



A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization

Jonathan Kirsch

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"[The Book of] Revelation has served as a "language arsenal" in a great many of the social, cultural, and political conflicts in Western history. Again and again, Revelation has stirred some dangerous men and women to act out their own private apocalypses. Above all, the moral calculus of Revelation—the demonization of one's enemies, the sanctification of revenge taking, and the notion that history must end in catastrophe—can be detected in some of the worst atrocities and excesses of every age, including our own. For all of these reasons, the rest of us ignore the book of Revelation only at our impoverishment and, more to the point, at our own peril."

The mysterious author of the Book of Revelation (or the Apocalypse, as the last book of the New Testament is also known) never considered that his sermon on the impending end times would last beyond his own life. In fact, he predicted that the destruction of the earth would be witnessed by his contemporaries. Yet Revelation not only outlived its creator; this vivid and violent revenge fantasy has played a significant role in the march of Western civilization.

Ever since Revelation was first preached as the revealed word of Jesus Christ, it has haunted and inspired hearers and readers alike. The mark of the beast, the Antichrist, 666, the Whore of Babylon, Armageddon, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are just a few of the images, phrases, and codes that have burned their way into the fabric of our culture. The questions raised go straight to the heart of the human fear of death and obsession with the afterlife. Will we, individually or collectively, ride off to glory, or will we drown in hellfire for all eternity? As those who best manipulate this dark vision learned, which side we fall on is often a matter of life or death. Honed into a weapon in the ongoing culture wars between states, religions, and citizenry, Revelation has significantly altered the course of history.

Kirsch, whom the *Washington Post* calls "a fine storyteller with a flair for rendering ancient tales relevant and appealing to modern audiences," delivers a far-ranging, entertaining, and shocking history of this scandalous book, which was nearly cut from the New Testament. From the fall of the Roman Empire to the Black Death, the Inquisition to the Protestant Reformation, the New World to the rise of the Religious Right, this chronicle of the use and abuse of the Book of Revelation tells the tale of the unfolding of history and the hopes, fears, dreams, and nightmares of all humanity.

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