

THIS IS HOW THE WORLD ENDS: TWO EXAMPLES OF A MEDIEVAL TOPOS

CLIFFORD DAVIDSON

In the early fourteenth century, during the Great Famine – that is, around a quarter of a century before the arrival of the bubonic plague in 1348–49 – England suffered from spectacular harvest failures due to climate change (the Little Ice Age), food shortages, and inflation, along with dynastic turmoil and social unrest.¹ The extent of the disruption, extreme as it was, not surprisingly provided fertile grounds for ruminating about the End of History. The *Holkham Bible Picture Book* (British Library Add. MS. 47682), dated by Lucy Freeman Sandler between 1325 and 1335,² is a unique work that encapsulates the End as part of the traditionally established story, and, in its handling of the conclusion of history, concludes by presenting a narrative culminating in images of the Fifteen Signs of Doomsday that, in context, is intense and vivid. The style of illustration in the book is vernacular, compellingly expressed, as indicated in the exhibit catalogue *Art of Chivalry*, “in large-scale figures, crowded compositions and harsh colours, the streaky shading recalling *opus anglicanum*.”³ A lack of the gaudiness of gold and silver coloration,⁴ usually encountered in high-end illuminated manuscripts on parchment, befits the earnestness of its message in speaking to its audience.

¹ See Philip Slavin, “Market Failure during the Great Famine in England and Wales,” *Past and Present*, no. 222 (2014): 9–49; also for relevant information and further bibliography, though focusing on the Continental predicament, Adam Franklin-Lyons and Marie A. Kelleher, “Framing Mediterranean Famine: Food Crisis in Fourteenth-Century Barcelona,” *Speculum* 97 (2021): 40–76. Slavin suggests a parallel with the Great Potato Famine in Ireland and elsewhere in Northern Europe, including Scandinavia. The latter, affecting Norway, falls within family memory in my case – i.e., my great grandfather’s time, as relayed to me by my father, who was born in 1889.

² Lucy Freeman Sandler, *Gothic Manuscripts 1285–1385*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 2:106. Others have dated the manuscript earlier, some suggesting a time closer to the aftermath of the English defeat in the battle of Bannockburn (1314).

³ Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England, 1200–1400* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1987), 286.

⁴ First noticed by Montague Rhodes James, “An English Bible-Picture Book of the Fourteenth Century (Holkham MS. 666),” *Walpole Society* 11 (1922–23): 2. Its present shelf mark was given to the manuscript after it was acquired by the British Museum (now British Library).

A century later John Lydgate's presentation of the *Dance of Death*, with its attendant designs as subsequently painted in the Pardon Churchyard at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, was also a reflection of the national angst in a time of epidemics, which recurred in waves, and national trauma.⁵ But a little-known (undated) 88-line poem by Lydgate (c.1375–c.1449) provides a distinct contrast to the *Holkham* version of the Fifteen Signs. This is "The Fiftene Toknys aforne the Doom", contained in British Library MS. Harley 2255 (fols. 117–118v), and copied by a known scribe, John Shirley.⁶ Here Lydgate produces a rather abstract version of a legend about what was believed would culminate in an inevitable future event. To be sure, a general interest in the End of Time might have seemed a normal concern in a century characterized by Sylvia Thrupp as "the golden age of bacteria".⁷

The Manuscript. The artist of the *Holkham Bible Picture Book* has been identified as a layman and talented professional, a Londoner from the evidence of his miniatures, who was commissioned to do the work by an anonymous Dominican friar, both of them pictured together on the first page of the manuscript.⁸ Some notion of an original plan for the book is given on this page also by a banner held by an angel. It was apparently to be a conventional depiction of central events of Christian history – i.e., the birth of Jesus, his Passion, miracles, the latter including popular infancy episodes from the Apocryphal gospels.⁹ No mention is made in the outline of the extensive dramatization of the Creation,

⁵ See Clifford Davidson and Sophie Oosterwijk, *John Lydgate: The Dance of Death, and Its Model, the French Danse Macabre* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

⁶ For a recent study of this manuscript, see Stephen R. Reimer and Pamela Farvolden, "Of Arms and the Manuscript: The Date and Provenance of Harley 2255," *Journal of the Early Book Society* 8 (2005): 239–60, and see Eleanor Prescott Hammond, ed., *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey* (1927; repr. New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 79. The poem was edited by Henry Noble MacCracken, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, EETS, e. s. 107, (London: 1911; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 117–20.

⁷ *Society and History: Essays by Sylvia L. Thrupp*, ed. Raymond Grew and Nicholas Steneck (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 118.

⁸ This page is an inserted leaf. For facsimiles, see William Owen Hassall, *The Holkham Bible Picture Book* (London: Dropmore Press, 1954), hereafter Hassall; and *The Holkham Bible Picture Book: A Facsimile*, with commentary by Michelle Brown (London: British Library, 2007); hereafter Brown. The illuminations are conveniently shown in color on the web at, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMINBig.ASP?size=big&IllID=34267>. For what is known about the history of this book, its discovery and a description of its content, see James, "English Bible-Picture Book," 1–27.

⁹ For discussion of the final organizational plan of the book, see Brown, *Holkham Bible Picture Book*, esp. 25–7. Brown also usefully provides translations of the accompanying texts and glosses provided by the scribe. The Anglo-Norman texts were transcribed by Frederick P. Pickering, *The Anglo-Norman Text of the Holkham Bible Picture Book* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), which also contains much valuable commentary.

the Fall, or the significant contrast between Cain and Abel as models of good and evil that seems meant to be applicable to contemporary events in Edward II's reign (1307–27). Nor is there any notice in this list of the events to be associated with the End of History, notably the Fifteen Signs of Doomsday, presented in the book in the order established by the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor.¹⁰ The patron's motive in commissioning the book may be revealed in the order that the workmanship should be very fine, suitable to show to "a riche gent" (a rich merchant, or an aristocrat?). This explicitly indicates that the artist must produce a product that will influence a person or persons of power, an audience implied also by the textator's use of Anglo-Norman French—a language not understood by the lower Middle English-speaking classes.¹¹ There is also an interestingly little hint on this page that flattery was *not* to be the book's intent: the inclusion of a small image indicative of the troubled age – a seated monkey looking into a mirror, a conventional symbol of vanity and irrationality.

The monkey image may then be seen to be connected to the content of the next two pages, fol. 1v suggesting a pessimistic view of the human condition, the striving of men for authority,¹² especially those who are dominated by their own ambition. This is revealed in esoteric form in the Wheel of Fortune, being turned at its center by a crowned Lady Fortuna, her eyes wide open.¹³ She is "that which happens", *Fate* (Anglo-Saxon *nyrd*)—the goddess who elevates the one who would be king (*regnabo*), the one who is monarch at the top (*regno*), but the goddess also causes the decline of the one who has fallen (*regnavi*)—and so is responsible for the debasement of the one who has lost all power (*sine regno*). The latter is quite possibly, as Michelle Brown suggests,¹⁴ a reflection of the status of Edward II himself and other failed hopefuls to power in the period when the book was produced. Is power, authority over others, simply ambiguous at its center, where the wheel turns? Or is it God who possesses ultimate control?¹⁵ The next miniature sharpens this question.

¹⁰ For the various versions of the Signs, see William W. Heist, *The Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State College Press, 1952), *passim* (the *Holkham Bible Picture Book* does not receive notice in this wide-ranging study). See also the chart comparing the major branches of the motif in Shannon Gayk, "Apocalyptic Ecologies: Eschatology, the Ethics of Care, and the Fifteen Signs of Doomsday in Early England," *Speculum* 96 (2021): 36–7.

¹¹ Pickering, *Anglo-Norman Text*, xiv.

¹² Women too must be included, however – for example, Isabella, King Edward II's queen.

¹³ On Fortune, see especially Frederick P. Pickering, *Literature and Art in the Middle Ages* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970), 168–222; Pickering, *Anglo-Norman Text*, xvi.

¹⁴ Brown, *Holkham Bible Picture Book*, 31.

¹⁵ Cf. Pickering, *Anglo-Norman Text*, 71.

Fol. 2r is remarkable for its image of God, distinguished by a cross-nimbus that designates him as the Trinity: an image here of God the Creator in the center of the cosmos as the *Logos*, i.e., Wisdom, with a pair of compasses in open position.¹⁶ He is encircled by the orbit of the sun and the moon, and above are the heavens. Here, ominously, the archangel Michael, normally present in Last Day iconography, is seated and acting as a judge as he will among souls at the Last Judgment. On his left, he is turning away those angels who were followers of Lucifer in rebellion against the deity; at his right are the obedient angels who have remained loyal. These, with hands held in prayer, hands joined (*unctus manibus*), are being welcomed to remain in bliss instead of being consigned to the place of darkness, the open hell mouth which below is spewing red flames across the entire bottom of the cosmos – the place prepared for the violent, the dishonest, the ones who in this life hate and lie.

Good and evil are already potentially present within the envelope of time, antecedent to the crimes of our mythic first parents. Indeed, the End of History is already implied in its beginning, even as the deity creates all things that exist in this earth, including Adam and Eve, who are set together to care for Eden, the walled garden of Eden where birds sing and fruit is brought forth (fols. 2v–3v). The events that happen here will resonate to the end of time as the formerly innocent and nude figures of the first people succumb to the wiles of the serpent, who has an attractive woman's head (resembling in this respect a lady of the royal court),¹⁷ a bird's torso, and a body coiled around the forbidden tree. Eve, the first to eat, is described in the inscription in Anglo-Norman French as "tro feble", reflecting the limit of her culpability as the first human to disobey God on account of her gullibility.¹⁸ Below in the same image, Adam and Eve, attempting to hide their nakedness with vine leaves, are expelled from the garden into the outer world by an angel, whereupon (fol. 4v), presided over by a Cherub with a flaming red sword,¹⁹ they must labor (tilling and spinning) and bring forth children. Their progeny, Cain and Abel, will reflect the fate of humanity, the two ultimate potentialities of the human race.

¹⁶ See John B. Friedman, "The Architect's Compass in the Creation Miniatures in the Later Middle Ages," *Traditio* 30 (1971): 419–28.

¹⁷ See John K. Bonnell, "The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and the Mystery Play," *American Journal of Archaeology*, 2nd ser. 21 (1917): 255–91.

¹⁸ See St. Augustine for the implication that actually Adam's sin was the greater since Eve was deceived, while Adam ate knowingly (*The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods [Random House, 1950], 459, 14.11). Questions open up here about the freedom of the will, and even of God's potential responsibility in the Fall.

¹⁹ Genesis 3:24.

The two sons, Cain and Abel, as depicted on fol. 5, represent the two potentialities, one a reprobate, the other a model of obedience. At the top, Adam, like Abel in a sheep-skin garment, gestures his satisfaction and disapproval to his sons as he observes their annual sacrifices: Abel's sheep is picked to please God, Cain's choice of the poorest quality wheat, adulterated with tares, to perform the minimum necessary, and this unwillingly. The sacrificial fires demonstrate the effect of their performance of duty: Abel kneels in prayer as the smoke ascends "to heaven", while Cain's fire fails to ignite fully and casts forth an ugly smudge. Worse yet, the smudge "descendyt" to mingle with flames in the mouth of hell, which is literally a demon's head with horns, piercing eyes, and teeth that mock Cain for his hypocrisy. The scene below on this page returns to a previous time, here Adam commanding his sons, the wheat farmer and the herdsman, to enact their sacrifices, with gestures revealing their attitudes, compliant and hostile. Then on fol. 5v, Cain, the hostile son, who had been designated by St. Augustine as the "archetype of crime",²⁰ "de grant envie" kills his brother (still holding his shepherd's crook) with the jawbone of an ass.²¹ Thereafter, at the right, God, appearing with a cross nimbus as the Trinity, is looking on, his gestures indicative of his cursing of Cain. The reprobate, to hide his crime, seems to be attempting to bury his brother in a shallow grave. In the *Holkham Bible Picture Book* he is a perverse model of strife and contention, the kind of unbending behavior that bedeviled Edward II's reign and an example of those who were regarded to be doing the Devil's work in the realm in those years. Such persons may be expected to be extraordinarily busy fomenting strife as the Last Days approach.

Extreme strife is indeed the case when the artist arrives at the final section of the manuscript, entirely devoted to the End of History. Fol. 39v depicts the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and a prophet ("Jeremiah", a mistake for Jerome) rolling out a scroll which announces that Signs of the End will appear when the extreme wickedness of the people, greedy and irrational, will incite them to hide in terror from the sight of dislocations in the heavens. Members of all ranks of society, clergy and lay, quake in fear. The sun and the moon are darkened, behind a cloud; animals emerge from the ground and roar. Then, on fol. 40r (upper image), there is a confused mob of men, a king, mounted, and knights in chain mail, fighting and dying; the inscription in the manuscript cites the lust for power and authority gained by force, signs of the deadly sins of pride, envy, and covetousness. In the image below, the commons, in less adequate protective gear, are also

²⁰ *City of God*, 482, 15.5.

²¹ See Meyer Shapiro, "Cain's Jaw-Bone That Did the First Murder," in *Late Antique, Early Christian and Mediaeval Art* (New York: Braziller, 1979), esp. 48; and also the chapter on the iconography of Cain in my *History, Religion, and Violence*, Variorum ser. (Aldershot, Hants., U. K.: Ashgate: 2002), 251–66.

engaged in lethal warfare.²² M. R. James credibly believed that these miniatures made reference to the artist's own "troubulous" times,²³ and they are especially endowed with the "high, at times shrieking" emotional pitch attributed to this work by Sandler.²⁴ Pickering sees here a "cry of social protest."²⁵ All, representing the legacy of Cain, likewise reflect the cutthroat state of politics in the times, the disintegration of order and the tyranny of violence in the time of Edward II, but also specifically announce the hope that the final Judgment Day will not be delayed.

The Fifteen Signs, inspired by various esoteric, biblical, and legendary sources, themselves are presented in vivid tableaux, which, in their imagining of the "tribulation", are described by Hassall as "almost surrealist".²⁶ The initial three Signs are condensed into a single miniature, above, in which on the first day the seas rise up, making a high wall of wavy blue lines on which fish swim about, then on the second day (not illustrated but noted by the textator) fall so as almost to disappear from sight. On the third day great fish, meant to represent whales, with wide open mouths and sharp teeth, roar in fear. Below, on the fourth day, the sea, indicated by horizontal stripes of blue, burns with orange-red flames rising above it. At the right, grass and trees are transformed so that all are shown to be oozing blood.

On the sixth day, the top of the page presents, on the left, houses and castles tumbling in the wake of an earthquake, indeed all buildings, steeples and towers falling over, all collapses. Trees are uprooted. On the right, on the seventh day great stones being thrust apart, then are fiercely slammed together. Below (the eighth day), the earth trembles and shakes, moved by a hand, presumably of God, reaching out of the cosmos, which is marked out by clouds and stars. The result is a confused orb of color, with greens and oranges predominating. At its right, on the ninth day, the circular earth is leveled and flattened, according to the ringing words of Isaiah: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places plain [i.e., flat]." ²⁷

²² For detailed discussion of the armor and protective gear, see the appendix by James Mann, in Hassall, *Holkham Bible Picture Book*, 157–60.

²³ James, "English Picture-Bible," 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; Sandler, *Gothic Manuscripts*, 106. Pickering sees here a "cry of social protest" (*Anglo-Norman Text*, 122).

²⁵ Pickering, *Anglo-Norman Text*, 122.

²⁶ Hassall, *Holkham Bible Picture Book*, 6. The principal source for the "tribulation" at the End of History is Matthew, 24.

²⁷ Isaiah 40:4; cf. Luke 3:5.

Further marvels are to be revealed on the tenth through fourteenth days (fol. 41v). The scribe's glosses explain that, on the tenth day, those who have been hiding themselves in caves in terror now come forth but are lacking in speech and confused, while on the eleventh day the dead shall arise, in shrouds or nude, among their tombs. At the bottom of the page, the stars, like little yellow orbs encircled by flames, are falling from the orb of the cosmos onto the earth (day twelve), while under a blue sky to the right (day thirteen) all the living will die and be brought back to life, tonsured monks, kings, a bishop, some nude, others in clothes or vestments.

On the fourteenth day (fol. 42, above) the orb of the earth and all under the heavens will go up in flames as the world and the sky burn. Then, below a long inscription on a scroll announces the scene that will appear at the Second Advent when Christ is descending in the eastern sky with the sound of thunder in a cloud suspended in the air, the orbs of the sun and the moon (with a human face looking out) at his right and left. An angel at his right holds a cross and grave clothes, while the one at his right raises a lance with vexillum²⁸ and also holds the crown of thorns, in design like the relic given to the King of France by the Byzantine Emperor Baldwin II in 1239 and displayed at Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.²⁹ (These, along with the cross and nails, are the physical Signs of the Passion.) The depiction of Christ places emphasis on the display of the Five Wounds "que yl sufryt por nos", most famous of all as objects of devotion.³⁰ At the four corners of the image angels blow long trumpets of shining brass, the Last Trump, from the four corners of the earth. Below, two of the trumpeters raise their instruments toward the risen souls among objects intended to represent tomb covers. The dead have now arisen, all nude, representatives of the lowly and the great, wearing miters and crowns, men and women. And all, as the scribe has written, are now restored to thirty years of age rather than retaining their age at the time of their death. Thus they will go to the Judgment in the "valeye de losaphat".

The actual Judgment there will be illustrated on the verso of the final folio, when Christ, now seated as judge, is again shown displaying his five wounds, colored deep red, his hands turned in gestures of approval (his right) and rejection (his left) toward the resurrected figures, who will be destined for either heaven or hell – the ones on his right, kneeling (the page is smudged), or on the left, the damned. Here appearing in the pres-

²⁸ The lance represents the weapon that was used by the centurion Longinus, who inflicted the wound in Christ's side with it. See, for example, Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 243–46.

²⁹ See Ethelbert Horne, "The Cross of Thorns in Art," *Downside Review* 53 (1935): 48–51.

³⁰ See Douglas Gray, "The Five Wounds of Our Lord," *Notes and Queries* 208 (1963): 50–1, 82–9, 127–34, 163–68.

ence are the Instruments of the Passion: the cross, three nails held by an angel, another holding the lance and crown of thorns. The time of hope of salvation has passed, however, for the ones who are condemned. All of them are stripped nude, members of all ranks of society, including a bishop and a king, tonsured monks and a woman, destined to be captured, encircled by a chain (the presence of red pigment indicates that it is hot). The chain is attached to the neck of a furry devil with horns who will pull them all toward hell.

In the lower left segment of the image, the association of music and harmony with bliss is being emphasized as angels in a balcony play instruments, a trumpet and portatif organ with metal pipes and a keyboard. Below them, two angels welcome three nude figures, souls, to invite them to enter the gate of heaven. By contrast, indicative of the day which is also a "day of vengeance", described by John Mirk to be "cruell", "ferdfull", and "horrybull",³¹ the condemned are treated to horrific punishment, boiled in cauldrons over an open hellmouth, one apparently made to swallow a snake. Nude figures, including a man with a pair of small scales (a money changer?), and an alewife with a pot of flaming ale held on her head, are being carried piggy-back by furry devils. One of the demons pushes a wheelbarrow full of nude figures toward the place of punishment, the open, gaping hell mouth. One could expect that in addition these ugly devils, demonic creatures, would have been imagined to emit a foul odor, perhaps the stink of feces and death about them.³² As the scribe has written, those who enter heaven will have "grande ioye", while the condemned will have only pain without respite, not even on one day a week.

The Poem. Lydgate's "Fifftene Tokynys aforne the Doom" opens with a credit to St. Jerome as the presumed originator, his authority derived from "inspiracioun", and then proceeds to an invocation of holy Scripture as a reminder of Judgment Day – the beginning of a very conventional versification of the text in the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*). Each of the Signs will be set out by roman numerals designating the number of the day when it occurs, beginning with the "First day" when "the se shal ryse on heighte / Above al hillys" to fifty cubits, then on the second it will fall nearly out of sight, while "Wilde beestys" roar "vpon the flood." On the third day, birds, fish, and animals everywhere come out, trembling and complaining, moaning loudly; enigmatically, this noise is said not to have been "maad in veyn, / For what they mene, God shal knowe alloone". Then on the

³¹ John Mirk, *Festial*, ed. Theodor Erbe, EETS, e. s. 96 (1905; repr. Millwood, NY: Kraus, 1987), 3; as quoted in Clifford Davidson, *History, Religion, and Violence* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2002).

³² See Thomas H. Seiler, "Filth and Stench as Aspects of the Iconography of Hell," in Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler, eds., *The Iconography of Hell* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 122–40, who cites, among other references, Dante's *Inferno* ("tristo fiato," canto 11.12).

fourth day, the water and sea “Shal brenne as ony flawme light”. Continuing, on the fifth day, a “bloody” dew falls upon herbs, trees, and fowls, which fly away “for feer” and fail to eat or drink so as to lose their strength, entirely in terror of the Last Judgment.

And so the poem carries on. The sixth day: “Grete Castellys” and towers fall to the ground, and there are “Fyry floodys” [*fiery thunderbolts will pour out of the setting sun and run across the sky – Golden Legend*³³] which spare nothing “tyl al be wast and spent” – flames which reach up to the edge of the “firmament”. The seventh day: Stones crash together, breaking into “fourte partyes” and falling; only God “in his hih maieste” knows what this means. On the eighth day, there will be an earthquake so severe that nothing can stand, while on the ninth high “mounteyns tourne into poudir” so that the earth becomes totally flat. On day ten, men emerge from caves disoriented and “renne abrood” like raving drunks or madmen, “Dedly pale and devoyde of blood”. No one speaks to another, not even brothers. The eleventh Sign, allegedly found in Scripture, has bones of the dead rising up and standing on their tombs all day [*so that the dead will be able to come out – Golden Legend*], a dreadful sight.

Day twelve: On this “mor dredful” day, the stars will fall with “firy leveve [trains] and ferful violence”, while all the beasts will come out onto a field and make noises, crying and howling, too afraid to eat. On the thirteenth day, all who are alive will die “echon”, and then arise “With othir bodyes to come to lyve ageyn”. Then, on the fourteenth day the heavens and the earth are consumed by flames and are reduced to “asshes dede”. Finally, on the fifteenth day, “as Seyn Jerom pleyntyly doth devise,/ Hevene and erthe al newe shal be sene,/ And alle bodyes shal that day aryse”.

Lydgate then added the following lines, not in Jacobus’s account in the *Golden Legend*:

As this doctour [Jerome] setteth the emprise
Of this mateer, God graunte, as I wisse,
Afor this day that al men been so wysel
Thorough Christes passioun, that they may come to bliss.

Lydgate’s poem thus ends on an irenic note, quite different from the sharply visualized final section, including the Fifteen Signs series, in the *Holkham Bible Picture Book*. In this his words here are perhaps consistent with his lifelong determination as a court poet not to cause dissension. He took upon himself to avoid fomenting division in the realm, even

³³ I have included a few cases of variance in which Lydgate departs from Jacobus de Voragine, citing *The Golden Legend* for convenience from the translation of William Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 8–9.

when there was much that could have been challenged. Lydgate was, as Paul Strohm has noted, “a wholehearted ally determined in no respect to offend.”³⁴

Implications. These works, Lydgate’s poem and the illustrated *Bible Picture Book*, are not of course unique examples of the Fifteen Signs in the literature and art. Other prominent examples appeared in the late Middle Ages in such media as stained glass – e.g., the famous window in All Saints North Street, York, based on the account given in the *Pricke of Conscience*, and alabaster carvings now preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum.³⁵ There are also records, noted by Philip Nelson, of a guild at Boston possessing “a table [altarpiece] of alabaster with the story of the dome” in 1534, and an “altar of Doomsday” at Great St. Mary’s, Cambridge, in 1550.³⁶ Nor have versions of the Apocalypse failed to endure even to the present day, indeed nowadays in abundance, especially among fundamentalist Christian and fringe members of other Abrahamic faiths.

In our unstable times, “visionary” thinking can emerge even in the strangest places, even, for example, in rumors of calculations of the End derived from a reading of Mesoamerican calculations, known to be erroneously understood, from ancient glyphs. In one prediction, based on a Mayan calendar purporting to summon up world-ages of 5,126 years, the End was to come with an apocalyptic event occurring on December 22, 2012. In another, the End was supposed to occur when the earth would collide with a planet, sometimes named Niburi, which never existed in reality or, apparently, even in Mayan prognostification.³⁷ We have here fantasies of the kind often grasped at by conspiracy theorists and their ilk. Obviously, the world did not end in December 2012.

³⁴ Paul Strohm, “Hoccleve, Lydgate, and the Lancastrian Court,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 657–58. Lydgate’s contemporary, Hoccleve, as Strohm notes, could cautiously arrive in 1413 at approval of fomenting division, but only if required to protect the Church or one’s own properties – a standard of ethics at considerable variance from biblical ethics, though one that all too often resembles moral principles encountered in our own century among the very rich.

³⁵ See Clifford Davidson, “The Signs of Doomsday in Drama and Art,” *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 26 (2000): 223–46; Francis Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters* (Oxford: Phaidon, Christie’s, 1984), 314–16; Philip Nelson, “A Doom Reredos,” *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 70 (1918): 67–71.

³⁶ Nelson, *op. cit.*, more recently mentioned in Paul Williamson et al., *Object of Devotion* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, [2010])

³⁷ The origin of a planet named *Nibur* derives from Sumerian myth. For information about the Mayan calendar I am especially indebted to Mark van Stone, and to his useful handbook, *2012: Science and Prophecy of the Ancient Maya* (Thcaélel Press, 2010).