

RELIGION

# Why the apocalypse was good news for medieval Europe

New research is suggesting that, far from inspiring fear and panic, ideas about the 'final days' may have been a positive force in the Middle Ages

**A**n obsession with the end of the world was more widespread in the Middle Ages than previously thought, a new study is suggesting. Yet, rather than leading to societal breakdown, this preoccupation with the apocalypse may actually have helped improve the cohesion of medieval society.

"Between 400 and 1000 AD there was so much crisis: the Roman empire fell in the west, there were Arab conquests and Viking raids," says historian James T Palmer, author of *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press). "How people coped with hopes and fears about how the world might end is fascinating: it takes us to the heart of how people deal with knowing that their time is short."

Belief in the apocalypse was, says Palmer, a common one. "Denials of the imminence of the end of the world were strikingly rare, and an impressive parade of mainstream figures from emperors to monks actively appealed to apocalyptic ideas," he says.

Yet Palmer stresses that, as counter-intuitive as it may seem, not all views of the apocalypse were negative. "It wasn't as simple as people being afraid of the end of the world. Many Christians looked forward to Judgment Day and entering

heaven. All they could do was be prepared and lead the best life that they could."

Palmer suggests that belief in the end of the world also had a positive effect on the wider world by inspiring theories about how society should best be organised before humanity was divinely judged. "Writings about the apocalypse supplied ideas about the 'three orders of society' – those who fight, work, and pray – and supported the importance of emperors and kings in ensuring the world's safety. The desire to reach as many people as possible with the Christian message before the apocalypse led popes to launch missions to the 'ends of the Earth'. Such activity changed the political and cultural map of Europe, because Christendom's expansion meant that it no longer looked like the Roman empire."

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**This is the end** A 10th-century depiction of the Sounding of the Second Trumpet, thought to herald the apocalypse. Such beliefs, argues James T Palmer, "changed the political map of Europe"

Finally, attempts to ascertain the exact proximity of the last days may have led to improvements in analytic thought. "Some people worried whether the world might only last a fixed amount of time," says Palmer. "Many also thought that signs in the sky, such as eclipses, were portents. This kind of thinking encouraged others – notably the eighth-century English monk-scholar Bede – to investigate the nature of time and the heavens, promoting rational, protoscientific thought."

Indeed, despite the apparent differences between the medieval and 21st-century mind, Palmer suggests that there

may be more parallels than we like to think. "We are not so very different, worrying about the End," he says. "Apocalypse is not limited to cults and fanatics. It's like concerns about climate change: people can be encouraged to adapt their behaviour to prepare for the future, but may not stress about it constantly. The language of apocalypse is also deeply ingrained in the alarmist way the news reports lots of things."

"We are always living in the shadow of the End. Exploring our apocalyptic pasts reveals much about how societies deal with the challenge of an uncertain future." *Matt Elton*