize a persistent, widespread, and deep-seated psychological affinity for this message.

This apparent need for apocalyptic discourse may indeed go beyond mere information seeking—as suggested by McQueen—or the somewhat lascivious sounding motivations in the diatribe proffered by Titlestad. In fact, writing only days before one of the last prognosticated end of the world events—namely, the much publicized and portentous misreading of the cyclical Mayan calendar ending on December 21, 2012—contributing science writer for *Scientific American* Daisy Yuhas stated, “It’s not the first ‘end is nigh’ proclamation—and it’s unlikely to be the last. That is because, deep down, there’s something appealing—at least to some of us—about the end of the world.”⁷ In her review, Yuhas draws on research

4 Ibid.

5 Michael Titlestad, “The Logic of the Apocalypse: A Clerical Rejoinder,” *The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 14 (2013), 14.

6 Ibid.

7 Daisy Yuhas, “Psychology Reveals the Comforts of the Apocalypse,” December 18, 2012, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/psychology-reveals-the-comforts-of-the-apocalypse/>.

being conducted in multiple scientific disciplines to back up this statement. One of the works Yuhas uses is by University of Minnesota neuroscientist Shmuel Lissek's work on the human fear system. Lissek links our "moth to the flame" type behavior—in response to doomsday proclamations—to an ancient and obdurate mechanism that has, over our evolutionary history, favored those with a better-safe-than-sorry lifestyle. According to Lissek, our primary and initial response to alarm is fear, simply because "This is the architecture with which we're built."⁸ However, instead of avoiding that fear as one might expect, Lissek believes that a measure of comfort can be found, in respect to these built-in mechanisms, through connecting with those intentionally stoking these fears—by, for instance, finding a group of like-minded fatalists; avoiding individual responsibility by attributing doom to some larger cosmic order; or even relieving the (relatively greater) anxiety of uncertainty by knowing exactly when the end will come. Lissek, in collaboration with National Institute of Mental Health neuroscientist Christian Grillon, characterizes this elevated state of anxiety as akin to someone knowing they will receive a painful electric shock at some point in the future, but they have no idea when. Lissek would argue that if that person could be sure that the shock would not come for ten years, ten minutes, or even ten seconds, they would invariably relax. Simply put, any anxiety arising from uncertainty is now gone. Yuhas concludes that "knowing when the end will come doesn't appeal equally to everyone, of course—but for many of us it's paradoxically a reason to stop worrying."⁹ This reaction marks a distinct departure from merely communicating the complexities that beguile and entertain our human brains. Masquerading as certainty, and not as some kind of backfiring atavistic coping mechanism run amok, the apocalypse—at least for some—has become therapeutic.

While arguably valuable to our survival up to this point, this evolutionary tendency creates the perfect storm for environmental inaction. In their article, "The Tragedy of Cognition," Dominic Johnson and Simon Levin attribute this lack of responsiveness to "environmental change being largely invisible, very long term, hypothetical, uncertain, and controversial."¹⁰ In fact, because the mechanisms that manifest climate change lie largely outside of our immediate sensory perceptions, the authors suggest the possibility that the threat inherent in climate change could very well lie outside the realm of human comprehension. Compounding the problem is that almost all courses of remedial action require significant additional material and social capital without possessing any immediate sense of tangible returns on that investment. What we begin to realize, as well as

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Dominic Johnson and Simon Levin, "The Tragedy of Cognition: Psychological Biases and Environmental Inaction," *Current Science* 97, no. 11 (2009), 1594.

experience for ourselves, is that the salience of an issue is often directly proportional to its degree of palpability to the human senses.¹¹ Regrettably, we have to ask the question if there could ever be a more poignant irony than the calm and indifferent way we maintain the status quo in the face of certain death? Johnson and Levin are certainly not surprised. They surmise that, despite the outward appearance of a mercurial nature, we are, in actuality, hardwired to respond only to immediate threats that we can see, smell, hear, or touch—and therefore understand.

While enhanced understanding, enjoyment, and psychological wellbeing do seem to share a positive correlation to the profligate use of apocalyptic rhetoric, and while this may seem puzzling to most, according to professor of religion Lorenzo DiTommaso, this is actually a very commonplace contradiction that occurs when people internalize conflicting beliefs.¹² DiTommaso, who has been researching groups of doomsday believers for his book, *The Architecture of Apocalypticism*, asserts that “problems have become so big, with no solutions in sight, that we no longer see ourselves able as human beings to solve these problems.”¹³ DiTommaso contends that it is precisely this unmanageable complexity and inscrutability of the world’s problems the uniting factor among the radically disparate groups that he studies. Identifying these practically universal and difficult-to-reconcile beliefs, DiTommaso states, “the first [belief] is that there is something dreadfully wrong with the world of human existence today. On the other hand, there is a sense that there is a higher good or some purpose for existence, a hope for a better future.”¹⁴ Like Yuhas, DiTommaso believes that a certain degree of personal comfort can be achieved when anticipating a cosmic correction of biblical proportions—essentially just wiping the slate clean. This type of apocalyptic discourse identified by professor of communication Michael Salvador as a “flood myth.” He estimates that this “largely undermines contemporary environmental discourse that attempts to generate public activism in addressing ecological problems, by replacing an emphasis on human efficacy with symbolic vindication and exchanging collective effort for individual survivalism.”¹⁵ Writing for the journal *Ecotheology*, author Catherine Keller states, “These movements, or moods, some cryptoapocalyptic (not acknowledging their roots in biblical mythology), some retroapocalyptic (referring the present moment back to the bible’s precise predictions), tremble and trill to the

11 Ibid.

12 Stephanie Pappas, “The Draw of Doomsday: Why People Look Forward to the End,” *Live Science*, May 16, 2011, www.livescience.com/14179-doomsday-psychology-21-judgment-day-apocalypse.html.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Michael Salvador and Todd Norton, “The Flood Myth in the Age of Global Climate Change,” *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 1 (2011), 47.

prospect of imminent destruction.”¹⁶ This common thread, or what Author Phil Torres calls the “clash of eschatologies,” sinuously wends its way throughout our entire past; he believes that these disagreements about our collective fate has essentially served as the grist for the dialectical mill which has nourished every major conflict to date.¹⁷ In other words, we can all agree that humans will someday soon cease to exist, but, unfortunately, we forestall any lamentation of that fact in favor of spirited debate about just how it will occur.

Being unable to agree on what should be the correct ending to our story is not the only complication surrounding the use of language imbued with catastrophism. Titlestad argues that Doomsaying has transcended the literalists domain and is now an immanent presence. What this means is that instead of being an eventuality that is merely close at hand, apocalypse has literally become a part of who we are and how we make decisions. Titlestad claims that “we use these ends to make sense of the present. We project catastrophic conclusions, or read any signs of prospective collapse as metonyms in order to regulate or ignore the quotidian (with its complexities of agency, complicity of victims, inscrutable flows of capital and its facile configurations of power).”¹⁸ He also believes that by applying this uncritical rhetorical approach to these problems, we run the risk of compromised thinking, experience a loss of imagination and agency, and become either extremely apathetic or, conversely, violent to an extreme. McQueen echoes this sentiment of peril when she states, “apocalyptic rhetoric creates a false sense of moral clarity,” and further that “A doomsday mindset casts political conflicts as battles between ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and ‘salvation’ and ‘destruction.’ Once we see ourselves as engaged in an ultimate battle against evil, we are often more willing to use terrible means—war, torture, genocide, nuclear annihilation—to achieve our ends.”¹⁹ This characterization of apocalyptic rhetoric takes us even farther afield from communicating urgency or complexity in colorful and easy to understand language. The implication here—especially with an issue like climate change—is that the things we do are no longer merely affected reactions to an external threat; instead, each thought we have, every decision we make, and each potential war we wage is the result of our interminably reinforced understanding that the apocalypse is decidedly inevitable and, indubitably, someone else’s fault.

Eliezer Yudkowsky, of the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, aptly syllogizes the folly of this fatalistic worldview ascribing nefarious and

16 Catherine Keller, “The Heat is On: Apocalyptic Rhetoric and Climate Change,” *Ecotheology* 7 (1999), 50.

17 Harrison.

18 Titlestad, 8.

19 Chesley.

villainous intent on others—due mostly to an entities' *a priori* need of a place to further exploit—when he states, “If our extinction proceeds slowly enough to allow a moment of horrified realization, the doers of the deed will likely be quite taken aback when realizing that they have actually destroyed the world. Therefore, I suggest that if the Earth is destroyed, it will probably be by mistake.”²⁰ The implication enshrined in Yudkowsky’s assertion is that, while most people think that methodologies for expert elicitation, reasonably conducted, will ineluctably arrive at some shared objective truth, and that institutions and individuals will act on rational decisions rooted in factual and scientifically credible information, Yudkowsky would argue, that the reality is faulty heuristics and bias. These biases will invariably intrude on our thinking at all levels of decision making—anywhere from where to get our morning coffee to the potential mass extinction of the human race. Johnson and Levin also address these psychological pitfalls when they point to the systemic deviations from rational choice theory that we see played out on a daily basis. Where rational choice theory assumes that entities will objectively weigh a broad selection of options and pick the best one, what often happens in the case of climate change is that maladaptive behaviors, “well established and widely replicated phenomena that are exhibited by mentally healthy adults,” lead people “to downplay the probability and danger of environmental change, and their role in it, while increasing their perceived incentives to maintain the status quo, and to blame problems on others.”²¹ In fact, when faced with a dizzyingly complex, and disconcertingly fluid, cognitive problem such as climate change, Johnson and Levin assert that “while such biases may have been adaptive heuristics that promoted survival and reproduction in the Pleistocene environment of our evolutionary past, in today’s world of technological sophistication, industrial power and mass societies, psychological biases can lead to disasters on an unprecedented scale.”²²

One of the most salient and endemic of our faulty heuristics, that Yudowski discusses, is motivated skepticism, known alternatively as confirmation bias. When confirmation bias latently intrudes upon the investigation of climate change, Yudowski points to two reasons why it can be particularly destructive. First, one that we witness quite often is that, even when given identical evidence, two biased parties will often arrive at completely incongruous conclusions. While this is not inherently a bad thing, it becomes a serious impediment to forward progress when parties only accept evidence that is favorable to their own arguments. Second, and

20 Eliezer Yudkowsky, “Cognitive Biases Potentially Affecting Judgement of Global Risks,” in *Global Catastrophic Risks*, ed. Nick Bostrom (New York: Oxford University Press), 1.

21 Johnson, 1593.

22 Ibid.

paradoxically, when parties have an extensive knowledge of logical flaws, they have a tendency to only use that knowledge when critiquing their opponents.²³ This practice of divisiveness has become all too common in politics, media, organizations, and our scientific community as well. The widening gulf delineating contracting groups of ‘believers,’ and stagnant with the dampening effects of inaction, has many calling for a change. We can see this battle of semantics play out day after day in the discussion on climate change. Especially disconcerting to many is the equal time and weight allotted to virtually anyone who decides to step up to the podium. Our passionate pursuit of impartiality and generous allowances toward freedom of expression has brought us to a point where “It has become exceedingly difficult to distinguish between a legitimate discourse of emergency, and escapist movements which monger fear and misplace hope. In the meantime, the greenhouse skeptics and their conservative allies use ‘apocalypse’ as the privileged term of denigration, while scientists try to dissociate themselves from its onus of religion and inevitability. In other words, in the civil debates, everyone disowns apocalypse.”²⁴

As we have seen, “everyone disowns apocalypse,” may be the ultimate in hyperbolic misnomers—even outstripping what passes for a ‘civil debate’ nowadays. Speaking specifically of politics, Titlestad addresses this contradiction when he states,

[T]here is an uncanny resemblance between the ways in which the left and the right use apocalyptic logic. Both seek opportunity at the limit, whether theoretical or economic. Both advance themselves through catastrophe, and both render the world in hysterical, noisy terms. Both seek, through their jeremiads, to awaken their auditors to the truth and new opportunities. Both trade in a worn currency of myth.²⁵

For those with the best intentions at heart, like Rachel Carson, apocalyptic rhetoric was intended to be used as a device to incentivize change in patterns of behavior that needed to be, and could be, changed by mutual agreement—doing so by previewing the potential fruits of inaction.²⁶ One irreconcilable problem, according to Breton and Hammond (2016), is that “Rather than offering any historic transformation or metaphysical salvation, environmental apocalypticism is an expression of the current post-political and post-democratic condition, in which ideological or disensual contestation and struggles are replaced by techno-managerial planning,

23 Yudkowsky, 9-10.

24 Keller, 49.

25 Titlestad, 13.

26 Salvador, 48.

expert management and administration.” Further, “in its insistence that the future human society must be guided by [the science of] climate change, it perforce closes off any space for democratic debate or disagreement.”²⁷ This facts-only approach wholly neglects our social and psychological needs. While economists, politicians, and those in the natural sciences may be loath to relinquish this intentionally (possibly disingenuous) dispassionate approach, the time has come for policy makers to willfully look beyond the data and holistically embrace the prospective solutions.

So, what else lies on the horizon besides our imminent doom? In the words of Keller, “There is no getting out of it. Apocalypse is part of the cultural atmosphere we breathe—thus climate and text heat up together.” What we have found is, much like what Foust and Murphy discovered in their critical analysis of US elite and popular press coverage of global warming, where apocalyptic rhetoric overwhelmingly maintained a presence throughout the selections.²⁸ Also, in the words of Keller, “since we cannot erase the texts, we must not leave its interpretation in the hands of fundamentalists.”²⁹ Fundamentalists, for our purposes here, shall be defined as anyone falling into the first of two camps identified by Foust and Murphy: 1) adherents to a tragic apocalypse who see climate change as nothing short of deterministic, which, as we have seen, has a severe dampening effect on human agency and innovation, and 2) those who are more in alignment with the comic apocalyptic framing, or those who believe it is within our power to alter the course of events and thereby avert disaster. When considering the second group, it begs the question: as we stand little chance of ever escaping the seductive pull of the jeremiad, and—for that matter—slipping from the surly bonds of earth and our primordial connection to it, why not capitalize on our psychological, behavioral, and cognitive needs to regain some semblance of control over our collective fate?

We propose that it is this distinction between the tragic and the comic frames that makes it possible to hope for an overwhelming adoption of the comic apocalyptic frame—a hope we share with Foust and Murphy who expressed it would “inspire approaches to communication about global warming that empower the public to overcome barriers to individual and collective agency, enabling them to become advocates for and participants in, global warming mitigation.”³⁰ A 2005 study that tested the appeal of messages denoting action on climate change showed that respondents

27 Hugh Ortega Breton and Phil Hammond, “Eco-apocalypse: Environmentalism, political alienation and therapeutic agency,” in *The Apocalypse in Film*, by Karen Ritzenhoff and Angela Krewani (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 4.

28 Christina R. Foust and William O’Shannon Murphy, “Revealing and Reframing Apocalyptic Tragedy in Global Warming Discourse,” *Environmental Communication* 3 (2009), 151-167.

29 Keller, 57.

30 Foust, 152.

preferred action that would be considered “doing good” over those that appealed to “logic and responsibility.” Moser, who cited the study, points to positive psychologists’ confirmation that living a meaningful life far outweighs any abstract appeals to logic—a faculty in which we are demonstrably deficient in anyhow.³¹ In other words, and contrary to arbiters of doom everywhere, we are not particularly predisposed to sit around resigned on the sidelines, waiting for God, nature, or some event that will wipe the slate clean and allow us a do-over. We are fundamentally social creatures that would do well to remember that we depend on each other for our own physical, psychic, and social survival.

“Apocalypse means unveiling, disclosure. So, we had better tease its contemporary incarnations out of their bitter sense of closure, toward their own disclosing potential.”³² Sounds easy, right? It is not. Setting aside the undesired effects of tragic apocalyptic rhetoric—for instance, a paralyzing sense of apathy, loss of agency, wanting to kill those who disagree with you, etc.—designing a grand positive vision for the future of humankind is definitely no walk in the park. Anyone who has studied the mountains of information out there on the implications of climate change could attest to this fact. Lacking such a vision, we have relied heavily on ancient rhetorical techniques that primarily invoke feelings of division, guilt and fear. One could ask the question, is this really the foundation on which we would like our future to be built? On the other hand, considering the urgency and complexity of the situation, it is difficult to judge too harshly those who have—out of desperation—used apocalyptic rhetoric to reach a world oblivious to its own downward spiral. Moser suggests that “a grand positive vision may well be something that no one creates but eventually emerges out of a myriad of images, stories, and on-the-ground efforts in developing alternatives (lifestyles, technologies, behaviors, environments, communities, institutions, etc.)”³³ Such a compelling vision could better fulfill the utility, entertainment value, and patronage to our savage sides than tragic apocalyptic ever has—and without the embarrassing side-effects of wantonly killing us all. I think if we distill down Moser’s last quotation, what she is actually saying is that there is no magic bullet and it is going to require contributions from us all to solve our little problem. However, judging by the comprehensive scope of those who dabble in the end of the world, we may be well on our way to that vision already—we just need to reframe it.

31 Suzanne C. Moser, “More Bad News: The Risk of Neglecting Emotional Responses To Climate Change Information,” in *Creating a Climate For Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change*, ed. Suzanne C. Moser and L. Dilling (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 74-75.

32 Keller, 58.

33 Moser, 75.