

Between Two Apocalypses: Catastrophic Millenialism and Narrative Modeling in the Gesar Epic

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Applying the theoretical work of Burton Mack and Catherine Wessinger to the final episode of the Gesar epic, The Great Perfecting of Hell (Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po), this article argues for narrative eschatology's role in framing the reader as a participant in the apocalyptic end of the Dharma. A narrative describing the destruction of a Buddhist kingdom embedded with a prophecy for a future, greater apocalypse of the Buddhist teachings themselves, the final episode of the Gesar epic pins the reader between two cataclysms—the narrative of Ling's end in the historical past and the destruction of all Buddhist Dharma in Tibet's future. In this way, the narrative's inside and outside are collapsed so that the reader becomes an apocalyptic participant awaiting the coming battle and return of Gesar. This article argues that The Great Perfecting of Hell reflects contemporary apprehensions about the complex political situation of early twentieth-century eastern Tibet. These apprehensions are enhanced through diversifying the apocalyptic possibilities that define the Buddhist tradition and introducing a new mythic script that orients the reader towards their contemporary world.