

# How 'Apocalypse' Became a Dirty Word

■ **Language:** The change from abstract, mystical images to ones of fear and foreboding can be laid to a great artist's work.

By JAMES RESTON Jr.

Apocalypse Now . . . Apocalypse Then . . . Apocalypse Soon . . . Maybe . . . Never . . . the Last Apocalypse. When did this lofty word become so sinister?

The last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, sometimes called the Book of the Apocalypse, has something to do with the word's modern association with disaster. In that fantastic and confusing book, we find the images of horrible monsters, islands changing their positions, the heavens opening up. Through the first millennium and a half after Christ, these stories were seen as metaphors, the mystical and perhaps even demented imaginings of the apostle St. John the Divine. The tales of an end time were not meant to be treated literally, nor were they so depicted.

In its modern usage, however, the word "apocalypse" occasions fear and trembling. But the word has been draped with this terrible trapping only in the past 500 years. If we go back to its Greek derivation, the word means an unveiling, an uncovering, a disclosure, a revelation.

I put the transformation of the word's meaning from revelation to catastrophe down to an exact date: AD 1498; to an exact place: Nuremberg, Germany; and to an exact work: a series of woodcut etchings called "Apocalypse" by Albrecht Durer. Of all the visual depictions of the apocalypse, these disturbing drawings are the most famous. Durer wiped out the abstract and mystical images. By blending realism with fantasy, his works enhanced the fear and foreboding about the apocalypse.

Durer's etching of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" is the best known of the series. The woodcut possesses a horrifying dynamic movement as the four horsemen gallop across the sky, vying with one another for position, trampling

their victims underfoot. The rider on the black steed is the central figure. While he trails his balance of justice and judgment behind him in the wind, his face is natural, muscular, human, except that his eyes are blank as if he is blind.

The Fourth Horseman, Death, is placed below the black stallion. The avenger is an emaciated, stick-like figure, with a gaunt face and wild eyes. He carries a pitchfork instead of the traditional scythe, as if he is harvesting rather than killing. His advanced age, his crazed look, his decrepit horse make him all the more terrifying.

If Durer's "Four Horsemen" are his most famous apocalyptic work, his portrayal of the opening of the Fifth and Sixth Seals of the sacred book that held the fate of the world lies at the heart of the modern concept of apocalypse. This was the passage in Revelation that so transfixed David Koresh in Waco, Texas, before his fiery incineration. The artist did not depict the actual opening. Nor did he depict the earthquake that occurred after the Sixth Seal was broken. Rather, he imagined the result of the opening. A shower of burning stars rains down upon a cowering humanity, as the sun turns black "as a sack cloth of hair" and the moon becomes blood red. The triangle of falling, burning stars is the focus of the woodcut.

As a work of art, Durer's woodcut of the Fifth and Sixth Seals may be less successful than the Four Horsemen. But as politics, it established the idea of the apocalypse as the fiery end for humankind in a nuclear-like conflagration.

Often, the question is asked if terror reigned in the streets a thousand years ago as the world approached the first millennium. The answer is clearly no: The Western world of AD 1000 was an illiterate place with no awareness of the calendar and no real appreciation of the passage of time. But if we must have a historical parallel for a time seized with rampant paranoia about the end of the world, AD 1500 is the year. When that jubilee year approached, the industrious and God-fearing populace was consumed with religious foreboding. At last, it was believed, the long-awaited return of Christ would come to pass.

In part, the paranoia can be explained by the invention of printing. Gutenberg's printing press had arrived in Nuremberg in 1470, and in the years afterward, the presses turned out literature and art with unparalleled speed and in unparalleled quantity. In 1472, astronomer Johannes Regiomontanus printed a series of popular calendars. For the first time in Western civilization, there was a wide appreciation of the passage of days and years, especially toward an apocalyptic benchmark. The calendars were widely distributed, and Regiomontanus was summoned to Rome by Pope Sixtus IV to work on the reform of the calendar.

Coupled with the wide dissemination of the calendar was a technical advance in clock-making. The invention of the coil spring around 1500 made it possible to mass-produce small, lightweight clocks for the home. The tick of the clock went along with the turning of the calendar page to give the citizen of Reformation Europe a fresh and intimate awareness of the passage of time toward an unnerving landmark date.

And what happened at the date was a revelation: the arrival of Martin Luther and the shaking of the Catholic Church at its roots.

Ironically, Luther himself had grave doubts about the Book of Revelation and relegated it to an appendix in his German New Testament. Today, if we have anything overtly apocalyptic, it is the year 2000 computer problem. That looming catastrophe involves essentially a time-keeping device that was set up incorrectly in its inception, and its consequences may be a deep worldwide economic recession.

But fear not: We will get through our apocalypse. We may have a few eye openers before it's over. But it will not be as unsettling as the Protestant Reformation around 1500 or as historic as the Christianization of Europe, nearly all at once, at the year 1000.

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"The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" by Albrecht Durer, one of a series of woodcut etchings dating from 1498 in Nuremberg, Germany. Durer's works enhanced the fear and foreboding about the apocalypse.