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

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1800s, several frontier regions of the young United States underwent considerable social and cultural transformation. One of these regions, the Old Southwest, evolved from an "untamed" wilderness to a burgeoning society of plantations and towns governed by new state legislatures and connected by a growing network of roads and carriageways.[1] This transformation took place at an unprecedented pace and over a huge expanse of land, and this has made its study challenging and difficult. D. W. Meinig, Professor of Geography at Syracuse University, highlights "the complexities of the topic" and the "challenge of holding together such an ever-enlarging and differentiating expanse." He notes, "It is not easy to prepare a coherent picture and general assessment of one of the most rapid, prodigious, and portentous set of geographic developments in modern world history."[2] Part of this "rapid, prodigious, and portentous" transformation included religion and religious ideas about a new order of existence and the coming of the millennium to America.

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[1]See the quixotic overview by Henry Adams, *The United States in 1800*, introduction by Robert H. Ferrell (1889,1957; repr., Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 1-28.

[2]D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, Vol. 2, Continental America, 1800-1867 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 221.

Such religious ideas embraced beliefs about cataclysmic upheaval and spiritual renewal. Notions about the end of the world in relation to "big" events like the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811 and 1812 and the frontier revivals of 1800 and 1801 played an important role in the evolution of America's frontier culture and its social patterns. The earthquakes and the revivals occurred after the turn of the century, and their apocalyptic interpretations suggest an acceptance of beliefs about teleological meanings by religious leaders and the populace in general. But what meanings can be gleaned from the juxtaposition of these unusual events and apocalyptic language? How did people interpret the earthquakes and the revivals in light of beliefs about the end of the world? Were rapid socioeconomic and political changes of the time viewed in apocalyptic terms? These questions, of interest to social scientists and specialists in American religion, will be explored in this study.

Ideas about the end of the world and the events associated with it have a long and lively history in western thought.[3] Apocalyptic rhetoric and language about end-time happenings speak to the longings of humans who seek to understand the destiny and purpose of their own lives and their world. History itself in the western sense presumes a series of "critical actions" that bring into existence a "new present" and change the present into what is "irretrievably past." This process undergirds the human struggle "to gain true existence, an effort to achieve substantiality" so that each person may avoid

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[3]Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (London: Random House UK, 1999).

living "in vain" and vanishing "like a shadow."[4] The *telos* or end for each person and for the world as a whole has been an important part of this struggle to know and understand the meaning of human existence.

World religions, especially those belief-systems that hold to a linear in contrast to a cyclical view of history, have taken a leading role in this effort to understand the fate of humans and their cosmos. For the West's three major religions–Judaism, Christianity, and Islam–Frederic Baumgartner notes, "Time passes from the creation to its end according to the will of God, with specific events as mileposts along the way."[5] Baumgartner also recognizes that a sense of progress toward an end is not completely inconsistent with a cyclical view of history. As Norman Cohn shows, Jewish and Christian apocalypses had their antecedents in world views embraced by Egyptians, people of Mesopotamia, Vedic Indians, and particularly the Zoroastrians.[6] But priority for apocalyptic history and thought in the West belongs to Jewish and Christian ideas about the end of time and its cataclysmic portrayal.

In ancient and classical times, Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings focused on the end of the world, the coming of the Messiah, final judgment, and the afterlife. So much so that D. S. Russell assets, "There is a homogeneity about [the apocalyptic

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[4]Erich Frank, *Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 116, quoted in Rudolph Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 4.

[5]Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, 3.

[6]Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001).

tradition] which justifies its classification as a distinct literary *corpus*."[7] In his work that examines ideas borrowed from Judaism by Christianity, Russell defines apocalyptic as esoteric in substance, literary in form, symbolic in language, and pseudonymous in authorship. His chapter titles delineate the relevant topics: human history and divine control, angels and demons, the time of the end, the Messianic kingdom, the traditional Messiah, the Son of Man, and life after death. But Russell concedes, "It is not always easy to define, . . . although it reveals certain fairly well-defined characteristics, apocalyptic is recognizable even when some of its formal characteristics are absent. It may be said to consist rather in a religious mood or temper which is different from, though related to, that of prophecy."[8]

According to Cohn, this apocalyptic mood originated with the Iranian religious reformer and prophet Zoroaster. After a thorough review of the apocalyptic beliefs of ancient Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Indo-Iranians, Canaanites, and Israelites, he concludes:

> 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

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[7]D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 BC - AD 100* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 104.

[8]Ibid. Compare Leon Morris, "Characteristics of Apocalyptic," *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1972), 34-67; and Paolo Sacchi, "The Great Themes of Apocalyptic," *Jewish Apocalyptic and its History*, trans. William J. Short, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha, Supplement Series 20, edited by James Charlesworth and Lester Grabbe (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 42-47.

> 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.
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> Unheard of before Zoroaster, that expectation deeply influenced certain Jewish groups . . . Above all it influenced the Jesus sect, with incalculable consequences.[9]

Cohn argues convincingly that the apocalyptic expectation cultivated by Zoroaster in the religious culture of the ancient Near East remained uniform in its core vision. He further suggests that this central motif of chaotic, cosmic conflict succeeded by peaceful, paradisaical utopia subsequently befitted legions of historical contexts and situations. He notes:

> The story itself has continued down the ages. And what a story it has become! Much theological speculation; innumerable millenarian movements, including those now flourishing so vigorously in the United States; even the appeal once exercised by Marxist-Leninist ideology–all this belongs to it. Nor is there any reason to think that the story is nearing its end. The tradition . . . is still alive and potent.[10]

In ancient Israel, prophetic glimpses of Yahweh's judgment and a new order of existence by the Hebrew prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel, and Zechariah expounded this apocalyptic genre.[11] This tradition was carried on during the dark ages of Judaism by Enoch, the disciples of Ezra, and the scholars at Qumran and found its culmination in the Gospel of Mark, the writings of Paul the Apostle, and the grandest of all Christian

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[9]Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 232-233. For a different view, see Walter Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement: Introduction & Interpretation*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 111-126.

[10]Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 233.

[11]Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

apocalypses–the New Testament book of Revelation.[12] These sources became the foundation for a rich legacy of apocalyptic ideology in western thought that has been passed along from the time of the founding of Christianity until today.

The early church advanced in earnest this "long look" from the beginning of time to the present and then to the end of time. By emphasizing past, present, and future, early Christian scholars gave their writing of history a distinct linear focus. Brian Daley well states the Christian view as voiced by notable patristic writers in contrast to other classical philosophies. He says:

> Patristic writers insist that the Christian lives in hope *within history*, and is freed by that hope to take history seriously. Jewish apocalyptic literature held out a hope for new beginnings, beyond the present order of time and space, to a people who had been led by centuries of oppression to doubt the possibility of the fulfillment of its hope within history. Platonic philosophy, supportive though it was of the religious instinct, implicitly discounted the value of the world of concrete, changeable individual things, while Stoicism called on the philosophic mind to resign itself to being consumed in the toils of an endless, cyclic cosmic process. Gnostic religion, in both its non-Christian and Christian forms, held out to its "enlightened" initiates the hope of escaping–in the spiritual, luminous core that was their best self–from the visible world, the body, and the institutions of everyday life, all of which it regarded as the product of a primordial cosmic mistake. Much as it drew on all these traditions for its themes and images, Christian eschatology from the second century onwards insisted on the continuity of its hope with *this* world and its history: on the necessary inclusion of the body in the human person's final salvation, on the relevance of Church, sacraments and doctrine to one's ultimate fate before God, on the necessity of moral goodness within this present life for those who wish to share in a life to come and–perhaps most significantly–on the presence of the *eschaton* already within time in the person of the risen Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus, experienced within the community

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[12]Dale C. Allison, Jr., "The Eschatology of Jesus," and M. C. de Boer, "Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, edited by Bernard J. McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 139-194; Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 115, ed. Stanley Porter (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 11-146.

> of faith, was for the early Christians "the guarantee of our inheritance, until we acquire possession of it" (Eph 1.14), the "first-fruits" of "the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8.23). The finality of God's Kingdom had already begun in this perennially unstable human realm.[13]

To promote this common hope, early Christian scholars agreed on basic teachings about end-time occurrences: a linear and teleological view of history, the resurrection of the body, God's judgment of all humans, the prospect of individual judgment by God at the end of one's life, God's retributive justice (i.e., bliss for the righteous and misery for the wicked), and a general sense that deceased believers remain involved in the life or communion of the church. But even from its inception the Christian Church could not totally agree on teachings about last things. As points of contention or disagreement, Daley notes five broad areas: the time and nearness of the world's end, the exact physical characteristics of the resurrection body, the extent of eternal salvation (e.g., what is meant by "all creation"), the possibility of change after final judgment, and the possibility of purgation from sin after death.[14] Daley's work highlights the fact that even a revered tradition of shared teachings about the meaning of history, its *telos* or goal, and specific final events did not stop the church from conjecture and debate over certain aspects of the end-time that remained ambiguous and uncertain.

This ambiguity arose from the rich variety of apocalyptic texts available to Christian exegetes and the wide diversity of thought (and its difficulty) in the major work of Christian apocalyptic–John's Revelation. Even today, this uncertainty in interpretation

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[13]Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 218.

[14]Ibid., 219-223.

accounts for the appeal of John's prophecy and its apocalyptic imagery to a wide range of readers. Greg Carey, for example, sees the interpretation of Revelation as an ongoing struggle among millenarian, literary-historical, liberationist, and ethical humanist readers "for the authority to interpret the Apocalypse in the public sphere."[15] The ambiguity of Revelation's apocalyptic ideology also accounts for its application to cultural and political as well as religious events over the centuries. Because religious themes about the end of the world pertained to political leaders and their realms of control, religious rhetoric naturally spilled over into political and social rhetoric. By critiquing Roman power and its culture of assimilation and by basing that critique on a meticulously crafted scheme for the end of all things, a scheme orchestrated by heavenly or otherworldly powers, John set in motion for all time a revolutionary vision for the exercise of power and the meting out of human justice.[16] That such a revolutionary message could relate keenly to visually-oriented societies–to listeners in John's day, to subsequent generations, and to hearers and readers today–is no surprise.[17]

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[15]Greg Carey, "The Apocalypse and Its Ambiguous Ethos," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. Steve Moyise (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 164-170.

[16]See "The lamb will conquer" in Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 118-135; and "The Critique of Roman Power" in Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 35-39.

[17]Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Frances Carey, ed., *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

Today the obsession with apocalyptic ideas–this "long look" by way of projection from the past, through the present, and toward a future end of time–hardly has abated in religious, social, and political thought. Natural disasters across the globe receive immediate attention in the press, and bizarre or unusual events are given extraordinary meaning. Daily outbreaks of violence, especially in the Middle East, are followed with painstaking care, since Christian preachers want to predict accurately the signs that will lead to the rapture and the second coming of Christ.[18]

Malise Ruthven, however, in his study on religious and secular fundamentalism indicates a much broader base of apocalyptic notions than Christian speculations. He pinpoints "messianic movements built around eschatological expectations," "chiliastic expectations and end of the world scenarios," and "secularized versions" of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian eschatology as indicative of what he calls "the collapsing of myth into history." According to Ruthven, this is only one of the "family resemblances by which different members of the fundamentalist tribe may be identified."[19]

As a prominent example, Ruthven states, "The attacks of 9/11 revealed the dangers of this apocalyptic outlook" (e.g., in its execution by adherents of Islam and in the reaction by followers of Christianity). He writes:

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[18]Richard Abanes, *End-Time Visions: The Doomsday Obsession* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998); Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[19]Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 90-94. See also Gershom Gorenberg, *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

> The leaders were not ignorant young men from a deprived region of the world protesting against economic injustices, but privileged enrages ["angry ones"] who could have expected to achieve high-status jobs in fields like medicine, engineering, and architecture. Their rage was theological. . . . Their final act was not a gesture of Islamic heroism, but of Nietzchean despair. The same mentality exists in the Western branch of what is often called fundamentalism–but might be better described as 'Abrahamic apocalypticism'. Christian premillennialists are theological refugees in a world they no longer control. . . . They have a baleful influence on American foreign policy, by tilting it towards the Jewish state which they aim eventually to obliterate, by converting 'righteous' Jews to Christ. . . . Whatever spiritual benefits individuals may have gained by taking Jesus as their 'personal saviour' the apocalyptic fantasies harboured by born-again Christians have a negative impact on public policy. Because of its impact on the environment and its baleful role in the Middle East, America's religiosity is a problem.[20]

Ruthven's connection of apocalyptic ideology to modern concepts of fundamentalism shows intensely the relevance and perils of end-of-the-world predictions in the postmodern, global setting. But he fails to reflect fully the deeply rooted nature of apocalyptic ideas in America's culture and its religious expression, especially as voiced by various traditions within the Christian faith.

Conceivably, every society has adapted and embellished traditions about "world cataclysm, the regeneration of the earth, and the creation of a terrestrial paradise."[21] America was no exception to this, but America's founding and early expansion by Europeans who ventured across the Atlantic Ocean to a "New World" strikingly relied on Christian ideas about the creation of a peaceful utopia. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, inhabitants of the Old World began to search for a better place and a better world–a

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[20]Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, 216-217.

[21]Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 1.

New World. Old World images of America as a "new order of the ages" (*Novum ordo Seclorum*) brought thousands of Europeans to its shores. Explorers and religious leaders led the way. Christopher Columbus conceived of the New World as John's "new earth" in the biblical book of Revelation. Franciscan missionaries to America, influenced by twelfth-century Italian mystic and philosopher Joachim of Fiore, echoed this sentiment. The Puritans also carried "this fervent iteration of America's millennial destiny" from the Old World to Massachusetts Bay, and such exuberant hope persisted in a variety of configurations into the early and mid-1800s.[22]

As they imitated the apocalyptic zeal of their Christian predecessors, early nineteenth-century preachers and prophets in America wanted to give meaning to the new order that was being shaped out of myriad socioeconomic and geopolitical changes. Because of the constant churning of events as the frontier moved farther to the West, there were many opportunities–"cracks" or "breaks" in the cosmological order–for ideas about the end of the world to creep in and take hold of the hearts and minds of common people. But a debate ensued, one that has persisted until today, about whether the rapid sequence of events in antebellum America represented something positive or something negative.

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[22]M. H. Abrams, "Apocalypse: Theme and Variations," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents, and Repercussions*, edited by C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 357. See too Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977).

In this debate, postmillennialists saw the world getting better and better and viewed societal changes as gradual progression toward an earthly "kingdom of God." Alternatively, premillennialists believed the world was getting worse and worse and explained the succession of changes as general decadence leading up to a final, cataclysmic intervention by the Almighty. Millennialism, derived from two Latin words meaning "a thousand years," has provoked contention among Christian thinkers for almost two millennia now and has gyrated around cryptic words written in the final book of the Christian New Testament. In a concluding vision of his Apocalypse or Revelation, John saw Satan bound for a thousand years. Then he saw Christian martyrs who had died for their faith come to life and rule with Christ for a thousand years.[23] Ever since, Christian interpreters have tried to figure out John's vision–whether the return or Second Advent of Christ and subsequent end-time events would precede (the view of premillennialists) or antecede (the view of postmillennialists) this "thousand-year reign" of Christ. A third view, that of amillennialists, has suggested that neither post- nor pre-millennialists had the ultimate interpretation of the movement of historical events toward a *telos* or goal and that John used "thousand years" as a symbol or figuratively and not to presage a literal period of time.[24] This debate over the ambiguous nature of John's prophecy has stood historically at the heart of apocalyptic concerns. Secular variations of

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[23]Revelation 20:1-6.

[24]Many postmillennialists would endorse the figurative sense of John's message; see Samuel Hopkins, *A Treatise on the Millennium* . . . , Religion in America Reprints, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (1793; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1972), 42ff.

post-, pre-, and amillennialism have complicated the overall picture.[25] As a result, the debate has spread from religious to political interpretations of antebellum America.

On the one hand, "liberal" or "progressive" interpreters of the era's religion, reform movements, and politics noticed what they felt to be steady progress toward the betterment of American civilization or society. In the words of Jack P. Maddex, "They were not 'millenarians' who longed for a cataclysm to erase a world they rejected, but 'progressive millennialists' who hoped that gradual development would convert 'the kingdoms of this world' into those 'of our Lord and of his Christ.'"[26] They therefore viewed rapid social change as something wholesome and good. On the other hand, "conservative" or "traditional" interpreters at the time viewed religion and reform efforts to be a reaction to the negative effects of rapid social change. Paul Boyer remarks:

> Even in these years of soaring reformist aspiration, the darker variant of apocalyptic interpretation made its presence felt. Those drawn to this tradition shared the longing for a righteous social order, but combined it with deep pessimism about the possibilities of achieving the Christian utopia by the instrumentalities of government, legislation, and reform effort. In these antebellum decades, a succession of millennial groups . . . rejected the larger society as irredeemably wicked and depraved and withdrew into separatist

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[25]See, for example, Nathan O. Hatch, "The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (July 1974): 407-430; Ruth H. Bloch, "The Social and Political Base of Millennial Literature in Late Eighteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 1988): 378-396.

[26]Jack P. Maddex, Jr., "Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum Southern Calvinism," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 46; see also Major L. Wilson, "Paradox Lost: Order and Progress in Evangelical Thought of Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *Church History* 44, no. 3 (September 1975): 352-366.

> communities where they believed the kingdom of God could most likely be achieved.[27]

Postmillennialists dominated this debate during the antebellum period, but James H. Moorhead admits that "premillennialism . . . was not without disciples." He suggests a blurring of the "darker contours of millennialism" by postmillennialists to reconcile social progress "with the symbols of the Apocalypse."[28] In fact, both groups agreed that order out of chaos would come. For postmillennialists it would come in the here and now, but for premillennialists it would come in the hereafter. The discussion continued throughout the nineteenth century. But how was this debate framed by events early in the century, and what does this suggest about apocalyptic or millennial thought in antebellum America?

In the early nineteenth century, apocalyptic language erupted in connection with cataclysmic events like the New Madrid earthquakes. Common troubles like disease and death also gave rise to apocalyptic speech, and political discourse sometimes displayed its own type of apocalyptic verbiage, especially during intensely emotional times brought about by crises like war. But apocalyptic language most naturally concurred with the outbreak of Protestant revivals on the frontier, since traditional Christian beliefs operated in an apocalyptic framework.

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[27]Paul Boyer, "The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States," in McGinn, Collins, and Stein, eds., *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, 519-520.

[28]James H. Moorhead, "Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800-1880," *Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (December 1984): 525, 535.

The teleological message of frontier revival preachers relied characteristically on threats and promises associated with the end of the world. Soon this otherworldly outlook and the variations of its intensity led to tensions and outright schisms in the ranks of Christian believers. As a result, "mainstream" Christians mediated or subordinated their eschatological outlook to dogmas about salvation (i.e., soteriology), but "fringe" movements gave apocalyptic rhetoric a more central and essential role in their group's identity. Those who felt put off by supernatural interpretations (e.g., God's direct intervention) of the frontier revivals moved toward scientific or secular explanations of the unusual phenomena exhibited by believers. Social reformers who were influenced by nonreligious utopian ideologies, which contained their own brand of apocalyptic tendencies, went their own way and set up various quixotic communities.

Ostensibly a unifying force in the short term, particularly to those who benefitted from them, the revivals of the early nineteenth century proved to be a divisive force in the long term. Apocalyptic beliefs did not and could not unite the churches nor their adherents. Whatever other factors caused this divisive impact on frontier society in early nineteenth-century America–socioeconomic conditions, various pressures of industrialization and modernization, shifts toward egalitarianism–the role of religion, the revivals, and the elusive nature of Christian apocalyptic must not be overlooked.

This investigation of a perplexing aspect of apocalyptic language–its teleological paradox and ambiguity–gleans from references to the end of the world and related catastrophic events during the period of Christian revivalism in the Old Southwest from about 1800 to 1820. The use of apocalyptic language by church leaders, frontier

preachers, and others will be examined in light of local settings and antebellum religion in general. For the purpose of this inquiry, "apocalyptic rhetoric" is defined in its classical sense, as indicated above, and broadly includes ideas about end-time events whether on earth or in the afterlife. Numerous studies examine the role, scope, and meaning of apocalyptic language in American religious and political discourse. Fewer studies examine apocalyptic language in popular discourse or as a result of a particular type or set of events, and little has been written about the role of apocalyptic rhetoric in the revivals of the early nineteenth-century or as a result of the New Madrid earthquakes. This probe into the significance of apocalyptic language for "cosmic" events like the New Madrid earthquakes and the revivals aims to enhance understanding and encourage additional study of a pertinent facet of antebellum Christianity in America.

The study begins with Chapter One, "Signs and Wonders and the New Madrid Earthquakes," that examines apocalyptic language in relation to the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-1812. The immediacy of the situation, as it appeared to those who witnessed or felt the tremors, pushed their interpretation of the quakes and other related natural phenomena in the direction of cosmic language about the end of the world. Many responded to these dire omens by converting to Christianity. But there were detractors who were not persuaded by the apocalyptic rhetoric, and many of those who were convinced subsequently defected. When the quakes died down and life returned to normal, the end of the world was not so apparent. This shows how apocalyptic language could be elusive and highlights its obvious, but often neglected, ambiguity.

Chapter Two, "Tecumseh's Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes," looks at a special case of apocalyptic language in the context of the frontier's social and political evolution. As settlers moved westward and were benefitted by the federal government's suppressive policies toward the Indians, a number of tribes responded by renewing their commitment to native traditions and ancestral lands. Native American revitalization movements were religious in nature and made use of apocalyptic language to indicate the collapse of the world as they knew it and the struggle to maintain harmony in a world disrupted by invasive threats to their ancient ways and their unspoiled lands. Among the Shawnee, Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa experienced visions that anticipated comets, "falling" stars, floods, and earthquakes. In particular, Tecumseh's prediction of the New Madrid earthquakes swayed many natives to align with his confederacy against the incursions on their lands and way of life. In contrast to Christian interpretations of the comet and the earthquakes as signs of divine favor on the movement of settlers westward, Tecumseh appealed to both the comet in the heavens and the shaking of the earth as signs for the tribes to unite and resist. The same cataclysmic events and the apocalyptic language employed to describe them could be used conversely by different religious traditions. This is another indication of the ambiguity of apocalyptic language.

Chapter Three, "Religious Apathy and Revival on the Southwest Frontier," shifts to an earlier time and examines the perceived low state of religion in the Old Southwest after the turn of the nineteenth century. Christian ministers decried the sad state of morals and worked tirelessly to evangelize what they believed to be an unregenerate society. Sacramental gatherings and camp meetings attracted the masses and gave clergy

the opportunity to motivate and convict the populace with preaching filled with traditional apocalyptic rhetoric. Many settlers took to heart the threat of the end of the world and the prospect of eternal damnation and converted to Christianity. A wave of revivals swept the frontier as large numbers of people gathered in Kentucky and Tennessee and experienced spiritual healing both in body and mind. Clergy responded variously to this apparent advent of the kingdom of God. Although the revivals promoted cooperation among frontier churches, the excitement and emotionalism led to unusual practices that threatened creedal doctrines and led to schism within major faith groups like the Presbyterians. The elusive and ambiguous nature of apocalyptic ideas certainly played an important role in this religious formation on the American frontier.

Chapter Four, "Revival Phenomena and Religious Division on the Frontier," continues the story of the revivals and details some of the strange bodily manifestations that accompanied the frontier revivals. Supporters of the revivals readily used apocalyptic imagery about God's judgment and the end of the world to explain these "exercises" or phenomena. But revivalists from centrist Protestant churches, while adopting the evangelistic incentive of the revivals for the advancement of traditional Christian beliefs, avoided the extremes of revival phenomena and their apocalyptic implications. Traditional Christian eschatology stressed personal salvation and the experience of each individual believer in relation to an exalted Lord or Christ. When apocalyptic ideas disrupted what was thought to be sacrosanct in terms of cherished doctrines about salvation, centrist Protestant ministers and thorough-going devotees to apocalyptic teachings like the Shakers parted ways.

After the excitement of the revivals died out, ideas about the literal end of the world eventually shifted to ideas about the end of the world as people knew it. Because the end of the world did not come about in a literal way (i.e., the premillennial idea), the progress and optimism of the era seemed to support the conclusion that the kingdom of God might come about in a metaphorical way (i.e., the postmillennial idea). When the revival era passed, many looked to social reform rather than conversion as the means to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. This shows the adaptability of apocalyptic language to changing circumstances and again illustrates its inherent ambiguity.

Chapter Five, "Rapid Change and Apocalyptic Tendencies," surveys the nation's breakneck political and socioeconomic changes during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is done by looking at how developments at the national level affected the Old Southwest and, as a case study, Tennessee. The chapter also explores whether apocalyptic ideology as a "more esoteric form of thought" could be used to "make sense" of unwieldy cultural and social evolution. As the Old Southwest evolved, pioneers and civic leaders generally spoke about divine or providential guidance, but rarely did they make use of apocalyptic language. Seldom did apocalyptic rhetoric penetrate socioeconomic or political thought. Exceptions did occur in religious contexts, from religious sources (e.g., preachers or prophets), or as a result of catastrophic events like the wholesale oppression of Indians and blacks. This raises doubt about the usefulness of apocalyptic rhetoric to assess the overall movement of events in antebellum America. The problem is not surprising, since apocalyptic language predicts potential rather than actual realities, and one of its key characteristics is ambiguity.

The flexible nature of apocalyptic thought challenged the people of the Old Southwest and will continue to perplex historians and students of American religion. Apocalyptic rhetoric's disparate religious contexts and interpretive nuances presented problems then, and they continue to do so today. In nineteenth-century America, spectacular events like the earthquakes and the revivals intensified an apparent polarity between end-of-the-world thinking and projection of new world paradigms. Belief in a literal end of the world and its cataclysmic agents clashed with the viewpoint about social progress and its goal to achieve the millennium in the here-and-now. Either way, the apocalyptic world view was a religious one that was primarily Christian and biblical. Native American and other religious systems added their own unique type of apocalyptic thought, but none of these were as pervasive in the Old Southwest as what was developed by Protestant Christianity. Social reformers and even politicians occasionally weighed in on the question of the millennium, but these ideologies borrowed heavily from Protestant Christianity and were never as thoroughgoing as biblical apocalyptic.

The polarity of apocalyptic rhetoric in the Old Southwest, however, was temporary. Life went on for settlers and their families, for interpreters and prognosticators. What was apparent about the end of the world or the millennium did not become real in any literal sense, since the continuum of time remained unbroken. But what was potential in terms of apocalyptic events occupied the minds of those who believed and who hoped to survive a cataclysmic moment and experience a better future. A key to appreciate and understand this fluidity of thought is the acceptance of the ambiguity of apocalyptic rhetoric. To that end, the exploration now begins.