David W Fletcher, *Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest* (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007)
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CONCLUSION

Apocalyptic or end-of-the-world language came to the Old Southwest with settlers who brought with them Christian beliefs about the material world's eventual demise and a divine ordering of a new mode of existence. The frontier revivals around the turn of the nineteenth century sparked interest in this type of discourse, and the earthquakes centered at New Madrid, Missouri Territory, during the winter of 1811-1812 provoked believers and skeptics to anticipate the imminence of epochal change. Constant political, social, and technological changes in the Old Southwest for the first three decades of the nineteenth century also caught the attention of many who observed in these transformations the role of providential guidance or Manifest Destiny. These events as signs of the times seemed to harken a new day, a new age. But progressive or linear thinking did not give a complete picture of how these uncommon events were being interpreted in apocalyptic terms in the Old Southwest.

Other perspectives in the Old Southwest proved the matrix of apocalyptic rhetoric to be ambiguous and uncertain. Interpretations of the earthquakes, for instance, varied between natural and supernatural causes. Many thought the quakes to be the handiwork of God, but others attributed the upheavals to demonic forces or the devil. Most observers regarded the quakes as "signs" or "wonders," but what was signified could not

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be pinpointed unanimously. The Shawnee Chief Tecumseh strikingly used the quakes to rally confederated resistance to settler encroachment on tribal lands. This was exactly the opposite meaning given to the quakes than that by eyewitnesses and subsequent travelers to the region such as Charles Latrobe who interpreted the quakes as one of the "portents" defining 1811 as "the Annus Mirabilis of the West" and a divine approval on the nation's westward expansion in spite of "the awe-struck Indian."[1] Consequently, no real agreement existed about what the quakes meant. Even if they indicated the end of the world to some, belief in an apocalyptic understanding of the quakes for many settlers soon passed, because the world did not end literally and the quakes did.

A decade earlier during a period of religious apathy (as perceived by Christian clergy), the frontier revivals produced substantial evangelistic success and inspired believers to conclude that the kingdom of God was at hand. Rural camp meetings, patterned initially after the annual Scotch-Presbyterian sacramental gatherings and adopted by Methodist and Baptist leaders, gave thousands of settlers the opportunity to mingle socially and listen to Christian preachers who stirred the masses with apocalyptic themes from the Bible. Outbreaks of unusual bodily phenomena or "religious exercises" such as the "jerks" transcended sectarian loyalties and puzzled revival leaders about their meaning. Like the earthquakes, some thought the bodily sensations came from God, but others judged them to be the work of Satan.

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[1] Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America, 1832-1833*, vol. 1 (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835), 102, 103.

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On the one hand, the revivals and their apocalyptic implications served to unify those who favored the enthusiasm and the various responses by the masses. On the other hand, the revivals and their commitment to emotive responses to the gospel fell as a sharp axe that divided believers into pro and anti-revival factions. Apocalyptic rhetoric clearly became a divisive factor between "mainstream" Protestants and groups like the Shakers who went beyond traditional notions about the end of the world and emphasized a realized eschatology (i.e., the presence of the kingdom of God and eternal salvation in the here-and-now). More study, though, needs to be done on the outcome of the revivals, their apocalyptic rhetoric, and the "in-house" divisions of several Protestant denominations (e.g., the Presbyterian Church and the Cumberland Presbyterians). But these divisions do highlight the inherent ambiguity of apocalyptic language and some of the unfortunate consequences of its uncertainty.

In one sense, the earthquakes and the revivals could be seen as epoch-making events that merited apocalyptic depiction, because they were cataclysmic or world-shattering in scope. From a different or nonreligious point of view, the apocalyptic nature of these historic events was not so clear or certain. From the mainstream political perspective, for example, neither earthquakes nor revivals seemed worthy of too much attention. The major devastation of the earthquakes occurred far from population centers on the eastern seaboard. The federal government and the country generally paid little long-term attention to the earthquakes except by way of curiosity and as a matter of the

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geological record.[2] The revivals were a religious matter to be left alone by and of little concern to politicians, since they caused no widespread disturbances in society. Religious fervor and excitement shook the churches, but the new round of "great" or spiritual awakenings hardly slowed the achievements and advances of "enlightened" culture and its technological superiority.

What seemed to be missing from the nonreligious rhetoric of this incredible period of American history was any sense of world-shattering, epoch-making change. The language of frontiersmen and settlers, businessmen and politicians, and even visionaries surely reflected the ideas of Manifest Destiny and occasionally hinted at the coming of a secular, utopian millennium. Those who had legitimate reasons to feel angst about the country's good fortune (e.g., Native Americans and African Americans) experienced the full brunt of cataclysmic upheaval in the oppressions they suffered, something most worthy of apocalyptic outcry. Protests with apocalyptic overtones were heard from the Daniel Butricks and the Elihu Embrees of the time, but seldom did they come from the slaves or native peoples themselves.[3] Even so, these critiques to visions of

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[2] Myron L. Fuller, *The New Madrid Earthquake (A Scientific Factual Field Account)*, United States Geological Survey Bulletin 494 (Washington, D.C.: government Printing Office, 1912; repr., Marble Hill, Missouri: Gutenberg-Richter Publications, 1995), 42; Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 112.

[3] One possibly insurmountable problem is the paucity of narratives from African Americans and Native Americans, but there are important exceptions (e.g., the Cherokee conversion narratives).

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millennial bliss underscored an important ambiguity of apocalyptic thought, namely, its applicability to antithetical forces in antebellum society.

In the Old Southwest of the early nineteenth century, apocalyptic rhetoric functioned primarily in a religious context but did have limited use in other types of discourse. Given this limitation, apocalyptic rhetoric can be used effectively as a tool to understand the public and private discourse of a society. The difficulty and challenge lies in the inherent ambiguity of such heightened religious language, but even this can be instructive about specific goals and aspirations and their level or perceived level of attainability. Sociologists and historians of American religion will find this to be fertile ground for further study.