

APOLLYON AND ARMAGEDDON: REVELATION'S APOCALYPTIC TRADITIONS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION IN HISTORY

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The purpose for this paper is to use the PBS “Frontline” Series video, “Apocalypse! The Story of the Book of Revelation,” as a starting point for discussion of Revelation’s apocalyptic traditions, their Jewish sources, and their interpretation and development throughout the church age.¹ The outline and presentation of the video is used as the framework upon which summary, commentary, and interaction is engaged.

I. Jewish Sources of John’s Apocalyptic Traditions

John’s apocalyptic stream primarily is Jewish apocalyptic. Jewish apocalyptic primarily is the direct response to four dramatic periods in Jewish history. This history is tied up with the ebb and flow of four empires: Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. These developments challenged Jewish faith in God. Apocalyptic literature was an attempt to reassure Jewish faith by adjusting Jewish thought in the harsh light of new historical realities for the Jewish people. What were these historical developments?

A. Babylonian Period (First Temple)

The first development was the loss of the Jewish state. The Babylonians destroyed both Jerusalem and the Jewish temple and sent the Jews into captivity in 586 B.C. The glorious kingdom of David came to a bitter and cataclysmic end.

1. “New Jerusalem”

After the total destruction of the real city of Jerusalem and its temple, is all lost for the Jews as a nation among the nations? The prophet Ezekiel answers no by realigning Jewish thought under the rubric of a “New Jerusalem” that would have its own equivalent new temple. Ezekiel’s New Jerusalem, though somewhat odd and distinctive in its configuration spiritually, at least could be contemplated. His new temple, however, was another matter entirely. Ezekiel’s temple would not be Mosaic in architecture, personnel, or service, rendering some of Ezekiel’s prophetic visions obtuse and entirely

¹*Apocalypse! The Story of the Book of Revelation*, PBS “Frontline” Series, dir. William Cran and Ben Loeterman, 120 min., PBS Home Video, 1999, videocassette.

confusing to many Jews. A “New Jerusalem,” however, took traction in Jewish thought, and from there the thought entered into John’s apocalyptic world.

2. Resurrection

If you died fighting for a kingdom that was destroyed, what hope was there of justice in this life? None, if the answer had to be constructed from within the perspective of an individual Jew. However, survival of the Jewish nation would be a consolation prize in the weighing of justice. Ezekiel’s answer was the valley of dry bones, the reconstitution of the Jewish nation after Babylonian exile. Eventually, in the Persian period, Jews synthesized Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones coming to life with resurrection doctrine coming from Persian Zoroastrianism. This synthesis especially found a home in the Pharisees; their doctrine of resurrection matured in the intertestamental period. Not all Jews, however, accepted such Pharisaic teachings.

B. Persian Period (Return)

The second development was the renewal of the Jewish state. The Persians under Cyrus, God’s anointed “messiah” according to Isaiah (Isa. 45:1), allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. Jews who returned brought back with them their exposure to Persian religious thought, especially Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster was an Iranian prophet of the sixth century B.C. who attempted to reform the ancient Persian religion with an emphasis on a form of dualism and his own variation of monotheism. His teachings are thought to have had significant impact on the major Western religious traditions. Besides developed reflections on resurrection doctrine, two other important Persian contributions were the religious metaphor of light and darkness and the apocalyptic battle that eventuates in the kingdom of God.

1. “Light/Darkness”

The language of light and darkness was central to Zoroastrian dualism. This symbolism was integrally tied to the concept of earth as a cosmic battleground between good, the forces of light, and evil, the forces of darkness. While the concepts of light and darkness can be found as religious metaphor in many religious writings around the world, the key in the Zoroastrian framework is the use of this metaphorical language to describe opposing forces of good and evil in a cosmic conflict worked out on the stage of human history that will continue worsening until consummated in a final war that brings about a new age. While Jewish religious thought properly is not dualistic, the ideas of two ages, an age of evil followed by an age of good, of cosmic conflict of opposing forces of good

and evil, and of a final battle, can be traced in Jewish writings that emerge during this time leading up to the first century.

2. *Apocalyptic War*

One of the most enduring images that developed in apocalyptic literature that fires human imagination is the Zoroastrian final battle, or as Saddam Hussein described the original Gulf War of 1991, “the mother of all battles.” The language of apocalyptic war is echoed particularly in Jewish literature at Qumran, a Jewish sectarian group that separated from what they considered Jerusalem’s corrupt temple cultus in the Roman Period. Their document, *The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness*, details that final apocalyptic showdown. This final battle would feature the inhabitants of Qumran as key participants. They would bring in the kingdom of God by defeating Israel’s pagan oppressors and purifying Jerusalem’s worship. They also concluded that the Jewish Revolt against Rome that began in A.D. 66 was the anticipated final conflict, and left their desert commune in battle array to meet and defeat, with God’s expected intervention, the advancing Roman legions under Vespasian coming down from Galilee. In Revelation, this war imagery is acutely and powerfully summarized in one famous word that has entered into the mainstream of American popular jargon—Armageddon. In contemporary popular imagination, one has the fictional efforts of the “Left Behind” series of Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which has garnished significant commercial success and has been transformed into cinematic drama.² Of course, LeHaye and Jenkins did not invent the modern prophecy novel genre. Already in the 1930s one has Oilar’s novelette, *Be Thou Prepared, for Jesus is Coming*.³

C. Greek Period (Revolt)

The third development was Hellenism. Alexander the Great (336–323 B.C.) conquered the world with his armies and society and culture with his cosmopolitan vision that all civilization should be Greek. Alexander’s “Hellenism” eventually became a giant

²The first book in the fictional series was Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale House, 1995). The movie was *Left Behind: The Movie*, directed by Victor Sarin, 96 minutes, 2000.

³Forrest Loman Oilar, *Be Thou Prepared, for Jesus is Coming* (Boston: Meador Publishing Co., 1937). See the discussion in Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 106.

social, religious, and cultural melting pot. Religious traditions, including those of the Jews, began to interact in this Hellenistic melting pot.

1. Angels and Demons

The book of *1 Enoch* is a composite Hellenistic Jewish work, but its main traditions can be dated back to about 250 B.C. Enochian traditions illustrate new and developing Jewish traditions in the interaction with Hellenistic traditions. One such tradition is a hierarchy of angels, with a head angel that is cast down to earth. Other ideas include devils, a dramatic victory of God over forces of evil, and a concrete idea of heaven and hell. Pharisees, for example, absorbed and developed angelic traditions during the intertestamental period and effectively communicated these ideas to the general Jewish populace in popular Pharisaic literature such as the book of Tobit. Another example is Jewish tradition about Abaddon, the place of death and destruction (Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12). Abaddon personified is a satanic, demonic figure of destruction. Revelation’s correlate is Apollyon, the destroyer angel of the abyss (cf. Rev. 9:11).

2. Images of Empire

The biblical book of Daniel, irrespective of the arguments of date, clearly is written for the context of the Maccabean Revolt (167 B.C.), the Jewish struggle against the enforced Hellenism of Syrian overlords.⁴ Daniel is important for understanding the on-going development of apocalyptic traditions, especially the idea of God’s sovereignty over pagan world empires. Daniel’s imagery of the shattered statue evoking the end of world empires (and, hence, logically, the end of history) is meant to communicate that the time of the oppressed people of God has come. God’s dominion over the kingdoms of the world is soon to be established. Daniel’s message to faithful Jews, set in the context of Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar (605–562), became particularly pertinent to Jews in the throes of the enforced Hellenism of the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.). Daniel’s message, whether to Jews oppressed by Nebuchadnezzar or by Antiochus IV, is the same: hold fast, God will deliver, and soon. Jewish apocalyptic forever would carry Daniel’s heritage of Jewish rejection of all pagan empire claims to ultimate power and authority. The spirit of Nebuchadnezzar and the Syrian Antiochus IV would be revisited in later Roman emperors such as Caligula (37–41), Nero (54–68), and Domitian (81–96). No matter how powerful their earthly throne nor majestic their present rule, the apocalyptic response to such sovereign claims of pagan kings was consistent and clear:

⁴The issue of the historical context of Daniel and the application of its prophecy, especially the dispensational perspective, will be treated later in the discussion.

ultimate destiny is under God’s sovereignty as Lord of Lords. In apocalyptic images of empire, the statue always is shattered: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great!” (Rev. 18:2).

D. Roman Period (Second Temple)

The fourth development was Roman patronage. Romans were a rising power in the Mediterranean world in the second century B.C. when the Jews were regaining religious and political independence from the Syrians under the Maccabees (167–140 B.C.). The Maccabees’s dynastic heirs, the Hasmoneans (140–37 B.C.), ruled as client kings under Roman patronage. This client kingship came to fullest expression in Herod the Great (37–4 B.C.), who was an Idumean, not a Hasmonean. Some Jews supported Roman patronage, particularly the Sadducees with their vested interests in preserving and maintaining the political status quo as a way of maintaining their institution of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Many Jews, however, despised Herod as a usurper to the Jewish throne, and Herod’s Roman overlords as the epitome of pagan empire attempting to rise up against God’s sovereign claims over Israel and the Gentile nations.

1. Roman Collusion

For some Jews, the Jewish temple no longer was a sign of God’s presence in Israel, but of collusion with Roman overlords. One such protest movement was Qumran. These desert dwellers had separated themselves from Jerusalem and its priestly cultus under the charismatic leadership of the Teacher of Righteousness about a century and a half before the time of Jesus. Among their library of writings, known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, their commentary on the prophet Habakkuk presents an important principle of (mis)interpretation that all readers of Revelation should understand. The Qumran Habakkuk commentary illustrates the “pesher” method of interpreting prophecy. This “pesher” method contemporizes the prophetic text by completely ignoring the original historical context of the prophet and his original audience. The interpretation (“pesher”) of any given verse in Habakkuk is equated with current news. In this way, each verse in Habakkuk is transformed into today’s news about the Romans and their lackeys, the Hasmonean client kings who also controlled the high priesthood. In terms of Revelation’s apocalyptic traditions, one can witness this “pesher” method of reading today’s headlines back into prophetic texts repeating itself over and over throughout the centuries of church history.⁵

⁵For more on this “pesher” style hermeneutic at Qumran, consult William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, Revised Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 27–28.

Other protests against Roman patronage seem to have been registered by John the Baptist and Jesus. John preached national repentance out in the desert, probably because he rejected the city of Jerusalem as polluted by the presence of a pagan occupying army, and Jerusalem’s temple polluted by the service of a corrupt priesthood that offered daily sacrifice on behalf of the Roman emperor and Sadducean high priests who had sold their souls to Rome under Annas and his family. Jesus as well made a dramatic and prophetic condemnation of the temple’s Sadducean authorities by throwing out their money changers, whose commercial activities in the Court of the Gentiles not only lined Sadducean pockets but, as well, polluted any chance for Gentiles to worship the God of Israel in the sanctity and holiness due his Name. Both John the Baptist and Jesus preached the apocalyptic message that, in the face of Jewish collusion with Roman overlords, the inbreaking kingdom of God was at hand. While neither John the Baptist nor Jesus show any direct dependence on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Scrolls illustrate similar reaction and revulsion on the part of some Jews to the detested Roman occupation of Judea and all Jewish groups in collusion with their Roman patrons.

2. First Jewish War

The Jews eventually revolted against Rome in the First Jewish War (A.D. 66-70). The Jewish rebels in Jerusalem threw out the Sadducean high priests and installed their own. The purification of Jerusalem and her priesthood, as in the days of Judas Maccabees, was on. The anticipated final battle in the *War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness* when the forces of God and his holy angels would defeat Israel’s enemies seemed at hand. The inhabitants of Qumran marched out to meet the Roman armies moving southward toward Jerusalem under general Vespasian (d. 79). The Jewish sect was annihilated so utterly that their very existence in history was completely lost for nineteen centuries until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. However, though annihilated as a Jewish sect, they left the power of their apocalyptic light and darkness language, with its images of a final conflict fought by God against all allied forces of evil arrayed against God’s people, to be absorbed by other later apocalypticists, including John of Patmos. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans. The rebel leader, Simon, was led in a triumph march in Rome and then beheaded. The Jewish minora and other spoils of the temple were paraded down Rome’s streets and carved into the Arch of Titus. Christians at the time interpreted the destruction of the Jewish nation and the Jewish temple as the prelude to the apocalyptic inbreaking of the kingdom of God. The post-war period of A.D. 75–100 saw a flurry of new Jewish apocalypses, such as 2 *Baruch* and 4 *Ezra*, trying to interpret the disastrous results of the First Jewish War.

3. John of Patmos

John of Patmos can be viewed as another negative reaction to Roman patronage, only this time from within the Christian world of the late first century. Emperor worship in Asian provinces grew dramatically under Domitian (d. 96). In the context of the popularity of the cult of the emperor in Asia Minor at this time, John interpreted conditions in Asian churches as compromise with Rome and intolerable. John images a beast with seven heads that are seven hills. No first-century reader could miss the seven hills as a symbol for Rome, the city famously set on seven hills in ancient literature. Rome is the new “Babylon,” easily equated, since Rome and Babylon were the only two historical empires to destroy Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. John’s visions were interpreted as suggesting that the fall of Rome was imminent, even within a few years. Perhaps the failure of this expectation explains why the book of Revelation was ignored almost completely in Christendom in its area of origin for almost a hundred years, and then only taken up by the heretic Montanus (A.D. 172) in his failed attempt to predict the “New Jerusalem” arriving near Pepuza in Phrygia of Asia.

II. Historical Developments of John’s Apocalyptic Traditions

A. Centrality of Millennial Imagery

One of the best concise summaries of the history of the interpretation of Revelation brimming with names, theories, movements, and information is found in the first part of Arthur Wainwright’s *Mysterious Apocalypse*.⁶ Wainwright helpfully has distinguished between *interpreters* of the Apocalypse and their interpretive theories versus *prophets* of the Apocalypse and their prophetic movements. His main thesis is that attempting to understand and apply the imagery of the millennium seems to be the central and controlling task assumed by both interpreters and prophets of the Apocalypse throughout the history of the church.

Echoing Wainwright’s thesis that the controlling imagery throughout church history for understanding Revelation is that of the millennium is the common use of prefixes to this term to distinguish major eschatological theories. Attaching a prefix characterizes not only a way to construe the *timing* of the second coming of Christ in relationship to the millennium, but also how to conceive the *nature* of the millennium itself. Three major eschatological constructs are indicated in this way. Premillennialism construes the second coming as necessary for the inauguration of an *earthly monarchial*

⁶Arthur W. Wainwright, “Part One: The Millennium and History,” in *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 21–103.

millennium of a literal thousand years at the end of history as a prelude to the final judgment. Postmillennialism construes the second coming as celebrating the beginning of an *earthly ecclesiastical* millennium of either a symbolic or a literal thousand years at the end of history as prelude to the final judgment. Amillennialism construes the second coming as concluding a *symbolic ecclesiastical* millennium of the entire church age. Premillennialism in its contemporary form is a post-Reformation development with generally Protestant roots. Postmillennialism is another post-Reformation development among Protestants, but with particular focus in English dissenter groups that transplanted to America in the colonial period. Amillennialism is a post-Constantine development with Roman Catholic roots, formalizing increasing reactions to early patristic chiliastic and new political realities after the Edict of Milan.

B. Developmental Periods

1. Patristic Apocalyptic

Before summarizing this period in the development of Revelation’s apocalyptic traditions, we first must distinguish ancient chiliastic of the patristic variety and premillennialism. Patristic chiliastic is a literal understanding of the millennium evident in second-century Christian writers, often with focus on speculations about the materialistic aspects of this millennium. This chiliastic of the early church fathers should be distinguished carefully from later views referred to as premillennialism for at least three reasons: (1) *Traditionally*, chiliastic is Jewish in background, the impact upon early patristic eschatology of hyperliteralistic, and, therefore, obsessively materialistic strands of Jewish apocalyptic traditions fueling failed Jewish insurrections such as the Bar Kokhba rebellion (A.D. 133–35); premillennialism, while literalistic, is neither hyperliteralistic nor obsessively materialistic, and does not stand in the stream of these particular Jewish apocalyptic traditions. (2) *Hermeneutically*, chiliastic anticipates only *one* future advent of Christ; premillennialism teaches *two* future advents, one secret, the “rapture,” and the other public, the so-called “second coming,” before the millennium. (3) *Historically*, chiliastic is a second-century phenomenon from the church fathers; premillennialism is a sixteenth-century phenomenon from the Anabaptists of the Reformation eventually finding permanent root in American apocalyptic in writers such as Joseph Priestly (d. 1804), Edward Bickersteth (d. 1850), and Thomas Birks (d. 1883).⁷ Second-century chiliastic and sixteenth-century premillennialism, traditionally,

⁷Cf. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 81–82.

hermeneutically, and historically, are not really the same animal, although they both center on the basic idea of a “literal” thousand year reign of Christ on earth.⁸

Further, just positing evidence of a generalized literal concept of the millennium in the early patristic fathers is not enough to establish a continuous *historical* line from second-century chiliasts to post-Reformation premillennialists. The desire to assert this connection sometimes is based upon the attempt to build a canonical argument that the chiliastism of the early church fathers, who were close historically to the actual teaching of the apostles themselves, inevitably has to be, by default, the apostolic view of the millennium, hence, inspired and authoritative. Thus, if post-Reformation premillennialism is in the direct, continuous, historical line of chiliastism, then premillennialism is the apostolic—read, only correct—understanding of the millennium. Even if such a theoretical historical line could be established, however unlikely, we still would have the more pressing hermeneutical issue of having to critique the traditions of the church fathers. Just because the church fathers taught something does not, *de facto*, make that teaching apostolic. Especially is this hermeneutical caution necessary when what is asserted about particular New Testament passages can only be *inferred* between the lines of admittedly ambiguous texts, none of which are as explicit in and of themselves as the eschatological superstructures built upon them.

a. Chiliastic Apocalyptic (c. 130)

The early church fathers do not show dramatic development of Revelation’s traditions, but acquaintance, hyperliteralism, and apologetic use. Curiously, John’s apocalyptic writing was ignored almost completely in Eastern Christendom, its place of origin, for almost a hundred years. Our earliest testimony of acquaintance with the book shows up in the West. Papias (c. 130), the bishop of Hierapolis, apparently knew the work, according to Irenaeus (d. 202, *Adv. haer.* 5.33.3–4) and Eusebius (d. 339, *HE* 3.39.12). Papias seems to have focused mostly on advancing the literal character of the millennial reign. Justin Martyr (d. 165, *Dial.* 80–81), an early apologist in Rome who was martyred, referred to the work, but simply to buttress apologetic arguments defending the doctrine of resurrection and the idea of a thousand year reign in a restored Jerusalem.

⁸In millennial arguments the term “literal” is rendered almost useless by linguistic ignorance and rhetorical abuse. Postmillennialism is just as “literal” as premillennialism. The existence of the church on earth is just as literal for a postmillennialist as the existence of a Jewish nation in Palestine is for a premillennialist. The reign of the church on earth is no less literal for a postmillennialist than the reign of a son of David on a throne in Jerusalem is for a premillennialist. A postmillennial reign of Christ simply is not conceived in *monarchical* terms, that is, in terms of Jewish nationalism, with its incumbent political and militaristic overtones.

Irenaeus (d. 202, *Adv. haer.* 5.32–36), bishop of Lugdunum (Lyon) in France, also understood Revelation’s millennial reign literally. As with Justin, Irenaeus’s emphasis was on the materialistic aspects of this millennial period. These early church fathers are called “chiliasts,” from the Greek word for a thousand. The chiliasm of these early church fathers tended to show hyperliteralistic and materialistic readings into the concept of the millennium of Rev. 20:4, as well as the New Jerusalem of Rev. 21:2. For example, Tertullian (d. 220) reported that pagan Roman soldiers had recurrent visions of the heavenly New Jerusalem in suspension above the city of Jerusalem that would appear and then vanish over a period of a number of days (*Adv. Marc.* 3.24.4). These hyperliteralistic tendencies can be understood within the context of persecution and martyrdom in the Roman Empire. The images of Revelation provided an assured future hope for the faithful in the midst of dire circumstances. The hyperliteral readings in part were a direct function of the relief of severe social distress. Such readings were not, however, necessarily the product of considered exegetical and historical interpretation of the texts from which they derive.

b. Montanus Apocalyptic (c. 172)

The first extended development of Revelation’s traditions is in the teachings of Montanus (c. 172). Unfortunately for Revelation’s reputation, this development, while initially tolerated, eventually was declared heretical. Montanus was a Christian of Phrygia later declared a heretic on the basis of his teachings about the revelatory activity of the Spirit, as well as announcing New Jerusalem’s imminent arrival in Papuza. Montanus interpreted a serious plague of his day as a sign of the end; he is our first signal of the serious use of Revelation in Christian circles after its composition for interpreting current events through its visions. Montanus, then, begins that long line in the history of the interpretation of Revelation of the struggle to interpret and apply John’s visions. The book of Revelation’s authority came under attack by the “Alogi” and Gaius of Rome (c. 210), who were attempting to undercut the Montanist movement by denying to them their main text. Montanus is a harbinger of Revelation’s future canonical and interpretive history: a book that is highly controversial in its attempted contemporary application even from the first sustained use of which we have record in Christendom.

c. Constantinian Apocalyptic (d. 337)

The next extended development of Revelation’s traditions was necessitated by the Roman emperor Constantine. Constantine converted, then declared Christianity legal in the Edict of Milan (313). Overnight, the world was turned on its head and former enemies declared allies. Suddenly, interpreting Rome as the beast of Revelation, formerly so pertinent and powerful under the persecutions by a succession of Roman emperors, no longer was tenable. How did the church react to this stunning, unexpected development?

i. Greek Orthodox—In the Eastern Church, the book of Revelation simply was ignored. The content already was considered too radical and violent, the visions too obscure and dangerous; heresy too easily lurked in the murky realms of its thought. The entire compass of Syriac-speaking churches did not even have a Syriac translation of the book of Revelation until the sixth century, half a millennium after the book’s original composition! This result in the Eastern Church is ironic, since the book had its origins in the churches of the East in the province of Asia Minor (the Letters to the Seven Churches). Even today the Greek Orthodox Church refuses to use Revelation in the liturgy of worship. The Eastern Church also rejects the use of Revelation for the development of any church doctrine.

ii. Roman Catholic—The church in the West, in contrast, found itself unable to let go of the book so easily. Two hermeneutical strategies of response to these new and surprising historical realities post-Constantine develop, both focused rhetorically on reconfiguring the *topos* of time. One strategy was deferred timing. The other strategy was symbolic timing.

a.) *Deferred timing.*⁹ The first hermeneutical strategy was to capitulate the reading of the millennium as literal and earthly, but to *defer* the timing. If one could shift the timing by centuries, one effectively could eliminate, or at least defuse, contemporary expectation. The chosen philosophy was an “in the year of the world” concept of religious time (*Annus Mundi*), with its related “sabbatical” millennium, based on the analogy of the seven days of the creation story in conjunction with Ps. 90:4 (a day as a thousand years). Current history was interpreted as in the “sixth millennium”; one only need calculate the beginning of creation to anticipate the end of the world, that is, the beginning of the “seventh millennium” or “sabbatical” millennium. The accepted calculation placed the seventh millennium not beginning before A.D. 500, which, at the time of Constantine, was almost two centuries away. Two centuries seemed like a long time.

This deferred time solution, of course, was an interim strategy. The effort worked only until the year A.D. 500 actually became imminent. Then, counterproductively, the solution itself eventually spawned even more intense apocalyptic fervor. Recalculation was necessary. The English monk Bede (d. 735) came to the rescue. Bede reset the beginning and recalculated the end for A.D. 800. This recalculation, however, played right into the hands of the political maneuvers of Charlemagne (d. 814), the French ruler

⁹A brief summary of this strategy is found in Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 48–50. O’Leary’s main resource for this material is Richard Landes, “Lest the Millennium Be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100–800 CE,” *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst, and Andries Welkenhuysen, eds. (Leuven, Netherlands: Leuven University Press, 1988), 137–211.

who consolidated the Carolingian dynasty of his father by uniting all European kingdoms under his control. Charlemagne declared himself emperor, the *de facto* heir of Rome and her traditions. He strategically set his imperial coronation for Bede’s millennially significant year of A.D. 800. Mundane political realities, however, after Charlemagne eventually forced the Carolingians to recalculate the end once again. The new strategy was a new calculation of the beginning of the “sixth millennium,” which was now declared to be the Incarnation. Thus, the dawn of the “seventh millennium” of religious history gained the symmetrical appeal of coinciding with a millennium of world history, the historical Christian millennium, the year A.D. 1000.¹⁰

Clearly, all such time deferred strategies were of temporary value only. Time persistently always caught up, inevitably forcing recalculations. The reality of history always seems to be causing perpetual millennial recalculations. (The other side of the coin is, millennial calculators never seem to tire of recalculating!) Though a popular interpretive strategy for some leaders post-Constantine, the ultimate ineffectiveness and hidden dangers of deferred timing, easily seen in historical hindsight, were not lost on others, such as Augustine, who opted for another strategy.

b.) *Symbolic timing.* The second hermeneutical strategy in response to empire developments under Constantine was to refuse to capitulate to reading the millennium as literal (monarchical) and earthly, but rather to insist on its symbolic meaning. Though he had precursors, and drew upon a number of interpretive traditions of his time, Augustine (d. 430), the great scholar of the West, was the catalytic agent in church history for the adoption of symbolic timing related to Revelation’s images. Augustine championed the traditional authority and apostolic authorship of Revelation. Because of Constantine, however, Augustine was forced to liberate Revelation from a literal interpretation of its visions and images, in days past so easily seen fulfilled in the evil empire Rome, but now no longer true. The former villain, Rome, by an interpretive sleight of hand, Augustine painted as the hero. Since Rome now supported and nurtured the church, Rome *must* be the hero. To accomplish this rehabilitation of Rome, Augustine remapped Revelation’s apocalyptic images onto the already existing terrain of the Christian life, thereby rubbing Rome completely off John’s apocalyptic canvas. To remap the images, Augustine championed a symbolic interpretation, following the “spiritual” or “timeless truth” interpretive traditions that had been developing in the Alexandrian school under the leadership of Origen (d. 254) and Dionysius (d. 265). The millennium of Rev. 20:4 was read as a heavenly reality only, not earthly, simply another way to describe the “New Jerusalem” of Rev. 21:2. Elements of Christian life reflected this heavenly reality as metaphor. For example, the “first resurrection” of Rev. 20:5 was interpreted as a metaphor for Christian baptism. The “millennium” of Rev. 20:4 was interpreted as a

¹⁰The first Christian millennium had its own significance that will be explored in later discussion.

metaphor for Christ’s present reign in the church (following Tyconius, d. ca. 400). Augustine also adopted and promoted the recapitulation theory of Victorinus (d. 304), who taught that the series of judgments in Revelation (seals, trumpets, bowls) do not progress linearly or chronologically; rather, they recapitulate the same truths for dramatic emphasis. Thus liberated from its beastly image, Rome, the “eternal city,” could stand for the strength and stability of the church.

c.) *Last Emperor Myth*. In fact, the Roman Empire, through its emperor, now was interpreted by some as the power restraining the appearance of Antichrist,¹¹ fulfilling the Pauline teaching of 2 Thess. 2:6–7. This perceived season of Antichrist’s restraint led to the myth of the “Last Emperor.” The Last Emperor was that Roman emperor who would be the last emperor immediately prior to the revelation of Antichrist. The myth of the Last Emperor had a long, rich, but complex tradition in European history, being appropriated by Charlemagne and the Carolingians, and later figuring significantly into French and German history, especially under the German king Frederick II (d. 1250).

d.) *City of God*. Unfortunately, “eternal Rome” was sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths in 410. In addition to reconfiguring the millennium, Augustine also had to transmute the “eternal city” that had had its literal correlate for a thousand years in the city of Rome to the eternal “City of God,” that had its spiritual correlate in heaven. Spiritual Rome replaced real Rome. Augustine’s interpretive ploys with the millennium and the City of God came at great cost, as the maneuvers drained both Revelation and history of all apocalyptic meaning. Revelation’s loss of its apocalyptic voice was the loss of its immediacy and urgency. The book conveniently could be shelved as playing second fiddle to the truths already revealed in other New Testament documents. Revelation might bark in its fearsome visions, but the book no longer had any interpretive bite for contemporary events. The end, whatever that was, for Augustine was a galaxy far, far away.

e.) *Council of Ephesus (431)*. The Western Church canonized Revelation but had a hard time containing the interpretation. Three significant problems were evident. First, the materialistic, almost hedonistic, excess of the chiliasts in imaging the millennium was an obvious embarrassment to later church leaders. Second, the Montanus heresy already had demonstrated early in the interpretive history of the book what maverick movements literal readings of Revelation could produce. Third, Constantine had turned the religious world on its head, and Rome no longer was the persecutor of the faithful. As a result, traditional readings of the beasts and Babylon as literal prophecies of Rome’s demise

¹¹Use of the term “Antichrist” is traditional for the historical embodiment of evil under the power of Satan in some individual at the end of time. Tracing the origin and development of the legend of Antichrist through the ages is a fascinating study. See Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

history itself had seemed to falsify almost overnight. No wonder then that the Council of Ephesus formally declared certain literal readings of the millennium heretical. For these reasons and others,¹² Augustine’s symbolic interpretation won the day in the Western Church. Augustine’s amillennialism would rule the mainstream interpretation of Revelation for a thousand years. Quite the accomplishment for one churchman. Minority reports did appear along the way, such as deferred timing schemes surrounding Charlemagne, as well as the Crusades, Joachim of Fiore, and radical fifteenth-century European movements that were the precursors to the radical Anabaptists of the Reformation.

2. Millennium Apocalyptic (A.D. 1000)

The next significant development of Revelation’s traditions was tied to the arrival of the first Christian millennium. Though the scholar Augustine’s spiritual interpretation of Revelation came to rule the church, Augustine’s scholastic erudition on Revelation did not rule popular thought. (So what’s new?) Pictures are worth a thousand words. Christian art in the Dark Ages continued to interpret Revelation literally for the great masses of believers, even though at times grotesquely. Whatever its aesthetic value, this art informed the thinking of the uneducated masses. Art is interpretation, and in that apocalyptic art, Revelation retained its potency for absorbing and explaining current events, such as the worldwide Bubonic plague (541–543) that wiped out as much as one-third to one-half of Constantinople’s population as one example. Such art helped maintain the sense among common people that Revelation had *something* to do with external *historical* events, not Augustine’s interior spiritual life of the believer. Deferred timing schemes also unwittingly fed into these popular apocalyptic anticipations.

a. Bede (d. 735)

The English monk Bede (d. 735) added to this popular understanding through his writings, though probably not in a way intended by Bede himself. Bede wrote a commentary on Revelation, but this work was not really his contribution to the popular imagination. (His commentary was nothing more than allegory along lines already established in the patristic traditions following Augustine.) More importantly, Bede was a philosopher of time. He calculated the age of the earth by adding biblical generations. He

¹²Philosophy also played a hand. Gnostic dualism and spirit emphasis sterilized Christian eschatology. Platonic dualism deprecated matter and all elements of the physical world. Expectation of a literal, millennial kingdom, therefore, clearly would evidence an inferior philosophy.

wrote about time and bequeathed to the church a clearly articulated concept of linear history, as well as the crucial phrase, *Ano Domini*, “in the year of the Lord.” This “year of the Lord” concept transmuted the older “in the year of the world” philosophy with its “sabbatical” millennium correlate into a philosophy that was more directly connected to Christ’s First Advent. These concepts about time fired the popular imagination. Time could be conceived as marching toward its appointed, sovereign end as decreed by the Lord Jesus Christ. The English monk Bede, then, along with his “sabbatical” millennium precursors, are the nascent beginnings nourishing that long series of end-time calculators whose entire eschatological theory hinges on one simple principle: add the days, know the time. The theory has one crucial flaw: how do we know when to change the mathematical rules right in the middle of our calculations such that one plus one no longer is two, that is, when history falsifies our math?

b. Sylvester II (d. 1003)

Such popular thinking about time became the fuel for the high anticipation that “something wonderful is about to happen” as the first Christian millennium of the year A.D. 1000 approached. When Sylvester II became pope in 999, the countdown to the millennium and the return of Christ was thought to have begun. The belief widely held was that in Sylvester II’s last mass of 999, Christ would emerge on earth to reveal his glory and reign, making manifest to the whole world the premier “year of the Lord.” Most fittingly, the completion of the historical church millennium would inaugurate the dawning of the divine royal millennium. Sylvester II celebrated the last mass of 999, of course, without even the slightest manifestation of the “year of the Lord.” More importantly, Christ did not return. The masses of believers were unspeakably disappointed and disillusioned. While the anticipated return of Christ never materialized, one can trace in this intense millennial fever that passed unrelieved in A.D. 1000 the undying desire in the popular imagination to bring Revelation down to earth on some concrete date. Many a false prophet has catered shamelessly to that desire.¹³

3. Crusade Apocalyptic (A.D. 1095)

The next significant development of Revelation’s traditions relates to the Crusades. Jerusalem had fallen to the Muslim onslaught by 638. The faithful were succumbing to the infidels with breathtaking speed. The whole Christian world seemed to be falling into chaos. In 1071 the Seljuq Turks who controlled the area around Jerusalem

¹³For a critique, see “Excursus 1: Setting Dates” at the end of this paper; cf. Wainwright, “Prophets and Prophetic Movements,” in *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 89–103.

cut off all pilgrim routes to the city. This Turkish action provoked Pope Urban II (d. 1099) to issue a call to take back Jerusalem in 1095, inaugurating three centuries of Christian Crusades.

a. Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179)

Hildegard was a German abbess and mystic whose claim to have visions was confirmed by the archbishop of Mainz. Her visions were recorded down by the order of the archbishop. Hildegard also was a talented poet, composer, and artist. Her connection to the Crusades is somewhat oblique, but deadly serious. Hildegard was the first to draw a picture of Antichrist. She depicted this figure, even though born from the church, as a Jew who would attempt to enforce Judaism on believers through observance of circumcision and the Torah. Effectively, Hildegard declared all Jews the enemies of Christ. Thus, when the Crusader armies were moving down the Rhine River valley in Germany, anti-Semitic mob violence broke out in the effort to kill Jews in the final conflict leading to the capture of Jerusalem and the return of Christ. As these Crusaders continued their deadly march, towns along the Rhine saw the mass killings of thousands of Jews, inaugurating centuries of Christian anti-Semitic activity. Instigated by Hildegard’s art, Christian Antichrist slander at the beginning of the Crusades struck Jews as the first victims, but certainly not the last.

a. Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202)

Joachim was an Italian monk in the monastery of Corazzo south of Rome. He found Revelation altogether obscure and its meaning impenetrable. One Easter morning, however, Joachim awoke with a sudden flash of insight into this difficult book that opened its pages to him. His flash was to take his cue from the Holy Trinity. History is a triad like the Trinity is a triad. Each historical period has a direct relationship to the mystery of the Trinity: God the Father is the period from creation through ancient Israel. God the Son is the period from King Josiah through the present. God the Spirit is the period of the future, and that future is imminent. This last statement of imminence is the most audacious, as Joachim thereby is directly contradicting Augustine and the longstanding teaching of the church that the end was far, far away. Joachim’s monastic influence is readily apparent in his description of the period of the Spirit as an age of peace that is eerily like a monastery. In fact, the monastic order of the church brings the necessary purification of the church preparatory to this final period. Thus, Joachim represents the survival of deferred timing schemes with their inherent periodizing of history over the dominant symbolic timing scheme of Augustine’s amillennialism in the period of the Crusades.

i. Literal and Linear. Besides the monastic movement itself, Joachim’s other “sign of the times” was the Crusades. For those who have eyes to see, Joachim taught, the

Crusades are the sure sign of that global conflict of God and Satan (Christians and Muslims). The Crusades without doubt will conclude in the Battle of Armageddon. God (crusader knights) will win. Revelation’s “beast with seven heads” can be mapped on the timeline of history as the seven historical kings infamous for their persecutions of Christians, from Herod the Great’s slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus down to the current Muslim leader, Saladin (d. 1193). Joachim confidently taught that numerical calculations could establish the timeframe of end-time events (shades of Bede). From the birth of Christ to the end of the world would be 1,260 years (using the 1,260 days of Rev. 12:6). Thus, the end is about 80 years into Joachim’s future—just conveniently far enough into the future such that Joachim does not have to contemplate being around to bear responsibility as a false prophet when his predictions are falsified. In regards to Revelation, Joachim of Fiore is the first serious minority report to Augustine not tied directly to the popular opinions of the masses, who never really were on board Augustine’s neutered apocalyptic in the first place. Joachim was the historical catalyst formally resetting in motion in a serious way the literal reading evidenced in early patristic interpretation, as well as the rejection of Victorinus’s idea, adopted by Augustine, that the visions of Revelation recapitulate the same truths. Joachim’s distinctive contribution was forever burning into apocalyptic imagination the idea that the images of Revelation are to be taken as a linear map of the progress of church history.

ii. Periodizing Precipice. This linear history mode can be seen in modern times, for example, in the desire of dispensationalists who, while trumpeting a “literal” interpretation and agreeing that the Seven Letters of Revelation 2–3 have application historically to seven actual churches in first-century Asia Minor, simultaneously assert these same letters also are intended as prophetic metaphors for marking seven periods of church history.¹⁴ Of course, by design, we always are in the seventh period, the “Laodicean Age” of a lukewarm church bent on apostasy, regardless in what century the dispensational writer happens to be (nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first). Funny how, throughout the centuries of interpretation, no historical periodizer from Joachim to today ever proposed a historical sequence and then concluded they were in the *middle* of their periodic scheme! *The goal of any periodic scheme is to convince readers that they are standing on the precipice of history.* Any indiscriminate bundle of “signs of the times” then can be thrown in as lagniappe “confirmation” of an already decided historical “fact.” The “signs of the times” do not actually have to be exegetically correct or even logically consistent for that matter. Any “sign” is “believable” because *belief in the arrival of the end already is established as a presupposition of the argument.*

¹⁴Cf. *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. E. Schuyler English (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1353.

4. Reformation Apocalyptic (1500s)

The next significant development of Revelation’s traditions result from Reformation politics. However, before we overview the Reformation period, we first must mention briefly the pre-Reformation Hussites.

a. Pre-Reformation Intimations

i. Hussites. Developments of the Reformation were presaged already in the 1400s with the story of the Hussites in the Czech Republic’s Bohemia province in central Europe. The Hussites were followers of John Huss and were focused on opposition to the two basic medieval institutions of European feudalism and the Roman Catholic Church. John Huss was burned at the stake in 1415, but the movement he started continued in various Hussite groups, some of whom were quite radical.

ii. Taborites. The Taborites, centered in the Bohemian city of Tabor, were one of these radical offshoots of the Hussite movement during the Hussite Wars. Their concerns were focused on religious issues of the Church and social issues of the peasantry, which already pointed respectively to later developments under Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer in Germany, and even the classless society ideals of twentieth-century communism. The Taborites declared the soon arrival of an imminent millennium, which would be facilitated by their war on all non-Taborites. After a brief interval of twenty years, 13,000 of 18,000 Taborite troops were slaughtered by the armies of the Czech king Sigismund in the Battle of Lipany in 1434. This defeat effectively ended the radical Taborite movement. Their thought and heritage, however, lingered on to haunt Europe’s history into the next century.

iii. Wycliff and the Papacy. The papacy long had been embroiled in political, military, and religious controversy for centuries. Thoughtful believers yearned and prayed earnestly for reform of the institution. The thoughts of John Wycliff (d. 1384) on the matter anticipated interpretive developments in the Reformation. Wycliff desired papal reform. He set high hopes on Pope Urban VI (d. 1389), the so-called “reform pope.” Urban, however, quickly proved to be a poor choice, and the papacy devolved into open schism. French cardinals elected Clement VII (d. 1534) to replace Urban VI. The collapse of Wycliff’s reform hopes he had placed in Urban VI turned Wycliff against the papacy. He decided the papal institution was irredeemably corrupt and declared the papacy to be Antichrist. Luther, though initially ignoring Revelation, eventually turned to the book’s images to fight his battles with the papacy, and brought Wycliff’s papal antipathy and Antichrist slander into the Protestant mainstream.

b. Martin Luther (d. 1546)

The Reformation basically is the story of the German monk Martin Luther, whose reaction against the sale of indulgences in 1516 generally is taken as the formal beginning of protest against the Church and attempts at reform. Our focus is Luther’s use of Revelation for political broadsides against the pope. Luther was able to surf the publishing wave created by the new Gutenberg printing press, so was able to disseminate his thoughts to the masses rather quickly. One important publication was his German translation of the Bible. At first Luther had no use for Revelation. He said he could not find Christ preached in the book. He even went so far as to relegate the Apocalypse to an appendix in the first edition of his German New Testament, clearly indicating a low opinion of the book, almost suggesting the book was not even to be taken as canonical. Later, however, Luther found in the beast imagery of the Apocalypse a powerful propaganda tool against the Roman papacy. He thereafter embraced Revelation wholeheartedly. In contrast, John Calvin (Jean Chauvin, d. 1564), the corresponding French luminary of the Reformation, had no use whatsoever for the Apocalypse and never changed his mind about the book. Tellingly, Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible except the book of Revelation.

c. Albrecht Dürer (d. 1528)

Luther’s interpretations of Revelation’s images might not have had the enduring effect they achieved without Albrecht Dürer. After Luther decided Revelation ought to be in the Bible after all, he commissioned Albrecht Dürer (d. 1528), widely regarded as the greatest German Renaissance artist, to create a series of woodcuts that would illustrate important images from John’s visionary world. We previously have documented the general public’s lack of reaction to Augustine’s spiritualized apocalyptic, instead finding their inspiration through the Dark Ages in various forms of apocalyptic art. So, fast-forward to the Reformation, and you know the rest of the story: a picture is worth a thousand words. Dürer’s woodcuts are some of the most enduring images of Revelation of all time. They are ubiquitous in publications related to Revelation. Because of Luther’s vitriolic rhetoric against the Roman Catholic papacy, forever etched onto the dramatic images of Revelation by Lucas Cranach (the Younger, d. 1586) and others after Dürer, various streams of Protestantism probably never will extirpate the Antichrist slander in this image of the pope as Antichrist and lackey of Satan from their apocalyptic imagination. Such papal Antichrist slander, for example, is particularly pervasive in Seventh Day Adventist literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁵

¹⁵Or, in other traditions, combined with a very healthy dose of misogyny, as in Dave Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast: The Roman Catholic Church and the Last Days* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1994).

d. Thomas Müntzer (d. 1525)

Thomas Müntzer was a German cleric initially attracted to Luther's reform movement. What drove Müntzer, however, was not theological reflection, like Luther, but his overwhelming interest in the economic oppression of German peasants by upper class landholders. This economic struggle caused Müntzer to skew religious reflection into social cause. Müntzer eventually led the Peasants' Revolt (1524–1525) in Thuringia, which was an unmitigated disaster. Five thousand unarmed and untrained peasants died, slaughtered on the field of battle when Müntzer's promised apocalyptic intervention of God never materialized. The tragic fate of the inhabitants of Qumran going out to meet Vespasian's Roman legions in the First Jewish War is reprised. Indeed, Marxists of the twentieth century claim in Müntzer's preaching, writing, and revolt the prototype, if not even the paradigm, in the struggle for a classless society in modern Europe. Taking his cue from apocalyptic periodization of history schemes (shades of Joachim), Karl Marx secularized the periods into a series of stages of class struggle that would eventuate in communism's total victory. During the communist control of East Germany, a great circular monument was erected in the very field of Müntzer's final conflict with a gigantic painted diorama on its inner wall aggrandizing Müntzer and the peasants' story. In the communist portrayal of Müntzer's revolt, Revelation's visions were hijacked into images of secular class struggle.

e. Radical Anabaptists (Münster Rebellion)¹⁶

French and German popular imagination was prepared for radical thought by the ravages of bubonic plague and excessive taxes levied for the on-going defense against Turkish expansion into Europe, which led to general social and political unrest. Into this unrest came Melchior Hoffmann (d. 1543), who was rebaptized as an Anabaptist, but seemed to stir trouble almost anywhere he traveled. Luther was particularly alarmed at the constant disruption to social peace Hoffmann's presence inevitably created, not to mention their theological differences on the Eucharist. Using the book of Revelation, Hoffmann taught that papal Rome was the Babylon of Revelation and Strasbourg, France the New Jerusalem. While rejected by Strasbourg's authorities and arrested, thereby reducing Hoffmann's influence, his ideas inspired Jan Matthys (d. 1534), a Dutch Anabaptist who himself decided that Münster, Germany was to be the New Jerusalem (convenient, since Strasbourg did not appear cooperative with the New Jerusalem program). Disciples of Matthys were received favorably by a small group in Münster.

¹⁶Very confusing and hard to keep distinguished is the name of a man, Müntzer, the German cleric of the Peasants' Revolt, and the name of a city, Münster, the German town made infamous by the Radical Anabaptist rebellion of Matthys and Bockelson.

Catholics and others were driven out of town and a new civic council set in place. Catholics besieged the town, and Matthys was killed in a skirmish. John Bockelson (John of Leyden, d. 1536), a disciple of Matthys, took control. Conditions inside the city soon spiraled out of control. John declared polygamy the social norm and himself king of the New Jerusalem. Eventually, this “king” was captured, tortured, and killed. His body and those of two other leaders were left to rot in cages above St. Lambert’s Church. The cages remain to this day.

5. American Apocalyptic (1600s–present)¹⁷

The next significant development of Revelation’s traditions is in the ideology of the New World coming out of colonial Europe. About a hundred years after Germany’s Peasants’ Revolt various Protestant groups in control in England were making conditions dangerous for dissenters, such as the Puritans, who were trying to purify the Church of England (separated from Rome in 1534 by King Henry VIII) from what they considered lingering vestiges of Roman Catholic “popery.” Puritans advanced the idea of a Holy Commonwealth, a covenant pact between God and state that would be the foundation for an established church under Puritan ideals of morality and ethics.

a. The New World

America from its very beginnings was born in apocalyptic language and has continued to this day to use this language to interpret its history. The Puritan reform movement failed in England, which remained Episcopal, but Puritans brought their ideals of a Holy Commonwealth to the New World with the high anticipation of a New World order. They did not call America “the New World” simply because they had not seen the continent before. (Have you ever wondered why so many colonial names have the word “new” in them, such as New England, New Jerusalem, New Bedford, etc.?) They anticipated actually establishing a New World, with God and government in covenant.

¹⁷ A rich resource on this topic for the general reader is Boyer’s *When Time Shall Be No More*. His discussion covers not only an initial overview of apocalyptic through the ages, but has detailed focus on the American development from the colonial period forward, especially in the twentieth century. Boyer’s thesis is that prophecy belief in popular American thought is far more central than generally acknowledged in the academic guild. In particular, Boyer argued that dispensational premillennialism has played a significant role in forming public attitudes on a wide range of issues that would include the now-defunct Soviet Empire, nuclear war, the European Common Market, Mideast policies and politics, and even the computer and the environmental crisis.

America would become the “righteous nation” God always had desired of the people of God. Puritans read Revelation’s millennium even more literally than did the second-century church fathers Papias, Justin Martyr, or Irenaeus, who thought God himself would have to bring in the millennium. Puritans were confident they would bring in the millennium, literally, on God’s behalf. The New World opening up in the American colonies was the sure sign of the inauguration of that grand earthly enterprise. New England literally would become Jesus’ city “set on a hill” not hidden under a bushel (Mt. 5:15), the New Jerusalem of Rev. 21:10. Cotton Mather (d. 1728), the brightest mind of all American Puritans, preached confidently that the American world was on course for transforming into the Holy City, which Christ’s return would celebrate. The revival preaching of Jonathan Edwards (d. 1758) in the context of the two Great Awakenings (1720s–1740s; 1795–1835) continued to promote and popularize this civic millennialism of the Puritans.¹⁸

b. The War of Independence

The Puritan heritage already was loosing its grip on government during the lifetime of Cotton Mather, but the apocalyptic formulation of the civic discourse was an abiding contribution of the Puritans to the American Revolution. The revolt from the tyranny of England’s colonial empire was fueled by apocalyptic language. King George quickly became the target of Antichrist slander; King George was declared to be Antichrist. Paul Revere (d. 1818) said the revolutionary fight really was a struggle against the beast of the Apocalypse. The Stamp Act of 1765 proved this apocalyptic equation for Revere and others. The British government passed a law requiring the appropriately stamped piece of paper for all types of commercial activity in the American colonies. Clearly, the Stamp Act was the mark of the beast for colonialists.

This civic millennial language of the colonial period carried over into political and religious discourse into the next century. A common assumption surfacing in sermons and speeches was that America had a special role in God’s plan and would come to realize a millennial destiny. The American and French political revolutions, the religious awakenings, and more were taken as divine preparation for this destiny. Zion, the New Jerusalem, would be built in America. Even up to the Civil War this civic millennialism is written clearly into public discourse and hymnody. Julia Ward Howe’s (d. 1910) “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” written specifically as a marching hymn for federal troops, is direct: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”¹⁹

¹⁸Cf. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 68–74.

¹⁹First appearing on the front page of *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1862. The melody preexisted as a campfire spiritual usually traced back to William Steffe in the 1850s.

Late in the nineteenth century factors inevitably arose to quench this civic postmillennial fervor, but such millennial language had been established firmly as central to American civic and political discourse. This trail is evidenced from President Woodrow Wilson’s (d. 1924) energetic support of the League of Nations after World War I to Ronald Regan’s (d. 2004) “evil empire” declaration of Soviet Russia during the Cold War.²⁰

c. The Nineteenth Century

The century following the American Revolution saw important religious movements in America that left an enduring mark on the nation’s apocalyptic landscape and language. Four American apocalyptic movements are notable in this regard.

i. Mormons. The first nineteenth-century movement is Mormonism, which has everything to do with the biography of Joseph Smith (d. 1844). In his very early years as a young boy, Smith was caught up in the highly charged atmosphere of religious revivalism in New York. As a young teenager, he claimed to have experienced a life-changing vision of God and Jesus Christ. Subsequently, according to Smith, the angel Moroni told him Smith would reconstitute the true church of Jesus Christ on earth, all others being irredeemably corrupted by false doctrine. Moroni, the last of the ancient prophets, led Smith to find golden tablets the angel had buried fourteen centuries earlier in a hill in Palmyra, New York. These golden tablets purportedly recorded the history of American Indians, revealing them to be descendants of Hebrews who had sailed the Pacific to the New World. Smith claimed to have translated the tablets. This work became the Book of Mormon, the inspired text of the Mormon religion (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Mormon leaders echoed the civic millennial language of the postmillennialism common in their day. America was the location of Zion on earth. The New Jerusalem would be established soon. Facing persecution at every stage of their journey, Smith led his Mormon followers ever westward in search of the New Jerusalem for the true church. Smith was murdered by a mob in Carthage, Ill., but Brigham Young (d. 1877) asserted leadership over the main group, continuing the trek westward. New Jerusalem finally was sighted in the hinterlands of Utah, eventually becoming today’s Salt Lake City.

ii. Millerites. The second nineteenth-century movement is the Millerite movement, or, more accurately, the Millerite fiasco. This movement has to be traced in two historical stages: (1) the first stage of the original movement that failed, and (2) the

²⁰Used in a March 8, 1983 speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida after Soviet fighters shot down Korean Air Flight 007 for violating Soviet air space, purportedly not knowing the target was a commercial flight, just west of Sakhalin Island in the North Pacific. All on board, 269 passengers and crew, perished as the plane spiraled into the sea, including U.S. Congressman Larry McDonald.

second stage of the surviving remnant that succeeded. The second stage involves the morphing of the original failed movement into today’s Seventh Day Adventists with their numerous, related splinter groups.

a.) *First Stage.* William Miller (d. 1849) made spectacular and dramatic eschatological calculations. He was the equivalent of a combined Bede and Joachim of Fiore on steroids. Miller read Revelation using the book of Daniel. Miller’s calculations showed Daniel’s two thousand three hundred year apocalyptic clock (2300 days, Dan. 8:14) started ticking in 457 B.C., calculating the time of the issuance of the decree to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. That gives the year 1843. In 1839 Joshua Hines put his printing press at Miller’s disposal to propagate Miller’s writings. Perhaps 40,000 to 50,000 believers were drawn from all walks of life to hang their eschatological beliefs on Miller’s star. They were Millerites. Miller refined his calculations down to the month. He declared the end of the world and the second coming of Jesus Christ would happen somewhere in the window between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. The prophetic moth danced the interpretive dance of death and touched the bright light of Revelation’s visions. Miller got zapped. March 21, 1844 came and went.

However, a hallmark of believing in “the end,” is the dogged refusal to accept history’s stark falsification, even in the face of total, public humiliation. Like a dishonest accountant, you cook the books. Miller cooked the prophetic books. That is, he “found” a mistake in the time-calculation formula and simply recalculated. (Funny how *every* recalculation ever suggested always pushes the date *forward*, never backward!). He decided he forgot to account for the one-year shift caused by the transition from 1 B.C. to A.D. 1. (What?) The new date was October 1844, less than a year away.

True believers rallied to Miller’s new date. Farmers refused to harvest bumper crops. Bankers cashed out. Businessmen quit their jobs. The millennial fever of A.D. 1000 struck again, as “something wonderful is about to happen.” October 1844, however, came and went. In contrast to the first failed-date fiasco, the disillusionment among Millerites this second time around was intense and deeply traumatic. Many were in financial ruin. This second prophecy failure among Millerites was truly “apocalyptic” (at least in the sense of world-changing) and became known as “The Great Disappointment.” Disenchanted Millerites now left the movement by the thousands. Miller himself died only five years later in 1849.

However, Miller’s movement did not die. One might wonder how, in the face of such brutal historical contradiction and embarrassing false prophecy, the movement possibly could survive. Be assured of one lesson of Revelation history: end-time belief ultimately is immortal. The Millerites survived by inventing a new eschatological doctrine and by adjusting their rhetorical strategy.

New Doctrine—Third Advent. As noted previously, apocalyptic faith maintenance knows no end to ingenuity and innovation. Some Millerite believers *still* hung on, even *after* the “Great Disappointment.” What was their solution to this extraordinary problem of historical falsification? Out of thin air they audaciously invented a bold, new doctrine of a *third* advent. They claimed that Jesus actually *did* come in October 1844. (Now you

see him; now you don’t.) How? Well, certainly not in the way that they had anticipated. History was too obvious for that fiction. They suddenly claimed that the second coming itinerary changed. Jesus’ journey to earth included an unexpected stop along the way. In other words, the trip was shorter than expected, that is, not all the way to earth. Jesus got only as far as appearing in the heavenly tabernacle, creating an “invisible coming,” which happened in 1844, as predicted. This invisible coming was the *first* part of the second coming. The *second* part of the second coming is that Jesus still will be returning to earth. Thus, by inventing a *two-stage second coming* (the first time ever in Christian thought, but not the last), true Millerite believers could continue in the hunt for the second coming—*second stage*, that is. What Millerites really invent is a *third* coming of Christ (incarnation, heavenly tabernacle, millennium). In between the heavenly tabernacle stop and the complete return to earth is a short period that continues to the present time that can anticipate the event at any moment. We already have had over one hundred and sixty years of such “imminence” preaching. (The elephant in the room is, when is “near” no longer near?)

In the context of this interim time between the heavenly tabernacle stop and the picking back up of Jesus’ return to earth, Millerites preached irrefutable “signs of the times” always showing that this event of the second stage of the return was near, very near, even at the door. This invention of an invisible part of the second coming was a shrewd move, as the strategy helped anesthetize Millerite historical memory of the “Great Disappointment” of October 1844. This strategy propped up faith in “imminence” preaching by relieving the pressure from historical falsification.

Rhetorical Strategy—Precisely Imprecise. The second key to survival for Millerites was an adjustment in their rhetorical strategy, that is, in their preaching. To stay in business with Millerite prophetic believers and remain unexposed as false prophets, Millerite preachers learned to be careful only to *insinuate* “nearness,” without getting caught by too much specificity, as did Miller himself. To insinuate nearness without explicitly saying “now,” Millerites learned to make subtle, leading suggestions supposedly adding up the “signs of the times,” but then stopping just short of an actual date prediction, with a “you do the math” knowing wink and a nod to the listener. The listener, fully understanding what had been insinuated, made the calculation, watched for the date, then became confused by historical falsification. Afterwards, the Millerite preacher simply published another book, making subtle shifts in calculations, and comforting the prophecy believer that they misunderstood matters somehow. Any false prophet in this way becomes invulnerable to historical falsification. In this ingenious way, the Millerite moth could weave in and around Revelation’s bright light forever in its “nearness” innuendo waltz without fear of *future* historical falsification, even though, in reality, they unequivocally were falsified in 1844—*twice*.

The Millerite “Great Disappointment” became a key pragmatic lesson learned from nineteenth-century prophecy preaching for later prophecy chasers of the twentieth and twentieth-first century. This “precisely imprecise” rhetorical strategy has been perfected by subsequent “imminence” preaching in the twentieth and twenty-first

century, especially among Adventists, Jehovah’s Witness, dispensationalists, Pentecostals, and others.²¹

b.) Second Stage—Seventh-Day Adventists. This persistent remnant of the original nineteenth-century Millerite movement historically reincarnated itself as the Seventh Day Adventist movement, the second historical stage of the original Millerite movement. The Seventh Day Adventist movement is inextricably tied to the prophetic activity of Ellen G. White (d. 1915). White was facially disfigured in an unfortunate injury as a young girl. She had an intense religious experience in a Methodist camp, later became a Millerite, and turned out to be the key figure stepping into the gap of the “Great Disappointment” after Miller passed from the scene. White claimed to have visions and special revelations. She wrote extensively and picked up the broken pieces of the Millerite movement. Millerites who refused to cry “uncle” to history’s stark and brutal falsification of the original movement now followed White. They eventually became known as “Seventh Day Adventists.” The emphasis on “seventh day” in the title is the Adventist teaching that worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, is the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:16). The Antichrist will be a Roman Catholic pope. The papacy is the power that has spread this “strong delusion” of Sunday worship to all Christendom. True worship of God happens on the only day recognized by God in the Law, the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. Thus, all current Protestant denominations, all Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Russian Orthodox churches, and any other group calling themselves Christian, but not worshipping on the seventh day of the week, will be in jeopardy of falling under the influence of the enforced Sunday worship of the Protestant beast and papal Antichrist of the end-time.²²

c.). Third Stage—Splinter Adventists. Adventist groups have a history of splintering into numerous fringe groups. Historically, all these splinter Adventist groups are the third stage ripple effect in history of the original failed Millerite movement. Each splinter Adventist group is tied to a distinct personality as leader. Three of the most significant splinter groups covered here are: (1) Herbert W. Armstrong’s Worldwide Church of God with its strange British-Israelism doctrine; (2) Charles T. Russell’s Jehovah’s Witness with their failed 1914 end of the world prediction and deep suspicion

²¹Cf. O’Leary on Hal Lindsey, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 208–218.

²²An attempt is made to distinguish the unwitting participation in Sunday worship of countless generations of believers through the ages from Sabbath violation of the end-time apostasy as an *intentional* following of the beast’s *enforcement* of Sunday worship. This distinction supposedly absolves all Christendom of the error up to the point of Antichrist. Cf. Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation: The Response of History to the Voice of Prophecy; a Verse by Verse Study of These Important Books of the Bible* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1897), 596–607.

of all organized religion (ironically like theirs is not), as well as all human government; and (3) David Koresh’s Branch Davidians of the infamous Waco, Texas disaster.

Worldwide Church of God. Herbert W. Armstrong (d. 1986) is a famous example of a splinter Adventist group. Armstrong, originally a businessman in advertising, was reached by the Adventist seventh-day worship argument in the 1920s. Though at one time accepted as an Adventist minister, Armstrong eventually was defrocked due to his eccentric teachings. Forming his own group, Armstrong secured a fifteen-minute spot on a radio station (KORE, Eugene, Ore.) and organized as the “Radio Church of God” (1934). This initial fifteen-minute radio spot grew into “The World Tomorrow” broadcast, with the associated publication of “The Plain Truth” magazine, both of which eventually reached an audience around the world. Appropriately, Armstrong later renamed his organization “The Worldwide Church of God.” The “World Tomorrow” radio program evolved into a television broadcast of the same name. The familiar face of the television era was one of Armstrong’s sons, Garner Ted. In later years the organization was rocked by moral and financial scandal and Armstrong’s failed prophecy regarding the year 1972. Armstrong was forced to disfellowship his intended heir, son Garner Ted, but the reason never publicly was stated; rumors were rife about adultery and gambling. Garner Ted was nonplussed over the entire matter and formed his own organization, “The Church of God International,” based in Tyler, Texas. Garner Ted continues a teaching ministry with weekly television broadcasts and supporting literature. Numerous other Armstrong splinter groups, usually having some modified form of “Church of God” in their name, also derived from this period of scandal and failed prophecy.

Armstrong’s most defining eschatological teaching is an Americanized subspecies of the “British-Israelism” tradition. The key to unlocking biblical prophecies about the future, Armstrong taught, lay in establishing the true identity of the British and American nations. This identity was—hold your breath—Davidic, no less! Promises to David about the establishment of his earthly throne Armstrong read as immutable and continuous in history, that the dynasty of David would have a continuous, historical stream. Through inventive readings of a conglomerate of Old Testament texts, Armstrong traced this stream in the transmission of the Abrahamic birthright of Ephraim and Manasseh, the “lost ten tribes” of northern Israel after Assyrian exile, and Jeremiah’s postexilic survival and protection of the daughters of King Zedekiah in Mizpah. Various biblical references that Armstrong read as pointing to the “northwest” quadrant of the world from Jerusalem lined up perfectly, he asserted, with the British Isles. So, Scripture pointed to the significance of Great Britain in the biblical horizons of great empires. Here to the British Isles the Davidic dynasty in Zedekiah’s daughters secretly emigrated and survived

through the centuries.²³ The American nation then inherits through a relationship with Great Britain a central role in end-time prophecy. What about Jesus Christ in this scheme? He was the promised fulfillment of an entirely different set of Abrahamic promises. Go figure.

Jehovah’s Witness. The second splinter Adventist movement notable in American history is tied to the personality of Charles T. Russell (d. 1916). In his formative years Russell could not abide the traditional church’s doctrine of hell and left the church a skeptic until reclaimed for eschatology by some Adventists. With the injection of new Adventist teaching, Russell became an intense Bible student, self-taught, and began his calculation career on the time of the end. He founded the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, an eminently successful publication venture whose main focus is promoting the imminent return of Christ (16 million copies, 35 languages, 2,000 newspapers early on carrying Russell’s sermons). Russell’s prophetic calculations caused him to conclude the “invisible return” of Christ (Russell’s version of the Adventist “heavenly tabernacle” teaching) actually happened in 1874, not 1844 as Miller had calculated. Jesus’ final return to earth (*third advent*) would be 1914, which would provoke Armageddon, the final conflict between the forces of good in capitalism and the forces of evil in communism/socialism. Russell’s movement survived the exposure of Russell as a false prophet after the critical date of 1914 came and went (the indomitable spirit of true believers—not even undeniable historical falsification counts).

Russell’s successor, Joseph F. Rutherford (d. 1942), gave Russell’s original movement the name that stuck through his enamored fascination with the name Jehovah. Rutherford taught that Jehovah was the true God, known only by that name, and only Jehovah’s witnesses the one true church. Organized religion of any form and denominations of any kind are all tools of Satan to deceive the world. Political parties and all governments are tools of Satan too (no flag saluting, no military service). Be on the lookout on the watchtower of time. The end is perpetually “near.” Thus, in Russell and Rutherford and the Jehovah’s Witnesses we have new Adventist *calculations*, but not any substantially new eschatological teachings developing Revelation’s traditions.

Branch Davidians. The third notable Adventist splinter group made famous in more recent memory was the fiasco of the “Branch Davidians” in Waco, Texas under the leadership of David Koresh, whose real name was Vernon Howell (d. 1993). The Branch Davidians can be traced back to an Adventist splinter group led by Victor Houteff (d. 1955). Adventist leadership rejected Houteff’s reform efforts, so he and his wife, Florence, formed their own Adventist group. They established a compound called Mt. Carmel, near Waco, Texas. After Houteff died, Florence led the group. Florence

²³Sounds weirdly similar to tracing the supposed family line of Jesus through European history in the fictional plotline of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

predicted the return of Jesus for April 22, 1959. After this prophecy failure, the group splintered further. That history eventually led to Vernon Howell gaining control of the group. Vernon later named himself David Koresh, and his compound “Ranch Apocalypse.” Four federal agents were killed when the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms raided David Koresh’s compound, which led to a standoff of several months with the federal government. Koresh interpreted these events as the beginning of the battle of Armageddon. The standoff ended in a disastrous conflagration of the compound when agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation moved in on the center April 19, 1993. Almost eighty people died in the tragic fire, historically reprising Qumran and Müntzer.

iii. Dispensationalists. The third nineteenth-century movement is Darbyism or dispensationalism. This movement provides us with the most dramatic and extensive development of Revelation’s traditions since Augustine, quite an accomplishment, to be sure. Therefore, some time will have to be spent surveying the history and teachings of this significant movement, particularly as commonly known through popular writers.

a.) *Plymouth Brethren*. Darbyism has roots in the Plymouth Brethren movement in Ireland and England in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, traditional Protestant denominations and clergy generally ignored the teaching and preaching of prophecy or the second coming of Christ. The Brethren movement was a lay reaction to this vacuum. Predictably, Brethren groups distrusted denominational clergy and rejected any semblance of hierarchical authority. Therefore, any Brethren cell easily accepted the teaching of a charismatic or assertive lay leader who would step into this gap and emphasize biblical prophecy and a “literal” interpretation.

Literal Emphasis. Unfortunately, the emphasis on “literal” interpretation of prophecy often was linguistically naive.²⁴ This lack of interpretive sophistication led to capricious abuse of general principles of interpretation distinguishing prose and poetry, the literal and the figurative, at the arbitrary discretion of the interpreter. This abuse led to the constant conflation of figurative and referential language in Scripture. Brethren teachers would criticize a figurative reading of a phrase or passage as “spiritualizing” the text. This “spiritualizing” put-down, however, was no more than a disguised attack on the legitimate figurative meaning of language when that figurative meaning would not substantiate the prophetic “literal” reading offered. Hypocritically or ignorantly, hard to tell in most cases, a supposedly “literal” interpretive pesher being offered on a prophetic passage could insist on a “literal” (referential) understanding of a phrase in one clause, and then slip into a metaphorical meaning on a phrase following in the very next clause, without even a hermeneutical hiccup. The term of aspersion in the nineteenth century was “spiritualizing.” The *term de jour* of the twentieth century became “allegorizing,” even though the interpretive strategy being opposed really had not one whit to do with true

²⁴See Excursus 3: “Signs of the Times” on the problem of the “literal” dictum.

allegorical methodology. “The real issue between the amillennial and the premillennial viewpoints,” Hal Lindsey wrote misleadingly, “is whether prophecy should be interpreted literally or allegorically.”²⁵ Besides the ignorant equation of figurative language with “allegorical” interpretation, Lindsey’s dismissive speech here is belied by his own hermeneutical practice. “Literal,” as practiced by Lindsey and others, is an interpretive strategy of convenience.

Allegorizing. For example, notice at Gen. 1:16, the creation of the sun and moon (“two great lights”), that the *New Scofield Reference Bible* has dropped entirely, silently, with no fanfare, Scofield’s original and fully “allegorical” comment.²⁶ The original 1909 and 1917 editions preserve Scofield’s original assertion that the sun was a “type” (read, “allegory”) of Christ, who would take this character of blinding light at the Second Advent, but now, even while the sun is not seen fully, light still exists, just so Christ is not seen, but his light exists and will be seen fully in the Advent. Likewise the lesser light, the moon, is a “type” of the church, Scofield “spiritualized,” that reflects the greater light of the sun.²⁷ Such hermeneutical nonsense is “allegory” richer than the master Augustine himself could muster. No surprise Scofield’s ridiculous note at Gen. 1:16 eventually was dropped completely in modern editions of the Scofield Reference Bible.

b.) *J. N. Darby.* John Nelson Darby (d. 1882), a former cleric of the Church of Ireland (Anglican), became the premier personality driving the Brethren movement in the Plymouth area (hence, “Plymouth Brethren”). Darby was assertive in his teachings and aggressive in his leadership. He ruthlessly attacked anyone who had the audacity to disagree with his particular teachings—even ejecting out of the fellowship former close associates and friends who became increasingly uncomfortable with his unusual teachings and tried to speak out against him. Darby brought his distinctive brand of the Brethren movement overseas to America in the 1860s. As he traveled the country, Darby gave numerous lectures, led Bible studies, and conducted Bible conferences disseminating ideas that became the hallmark of a new eschatological system that eventually came to be called “dispensationalism.” What were these teachings of Darby?

Dispensations. The name of the movement derives from an odd brand of periodization of biblical history. That is, even though Darby’s new dispensational teachings echoed the periodization of history already seen, for example, in Joachim of Fiore, Darby’s dispensations were distinctive in their aberrant theology. Each of Darby’s dispensations he defined as a divinely ordained period of human history in which

²⁵Hal Lindsey, with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 176.

²⁶*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, 2.

²⁷*The Scofield Reference Bible*, New and improved ed. (New York: Oxford University Press; London: H. Milford, 1917), 2.

humanity was given an express revelation of the will of God to which humanity was to respond with faith and upon which humanity would be judged differently according to the special parameters set by God for each of the different dispensations. Functionally, every dispensation expressed a new basis for salvation (which was one of the main critiques of Darby’s teachings from the very beginning even from some of his close friends—a criticism for which they paid a significant price). To be blunt, Darby’s novel idea of dispensations theologically better can be described as the heresy of multiple “salvation systems”—and even Darby’s closest associates knew that right away.

As later codified by Scofield, the dispensations are seven: innocence (Gen. 1:28), conscience (Gen. 3:7), government (Gen. 8:15), promise (Gen. 12:1), law (Ex. 19:1), grace (church, Acts 2:1), and kingdom (Rev. 20:4). For example, acceptability before God in the dispensation of law had a *Mosaic legal condition* to salvation. In the dispensation of grace, acceptability has a *Christocentric faith condition* to salvation. In the future kingdom, acceptability before God will have a *messianic legal condition*, that is, a more perfect legal condition available under messiah than was available under Moses. Notice carefully how the description of these dispensations has been both modified and mollified significantly in response to searing criticism when comparing the 1917 and 1967 editions, with the newer edition’s asseveration: “These different dispensations are not separate ways of salvation,” the note at Gen. 1:28 now reads; again, a little later one has the disavowal: “such stewardship is not a condition of salvation.”²⁸

Israel and the Church. However, Darby’s dispensational teaching is not really the key to his understanding of prophecy. The dispensations are exotic and interesting as strange doctrine unknown to the whole church for thousands of years. More importantly, though, these dispensations are a distraction to the cardinal doctrine in the teaching of Darby. Darby’s cardinal teaching upon which his entire system is based is his distinction between “Israel” and the “church” as two distinct people of God with entirely different tracks in salvation and in prophecy. In fact, *Darby’s entire dispensational system is sublimated to, and developed solely for, the purpose of supporting this distinction between the two mutually exclusive entities of “Israel” and “the church.”*

“Israel” for Darby is a *national entity* with an *exclusive and eternal covenant* for political supremacy over the nations of the world that will be lived out on earth. In contrast, “the church” is solely the result of Israel’s rejection of her messiah in his First Advent, an unnecessary historical accident, a prophetic “parenthesis” and diversion of God’s original plan for Israel for national and political supremacy among the kingdoms of the world. In the meantime, this prophetic parenthesis in the countdown to worldwide Israeli military supremacy and political empire is an opportunity for Gentiles to be saved and have some slice of the prophetic pie in the church’s exclusive covenant, that is,

²⁸The New Scofield Reference Bible, 3.

completely separate from Israel’s, for an eternal reign in heaven—at least as a consolation prize as runner up in the American Idol of prophecy contest.

Great Parenthesis. As if these theological aberrations were not enough, Darby’s teachings had two other innovations in apocalyptic traditions: (1) his “great parenthesis” innovation derived from Dan. 9:24, and, (2) his “secret rapture” innovation derived from 1 Thess. 4:17. The first innovation is the “great parenthesis.” The “great parenthesis” was a time adjustment cooking the eschatological books to attempt to deal with the awkward embarrassment of two millennia of church history without the return of Christ for any “nearness” preaching that emphasized imminence. Since Darby fundamentally could not accept this reality of church history—and not accepting historical reality will be a recurring and intractable sore spot in any “imminence” system—he had to invent some interpretive device that would simply erase two thousand years of church history and the non-event of the return of Christ. Such a radical rewriting would make the church’s two thousand years absolutely meaningless in the prophetic scheme, but that tremendous sacrifice was worth the price of reinvigorating “imminence expectation” and emphasis on the return of Christ.

This revisionist understanding of church history was accomplished by *manipulating a passage in Daniel inventing a transparently non-literal interpretation that denied the literal meaning of the text to import an alien meaning the text does not actually communicate.* The passage is Daniel’s famous seventy weeks to Israel’s messiah bringing in “everlasting righteousness” (Dan. 9:24). Darby insisted that Daniel intended his readers to pick up on a pause in the divine clock between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks. As numerous critics have noted, this supposed “pause” is nowhere explicitly stated or implied in the actual Daniel passage. The movement from week sixty-nine to seventy reads exactly as does any previous week. If any so-called “pause” existed between weeks sixty-nine and seventy, then this invisible, silent, unspoken, unacknowledged pause could not be denied between any of the seventy weeks in the entire sequence.

Such a pause is neither known to the apostles of the Lord, nor any of the church fathers, nor the great minds of the church for two millennia. Darby attempted to mitigate this amazing ignorance of the church inferred in the “great parenthesis” by an interpretive hubris that takes the breath away. He simply explained Daniel’s prophecy was “sealed” till the generation of the end-time, based on Dan. 12:9. That end-time generation would have the veil of mystery lifted off prophetic texts such as Daniel 9:24 through the brilliance and insight of a mind that was greater than Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Jerome, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and hundreds more combined—and Darby was the man. *Ecce homo.* The pause became dubbed the “great parenthesis.”

So, the end-time scenario is like a cosmic football game. The real game is played by the real home team—national Israel. The first half is Israel’s history up to messiah. After Israel’s rejection of messiah comes the half-time show. Into this half-time pause in Israel’s game, the church band comes out on the field to play. The church has nothing to

do with the points on the scoreboard, or the real outcome of the game. After the half-time pause, the crowds of history, duly distracted from Israel’s national game by the entertaining and energetic, but eschatologically insignificant, historical movement of the church, would then watch the church band leave the field, and the real game with the home team, Israel, the “wanna-be” world empire, would continue. God, the eschatological referee, would blow the whistle, and the second-half kickoff would restart the end-time game.

Any-Moment, Secret Rapture. The second-half kickoff event was Darby’s other extraordinary and daring eschatological innovation after the “great parenthesis” reading of Dan. 9:24. Darby taught that this kick-off to the (supposedly) delayed last week of Daniel would be the “secret rapture” of the church, which, since all prophecies necessary to be fulfilled before the rapture takes place are in place, could be at any moment. Darby’s supposed “secret rapture” teaching ostensibly is derived from Paul’s statement in 1 Thess. 4:17. Paul said that believers would be “caught up in the clouds” to meet the Lord in the air. The verb in this verse translated “caught up” (KJV, NRSV) is rendered in the Latin Vulgate, the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, by the term *rapio*, *raptum*, “snatch,” from which is derived our English word “rapture.”²⁹ After the church is so-called “raptured,” the divine eschatological clock for Israel begins ticking again, and Daniel’s seventieth week unfolds in a final seven-year period of tribulation for the world, at the end of which Christ returns for the second stage of the second coming. Without any doubt, this new, any-moment “secret rapture” teaching at the time Darby introduced the idea was an unknown concept in the language of Christian eschatology until voiced by Darby—once again, neither known to the apostles of the Lord, nor any of the church fathers, nor the great minds of the church for two millennia—either invented by Darby himself or snatched from elsewhere. Dispensationalists do not feel the extraordinary weight of this critique of two thousand years of Christian interpretation because they dismiss this observation of the exegetical elephant in the room with the most audacious and preposterous claims. Take Hal Lindsey, for example, who uses Dan. 12:9, the “sealing up” of Daniel’s prophecy to the time of the end as inferring that what Daniel wrote would be a complete mystery and senseless until the end-time generation. What kind of interpretive hubris would then countenance the following slam on millennia of Christian interpreters? “Christians after the early second century spent little time really defining prophetic truth until the middle of the nineteenth century.”³⁰ If anything in view of a representation of a supposed historical survey of Christian eschatological interpretation over the centuries is a lie, that is.

²⁹A most curious irony of history is that a main tenant of one dominant strand of modern evangelical eschatology is dependent for its name on terminology in the Roman Catholic Latin Vulgate.

³⁰*Late Great Planet Earth*, 181.

Third Advent. What Darby really invents, similar to Adventists, is a *third advent* of Christ (incarnation, secret rapture, millennium). Darby’s “secret rapture” of the church is nothing more than another “invisible coming” equivalent to the Adventist’s teaching of the invisible coming of Jesus to the heavenly tabernacle in 1844 (or Russell’s 1874). Because Darby emphasized the authority of the Bible and a literal reading of prophecy, his system became the darling of evangelical fundamentalism. Further, his teaching on national Israel was in the spirit of the age because this jingoistic rhetoric easily resonated with the American Zionist movement that was picking up steam politically in the late nineteenth century.³¹ In addition, Darby’s clearly maverick and idiosyncratic eschatological teachings regarding a “great parenthesis” in Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks and the associated cousin teaching of an any-moment “secret rapture” of the church—unheard of in all the ages of the church—also was in the spirit of the age of rampant apocalyptic expectations that the nineteenth century spawned—the most furious flurry of wild speculations that a growing industrial and secular society could provoke when challenging the bedrock tenants of American pietistic religion.

Historical Animosity. Dispensationalism, though going through attempted reforms in the twentieth century, still continues to emphasize the “great parenthesis” eisegesis of Daniel’s prophecy, with the “invisible coming” aberration on the second coming of Christ, ironically dubbed the “rapture” of the church. The imminence of Christ’s return is arbitrarily and perpetually propped up through indefatigable “signs of the times” preaching that is never dissuaded by historical falsification. Dispensationalists of the Darby variety, in fact, despise history. The true facts of history, as for Miller, Russell, and others, are inconvenient annoyances that disturb the hermeneutical equilibrium of a contrived prophetic system. The attitude clearly is along the lines of, “Don’t confuse me with the facts; my mind is made up.”

“*Prophecy*” vs. “*History*. ” Darby’s own words gives one of the most telling examples of his dispensational animosity to the real facts of history. In a comment on Rev. 4:1, Darby injected a revealing note. Revelation 4:1 opens with John’s invitation through a heavenly voice to “come up here”; that is, John is introduced to a vision of heaven. Darby pours into this verse his entire futurist system of interpreting all of Revelation from this point forward as events yet to occur. What is really bizarre,

³¹The movement’s official beginning as a political force in history usually is assigned to Theodore Herzl and the 1897 World Zionist Congress meeting in Basel, Switzerland. For the political marriage of American Zionism with American fundamentalism, especially in the twentieth century, see Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* (Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill, 1986). An interesting fresh perspective on President Truman’s decision to recognize the state of Israel after hard Zionist lobbying by his life-long friend, Eddie Jacobson, is given by Michael Beschlos, *Presidential Courage: Brave Leaders and How They Changed America 1789–1989* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2007).

however, is that Darby in a footnote on this verse launches out into a philosophically twisted false dichotomy between “prophecy” and “history,” setting these up as opposing ideas. “Prophecy,” Darby asserted, is the mind of God, history written in advance, knowledge of the future that has divinely-inspired authority; hence, only the one who has ascertained correctly divine “prophecy” can write true “history.” In counter-distinction, Darby defines “history” as mere human invention, the propositions of human ignorance, the futile attempt to know the mind of God. Most people would be in disbelief that Darby, after setting up this false and absurd dichotomy, then actually dared to acknowledge: “I do not admit history to be, in any sense, necessary to the understanding of prophecy. . . . I do not want history to tell me Nineveh or Babylon is ruined or Jerusalem in the hand of the Gentiles.”³² Any sense of logic here is twisted into a pretzel of epistemological contradictions. Declaring invalid any attempt at knowing “history,” how can any “prophetic” interpretation, which is supposed to be “history written in advance,” be confirmed or disconfirmed? Worse still, any objection to Darby’s purported interpretation of “prophecy,” that is, any objection to his dispensational futurist approach to Rev. 4:1 and all chapters forward blatantly is declared an attack upon the inspiration of the Bible. When “prophecy” is the contest, Darby already has declared “no contest.” Darby has the mind of God; objectors do not. Futurist interpretation in this way is insulated from the facts of history, rendered impervious to criticism. Dispensationalists following Darby in such convoluted and distorted ideology truly despise the facts of history.

Scofield Reference Bible. With such an idiosyncratic and aberrant teaching innovated after two thousand years of church history, what put dispensationalism onto its trajectory of dominance in the evangelical world? Cyrus I. Scofield (d. 1921) almost universally is credited with this feat. When one is apprised of Scofield’s continually notorious personal life, even after conversion, laced with liquor, gambling, forgery, divorce, jail time, and the like, this feat is even more astounding. He absorbed dispensational teaching from James H. Brookes (d. 1875), the famous minister of Walnut Street Presbyterian Church in St. Louis who for years was president of the Niagara Bible Conference. Scofield’s Kansas legal training and legislative experience qualified him for detail and argument, and he put this training and experience to good use in compiling a system of notes for teaching a correspondence Bible course. These notes essentially became the foundation for a unified, global system of Bible reference notes that evolved into the *The Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909, with a revised and updated edition in 1917.

Scofield Institutionalized. Undoubtedly the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* launched the new and strange doctrines into twentieth-century evangelical orbit.

³²John Nelson Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, 34 vols., ed. William Kelly (London: G. Morrish, 1867–1900), 2:272.

The Scofield Reference Bible is one of the most successful Bible reference notes publications of all time. Multiple editions have sold millions of copies. With its organized, systematized, and integrated set of dispensational notes in an apparatus at the bottom of each page of the inspired text, this publication became successful beyond expectation and did more than any single individual to spread dispensational teaching in America. Readers of Scofield’s notes were not advised of any alternative eschatological interpretations. Nor were they advised that these distinctive dispensational teachings were less than seventy years old when the Scofield Bible was first published. Further, they were not advised to be careful not to treat the notes as inspired as the biblical texts to which they referred. The Scofield system was institutionalized by Lewis Sperry Chafer (d. 1952) with his founding of Dallas Theological Seminary (1924), of which Chafer served as president until his death. Many names could be added to the list of twentieth-century dispensational leaders and teachers, but other academic notables are John Walvoord (d. 2002), Dwight Pentecost, and Charles Ryrie.

Scofield Popularized. A Dallas Theological Seminary graduate, however, excelled them all in commercial success and in popularizing dispensational teaching in the twentieth century. On the heels of the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and an Arab confederation of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, Harold Lee (“Hal”) Lindsey published *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), written in a popular and folksy newspaper style for the masses that rode the wave of the “Jesus Movement” of colleges and universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The book, translated into fifty-four languages with thirty-five million copies, is still in print. While attempts to respond to strong criticism of dispensational teaching from Reformed theologians and others has produced revisionist efforts such as “progressive dispensationalism,”³³ the main Darbyite teachings, in fact, are still solidly in place today, as one easily can determine in general conversation with the person in the pew of a dispensational preacher. The only matters that actually have changed are some of the “signs of the times,” which, of course, have to be updated for every new generation.³⁴

d. Conclusion

Almost all of the popular preaching on the second coming of Christ in America in the twentieth and twenty-first century, especially that which is disseminated through mass

³³Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton, Ill.: BridgePoint, 1993).

³⁴For a website with resources critiquing dispensational theology, consult <http://www.monergism.com/threshold/articles/topic/dispensationalism.html>.

media, including television programs, radio talk shows, mass-marketed publishing, Internet websites, streamed audio and video, and other methods, flows from these three nineteenth-century movements in variations, adaptations, and splinter groups. The main deposits on Revelation’s traditions are: (1) a distinct and easily recognizable rhetorical strategy, and, (2) theological aberrations necessary for supporting novel eschatological schemes. The rhetorical strategy is to induce “imminence” expectation artificially propped up by “signs of the times” preaching. The true *modus operandi* of this preaching is anti-historical, since transparent historical falsification occurs, but is denied. The theological aberrations are numerous, but the salient teachings from which most other deviations derive, or from which necessary implications are deduced, are four:

- The invention of *three advents* of Christ instead of two, unrecognized in two millennia of Christian theology. The usual deduction is a two-stage second coming of Christ.
- The invention of an *invisible coming* (heavenly tabernacle, secret rapture, etc.) to break up the traditional teaching of the second coming into two distinct stages separated in time. This invisible coming is an imperative presupposition of three advents. This first stage of the Second Advent *must be invisible* because this first stage of the Advent is *not historical*. Rather, this teaching is a *theoretical construct* that cannot be demonstrated in any historically verifiable way.
- The invention of a *great parenthesis* interpretation of Dan. 9:24 to explain away two millennia of church history in the non-event of the return of Christ. A necessary corollary would be the schizophrenic messiah, one that conforms to the humility of the First Advent, and the other that conforms to secular concepts of an earthly regent whose rod of iron is not nails in hands and feet but a scepter with which to beat.
- The invention of *covenant distinctions* between Israel and the church in prophecy and in salvation. These distinctions are buttressed by an elaborate dispensational periodization of history.

No significant development of Revelation’s traditions has manifested itself in almost the last hundred years. We still are riding in the wake of the nineteenth-century movements. However, given Revelation’s historical track record since the days of Montanus, this status quo (stagnation of apocalyptic imagination) should not be expected to continue indefinitely. The power of Revelation’s apocalyptic imagery to fire the imagination, inform millennial movements, and frustrate apocalyptic spiritualizers should not be naively underestimated—in any generation.

EXCURSUS 1: SETTING DATES

Interpreters of Revelation always will have to judge how to construe the realities of Revelation’s appropriate interpretation in the context of popular demands for relevance, especially when those popular demands sacrifice without a moment’s reflection both historical tenability and hermeneutical integrity for the cheap change of a fleeting emotional charge that “something wonderful is about to happen.” In the end, regarding the end, after the passing of the first Christian millennium, the question of “when?” remained for the church. Even a thousand years later, expectations for the second church millennium, the year 2000, revealed that, fundamentally, the church never fully has recovered from that original great millennial disappointment of A.D. 1000. The church chronically has had a hard time reconciling favored millennial traditions with the harsh realities of history.³⁵

A. Protean Quality

Neither has the church learned that “signs of the times” can be manipulated and morphed into an infinite variety of forms to meet popular anxiety of any kind in the face of contemporary realities of any age. This fundamental datum of apocalyptic rhetoric Boyer styled “the protean quality of the biblical apocalypses.”³⁶ After a survey of apocalyptic interpretation through the centuries, Boyer asked this penetrating and provocative question: “If the prophecies can be applied with equal validity to *any* historical situation, what becomes of their status as a divinely inspired foretelling of *specific* events?”³⁷ Whether world wars, megalomaniac dictators, holocaust, nuclear bombs, the European Common Market, Worldwide Council of Churches, the Roman papacy, AIDS, gay rights, women’s liberation, the collapse of traditional family values, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famine, pestilence, the Internet, CNN, the universal bar code, computer chips, the Y2K crisis,³⁸ the secular state of Israel, international

³⁵In a similar vein, compare Gundry’s observation, 50–51.

³⁶Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 80.

³⁷Ibid., 77.

³⁸The Y2K acronym stands for “year two thousand.” To have been such a cause of anxiety and alarm in the media and on the news prior to the turn of the millennium, the fast-fading memory of this crisis is amazing. The crisis was the fear that a time-keeping glitch in notating the year with only two digits, not including the century with four digits, in the clocks of computer chips running 90% of the world’s personal computers would

terrorism, global warming, genocide, influenza pandemic, genetic engineering, cloning, RFID,³⁹ or whatever else worries us greatly or is promoted as prophetic fulfillment—THE END IS NOT YET. Who would not want to capitulate to fantasies of escapism and fly away and leave all life’s hellacious reality behind? Like moths dancing an interpretive dance of death around the bright lights of Revelation’s visions, would-be contemporary prophets proclaim their prescient knowledge of the end to tantalize the crowds of religious but anxious on-lookers who are looking for external routes of escape from life’s harsh, confusing, and seemingly insoluble problems. Further, like the moth, in the moment their interpretive scheme actually touches the light by becoming a tad too specific, their sterile and impotent prophetic insights instantly die the death of a thousand falsehoods and fall to the ground, lifeless.

B. Apocalyptic Rhetoric

The real trick to maintaining deceptive prophetic illusions over knowing the future without suffering the jeopardy of instant falsification—while continuing to hold the popular imagination spellbound with verifiable “signs of the times”—would be determining how to dance just close enough to the light to look like one is touching the light and really knows the future without ever actually touching the light or really knowing. Predict the time, hit the light, and die the prophetic moth’s dance of death. On the other hand, suggest only that we’re “close,” constantly weaving near the light without ever actually touching the light, and live the prophetic moth’s innuendo waltz in perpetuity. Announce “irrefutable signs of the times,” confidently say we are “close” and

cause entire systems of computers around the world to crash with the change of the millennium (1999, 2000). This anticipated global computer failure would cause disastrous failures in world banking systems, creating the perfect opportunity for Antichrist to seize total control of the world market. Or, at least such a scenario was clear to Grant R. Jeffrey prior to the new millennium in *Final Warning: Economic Collapse and the Coming World Government* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995). Funny, Jeffrey no longer advertises this book on his website, but he does have a number of new publications bartering his brand of futurism for your entertainment.

³⁹RFID stands for “radio frequency identification,” a new technology for chips that emit radio waves that can be read at a distance. Every new piece of technology since the Gutenberg printing press has been announced as the potential “mark of the beast.” Now we have Katherine Albrecht and Liz McIntyre, *The Spychips Threat: Why Christians Should Resist RFID and Electronic Surveillance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006). The paranoia is palatable in Grant R. Jeffrey, *Surveillance Society: The Rise of Antichrist* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, 2000).

“something wonderful is about to happen,” but in reality constantly adjust your prophetic calculations like an Enron accountant cooking the books, and live without fear of falsification—at least in your own generation. After all, you have the extraordinary advantage that no one in your generation can outlive you to prove you wrong. Finally, your “close” prediction after your death slips off the horizon of interpretive history into the oblivion of forgotten falsification like a rudderless ship drifting quietly into the sunset. No worries, mate. Except for the poor blokes you suckered who are “left behind” in the wake of your departure, trying to pick up the broken prophetic pieces in the sad attempt to keep in tact what they had equated as their faith but in reality was your eschatological hard sell of cheap trinkets and beads.⁴⁰

⁴⁰For a technical rhetorical analysis of this phenomenon of apocalyptic discourse based on the ordering *topoi* of time, evil, and authority, see O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 20–60.

EXCURSUS 2: TWO MESSIAHS

How would one have to picture Messiah⁴¹ in Darby’s dispensational scheme? If the second coming is to establish a national Israel as just one more empire among the world’s empires, only this time Israeli, one would have to succumb to some unusual teaching that distanced the First Advent messiah from the Second Advent messiah. These two messiahs would have to be different in character and personality, since the historical picture actually revealed in Jesus Christ in the First Advent is one of humility, suffering, and death. A crucified Christ does not fit a hyperliteral reading of Old Testament prophecies about war and conquest taken as messianic or eschatological. One would have to invent two messiahs, craftily disguised under the metaphor of “two portraits” of one messiah. Lindsey proposed just such a scheme.⁴²

This christological double-take on messiah is classic Orwellian double-speak in theological dress. The christological and soteriological implications of these “two portraits” of messiah, if they are accepted without theological reflection, are immense and staggering. The preeminent implication is that the cross of Christ did not, in fact, deal decisively and finally with evil in the world. Calvary becomes a second-class soteriological effort that did not, in fact, achieve what the apostles claimed. The crucified Messiah’s soteriological job is left unfinished on the cross. A final climactic battle, Armageddon, is necessary to consummate what Calvary did not—God’s ultimate dealing with evil in the world. This “Armageddon” battle, of course, especially as popularly dramatized in the “Left Behind” books and movies, is nothing less than an unapologetic remake, with modern props and costume change, of the ancient Zoroastrian apocalyptic final war of good and evil. This remake is supposed to be scripturally based upon particular texts in the Jewish prophets that evoke militaristic imagery, but, these prophets we are assured, without doubt did not prophesy to their own generation with this imagery. Zoroaster comes home to America with a vengeance, facilitated by an unchallenged two-messiah tradition.

With this idea that a future battle of Armageddon is the real locus of where God decisively eliminates evil in the world, classic dispensationalists unwittingly have allowed the fox back into the christological henhouse. They have revived and sanctified a first-century Jewish expectation resoundingly rejected by Jesus of a military messiah.

⁴¹The term “Messiah” intentionally is capitalized to refer to the legitimate historical and theological role of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The term left in lower case as “messiah” distinguishes illegitimate eschatological artifices and theological aberrations.

⁴²Lindsey’s “Two Portraits,” *Late Great Planet Earth*, 28–29. Cf. *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1161.

Jesus' rejection of the militaristic messiah is why the “hosannas” of a messianic triumphal entry into Jerusalem quickly were drowned out by “crucify him” in less than a week (Matt. 21:9; Mk. 11:9–10; 15:13–14; Luke 23:21; John 12:13; 19:6). This Jewish messianic expectation has its historical matrix two centuries before in the Maccabean Revolt against Syrian Hellenization (Mattathias, Judas, Jonathan, Simon, 167–140 B.C.), and was reprised against Roman hegemony by the Zealots John and Simon in the first Jewish War (66–70) and Rabbi Akiba's messianic protégé Bar Kokhba in the second Jewish War (133–35). The apostolic teaching in the New Testament is that the cross is the ultimate revelation of Messiah's true and eternal character—where thorns are the “crown” and a cross is the “throne”—a Messiah that came onto the stage of history as a complete shock that forever will be a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Further, this eternally cruciform shape of messianic identity is the consummate revelation of God (Heb. 1:1–4; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 5:5–6). No other messianic identity awaits revelation to the world. If Christ is to vanquish his enemies with future thermonuclear blasts, the humility of the cross is a historical sham. A two-messiah christology has to deny this Pauline scandal of the cross, since the Second Advent messiah is so completely other—a glorified military conqueror that vanquishes pagan armies with his power rays. Amazingly, this theologically schizophrenic Christ is precisely what one will find among dispensationalists of the Lindsey variety: the first coming is as a servant king, messiah-the-humiliated; the second coming is a military king, messiah-the-humiliator. Lindsey is clear on this point.

When Jesus came the first time it was not to judge the world, but to save it. He came as the Lamb of God who gave His life to take away the sin of the world. The one thing that God has established for man to do is to believe in His Son as Savior. When Jesus returns the second time it will be as a lion to judge those who rejected the free gift of salvation from sin. Man will have completely demonstrated his worthiness of judgment.⁴³

One easily could be distracted by the seriously perverted theodicy propounded here in the completely specious argument on the tail end that humanity really needed an extra two millennia of rampant evil to demonstrate a worthiness of divine judgment. As if! No theodicy could be more lame. More to the point, instead of Lindsey's separated picture, his “two portraits” of messiah, as clearly laid out above, what we actually encounter in the New Testament is a *merged picture*, a proclaimed Davidic lion that when visualized instantly is presented as a slaughtered lamb (Rev. 5:5–6). When Lindsey asserts above that Jesus' first coming “was not to judge the world” one almost has the feeling that the Gospel of John simply has not been read at all. The Johannine proclamation of *salvation*

⁴³ *Late Great Planet Earth*, 174.

that simultaneously is judgment that comes into the world through the cross (Jn. 3:19; 5:22–30; 9:39; 12:31; 16:11) is conveniently ignored or critically disavowed. John’s merger of the two functions of judgment and salvation into one seamless theological garment, revealed by Jesus’ death on the cross, Lindsey unceremoniously rips apart, splitting the two christological functions across time. Lindsey thus creates two different christological functions tied to two different historical events, not the same christological function tied to one historical event. This distorted, functionally bifurcated christology then *allows for a different type of salvation at the end than one has at the cross*. Lindsey is clear about this matter too: “According to Zechariah, ‘all nations will be gathered against Jerusalem to battle.’ The Jews who live in the area will be on the verge of annihilation when God gives them supernatural strength to fight. Then the Lord will go forth to fight for them and save them.”⁴⁴ Proper exegetical and theological reflection on the implications of such an interpretation ought to step back from the text, take a breath, and rethink the matter. The crux of the meaning of the cross is at stake.

⁴⁴Ibid. Here we have again Lindsey’s ubiquitous tendentious argumentation style. Whether Zechariah 14 is to be read eschatologically in the first place is never even hinted. Perhaps so, but Lindsey never even broaches the question. Such Old Testament texts constantly are taken in a hermeneutical heist, assumed eschatological, and used without any attempt to demonstrate their original historical setting or interpretation.

EXCURSUS 3: “SIGNS OF THE TIMES”

The focus in “signs of the times” preaching often is on a select set of biblical texts said to apply to the end of time and offered as “proof” that the second coming of Christ is “near.” The basic technique reincarnates and promotes the classic “pesher” method of Qumran. Prophetic fulfillment is ripped from today’s headlines, just like an episode of CSI.⁴⁵ That is, no matter what generation the interpreter happens to be in, his or her particular generation uncannily always is right on the edge of the end-time drama. Newspaper headlines converted into prophetic “fulfillment” prove this end-time stage of history. However, before we overview popular texts used as “signs of the times,” we first need to address the smoke and mirrors usage of the “literal” dictum.

I. The Problem of the “Literal” Dictum

A. “Literal” as the Shoals of Subjectivity

A dispensationalist mantra is that interpreters should take the plain, literal sense unless the literal sense makes no sense—which actually makes no sense.⁴⁶ Those most loudly shouting this dictum from the pulpit seem oblivious to how dangerously close they are sailing to the shoals of subjectivity. This dictum involves both circular reasoning and a fundamental *non sequitur* of logic, providing no immunity from subjectivity. The question that is begged by those selling this snake oil as a cure-all to every exegetical woe is, *just who judges what is “sensible”?* The interpreter, of course! That is, the dictum is subservient to the interpreter’s own preunderstandings and fallacious assumptions. The interpreter can usurp the text’s authority, making the text a slave to the interpreter’s own “sensibility.” All interpreters do this to some degree.⁴⁷ When prophetic texts in particular are on the table, however, classic dispensationalists, especially of the Hal Lindsey variety, just deny culpability, apparently assuming immunity from interpretive subjectivity by advocating this dictum.

⁴⁵CBS’s “Crime Scene Investigation” series. Their marketing spot uses the tag of “ripped from today’s headlines.” Sounds just like current prophecy chasers.

⁴⁶E.g., Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 50, quoting David L. Cooper, *When Gog’s Armies Meet the Almighty in the Land of Israel* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1940); Lindsey, however, gives no actual page number for the quote.

⁴⁷Cf. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 19–20. On the crucial role of preunderstanding, see Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 154–68.

The dictum is not some magic bullet for proper interpretation. The dictum certainly failed the Ethiopian eunuch. The Ethiopian eunuch could read with “common sense” the prophet Isaiah’s Servant Song about someone who suffers (Acts 8:28–34; Isa. 53:7). Common sense dictated that the passage could be about the prophet Isaiah himself or possibly someone else. Those options the eunuch could anticipate. Yet, the eunuch’s own “common sense” still left him without a clue as to the prophetic text’s christological, and, hence, figurative meaning, until Philip drew the figure around Jesus of Nazareth’s suffering and death. Nothing in a literal “common sense” reading of Isa. 53:7 was of any assistance to the eunuch to know the passage was about Jesus. Even pointing to crucifixion is not enough in and of itself. After all, thousands of Jews were crucified in the time surrounding the life of Christ.⁴⁸

B. “Literal” as More Than Referential

Prophecy can be literal, but *literal is more than referential*. Even when read literally, how does one know when to read a prophetic image referentially or figuratively? If we have a great army invading on horses (Ezek. 38:15), is that a great army invading on horses, or the mechanized land forces of a modern army?⁴⁹ If we have the military weaponry of bows and arrows (Ezek. 39:3), are those bows and arrows, or the modern weaponry of infantry?⁵⁰ If we have God making a mighty shaking of the earth and pouring down torrential rains, and hailstones, fire, and sulfur (Ezek. 38:18–32), is that a divine mighty shaking and hailstones, fire, and sulfur, or is that the use of tactical nuclear weapons?⁵¹ Yet, turn right around in almost the same breath and find blood standing to the horses’ bridles for two-hundred miles (Rev. 14:20), and suddenly, that is just simply blood standing to the horses bridles for two-hundred miles. How instantly we have forgotten that this supposed Armageddon scene already has been pitched as a modern, mechanized army with tactical nuclear weapons. If one has warriors on horses, warriors with bows, heavenly hailstones, fire, and sulfur, and so on, are those referential, or

⁴⁸As by Cleopatra’s son, Alexander, who crucified 800 at one time, or by the Roman general Varus, who crucified 2000 in putting down a revolt; cf. Josephus *Ant.* 13.14.2; 17.10.10; *The Works of Flavius Josephus, Complete and Unabridged. New Updated Edition*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1987).

⁴⁹Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 157.

⁵⁰Ibid., 160–61.

⁵¹Ibid. 165–66.

figurative? Both referential and figurative readings are literal readings of the text. The salient question of language is, when do we know the difference between referential and figurative readings within the same context? Or, do we allow the excuse that a figure of speech was “the best the ancient prophet could manage” with his limited first-century military vocabulary attempting to describe scenes of modern military warfare? How do we know the prophet even *saw* scenes in the first place, especially when he does not say so? In fact, in this particular instance, this prophet says only that he was an *auditor* of God’s *speech* (Ezek. 38:17), not an observer of a scene. The true issue for interpretation is not an insistence on the clear, literal sense. The literal sense is clear, but the interpretive meaning, whether referential or figurative, is not. This literal or figurative ambiguity was the dilemma of the Ethiopian eunuch, and our dilemma as well.

A classic illustration of this dilemma is Lindsey’s reading of the prophecy in Zechariah 14. The prophet describes in 14:12 a plague striking those who have fought against Jerusalem: their flesh is consumed away while standing, their eyes consume away to their sockets, and their tongues consume away in the mouth. Lindsey offered a moment of revelation to his readers: “A frightening picture, isn’t it? Has it occurred to you that this is exactly what happens to those who are in a thermonuclear blast? It appears that this will be the case at the return of Christ.”⁵² Strange that in Zechariah’s words in 14:12 we have an “exact” description of thermonuclear war, when down only three verses later in Zech. 14:15 we have the main transportation in this thermonuclear enemy camp comprised of horses, mules, camels, and donkeys. I guess the donkey is toting the nuclear warhead.

Another good example is, again, imagery from Zechariah 14. The Lord goes forth to fight Israel’s enemies and stands on the mountain before Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, which splits the mountain in two (14:4). This passage Lindsey joins with Acts 1:11, the angels’ remonstrance to the disciples who are staring into the heavens after the ascension of Jesus. Lindsey concluded that Jesus comes back to the Mount of Olives, which is his understanding of the angels’ words “as you have seen him go,”⁵³ and this return literally splits the mountain, as Zechariah “prophesied.” Then, rendering this whole affair even more marvelous, an amazing realization takes hold of the Jews, Lindsey asserted. “The believing Jewish remnant in Jerusalem will rush into the crack . . . They will know this prophecy and realize that this great cavern has opened up for the Lord to protect them from the terrible devastation that He is about to pour out upon the godless

⁵²*Late Great Planet Earth*, 175.

⁵³Even taken literally, the question is the adverbial meaning of the phrase “as you have seen him go,” which just as well could be an adverb of *manner* as an adverb of *place*.

armies all around. It will be used as a type of bomb shelter.”⁵⁴ To add scientific aura to the whole interpretation, Lindsey, donning the mantle of the scientist, refers—only obliquely, with zero documentation (“it was reported to me”)—to seismic studies of some oil company that “discovered a gigantic fault running east and west *precisely* through the center of the Mount of Olives. The fault is so severe that it could split at any time. It is awaiting ‘the foot.’”⁵⁵ Well, that unnamed and unknown oil company with its undocumented and unpublished seismic study certainly seals the authenticity of Lindsey’s exegesis of Zech. 14:4!

C. “Literal” as Capricious Application

Sometimes the inane duplicity of this literal mantra can be self-incriminatory in the same breath without a moment’s hesitation or stuttering. Take, for example, the following amazing series of hermeneutical assertions about the “four horsemen” of the Apocalypse of Revelation 6.

I don’t believe they are allegorical. I don’t believe they are metaphoric [*sic*]. I believe they are factual. I believe that there will be four horsemen of the Apocalypse that will represent four different, specific times of terror that will come upon the earth in rapid succession.⁵⁶

Quite breathtaking in its self-contradictory expression, this statement bends language backwards upon itself. If these four horsemen are not “allegorical,” not even “metaphoric” [*sic*], *then they are referential: they are four horsemen*. The language then is telling us about four men riding four horses on the terrestrial plane of earth. Yet, in the same breath as denying they are “allegorical” or “metaphoric” [*sic*], is the audacious assertion that the four horsemen are not four horsemen, but, in fact, “represent” something! Bluntly, the four horsemen are not actually horsemen riding. They are

⁵⁴I swear, I am not making this up. *Late Great Planet Earth*, 175. Nothing could more closely evoke the paranoia of the Cold War and the “duck and cover” drills for elementary school children of the 1950s.

⁵⁵Ibid., 174 (emphasis added). The allusion to “the foot” is to the return of Jesus to the Mount of Olives. Notice how Lindsey adroitly slips in that word “precisely” again into his apocalyptic rhetoric. He seems incurably enamored with “precisely” lingo. One must not forget the original audience upon which he honed his rhetorical skills as a minister for Campus Crusade for Christ—college and university campuses of the 1960s.

⁵⁶John Hagee, “Countdown to Armageddon,” DVD, Documentary, 2004, 100 min, A&E Television Networks.

“specific times of terror.” So, the real meaning (read, metaphorical) that is hidden in the figure of four horsemen is “times of terror.” How can language that assuredly is *not* “metaphoric” [sic] simultaneously be metaphorical or figurative by “representing” something other than what the referential sense actually is? (The very definition of metaphor!) In this Orwellian double-speak no longer do we have the highly-touted “literal” meaning. We duplicitously have *denied* metaphor only to *use* metaphor in the next breath to explicate the meaning!

We now turn to overview popular texts used to “prove” the arrival of the end. While “chosen” biblical texts have a tendency to vary across time and speakers, we only need to deal with a few. The following popular passages heisted from their historical and exegetical moorings in Scripture are enough to demonstrate quickly the slim to non-existent exegetical or logical basis in the use of such scriptural passages as supposed “proof” that the end-time drama is on.

II. Example 1: “this generation”(Matt. 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32)

One common text used in “signs of the times” preaching is Jesus’ statement about “this generation” not passing away until “all these things” are fulfilled (Matt. 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32). Matthew 24 is a great passage to illustrate the problem of the language of prophecy, especially since we are confronted in this passage with the broader terms of the coming of the Son of Man, the sun and moon darkened, stars falling, and the powers of heaven being shaken. The problem of whether the literal sense is intended as referential or figurative especially applies to the eschatological discourse Jesus gave on the Mount of Olives recorded by all three Synoptic Gospels. The question is how to interpret the eschatological language. When the “stars fall from heaven,” do the stars fall from heaven, or do we have to do with some other meaning? Fortunately, the meaning of Jesus’ prediction about the temple’s destruction no one argues. The temple’s destruction is the temple’s destruction for virtually all interpreters. (At least we have one hermeneutical reprieve in the passage.)

A. Mark and Luke’s Version

Mark and Luke indicate that the time of fulfillment of the matters that the disciples had asked about (destruction of the temple) was close enough that the generation of the disciples hearing his teaching would witness the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple. The most straightforward interpretation is that this prophecy was fulfilled exactly as Jesus had predicted in Titus’s destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. At least on this point, then, “this generation” in both Mark and Luke clearly refers to the disciples’ own generation.

The problem is, in Mark and Luke the disciples ask a singular question, the destruction of the temple. That is, both Mark and Luke restrict the disciples’ question

about “when” to the immediate prediction Jesus had made about the temple’s destruction (cf. Mk. 13:4; Lk. 21:7). Neither one has anything about “the end of the age.” Luke’s context could not be clearer that the Jewish War against Rome is meant by Jesus, when Luke makes explicit the intended meaning is the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans (“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near,” Lk. 21:20). The difficulty is, though the disciples’ question in Mark and Luke is simple and clear, in answering that question, Jesus has included apocalyptic language and imagery. Is Jesus’ apocalyptic language an unexpected jump to the end of time, or the inclusion of end-time teaching without an end-time question? Possibly. Yet, another possibility would be to understand that Jesus is appropriating eschatological language, which always bears the undercurrent of divine judgment, not to complicate a simple historical answer to a simple historical question but to assist the church in interpreting the fall of Jerusalem as the judgment of God. That is, the apocalyptic language is in service to a pedagogical purpose. Jesus was teaching the future church that Jerusalem did not fall simply because the Jews rebelled and the Romans responded. Jerusalem fell because God judged the Jewish nation for rejecting the Messiah. In this reading, the apocalyptic language Jesus used about the temple’s destruction is understood as metaphorical, not referential, and still applies to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. We have precedent for this way of reading Jesus’ apocalyptic language here in Mark and Luke in Luke’s later presentation of Peter’s use of Joel 2:28–32 in his explanation of the Pentecost phenomena (Acts 2:14–21). Peter’s Joel quote includes the apocalyptic wording about the sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood, even though what has been described by Luke in the historic events of Pentecost does not have a referential correlate to these astronomical events. Clearly, Peter has taken Joel’s words about these astronomical events metaphorically. One could speculate that Jesus’ own manner of teaching about the temple’s destruction is what taught Peter this way of reading Joel.

B. Matthew’s Version

While the above interpretation might be a viable one in terms of Mark and Luke, Matthew’s version does seem to muddy the Synoptic waters. In Matthew’s version, the disciples *do* ask an additional question about the “end of the age.” Our first clue is to notice that only Matthew has the disciples’ question split into multiple parts like this, with secondary questions about the sign of Jesus’ coming and the end of the age (Mt. 24:3). Why would Matthew *include* these secondary questions if both Mark and Luke *omitted* them? Not because Matthew wanted to teach about the end of the age but Mark and Luke did not! Rather, a canonical reading of the three Synoptics *together* might supply the answer. In the post-resurrection realities of the church and the teachings of Jesus, Mark and Luke were well aware that the disciples’ equation of Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem with the end of the age was ill informed both historically and theologically. So, Mark and Luke omit the inference by the disciples that the destruction of Jerusalem would be the end of the age. In contrast, Matthew includes the questions to

show how Jesus corrected the ill-informed theology. Both Mark and Luke make clear that Jesus modulated the eschatological judgment language of the coming of the Son of Man to apply to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. In this way, Jesus would validate the church’s later interpretation of Jerusalem’s destruction as a divine act of God in history, just as Jerusalem’s destruction by the Babylonians centuries earlier was a divine act of God in history. The implication then, in the canonical context of both Mark and Luke, is that even though Matthew acknowledges the secondary questions of the disciples about the end of the age, a Synoptic reading makes clear that *the disciples themselves have equated the fall of Jerusalem with the end of the age, not Jesus.*

Were the disciples right to make this equation? Such does not seem to be the drift of Mark and Luke’s version of this Olivet Discourse. Further, one could point out that even after the resurrection the disciples remain in a fog about how to correlate their previous preunderstandings about the meaning of “Israel” and “kingdom” in the light of the new realities brought about by the completely unexpected events of Jesus’ death and resurrection—realities that change everything—such that they ask the bumbling question: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:7). Luke will take twenty-eight chapters in Acts to answer this question. Luke will lay out carefully in the ministries of both Peter (Acts 1–12) and Paul (Acts 13–28) how this old pattern of Jewish nationalism for framing up what is happening in Jesus Christ, long nurtured in popular Jewish thought for almost two centuries by nostalgia for the glory days of the Maccabean Revolt, no longer works for understanding old questions and old answers, whether “Israel” or “kingdom.” “You will be my witnesses . . . to the uttermost parts of the earth” is Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ Jewish nationalism (Acts 1:8), which is Luke’s equivalent to Matthew’s “Go, therefore, and make disciples” (Mt. 28:19).

C. Dispensational Version

The dispensational twist on Matthew 24 depends on the eisegesis of the Danielic “great parenthesis” into Matthew’s context. In a dispensational scheme, Jesus meant for the apostles to fast-forward their understanding not only past the obvious destruction of Jerusalem, which was the immediate point of their question, but even past two millennia of the half-time show of the church to the real game of Israel-the-empire at the end of time. The apostles were supposed to apply the statement about “this generation” to the “terminal generation” that presages the so-called “secret rapture” of the church and the following seven-year tribulation period at the end of time that would culminate in Christ’s second (*third*) coming. Such an elaborate eschatological scheme, however, in no way is explicit or spelled out in this passage in Matthew on its own. The entire scheme for interpreting Matthew 24 is totally dependent upon asserting the so-called “great parenthesis” in Daniel’s seventy prophetic weeks, elaborated only by a contorted weaving in and out of multiple scriptural texts into an entire system, and then unilaterally inserting this entire scheme into Matthew 24.

1. Manipulating the Math

In interpreting the meaning of “this generation,” we at least have had to mention the complication of reading apocalyptic language in general as referential or metaphorical, which impacts how one would contextualize the appearance of “this generation” in Matthew 24’s apocalyptic language. What happens, however, if just for the sake of argument, we allow that Jesus was forecasting two millennia into the future in answering a simple question about the temple’s destruction? Are we getting straight talk from Lindsey about how to understand “this generation” within that scheme? The answer is a clear “absolutely not.” Lindsey’s chosen rhetorical strategy is constantly to manipulate the math. In the three decades since *Late Great Planet Earth* was published, Lindsey has offered up three vastly different definitions of “this generation,” continually forced to stretch the meaning as time has marched on. He has grossly inflated his original forty years definition by 150% to one hundred years in just three decades. How “precise” is that?

2. Fiddling with Falsification

a. Forty Years

The general reading public has been duped about how to do the math of a “biblical generation” for those who are supposed to be the “terminal generation.” Painfully obvious is that the math of a “biblical generation” changed dramatically in the three decades following the publication of Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970. Lindsey’s first operative equation was that “a generation is something like forty years.”⁵⁷ Notice in this important calculation establishing the length of “this generation” in Mt. 24:34 that not even the slightest allusion or suggestion is even hinted that the calculation factor is other than the figure of forty years. Even the attempt to hedge a bit with the expression “or so” tagged on the end does not help. This “or so” amount has to be less, and on the rules of logic, significantly less, than the larger matrix of forty years itself. Again, the subjunctive contingency of the auxiliary verb “could” in “could take place” is only a thinly disguised and superficial cover belied rhetorically by the actual precision of the argument being made. (Forty years of an end-time “window of imminence” is only 2% of the two thousand years since Jesus’ first advent.) Notice that Lindsey slipped into “precision” language in his prophetic swagger, such as the

⁵⁷Lindsey asserted in 1970: “A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then *within forty years or so of 1948*, all these things could take place,” *Late Great Planet Earth*, 54 (emphasis added).

misleading expression, “world events which are *precisely* predicted.”⁵⁸ As we shall see with the business of “this generation,” Lindsey can assert “precisely” but constantly avoid precision—a transparent sign of interpretive duplicity.

Lindsey’s math has been falsified historically twice already. The first falsification was 1988. The date of 1988 (1948 + 40) was a known data point among Lindsey disciples and many other end-time chasers in the 1970s and early 1980s.⁵⁹ When 1988 came and went without any Apollyon or Armageddon, Lindsey was scurrying for literary cover. As a result, Lindsey had to cook the prophetic books. As indicated, dispensationalists actually despise the facts of history. His differing rhetorical strategies mark the inexorable passage of each decade since his first publication in the 1970s. We can see three differing strategies for the next three decades.

b. Forgotten Years

Lindsey’s first strategy in the 1980s was to back off his former specificity about “this generation,” effectively sounding a hermeneutical retreat. Lindsey, though still relying heavily on his futurist interpretation of “this generation” in Mt. 24:34, in his new publication, *The 1980’s: Countdown to Armageddon*, simply erased the specific mention of the figure of forty years clearly set forth in *Late Great Planet Earth*, as if that earlier reference could be forgotten.⁶⁰ This strategy, however, was not helpful to his cause. Lindsey could not stem the flood of pent-up demand in his audience for specificity that Lindsey himself had unleashed in the 1970s in *Late Great Planet Earth*. A more effective rhetorical strategy had to be devised to answer audience discontent. Lindsey’s rhetorical ingenuity was up to the task.

⁵⁸ *Late Great Planet Earth*, 41 (emphasis added).

⁵⁹ I should know; in the early 1970s I was one of them. We also have Edgar C. Whisenant’s widely distributed publication, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988* (Nashville: The World Bible Society, 1988). Whisenant calculated that the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah in 1988, September 11–13, would be the exact date; 300,000 copies were given freely to pastors; over four million copies sold in bookstores and other outlets. Whisenant was a prophetic moth zapped quickly in the bright light of history’s falsification. He recalculated numerous times, finding impossible saying no to his obsession for mathematical calculation; he immediately retried for October 1988, then 1989, 1993, and 1994 (apparently his last attempt). That monkey eventually might have typed a line of Shakespeare at some point if only he had kept at the task.

⁶⁰ Hal Lindsey, *The 1980’s: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 162.

c. Fudged Years

Lindsey’s second strategy in the 1990s was to shift the key end-time starting point. Basically, he fudged the math. Under even more intense scrutiny and criticism in the passage of time after the failed 1988 expectation, Lindsey finally put forward an entirely new hermeneutic: *he shifted the starting date*. His starting point changed *nineteen* years, almost *half* the duration of the original calculation, from 1948 to 1967. “I have begun to see,” Lindsey wrote rather coyly and disarmingly nearly a quarter century after *Late Great Planet Earth*, “that the recapture of Jerusalem was much more important than even the taking and re-establishing of the nation of Israel.”⁶¹ Really? Wow! What a seismic shift in the end-time starting point to describe with such understatement! Of course, one would not want to draw too much attention to this matter of prophetic *mea culpa*. Unfortunately, even this recalculated scenario was falsified ($1967 + 40 = 2007$). Lindsey should have studied the history of interpretation of Revelation. As Roman Catholics learned in their own eschatological calculations post-Constantine, deferred timing schemes at best are only a temporary solution to the popular clamor for imminence.

Thus, Lindsey still would have to cook the prophecy books *again a third time* like a bad accountant, after 2007, unless something ingenious and resourceful could be done now to settle the matter rather permanently—that is, at least for Lindsey’s lifetime. What to do? Why, not only can you *change the starting point*, while you are on a roll in these massive manipulations despising historical falsification, how about just *changing the entire equation*? Yes, completely change the equation for a “biblical generation,” of course! That will change the math. Lindsey unilaterally decided to declare abruptly, without offering any historical or exegetical warrant, that a “biblical generation” no longer was a clear and unequivocal forty years, as in the early 1970s. Suddenly, without warning, Lindsey expanded the elusive figure to *double or more in length, even up to one hundred years!* In crying “uncle” to history, Lindsey finally has been forced to assert, “A biblical generation is somewhere between 40 and 100 years.”⁶² Any mathematician would consider changing calculations by up to 150% a fairly significant adjustment to any formula!

This duplicitous extension gives Lindsey plenty of room not to have to worry about any future additional adjustments. He now has the great prophetic luxury of avoiding being around when falsification is reprised for the third time.⁶³ No median adult

⁶¹Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth—2000 A.D.: Will Mankind Survive? Revised, Updated Edition* (Palos Verdes, CA: Western Front, Ltd., 1994, 1996), 173.

⁶²*Planet Earth*, 5.

⁶³1988, 2007, and, now, 2067 ($1967 + 100$).

alive today will be around then to confront the failed calculation; Lindsey certainly will not be. He is home free now on his end-time innuendo dance with “this generation”—both in prophecy and in publication. Once again, Lindsey may have achieved the appearance of precision, perhaps satisfying his commercial coterie for the time being, but such an appearance is deceptive and illusory; this too shall pass. The date will vaporize in the searing heat of inevitable historical falsification, probably with no notice whatsoever due to lost memory. Lindsey’s device is an old trick learned from Joachim of Fiore’s handling of Rev. 12:6 and the 1,260 days equals 1,260 years, which put the matter eighty years into Joachim’s future when calculated from Joachim’s *new* starting point (compare Lindsey) of the birth of Christ. Joachim died in 1202. He did not have to face the failure of his new “window of imminence” calculation. Neither will Hal Lindsey now, even though he already has been falsified *twice*, in eerie historical parallel to William Miller, but admittedly without the nineteenth-century prognosticator’s fanfare and drama. History resoundingly has falsified Lindsey’s constantly shifting hermeneutic on “this generation” in Matt. 24:32 as a fairy tale. Lindsey no more knows how to do the math on “this generation” than the man in the moon.

III. Example 2: “a nation be born at once?”(Isa. 66:8)

A. Modern Israel and Isa. 66:8

Another text is Isa. 66:8, when Isaiah asks, “Shall the earth be made to bring forth in a day? Shall a nation be born at once?” This passage is said to be a prediction of the action of the United Nations in voting to create the modern secular state of Israel in one day in May 1948. The United Nations action was anticipated in Great Britain’s 1917 Balfour Declaration calling for a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people. Both the Balfour and United Nations declarations were born in the cataclysmic geopolitical changes of the twentieth century’s two world wars, which included World War I’s collapse of four imperial dynasties—Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey. Such changes brought on revolution and political chaos (such as the Bolsheviks in Russia, the Nazi Socialist Party in Germany), and deep social unrest across Europe. These strong European social and political currents flowed directly and inevitably into World War II. Into this highly volatile geopolitical and social mix was poured the incendiary issues of Jewish Zionism and the Jewish Holocaust.⁶⁴ Did Isaiah anticipate this 1948 United Nations declaration? Hardly.

⁶⁴ As crudely, callously, and inhumanely expressed by Jack Van Impe in alluding to a future Jewish holocaust, “the Jews have been steadily marching toward Hitler’s ovens ever since the fall of their beloved city in A.D. 70.” Jack Van Impe with Roger F. Campbell, *Israel’s Final Holocaust* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 51.

First, Isaiah’s question interpreted as the United Nations declaration in 1948 is ripped from its literary context. Its own context is a rhetorical question of two finely-balanced poetic lines of Hebrew. The rhetorical question then is jammed into an indicative declaration of one line (“a nation will be born in a day”). Never asked in this act of interpretive violence is whether an indicative statement that affirms an assertion that a nation will be born in a day Isaiah’s intent. Before we knee-jerk answer with a “yes,” we ought to be obligated to lay out systematically the complex issues of the poetic lines in the Hebrew of Isaiah’s carefully crafted and sophisticated verses in chapter 66. We should study their meter, their breaks, their symmetry, their chiasms and possible *inclusios* that insinuate structure and meaning, whether irony, play on words, or skillful inversions of sense. Such a study easily demonstrates in the context of Isaiah 66 that Isaiah uses the irony of the obvious, and his whole series of rhetorical questions, not just the one in consideration, expect a “no” answer.

Second, hermeneutically, upon what principle do we jump instantly from weeks and days as metaphors for years in prophetic “end-time” lingo to “day” meaning just one twenty-four hour day in a supposedly “end-time” prophecy? So Daniel’s “weeks” in Dan. 9:24 clearly are metaphorical years, but Isaiah’s “day” in Isa. 66:8 is supposed to be *a literal twenty four hours*, and both are supposedly “end-time” texts? Where comes the exegetical prowess to jump back and forth like that? Who gets to make these arbitrary imperial decisions of interpretation of time references in eschatological texts?

Third, why is the question of Isaiah’s original historical context not even broached, completely ignored? The salient hermeneutical question is how would these rhetorical lines first have been read and understood for those in Isaiah’s original audience? One simple observation of Hebrew poetry immediately can note that the lines in question are in a series of questions, asked rhetorically, to which the correct answer in each case is “no!” “Who has heard such things? Who has seen such things?” Isaiah asks (Isa. 66:8a). To what “things” does he refer? The “things” are specified in the immediately preceding lines in the context: “Before she was in labor, she gave birth” Is that possible? Of course not! “Before her pain came upon her she delivered a son.” Is that possible? Of course not! Then Isaiah continues without pause the rhetorical flourish: “Shall the earth be made to bring forth in a day?” The answer still is, no, of course not, not in the face of Israel’s denuded forests and destroyed croplands in the wake of Babylon’s armies! “Shall a nation be delivered in one moment?” No, of course not, not in the wake of Babylon’s ferocious sack of the city! So, whereas Isaiah’s *poetic irony* does dictate a brief period of time within the context of preposterous rhetorical questions, the point is not *that* a nation will be born in a moment, but, rather, no matter how long Israel struggles to reestablish her national existence in the hard times of postexilic realities, faithful Jews will be those who have the tenacity to hang on within Jerusalem’s ruins, who believe that God, in spite of all appearances, will be with Israel and will bring her back to national life. This faith is a powerful faith, a faith like Isaiah’s, and a faith that ultimately will lead to Messiah. This faith trusts the covenant God to bring life out of absolute destruction and death, which is precisely what God accomplished with Messiah when Israel did bring forth the redeemer. Out of the absolute destruction and death of the

cross and a cold, dark tomb, God brought forth life and the eternal promise and security of the destiny of God’s people.

Is not the legitimate historical context of Isaiah 40–66 the return from Babylonian exile? Are not the questions addressing the issue of the difficulties confronting the ragged remnant returning to the ruins of Jerusalem and its temple leveled to the ground by the armies of Babylon in 586 B.C.? Will the walls go back up in a day? No, of course not. Rebuilding Jerusalem is not magic. Will the returning Jews go to bed one night, and the next morning find the temple in all of its original Solomonic glory at the end of main street? No, of course not! Raising the temple again is not magic. These are hard matters for the returnees walking through the ruins of a former life now cataclysmically destroyed, a severe challenge to faith in God. Those who believe, as does Isaiah, that the God of creation *can* make a new heavens and a new earth, a new day for a renewed Israel after the total devastation of the Babylonian exile (Isa. 65:17), can see in the impossible circumstances of the return the salvation of God. For one who holds this kind of faith in God, Isaiah promises that, in God’s hands, Jerusalem’s future holds the promise of eventual succor for the physically and spiritually parched returnees:

*Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom. (Isa. 66:10–11, NRSV)*

Thus, even a simple exegetical overview shows that Isa. 66:8 means the opposite of what is claimed by those pointing to the action of the United Nations in 1948. How do we naively leapfrog over this entire exegetical mountain and millennia of time from Isaiah 66 and the issues of the Jewish return from Babylonian exile straight to 1948 and the United Nations?

The appeal to the hermeneutical artifice of “two mountain peaks” of prophetic duality, historical past and eschatological future, both true in their own ways and assumed latent in favored prophetic texts simply begs the immediate question. Do we not claim the divinely inspired authority of a Gospel writer in asserting so-called prophetic duality of a text when no Gospel writer actually appeals to the texts we are asserting as holding hidden eschatological duality in the specific ways we are interpreting them? We have to ignore that a more literal and direct interpretation is right to hand in Israel’s own postexilic history! Instead of a more literal and historical interpretation, we opt for a metaphorical flight of fancy that jumps over two millennia, ignoring that in so doing we have given divine approbation to a human institution, the United Nations, with which, after all, God has nothing to do. Modern Israel is a *secular state*, a human creation of the

twentieth century, the product of the political and military struggles of power-mongering colonial nations still trying to extricate themselves from the old, collapsing paradigms of eighteenth and nineteenth-century mercantilism, colonialism, and conquest. At the same time, Allied national leaders were trying to expiate passive complicity in the horrors of the Jewish holocaust of World War II. As a result, Jews were invested with colonial powers by secular superpowers in a brazen land grab. This colonial land grab illegally and illegitimately wrested from lawful Palestinian residents land they owned but unilaterally was given away without their consent nor even the minimal consideration of a dime of payment by those who did not even own the land. The United Nations land grant of 1948 was a votive offering to expiate complicity in the holocaust by Allied forces, as well as to placate the powerful political forces lobbying American Jewish Zionism and various supporting religious forces pushing for half a century for a modern state of Israel. If any “biblical prophecy” was fulfilled in such action, that would be one clear example of a blatantly humanistic and self-fulfilling prophecy of gross injustice.⁶⁵

B. Modern Israel and Ezekiel 37

1. *Specious Distinctions*

Some also point to Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones vision (Ezekiel 37) as prophetic of 1948. However, Ezekiel’s vision is about a *spiritual rebirth* of the nation (Eze. 37:23) as the only solution for *postexilic Israel* in the withering realities of having suffered the wrath of God in the loss of nationhood and consequent Babylonian exile. Lindsey, for example, attempted to distinguish between a “physical restoration” and a “spiritual restoration” of Israel in the Ezekiel passage. He offered absolutely no exegetical observation or argument whatsoever for this assertion.⁶⁶ The distinction is specious and alien to this passage, solely derived from the preexisting commitment to the scheme of national Israel and a prophetic end-time game for Israel’s own world empire. Ezekiel’s entire point is that the absence of a spiritual Israel, an Israel faithfully obedient to the covenant, is what created the wrath of exile in the first place, and *no return has any purpose whatsoever, postexilic or end-time, without the prior reality of right relationship*

⁶⁵The historical and political precedent has been set. By the very nature of her secular creation, the modern state of Israel appears to have been granted permission to grab land whenever that serves her nationalistic aims, whether true survival or the pretense thereof, and the United Nations perpetually will be hamstrung to respond.

⁶⁶Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 48. This assertion reveals once again that characteristic tendentiousness in Lindsey’s attempts to harness biblical verses in slavery to his preconceived dispensational system. Literal, historical exegesis is simply absent.

to God. In fact, contemporary dispensationalists are loathe to admit that prior to 1948, most dispensational writers insisted that Jewish conversion must *precede* any realization of Jewish nationhood, which they found a compelling reason for evangelistic mission among Jews. Good examples are Arno C. Gaebelein’s (d. 1945) efforts among New York’s Jewish immigrants and William E. Blackstone’s (d. 1935) personal contributions to the Chicago Hebrew Mission, today known as the American Messianic Fellowship.⁶⁷

Further, Lindsey also claimed that he had studied commentaries from Christian scholars as far back as 1611 who gave testimony to the expectation that the Jews would be returning back to Palestine as a part of God’s prophetic action in the end-time; conveniently (and disingenuously) however, the only examples he actually proffered in press were two dispensational popularizers of the nineteenth century! Lindsey’s extravagant overstatement is that he had “found that *many scholars* clearly understood that the Jews would return to Palestine and re-establish their nation before the Messiah would come.”⁶⁸ Then, without whispering a word about even one of these illustrious “many scholars” that provided a trail all the way back to 1611, Lindsey offered lengthy quotes from only two authors, and *both of these were nineteenth century writers*, John Cumming (1864) and James Grant (1866)—amazingly misleading, besides completely tendentious and begging the question!

2. Radical Roots

Fact of the matter is, evidence for this idea of the return of the Jews to the Holy Land does exist back to the Reformation, but the evidence stops dead cold just about where Lindsey indicated (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). Why? Because the idea was innovated by the most radical of the post-Reformation prophets and prophetic movements in the conflicts between the English King and Parliament, such as the Ranters, Levellers, Diggers, and Quakers. All proclaimed the imminent millennium to arrive in England. This radical English heritage Lindsey apparently does not seem to want to be associated even while finding convenient claiming their interpretive traditions. Worth giving at length is Wainright’s discussion of the matter.

A characteristic of English prophets in the mid-seventeenth century was their favorable attitude toward the Jewish people. They predicted the return of the Jews to the Holy Land and their conversion to Christianity, and they tried to make these predictions a reality. The Ranter John Robbins made a fruitless attempt to recruit an

⁶⁷This Blackstone is not the famous eighteenth-century English jurist.

⁶⁸*Late Great Planet Earth*, 49 (emphasis added). Scholars? Who are they? What are their academic credentials? Many? Where are they?

army of 144,000 to liberate the Holy Land from the Turks. Thomas Tany, another Ranter, who claimed to be a descendent of Aaron, announced that he was to lead the Jews back to Israel. Having been commanded in a vision to slaughter every member of Parliament, Tany drew his sword in the House of Commons. Nobody was killed, but Tany was committed to prison. He later drowned in an attempt to make the journey to the Holy Land.⁶⁹

Boyer points out that the English Puritans channeled this Jewish return concept from the English dissenter controversies to the New World of the American colonies. A good example is Increase Mather’s *The Mystery of Israel’s Salvation Explained and Applied* (1669).⁷⁰ The truth of the matter is, dispensationalists simply depend upon modern institutions such as the United Nations to do for them what the Ranters could not do for themselves, and then claim such secular, human action as the work of God, like the conquistador DeSoto (d. 1542) planting the Spanish flag on the shores of Florida and claiming such sixteenth-century imperial seizure of territory the act of God. The modern state of Israel is an altogether modern reality, a twentieth-century imperial seizure of territory declared by dispensationalists the act of God. Further, modern Israel itself is a human creation, not divine. Modern Israel today is avowedly secular, not religious—in other words, as far from Ezekiel’s postexilic spiritual ideals as can be conceived.

Instead of “prophecy” of events more than two millennia distant, Ezekiel was addressing issues of “what now?” for Israel after the Babylonian debacle, just as was Isaiah. Neither Isaiah 66 nor Ezekiel 37 are about the United Nations and 1948, or the Israeli Six Day War of 1967 for that matter. No “generation” of forty years post the 1948 event, inferring 1988, nor the Six Day War of 1967, inferring 2007, has any biblical or eschatological significance on any supposed eschatological “time line” of God. A legitimate historical exegesis of Isaiah and Ezekiel would reveal the lie in any current calculation. Thus, the year 2007—which had been Lindsey’s *second* adjustment to the meaning of “this generation”—came and went without any significance for the second coming of Christ, exactly as did 1844 for William Miller, 1914 for Charles Russell, and 1988 already had for Hal Lindsey.

⁶⁹Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 93.

⁷⁰Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 182–83.

*IV. Example 3: “earthquakes, famines, and plagues”(Mk. 13:8; etc.)***A. Earthquakes**

Another “sign” often pointed out is earthquakes, famines, and plagues, along with the twin thought of wars and rumors of wars (Lk. 21:11; Mt. 24:7; Mk. 13:8; cf. Mt. 24:6). An asserted increase in the number or severity of earthquakes is a perennial favorite as a pointer to the “terminal generation” and the end. The only problem is, for anyone who would actually do their homework to find out, seismologists will give statistics to anyone who asks that demonstrate how earthquakes in the twentieth century were not any more prevalent than any other century, nor was their severity particularly notable. In fact, the largest earthquakes on record did not even happen in the twentieth century. One of the largest earthquakes ever known was the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Estimated at magnitude 8.7 or more on the modern Richter scale, the Lisbon quake hit on the morning of Nov. 1, 1755, with an epicenter in the Atlantic Ocean about 125 miles west-southwest of Cape St. Vincent. This quake probably was the most destructive and deadliest ever recorded. The entire port city of Lisbon, Portugal was virtually destroyed, killing upwards to 100,000 people. As the quake developed over a period of twenty to thirty minutes, residents rushed in panic to the harbor area to avoid collapsing downtown buildings, and, to their utter amazement, saw nothing but the seafloor and the washed-out remnants of centuries of lost cargo and shipwrecks. As the population amassed at the harbor staring in disbelief, suddenly and without warning, the monstrous tsunami raised up by the earthquake finally arrived on its hurling landward journey, crashing in and totally engulfing the entire harbor and town. In areas not flooded by the tsunami waters, fires raged uncontrolled for days. Politically, the Lisbon quake is credited with seriously disrupting Portugal’s colonial ambitions. In the religious arena, John Wesley convinced Londoners of the 1750s that the Lisbon quake was a clear sign of God’s displeasure with sinners.⁷¹

B. Famines and Plagues

Closely associated (supposed) sure signs in the “signs of the times” game are famines and plagues. While famines sometimes capture the headlines and, predictably, the attention of end-time prophets, the gripping and frightening specter of plagues and diseases proves a virulent attraction for these perennial purveyors of doom. Plagues

⁷¹See Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004). A good web resource on the field of seismology specifically related to earthquakes is <http://www.norsar.no/index2.html>.

conveniently are defined as “diseases that cannot be cured” and AIDS cited as the fulfillment. What can be said about the typical rhetoric of such prognostications?

First, how does one come to that definition of the word translated as “plague” in the first place? The word for “plague” in the commonly-used passages (Lk. 21:11; Mt. 24:7; Mk. 13:8) simply means a widespread, contagious disease. Nothing in the Greek word’s linguistic or semantic domain means “incurable.” Forget the fact that the Black Death during the Dark Ages of Europe met the definition of a “disease that cannot be cured” and literally wiped thousands of European towns and villages completely out of existence. The modern disease of AIDS, though deplorable and sad in each fatal case, does not even come close as a percentage of the total world population to the Black Death in the Dark Ages of Europe. So neither in kind nor consequence does AIDS have any unique or even distinctive profile that would set this disease out as a clear “sign” of any eschatological significance. Further, just because a cure has not been found does not mean a cure will not be found. Then, when a cure is found, AIDS suddenly, given the “incurable” definition, no longer is a “sign of the times”? Now you see it; now you don’t. Nice slight of hand.

Second, the actual content of Jesus’ teaching about earthquakes, famines, plagues, wars and rumors of wars is ignored. Jesus said such disasters would occur, but not to let anyone make anything of them, because, clearly, with all such disasters, “the end is not yet” (Mt. 24:6). How much more transparent can Jesus’ teaching be? Earthquakes, famines, and pestilence, along with wars and rumors of wars are *not* a sign of the end; rather, they signal the *continuation* of life’s struggles: “You are going to hear about wars and rumors of wars: see that this does not trouble you: for all these things inevitably will happen, *but the end is not yet.*” (Mt. 24:6; emphasis added).

Third, even the meaning of “the end” itself has to be inferred. Is Jesus referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the temple, or the end of time? At this point in the dialogue, we are not far along in the discussion. Thus, the contextual meaning of “the end,” at least at this point in Mt. 24:6, would seem to be related much more to the question about the temple’s destruction than already picking up the second question, that is, assuming even that Jesus accepted the Jewish nationalistic assumptions hidden in the second question. However, even if “the end” here were taken as a premature reference in the current discussion by Jesus to the end of time, the qualifier “not yet” still would apply. The so-called “signs” in question *are rejected as such by Jesus himself.*

V. Example 4: “knowledge will be increased”(Dan. 12:4)

Another text sometimes used is Dan. 12:4, “many will run back and forth, and knowledge will be increased.” This “knowledge will be increased” supposedly is a veiled reference to the “knowledge explosion” of the Internet. Knowledge explosion of the Internet? That’s a laugh. The knowledge explosion that brought Europe out of the Dark Ages apparently simply does not count? Neither does the knowledge explosion of the Enlightenment that set the stage for all modern philosophy and science today, including

the machines that are foundational to the Internet, nor the incredible and stunning results of the Gutenberg printing press? What a biased and historically ignorant perspective. Since we did not live these times, we simply do not evaluate appropriately their true impact on human history. Proposing the Internet as the first time humans have experienced a “knowledge explosion” is simply naive and fundamentally ignorant of the history of Western Europe, not even counting the entire scene of the Orient.⁷² In addition, given enough time, the present Internet will look like child’s play, just like an old 1950s picture of an entire room full of banks of computers with their dual spinning magnetic tape spools looks so backward and primitive today, when at the time so *avant garde* and incredible. That entire room of 1950s computer hardware, by the way, could not even begin to calculate what even the cheapest notebook computer in the lap of an elementary school child can perform today. Today’s Internet will appear mere child’s play at some point in the future.

Such an obvious aging of an interpretive flourish to find fulfillment of Dan. 12:4 in present technology is striking if not pathetic in an Adventist volume I have in my library that now is over 110 years old. The author pointed to the telegraph, the trolley car, the suspension bridge, electric lighting, the steam railway, the typewriter, the phonograph, and other elements of the burgeoning industrial revolution as strongly marking the “present age.”⁷³ The one item, however, that always puts a smile on my face to read is his reference to “modern artillery.” The example he gives is of a canon guarding New York harbor: “At Sandy Hook, guarding the entrance to New York harbor, is a monster breech-loading canon 49 feet in length, weighing 130 tons, capable of throwing a projectile, [sic] over five feet in length and weighing 2,400 pounds, a distance of twenty miles.”⁷⁴ Quite quaint now, be assured true “believers” then were in similar awe and fully assured with a vision of this canon that Daniel’s vision of the end was “nigh, even at the doors” (Mk. 13:29, KJV). Who shall smile, quaintly bemused, reading our own assured prognostications a century from now?

⁷²On the extraordinary explosion of knowledge with the Gutenberg printing press, for example, see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On the intellectual foundation of the Internet actually being based on the Gutenberg printing press, see Michael Hauben, “The Expanding Commonwealth of Learning: Printing and the Net,” accessed at <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.x16> on June 14, 2006.

⁷³Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 332-36.

⁷⁴Ibid., 332.

VI. Example 5: “they . . . will see”(Rev. 11:9)

As one last example, the assertion is made that the death of two witnesses, according to Rev. 11:9, must be witnessed by the “whole world simultaneously.” The inference is that such a situation could not possibly be fulfilled until satellites and CNN news. The only problem is, these assertions fall completely off the table of sound exegesis and hide faulty assumptions that actually “read into” the text inferences that clearly are not what the text actually indicates.

First, the adjective “whole” or “all” is nowhere to be found in this passage. Literally, the Greek of this text is straightforward. The text reads: “Those from peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will see.” “All” is not used at all! So, to say that the “whole world” or “all the world” must witness this event is completely off the beam and reading into the text an important but non-existent adjective qualifier that changes the meaning of the text completely.

Second, the declaration made in the passage itself is only that the onlookers “will see” the dead bodies. Not a word is given about *how* they will see, or even less, that the seeing must be *simultaneously*. An American president lying in state in the capital rotunda, with thousands of grief stricken mourners from around the world silently slipping by the flag-draped casket, would fully satisfy the intent and meaning of “those from peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will see.” This text in its basic sense entails absolutely no demand for satellites, CNN news, the whole world, or simultaneity. This reading of Rev. 11:9 as “the whole world simultaneously” is completely bogus.

VII. Strange Ambivalence to the “Signs”

One more point about signs of the times should be made. What is striking about modern dispensational writers in regard to “signs of the times” is their ambivalence in exactly how to position their own stance with regard to any particular “sign,” or, in other cases, the positive or negative value in their appraisals of social reform or political activism. With any particular issue, they know not whether to trumpet its praise or castigate its vanity. In the Cold War period, for example, the effort to pursue nuclear non-proliferation and the build-up of American military might in the Reagan era could be trumpeted as a way to keep America strong and in the game of holding back the forces that Antichrist would assemble against Israel. Or, that same effort could be denigrated as a denial of the inevitable march to Armageddon.⁷⁵ Either way, any such effort, movement, or event can be read as a “sign of the times” and heralded as the sure indicator

⁷⁵Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 252, pointed to a typical example in Lindsey the Cold War ideologue versus Lindsey the thoroughly consistent premillennialist.

of the millennial Advent, even when we are not sure how we feel about the matter politically or socially. This mercurial perspective is quite strange in the light of the bombastic preaching that uses these very “signs” as infallible proofs of the end.

VIII. “Signs” Conclusion

A common feature of modern teaching and preaching about the second coming of Christ is the use of “signs of the times” to “prove” the end is near. These “signs” are based on questionable presuppositions, faulty exegesis, distorted facts, or flat out false information. Further, this “signs” emphasis systematically and seemingly intentionally ignores the long history of finding “signs of the times” in every Christian generation from the teachings of Montanus on.

The point is not whether any one set of “signs” in any generation is correct. Given enough time, even a monkey could type a line of Shakespeare. The point, rather, is rhetorical: all you need to do with any talk of “signs” is persuade the audience. The trick is to use whatever is integral to the political and social discourse of the day, whether Saladin and the Muslim onslaught, Communist Russia and the threat of nuclear war, or Osama ben Ladin and the threat of global terrorism, strike a chord of fear that resonates with the needs and anxieties of the audience, and speak boldly and convincingly, and you usually can cross the goal line of public persuasion. To be sure, the actual exegetical legitimacy of your purported “sign” simply does not matter at all for your “sign” to work persuasively in your apocalyptic discourse. That is why the craziest and wackiest “signs” one can imagine can be read in a pamphlet, heard on the radio, or viewed on some cable channel. The only question is, is someone in the audience persuaded? That’s all that matters. Suggest only that we are “close,” constantly weaving in, around, and near the blazing light of Revelation’s visions without ever actually touching the light, and live the prophetic moth’s innuendo waltz in perpetuity, as long as you can get your listener to write that check to support this vital end-time ministry or buy your end-time book, which, unfortunately, you will have to revise soon.