

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in
Reformation Europe
Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell
Excerpt
[More information](#)

I Introduction: An Apocalyptic Age

More than any other period of European history the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were characterised by apocalyptic expectations, eschatological speculations and millenarian dreams. To contemporaries it felt as though they were living through the Last Days. This preoccupation with the end of the world, the end of time, and the arrival of the thousand-year kingdom of Christ, was rooted in the deep religious, social, political, economic and – above all – the demographic crises of the time. The year 1500, being a half-millennium, was greeted as a year of special apocalyptic significance. Even the Roman curia, which actively discouraged apocalyptic speculation, had announced 1500 as a special Jubilee year, a holy year, where pilgrimage would be particularly rewarded. The increase in apocalyptic preaching, claiming that the arrival of Antichrist was imminent, in fact obliged the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513 to forbid preaching about such matters.

Historians have long recognised the period 1490 to 1648 as an age of crises in Europe. There was crisis in religion: Eastern Christianity, with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, had come under the control of the Turkish Muslims, who continued to threaten Western Christianity throughout the period, while Western Christianity itself, for so long controlled by the Roman curia, broke up after 1517 with Luther’s 95 theses being pinned to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, and the religious upheavals which followed. There was crisis in the social structure: feudal society was in the process of breaking up, with peasants in rebellion in Germany from the 1520s, in Scandinavia from the 1530s, in England in 1536, in France in the later sixteenth century. There was crisis in the political realm: as the medieval feudal states became obsolete, so war became endemic across Europe as new dynastic and territorial states were brought into existence. There was crisis in the economy: a money economy came to replace the feudal economy of services and exchange of goods, and inflation, until then relatively unknown to contemporaries, brought untold hardship and starvation to many. There was crisis in demography: for the first time since

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe

Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

before the Black Death of 1348, towards the end of the fifteenth century the European population began to expand inexorably, and people began moving in great numbers from the countryside to the towns and cities. Thus what had been a stable society, where the majority could expect to continue the life of their forefathers in the locality where they were born, became a dynamic society, characterised by migration from country to town and by enforced mass emigration across Europe. The Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, more than 100,000 Reformed fled the southern Netherlands from 1567 onwards as a consequence of the Spanish reconquest by the Duke of Alva, and thousands of Huguenots fled France after the St Bartholomew Day massacre in 1572, and these were only some of the major crises of dislocation.

Finally, there was a crisis in world-view, moving from the known to the unknown: the voyages of Christopher Columbus from 1492 first revealed parts of the world hitherto unknown to Europeans, especially the so-called 'new world' of America, while the mental voyage of Nicolaus Copernicus, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, published in 1543, revealed that the earth was not the centre of the universe, but revolved around the sun as a mere planet, an observation so radical that it took nearly a hundred years to gain full acceptance. Indeed, 'crisis' has been one of the main categories of research and explanation among early modern historians over the last twenty years.¹

What these crises had in common for contemporaries, was that they were all interpreted in religious and biblical terms, and especially that they were interpreted apocalyptically: as evidence of the approaching Day of Judgement and the return of Christ. The tendency of modern historiography to divide and to develop subdisciplines such as demographic history, military history, Reformation history, medical history, agricultural history and social history (to mention just a few) has certainly enhanced our knowledge of different areas of the early modern past. But in the process it has unwittingly sacrificed much of the contemporary world-view. Our book is an attempt to recapture something of contemporary religious and apocalyptic interpretations of the crises of the early modern period, on the one hand, while, on the other, using some of the insights offered by modern specialised historiography in order to understand why an apocalyptic interpretation of events and crises in early modern life made sense to a Christian society under stress.

One of the distinctive features of the Reformation was the emphasis on the Bible, especially the Gospel, as the basis for Christian faith and life. For

3 INTRODUCTION: AN APOCALYPTIC AGE

the first time, through the benefits of the recently invented art of printing, the Bible, whole or in part, became widely available, not only to the learned world in Latin, or to the common people who themselves could read it in the affordable vernacular translations, but also to those who could not read at all, through illustrated editions and through other people reading the text aloud.² Appearing as it did in an apocalyptic climate of fear and anxiety,³ the Bible came to be closely read, especially in the growing evangelical circles, for evidence that the many crises of war, famine, disease and faith that people were experiencing, were indeed signs of the End and the Coming of Christ. Thus the growing availability of biblical texts in turn served to enhance the apocalyptic mood of the age.

Christ's own prophecy of what would happen in the Last Days, before His return, was frequently quoted and used in sermons. There are two accounts of it in the Bible, one by Matthew (24: 3–13), and the other by Luke (21: 5–32). According to Matthew, Jesus foretold His own return like this:

many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.
And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled:
for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.
For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there
shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.
All these are the beginning of sorrows.
Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall
be hated of all nations for my name's sake.
And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall
hate one another.
And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.
And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.
But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.
And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness
unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

False Christs, wars and rumours of wars, famines and pestilences, Christians persecuted and killed, false prophets, the dominance of evil and the decline of mutual love, and finally the preaching of the true Word again: all these things could be seen to be happening in this period. In the account by Luke, Christ also spoke of portents in the sky, such as eclipses and comets: 'And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring.' It was quite clear to people at the time that prophecy was being fulfilled and that the End was near.

It was Antichrist who, more than any other figure or event, heralded the imminence of the Apocalypse. ‘Little children’, the apostle John had warned the early Christians, ‘it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time’ (1 John 2: 18). The arrival and identification of Antichrist was essential to Protestants in particular, and helped convince them that they were indeed living through the Latter Days. Early on, Luther and the other reformers identified Antichrist as the pope. Antichrist provided the basis for one of the most successful works of visual propaganda in the early Reformation, Lucas Cranach’s *Passional Christi und Antichristi* (1521).⁴ To speak of Antichrist was to speak of the Last Days. Thus, it has to be remembered that whenever people of the early modern period spoke of Antichrist they were in fact talking in apocalyptic terms.

Christ’s prophecies of what was to happen around the Day of Judgement seemed to be expounded at length in the Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse, the vision of John. Thus this, the most visionary document of all the books of the Bible, naturally became the most frequently printed, and also the most frequently illustrated. Between 1408 and 1650, at least 750 separate editions of the Book of Revelation, and commentaries on it, were published, many of them in convenient and cheap editions.⁵ Considering that this figure does not include the many reprints of these editions, or the many editions of the Bible in which it was included – sometimes as the only illustrated part – it is clear that the impact of this text on popular perception and culture was colossal.

Of all the illustrations of the Book of Revelation, none became more influential than those made by Albrecht Dürer for an edition produced in both a Latin and a German version, published in Nuremberg in 1498. For Dürer’s edition seems to have reached an exceptionally large audience, according to modern research.⁶ And of the fifteen illustrations Dürer produced for this edition, the one that became the most celebrated and familiar was that of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Plate 1.1). This is undoubtedly also the image which most potently encapsulates the anxieties and preoccupations of the age.

The text which it is illustrating is as follows:

Plate 1.1 (opposite)
Albrecht Dürer, *Four
Horsemen of the Apocalypse*
(1498)

And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were
the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.
And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and
a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in
Reformation Europe
Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell
Excerpt
[More information](#)

5 INTRODUCTION: AN APOCALYPTIC AGE



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in
Reformation Europe
Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell
Excerpt
[More information](#)

6 THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say,
Come and see.
And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him
that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one
another: and there was given unto him a great sword.
And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come
and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a
pair of balances in his hand.
And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat
for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not
the oil and the wine.
And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast
say, Come and see.
And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was
Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the
fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death,
and with the beasts of the earth.

Previous illustrations of the Four Horsemen in late medieval block-books and paintings had all, in accordance with the text, portrayed them separately, arriving one at a time with their curses of war, famine, disease and death. Most of these pictures were relatively anodyne and undramatic in their portrayal of the disasters prophesied in the text.⁷ This is particularly evident in the Dutch block-books of the Apocalypse – thin, hand-made, picture books of the late fifteenth century⁸ (Plate 1.2). By contrast, Dürer’s newly invented modelling system, which Erwin Panofsky has termed ‘dynamic calligraphy’, enabled Dürer to enlarge the format and present the Four Horsemen together, and to do so with great dramatic force.⁹

Dürer’s image of the Four Horsemen riding across the sky, with the archangel hovering above them, conquering and slaying everything before them, while the monster of Hell devours the mighty of this world, is vivid and haunting, and it came to affect generations of artists. For instance, when Lucas Cranach, the court painter of Luther’s patron the Elector of Saxony, provided the illustrations for Luther’s German New Testament of 1522, he took it as his model¹⁰ (Plate 1.3). The only part of this New Testament to be illustrated was the Book of Revelation, and it was Luther who insisted on this, despite the doubts he then had about its authenticity and value. Thus, as this picture appeared in the first Protestant vernacular edition of the New Testament, it set the agenda not only for subsequent illustrated editions of the Bible, but also for Protestant and Reformed interpretations of the Apocalypse. A century later, the leading German illustrator, engraver and publisher, the Frankfurt-based Mattheus Merian,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe

Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

7 INTRODUCTION: AN APOCALYPTIC AGE

was still being similarly inspired in the engravings he produced for the illustrated Bibles he published between 1625 and 1630. The Merian Bible became the most widely circulated family Bible in southern Germany and Switzerland¹¹ (Plate 1.4). Merian elaborated Dürer's concept. While the Four Horsemen still charge together across the sky, Merian also includes in the same pictorial space the prophecies which concern the opening of the fifth and sixth seals in the Book of Revelation, chapter 6. Thus we see how 'the stars of heaven fell unto the earth', and how a great earthquake was followed by the sun becoming black as sackcloth of hair, 'and the moon became as blood'. And in the top left-hand corner of the engraving, we see under the altar 'the souls of them that were slain for the word of God' being redeemed.¹²

Not only was Dürer's image of the Four Horsemen innovative artistically, but his edition of the Book of Revelation was also innovative in textual terms, for this was the first time that the full text appeared in an illustrated edition. The Dutch block-books, by comparison, had only offered brief inscriptions, cut in relief into the woodblock of the picture itself. The popular impact of bringing the two together – text and illustration – in an age preoccupied with these themes, cannot be overestimated.¹³

Ours, of course, is far from being the first modern book on apocalyptic expectations in the early modern period. Out of what has become a considerable literature, a few works need to be mentioned. Norman Cohn's celebrated book *The Pursuit of the Millenium, Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1961), takes the apocalyptic story well into the sixteenth century. His main concern is with millenarian thought and where it led to outbreaks of social radicalism and revolution. Robert Lerner, by contrast, in a series of studies, has demonstrated that millenarianism was a widespread and constant phenomenon in European history by the end of the middle ages.¹⁴ Katherine Firth, Bryan Ball and Paul Christianson have all shown that apocalyptic expectations were pervasive in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, while Charles Webster has shown the impact on social thinking and planning of such expectations amongst English Puritans in the period 1626–40.¹⁵ Robert Barnes has done the same for Germany and German Lutheranism.¹⁶ Jean Delumeau, the French *Annales* historian, has explored the pervasiveness of sin and fear in Europe in our period and beyond (1400–1800), emphasising their apocalyptic roots.¹⁷ In the light of so many recent studies on the theme, it is clear that there was an extraordinary diffusion of apocalyptic expectations in the period.¹⁸

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in
Reformation Europe
Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell
Excerpt
[More information](#)



Plate 1.2 Dutch block-book, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (c. 1470)

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in
Reformation Europe
Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell
Excerpt
[More information](#)



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-46701-8 - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in
Reformation Europe
Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell
Excerpt
[More information](#)

