



Waiting for the End

The growing interest in apocalyptic prophecy



William Martin

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The world as we know it is coming to an end. Not because some general or madman will push a button and reduce our planet to poisonous ash. And not because the weight of a burgeoning population will cause it to lurch out of orbit. Rather, the end is near because God has had it planned that way for at least 1,900 years. It's all right there in the Bible, in Daniel and Revelation, with auxiliary illumination from other key portions of Scripture. Just as surely as he created a fully furnished universe out of nothing in six twenty-four-hour days approximately 5,986 years ago, so is he now about to bring it to completion in precise accord with the detailed blueprint tucked away in his Word.

Judeo-Christian history has seen numerous outcroppings of interest in biblical prophecy, usually in times of social upheaval, but few, if any, have been as widespread and influential as that now flourishing in conservative Protestant circles. No hard data are available, but millions of American evangelicals apparently believe that within the present generation, and probably sometime in the 1980s, Jesus will return to lay the groundwork for a glorious thousand-year reign here on earth. Hundreds of Bible-believing preachers discuss the chronology of these latter days with confidence that what they are saying is as familiar and real to their congregations as the stories of Noah's ark and the birth of Jesus. The same themes are proclaimed by such leading television evangelists as Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Rex Humbard, Herbert W. Armstrong, Kenneth Copeland, and Jack Van Impe, and on such lesser-known programs as *The Voice of Prophecy*, *The King Is Coming*, and *11:59 and Counting*. They are elaborated endlessly in traveling slide-shows and lectures by spokesmen from such independent ministries as Lamb and Lion, Second Coming, Inc., and World Prophecy Ministry, and are updated regularly in such periodicals as *It's Happening Now*, *Bible in the News*, *Bible Prophecy Newsletter*, and *The Endtime Messenger*. They have been the subject of novels, stage plays, films, and cantatas, and are reflected in hymns, gospel songs, and bumper stickers ("Ready or not, Jesus is coming"). And the number-one nonfiction volume of the 1970s was not a revolutionary diet plan or a manual on sexual fulfillment but Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (over 15 million copies sold), one of five successful prophecy books by Lindsey that led *The New York*

Times to name him the best-selling author of the decade. The book was also the basis of a 1977 movie narrated by Orson Welles.

Though its growth has occurred mostly within the past two decades, this movement, based on biblical prophecy, had its roots in the nineteenth century. The French Revolution and its aftermath had kindled interest in prophecy, as biblical students saw the destruction of papal power, the secularization of the state, and the rise of a religion of reason as being remarkably similar to events described in Daniel and Revelation. A number of societies and conferences, primarily in Great Britain, developed an approach to these texts contending that they foretold, in explicit detail, the restoration of the Jews to Palestine, a cataclysmic end to the present age, the Second Coming of Christ, and the Millennium—a thousand years of unearthly bliss. Further, those able to break the code of these books not only could understand what was happening all about them but could face the end of the age with a joy born of the certain knowledge of eventual triumph.

Millenarian thought also flourished in the United States during the nineteenth century. Mormons spoke of themselves as Latter Day Saints, and the Shakers viewed Mother Ann Lee, their founder, as the female complement to the male Christ of the First Advent, and taught that she had inaugurated the Millennium. The most notable millenarian during the first half of the century, however, was William Miller, a prolific writer who held camp meetings and tent revivals that built him a following estimated at 50,000 people. Miller believed so strongly in his ability to interpret biblical signs that he confidently selected 1843 as the year Christ would return in fiery judgment. His willingness to set dates drew tremendous interest, but ultimately brought his movement to ground and subjected him to ridicule and charges of fanaticism and quackery.

Eventually, millenarians learned to avoid the embarrassments of overspecification, and by 1875, with the evangelist D. L. Moody as a prominent public spokesman, the movement grew into a supra-denominational community characterized by an ecumenical spirit that did not require commitment to any specific interpretative scheme. The most widely held view of the end-time, however, was a pre-millennial theory (so called because it taught that Jesus would return *before* the Millennium) developed by an Englishman, John Nelson Darby, and incorporated into the Scofield Reference Bible, an enormously influential book published by the Oxford University Press in 1909.

The latest revision of the Scofield Reference Bible, a 1967 edition, has sold more than two million copies to date. In this book, C. I. Scofield printed interpretations of Darby's teachings on the same pages as the

Scripture on which they were ostensibly based, thus creating an impression in the minds of many readers that the notes and their teaching were virtually of canonical status.

Though factions within the ranks of literalist fundamentalism disagree over the precise sequence of events, those who adhere to the Darby-Scofield version believe that the triggering action will be "the Rapture." This term, not found in the Bible, means "the catching up," and refers to the scene described in I Thessalonians 4:16,17: "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

After the Rapture, a seven-year period of Tribulation will fall on those left behind. It will begin with the appearance of the Antichrist as leader of a ten-nation confederation. He will seem to be a man of peace and will side with Israel when it is threatened by a northern coalition which is now generally expected to be led by Russia and to include Germany, the Arabs, and Iran. His help will not be needed, however, because the coalition will be so devastated by earthquakes and pestilence that it will take seven months just to bury the corpses.

Realization that the raptured saints—the faithful who were caught up—had been prudent to believe in Jesus will cause 144,000 Jews and a multitude of gentiles to accept him as savior and messiah. These converts, together with two outstanding prophets, possibly Moses and Elijah brought back to life, will win others to Christ. Unfortunately, these new Christians will be marked for persecution by the Antichrist, who by this time will have begun to show his true colors. In a symbolic act so egregious that it will be known as the "abomination of desolation," the Antichrist will enter the temple of Jerusalem, cancel all worship services, and begin to use it as his political headquarters. In fear for their lives, many will seek refuge in the rock cliffs of the ancient city of Petra in Jordan.

During the Tribulation, the earth and its people will be visited by unprecedented inconvenience. Rising sea levels, hundred-pound hailstones, falling stars, and fires will devastate one third of the earth. The sun will become seven times hotter than normal, then grow dark. Oceans, rivers, and lakes will turn to blood. Scorpions, locusts, and boils will plague humankind. Stupendous earthquakes will level mountains and cities, and a two-hundred-million-member army from the East (probably from China) will kill half of those who manage to survive these disasters. The Antichrist will seek total control over humanity by requiring that every person wear a mark or a number (probably 666—the

designated "Mark of the Beast," Revelation 13:16-18) in order to buy or sell. Those who refuse to accept this Mark of the Beast will be slain or will risk starvation because they cannot buy food. Those who accept it will burn forever in hell.

At about this point, the Antichrist will be joined by the False Prophet, a religious leader associated with Babylon (a city called "the Mother of Harlots") and often identified in prophetic circles as the Pope. As cities crumble and the perplexity of nations mounts, the army of the East will assemble in the plain of Megiddo, outside Jerusalem, for an all-out assault on the Holy City. At this, Christ will return in glory to the earth, touching down on the Mount of Olives and beheld by every human eye, probably by means of satellite television. He will join the battle of Armageddon, and his armies, perhaps comprising the raptured saints, will wreak such destruction that blood will flow as deep as a horse's bridle for a distance of two hundred miles. The Antichrist and the False Prophet will be slain and cast into a lake of fire, and Satan will be bound in a bottomless pit, to remain for a thousand years (Revelation 20:1-3).

With Satan out of the way, at least temporarily, the saints will enjoy the marvelous Millennium, an age characterized by good weather, peace, an end to crime, advancements in knowledge, and the absence of fear. At the end of this period, in a kind of last sporting gesture, God will give Satan one more chance to work his evil ways, and the Prince of Darkness will tempt and win millions of people who became Christians during the Tribulation and the Millennium but who nonetheless remained open to his appeals. This army of backsliders will muster for one final battle with the faithful believers, at which time God will bring fire down upon the heretics, destroying them where they stand. Satan and all unbelievers will join the Antichrist and the False Prophet in the lake of fire, where they will be tormented day and night forever. The earth will be destroyed by fire and replaced by a new heaven and a new earth, which will serve as the eternal abode of the redeemed.

Since pre-millennial doctrine holds that deterioration in economic, political, domestic, and moral spheres will precede the Second Coming, many evangelicals, unsurprisingly, have felt that the end of the age is near. The most important catalyst of the current boom in prophecy studies, however, has unquestionably been the political restoration of the nation of Israel. Pre-millennial doctrine presumes that the people of Israel will be in Palestine at the time of Christ's return. The 1917 Balfour Declaration, which permitted Jews to settle in Palestine, was widely viewed by pre-millennial fundamentalists as the fulfillment of Jeremiah 29:14: "I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." This belief received an enormous boost with the formal establishment of

the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, the date on which, according to Hal Lindsey, "the prophetic countdown began!"

In Jesus's discussion of the signs of the end, he told his disciples that "this generation will not pass away till all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). He was apparently referring to the lifetime of his hearers, but since biblical literalists cannot concede that Jesus may have been mistaken, they conclude that "this generation" refers to those alive when the unmistakable signs of the end begin to appear. Since they regard the restoration of Israel as such a sign, they infer that we are living in the terminal generation. The chief problem with this interpretation for several years was that Israel was supposed to be not simply in Palestine but in control of Jerusalem as well. When this came to pass, in 1967, at the conclusion of a six-day war that seemed almost miraculous even to many non-believers, expectation within prophetic circles grew feverish.

Today, so many pieces of the puzzle seem to have fallen into place that pre-millennial believers display enormous confidence in their interpretative ability. Almost any scrap of truly bad news is hailed as another sign that we are in the homestretch of history, so that earthquakes, volcanoes, and famine, Russian aggression in Afghanistan, China's emergence as a world power, the rise of OPEC, the revolution in Iran, threats against Israel, unrest in Latin America, weakness of the dollar, increases in abortion, explicit sex on cable television, gay-rights parades, and any other perceived threats to the political, economic, or moral health of America and the world are greeted with an odd sort of self-conscious optimism. In Hal Lindsey's 1973 book, *There's a New World Coming*, he observes: "As world conditions increasingly fall into the pattern that Jesus spoke of, it may sadden the believer but it should give us a sense of intense anticipation that we are indeed the generation that is standing on the brink of seeing the return of Jesus Christ to this earth!" In an even more upbeat vein, Christian Broadcasting Network president Pat Robertson tells supporters: "We are not to weep as the people of the world weep when there are certain tragedies or breakups of the government or the systems of the world. We are not to wring our hands and say, 'Isn't that awful?' That isn't awful at all. It's good. That is a token, an evident token of our salvation, of where God is going to take us."

Given the premise that the Bible has something to say about current events, only moderate imagination is required to identify Russia as "Rosh," a leading member of the northern confederation expected, in the prophetic literature, to attack Israel, or China as harboring the "Kings of the East." Hal Lindsey's suggestions that the demonic mutant beasts

of Revelation 9 are really armored tanks and Cobra helicopters and that the "great eagle" expected to transport Jews to "their place of protection" in Petra may be aircraft from the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean are more fanciful but so speculative as to evoke little more than curiosity even from true believers. Students of prophecy do, however, give serious attention to truly important problems, such as scouting out the Antichrist and identifying the Mark of the Beast, since this kind of intelligence may mean the difference between an eternity in heaven and an eternity in hell.

As noted earlier, the consensus view of the Antichrist is that he will be a Satan-supported charismatic czar who will institute and enforce a political and economic dictatorship so complete that buying or selling will be impossible without his authorization, symbolized by some form of 666 on the hand or forehead. The ten-nation confederation that will serve as his power base is widely identified as the Common Market, whose giant computer complex in Luxembourg is said to be nicknamed "The Beast." Many are appalled at rumors that, in a cashless and checkless society, economic transactions will require that each of us be assigned a number consisting of three sets of six digits, to be invisibly tattooed on our hands or foreheads. And some believe that the laser-read computer code on supermarket goods is but one indicator that the Mark of the Beast is already in our midst, just waiting to be applied to humans.

News that various forms of 666 are prominently in use spreads through fundamentalist networks as rapidly as the false reports that worms are used in McDonald's hamburgers or that Satan-worship infests Procter & Gamble, but the most widely known collection of such information is Mary Stewart Relfe's *When Your Money Fails* □ *the "666 System" is here*, a privately printed volume that sold over 300,000 copies within six months of its publication in January, 1981.

With dozens of documents and photographs to back her claims, Relfe asserts that Olivetti, Lear Siegler, and NCR computer systems, Boss work gloves, Scotty fertilizer, McGregor clothing, shirts made in Communist China, shoes made in Italy, and parts for Caterpillar tractors have all been found bearing 666 as their product code. Sears, J. C. Penney, and Montgomery Ward are said to use computer programs that call for 666 as a prefix. The ominous number reportedly is also used by the World Bank, the IRS, Medicaid, and the Selective Service. Further, Relfe states that when Anwar Sadat reopened the Suez Canal to commercial navigation in 1975, he rode in a warship with 666 emblazoned boldly on its bow, and that tanks built "for President Carter's Secret Service Force" were stamped with 666, as were metric rulers widely distributed in the U.S. during 1979, some perhaps to

schoolchildren who were using an elementary algebra book entitled *666 Jellybeans*. And in Israel, she writes, 666 is used as a prefix for Arab-owned vehicles, overseas telephone calls, and the national lottery, all as part of an effort "to 'educate,' prepare and condition the Jews to accept '666,' which will be the number of their 'False Messiah' (the Antichrist) and his World Government System." After reading this book, I felt a bit queasy at recalling that my take-home pay at the time I first developed an interest in biblical prophecy was \$666.66, and that once, while living in Massachusetts, I had seen four nuns in a car whose license number contained the dreaded digits.

The False Messiah who is expected to turn these devilish developments to his own ends has been detected by earlier generations in the persons of Nero, Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, and similar unworthies. In the 1970s, he was thought by many to be embodied in Henry Kissinger, less because Kissinger displayed any singular talent for wickedness than because, like the putative Antichrist, he was a globe-trotting peacemaker who was gaining worldwide attention and adulation. To feed this speculation, David Webber, pastor of the Southwest Radio Church and a longtime prophecy student, noted that in a numerological system in which A equals 6 (the number of man, who was created on the sixth day and subsequently messed up a brand-new universe), B equals 12, C equals 18, and so forth, the numerical value of "Kissinger" is 666. With the dimming of Kissinger's star, the world stage was ready for other likely candidates. In 1981, Relfe declared: "My prudent assessment is that President Anwar Sadat of Egypt is either history's nearest prototype or the real Mr. '666,'" citing, in support of her theory, Sadat's early admiration for Hitler and his penchant for swastika-decorated neckties.

Hal Lindsey, who predicted Sadat's assassination, declines to name a specific individual, but says he believes the Antichrist is a passionate humanist who "lives right now somewhere in Europe." One might reflect on the fact that our current President, Ronald Wilson Reagan, an affable man with a bold economic plan, has six letters in each of his three names.

These attempts to read the signs of the times are not fundamentalist equivalents of brain twisters and Double-Crostics; they lead to concrete directives for action. David Terrell, a fanatical minor league radio-and-television preacher who does not accept the Scofield Bible's view of the Rapture, insists that the church will experience the Tribulation (an opinion shared by Pat Robertson) and has persuaded several thousand of his followers to move to rural areas in the South and Southwest precisely because he wants them to get through the seven-year period without having to buy or sell, and thus without having to

receive the damnable Mark of the Beast. Relfe, who believes the Rapture will occur midway through the Tribulation, recommends erecting a shelter, planting a garden on a small plot of land outside the city, and setting aside a bag of silver coins for every member of the family

In anticipation of the Beast, some Christians have borrowed money they never expected to pay back, because they were certain Jesus would return before the debts came due. Herbert W. Armstrong's empire suffered a serious blow when the end failed to begin in January of 1972, as Armstrong had predicted, thus bringing hardship to many people who had given most of their assets to the church in the expectation of going to Petra, where such worldly possessions would be useless.

Belief will surely influence behavior in other ways as well. I doubt, for example, that people I have heard weeping and moaning in darkened auditoriums while itinerant doomsayers showed their 666 slides will quietly accept any form of national identification card such as is used in some European countries and has occasionally been proposed for America. And I suspect that some supporters of the Southwest Radio Church or of Mary Stewart Relfe's ministry are unlikely to subscribe to cable TV, since both Relfe and SRC warn of a fiber-optics cable that can transmit sounds and pictures from one's home to a distant monitor, even with the set turned off.

More significant, one has to consider how pre-millennial theology will manifest itself in the activities of the Christian New Right, many of whose members accept its tenets. Secretary of the Interior James Watt has emphatically denied that his remark (to a House Interior Committee) "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns" implied that we should not be greatly concerned with long-range husbanding of natural resources. But one is hard-pressed to understand why he raised the issue if that was not precisely what he meant. Similarly, if a President were to appoint one or more pre-millennialists to key foreign-policy posts (who at the confirmation hearings would think to probe for beliefs about the Second Coming?), what incentive would they have to work for lasting peace in the Middle East, since they would regard a Russian-led attack on Israel as a necessary precursor of the Millennium? What stance would they assume toward the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations, both of which are viewed as major engines of the one-world Antichrist conspiracy? And if the nuclear destruction of Russia is foreordained, as in some pre-millennial schemes, might not a fundamentalist politician or general regard his finger on the button as an instrument of God's eternal purpose?

As I trust this account of pre-millennial thought has shown, a sizable subculture exists in this country, for whom the past, present, and future are interpreted in a manner radically different from the way they are presented to us in secular media and institutions. Alien as it may appear to those unacquainted with it, this interpretation is bedrock and touchstone to millions of fundamentalist Christians, including some of the most studious and thoughtful of that increasingly important aggregate. Because it is part of a long intellectual tradition, with extensive and systematic content, it deserves to be accorded serious examination, not to be dismissed as nonsense.

One glaring weakness of much popular pre-millennial literature is the casual method of documentation employed by its authors. The *National Enquirer*, *The Midnight Cry*, the *Borger (Texas) New Herald*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* may be quoted in the same publication, with no hint that some sources are likely to be more reliable than others. "Experts" known to be eccentric, or whose pronouncements are demonstrably erroneous, are characterized as "eminent researcher," "astute financial officer," and "renowned authority" Best-selling books by pre-millennialists declare that "university classes teach people how to perform supernatural feats" and that Russian experimenters "have been enormously successful at contacting supernatural forces and spirits," or tell of "how nylon stockings disappeared on several hundred women 'in a flash' and why this event can kill a nation," all without conventional documentation. The growing use of numerological schemes to uncover hidden examples of 666 is often ingenious, but scarcely more compelling in its authority than Tex Ritter's classic recitative about a soldier who used a deck of cards as a Bible, or accounts of the peculiar coincidences in the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy

Mary Stewart Relfe asserts that such song lyrics as "What the world needs now is love, sweet love" and the Coca-Cola theme, "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony," are anti-American attacks on Christian values, and she tells of being "rendered immobile" at learning that the Sex Pistols' irreverent "I am an Antichrist, I am an Anarchist" was part of the lyrics of the number-one song in England. Among pre-millennialists, the record for predictive accuracy is still spotty. Salem Kirban, for example, one of the most prolific writers in the field, predicted in various publications that the 1976 Republican convention would be accompanied by riot and guerrilla warfare, that automobiles would be banned from major U.S. cities "by or before 1977," that a negative income tax would be approved by Congress by 1977, that Queen Elizabeth would resign by 1978, and that Edward Kennedy would

be elected President in 1980. Without supplying dates, but with an implication of imminence, Kirban also predicted a successful head transplant on a well-known personality and the publication of an obscene Bible, studded with sex photos and profanity, which many churches would hail as "being in tune with reality."

These examples of overreaching reflect poor scholarship and faulty journalistic technique rather than inherent weakness of doctrine, and some evangelical scholars who adhere to pre-millennial beliefs decry such attempts at over-specification. But even if these peculiarities could be minimized or eliminated, a great gulf would still separate pre-millennialists from those with less deterministic perspectives on history. Fundamentalist teachers of prophecy are fond of saying that "practically all scholars" or "virtually all commentaries" agree with their views, but this is far from the case. In fact, the biggest problem with the pre-millennial position is that it largely disregards the scholarship associated with the major European, British, and American seminaries and graduate schools of religion, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Oxford, Cambridge, Tübingen, and Marburg. These are, of course, precisely those universities accorded greatest esteem in the non-evangelical and secular worlds.

The study of Daniel, Revelation, and similar biblical literature has enjoyed some popularity in these universities and seminaries since about 1960, and such world-class scholars as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Johannes Metz have sought to enhance its standing in serious theological discussion. Though they eschew the literal interpretations favored by fundamentalists, these mainstream scholars view prophetic Scripture as bearing witness to the liberation and hope implicit in the biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God, and thus providing meaning to believers in difficult and confusing times. Pannenberg, for example, asserts that the imagery of these texts should be seen not as depicting actual future events but as affirming that God will eventually bring history to consummation and that its meaning, heretofore hidden from human wisdom, will then be revealed. For Moltmann, the force of the fantastic visions of millennial glory is to offer a transcendent hope that enables us to manifest courage and experience victory in our present circumstances, however troubled and pain-filled they may be. And Metz, a theologian vitally concerned with Christian social action, regards these writings as encouraging a creative and militant approach to the future that includes the overthrow of oppressive power structures and the hopeful attempt to build—not just wait for—a golden age of justice and equality for all humankind.

Despite such efforts, however, the end-time literature is not of paramount concern to mainstream biblical scholars, and interpretations such as those of Darby and Scofield have no standing whatever. Instead, the Scriptures on which the pre-millennial view is based are regarded as part of a distinctive genre of Jewish literature called "apocalyptic" (not "prophetic"), which flourished between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. Despite its imaginative nature and variety of detail, apocalyptic literature consistently displays several identifying characteristics. In symbolic language filled with mysterious numbers, fantastic beasts, and unusual meteorological and astral occurrences, the writer first sketches a selective dive survey of past history, which has the effect of certifying the vision as trustworthy, then moves to predictions about the future. In almost all such literature, the world is depicted as bad and getting worse, with little hope for improvement by human agency. Just when total destruction seems inevitable, the present age is brought to an end by God's intervention and a glorious new age dawns, complete with a flawless paradisiacal realm. This dualistic contrast of the two ages often, but not always, includes a Messiah (or Christ) and an Antimesiah (or Antichrist) as lords of the two eras.

The differences between pre-millennial and mainstream scholarship can be seen in a comparison of their understanding of the Book of Daniel. To pre-millennialists, Daniel was a prophet of the Babylonian captivity who, in the sixth century B.C., predicted events that were to occur between 1948 and the end of the present century. Non-evangelical scholars contend that the book was completed between 166 and 164 B.C. and reflects the oppressive occupation of Palestine by the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who stopped the sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem and set up a statue of Zeus on the altar of burnt offering, an act aptly described as "the abomination of desolation." The book is regarded as a standard example of apocalyptic literature, mistaken about a few historical matters that occurred four centuries before the writer lived, and wrong in its attempt to predict the future, but capable of inspiring faithfulness at a time of religious persecution. In similar fashion, the visions of Revelation are understood by non-evangelical scholars to be symbolic descriptions of the persecutions anticipated and experienced at the hands of Rome near the close of the first century A.D.

Representatives of each of these two quite different approaches to biblical studies are likely to regard members of the other camp as hopelessly wrongheaded—ignorant in one case, impious in the other. As one reared in fundamentalism and educated in both evangelical and liberal tradition, I do not regard the outlook for rapprochement as

especially promising. A shift from evangelical interpretation to the historical-critical approach is clearly more common than the reverse. An evangelical would likely respond to this claim with the observation "Broad is the path that leads to destruction," but one committed to follow the evidence where it leads can take heart from Jesus's assertion that the search for truth is also the search for freedom.

Pre-millennial teaching is probably most attractive to those who feel that the world, or at least their segment of it, is out of control, and can be brought to a good end only by concerted supernatural intervention. Such feelings of marginality are likely to be especially acute when established ways of life are being threatened. To many, however, an apocalyptic outlook is simply part of the package they have inherited, and adherence is less a matter of alienation or attraction than of received tradition and perceived truth. If the Bible says these things shall come to pass, they shall come to pass, whether or not the prospect pleases. And if current events seem to offer tangible supporting evidence, then faith is strengthened and hope increased.

Barring nuclear holocaust or some shift in Israel's status that would necessitate a drastic reconstruction of the end-time scenario, the current wave of apocalyptic interest will surely maintain its force at least throughout the 1980s, and probably to the year 2000, the numerical properties of which will likely encourage still further millennial speculation. But if Jesus keeps on not coming interest will eventually crest and recede to await the next promising configuration of signs. On the other hand, if substantial numbers of our more pious neighbors mysteriously disappear, and Henry Kissinger or Ronald Reagan shows up on television a short while later to suggest that we have the number 666 tattooed on our foreheads, we might witness even greater concern for the signs of the times, and a keen effort to avoid serious missteps. Should that occur, some of us would doubtless lament the fact that we had not paid closer heed to the Apostle Paul's warning: "Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."

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