

1-1-1994

# "A Gof-Forsaken Place": Folk Eschatology and the Dust Bowl

Brad Lookingbill

*University of Toledo*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Lookingbill, Brad, "'A Gof-Forsaken Place': Folk Eschatology and the Dust Bowl" (1994). *Great Plains Quarterly*. Paper 801.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/801>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## “A GOD-FORSAKEN PLACE” FOLK ESCHATOLOGY AND THE DUST BOWL

BRAD LOOKINGBILL

On an idyllic Sunday in April 1935, people from Lubbock, Texas, to Topeka, Kansas, went on picnics, planted gardens, visited neighbors, and attended church. Communities had been punished with depression and drought, yet on that spring day Plains men and women felt assured that peace and safety had returned. Suddenly in midafternoon the air turned cold, and people noticed then that the sky had become filled with birds, fleeing from some unseen force. Fifteen-year-old Ida Mae Norman, driving home from a Palm Sunday church service with her family, saw a thin strip of black on the horizon north of Guymon, Oklahoma.

Seconds later, they were enveloped in a wall of dust. She later recalled: “I was so frightened. I thought the world had come to an end.” She feared that the foreboding dust storm might be a “signal for Armageddon.”<sup>1</sup>

The teenage girl’s fear reflected a common response to dramatic ecologic and economic shifts. From the Puritan’s “Day of Doom” in colonial history to Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* in recent years, apocalyptic strains have echoed throughout American culture and remained malleable to particular historical circumstances. Premillennial dispensationalism, the eschatological form popular in the twentieth century, regards events not as harbingers of a progressive evolution into the Kingdom, as postmillennialism contended. Instead, individuals saw omens of disaster as increasing trials which would precede the imminent return of Christ in judgment and salvation.<sup>2</sup> This paradoxical faith, constructed within the social experience and from the religious traditions of grassroots Christian piety, persisted in the folklore articulated throughout southwestern Kansas, northwestern Oklahoma, southeastern Colorado, and the Texas Panhandle. The folk eschatology of

*Brad Lookingbill is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Toledo. His publications include “Dusty Apocalypse and Socialist Salvation: Woody Guthrie and the Dust Bowl Image,”* *Chronicles of Oklahoma* (forthcoming 1994).

[GPQ 14 (Fall 1994): 273-86]



FIG. 1. "Black blizzards": a dirt storm in Dalhart, Texas. Photograph courtesy of the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University.

the Dust Bowl signified the continuing connection between lay religious belief and a fundamentalistic Christian subculture.

#### DEPRESSION CHALLENGES AND INITIAL CHURCH REACTIONS

Communities throughout the short-grass Plains in the 1930s faced a series of challenges. Economic depression reduced the price of wheat, a critical commodity for regional agriculture, from \$1.16 per bushel in 1926 to \$0.68 by 1930. In addition, climatological records from 1932-36 recorded the most extreme drought in the history of the southern Great Plains. Soil erosion and high winds took a severe toll and produced over 352 dirt storms, large and small, usually in the early spring.

The U.S. Soil Conservation Service reported storms in which visibility was reduced to less than a mile and listed 72 in 1937, the top figure for the period.

Though most of the sandstorms were short and light, the rare but destructive black blizzards created greater awe in residents' minds than in other dusty times. Scrambling for a piece of stable land, individuals often linked together the economic downturn and environmental hazards and recognized the dirty thirties as the greatest tribulation of their lives.<sup>3</sup> Religious folklore, in addition to other variables within the cultural equation, contributed to this perception of the hard times.

While communities struggled for survival, religious institutions remained important sources of social continuity. Although total

population in both Kansas and Oklahoma declined, church membership increased in the Southwest region from 1926 to 1936, growing slightly from 4,457,592 to 4,525,679. Methodist, Baptist, Church of Christ, Lutheran, and Mennonite Brethren groups all experienced marginal growth in membership, with a greater increase during these years than during the preceding ten years. For example, in forty-seven rural Protestant denominations in Sedgwick County, Kansas, the total membership increased only slightly during the twenties, but they increased by 14 percent between 1930 and 1935. Members under the age of twenty-one increased by 64 percent in the early years of the Depression, and attendance at Sunday morning services increased 25 percent from 1930 to 1935 in the county. Drought and economic depression presented obstacles for some established churches in the southern Plains. Several of them declined, consolidated, or even closed, continuing a trend that had already begun earlier in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

Although mainline Protestant activities continued in static conditions in most rural Plains locales, a few new Christian churches experienced dramatic surges in membership and participation. The Assemblies of God reached 148,043 members in the entire Southwest by 1936, a 208 percent increase from 1926. In Texas and Oklahoma, this particular Protestant denomination multiplied its membership five times during the ten-year period, and membership quadrupled in Kansas. The Church of the Nazarene also doubled its membership in all three states. One resident, referring to the Nazarene Church of Sublette, Kansas, commented: "They are very religious and quite emotional. They take their religion very seriously and are very hard in their condemnation of other people's conduct."

Another denomination, the Pentecostal Holiness Church, also increased significantly. Total membership in Oklahoma reached 2315 in 1936, increasing from the 1926 mark of 1573. During the quadrennium of 1933 to 1937, the Oklahoma conference of the Pentecostals raised the second highest amount of

finances in the entire national denomination, and only three conferences exceeded it in assets. They also increased their world missions activities during the Depression decade, when it might have been expected that economic difficulties would inhibit such activities.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these "religions of rigor" offered a comforting spiritualism to the laity. They assured believers of happiness in the world to come while easing the burdens of this life with the claim that money, status, and power were unimportant for salvation.<sup>6</sup>

#### FUNDAMENTALISM ON THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

Evidence from the hardest hit regions of the southern Plains reveals the importance of religious institutions to particular communities. For example, in Hardesty, Oklahoma, the Apostolic Faith Church organized in 1933 after a revival where "eighty souls were saved." In nearby Wilburton and Morning Star, church membership increased over 100 percent in 1933 and 1934, and a new Church of Christ was built in Keyes, Oklahoma. The United Methodists of Meade, Kansas, recorded that the drought "tried the souls of the people," but the church thrived during the decade. The Church of God in Beaver, Oklahoma, held a mortgage burning service on 17 September 1938, following the completion of a new building.<sup>7</sup> Some churches reported that donations declined due to the economic downturn, but Reverend L. R. Scarborough reported in the *Baptist Standard* that the church in Lubbock, Texas, led the way in the "tithing movement." Reverend Mark A. Dawber, reporting for the Home Missions Council of the Methodist Episcopal Church, concluded that the people of the drought region maintained their levels of contributions because "this was a real test of Christian faith."<sup>8</sup>

Countless residents reported religious activities as popular and inexpensive recreation, and insisted that the hard times might end if people would simply go to church more often. Though some laity reported shame in being



FIG. 2. "Popular and inexpensive recreation": the First Methodist Church of Merkel, Texas. Photograph courtesy of the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University.

unable to attend church due to their lack of proper clothing, one pious school teacher from Wheeler, Texas, responded: "In my own case I have always gone to church regardless of the kind of clothing I had. I feel that my prime motive was to worship God. I believe that people who give lack of proper clothing as an excuse for not going to church just want an excuse or they are not truly Christian." Another woman agreed and faithfully declared: "I am optimistic because of the drought because my Lord has promised that all things work together to good to them that love God. . . . We have always attended church regularly, but we have received more spiritual blessings and a closer bond to Christians since the drought." Members suffered from the burdens of adverse weather and a bad economy, but they were ones which many faithful were willing to bear.<sup>9</sup>

Fundamentalist religion left an indelible mark upon the membership of local churches.

By 1936, over one-third of the total population of the southern Great Plains maintained church membership, and low church Protestant denominations dominated religious life there. For example, 91 percent of Oklahoma's church members claimed a Protestant faith, while a majority of these emphasized Biblical literalism, individual morality, and a premillennial eschatology. The last of these provided a major impetus for evangelical growth in American culture and served as a building block for conservative traditions regardless of denomination. A similar pattern homogenized churches in Haskell County, Kansas, where people expressed similar fundamentalist beliefs, even those who did not regularly attend church.<sup>10</sup>

Essentially, the Old Time religion that marked frontier life in the region had survived over the years, and the pattern of revivals and camp meetings continued throughout the Dust Bowl decade. Over 109 tents were assembled



for a camp meeting near Beaver, Oklahoma, in August 1934, with people flocking to the meeting from the drought states. A Kansas newspaper reported that the experience benefitted numerous communities, for the meeting closed with "souls at the altar earnestly seeking God and pressing their cases before Him." The Nazarene Church in Sublette, Kansas, ran newspaper advertisements for a revival, reminding people of the relationship between the drought and deliverance: "Get the dust out of your eyes and make the closing services a time of soul saving."<sup>11</sup> Revivalists determined that the spiritual fields remained ripe for harvest, though much of the farmland appeared barren.

Local pastors and districts, often independent from major denominations either formally or simply in practice, spoke little of relief during the 1930s but emphasized instead depravity and grace. A popular Sunday morning radio program in Kansas compared the problems of the people with the persecutions of the Savior. A survey of Sunday sermons listed in one newspaper of a southern Plains community reveals such titles as "Is There Any Hope for the Hopeless Today?," "Jesus and the Problems of Life," "Holy Suffering," "The Future Life," "Dust Storms and God," and, most appropriate, "I Thirst." In February 1935, clergy from the Perryton, Texas, District of the Methodist Episcopal Church-South cited the need to return to "the fundamentals of religion" in order to resolve the crises of the depression years. Echoing the view espoused by a strong religious minority in the 1920s, West Texas Methodists maintained that the greatest threat to Plains communities remained whiskey and immorality rather than economic deprivation, as they proclaimed that the "hour of destiny" had arrived in the fight against the forces of spiritual decay. Regardless of their numbers, a vocal assortment of conservatives and evangelicals, working from their own definition of righteousness, dominated political debate in population centers as large as Amarillo.<sup>12</sup> According to the messages proclaimed throughout the southern Plains, an essential part of



FIG. 3. Panhandle dust storm, Perryton, Texas. Photograph courtesy of the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University.

any relief for those who suffered included repentance and faithfulness to the Almighty.

As the economic and environmental decline continued, conservative religious voices persisted in their emphasis upon the spiritual crisis of the day. Rev. M. E. Markwell of the Methodist Church in Boise City, Oklahoma, questioned the community: "Who have we been serving, who are you serving today? . . . If ye were God's servants, ye would receive better pay. God has been kind and merciful, we have been selfish and unappreciative." These clergy believed that the hope for the region remained in a return to the traditions which united the communities in the past, and so messages about resilient faith and inevitable punishment resounded throughout. One minister, writing in a Baptist newspaper in Texas, ordered people to seek relief from adversity through the Lord: "If you are a failure it is because you have no faith." Those who suffered deserved their fate because "there is no

such thing as Chance. Everything is test, or punishment, or reward, or prevision." A minister from the Methodist Episcopal Church in Meade, Kansas, praised the God-sent punishment of the day: "We are reminded very forcibly of the greatness of our sin, and at the same time, of the greatness of God's love and kindness toward us. . . . We also realize that we have deserved nothing but damnation on account of our sin."<sup>13</sup> These strident voices suggested that an angry God unleashed the hard times to chastise a prodigal people, and only an appeased God would lift the yoke.

#### THE GREAT TRIBULATION

While the years of dust, drought, and depression persisted in the High Plains, a number of ministers and churches began to sense that the adversity experienced by the laity represented a part of the Providential plan for revival in the last days. A few religious sects held meetings on street corners and began to warn people to be ready, for the portentous events "were fulfillment of the signs of the times and heralded the approach of the end of the world." One prayer group in Kansas appealed to the citizens of the Plains to reconsecrate their lives and prepare themselves for "God's own way and judgment to deliver us from this dust peril lest . . . a worse calamity come upon us."<sup>14</sup> The *Baptist Standard* of Texas declared that the sinners of the world should prepare themselves for tribulation:

Eminent leaders agree that the world, after a cycle of disturbance that has shaken the foundations of every phase of life, political, social and economic, is ready. . . . Then indeed would mankind intelligently be able to face this world crisis, judgment that has come upon us and our boasted civilization and work itself through to peace and normalcy.<sup>15</sup>

For those who viewed the crises of the depression years as a part of the divine plan, the

future would reveal more hardship if humans failed to repent and labor for the Lord.

For a vocal and prophetic minority, the crisis presented a sign of God's vindictive punishment on an apostate people as well as hope for His imminent return. "The nations that forget God," declared a Southern Baptist convention resolution in 1932, "shall not prosper." Reverend Gerald B. Winrod, a popular Kansas crusader who organized the Defenders of the Christian Faith, observed that the signs of the times in the 1930s confirmed that the great tribulation was approaching. Commenting specifically on the Depression, he advised that "more religion—rather than more legislation—is the need of the hour."<sup>16</sup>

Though the precise expectations of every person remains difficult to measure, anecdotal evidence suggests that apocalyptic dread became a common belief among the grassroots population. Frequent statements by farmers included: "We're in the last days before Christ returns, [problems] will get worse," and "Sin is to blame for the whole thing. God uses it for his purposes." In Boise City, Oklahoma, the local newspaper opened one article with a quote from Scripture, identifying the economic crisis in the community with Ezekial 22:12-13 in which the Lord declared: "Behold, therefore, I have smitten my hand at thy dishonest gain which thou hast made, and at thy blood which has been in the midst of thee."<sup>17</sup> One Oklahoman reported that a foreboding mood prevailed throughout the drought region, and that "always in the back of hearts and minds stood the question: Are we being punished by an angry God? If so, what is next?" Warned a letter to the *Amarillo Globe-News*, "Only a complete turning to God can prevent the complete collapse of this portion of Texas in which we live." The signs of God's impending judgment and wrath abounded, according to its author, with riots, strife, grief, rumors of war, and floods all signaling the end of time; but there was still time to "turn your paper over to God."<sup>18</sup> Certainly not everyone flocked to these explanations, although their appearance

in a variety of local newspapers and personal recollections suggest that such dismaying thoughts tempted residents.

Secular voices across the dry prairies articulated the fear that the dust storms represented another divine visitation. One Russell County, Kansas, newspaper, in the midst of a front page full of bulletins about raging dust storms, printed a stern warning: "A Curse for Disobedience? The Lord shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust; from heaven shall it come down on thee, until thou be destroyed. Deut. 28:24." In Amarillo, Texas, a local columnist discussed the frequent calls that he received concerning the incessant sandstorms. Folks expressed to him a conviction that the days of dust were "a visitation from the Lord" and fulfilled the curses of disobedience declared by the Scripture. Nevertheless, the columnist doubted the concerns, because "I can't believe He would select the very best people for punishment when there are others so much more deserving of His wrath."<sup>19</sup> Even the toughest souls felt the frustration and rationalized reasons for the dirt barrage.

The drama of the noisome black blizzards of the 1930s brought a sense of utter helplessness to individuals in the midst of a hostile environment, and terror clutched the hearts of some as dust stifled communities. The *Lubbock* (Texas) *Avalanche-Journal* reported that two people became "hysterical because of the expressed fear that the world was coming to an end." The *Topeka Daily State Journal* received phone calls throughout one dramatic dust storm, with one startling voice declaring: "Watch for the second coming of Jesus Christ. God is wrathful."<sup>20</sup> Delores Marie Wilmot, a resident of the Oklahoma Panhandle during the Dust Bowl years, recalled an early duster and the frightening and perplexing image of the darkened sky:

We thought the end of the world was surely coming, you know because, well, we went to church all of the time and they had these traveling evangelists, and they preached the

old fire and everything else was going to fall on you anytime; and I used to sit there bug-eyed and so scared of what the Lord was doing or going to do to us. And so I thought, boy, here it's come! And I wasn't the only one because, well, I was just a kid but there was a lot of adults that thought this was it. They had never seen anything like it before!<sup>21</sup>

Wilmot as well as other residents survived countless dust storms over the years. She expressed the apocalyptic mood which prevailed when the foreboding rollers appeared upon the horizon of the High Plains in the 1930s.

When the awesome dirt storms rolled over the southern Plains with turbulent black clouds that showered dust instead of rain, some concluded that the apocalypse had arrived. The black blizzard of 14 April 1935, stands as the worst one in the memories of most residents. It arrived on a Sunday that had been marked by clear skies and calm weather. Witnesses who viewed the ominous cloud on the horizon felt "the Wrath of God descending at one time" to punish everything in its path. The black roller engulfed the northeastern sky and advanced across the southern Plains, with hundreds of birds flying before the storm seeking shelter.<sup>22</sup> In Liberal, Kansas, the local newspaper reported that during the storm's climax, "some people thought the end of the world was at hand when every trace of daylight was obliterated at 4:00 p.m." Alarmed people fell to their knees and prayed for forgiveness as the wall of dirt approached, and railroad workers at Dalhart, Texas, reportedly feared that "the world had come to an end."<sup>23</sup> The cataclysmic images of Black Sunday dominated the recollections of those who witnessed the incredible vision of the duster.

Reports of Judgment Day abounded and fueled the image of terrorizing dust storms. Few storms reached the magnitude of that particular day, but fifty years later Dessie M. Hanburry of Amarillo, Texas, vividly recalled the foreboding image of doom: "We thought





FIG. 4. "A prelude to the apocalypse": a dust storm in downtown Dalhart, Texas. Photograph courtesy of the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University.

the world was coming to an end. It was so dark, you couldn't see the light in the room. I've never witnessed a darkness so dark." In future decades, this remained the archetypical storm against which survivors measured all others. In another instance, a woman in Griggs, Oklahoma, reported that the mighty roller clouds frightened her into believing that "the Lord was returning to gather His flock." A family trapped in a car near Beaver, Oklahoma, during Black Sunday "thought the world was coming to an end." In Sherman County, Texas, Mrs. Joe Billington remarked that not one ray of light appeared for twenty-five minutes, which some thought a prelude to the apocalypse.<sup>24</sup> The black blizzard raged for hours, submerging everyone in its path of darkness and in an unforgettable experience.

Countless people across the High Plains voiced their fears in eschatological language. This common pattern of individual reaction underscored the influence of popular religious myths. Wanita Brown, while living near Amarillo, Texas, noticed the dramatic weather and described her haunting reaction: "And the dust was just rolling in, just like a fog coming in, and in no time it was as dark as night. Yes, I remember that day. You know, we couldn't imagine whether the world was coming to an end or what." Larue Young of Canadian, Texas, thought "perhaps the world was coming to an end. This sand storm was a terrible thing, and it was one of the experiences in my life that I will never forget." The Urban family of Perryton, Texas, also recalled that the dusty apocalypse seemed to climax the

years of tribulation, and that “a lot of people were just frightened to death—they thought it was the end of the world. It was real gruesome.” “Almost universal,” according to another survivor, was the anxiety that this violent Sunday afternoon might be the end of the world.<sup>24</sup>

#### SEEKING ANSWERS IN FOLK BELIEFS

Some local preachers from evangelical sects declared that the drought revealed part of the Almighty’s plan. A “Job’s Comforter” near Alva, Oklahoma, proclaimed that “the drought is a direct punishment for our sins. . . . [D]ays of grace and mercy and rain for this great prairieland are forever past.” After all, some fearfully suggested, the Scriptures prophesied: “And thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron.” Life seemed as scriptural as Revelations, since “one woe has past and behold, there came two woes more hereafter.” The Nazarene Church in Meade, Kansas, reported that the seating capacity had been filled for every service “because people are awakening to the warnings of God’s word, that financial conditions and crop shortages are dependent upon someone greater than man.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, individuals were urged by pious community spokesmen to attend church in order to save their bank accounts and crops as well as their souls.

As the value of farm property dropped by forty percent during the 1930s, people throughout the troubled southern Great Plains found that their folklore provided answers concerning the cause of the difficult days. One resident of Wheeler, Texas, observed: “I think the drought was sent to us from God because of the wicked and perverse ways of the people existing today. Deut. 28:15 and 24.” Another Texan concurred when responding about the impact of the Depression: “I go to church more for spiritual guidance and strength. My belief is that God is punishing us for the way we live.”<sup>27</sup> Evelyn Harris, while writing to a friend in Oklahoma concerning the hardships of the farm, felt that farmers should accept their

present adversity without complaint: “They forget that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, and that we, as farmers, are powerless to do anything about it either way . . . [when] some other act of God destroys our crops.”<sup>28</sup>

Others, however, were not so certain of the favor of Providence. One native expressed the universal cry of Job in the *Boise City News* of Oklahoma: “Why is it when we ask so little of life sometimes and conduct ourselves to the best of our ability, we should be punished so severely?” Buren Sparks of Texas believed that he had the answer. During the late twenties, people had turned their back on God and pursued the pleasures of life; but then came “the [D]epression, the drought, falling prices, and you are broke like all the other big ranchmen.” Now, God released the winds of dust upon the region. After recounting a parable of a family searching for their lost son in a dust storm, he concluded that “to be lost in hell is a million times worse than being lost in a sandstorm. Sandstorms can touch your body but not your soul.”<sup>29</sup>

Some individuals found strength to cope with the blowing dirt in a vicarious vision which transformed the physical struggle into a supernatural one. One pious woman commented: “When I see a dust storm coming, I feel that it is God’s will—so I try to like it.” Another resident trapped in the dirt claimed that the dark blizzards were sent to force people to “think of the beautiful day after the storm”—the punishing climate helped her “look forward to the resurrection.” Les Dodson of Sherman County, Texas, believed “a situation like this brings the inhabitants’ hearts and thoughts closer to God. A dry season certainly is a time to get a little dust on your knees from kneeling in prayer.” Stoical statements resounded in the dusty assault, and a philosophical Kansas farmer scrawled the spiritual battle cry on a dust-encrusted window: “Take it and like it, In God we trust!”<sup>30</sup>

The fearsome sight of the increasing dust storms in the midst of other trials conjured up numerous scriptural analogies and metaphors.



FIG. 5. "A man could get religion in a God-forsaken place like this." Methodist Church in 1930s Plainview, Texas. Photograph courtesy of the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University.

A resident of Beaver County, Oklahoma, recalled being trapped in an unexpected duster: "When I saw the wall of dirt, I just wondered if like Tyre and Sidon we were to be buried here." The blizzards descended "like an Old Testament plague," a floating "pestilence . . . like the dust-laden scourge visited upon the Egyptians." Overwhelmed by a week-old dust storm, one Kansas farmer reacting to New Deal agricultural programs speculated to Senator Arthur Capper that the blowing conditions reflected the "wrath of Almighty God" for the "unpardonable sins of destroying crops and livestock when millions were on the verge of starvation."<sup>31</sup> Nature itself revolted against humanity with assaulting dust storms, and many people relied upon com-

mon folk beliefs to comprehend the destruction of their way of life by a force beyond their control.

The drama of the black blizzard of 14 April 1935, left an indelible mark on the folklore of the Dust Bowl region. In Pampa, Texas, noted folk balladeer Woody Guthrie watched the dust storm roll in like "the Red Sea closing in on the Israel children." In the ballad of the "Dust Storm Disaster," he sang that "the worst of the dust storms that ever filled the sky" appeared and "they thought the world had ended, and they thought it was their doom."<sup>32</sup> In light of the environmental crisis of the 1930s, Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, an Oklahoma poet, concluded: "A man could get religion in a God-forsaken place like this."

Perhaps the most famous piece of literature about the Dust Bowl experience, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, suggested the popular apocalyptic mood in its title.<sup>33</sup>

Rather than social commentary, most indigenous poets and writers in the 1930s filled their work with lamentations about the cruel climatic conditions.<sup>34</sup> For example, Elmyr Doran Warren of southwest Texas penned a poem entitled "The Dust Storm" in which he describes the supernatural origin behind the dirty thirties:

How long, Oh God, we pray Thee,  
Must we pay this terrible price  
For wheat thrown into an Ocean  
Or burned-what a sacrifice!  
We know that Thou art ruling,  
We can not read Thy plan;  
In darkness, like children we pray Thee-  
It is hard to understand.  
. . . . .  
We ask Thee, Heavenly Father,  
To be with us through this hour  
That all might know Thy wisdom,  
That all might feel Thy power;  
Give us hope on through this pall of dust,  
And strength to say "Thy will be done."<sup>35</sup>

The folk culture accepted the dust, drought, and depression as part of a divine plan; they had been caused by God, and only faith in His will could deliver the region from the trials.

Meanwhile, the boosters of the region, employing this common religious rhetoric, opined that even a divine disaster represented a blessing in disguise. John L. McCarty, a local writer, editor, and businessman from Dalhart, Texas, praised the wondrous workings of Providence for the storms. In "A Tribute to Our Dust Storms," McCarty wrote: "Let us in stentorian tones boast of our terrific and mighty sandstorms and of a people, a city, and a country that can meet the test . . . and the God capable of such gigantic destructive demonstrations of nature can be just as calm and tender as the hushed quiet before the

storm or the bright day which follows."<sup>36</sup> William Baker, a county agent from Oklahoma, wrote in a poem that folks on the land told him the dusters were "a punishment to man so dumb to plow the land for more income." Nevertheless, Baker told them that the "acts of God" were unlikely to strike the same place twice, and the sensible response was to go right back and rebuild and replant. In fact, newspapers and insurance companies across the region argued that the drought was an "act of God," something beyond human control and wholly unexpected. Individuals were able to absolve themselves of any environmental responsibility by attributing the Dust Bowl crisis to a punitive and protective Providence.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Historian Walter Prescott Webb wrote that the vicissitudes of Great Plains life created an "illusion of unreality" in the minds of residents. People did not intentionally exaggerate their descriptions of the dust storms, the effects of the drought, or the adversity of the Depression. Instead, they resorted to metaphors or analogies engrained in folkways for lack a better means to convey the impression left by hard times. Although much of the blowing dirt and drought lacked the extreme drama of Black Sunday, the religious symbolism provided an available and convenient method to explain the sense of foreboding and calamity ushered in by the decade. Furthermore, such statements as "black as when Jesus was hanging on the cross" were concepts related to the fact that the most vicious dust storms struck during the Easter season.<sup>38</sup> Men and women reacted to two different phenomena when they responded to both the Depression and the environmental problems; the former could be labeled human-made, the latter ascribed to natural forces. The responses of locals rarely separated the two events. Rather, according to their statements of popular faith, the cataclysmic events together represented a visitation by an angry God to bring about the

end of the world or at least the end of sin. Perhaps this *mentalité* emerged syncretic with the fact that the competitive agricultural system, fundamental to socioeconomic stability in southern Great Plains communities, remained greatly dependent upon the unpredictable rhythms of a harsh environment.

Fundamentalistic religious beliefs functioned as both an escape and a creative force by pointing to the economic and environmental calamity as evidence of Heaven's mysterious ways. These notions became rooted in the regional culture by the 1930s and complemented the disastrous conditions.<sup>39</sup> The cataclysmic vocabulary employed by clergy, and especially laity, tended more to an expression of a conservative cultural mood rather than an intrinsic part of a theological system. Hence, individuals may not have been able to explain the theological nuances of either premillennial dispensationalism or denominational orthodoxy, but in rural communities across the region, residents found a vivid illustration of the wrath of God. They only needed to step into their fields where crops had withered under the blazing sun, or to speak with a neighbor who had lost a farm through a bank foreclosure.

The history of popular religion in America is in some sense the history of the changing ways in which individuals have explained their relationship to an encompassing world and to a God who has been assumed to be active in human history in general and their personal history in particular. In the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, people drew upon their cultural background to explain calamitous events and ecological warnings. In this case, men and women steeped in the symbol and myth of a rugged folk eschatology found a paradoxical assurance in the climatic and climactic movements of the invisible hand of Providence.

#### NOTES

The author would like to express his appreciation to Dr. Gerald Thompson of the University of Toledo for his insight and advice with the manuscript.

1. Ida M. Norman, in Anne Reifenberg, "Black Sunday: The Day the Dust Bowl Got Its Name," *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, Tex.), 14 April 1985, p. 28A; Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 18.

2. For detailed discussions of millennialism and popular religion, see Paul S. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989); Lois P. Zamora, ed., *The Apocalyptic Vision in America* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982).

3. See Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "In God We Trusted, In Kansas We Busted . . . Again: A Social History of Dust Bowl Kansas" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991); Guy Logsdon, "The Dust Bowl and the Migrant," *American Scene* 12 (1971): 4-5; Paul H. Carlson, "Black Sunday: The South Plains Dust Blizzard of April 14, 1935," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook* 67 (1991): 6; James C. Malin, "Dust Storms," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 14 (May-November 1946): 129-44, 265-96, 391-413; R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981); Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); William E. Riebsame, "The Dust Bowl: Historical Image, Psychological Anchor, and Ecological Taboo," *Great Plains Quarterly* 6 (Spring 1986): 127-36.

4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Religious Bodies: 1936*, vol. 1 (Washington D.C., 1941), pp. 60-61, table 7; Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl* (note 3 above), pp. 185-202; Dwight Sanderson, *Research Memorandum on Rural Life in the Great Depression* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1937), pp. 93-94.

5. U.S., *Census of Religious Bodies* (note 4 above), p. 346, table 25; pp. 375-85, 412, table 29; George H. Paul, "The Religious Frontier in Oklahoma: Dan T. Muse and the Pentecostal Holiness Church" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1965), pp. 125-27, 140; Robert T. Handy, *The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 14-15; Martin E. Marty, *The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941*, vol. 2 of *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

6. Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); James D. Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brun-

swick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983), pp. 23-72.

7. Guymon *Daily Herald* (Okla.), 24-25 April, 24 September, 1 October, 12 November 1976; Pauline Grey, *Pioneer Stories of Meade County, Kansas*, 4th ed. (Meade, Kans.: Meade County Historical Society, 1985), pp. 39-40; Marylou McDaniel, ed., *God, Grass, and Grit: A History of the Sherman County Trade Area* (Hereford, Tex.: Pioneer Book Publishers, 1971), p. 56; Robert R. Wilson and Ethel M. Sears, *History of Grant County Kansas* (Wichita: Wichita Eagle Press, 1950), p. 184; Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl* (note 3 above), p. 190.

8. L. R. Scarborough, "A Great Peril in Our Progress," *Baptist Standard*, 4 July 1935; Mark A. Dawber, "The Churches in the Dust Bowl," *Missionary Review of the World* 62 (September 1939): 394-95.

9. Ruby Winona Adams, "Social Behavior in a Drought Stricken Texas Panhandle Community" (Master's thesis, University of Texas, 1939), pp. 66, 78.

10. Not only is the term fundamentalist problematical for scholars of lay religion, but its meaning is also disputed among theologians themselves. In the 1930s, fundamentalism represented a Biblicist, Calvinistic orthodoxy, an evangelical spirit, individualistic morality, and a millenarian eschatology. For useful discussions, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). For church membership, see U.S., *Census of Religious Bodies* (note 3 above), pp. 270-72, table 22; Earl H. Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Sublette, Kansas*, Rural Life Studies: Vol. 2, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942): 86-90. For an interesting account of Dust Bowl migrant religion in California, see James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

11. *Meade County Press* (Meade, Kansas), 30 August 1934; *Sublette Monitor* (Kans.), 18 April 1935; Worster, *Dust Bowl* (note 1 above), p. 170.

12. *Amarillo Daily News* (Texas), 2 February 1935, 14 April 1935, 17 July 1935; Clifford R. Hope, "Kansas in the 1930s," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 36 (Spring 1970): 11; David Nail, *One Short Sleep Past: A Profile of Amarillo in the Thir-*

*ties* (Canyon, Tex.: Staked Plains Press, 1973), pp. 35, 97; Joel A. Carpenter, "Fundamentalist Institutions and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism, 1929-1942," *Church History* 49 (March 1980): 63-75.

13. Anderson M. Baten, "Faith in Yourself," *Baptist Standard*, 21 March 1935; *Meade County Press*, 28 February 1935; *Boise City News* (Okla.), 18 April 1935.

14. Dust Bowl Manuscripts, W. S. Campbell Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, hereafter cited as Dust Bowl Manuscripts; *Dodge City Daily Globe* (Dodge City, Kans.), 29 March 1935; *Topeka Daily State Journal*, 23 March 1935; Walter Davenport, "Land Where Our Children Die," *Collier's* 100 (18 September 1937): 73; Hurt, *The Dust Bowl* (note 3 above), p. 56.

15. Ernest O. Sellers, "A Spiritual Awakening," *Baptist Standard*, 21 February 1935.

16. Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1958), p. 116; Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism* (note 9 above), p. 112; Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 101-24.

17. *Boise City News*, 21 March 1935; Thomas F. Saarinen, *The Perception of Drought Hazard on the Great Plains*, Department of Geography Research Paper No. 106 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 107.

18. Dust Bowl Manuscripts, (note 13 above); *Amarillo Globe-News*, 12 April 1935; Nail, *One Short Sleep* (note 11 above), p. 114.

19. "Southwest Breezes," *Hutchinson Herald* (Hutchinson, Kans.), 24 March 1935; *Amarillo Globe-News*, 10 June 1935, pp. 55-56; Nail, *One Short Sleep* (note 11 above), pp. 113-14.

20. *Avalanche-Journal* (Lubbock, Tex.), 31 May 1938; *Topeka Daily State Journal* (Kans.), 20 March 1935; Avis D. Carlson, "Dust," *New Republic* 82 (1 May 1935): 333; Worster, *Dust Bowl* (note 1 above), p. 17.

21. Delores Marie Wilmot, interview by Joan Kachel, 22 May 1979, Oral Interview Collection, No Man's Land Historical Museum, Goodwell, Oklahoma.

22. *Meade Globe News*, 18 April 1935; Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl* (note 3 above), pp. 1-3, 75-76; Carlson, "Black Sunday" (note 3 above), pp. 5-17; James Wesley Ware, "Black Blizzard: The Dust Bowl of the 1930s" (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 1977), pp. 57-58.

23. *Liberal News* (Kans.), 15 April 1935; Vance Johnson, *Heaven's Tableland: The Dust Bowl Story* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), p. 156; Michael



Parfit, "The Dust Bowl," *Smithsonian* 20 (June 1989): 46.

24. Terin Miller, "Panhandle's Black Sunday Remembered," *Amarillo News-Globe* (Tex.), 14 April 1985, p. 18A; Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl* (note 3 above), p. 2; *Herald-Democrat* (Beaver, Okla.), 18 April 1935; Mrs. Joe Billington, in McDaniel, ed., *God, Grass, and Grit* (note 6 above), p. 56.

25. Wanita Brown, interview by Ronnie Rittenberg, 2 April 1989, transcript, Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon, Texas; Mr. and Mrs. H. B. Urban, interview by Diane Urban, 15 June 1974, *ibid.*; Larue Young, interview by Bob W. Young, 30 June 1974, *ibid.*; *Dust Bowl Manuscripts* (note 13 above).

26. Caroline Henderson, "Dust to Eat," ed. Virginia C. Purdy, in *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 58 (Winter 1980): 440-54; Harlan Miller, "When Searing Drought Smites the Farm," *New York Times Magazine*, 27 May 1934, p. 7; *Meade County Press*, 21 March 1935; Pauline Grey, *Pioneer Stories* (note 6 above), p. 38; Stanley Vestal, *Short Grass Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1941), p. 193; Dawber, "The Churches in the Dust Bowl" (note 7 above), p. 394; Marilyn Coffey, "The Dust Storms of the 1930s," *Natural History* 87 (February 1978): 81.

27. A. D. Edwards, *Influence of Drought and Depression on a Rural Community*, Case Study in Haskell County Kansas, Social Research Report No. 7, Farm Security Administration and Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939); Adams, "Social Behavior" (note 8 above), pp. 80, 73.

28. Evelyn Harris, "Letters of Two Women Farmers," *Atlantic Monthly* 152 (August 1933): 241.

29. *Boise City News*, 18 April 1935; Parfit, "The Dust Bowl" (note 22 above), pp. 52-53; Buren Sparks, "Dust Storms and Providence," *Baptist Standard*, 9 May 1935.

30. Adams, "Social Behavior" (note 8 above), pp. 66, 82; "Agriculture: 500,000 Tons of Dust Cover Kansas and Points East," *Newsweek* 5 (30 March 1935): 6; Les Dodson in McDaniel, ed., *God, Grass, and Grit* (note 6 above), p. 54.

31. "Dust: More Storms Wreak Destruction in the Southwest," *Newsweek* 5 (20 April 1935): 11; *Amarillo Daily News*, 3 March 1935, 5 March 1935; *Herald-Democrat*, 18 April 1935; James B. Beddow, "Depression and New Deal: Letters from the Plains," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 43 (Summer 1977): 141-42; Miller, "When Searing Drought Smites" (note 25 above), p. 7; Coffey, "The Dust Storms of the 1930s" (note 25 above), pp. 73-82.

32. Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1980); Woody Guthrie, *Library of Congress Recordings*, Elektra Recordings (no recording number); Woody Guthrie, *Dust Bowl Ballads*, Folkways FH 5212.

33. Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, in William Howarth, "Beyond the Dust Bowl," *National Geographic* 166 (September 1984): 337; John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939; rpt. New York: Viking Press, 1986); David E. Smith, "Millenarian Scholarship in America," *American Quarterly* 17 (1965): 548-549.

34. Kenneth Porter, "Anthology of Kansas Verse," *Kansas Magazine* (1937): 35-37; Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988), pp. 72-93.

35. Elmyr Doran Warren, "The Dust Storm," in *The Wind in the Cottonwoods*, ed. John L. McCarty (Dalhart, Tex.: Dalhart Publishing Co., 1936), p. 211.

36. John L. McCarty, "A Tribute to Our Sandstorms," John L. McCarty Papers, Amarillo Public Library, Amarillo, Tex.

37. William Baker, "Dust Bowl Blues," unpublished poem, No Man's Land Historical Museum, Goodwell, Okla.; Miller, "When Searing Drought Smites" (note 25 above), p. 7; J. Russell Smith, "Drought-Act of God and Freedom," *Survey Graphic* 23 (September 1934): 412; Dwight Sanderson, *Research Memorandum on Rural Life in the Great Depression* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1937), p. 92; *Liberal News*, 15 April 1935; *Amarillo Daily News*, 15 April 1935; Worster, *Dust Bowl* (note 1 above), pp. 113, 138, 170; Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl* (note 3 above), pp. 185-202; R. Douglas Hurt, "The Dust Bowl," *The American West* 14 (March/April 1977): 23.

38. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (1931; reprint. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), pp. 453, 481; George Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), pp. 4-7, 130; Silvia Grider, "Black Easter: April 14, 1935," in *Diamond Bessie and the Shepherds*, ed. William M. Hudson (Austin, Texas: Encino Press, 1972), pp. 61-71.

39. Harry G. Lefever, "Religion of the Poor: Escape or Creative Force?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 16 (September 1977): 225-36; for a full analysis of the regional approach to culture, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).