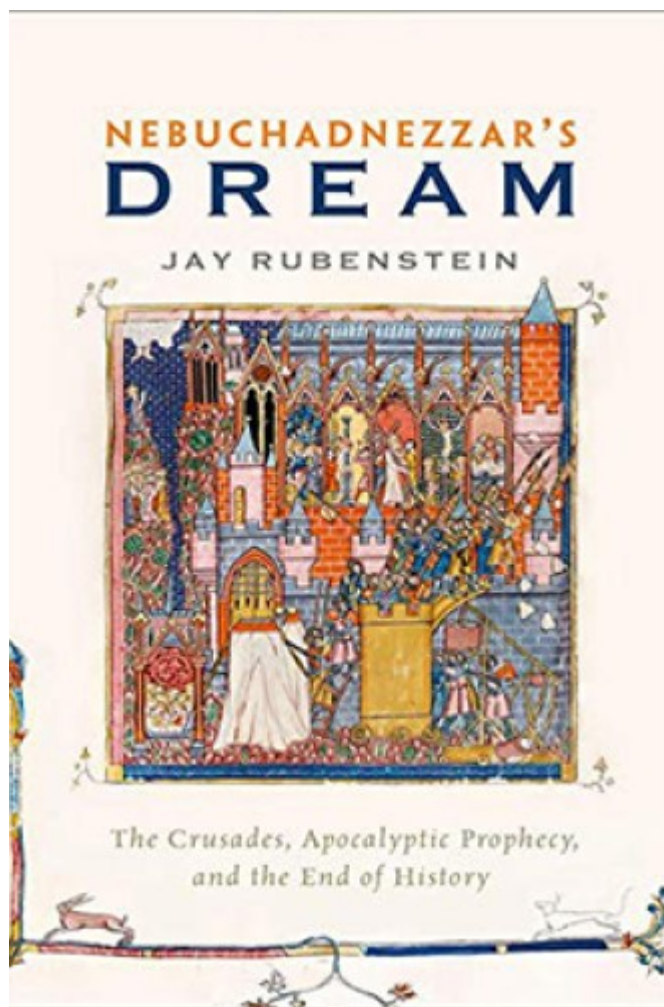


How Crusades-era literature shaped the idea of the Christian West

Jay Rubinstein places himself in the apocalyptic mindset of authors like Joachim of Fiore.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

The Crusades, Apocalyptic Prophecy, and the End of History

By Jay Rubenstein
Oxford University Press

By their own lights, the Crusades were remarkably successful. In a series of military struggles that had the church's blessing, armed expeditions extended and reinforced the influence of Latin Catholic Christianity and of the Catholic Church. They conquered Muslim kingdoms in Spain and Sicily, subjugated pagan realms in the Baltic lands, and smashed heretical movements in southern France. For each outburst of militant zeal, warriors expected to receive all the spiritual benefits they would have received had they traveled to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, however, was the Crusades' one region of conspicuous failure. Christian forces could hold neither that holy city nor the territorial footholds they had secured throughout the Levant. In a brilliant and thoughtful book, Jay Rubenstein shows how that exception proved important to Latin Christian Europe and traces the legacy of that searing disappointment.

Those of us who grew up in the 1960s reading books like Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) learned about the apocalyptic and millenarian impulses that lay just below the surface of popular thought throughout the Middle Ages, and which found eloquent expression during times of Crusading zeal. Among other things, it was a sense of cosmic war and imminent apocalypse that turned many Christians against those communities they saw as God's visible enemies in their midst—the Jews, above all.

It was odd, then, to open the book and read that Rubenstein began his project "confident that the Apocalypse and the Crusades had nothing to do with one another." However, that position reflects the consensus of many modern Crusades scholars, and thus Rubenstein's task in this book is essential. He shows the centrality of apocalyptic thought to the Crusading era as well as to later eras—and perhaps to any time when large numbers of Christians face incomprehensible worldly catastrophes.

Although historians conventionally number many discrete crusades, Rubenstein focuses on the first three, which spanned the century following the 1090s. In so doing he traces the precipitous decline of hope and expectation that marked that period.

The First Crusade was a time of limitless optimism and dreaming, when visions of a new Christian order seemed very plausible. Those hopes crumbled by the 1140s, the time of the Second Crusade and its multiple disasters. For all the mythologies associated with Frederick Barbarossa, Richard Coeur de Lion, and Saladin, the Third Crusade also proved a bitter disappointment. Rubenstein's use of a threefold analysis is curiously appropriate in view of the mystical threefold pattern many apocalyptic writers thought they saw unfolding in history. Many discerned three successive ages, respectively attributed to the persons of the Trinity.

Rubenstein shows how each phase of actual Crusading history was interpreted by Latin Christian theologians and historians, such as Lambert of St. Omer and Bernard of Clairvaux. He is at his best in showing how these authors expressed the historical, geographical, and cosmological concepts of their time. For example, the city of Jerusalem mattered greatly to them because it literally lay at the center of the world, at the juxtaposition of the three continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Where else could Jesus have chosen to redeem his world? The medieval European thinker lived in a world of symbolic sacred geography, quite separate from the practical tools required to navigate between ports and countries.

History was also a sacred pursuit. Rubenstein shows how naturally those authors accepted grand unifying theories of historical development and, where possible, linked them to biblical texts.

The title, *Nebuchadnezzar's Dream*, is taken from the book of Daniel, that near-infinite resource for those in quest of prophetic enlightenment. In the dream, the king of Babylon sees a great statue composed of various materials, from its head of gold down to its lower levels of iron and clay, each of which represents a successive worldly kingdom. That symbol worked wonderfully well for patristic and medieval writers, who so enthusiastically enumerated various ages of history.

In Lambert's six-age model, for instance, the final age spanned the historical time between two transformational events, namely, from the birth of Christ to the seemingly miraculous fall of Jerusalem in 1099. History began and ended in the holy land.

Rubenstein argues plausibly that Crusading-era literature marked a crucial stage in the development of the concept of the Christian West. That activity also coincided with secular developments that laid the foundation of a confident new Europe: the

warming climate that in turn supported a major demographic expansion, and the consequent growth of town and trade. Latin Europe ceased to be a historical backwater.

The other lasting inheritance is of more questionable value. Among the thinkers Rubenstein studies is Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), who would be the source of countless later historical visions, utopian pseudo-prophecies, and conspiracy theories. Joachim devoted himself to understanding Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which led him to offer his own apocalyptic scenario about the world's imminent end. As recently as 2008, an urban legend attempting to depict Barack Obama as a utopian idealist whose predictions had failed arose. The legend claimed that Obama had cited Joachim in his campaign speeches—on three occasions, of course.

Rubenstein's greatest achievement is to place himself sympathetically in the mindset of the authors of the Crusading era. He notes how easy it would be to think in apocalyptic categories if you entered church every Sunday through a door marked with signs of judgment that consign the just and the unjust to their appropriate eternal rewards. How could a medieval Christian not think apocalyptically? In the 12th century, he remarks, "the Apocalypse was only one aspect of the experiences and perception of a medieval Christian's life, a significant one, and an everyday one as well, part of the imaginative floor plan around which belief and practice would necessarily arrange themselves."

The apocalypse as everyday and commonplace: that is a provocative and valuable insight, and one that applies to many modern Christians beyond the Euro-American world.