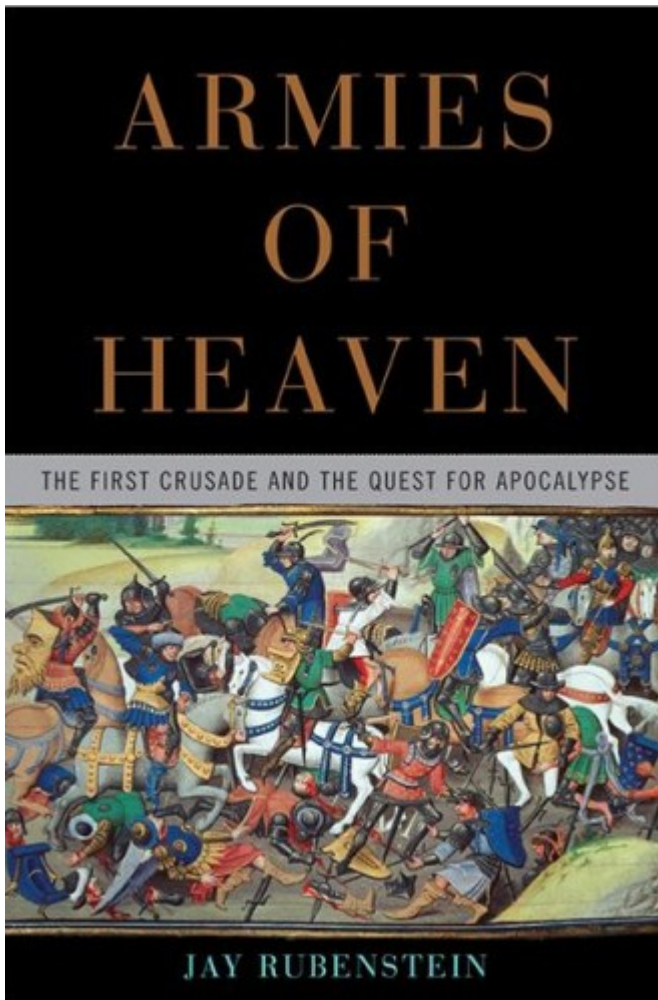


Armed and dangerous

by [Matthew Avery Sutton](#) in the [April 4, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Armies of Heaven

By Jay Rubenstein

Basic Books

The end is nigh. Or is it? American Christians have long been fascinated by biblical prophecies anticipating the end of the world. William Miller convinced thousands of people that Jesus was going to return in 1843. Pentecostals worshipping at the Azusa

Street revivals in 1906 felt sure that the restoration of dramatic gifts of the Spirit indicated that the second coming was imminent. Fundamentalists in the 1930s, confronting a worldwide economic depression and European dictators arming for battle, had little doubt that the end was near. The Jesus people of the 1970s, reacting to a lost war in Vietnam and the fall of a president, believed that Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* held the key to understanding the times. Most recently, elderly radio evangelist Harold Camping inspired his followers to put up billboards announcing the date of the second coming. But so far nobody has gotten it right.

While earnest followers of American doomsday prophets have lost money and sometimes faith, none of them literally lost their head in the quest for the coming apocalypse. That wasn't the case a thousand years ago. University of Tennessee historian Jay Rubenstein's *Armies of Heaven* is a lively, engaging, well-researched, beautifully written book that explores the history of the First Crusade. Rubenstein has a gift for making thousand-year-old history both exciting and relevant. The world of the crusaders was very different from our own, and yet some of the major issues driving their quest resonate today.

In 1096, Rubenstein explains, 100,000 people left their homes in France, Italy and Germany for Jerusalem. It took three years for a small fraction of that group to fight their way into the holy city, but they made it, and they claimed Jerusalem for Europe and for God. The pilgrims and crusaders who embarked on this quest believed that the Bible prophesied that near the end of time Jerusalem would be restored to God's people (who could be Jews or Christians, depending on who was doing the interpretation, but certainly not Muslims). The restoration of Jerusalem, they believed, would immediately precede the second coming of Christ and the battle of Armageddon.

Crusaders thought that they could play an active part in fulfilling the prophecies of the book of Revelation, working as God's agents on earth to hasten the apocalypse. "At the very least," Rubenstein explains, the soldiers believed that they "had set in motion events prophesied for centuries. The work begun with Christ's crucifixion a millennium earlier might now be drawing to a close, the apocalyptic clock started due to the actions of modern men."

The men and women who embarked on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem had many motivations. One of the early leaders who helped inspire and shape the crusade was

Peter the Hermit. Peter claimed to have visions of Jesus in which he told Peter to "cleanse" the holy places in Jerusalem. Peter traveled through France, Normandy and Germany, telling of his visions and sharing stories of the horrors supposedly being perpetrated in the Holy Land. He called for Christians to right these wrongs and won many converts, especially among the common people. His message, Rubenstein explains, was clear. "The Last Days were at hand, and Jerusalem needed to be conquered."

Pope Urban II provided another inspiration for the crusade. Like Peter, he encouraged the faithful to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and in so doing he hoped to remake Europe and Christendom as well as to solidify his own power. Peter and Urban were not alone. "Other preachers, pilgrims, prophets, zealots and crackpots," Rubenstein writes, "delivered sermons infused with their own apocalyptic and feral sensibilities." Before long, princes and knights as well as commoners with many motivations set off to take Jerusalem for God and to call down the apocalypse.

They traveled in different groups and along multiple routes. On the way, they encountered numerous obstacles and battled for control of Eastern strongholds. Rubenstein argues that the crusade marked the first time that Christians viewed military violence not as a necessary evil but as a positive good. This was a war "fought on behalf of God and in fulfillment of his plan." Yet in trying to bring heaven to earth, the crusaders created an apocalyptic hell.

Rubenstein conveys in rich detail the crusaders' seemingly insatiable lust for violence. Pilgrims burned a castle full of presumed heretics to the ground, killing everyone inside; they captured local troublemakers and gouged out their eyes and cut off their hands and feet; they cut up and roasted enemies' babies; and they sliced off testicles, noses and lips. The greatest violence occurred during sieges of major strongholds that in many cases were held by fellow Christians, usually devotees of the Eastern church. Crusaders routinely cut off the heads of their enemies (dead and alive) and hung them from their saddles, distributed them as gifts or launched them back over enemy walls. Some even practiced cannibalism both to satisfy their hunger and to scare their enemies.

The horror the crusaders created and experienced reaffirmed for them that they were living through the apocalypse. That they were often victorious in their battles despite usually being substantially outnumbered fueled their conviction that the movement was of God. The crusaders and pilgrims who eventually made it to

Jerusalem had to wage another horrendous battle, during which blood flowed like water. But in the end, they were victorious.

Armies of Heaven transports readers into the distant past, when life was nasty, brutish and short. But the world of the crusaders was also one of great dreams and hopes about both this life and the next. Rubenstein concludes the book by showing how the First Crusade helped remake Europe. It elevated the individual, helped establish national identities, accentuated the differences between Western and Eastern Christianities and in some ways foreshadowed the religious violence that wracks the modern world.

Many Christians still quest for the apocalypse, and we can be glad that they do it through best-selling books, cable TV shows and popular radio broadcasts rather than with swords and torches. The armies of heaven aren't what they used to be, and that is a good thing.