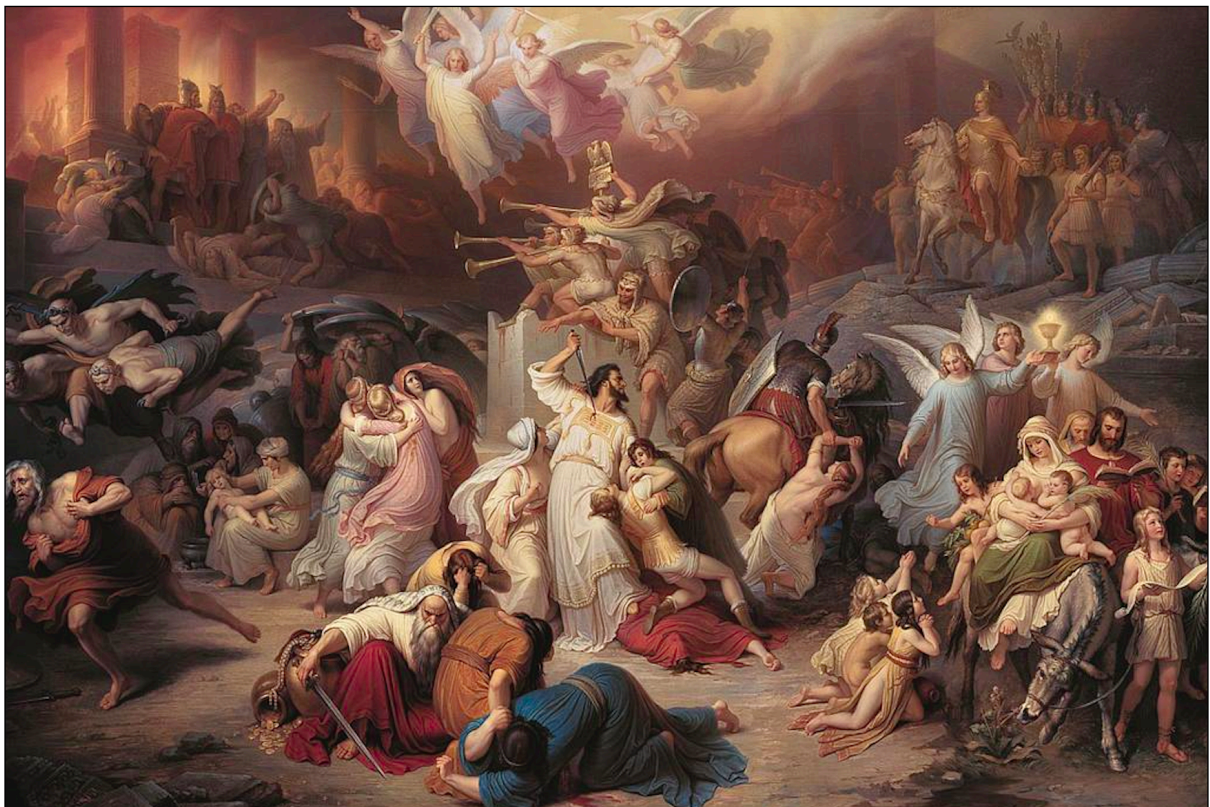




The Destruction of Jerusalem, Wilhelm von Kaulbach, 1846

Armageddon Ready

Merely the ravings of a maniac, no more worthy nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams.

Thomas Jefferson on the Book of Revelation

THE BOOK OF REVELATION LOOMS large over today's Christian congregations, as it has throughout Christianity's blood-spattered, two millennia-long history.

The signs and omens depicted in the narrative of the Apocalypse have endured throughout empires, kingdoms, nation-states and world wars, right up to the present day, when the End Times seem to be unfolding right before us daily in the evening news.

The *Book of Revelation* depicts an evil entity (elsewhere in the Bible called the Antichrist) who takes control of the world during a seven-year Tribulation period, a nightmarish series of cataclysms which culminate in the Second Coming of Jesus.

Biblical scholars interpret the book—ostensibly written by John of Patmos around 90 CE—in various ways, ranging from the historical (*Babylon*, the *harlot*, and the recurring number *seven* likely refer to Rome and the number 666 to emperor Nero), to the prophetic (Millennialists—named for the thousand year reign of Christ described in chapter 20 believe, for example, that it describes real events that have yet to happen.)

More 'symbolist' readings maintain that the accounts in Revelation refer not to real people or events in either the past *or* future, but are an allegory of the spiritual path and the age-old struggle between good and evil.

But regardless of whether the *Book of Revelation* was intended to be prophecy or merely allegory may not be all that relevant in the modern age, because many people in positions of power take it literally enough.

According to Talmudic ideology, followed by fundamentalist Zionists in Israel and America, the messiah can only come after the Battle of Armageddon (Har-Megiddo, an ancient town located in northern Israel) and many interpret this as a final world war fought between the U.S. and its allies and Israel against Russia, China, and Iran.

Not only might some millennialist politicians and religious leaders hesitate in trying to prevent the outbreak of World War III in a crisis situation; some might actually consider it their duty to hasten its onset.

Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush were both strongly influenced by the apocalyptic beliefs of powerful supporters on the evangelical right. Reagan viewed America's buildup of nuclear weapons as part of a prophetic plan ultimately ending Armageddon, and Bush's 'War on Terror' was seen by himself and others in his administration as nothing less than a 'holy war' between the forces of good and evil.

Ideologues like these fail to place the *Book of Revelation* in its proper historical context, with potentially tragic consequences.

The term *apocalypse* derives from the ancient Greek *apokálupsis*, meaning *revelation* or *unveiling*, and refers not to a world-ending cataclysm but to a series of dreams or visions revealed by a supernatural being to a human intermediary. Seen in that light, the intention of the author of the *Book of Revelation* is not that difficult to discern.

The time in which it was written was a precarious period in Christian history, about 20 years after the fall of Jerusalem. At the time, followers of the small but growing religion were forced to demonstrate loyalty to Rome, something Christians could not in good conscience do, despite refusal potentially meaning torture or even death.

The imagery in the *Book of Revelation* follows that established by many older apocalyptic writings in the Old Testament, —stories which any Christian of the time would have been intimately familiar with.

The *Book of Revelation* was written to offer encouragement to the beleaguered flock, assuring them that their Roman oppressors would soon be destroyed and righteousness would prevail in the world.

The author of the *Book of Revelation* was not predicting events that would happen in some distant future, much less nearly two millennia later as modern millennialists claim—but was addressing people of his own time, about events that had happened or were about to happen during their own lifetimes.

In the nightmarish visions of the *Book of Revelation*—a tale of conflict where one side is wholly righteous and the other wholly evil—'Babylon' was not the United States, nor was it Russia, China, or any other modern nation-state. It was *Rome*.

Three centuries later, in 367 CE, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (influenced greatly by Augustine of Hippo) established *Revelation* as the concluding book of the New Testament, and in doing so unwittingly set the stage for modern day millennialist politicians and religious leaders to exploit the mythic narrative in legitimizing their own nightmarish apocalyptic agendas.

The Romans often read the future in the entrails of a chicken, but no less absurdly, political opportunists of today see fit to consult a 2,000-year old work of fiction.

Those who believe the *Book of Revelation* is some sort of instruction manual heralding a fast approaching, apocalyptic 'End Times' are not merely misinformed, but tragically so, considering its very real potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. ■