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**Apocalypse/Apocalypticism.** This term is used to identify the final phase of earthly history, and is associated with the Christian belief that there will be a lifting of the veil of God's sacred scheme for fallen humanity in the end of history. Based on prophetic passages in the book of Revelation (or Apocalypse) of Saint John the Divine, it concerns the imminent end of the world and an ensuing general resurrection and final judgment. This is the time of the "church triumphant," according to Edwards, when "all the changes, dangers, doubts, difficulties, storms and tempests, sorrows and afflictions of this world shall forever vanish and be abolished" (*WJE* 5:124).

Apocalyptic thought and belief played an important role in Edwards's sense of history. Consciously assuming the task of setting the New England revival within the grand apocalyptic and eschatological confines of sacred ecclesiastical history, Edwards clearly resembled other prominent figures in the history of the church who turned to history and wrote their narratives in response to decisive historical changes within which the Christian church found itself in the world. After the conversion of Constantine the Great in 312 CE, and the transformation of the Christian church into the faith of the Roman Empire, Eusebius composed *Ecclesiastical History* to supply the historical justification for the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Augustine wrote the *City of God* after the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 in order to defend Christianity against its many adversaries after the fall of Rome. And John Foxe composed his *Acts and Monuments*, commonly called "Book of Martyrs" (1563), in order to forge a new Protestant vision of England in the face of Bloody Mary's persecutions of the Protestants in the land. Faced with new historical circumstances, each of them forged a new apocalyptic philosophy of sacred, providential history of the Christian church upon earth. Such was also the case with the New England theologian. The new historical reality of the Great Awakening required him to turn to sacred, ecclesiastical history to explain the divine drama engulfing the whole of New England. In this role Edwards made himself not only the theologian but also the historian of the revival, constantly explaining the apocalypse and eschatology of the Great Awakening.

Edwards developed a unique apocalyptic philosophy of history, according to which he interpreted the progress of the Protestant awakening in Europe and the Great Awakening in the British colonies of America during the first half of the eighteenth century. Concerning the awakening, Edwards declared in his sermon series on the "history of the work of redemption," in 1739:

We have all reasons from Scripture to conclude that just before this work of God [revivals preceding the millennium] begins it will be a very dark time with respect to the interest of religion in the world. It has been so before those glorious revivals of religion that have been hitherto. So it was when Christ came, it was an exceeding degenerate time among the Jews, and so it was a very dark time before the Reformation. And not only, but it seems to be foretold in Scripture that it shall be a time of but little religion when Christ shall come to set up his kingdom in the world. (*WJE* 9:460)

When the rising tides of the evangelical awaking reached New England, he wrote in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival*: "'Tis not unlikely that this work of God's

Spirit, that is so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind.” Apocalyptic reasoning was thus inextricable from his vision of history.

Few philosophers of history can boast that the views they developed in their private studies actually materialized in history during their lifetime, or that the passage of time had testified to their historical prognosis. But perhaps Edwards considered himself among them, for he fit the Great Awakening of 1740–1744 into his apocalyptic interpretation of history. Believing God to be the sole author of history, and maintaining that divine activity is not alienated from the fate of human beings within it, he argued in “Miscellanies” no. 702 that God works continuously through history to advance his work of redemption, which constitutes “the end and drift of all God’s works & dispensations from the beginning & even the end of the work of creation itself” (*WJE* 18:284).

He calculated in *A History of the Work of Redemption* that the Deity’s redemptive activity would culminate in a last remarkable dispensation, whereby the “Spirit shall be gloriously poured out for the wonderful revival and propagation of religion.” So it was in the past, “and so it is foretold it will be at the great pouring out of the Spirit of God in the latter days” (*WJE* 9:460, 142). This, he further declared in *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, will be “the last and greatest outpouring of the Spirit,” the penultimate event in sacred salvation history preceding the millennium and the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God. Since it would be the last effusion of the Spirit, the present revival would inaugurate “the glory of the approaching happy state of the church” and its “most glorious and perfect state” on earth. As the final “great work” of the Spirit, such a glorious act “shall be accomplished, not by the authority of princes, nor by the wisdom of learned men, but by God’s Holy Spirit” (*WJE* 4:280; *WJE* 9:460). Rather than a magisterial reformation imposed from above, he argued in *A History of the Work of Redemption* that the last remarkable revival in history would take place when the Holy Spirit “shall bring great multitudes” to be “glorious instruments of carrying on” the work of redemption.

This prognosis was put to the test almost immediately. Within a year of preaching the sermons constituting *A History of the Work of Redemption*, the Great Awakening erupted in New England. Historical events therefore confirmed Edwards’s apocalyptic prediction: once again God was advancing his work of redemption through the convergence of divine dispensation and revival. Here was the main source for the great enthusiasm with which Edwards greeted the awakening and his continuing zeal in seeking to perpetuate it.

In *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Edwards established an unbreakable link between the unfolding apocalypse of divine judgment and the human existential condition, claiming in “a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands at the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners . . . [h]ow awful is [it] to be left behind in such a day!” and not included in “the kingdom of God.” According to this apocalyptic vision, those who “are not this day born again” and are “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” are “going down to hell” and should be counted as “the children of the devil.” Apocalypse and eschatology are the core and the heart of the historical process.

In 1739 Edwards argued that the work of redemption is carried out “by many successive works and dispensations of God,” which inaugurate remarkable periods of revivals, or “special seasons of mercy.” In *The Distinguishing Marks*, he interpreted the Great Awakening on the basis of this theological reading of history, claiming it heralded, along with other revivals in

Germany and Scotland, “the commencement of that last and greatest outpouring of the Spirit of God, that is to be in the latter ages of the world.” The penultimate stage in providential history, the revival signified a special time—*kairos*—an epoch in salvation history in which the eternal transforms the temporal. Hence his fervent belief that the New England revival initiated a decisive moment in salvation history; as he wrote in *The Distinguishing Marks*: “Now [that] Christ is come down from heaven into this land, in a remarkable and wonderful work of his Spirit, it becomes” necessary for “all his professed disciples to acknowledge him, and give him honor” (*WJE* 9:121, 143; *WJE* 4:230, 270).

God’s present dispensation thus transformed the realm of history into a grand apocalypse—a special space of time within which the Deity revealed the advance of his redemptive plan. Likewise, believing the awakening to open a new period in the realization of sacred, prophetic revelations, Edwards conceived of it as a grand apocalyptic and eschatological event proclaiming the final epoch in the drama of salvation and redemption: the New England revival, being part of the Protestant evangelical awakening, he declared in *Some Thoughts*, “is the dawning, or at least a prelude, to that glorious work of God,” which “shall renew the world of mankind.” Edwards’s apocalyptic visions and eschatological expectations now reached a zenith, as can be seen in his letter to the Reverend Joseph Bellamy in early 1741: “Neither earth or hell can hinder” God’s “work that is going in the country,” he proclaimed. And since “Christ gloriously triumphs at this day,” all should “give glory to him who thus rides forth in the chariots of his salvation” (*WJE* 4:353; *WJE* 16:99). The awakening signaled the penultimate stage in God’s historical scheme of redemption; it was the realization of a divine plan that constituted the core of history, as well as its goal. In an age in which Enlightenment historians had made many efforts to exclude theistic considerations from the realm of history, Edwards dwelt on God’s close and intimate relationship with it.

Edwards marshaled his intellectual energies to promote the cause of the awakening, demanding, as he wrote to the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock in 1740, that all “those that make mention of the Lord” should be “awakened and encouraged to call upon God, and not keep silence, nor give him any rest, till he establish and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth” (*WJE* 16:85). Accordingly, his ultimate goal was to provide a grand apocalyptic and eschatological historical justification of the Great Awakening, including giving it a wider historical background. In *The Distinguishing Marks* he declared that the present dispensation of the Spirit of God should be seen in historical terms within God’s scheme of redemption: as the “apostolical age” was “an age of the greatest outpouring of the Spirit of God that ever was,” and later “the [Protestant] Reformation” a time “of great pouring out of the Spirit to revive religion in the world,” so indeed was the case with the current revival; it was “in general, from the Spirit of God.”

Edwards’s utmost apocalyptic historicization of God’s work of redemption influenced his rhetoric of history. If during the “little revival” of 1734–1735 he admitted, “I forbear to make reflections, or to guess what God is about to do” with this event, then during the Great Awakening, having forged the premises of his philosophy of history in *A History of the Work of Redemption*, he situated the revival in the context of God’s grand apocalyptic historical scheme of salvation and redemption. He had therefore no hesitation to define in *The Distinguishing Marks* the awakening as the penultimate apocalyptic event in sacred, providential history: “Christ is come down from heaven into this land,” he boldly proclaimed in 1741, in the form of “a remarkable and wonderful work of his Spirit” (*WJE* 4:109, 270). Based on such strong apocalyptic and eschatological modes of conviction and persuasion, he wrote in *Some Thoughts*

that “what is now seen in America, and especially in New England, may prove the dawn of that glorious day,” or the beginning of the last remarkable effusion of the Spirit. Having grasped the clue to God’s redemptive activity in time, he argued that “the very uncommon and wonderful circumstances and events of this work, seem to me strongly to argue that God intends it as the beginning or forerunner of something vastly great” (*WJE* 4:358). Likewise, he wrote in 1743 to the Reverend William McCulloch of Cambuslang, Scotland: “We live in a day wherein God is doing marvelous things; in that respect we are distinguished from former generations.” Hence, “I cannot think otherwise, than that what has now been doing, is the forerunner of something vastly greater, more pure, and more extensive” (*WJE* 16:106).

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*Further Reading*

McClymond, Michael J., and Gerald R. McDermott. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Ch. 35.

Zakai, Avihu. *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.