

**BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE**

***A Beautiful Ending: The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Making of the Modern World.* By John Jeffries Martin. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022. viii + 323 pp. \$35.00 cloth.**

In the contemporary world, the word “apocalypse” has become synonymous with cataclysmic disaster, cosmic destruction, the end of the world. Books such as Daniel and Revelation are viewed as harbingers of doom. Yet fear of the end was only part of apocalyptic speculation in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Earlier ages frequently combined anxiety regarding the last times with profound hope in what was expected to follow, an age of peace after the tribulation. Hence the title of this book: “A Beautiful Ending,” in which John Jeffries Martin, professor of History at Duke University, makes a robust case for hope as central to the “apocalyptic imagination” in laying the foundations for modernity.

In a time of constant wars, famines and plagues, and new political threats on the horizon, it is perhaps unsurprising that the apocalyptic tradition provided a potent lens through which religious communities viewed and interpreted reality. Nor was this a distinctly Christian phenomenon. The three Abrahamic faiths each had their own version of the beautiful ending, spinning the apocalyptic thread in different ways, and, through a series of vignettes, Martin skilfully interweaves these parallel, and sometimes overlapping, religious hopes.

Martin’s canvas is broad and richly textured, not just in his interest in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian hopes, but in demonstrating the impact of apocalyptic traditions on scientific experimentation, exploration and territorial expansion, political discourse, visual art, and the printed word, as well as theological disputes. His first chapter illustrates his approach. It takes the preaching of the fiery Florentine Dominican Savonarola (1452–1498) as its starting-point, locating him against the backdrop not only of turmoil in Florence and other Italian city-states, but of wider movements, such as the rise of the Ottomans, and the expansion of Christian monarchies and empires. Martin explores how Christian apocalyptic hopes of the period were balanced with a Muslim version which inspired the Ottomans, and messianic hopes among exiled and persecuted Jews in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

This would continue in subsequent decades and centuries. So, for example, Christian hopes for a last world emperor, inspired by the twelfth-century visionary Joachim of Fiore, were matched by Muslim hopes connected to the Ottoman emperor Süleyman, forerunner of the Mahdi, and even the Mahdi himself. Some Christians would come to pin such hopes on the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, reinterpreting the Second Charlemagne Prophecy which had identified the Christian emperor who would unite the world as a ruler named Charles. Tensions between Christians and Ottomans also encouraged Jewish messianic hopes, such as those associated with David ha-Reuveni, who engaged the interest of both Pope Clement VII and King João of Portugal.

A few strands of Martin’s discussion are worth special mention. First, the importance of the printing press, which made possible relatively cheap production and widespread circulation of Albrecht Dürer’s famous Apocalypse woodcuts, created against the

upheaval and anxiety of the age, racked by war, plague, and famine which vividly recalled the infamous Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev 6:1–8). Later printed Bibles and tracts would play out Reformation polemics visually, with woodcuts depicting Revelation's Babylon wearing the papal triple tiara on the one side, and images of the seven-headed Luther on the other. But Martin also reveals the lesser-known fact that Gutenberg's earliest foray into printing – a single leaf of which survives only by chance – was an apocalyptic poem, *The Book of Sibyls*.

Second, Martin gives due weight to the apocalyptic framework within which fifteenth- and sixteenth-century exploration was undertaken, as well as push back against colonial expansion by figures such as Bartolomé de las Casas. Not only did Christopher Columbus compose his famous *Book of Prophecies*. He seems to have regarded himself as the one who, according to Joachim of Fiore, would come from Spain to restore Zion's house. Similarly, Amerigo Vespucci's claim to have discovered that great multitude "that no one could count" described in John's Revelation (Rev 7:9) demonstrates the pervasive influence of apocalyptic traditions. Against such a backdrop, it is unsurprising that the new cartography, inspired in part by the Latin translation of Ptolemy's *Geography*, also took a decidedly apocalyptic turn.

Nor were the scholars immune from apocalyptic fervor. Particularly fascinating is Martin's discussion of Cardinal Ximenes de Cisneros' polyglot Complutensian Bible, that great work of early-sixteenth-century biblical scholarship, which he shows bore traces of Savonarolan influence. Cisneros saw his project as a tool for the conversion of Muslims and Jews, viewed as a necessary preparation for Christ's second coming.

Overall, Martin has provided a historiographical narrative which is as engaging as it is compelling, drawing together in the process discussion of Francis Bacon, the Radical Reformation, Catholic demonization of Huguenots, and the influence of Kabbalism on Christian humanists such as Pico della Mirandola and Guillaume Postel. Particularly significant is his demonstration of apocalyptic threads in the three Abrahamic faiths, not as separate entities but in constant dialogue with and reaction to each other. There are only minor points over which one might quibble. The assertion that Jews had awaited a Messiah from "their earliest history" (p. 5) is somewhat misleading, given evidence for the lateness and diversity of messianic expectation in Second Temple Judaism. Some scholars of apocalyptic might query his use of the term "apocalypse" to describe, not the New Testament book of that name, still less the concept of divine revelation (*apokalupsis* = "unveiling"), but the End itself. Still, in this he mirrors much contemporary scholarly, as well as popular usage, which tends to conflate apocalyptic and eschatology. None of this, however, detracts from the significant achievement of this volume in demonstrating the extent to which the apocalyptic imagination provided the seedbed for modernity, in a narrative which is wide-ranging, richly illustrated, and, most importantly, eminently readable.

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