David W Fletcher, *Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest* (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007)
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CHAPTER TWO: TECUMSEH'S PREDICTION OF THE NEW MADRID EARTHQUAKES

When viewed in their Native American context, the predictions of the Great Comet of 1811 and the subsequent New Madrid earthquakes by the Shawnee chief Tecumseh were remarkable and necessary. In general, Native American religious beliefs included apocalyptic elements, but these beliefs differed prominently from those of Christianity. Indian eschatology usually followed one of two broad categories: (1) stories in which the natural world collapsed or ended as a result of human irresponsibility; and (2) stories in which the cycle of degeneration and destruction preceded a time of rebirth or renewal. The balance of nature and the community of spirits was the key, not progress toward personal salvation as in Christianity, and this harmony was the goal of cataclysmic "purification" like the New Madrid earthquakes.[1]

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa (Fig. 2.1), known as the Prophet, led an important renewal or revitalization movement among Native Americans in the Ohio River valley that spread across the eastern United States and Canada.[2] In 1805 and 1806, their work became intertribal in

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[1] Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 149-165.

[2] Lee Irwin, "Freedom, Law and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance," *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 35-55.

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Fig. 2.1. *Tenskwatawa (The Prophet)*, copied by Henry Inman from an original by Charles Bird King, 1830s. Copyright 1996 Smithsonian Institution. From David C. Hunt, "American Collection: Henry Inman," n.d., http://inman.surnameweb.org/documents/henry-inman.html (accessed 3 September 2006).

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scope after the younger Tenskwatawa had a series of visions that included his foretelling the advent of a solar eclipse. Other natural wonders, particularly the New Madrid earthquakes, also were discerned by the two brothers. These Shawnee prophecies about widespread cosmic events have been dismissed as myth or folklore by skeptics who have thought the link between the written records and the oral predictions to be unverifiable. But, when properly understood, these predictions accentuated influential aspects of Native American cosmology and religion in light of and as a response to unending incursions on the tribes' ancestral lands.

The Shawnee and other tribes viewed themselves as subordinate to nature and not in control of it. They existed symbiotically with the natural world, and they drew strength from its power and mystery. They learned meaningful lessons by observation and meditation that affected their cosmology (i.e., beliefs about the world), their language and thought patterns, and their destiny. They and their world were one, so much so that predictions by holy people about unusual or infrequent natural phenomena did not seem odd or strange.[3]

The pioneer descendants of European Christians generally disdained the Indians as savages, uncivilized, and in need of true religion, and they judged them incapable of any genuine religious experience in their natural state. These Christian "invaders," who produced most of the written records about the Indians in the early nineteenth century,

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[3] See Joel W. Martin, *The Land Looks After Us: A History of Native American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker, *Native American Theology*, 126-148. For the intricacies of the cosmology of a specific tribe, see Raven Hall, *The Cherokee Sacred Calendar: A Handbook of the Ancient Native American Tradition* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2000).

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had a clear prejudice against the legitimacy of predictive prophecy among natives, including the Shawnee. In a brief section about Tenskwatawa, for example, Thomas L. McKenney, who served as the federal government's Superintendent of Indian Trade from 1816-1822 and then as Superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1824-1830, described the justification for his bias in the following way:

> We have received, through the politeness of a friend, a narrative of the history of these celebrated Indians, dictated by the Prophet himself, and accurately written down at the moment. It is valuable as a curious piece of autobiography, coming from an unlettered savage, of a race remarkable for tenacity of memory, and for the fidelity with which they preserve and transmit their traditions, among themselves; while it is to be received with great allowance, in consequence of the habit of exaggeration which marks the communications of that people to strangers. In their intercourse with each other, truth is esteemed and practised; but, with the exception of a few high minded men, little reliance is to be placed upon any statement made by an Indian to a white man. The same code which inculcates an inviolable faith among themselves, justifies any deception towards an enemy, or one of an alien race, for which a sufficient motive may be held out. . . . With this prefatory caution, we proceed to give the story of Tenskwautawaw, as related by himself–compiled, however, in our own language, from the loose memoranda of the original transcriber.[4]

From this attitude of condescension toward natives, McKenney conceded the principle of strict veracity by the Indians "among themselves," but he could not rise above a belief in their habitual dissimulation when they interacted with "a white man" or "strangers." A strong Eurocentric bias with its criteria of what constituted civilization, education, and ethics blinded McKenney and many of his contemporaries from seeing and recording fairly the intricacies of native culture and religion.

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[4]Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, *Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of Ninety-Five of 120 Principal Chiefs from the Indian Tribes of North America* (Philadelphia: Frederick W. Greenough, 1838), 37.

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In remarks specifically about Tecumseh, McKenney emphasized the leader's mendacity and rationalized this viewpoint on the basis of what he felt to be native superstition. He summed up his assessment by saying:

> Tecumthe was not only bold and eloquent, but sagacious and subtle; and he determined to appeal to the prejudices, as well as the reasons, of his race. The Indians are very superstitious; vague as their notions are, respecting the Deity, they believe in the existence of a *Great Spirit*, to whom they look up with great fear and reverence; and artful men have, from time to time, appeared among them, who have swayed their credulous minds, by means of pretended revelations from Heaven. Seizing upon this trait of the Indian character, the crafty projector of this great revolution, prepared his brother Tenskwautawaw, or Ellsquatawa, . . . to assume the character of a Prophet; and, about the year 1806, the latter began to have dreams, and to deliver predictions.[5]

With such slanted explanations McKenney failed to portray accurately and could not possibly ascertain the nuances and mysteries of native beliefs and practices. By adopting this kind of prejudicial reasoning, those who recorded the culture and traditions of early nineteenth-century natives ironically made their own testimony highly suspect.

As noted in the previous chapter, William Pierce observed that the earthquakes frightened the Indians in the Mississippi valley and possibly killed many. But the upheavals were not completely unexpected among the natives. Over two months prior to their occurrence in December 1811, Tecumseh had predicted the powerful earthquakes. In his quest to persuade the southern tribes to confederate and repel encroaching settlers, the great orator visited the grand council of the Creek Nation that had assembled at Tuckhabatchee near the confluence of the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers (in south central

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[5]Ibid., 42.

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Alabama).[6] His attempts to persuade Big Warrior, principal chief of the Upper Creeks, met with resistance. After lengthy and emotional appeals, Big Warrior consistently refused to pledge his people in confederation. Angered by the old chief's unwillingness, Tecumseh finally shouted at him, "Your blood is white! . . . You do not believe the Great Spirit has sent me. You shall know. I leave Tuckhabatchee directly and shall go . . . to Detroit. When I arrive there, I will stamp on the ground with my foot, and shake down every house in Tuckhabatchee!"[7] When the great comet appeared soon after, Creeks remembered other words from Tecumseh about his "strong arm of fire, which will stretch across the sky."[8] In December, when the earth quaked and houses in their villages

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[6] On Tecumseh's six-month tour from August 1811 to January 1812, see John Sugden, "Early Pan-Indianism: Tecumseh's Tour of the Indian Country, 1811-1812," *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 273-304. What effect Tecumseh' tour of the southern tribes had on the Cherokees, their response to the New Madrid earthquakes, and the growth of the Ghost Dance movement has been much debated. William G. McLoughlin, "New Angles of Vision on the Cherokee Ghost Dance Movement of 1811-1812," *American Indian Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1979): 317-345; William G. McLoughlin, "Ghost Dance Movements: Some Thoughts on Definition Based on Cherokee History," *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 27; Michelene E. Pesantubbee, "When the Earth Shakes: The Cherokee Prophecies of 1811-12," *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 301-317; and Russell Thornton, "Boundary Dissolution and Revitalization Movements: The Case of the Nineteenth Century Cherokees," *Ethnohistory* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 366-367.

[7] Quoted in Allan W. Eckert, *The Frontiersman: A Narrative* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 527-528. See too Glenn Tucker, *Tecumseh: Vision of Glory* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1956), 206-211; and Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 1-5.

[8] Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, 4. This was an interesting play on words, since the name "Tecumseh" could mean "Shooting Star."

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collapsed, they knew that the Great Spirit really had sent Tecumseh to them, and he had reached Detroit, just like he had said.[9]

Native Americans regularly relied upon stories and anecdotes to unravel the many puzzles of the natural world. The effect of these earthquakes on native peoples was no different. One tradition, the Chickasaw story about the formation of Reelfoot Lake in northwest Tennessee, credited the earthquakes to the Great Spirit who stomped his foot furiously because Chief Kalopin (meaning "reelfoot") had disobeyed him.[10] But in spite of variant explanations for the earthquakes, the question of Tecumseh's prior knowledge of them must be taken seriously, and no one has found an adequate answer. Perhaps he took the rhetoric about cosmic disturbances from a common stock of phrases parlayed by charismatic native leaders. Or, as typically suggested by Christian interpreters, his utterances were embellished post facto by those who codified the oral tradition.[11] To the contrary, Tecumseh seemed to know about the shocks well in advance and verbalized that understanding on several occasions.

Tecumseh grew up in a world already in conflict. Born in central Ohio in 1768 to a Creek mother and a Shawnee father, Tecumseh witnessed conflict along the border

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[9] See the version in Albert James Pickett, *History of Alabama and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi* . . . , 3rd ed. (Charleston: Walker and James, 1851), 2:240-254.

[10] "The Legend of Reelfoot Lake," Reelfoot Lake: The Legend, n.d., http://www.reelfootlake.com/legend.htm (accessed 16 April 2006).

[11] Lewis S. Dean, "'Tecumseh's Prophecy': The Great New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812 and 1843 in Alabama," *Alabama Review* 47 (July 1994): 163-171.

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areas during the Revolutionary War.[12] As a young leader, he and his brother Tenskwatawa resisted the rapid expansion of American civilization and opposed cession of Indian lands in Ohio to the United States in the Treaty of Greenville (1795).[13] A decade later after Tenskwatawa's visions sparked renewal among the tribes of the Great Lakes region, Tecumseh with his great oratorical skill turned the movement from cultural and religious revitalization toward intertribal confederacy.[14] Tecumseh combined the savvy of heightened political rhetoric with his innate disdain for the white man. He saw clearly and poignantly the plight of the tribes and their continual deterioration in face of unrelenting incursions on their ancestral lands. To remedy the situation, he strove to pull together the eastern tribes in a federated revolt against their enemies.

In the thinking of most Native Americans, this extreme course of action called for the use of apocalyptic language to invoke the aid of the celestial bodies, since these heavenly powers watched over and guided the natural world and its events. Tecumseh

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[12] For the classic nineteenth-century biography of Tecumseh, see Benjamin Drake, *Life of Tecumseh and of His Brother The Prophet* . . . (Cincinnati: E. Morgan & Co., 1841; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969). Best modern renditions include R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, The Library of American Biography, ed. Oscar Handlin (New York: Longman, 1984); and John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

[13] For a summary of the progress of westernization in the Ohio Valley, see Beverly W. Bond, Jr., "American Civilization Comes to the Old Northwest," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 19, no. 1 (June 1932): 3-29.

[14] For a good assessment of the record of what Tecumseh said and did versus what the Prophet said and did, consult Alfred A. Cave, "The Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh, and Tippecanoe: A Case Study of Historical Myth-Making," *Journal of the Early Republic* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 637-673; also, R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

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acted accordingly. As leader of the revolt, he appropriately viewed himself as the mouthpiece of the Great Spirit.[15] True to his role as Shawnee chief and prophet for the Great Spirit, he waxed eloquent and uttered in a spirit of bellicosity the following words while encamped among the Creeks at Tuckabatchee in October 1811:

> In defiance of the white men of Ohio and Kentucky, I have traveled through their settlements–once our favorite hunting-grounds. No war-whoop was sounded, but there is blood upon our knives. The pale-faces felt the blow, but knew not from whence it came. Accursed be the race that has seized on our country, and made women of our warriors. Our fathers, from their tombs, reproach us as slaves and cowards. I hear them now in the wailing winds. The Muscogee were once a mighty people. The Georgians trembled at our war-whoop; and the maidens of my tribe, in the distant lakes, sung the prowess of your warriors, and sighed for their embraces. Now, your very blood is white, your tomahawks have no edges, your bows and arrows were buried with your fathers. O Muscogees, brethren of my mother! brush from your eyelids the sleep of slavery; once more strike for vengeance–once more strike for vengeance–once more for your country. The spirits of the mighty dead complain. The tears drop from the skies. Let the white race perish! They seize your land, they corrupt your women, they trample on your dead! Back! whence they came, upon a trail of blood, they must be driven! Back! back–ay, into the great water whose accursed waves brought them to our shores! Burn their dwellings! Destroy their stock! Slay their wives and children! The red man owns the country, and the pale-face must never enjoy it! War now! War forever! War upon the living! War upon the dead! Dig their very corpses from the graves! Our country must give no rest to a white man's bones. All the tribes of the North are dancing the wardance. Two mighty warriors across the seas will send us arms.
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> Tecumseh will soon return to his country. My prophets shall tarry with you. They will stand between you and your enemies. When the white man approaches you the earth shall swallow him up. Soon shall you see my arm of fire

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[15] See the speech of Tecumseh to the Osages in Missouri, Winter 1811-1812, in John Dunn Hunter, *Memoirs of a Captivity among the Indians of North America, from Childhood to the Age of Nineteen . . .* , 3rd ed., ed. Richard Drinnon (1824; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 28-31; and, for Hunter's remarks about the speech, William M. Clements, *Oratory in Native North America* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 139-142.

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> stretched athwart the sky. I will stamp my foot at Tippecanoe, and the very earth shall shake.[16]

Various versions of this speech from the memory of observers or through secondhand reports have been passed along in the written sources. As Tecumseh traveled among the different tribes, he undoubtedly gave a number of speeches that had the same basic outline and used similar phrases and terminology. For sure, the connections in the lines of the tradition's transmission have been unwieldy and nearly impossible to ascertain. George Washington Campbell, a United States Senator from East Tennessee, illustrated this when he wrote about Tecumseh's speech to H. S. Halbert. He remarked:

> The speech of Tecumseh as he spoke it to the Creeks or Muscogees was very powerful, and the points were the very same to the Choctaws, Cherokees, Seminoles. It was told to me by Boles, the chief of a squad of Cherokees who split off from the Cherokees and finally settled in Eastern Texas, where Cherokee County is now. Stonahajo told of the speech to the Cherokees and the points were the same.[17]

Even by mid-century the redactions were many and complex. But the fact that no known transcription of this speech (or most of Tecumseh's speeches) was made at the time it was spoken detracts in no way from the plausibility of its basic reliability. As Eckert suggests, "The elemental similarity of the many accounts . . . lends considerable

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[16]Quoted in Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne* . . . (Fort Wayne, Indiana: D. W. Jones, 1868), 193-194.

[17]Allan W. Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 764, quoting George Washington Campbell, letter to H. S. Halbert, n.d., *Tecumseh Papers*, Draper Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

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authenticity to what was uttered."[18] Above all else, the impact of Tecumseh's words on the Creeks and other tribes, not their scientific accuracy or predictive quality by modern standards, remained paramount. As suggested by a prominent biographer of the Shawnee leader, "The significant fact is not whether Tecumseh did or did not predict the earthquakes, but that the Creeks believed that he had done so. That belief was crucial, for it established Tecumseh's credibility."[19]

Tecumseh, like other tribal leaders who gave speeches that were "very smooth flowing, full of logic, and quite persuasive," tried to convince his listeners to bond together and resist the whites.[20] Tecumseh's use of rhetoric in order to bring about confederacy represented "a point of contact between two cultures in conflict" that "both shaped and was shaped by that conflict." In this respect, his speech to the Creeks underscored "the complex connections among rhetoric, culture, and politics."[21] But Tecumseh's speech at Tuckabatchee went beyond the rhetoric of politics to invoke religious belief and its incredible claim to prognosticate future occurrences.

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[18] Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Heart*, 764. See also the comments by Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 148-150. For difficulties in analysis of Indian speeches, see David Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[19] Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 251. Compare Drake, *Life of Tecumseh*, 145; and Joel W. Martin, *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees' Struggle for a New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 114-132.

[20] W. C. Vanderwerth, *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 10.

[21] Robert Yagelski, "A Rhetoric of Contact: Tecumseh and the Native American Confederacy," *Rhetoric Review* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 65.

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Very much a part of Shawnee culture and religion, the ability to foretell or predict future events set apart those who were believed to be endowed with the gift of prophecy. Other Algonquian tribes, notably the Delaware and Kickapoo, and the Iroquois peoples embraced and respected the genius of the prophet in tribal affairs. The century of extreme crisis for Indian identity, about 1750 to 1850, witnessed the rise of great prophets for most of these peoples.[22] Given the circumstances at that time, the prophet's calling, codified by the Shawnee in their prophet's (i.e., Tenskwatawa) sacred slab and the tribe's moral code, was no idle wishfulness.[23] By referring to the earth shaking and fire crossing the sky, Tecumseh may have used "stock-in-trade" language. Most importantly, as representative of the Great Spirit, he called upon heaven and earth to act as witnesses for his movement against the atrocious trespasses on the Indians' ancestral lands. So it was not unusual or out of the ordinary for the great chief to be numbered among the prophets and make use of his gift of prediction when confronting a crisis situation.[24]

This as well conformed to Shawnee beliefs in many deities or spirits that superintended the natural world. The Shawnees like most tribes adhered to a hierarchy of spiritual forces. Theirs was mothered by Kokomthena (Our Grandmother) and fathered by their Supreme Being or Great Spirit who was called Muyetelemilakwau (the

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[22] James H. Howard, *Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native Indian Tribe and Its Cultural Background* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 196.

[23] Ibid., 201-202, 204-207.

[24] Ernest Thompson Seton and Julia M. Seton, *The Gospel of the Redman: A Way of Life* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Seton Village, 1966), 88-94.

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Finisher).[25] Everything hinged on belief in these ancestral spirits, and nothing happened without their benevolent blessing or malevolent curse. For Tecumseh to utter words of federation in response to the settlers' usurpation of land or to talk of war against the government, as he did at Tuckabatchee, without reference to these spiritual forces would have been unnatural. Too, these chief deities spoke through the prophets who were their special representatives to people on earth. As the deities controlled the earth's natural forces, they chose to impart knowledge of these events through their prophets.

Shawnee cosmology, like conservative Indian beliefs generally, prescribed imminent catastrophe when the laws of the higher deities were neglected or broken.[26] In his efforts among the tribes, Tecumseh endeavored to uphold the sanctity of their ancestral lands and ways and thereby avert the anger of the Great Spirit and consequential disaster. His warnings were anything but trickery or political maneuvering. In the context of Indian cosmology and beliefs about prophecy, his predictions of the comet and the earthquakes make perfectly good sense. Had not Tecumseh voiced disapproval of those who resisted confederation and done so from the highest authority (i.e., the Great Spirit) with the direst consequences (i.e., the shaking of the earth), he would have failed to live up to his calling as a prophet in the fullest tradition of the Shawnee people.

In his remarkable prediction, Tecumseh linked the passing of the comet and the shaking of the earth to his call for united opposition to the westward push by white settlers. These would be the signs of Tecumseh's validity as the champion of Native

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[25] Howard, *Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native Indian Tribe*, 162-170.

[26] Ibid., 168.

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American resistance. As was noted in the previous chapter, Charles Latrobe believed the comet and the earthquakes to be signs of divine favor on the movement of settlers to the West. This shows that the same cataclysmic event, or set of events, could be used by different religious traditions to reach antithetical conclusions. The ambiguous nature of the cosmic signs and the elusive apocalyptic language used to describe them allowed for varying interpretations. As will be seen in the next two chapters, this problem of uncertainty in apocalyptic language affected various groups of Christians during the frontier revivals that happened a decade earlier.