



· J E S U S ·  
APOCALYPTIC PROPHET  
OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

BART D. EHRMAN

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**JESUS**



# Jesus

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*apocalyptic prophet of the new millennium*

**Bart D. Ehrman**

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*To Kelly and Derek*





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# *preface*

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Scholars have written hundreds of books about Jesus (not to mention the thousands of books written by non-scholars). A good number of these books, mainly the lesser-known ones, have been written by scholars for scholars to promote scholarship; others have been written by scholars to popularize scholarly views. The present book is one of the latter kind. I really don't have a lot to say to scholars who have already spent a good portion of their lives delving into the complex world of first-century Palestine and the place that Jesus of Nazareth occupied within it. And frankly, having read scores of the books written by scholars for scholars, I don't think anyone else has much more to say either. This is a well-beaten and much-trod path.

There does seem, though, to be room for another book for popular (i.e., general-reading) audiences. It's not that there aren't *enough* books about Jesus out there. It's that there aren't enough of the right *kind* of book. Very, very few, in fact.

For one thing, most popular treatments are inexcusably dull and/or idiosyncratic. I've worked hard to make this one neither. You'll have to decide for yourself whether it's dull. But I would like to say a word about idiosyncrasy.

It's true that some rather unusual views of Jesus sell well: "Jesus Was a Marxist!" "Jesus Was a Feminist!" "Jesus Was a Gay Magician!" After all, if any of these views should be *right*, it might be worth knowing. What has struck me over the years, though, is that the view shared probably by the majority of scholars over the course of this century, at least in Germany and America, is equally shocking for most nonspecialist readers. And yet it is scarcely known to the general reading public. This is the view that is embraced in this book. In a nutshell, it's a view first advanced most persuasively by none other than the great twentieth-century humanitarian Albert Schweitzer. It claims that Jesus is best understood as a first-century Jewish apocalypticist. This is a shorthand way of saying that Jesus fully expected that the history of the world as we know it (well, as he knew it) was going to come to a screeching halt, that God was soon going to intervene in the affairs of this world, overthrow the forces of evil in a cosmic act of judgment, destroy huge masses of humanity, and abolish existing human political and religious institutions. All this would be a prelude to the arrival of a new order on earth, the Kingdom of God. Moreover, Jesus expected that this cataclysmic end of history would come in his own generation, at least during the lifetime of his disciples.

It's pretty shocking stuff, really. And the evidence that Jesus believed and taught it is fairly impressive. Odd that scholars haven't gone out of their way to share that evidence with everyone else. Maybe they've had reasons of their own.

The evidence itself plays a major role in this book. Most other popular treatments of Jesus rarely discuss evidence. That's a particularly useful move—to avoid mentioning the evidence—if you're going to present a case that's hard to defend. Maybe if you just tell someone what you think, they'll take your word for it. In my opinion, though, a reader has the right to know not only what scholars think about Jesus (or about any other person or event from the past), but also *why* they think what they think. That is, readers have the right to know what the evidence is.

I think that the process of understanding history is analogous to taking a long trip by car. If you know your driver well, you can simply say, "Take me to Pensacola," and assume that when you're there, he'll let you know. If your driver is a complete stranger, though, you're probably better off getting a map and figuring out the route yourself, just in case. The scholars who write books about Jesus are probably strangers to you. If they are going to take you on a trip through history, you have

the right to know which map they've decided to use and which route they've opted to follow. The reality is that a lot of drivers along this particular road take shortcuts that end up going nowhere, and others find themselves revving their engines (for effect) in dead ends. More commonly, they end up in California, when you wanted to go to Florida. But they tell you it *is* Florida, and since you haven't been shown a map, you pretty much have to take their word for it.

For this book, I want not only to state my views of the historical Jesus but also to show *why* they are my views. As it turns out, the map itself is interesting. Pity that it's so unfamiliar to the people who would be most fascinated by it. In any event, I plan to use this book not only to map out a consensus view of the historical Jesus, a strange new land for many first-time travelers, but also to trace the route through the intriguing twists and turns of history, showing what the surviving evidence is and how it can be used. Anyone who doesn't like where the journey takes us will, therefore, be able to retrace his or her steps, figure out where I've gone astray, and take a different path that leads elsewhere.

For all those who stay with me to the point of destination, both those who decide to stay there and those who choose to explore some other routes, I'd like to say that I'm glad you're along for the ride and hope you enjoy the trip.

Let me end these brief prefatory remarks by acknowledging some of my debts. I'd like to thank my editor at Oxford University Press, Robert Miller, who urged me to take on this project and guided me along the way with uncommon skill. Once it was finished, I asked several people to read the manuscript and found their comments enormously helpful. First was my incisive graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Diane Wudel, one of the few people on the face of the planet who actually seems busier than me. Then came three relatively young (we keep hoping this) but seasoned (this one is assured) scholars in the field, friends with incisive minds, quick pens, and the good sense to agree with me on lots of interpretive issues: Dale Allison of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, a prolific and learned scholar; Susan Garrett of Louisville Theological Seminary, one of the most sensible exegetes in the business; and Dale Martin of Duke University, the smartest New Testament scholar I know. Last and (with apologies to the others) best (for reasons unrelated to the manuscript) was my partner, Sarah Beckwith, a brilliant medievalist in the English Department at Duke, whose mind is something to behold.

I am dedicating this book to Kelly and Derek, my kids—so different from one another (and lucky for them, from me), yet both so terrific and so much a part of who I am. They mean far more to me than they will ever know. I would give them the world, but since I'm a bit constrained in my resources just now, they'll have to settle for this book.

Translations of the Greek New Testament and the Coptic writings of the Nag Hammadi Library are my own; for the Hebrew Bible, I've used the NRSV.

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**JESUS**



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## *the end of history as we know it*

FOR NEARLY TWO THOUSAND YEARS THERE HAVE BEEN CHRISTIANS WHO HAVE THOUGHT THAT THE WORLD WAS GOING TO END IN THEIR OWN LIFETIMES. THE THESIS OF THIS BOOK IS THAT this belief is as ancient as the Christian religion itself, that it can be traced all the way back to the beginning, to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus thought that the history of the world would come to a screeching halt, that God would intervene in the affairs of this planet, overthrow the forces of evil in a cosmic act of judgment, and establish his utopian Kingdom here on earth. And this was to happen within Jesus' own generation.

It is a bold thesis, and I will need some time to develop it properly. I'd like to start not at the beginning of Christianity, with the life of Jesus, but closer to our own time, with views that continue to be found among some of Jesus' followers, contemporary visionaries who still maintain that the end of all things is imminent. From there we can move backward in time to the views proclaimed by the founder of Christianity. The question underlying this survey can be expressed simply: Is it possible that modern-day (and nineteenth-century, and medieval, and early Christian) doomsayers who have proclaimed the imminent end of their world have actually subscribed to the views of Jesus, who proclaimed the imminent end of his?<sup>1</sup>

### **Starting Near the End**

Future historians looking back on the twentieth century will not consider 1988 an exceptionally significant year. It was a time of large-scale natural disasters—a hurricane that left half a million Jamaicans homeless and an earthquake in Armenia that savaged entire cities and left forty thousand dead. Somewhat less earthshattering was the national news here in the States: in 1988 the federal government bailed out the country's savings and loans institutions and George Bush trounced an ill-fated presidential bid by Michael Dukakis. More significant politically were the developments on the international scene, in particular an uncommon number of international peace initiatives—the end of a six-year war in Nicaragua, the Soviet withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the Ayatollah Khomeini's proclamation ending Iran's war with Iraq, the first meeting between representatives of the United States and the PLO. But from a historical perspective, these developments pale in comparison with the cataclysms of the year to follow—1989, the year of Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first free election in the Soviet Union, the execution of the communist dictator of Romania Nicolae Ceausescu, the victory of Lech Walesa's Solidarity Party in Poland. By way of contrast, the most intriguing events on the American scene in 1988 were human interest stories that made little long-term impact on the history of the world: this was the year that Leona Helmsley was indicted for income tax evasion, that Sonny Bono was elected mayor of Palm Springs, that the Chicago Cubs played their first game in Wrigley Field under lights, and that evangelist Jimmy Swaggart staged a tearful confession before millions for taking a prostitute by the hand for purposes other than evangelism.



But it was not supposed to be that way. 1988 was *supposed* to be the year of the century—in fact, the year of all time. 1988 was to be the year the world ended.

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## The Peculiar Case of Edgar Whisenant

Proof was given in a widely distributed and remarkably influential booklet entitled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*.<sup>2</sup> Written by Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA rocket engineer—who, presumably, therefore, was a pretty smart fellow—the book, true to its title, enumerated biblical and logical reasons why 1988 would be the year that history would begin to end. Sometime during the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah, September 11–13, Jesus Christ would return from heaven to remove his followers from earth (the “rapture”), before a seven-year period of cataclysmic disaster on the earth (the “tribulation”). The tribulation would begin at “sunset 3 October 1988,” when the Soviet Union invaded Israel and so inaugurated World War III (p. 47). The crises that ensued would lead to the rise of a personal agent of Satan, the Antichrist, who would lead millions away from God, and, in the midst of worldwide ruin and despair, declare himself to be divine. He would then try to take over the world’s government, leading to a thermonuclear war on October 4, 1995, which would devastate the United States (“you can walk from Little Rock to Dallas over ashes only”), throwing it into nuclear winter (temperatures would never rise above  $-150^{\circ}$  F), and eliminating its food and water supply. It wouldn’t be a pretty picture.

The book may sound like a bit of science fiction, but it was read as Gospel Truth by a surprising number of sincere and devout Christians and sent untold numbers of others scurrying to their Bibles to see if these things could be so. Within months of its production, over 2 million copies were in circulation.

Numerous Christians, of course, pointed out that the Bible itself indicates that no one can know when the end will come. As Jesus states in the Gospel of Matthew: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt. 24:36). Whisenant himself, though, was unfazed by Jesus’ words. He, after all, had *not* predicted “the day and hour” of the end, just the week: “We just cannot know the day nor the hour. But I’m still just as happy knowing the week. I do not need to know the day and the hour” (p. 8).

The “88 reasons” that Whisenant provides for his readers are presented, for the most part, as biblically certain prophecies that many co-literalists had difficulty disputing. For example, from the same chapter of Matthew, after detailing the cosmic disasters that would happen at the end of time before the arrival of the Kingdom, Jesus said:

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place (Matt. 24:32–34).

What, though, does this mean? Whisenant points out that in the Bible, the “fig tree” is often used for the nation of Israel. The fig tree “putting forth its leaves” is obviously a reference, then, to Israel coming back to life after a long hiatus. Thus, the end will come within a generation of the reestablishment of Israel as a nation. Since the modern state of Israel was established in 1948, and since a generation in the Bible comprises forty years—voilà! 1988 must be the year.

Whisenant claimed that dozens of other biblical predictions all pointed to exactly the same time

Most of them are highly complicated. As one of the simpler examples: in Leviticus 26:28 God tells the people of Israel that if they are disobedient, they will be punished “sevenfold” for their sin. Whisenant takes this to mean a punishment lasting seven “years,” and he notes that in the Jewish lunar calendar, a year consists of 360 days. Moreover, in a number of biblical texts (i.e., Num. 14:34), God reckons one day as a year. This means, then, that the punishment of Israel, before it can inherit its reward, was to last  $7 \times 360$  years, or 2,520 years in all. According to the book of Daniel, Israel’s punishment was to begin with the seventy-year oppression of Israel by the Babylonians, which started according to Whisenant, with the reign of the monarch Nebuchadnezzar in 602 BCE and ended, therefore, in 532 BCE.<sup>3</sup> If the time of Israel’s punishment is to last an additional 2,520 years, then it happens to bring us up to...surprise!...1988.

Despite the massive and detailed argumentation—it goes on for page after interminable page—not everyone, even among Whisenant’s closest followers, was convinced. A letter written by Norvell L. Olive, executive director of the World Bible Society, the group responsible for circulating the book, serves as its foreword and, somewhat oddly, provides a kind of rearguard protection: “If for some reason these events do not happen, I cannot see how any honest person could say anything but good about someone who would sound the alarm when they smell smoke.”

Mr. Whisenant himself, of course, was far more confident. Of his eighty-eight reasons “why 1988 looks like the year of the rapture” (p. 3), he points out that “Reason #17, added to reasons #10 and #11 plus reason #4, provides four witnesses of God that 1988 through 1995 is the 70th week of Daniel [i.e., the period of the great tribulation following the return of Jesus for all his true followers]. It all fits together a little too neatly to be discarded completely. I could not have faked it, had I wanted to” (p. 2).

Many readers agreed. Throughout the South, especially in parts of Appalachia, there were readers who took Mr. Whisenant’s book with the utmost seriousness. Newspaper and TV accounts reported people quitting their jobs, selling their homes, and devoting themselves completely to prayer immediately prior to the fated week of September 11.

When the end didn’t come, they had to pick up the pieces as best they could.

Mr. Whisenant, however, remained true to his convictions. When time continued on merrily after his projected date, he published another booklet, *The Final Shout Rapture Report: 1989*, explaining his slight miscalculation.<sup>4</sup> By an oversight, he had neglected to observe that when the Gregorian calendar that we use today was first created in the sixth century, it started the first decade of the new era as AD I. There was no year zero. But as a result, the first decade AD had only nine years. And so, all of his earlier calculations had been off by one year. But the end was sure, now, to come on September 11–12, 1989!

In places, though, the bravado of this second edition begins to ring hollow, as the author gives some statistical probabilities: “Jesus is coming, and I would give it at least a 50% chance in 1989; if not then, an abundance of Scriptures point to 1992. However, if the birth date of Christ is off one or two years, then it could be 1990 or 1991. There seems to be a lot more evidence for ’89 or ’92 than any other time for the Rapture” (p. iii).

## **Taking the World by Storm: Hal Lindsey’s Late Great Planet Earth**

The end never did come, however, and the millions of copies of Mr. Whisenant’s booklets have been

relegated to the trash heaps of historical curiosities.

~~And there they reside next to scores of others, no less curious. The predicting of the time of the end has a long and noble history; and even though every attempt to pinpoint the end since the beginning has proved to be incontrovertibly wrong, the enterprise continues alive and well among us. Prophetic books that predict the cataclysms of our immediate future, based on readings of the Bible no more less bizarre than Mr. Whisenant's, are among the best-selling religious literature today. In fact probably the single most read author of religion in modern times is a writer who, while somewhat more guarded than Mr. Whisenant, predicted in 1970 that a thermonuclear holocaust would engulf the planet by the late 1980s. The author is Hal Lindsey, and his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the best-selling work of nonfiction (using the term loosely) of the 1970s. Today there are over 28 million copies in print.~~<sup>5</sup>

Lindsey was no number cruncher like Whisenant. He was a savvy observer of the times with an unusual knack for relating to, even mesmerizing, the average mildly interested reader—especially college students. His book reads like a detective novel (where we know whodunnit—or better yet, who'll do it—but want to find out when and how) and is packed with anecdotes, plausible historical scenarios, and predictions of mass destruction and misery tailor-made for audiences soon (this was in 1970) to enjoy such apocalyptic cinematic thrillers as *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*. Lindsey sees the world as the stage of God's historical activities and the Bible as the blueprint. He begins by insisting that the Bible has a track record: just as the ancient prophecies of the Messiah came true in the coming of Jesus, so too the prophecies of the end will be fulfilled in his second coming. These prophecies are not straightforward predictions per se, since the ancient prophets could not have possibly realized what God was showing to them: their revelations presupposed advanced military technology unimaginable to the world of spears and swords. And so, when the prophet Zechariah said that when God wages war against his enemies, “their flesh shall rot while they are still on their feet; their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths” (Zech. 14:12) this, according to Lindsey, is “exactly what happens in a thermonuclear blast.” The prophet wrote what he saw; he just didn't realize what that was.

Particularly striking is Lindsey's precise calculation of what will happen at the end of world history. The major players in the prophetic scenario are the restored nation of Israel; oil-thirsty and power-hungry Russia and its eastern bloc allies; an alliance of Arab states, headed by Egypt and intent on reestablishing Palestinian control of the Holy Land; China, with its standing army of 200 million and a ten-nation European commonwealth (with whom the United States may be vaguely aligned although Lindsey thinks the United States may already have been destroyed by nuclear war or taken over by Communists by then) headed by a charismatic and widely adored statesman whose identity unbeknownst to the world at large, is in fact the Antichrist.

The cataclysmic events portrayed by the ancient prophets begin sometime in the 1980s. Israel, having acquired control of Jerusalem, rebuilds the Temple (which had lain in ruins since the Romans destroyed it in 70 CE),<sup>6</sup> creating enormous tensions with the surrounding Arab states. Concerned about its growing sense of isolation in an age of nuclear threat, Israel signs a peace treaty with the leader of the European commonwealth, who through uncanny skills of diplomacy is able to keep the peace. But after three and a half years, he reveals his true colors: entering the Jerusalem Temple, he declares himself to be God and institutes a bloody reign of terror intent on making the world bow to him as the one who holds all economic power. In response, the Arab-African confederacy invades Israel from the south. Russia, driven by its need of the natural resources of the Middle East, uses the occasion to launch an amphibious and ground invasion from the north, overthrowing Israel and crushing the southern alliance as well. It then moves on to take Egypt. In response, the European commonwealth launches a tactical nuclear attack against the Russian army, destroying it, and the Russian homeland

in toto. This leaves, then, two major world forces—the European commonwealth headed by the Antichrist and China, whose 200-million-man army will converge on the Holy Land and engage the Europeans in the final battle. Nuclear arsenals will be unleashed; the major cities of earth will be destroyed. And then, when there appears to be absolutely no hope, God will intervene once and for all. Christ will appear from heaven to overthrow the forces of evil and to set up his good Kingdom on earth.

Lindsey repeatedly tells his reader that these events are described in precise detail by the ancient prophets, who, of course, must be believed. And he repeatedly affirms that all the pieces are already in place, so that the world does not have long to wait. China (by 1970) had boasted that it could field a 200-million-man army, the European commonwealth had nearly all ten members, the Soviet Union was flexing its expansionistic muscles, Israeli-Palestinian tensions were at an all-time high. And although no one could know *exactly* when the Antichrist would make his move, anyone who could read the Bible could know *pretty nearly* when. Appealing to Matthew 24, as Edgar Whisenant was to do with more extensive numerical proofs some years later, Lindsey tells his readers that it would be sometime “within forty years or so of 1948.” He assures them that “many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.”

Indeed, they did: for decades, John Walvoord, professor (and president) at Lindsey’s alma mater Dallas Theological Seminary, has made a career (and a very nice one) of writing books about the imminent end of the age. Some of Lindsey’s fellow students have claimed that *The Late Great Planet Earth* was little more than cribbed lecture notes.<sup>7</sup>

What, though, happened when the time drew near and historical events called the details of Lindsey’s predictions in doubt? As might be expected, he wrote another book, *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, arguing that everything was going according to plan.<sup>8</sup> And clearly some things were: the book stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for twenty-one weeks.

Problems *did* arise, of course, with the demise of communism—since so much of Lindsey’s reconstruction was built on the expansionistic tendencies of the now-defunct Soviet Union and on American fears of the spread of communism. His first reaction revealed Lindsey’s true conspiratorial colors: “the reality,” he argued, “is that the ‘collapse’ of Communism is part of a masterful game of deceit engineered by Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet KGB. It is part of an elaborate strategy to secure Western aid and technology, buy time, persuade the West to unilaterally disarm and, at the same time, continue a covert but nevertheless dramatic military buildup of its own.”<sup>9</sup> When that became too implausible even for Lindsey to believe, he changed his views again, seeing the final battle of Armageddon as precipitated, not by a Soviet communist takeover, but by insurgencies caused by Muslim fundamentalists.

And so it goes—alterations based on the changing tides of historical events, wisps of smoke scattered to the wind but still taken to signify impending doom. Evidently Lindsey’s reputation has not been tarnished a whit either by his failed interpretations or his more recent claims that UFOs are deceptive ruses by demons, who will soon stage a massive UFO landing to mislead earthlings into believing in life on other planets.<sup>10</sup> His books and videos continue to be enormously popular.

## **And the End Keeps Comin’**

The failure of these past predictions to materialize has done little to stall the cottage industry of prophecy books. In fact, if millions of the Bible-believing faithful in America thought the time was



ripe at the end of the 1980s for the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies, the end of the 1990s had created even more worldwide interest in the possible end of the age, even outside of the evangelical ranks. The end of the millennium itself is the chief culprit, a moment still future for me now as I write these words, but past for many of you who are reading them (unless, in fact, the End *has* come). Oddly enough, people have been interested in this particular period—the time of the year 2000—for centuries. And the interest, again, has biblical roots.

Traditionally, the calculus has worked something like this.<sup>11</sup> The story of creation found in the book of Genesis indicates that God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh. Moreover in the New Testament book of 2 Peter we are told that “with the Lord, a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day” (2 Pet. 3:8, cf. Ps. 90:4). In an ancient Christian writing called the Epistle of Barnabas (which some early Christians included among the books of the New Testament; it now may be found in the collection of works known as the Apostolic Fathers), produced around the year 130 CE, we find the first instance of a Christian maintaining the corollary that has been picked up by Christian date-setters for centuries: God’s creation is to last six thousand years, followed by a thousand-year period of rest—the so-called millennium.

What, though, does this have to do with the year 2000? Well, for purists, nothing. As I noted, when the calendar used today was invented in the sixth century—by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus (whose name is translated “Dennis the Short” by the witty and fellow short fellow Stephen Jay Gould)—it began the new era with the year 1. There was no year zero. This means, technically, either that the first decade of the Common Era had only nine years rather than ten (Edgar Whisenant’s temporal fallback position), or that every new decade, century, and millennium begins, like the first, with years ending with a 1 (1981, 1991, 2001, etc.). If so, then every old decade and century ends with a year ending with 0 rather than 9 (so that the last year of the 1980s, oddly enough, would be 1990, and the end of the second millennium would be 2000, etc.). Calendrical purists tend to prefer this second option, since mathematically a “decade”—even the first—does indeed require ten years, so that the year 2000 marks the end of the second millennium, not the beginning of the third.

But to return to the question. What does the year 2001 (or 2000, for those who just prefer keeping things simple) have to do with the calculus of the age-old Christian belief that the world was to last six thousand years? Since the seventeenth century, many Christians have believed that the world was created around the year 4000 BCE.

Actually, the date can be made more precise. In 1650 CE, an Irish archbishop and scholar, James Ussher, engaged in a detailed study of when the world began. Ussher based his calculations on the genealogies of the Bible (which state not only who begat whom, but also indicate, in many instances, how long each of the people thus begotten lived) and a detailed study of other ancient sources, such as Babylonian and Roman history. On these grounds, he argued that the world was created in 4004 BCE—in fact, at noon on October 23. This chronology became dominant throughout Western Christendom. It was printed widely in King James Bibles and continues to be believed by nonevolutionarily minded Christians today.

Why, though, did Archbishop Ussher not simply round things off a bit and opt for the year 4000 BCE, say, sometime in late afternoon? It was because he realized full well that in addition to failing to start the era with the year 0—a failing for which he can scarcely be faulted, since the concept of zero was not mathematically worked out yet in the sixth century—Dionysius Exiguus miscalculated the date of Jesus’ birth, from which the era had its beginning. For if Jesus was in fact an infant during the reign of King Herod—as related by both Matthew and Luke in the New Testament—then he must have been born no later than 4 BCE, the year of Herod’s death. This creates a problem, of course, for those who continue to work with the abbreviations AD (anno Domini: Latin for The Year of our Lord) and BC (Before Christ)—since, as sometimes noted, according to the calendar we use Jesus was actually born

four years Before Christ!

~~The larger problem, though, is that if the world were to exist for exactly six thousand years—many readers of the Bible have maintained since practically the inception of the Christian religion—should have ended already, by noon on October 23, 1997. But the world keeps on tickin’.~~

I obviously won’t be able to pinpoint every moment that every Christian has thought the world was going to end. That would require a book of about two thousand chapters. But I do want to show that this isn’t just a recent phenomenon. And so, I would like to say a few words about several of the highlights (or, depending on one’s take, lowlights) of the tradition, moving back in time now to the nineteenth century, then the Middle Ages, and then the early Christian church.

## William Miller’s Great Disappointment

Probably the best-known date-setter of American history is William Miller, a kind of nineteenth-century Edgar Whisenant.<sup>12</sup> Unlike his fated successor, Miller never published anything like 2 million copies of his writings; but the splash he made in American history was far greater. He wasn’t as precise as Whisenant in knowing the particular week in which Jesus would come, but he did know the year. Based on a careful study of biblical prophecies, Miller maintained that Jesus would return to earth in a cosmic blaze of glory in the year 1843.

A simple and uneducated farmer from up-state New York, Miller had been raised in a religious home but rebelled from his Christian heritage as a soldier fighting in the American War of 1812. After the war, burdened by his doubts and troubled by his irreligious ways, he turned to the Bible to find the Truth. And find it he did, in clear and certain terms: not only the truth of the existence of God and the importance of faith in Christ, but also of the end of the world. For two years Miller studied in detail the texts of the prophets. In particular he was engrossed with the book of Daniel, which states that “unto two thousand and three hundred days, then shall the sanctuary be cleansed” (Dan. 8:14). His interpretation of the passage was based on several (for him) fairly obvious assumptions: (1) that the “sanctuary” referred to God’s holy creation, (2) that its being cleansed referred to the purging of the creation at the end of time, (3) that, as elsewhere in the Bible, a day of God’s time refers to a human year, and (4) that the terminus a quo—the time from which the clock would start ticking—was the beginning of the reconstruction of the earthly Jewish sanctuary, the Temple in Jerusalem, in 457 BCE. Miller then drew the inevitable conclusion: 2,300 years after 457 BCE would be 1843 CE. In his own words: “I was thus brought, in 1818, at the close of my two years’ study of the Scriptures, to the solemn conclusion, that in about twenty-five years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up.”<sup>13</sup>

It was a conclusion he stuck to for the rest of his life, even after the twenty-five-year period had expired.

At first Miller had no converts at all; in fact, he scarcely told anyone of his discovery. But eventually—after five more years of study devoted to ensuring that he had not made a mistake—he began to tell neighbors and friends, and eventually ministers. By 1831 he began receiving invitations to speak to small congregations in rural New England, then to ministers’ conferences, then, as he won more and more adherents, to massive rallies in major cities in the Northeast. Some of his converts were, unlike Miller himself, organizationally and entrepreneurially inclined (though, unlike some of his latter-day successors, none of them made any money off their involvement). As the fated date approached, huge tent meetings and camps were arranged; thousands of people came to hear the good

news, and many of them converted. Soon the movement, with eloquent ministerial converts who attracted the hoards, began to take on a life of its own. Even though Miller himself remained a humble Baptist to the end, there was talk (and some allegations) of creating a new denomination.

Miller himself had never set any specific date for the end—apart from the somewhat vague claim that it would come “sometime around 1843.” In January of that year, he made one clarification—the date needed to be calculated according to “ancient Jewish reckoning,” so that it actually extended from March 21, 1843, to March 21, 1844. Those who had expected Christ’s return by the last day of 1843 were disappointed when the new year appeared, but they placed their hopes on the revised terminus ante quem in the spring. The movement continued to thrive, picking up thousands of converts, until that date, too, came and went.

One might have expected this failure to have ended the movement. But as with Whisenant and Lindsey and their countless thousands of followers in our day, so too then. It was noised about that brief delay was all part of the divine plan; among other things, it allowed more converts to join the fold and so escape the coming wrath of God. The movement picked up steam and reached a feverish pitch when one of its more articulate members insisted that the final date was to be October 22 of that year. Miller and his closest colleagues resisted the date, but the groundswell of support made it impossible to ignore. By October 6, 1844, they conceded that in fact the world had just over two weeks to live.

This time the failure of the end to appear created particular hardship. Their fervent hopes completely dashed, Millerite believers were subject to abject ridicule and, in some cases, real physical hardship: some of the faithful had quit their jobs to devote themselves to the mission of spreading the word; some farmers had left their crops in the field unharvested; some people had given away all their possessions (at least one of whom went to court afterward in an effort to win some of them back). Some never recovered from the non-event that historians have come to call “The Great Disappointment.” It was enough to keep most Christians from ever predicting the day and the hour of Jesus’ return: apart from the occasional Edgar Whisenant, most have been content to talk about what will happen in “our generation.”

But the Millerite movement was not itself without long historical precedent. Move the clock back six centuries, and *mutatis mutandis*, you can find a similar movement sweeping across the continent of Europe.

## Joachim of Fiore’s New Era of the Spirit

Joachim of Fiore is scarcely a household name, but it used to be.<sup>15</sup> For centuries. Joachim was born in Calabria (the toe of Italy) in 1135 CE. As a young man, he served as an official in Silicia, in the court of Palermo. But in 1171 he entered the Benedictine monastery of Corazzo and soon thereafter became the abbot. While on a trip to another monastery south of Rome in 1183, Joachim had a series of visions in which he learned, directly from God, he claimed, the mysteries that would unlock the meaning of the Bible and the course of human history. Over a period of eighteen years, he wrote and discussed these mysteries, while remaining actively involved in political affairs as a kind of liaison between secular and church officials.

Joachim believed that when God, the Holy Trinity, created the world, he put something of his own essence into it. The world, therefore, must be understood in a trinitarian way as moving through a sequence of three ages or eras. The first was the era of God the Father, in which humans were und

the harsh and restrictive, but just, Law of God. This era lasted from the time of the call of Abraham the father of the Jews, up to Jesus. Jesus brought in a new period, the era of the Son, in which humans were given the gospel of God and freed from their bondage to the Law. At the end of this, the second era of the world, the Antichrist would arise, acquire as an ally a leading political figure (probably a Muslim infidel), and be opposed by a holy and powerful pope along with two groups of Christian “spiritual men.” This would lead, then, to the third and most glorious era of all—the era of the Spirit in which people would be liberated from the human restraints of this relatively evil age and freed to worship God fully in lives completely devoted to contemplative meditation. This might not sound like utopia for people today, but for a twelfth-century monk, it would be paradise.

Joachim was clear that the end of the age would come soon: “This [crisis of the second era] will not take place in the days of your grand-children or in the old age of your children, but in your own days, few and evil.”<sup>16</sup> He observed that the time of the first era, that of the Father, from Abraham to Jesus lasted, according to Matthew 1:17, for forty-two generations. Since Joachim believed that events in each era are foreshadowed in the ones that preceded, he claimed that the second era would also last for forty-two generations; moreover, since for him a generation was an average of thirty years, he maintained that the forty-first generation had begun in the year 1201. When, then, would the history of this age draw to a final close? You do the math.

Still, Joachim refused to name the specific time of the end, and was able to fudge a bit by claiming that unlike the preceding generations, the forty-first and forty-second might take a bit longer. But as so often happens, his followers found his vague and general predictions somewhat less than satisfying and worked to tighten up the timetable. A couple of decades after Joachim’s death, some Franciscan monks disinterred his writings (they had not made much of a splash in his own day), forged a number of other writings in his name, claimed divine authorization for their teachings (since they alleged they derived from revelation from on high), and insisted that the world as they knew it was certainly going to come to an end in the year 1260.

Of course, it didn’t. But for centuries afterward, church people reinterpreted Joachim’s teaching believing that the antichrist was soon to appear here at the end of the second era of the world, before the new age of peace, harmony, and freedom arrived.

## Montanus and the New Jerusalem

We have moved, rather quickly, from the twentieth century to the middle of the nineteenth to the end of the twelfth. But our hop, skip, and jump through the history of Christian apocalyptic doomsaying has not yet come close to its point of origin. If we now choose to skip back an entire thousand years to the end of the second century, we continue to find prominent Christian groups proclaiming the imminent end of history as we know it. While several groups of this ilk are known from this time, I will mention just one. It is a group of Christians who followed a self-proclaimed prophet named Montanus and who were known, therefore, as the Montanists.<sup>17</sup>

One of the reasons the Montanists have been seen as so important historically is that one of the most prominent theologians in the history of the church joined their ranks at the height of his career. This was the fiery and prolific North African author Tertullian, commonly regarded as the father of Latin theology. Tertullian wrote most of his surviving works after the turn of the third century, but Montanus had been active some thirty years earlier.

As with most ancient figures, we don’t know as much about Montanus as we would like. According



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