

May 2010

# Visions of Apocalypse

**What Jews, Christians, and Muslims Believe about the End Times,  
and How Those Beliefs Affect Our World**

An essay on comparative eschatology among the three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and how beliefs about the end times express themselves through foreign policy and conflict

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The creation of this monograph was sponsored by the Strategic Assessments Project within the National Security Analysis Department of The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory (APL). Its ideas are intended to stimulate and provoke thinking about national security issues. Not everyone will agree with the premises put forward. It should be noted that this monograph reflects the views of the author alone and does not imply concurrence by APL or any other organization or agency.

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## PREFACE

On the slopes of the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem and within sight of both the Temple Mount and the al-Aqsa Mosque, lie 150,000 Jewish graves dating from ancient times through today. Many of the bodies are buried with their feet toward the city, because ancient prophets declared that the resurrection would begin there, and the faithful would rise and follow the Messiah into the Holy City.

On their way to the Golden Gate the risen will pass several prominent Christian churches that were built there to commemorate the Jews' rejection of a man who was later crucified and became the founder of a worldwide faith related to (but often in conflict with) Judaism. The Christians disagree with the Jews, because they believe that man was and remains the Messiah that the Jews are waiting for. They agree with the Jews, however, that he will arrive at that very spot and enter the Holy City with the saints behind him.

When the Messiah and his entourage—whether Jewish or Christian—reach the Golden Gate (the place that ancient prophets said the Messiah would enter the city) they will find it sealed off. Over five hundred years ago, an Ottoman sultan, champion and protector of Islam, determined to block the Jewish Messiah's entry and walled off the gate. Informed that the prophet Elijah would precede the Messiah, the sultan also constructed a cemetery at the foot of the gate, believing that a holy man would not tread on a grave. Years later, Jewish rabbis ruled that it would be permissible for Elijah to walk there anyway, because the prohibition only pertains to Jewish graves.

Jerusalem is the epicenter of eschatology—the focal point of the apocalyptic scenarios of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three faiths think of the city as their own. All three faiths gave rise to prophecies that the end of human history will occur there. The story of how these three systems of belief think about the end times and how those visions of apocalypse affect our world underlies much of what occurs in our world today.

Since 1967 and the Six Day War, American presidents have often joined international efforts to stop Jewish settlement on Israeli-occupied territory in Palestine, because building homes on the disputed land provokes angry responses from the dispossessed Arabs in the region and disrupts efforts to achieve a Middle East peace. What you may not know is that the Israeli term for the disputed settlements (*hitnakhlyot*) refers to Biblical promises from God to Israel concerning ownership of the land, and that some groups of settlers believe that by building homes there, they are helping to hasten the arrival of the Messiah and the end of human history.

The United States and her European allies oppose Iranian nuclear developments, fearing that the Shiite government there is determined to make weapons of mass destruction. Some pundits believe that the Iranian nuclear weapons program is unstoppable and that the US should acquiesce and formulate a nuclear deterrent strategy similar to one used against the Soviets in the Cold War. What you may not know is that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claims to be in contact with a man born in the 9<sup>th</sup> century who is still alive today, and he is an adherent of an Islamic school that teaches students that the end times have

arrived and that in the wake of an exchange of nuclear weapons, God will intervene to save Muslims and destroy their enemies.

Over the course of the last two centuries, American politicians have pursued a vision of the United States as a beacon to the rest of the world. Presidents on both the political right and left have spoken of a world devoid of crime, war, pollution, and want. Opponents have attacked these lofty goals as unachievable and a colossal waste of resources. What you may not know is that both views are rooted in ancient prophecies about the end times, and that differences in political views today emanate from differences in Biblical interpretation from two thousand years ago.

Our world is shaped, influenced, and in some cases governed by age-old prophecies recorded in the sacred literature of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Quite apart from the theological question of whether a divine being has a hand in world affairs, believers and their views on prophecies indisputably affect our world. The terrorist who is planning to attack you, and the government trying to protect you have different views about how (or if) human history will end. The Jewish settler building an illegal home in Hebron and the Israeli policeman coming to arrest him represent two radically different approaches to how to interpret the Book of Isaiah. The Hamas terrorist who wants to kill both of them likewise has a compelling and very different belief about the end times and has his own interpretation of Isaiah. Christians, who believe in Jesus the Son of Mary, fear Muslim radicals, who also believe in Jesus the Son of Mary, but who have a very different idea of how Jesus will return and what He will do when He arrives.

The influence of eschatology (beliefs about the end times) pervades our world. Why do some Americans attach religious significance to the State of Israel while others dispute the Jews' right to land taken in the Six Day War? Why do some Orthodox Jews support the secular government that rules them while others deprecate it—even to the point of actively cooperating with Israel's enemies? Why does the United Nations garden in New York contain a bronze statue adorned with the words of an ancient Jewish prophet—a sculpture given to the UN by an officially atheistic country? Why do some Christians in America get angry about how fellow Christians interpret the Book of Revelation and label them escapists, fascists, and enemies of conservation?

The answers to these questions are complex. But at the root of them and many other issues in our world today are ancient beliefs about how (or if) human history will end.

Lately I live in two worlds. From Monday through Friday I work as a national security analyst at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory in Laurel, Maryland. On the weekends I teach adult education, including Biblical eschatology, at my church. Over the years, my fascination has grown at how those two worlds relate to each other. On the one hand, they don't relate at all, because 21<sup>st</sup> century America clings to that sacred principle of unsacredness—the separation of church and state—that has protected religious freedom in our country for two centuries. On the other hand, the two subjects constantly intrude on each others' domain and endlessly violate the artificial boundary between them. The Bible has much to say about politics, warfare, and the course of humanity's history and future. National

security affairs, in turn, must wrestle with the belief systems that frame the cultural interactions within our world.

We are a nation that likes to believe that our religious beliefs do not affect our foreign policy formulation too much. We will allow social conservatism to clash with liberal and progressive agendas in matters of life, death, and morality. But for most Americans, it would be hard to detect how matters of faith influence our foreign policy. Not so for our adversaries. If we were to eavesdrop on Islamic extremists planning their next attacks against the West, we would find the conversation punctuated by (if not riveted to) visions of apocalypse. Jihadists often express their violent impulses in terms of eschatological beliefs. Indeed, not a few believe that their acts of aggression against infidels contribute to a sort of “jump-starting” the end times program.

But surely 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans are beyond all that. Or are we? As I examined the subject more closely I found strong eschatological themes expressing themselves in American foreign policy. Both right- and left-wing agendas, both conservative and liberal ministers, both hawks and doves have recourse to Biblical expressions, symbols, and themes as they shape the course of foreign relations. In fact, as this essay will reveal, differences in how one interprets Biblical prophecy lie at the very heart of policy debates today. The verbiage contained in our country’s foundational documents, Lincoln’s inaugural address, our most recent National Security Strategy, and even in the latest Quadrennial Defense Review points toward a future first framed by a collection of prophetic writings dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Likewise,

those same words elicit suspicion, contempt, and even violence from some who read them, because they interpret those same prophecies in a radically different way.

In a similar manner, Jewish beliefs about the end times influence activities within the state of Israel and color Israel's relations with her neighbors. As with Christians in America, Jews within (and without) Israel differ significantly in what they think about end times prophecy, and those differences in turn express themselves through politics, foreign relations, and war.

All three beliefs—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—claim descent from Abraham. It should not surprise us, then, that all three beliefs contain compelling and controversial visions of how human history will end, because according to the record in Genesis, God's promises to Abraham included universal and eschatological dimensions. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12: 2, 3 [NIV]) All three faiths believe they are the heirs or benefactors of those promises, and even modern adherents think about the world around them in terms of how those promises and the prophecies that followed will play out. This book is aimed at tracing those beliefs, observing how they express themselves today, and how they interact—sometimes violently—with each other.

My intent is to enumerate (not evaluate) religious beliefs about the end times. My aim is to introduce into the debate over foreign affairs an essential though largely ignored subject. In considering the course of human history and the near-term and far-term future, it would be



foolish to ignore the great prophetic writings out of a sense of intellectual arrogance, the more so when those visions of apocalypse are so deeply ingrained into the world-views of millions of people. By understanding the essential eschatological themes that are present even in the most coldly calculated policy formulation today, the student, analyst, official, devoted believer, and dismissive unbeliever can better comprehend the world. Prophets of the Old Testament spoke to both believers and unbelievers; their prophecies generated both obedience and disdain. Some prophets were promoted and rewarded while others were berated, jailed, and killed. But their words live on; their visions of apocalypse thrive today.

NOTE: I have used the BCE/CE method of dating throughout this essay, as opposed to using Christian or Islamic methodology. Additionally, I have used the most common forms of names for people or writings, which will, of course, vary from Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, or Arabic spelling.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Prophecy and Interpretation

#### The Sacred Literature

This essay deals with eschatology and its effects on foreign policy in the modern world. The word derives from the Greek word *έσχάτος* (ESCHATOS), which means “last” or, by extension, “last things”. Eschatology is the study of last things—specifically the end of human history, including the final judgment of mankind. Many faiths feature beliefs about the end times, but the three eschatologies we shall examine in this work are of special note because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have strong and enduring effects in the United States, Israel, and the Islamic world, respectively, and because they are related to each other—often overlapping or violently clashing in their dogmas.

The three Abrahamic faiths each have a body of foundational literature that is considered (by most or at least many believers) to be sacred—i.e., of divine origin. The Hebrew Bible, composed of what Christians refer to as the Old Testament, includes three major subdivisions: the ***Torah*** (i.e., the Law, the Pentateuch), which includes the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; the ***Nevi'im*** (the Prophets), including the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi; and the ***Ketuvim*** (the Writings), which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations,

Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Hebrew tradition took the first letters of these three divisions and derived the word **TaNaKh** (or Tanakh) to describe the entire collection. In addition to the Tanakh, Judaism also looks to the sacred collection of rabbinical teachings known as the Talmud, which is composed of the Mishnah (a record of oral law) and the Gemara (supplemental teachings). Most Jewish eschatology derives from the Tanakh, along with critical interpretation from the Talmud.

Christianity's sacred text is the Bible, which includes the Hebrew Bible under the rubric "Old Testament". In addition to that older work, the Christian New Testament adds the four Gospels entitled Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the book of the Acts of the Apostles; the Pauline Epistles of Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, I and II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Titus, and Philemon; the book of Hebrews; and the Epistles of James, I and II Peter, I, II, and III John, and Jude; and the book of Revelation. Nominations for Christian supplemental scriptures could include the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, etc., but since this essay is a general survey of eschatological doctrine, we will not consider these texts.

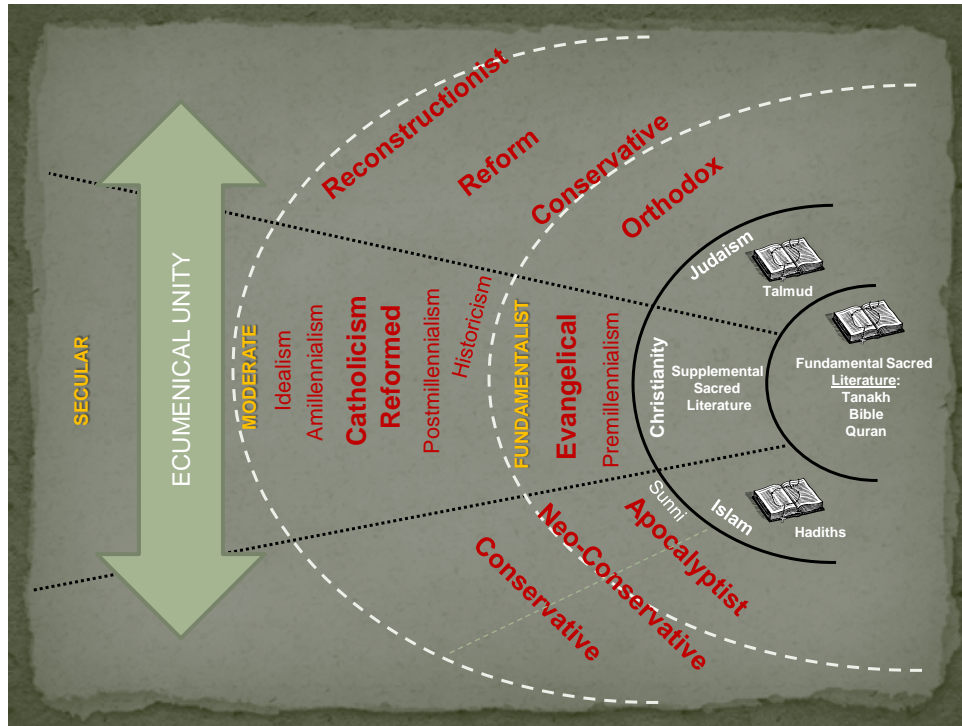
Islam's most sacred text is the Qur'an, which Muslims believe was spoken by the prophet Muhammad and later written down. Written originally in Arabic, it is organized into 114 chapters called *suras*. The Qur'an includes many references to Jewish and Christian literature and considers the narratives of biblical figures such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus to be descriptive of divinely inspired prophets, of whom Muhammad was the last and greatest. Supplementing the Qur'an are *hadiths* and the *Sunna*. Hadiths, which may be classified according to various levels of authenticity by Muslim scholars, are written traditions

of Muhammad along with scholarly commentary. The *Sunna* is a term describing the path or practices of Muhammad, as revealed through both written *hadiths* and oral traditions. Much of Islamic eschatology derives from *hadiths*.

### Bands of Prophetic Interpretation

The sacred texts of these three faiths include historical narrative, ritual and moral laws, devotional poetry, and, most important for this work, prophecy—specifically, prophecy concerning the end times. All three faiths anticipate a final judgment of mankind and, prior to that judgment, a series of dramatic episodes on earth. In order to grasp how those prophecies affect the modern world, we need to examine how adherents to the three faiths relate to those prophecies.

To simplify the study it is useful to think about three major “bands” of prophetic interpretation within each faith, as illustrated in Figure 1. It is at once obvious but important to note that any effort to categorize belief systems must generalize to some degree, which will, in turn, run roughshod over specific denominational nuance. Religions, sects, denominations, factions, and schools of thought develop over conflicting interpretations of sacred scripture, and because they separate from related faiths over these differences, it can be difficult to categorize and generalize without offending adherents. But to address the issues in this essay, I have chosen to describe general trend lines of interpretation, not denominational detail.



**Figure-1. Prophecy and Interpretation**

Each of the three Abrahamic faiths includes a fundamentalist school of interpretation.

In general, fundamentalist interpretation believes:

1. That the sacred texts are divinely inspired and carry the weight of divine authority.
2. That the sacred texts are inerrant.
3. That the prophecies within the sacred texts are to be interpreted literally.
4. That the apocalyptic prophecies are descriptive of the end times specifically.

Within the fundamentalist band are countless variations on these beliefs—nuances of emphasis and relevance, as well as wide variations on interpretation of the specific prophecies and their symbolic language. But in general, fundamentalist interpretation considers prophecy to be literally true and anticipates future fulfillment of it.

Each of the faiths likewise has what I call (for lack of a better term) a moderate band of interpretation. In general, moderate interpretation believes:

1. The sacred texts were written by human beings, perhaps influenced or inspired by God.
2. That the sacred texts are not necessarily inerrant.
3. That the prophecies within the sacred texts are to be interpreted non-literally.
4. That the prophecies do not necessarily refer to future events.

Some within the moderate band believe that prophecies are intended to be metaphorical, rather than specific predictions of future events. In a similar manner, some believe that the prophecies were not intended to address the end times at all, but rather to describe in a dramatic way some general spiritual truth. Other moderate interpretations include the belief that all or most of the prophecies have already been fulfilled in the distant or recent past and thus do not pertain to the future. In general, believers within the moderate band do not emphasize prophecy or eschatology in their worship. Instead, they tend to focus on the moral and ethical teachings of their religion. Hence, believers in the moderate band may not even know their denomination's stance on eschatology; it is often ignored or marginalized.

Finally, some believers within the three faiths employ what we might term a "secular" view of prophecy. Within this band, believers might view the sacred texts as important, beloved, and worthy of reading, but might not attach any divine origin or inspiration to them. Some within this band would dismiss prophecy about the end times as mythical, irrelevant, or only of literary significance. I refer to this band as secular, because those within it think about their religion more as a cultural phenomenon, rather than as a spiritual one. They tend to see

religion as a part of a greater societal spectrum that includes other beliefs, as well as secular subjects such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so on.

These descriptions of interpretation trends are, of course, extreme generalizations but represent major trends within each faith. In matters of religious belief it is difficult to pinpoint exact positions on any set of dogmas. A given synagogue, church, or mosque might proclaim an official doctrinal position and yet have members who differ in their beliefs from established dogma and from each other. Allowing for such infinite variations, these three bands of interpretation are easy to detect and examine within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In addition to describing how believers interpret prophecy, the three bands also serve to show the wide spectrum of thinking among believers concerning modernism and ecumenicalism. In general, adherents within the fundamentalist band tend to be distrustful of modernism, including scientific claims that challenge the validity or authority of the sacred texts. Further, those within this band generally resist cooperation or integration with other faiths, because they believe these faiths to be false. There are, of course, many exceptions and nuances of these trends among fundamentalist believers.

Those within the moderate band tend to be more accepting of modernism and science. Some moderate denominations and sects have, in fact, evolved into their present form in response to modernism. (Examples would include Reformed and Reconstructionist Judaism.) Believers in this category are generally more accepting of other faiths, often willing to accept that God works through other faiths in addition to their own.

The evolution of religious and eschatological beliefs is a dynamic, not static, process. Over the centuries science, war, migration, politics, disease, and countless other factors have

challenged, demolished, or sharpened religious dogmas. Within all three Abrahamic faiths, it is easy to see not just *bands* of interpretation, but also *trends* of change. The two most prominent trends are those of modernism and fundamentalism. Modernism is a trend that, in simple terms, acts to pull religious belief away from literalism and fundamentalism, while the fundamentalist trend pulls in the opposite direction away from modernism.

Within Judaism, for example, there has always been a fundamentalist trend that attempts to rivet attention back on the Torah and away from anything else, including supplementary religious texts. During the Roman occupation of Judea, the Pharisees and Sadducees disputed over this issue. The former embraced not only the written Torah, but also believed in an “oral” Torah—i.e., beliefs handed down through oral transmission and later redacted into the Talmud. The Sadducees, on the other hand, did not accept an oral tradition and insisted on the Torah as the only authoritative sacred scripture. Two millennia later, European Jews, in response to the Enlightenment’s challenge to religious dogma, evolved a Reformed Judaism that was more friendly to modernism and input from sources other than the Torah. At the same time, the fundamentalist trend hardened Orthodox Jews away from modernism and their Reformed brothers. The same competing trends of fundamentalism and modernism have characterized developments within Christianity and Islam.

Over the centuries these bands and trends of interpretation birthed various schools of thought concerning prophecy and the course of human history. Some schools foresee an impending series of dramatic events coupled with God’s direct intervention to resolve the conflict between good and evil. Others predict a gradual evolution of human society toward a successful resolution with God not intervening, but rather guiding with an invisible hand. Still



others dismiss or ignore prophecy completely, focusing instead on moral and ethical issues. But a common theme among almost all schools of thought across all three Abrahamic faiths, is the anticipation of the Golden Age.

### The Golden Age and Its Implications

The sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each offer prophecies about a future “Golden Age”—i.e., a culminating age of human history prior to the final judgment in which there is world peace, harmony, prosperity, righteousness, and justice. In the Hebrew Tanakh, the Golden Age is related to the arrival of the Messiah, a Jewish king who enjoys universal rule as “Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”. (Isaiah 9:6) The Messiah is endowed with divine authority and power and actually changes the natural order by removing the ferocity of animals, removing disease, and increasing agricultural productivity on the earth. He restores Israel to prominence among the nations, who in turn become tributaries to the confederation that he rules, thus removing international warfare.

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their

spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. (Isaiah 2: 2-4)

Christianity also anticipates a future Golden Age. Christian eschatology draws heavily from the Jewish prophecies in the Old Testament and relates those scriptures to the anticipated return of Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation describes the return of Jesus as a warrior king who subdues his enemies and then rules for a thousand years before the final judgment of mankind.

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. (Revelation 19: 11-15)

Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. (Revelation 20: 6)

Revelation's reference to the length of Christ's reign—one thousand years—gave rise to the term "Millennium" among Christians to describe the future Golden Age. Hence, "millenarians" are those who believe in a future fulfillment of prophecies relating to the thousand year reign of Christ. (Latin mille = thousand.) A similar term, chiliasm, derives from the Greek word χιλιά (thousand) and pertains to the expectation of Christ's return and his subsequent world rulership.

Islamic prophecies also anticipate a golden age, but the length and causality of it differs in that it is the Mahdi—i.e., the final and greatest caliph—who brings it about, and most Muslim scholars believe that he will rule for seven years prior to the final judgment. The Islamic golden age also features universal peace and prosperity under Islamic law (sharia).

Religious beliefs concerning the golden age affect believers' perspectives on world history, international affairs, and foreign policy. Although all three faiths prophesy about the future Golden Age, various denominations within the fundamentalist, moderate, and secular bands of interpretation handle those prophecies differently. The major issues stem from two crucial questions:

1. Does God bring about the Golden Age through the dramatic intervention of his agent (Messiah, Christ, Mahdi), or does mankind bring about the golden age through a gradual, global progress toward peace?
2. If God is going to intervene into human history to bring about the Golden Age through his agent, can believers act so as to hasten his arrival?

As we will see, the answers to those questions imply radically different ways of thinking about world affairs. Believers' attitudes about the future Golden Age have translated into discernible foreign policy trends in the United States, Israel, and the Islamic world. By understanding those beliefs and their policy implications, analysts and decision makers can better comprehend and inform policymaking.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Mélekh ha-Mashíah

#### (The Anointed King)

#### Judaism and the End Times

- **Why have the Jewish people—dispersed throughout the world for the last two thousand years—maintained a collective identity?**
- **Why do Jews in faraway lands continue to contribute the *khalukah*—a charitable donation for their coreligionists in Palestine, and pray three times a day for a return to their ancient homeland?**
- **Why do some Orthodox Jews support the state of Israel while other Orthodox Jews consider it to be a blasphemous rebellion against God?**
- **Why do some Jewish settlers brave the dangers of the occupied West Bank to build homes there, while others publicly ally themselves with Iranian President Ahmadinejad and deprecate those settlements?**

Across our world today, Jewish beliefs about the end of human history influence politics, diplomacy, and, within Israel, domestic policy. Problems in the Middle East that have seemed intractable for decades have roots in Jewish eschatology. The questions about Jewish settlement in the occupied territories and the fate of Jerusalem hinge upon ancient prophecies and how various sects within Judaism interpret those prophecies.

Jewish beliefs about the end times originate from the Tanakh, are elaborated through Talmudic commentary, and from there find expression in various schools of interpretation from Orthodox fundamentalism to Reconstructionist dismissal. The Hebrew Bible is replete with eschatological predictions in which, at the end of human history, the nation of Israel will dominate the earth and enjoy the rule of the Messiah. The anointed king will be a descendant of David and Solomon. Some prophecies suggest he will have both human and divine attributes. He will subdue his enemies, restore the borders of Israel, and rule a confederation of kingdoms from his capital in Jerusalem. The Messiah will usher in an age of world peace and prosperity, eliminate disease and crime, and, according to some interpretations, change the biosphere so that animals lose their ferocity and harsh environments become productive.

Every one of these predictions remain controversial, with various Jewish sects arguing points of exegesis, historical context, or other nuanced meanings, and each emphasizing some combination of literal or metaphorical interpretation. Before dealing with how modern Jews think about these prophecies, we will summarize the teachings from the Tanakh and Talmud.

### The Tanakh

Prophetic visions of how human history would culminate began in the Torah with general statements concerning the fate of Abraham's descendants. Abraham (his God-given name in Hebrew means "father of many nations") was originally named Abram ("exalted father") and descended, according to Genesis 10, from Shem, Noah's son. [Both Jews and Arabs claim descent from Shem, whose name provides the root for Semite; hence, one who is "anti-Semitic" has antipathy toward the descendants of Shem.] Following the accounts of creation, the genealogies of Adam's descendants, the flood, and God's intervention to stop the

building of the Tower of Babel, Genesis records the commissioning of Abram to leave his family and native city and journey to Palestine. In return, God promised Abram "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3, NIV)

The Abrahamic Covenant, as it became called, obviously addressed phenomena that would extend beyond Abraham's lifetime, but as Jewish (and later, Christian) thought developed, some rabbis and theologians perceived eschatological dimensions to it as well. The end of human history would feature the complete fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in that his descendants would populate the dominant nation and have global influence. These ideas were reinforced by later prophecies that promised God's redemption of Israel through the person of the Messiah, who will be descended from Abraham.

The Torah includes the Law of Moses, spelled out in portions of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In the closing chapters of Deuteronomy, God warns Israel through Moses that He will bless them if they are obedient but curse them if they turn to other gods. The most severe form of punishment that Israel will face is banishment from the Promised Land (Canaan) and dispersal among the nations. In essence, Israel would cease to be a political collective and Jews would instead be assimilated into foreign lands and cultures. Still, God promised that even then He would not forever abandon His people. When the dispersed and defeated descendants of Abraham would turn again to Him, God would recall them back to their land and restore them as a nation. Later prophecies tied this restoration to the arrival of the Messiah.

Historically, this prophecy was considered fulfilled, at least in part, in the Babylonian captivity. In 605 BCE Nebuchadnezzar invaded the rump kingdom of Judah and began the wholesale deportation of thousands of Jews. Eight years later he captured Jerusalem, and in 586 BCE the Babylonians burned the city walls, destroyed the Temple, and put an end to the Jewish monarchy. As predicted, the Jews had suffered the ultimate discipline from God. When the Persians under Cyrus conquered Babylon, the new ruler decreed that the Jews could return to their homeland. Hence, by the beginning of the Common Era, a large Jewish community was again residing in Palestine under the influence and, at times, domination of various rulers from Egypt, Syria, and finally Rome.

From about the mid-ninth century through the mid-fifth century BCE, the Jewish prophetic books were written. (Some scholars believe the prophetic literature originated later.) Writing prophets arose in both the northern Jewish kingdom of Israel (until it was destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC) and the southern kingdom of Judah. The prophets included both “pre-exilic” (i.e., those who wrote before the final destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC) and “post-exilic” (i.e., those who wrote during the exile and after the return from it. Pre-exilic prophets include Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah. Post-exilic include Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Obadiah, Joel, and Jonah. The Book of Daniel also includes important eschatological prophecies, but historically Jewish scholars have considered the book to be part of the Ketuvim (Writings) rather than the Nevi'im (Prophets). While some Jews and Christians consider the Daniel prophecies to address the end times, others believe that the book was written in the second century BC in response to the depredations of Antiochus IV.



## The Day of the Lord

“Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.”

--Isaiah 13:6 (NIV)

The Jewish prophets address a number of diverse issues in their writings. They comment on foreign relations, social and legal issues, and matters relating to the priesthood. In large part, however, they point to the infidelity of Israel—her leaders, her priests, her people—and warn that compromising the special covenant relationship that Israel enjoys with God will invite punishment. A prominent theme among many of the prophets is their description of the “Day of the Lord”. As described in the sacred texts, the “day” is an era or age in which the Lord will act decisively first to punish Israel and the Gentile nations for their disobedience, but then to redeem the faithful remnant of Israel, re-establish the kingdom, and rule Israel and the world in the person of the Messiah.

The punitive conditions on the earth during the Day of the Lord will be severe, according to the prophecies.

The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low;  
the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. (Isaiah 2:11)

See, the day of the Lord is coming --a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger-- to  
make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. (Isaiah 13:9)

Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. (Isaiah 13:11)

But that day belongs to the Lord, the Lord Almighty-- a day of vengeance, for vengeance on his foes. The sword will devour till it is satisfied, till it has quenched its thirst with blood. For the Lord, the Lord Almighty, will offer sacrifice in the land of the north by the River Euphrates. (Jeremiah 46:10)

For the day is near, the day of the LORD is near-- a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations. (Ezekiel 30:3)

Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. (Joel 1:15)

The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? (Joel 2:11)

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. (Joel 2:31)

Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. (Amos 5:18)

"The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head. (Obadiah 1:15)

"Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth." (Zephaniah 1:18)

The prophecies thus indicate that the Day of the Lord will feature unprecedented violence, destruction, and despair—especially for those who have rejected the true faith. But the prophecies also agree that although Israel will not escape her just punishment, God will use His judgment program to rescue the Jewish nation. He will gather the Jews from across the world, resettle them in the Promised Land, and re-establish their nation. From Jerusalem, He will protect and provide for the faithful remnant of Israel which He has redeemed.

In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. (Isaiah 4:2)

In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 10:20)

In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. (Isaiah 11:11)

In that day the Lord Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people. (Isaiah 28:5)

For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion's cause. (Isaiah 34:8)

This is what the Lord says: "In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances..." (Isaiah 49:8)

The Lord their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown. (Zechariah 9:16)

On that day I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness," declares the Lord. "I will keep a watchful eye over the house of Judah, but I will blind all the horses of the nations. (Zechariah 12:4)

Once God has restored Israel, the Messiah—the anointed king—will rule both the nation and the world. The Gentile nations will become tributary to Israel, and the Messiah will miraculously bless the entire world by ending war, eliminating disease, removing the ferocity of animals, and causing the earth to become much more fruitful.

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. (Isaiah 2:2-4)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting

Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the Lord at its border. (Isaiah 19:19)

"In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the Lord's house and will water the valley of acacias. (Joel 3:18)

On that day the Lord will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the Angel of the Lord going before them. (Zechariah 12:8)

### Eschatology of the Talmud

The Talmud is the collection of rabbinical teachings, legal decisions, and commentaries that most Jews revere as sacred, supplemental literature. From its beginning as oral traditions carefully rehearsed and taught to succeeding generations of rabbis, the Talmud was eventually formalized and redacted into written form. The Mishnah includes records of rabbinical legal decisions dating from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 AD) through 200

AD. Later commentaries on the Mishnah (through about 500 AD) were redacted and are known as the Gemara. Together, the Mishnah and Gemara comprise the Talmud. Although there exist both a Palestinian Talmud and a Babylonian Talmud, the latter is considered the more authoritative and complete.

Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter XI of the Babylonian Talmud contains a long discussion of eschatological matters. It includes rabbinical arguments about whether the Torah hints about resurrection—a major point of contention between the Sadducees and Pharisees before the destruction of the Temple. Concerning the coming of the Messiah, various rabbis explain the expected signs and the general conditions on the earth when “ben David” (i.e., the descendent of King David) will arrive. The Talmud states that, just as a week is divinely organized into six days of work followed by a Sabbath, so also human history will play out in three periods, each of two thousand years duration, followed by a thousand year Sabbath.

The Messiah, according to various interpretations, would appear in the course of the third period or at its end. Some rabbis then stated that all signs and preconditions for his arrival have already taken place and that any further delay is due to unrighteous behavior by Israel. Hence, through righteous acts, the faithful Jew can help to hasten the Messiah’s coming. Other rabbis dispute this, insisting that the timing of his arrival is already ordained and not subject to human manipulation. Controversy on this point continues today.

Said Rabb: All the appointed times for the appearance of the Messiah have already ceased. And it depends only on repentance and good deeds.

Samuel, however, said: It is sufficient for the mourner to remain with his own

sorrow (*i.e.*, the suffering of Israel for such a long time is sufficient that they should be redeemed even without repentance.) And on this point the following Tanaim differ. R. Eliezar said: If the people of Israel will repent they will be redeemed, but not otherwise. Said Jehoshua to him: According to you, if they will not repent they will not be redeemed at all? (Replied R. Eliezar [1](#)): The Holy One, blessed be He, will appoint, for this purpose, a king whose decrees concerning Israel will be as severe as Haman's were. And this will bring them back to the better side, and they will repent. (Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter XI, p. 305.)

R. Alexandri said: Jehoshua b. Levi propounded a contradiction: It reads [ibid. ix. 22]: "I the Lord will hasten it in its time." "Hasten" and "in its time" contradict each other. And the answer was that if they will be worthy I will hasten it, and if not, they must wait till the right time will come. (p. 307)

Regarding conditions on the earth just prior to the Messiah's arrival, the Talmud offers two contrasting possibilities:

Ben David will appear either in a generation in which all will be upright or in one in which all shall be wicked. "All upright," from [ibid. ix. 21]: "And thy people--they all will be righteous, forever shall they possess the land." And "all wicked," from [ibid. lix. 16]: "And he saw that there was no man, and wondered



that there was no intercessor." And [ibid. xlviii. ii]: For my own sake, for my own sake, will I do it." (p. 307)

The Talmud goes on to discuss whether the days of the Messiah will be good or bad, because prophecies from the Tanakh suggest both. The general conclusion of the rabbinical discussion is that those who are following the Torah will enjoy blessing from the Messiah, while those who disregard the law will suffer. Regarding the length of the Messiah's reign on the earth, rabbis in the Talmud again disagree, some suggesting 40, 70, 400, or even 7000 years.

After the final redaction of the Talmud (c. 500 CE) Jewish scholars continued to debate and comment on eschatological prophecy. Among the most influential of the post-Talmudic scholars was the 12<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, more commonly known as Maimonides or by the acronym, the Rambam. Maimonides' contributions to Jewish thought sprang from his masterful integration of Jewish traditionalism with contemporary philosophy. Hence, he reached out to both religious Jews and to the rationalist world in which he lived. Among his many accomplishments was his treatise on the Talmud called *Mishneh Torah*. Originally rejected by most Jewish scholars during his lifetime, it gradually became accepted as an authoritative explanation of Jewish law. In the *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides enumerated thirteen fundamentals of the Jewish faith that, according to him, every true believer must embrace. The last three deal with ultimate punishment and reward, the coming of the Jewish Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead.

Maimonides sparked great controversy concerning these articles of the faith in that his views included ideas that seemed to emanate from sources as diverse as Aristotle and Muslim philosophy. In his "Treatise on Resurrection", he stated that although he believed that the book of Daniel indeed predicted a bodily resurrection, this miracle would not be permanent, nor would it relate to the messianic era or the final state of Jews in eternity. Rather, the resurrected would later die again and would ultimately move into eternity in an incorporeal state. Many scholars rejected this view as heresy, but others who followed the ancient Sadducees' non-belief in resurrection embraced Maimonides' proposal.

The Rambam also related his interpretation of the coming Messiah, insisting that he would be a very great Jewish king who enjoys universal adoration, but that he will not literally change nature. Rather, prophetic predictions that "the lion will lay down with the lamb" refer allegorically to peace between Israel and her former antagonists, the Gentile nations.

Maimonides predicted that when the Messiah reigns, Jews will regain their political independence and will experience increased prosperity and peace, although differences among social and economic classes will still exist. As they benefit from the blessed conditions of the Messiah's reign, the Jews will be able to fully devote themselves to the study and practice of the Torah.

### Characteristics of Jewish Eschatology

Unlike Christian and Islamic beliefs concerning the end times, Jewish apocalyptic beliefs concentrate on one specific issue: the Messiah. Will he come? If so, when? Can faithful Jews speed his arrival somehow? Or did the ancient prophecies mean that a messianic Golden Age

would come, rather than a person? If so, will God work through mankind to achieve that blessed reality, or will it happen miraculously? Can God work through other faiths as well as Judaism to bring about the Golden Age?

Jewish thinking about the end times has been conditioned by the unique historical experiences of the Jewish people. Almost from the moment that 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE prophets began to predict a future messiah, candidates to step into those apocalyptic shoes appeared. One of the reasons that the various denominations of Judaism have such diverse opinions about the question of a future messiah is that there have been so many fraudulent messiahs in the past. Disappointment and bloodshed were the reward for past Jewish uprisings brought about by false messiahs.

The list of would-be Christs throughout Jewish history is lengthy. Some men claimed the distinction for themselves. Others hinted that they might be the one and accepted the mantle when it was offered. Still others made no claims at all but were thrust into the spotlight by expectant and hopeful Jews. Some wise men believed that Cyrus the Great was the messiah. Others welcomed Alexander and saw in the conqueror the fulfillment of prophecy. Many believed that Judah the Maccabee was the messiah as he carved out an independent Jewish state that lasted a hundred years until 63 BCE when the Romans moved in. During the time of Jesus, he and at least three others (Simon ben Joseph, Athronges, and Menahem ben Judah) were thought to be the anointed one.

Messiahs often brought bloodshed with them, but Simon bar Kokhba outshined them all. In 132 CE he launched a carefully prepared revolt against Rome, while supportive rabbis designated him as the messiah whom they had long awaited. For two and half years the Jews

under Simon enjoyed an independent state, but Rome was not to be put off forever. Emperor Hadrian amassed a huge army and launched a counteroffensive that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths—both Jewish and Roman. After the inevitable Jewish defeat the slaughter continued, with most of the Jewish population of Judea killed or sold into slavery. Scholars were put to the sword, ancient scrolls burned, and Jews were forbidden from entering Jerusalem. Hadrian was so determined to end the menace of Jewish rebellions that he set up a statue of Jupiter on the grounds of the destroyed Temple and removed any references to Jews or Judaism from the city. Together with the first revolt of 66-70 CE, the Bar Kokhba Revolt led to the permanent dispersion of the Jews away from the ancient homeland. From 135 CE on, the Jewish religion was no longer centered on the Temple Mount of Jerusalem but instead lurked in innumerable synagogues all over the world. Rabbis turned their attention to the problem of how to maintain their special relationship to God while in exile, and they learned to view any future messiahs with skepticism and caution.

Nevertheless the list of claimants grew. Throughout the centuries Jewish would-be messiahs arose, some of them commanding huge followings. Moses of Crete assured his 7<sup>th</sup> century followers that he would lead them across the water to the ancient homeland on foot. He disappeared after directing the faithful to throw themselves into the sea. A thousand years (and at least ten messiahs later) Sabbatai Zevi led a huge movement of Jews and proclaimed himself the messiah. Each of his bizarre episodes, including his marriage to a former prostitute, encouraged his followers in their apocalyptic expectations until, at last under pressure from the Turkish sultan, he converted to Islam.

One would think that with such a record of failed messiahs Jewish believers would forego their eschatological expectations forever...and some did. As the Diaspora continued through the centuries, as messiahs came and went, some scholars contemplated the possibility that the ancient prophecies were simply wrong. Others began to believe that they instead were meant to predict a gradual societal evolution toward a restored, peaceful, and prosperous future. Still others clung to the hope that a personal messiah—the real thing—would someday arrive.

Certainly the difficult conditions of the Diaspora contributed to messianic expectations throughout history. Jews who found themselves despised, dispossessed, and frequently accused of crimes against Christianity (from murdering the Messiah to killing Christian babies for the purpose of stealing their organs) had to hold fast to their community, their devotion to God, and to their hopes for the future. A sustained desperation gave rise to a rich apocalyptic as generations of rabbis searched the ancient scriptures for some clue as to when the Anointed One would reveal himself. The dawn of the Enlightenment and the gradual emancipation of the Jews in Europe led to a multiplicity of Jewish denominations, each with its own interpretation of the old prophecies—some dismissing them, others viewing them as metaphors, and others insisting they might yet come true. But each of these groups were energized in their beliefs by the phenomenon of Zionism and its unexpected success.

### Zionism and Modern Israel

At first glance, it would seem that ancient Jewish prophecies and the varied methods of interpretation would be of immediate interest only to believers within Judaism and perhaps to

Christian or Muslim believers who attach significance to them. But instead of receding into an esoteric corner of religious scholarship, Jewish eschatology advanced to the forefront of modern history, largely because of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Zionism began in late nineteenth century Europe as a reaction to long centuries of anti-Semitism. The Russian anti-Jewish pogroms that began in 1881 and continued in waves through 1920 stimulated both emigration to safer locations and a strengthening sense among European Jews that they needed their own homeland. Following the infamous Dreyfus Trial in which an innocent Jewish captain in the French Army was accused of spying for Germany, a brilliant Jewish journalist named Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) turned his energies toward establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. He instigated the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1897, and from that time on, European Jews and their co-religionists in the United States and elsewhere began to influence their governments toward that goal.

World War One saw the British wrest control of Palestine from the Ottoman Empire, giving rise to the possibility of a new destiny for the Jews' ancient homeland. Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur Balfour sympathized with the theme of Zionism and the helplessness of European Jews in the face of rampant anti-Semitism. He obtained the cooperation of the British cabinet and issued the Balfour Declaration, which stated that the British Empire favored the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1922 the League of Nations confirmed the British Mandate, partly based on that objective. Jews from across the globe began to emigrate to the land of their forefathers.

When world war again engulfed the region in 1939, the British government, concerned about retaining Arab cooperation against Germany, reversed its position and tried to limit Jewish emigration to Palestine. The White Paper of May 17, 1939 also declared Britain's opposition to a Jewish state there. This *volte-face* not only disappointed Jewish Zionists, but it also signaled a sense of disregard concerning the fate of European Jews to Hitler and his minions. The result was sustained conflict in Palestine among desperate Jews who felt betrayed, angry Arabs suffering displacement, and British authorities fast losing control of the situation. When the Mandate ended in 1948, Jewish Zionist leaders established the State of Israel.

This singular historical anomaly—the return of a dispersed people to their ancient homeland—elicited widely diverse feelings from among Jews, depending on how they viewed both the nature of Zionism and the relevance of ancient prophecies. Zionism began as a socialist, not a religious movement. Indeed, early leaders were openly anti-clerical. As the movement coalesced into a modern state, however, rabbis, scholars, and statesmen gave rise to a vigorous debate that ranged from anti-Zionist fervor and vilification of the State of Israel to a new movement called Religious Zionism. The political conflict continues today, and how Jews relate to it depends largely on how the various sects within Judaism feel about eschatology.

### Jewish Beliefs Today

The Tanakh, Talmud, and rabbinical commentary are replete with prophesy, but how do modern Jews think about those prophecies? Not surprisingly, Jewish attitudes concerning eschatology vary widely. Of the approximately 15 million Jews in the world today, the majority

of them can be generally categorized according to four major groupings: Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed, and Reconstructionist. (Numbering the world’s Jewish population is complicated, because the term “Jewish” can be considered a racial group, religious affiliation, ethnic categorization, or even a language group.) Each of these groups has a different perspective on prophecy, and within each group are countless variations and nuances among their eschatological beliefs as seen in Figure 2.

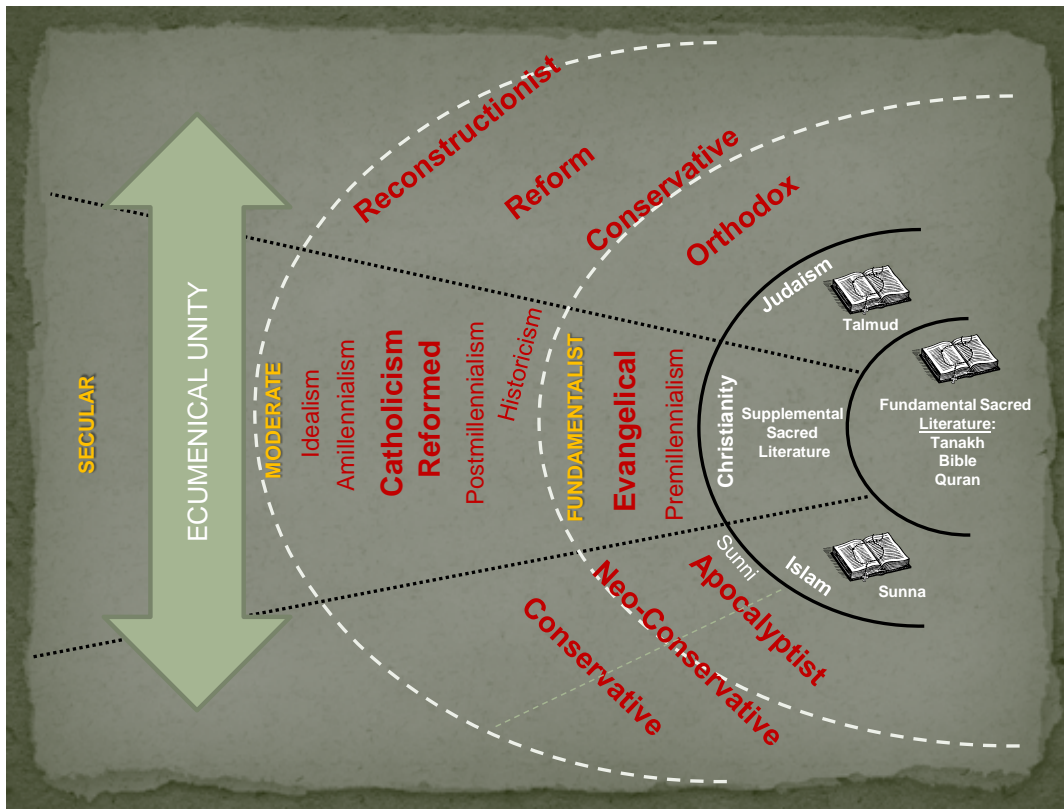


Figure-2. Bands of Prophetic Interpretation

Orthodox (or Torah) Judaism

Orthodox Jews comprise the most fundamentalist believers within Judaism. They believe in the divine inspiration of both the written and oral law (Torah), and that these laws



should be strictly adhered to. They believe that prophecy should be interpreted literally and that on some future date, the Messiah will come and restore Israel. Within the Orthodox community there are two primary divisions—the Haredi and the Modern Orthodox. Haredi (known by some as ultra-Orthodox) adhere to a strict regimen of study, prayer, and obedience to the law. Modern Orthodox Jews also seek to follow the law but embrace more openness to modern technology and culture.

Within the Orthodox community there has always been a central question: how should a Jew relate to the rest of the world and to the influences of modernity? The most fundamentalist trends insist on isolation and a strict concentration on studying and living according to the Torah and ancient traditions. Others believe that loyalty to the Torah does not mandate ignoring the outside world, but that Jews should seek to engage the modern world. This dialectic plays out today in how Modern Orthodox Jews and Haredi Jews relate to the State of Israel. Modern Orthodox Jews are generally supportive of the State of Israel, because they view Zionism as having religious (i.e., eschatological) significance despite its anti-clerical beginnings. Haredi Jews, on the other hand, tend to be skeptical if not hostile to the state, because they feel that Zionism is not only irreligious, but that it seeks to intrude on the prerogative of the coming Messiah. According to this view, only God's Anointed One can truly restore Israel.

As early as 1862, Orthodox Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer posited that Jews could achieve their intended salvation and safety only through self-help. This idea followed a rabbinical line of thought within the Talmud that individual Jews could, through their righteous acts, hasten the coming of the Messiah. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), also known as Rav Kook,

became the preeminent advocate of Religious Zionism—the belief that the Zionist movement would unwittingly accomplish God’s designs to bring about the restored nation of Israel. Contrary to the views of many Orthodox rabbis at the time, Kook insisted that Jews must actively participate in achieving God’s designs for the nation. He immigrated to Palestine in 1909 and became the Chief Rabbi of Jaffa in 1921. Although of a Haredi background, Kook saw value in secular education, because he believed that in order to establish and maintain a modern State of Israel, religious Jews would need modern skills and education.

Rav Kook’s son also became a prominent leader in Palestine. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook became the spiritual father of the Gush Emunim (Bloc of Believers). Founded in 1974 after the Yom Kippur War, Gush Emunim believed that the territorial integrity of Israel was of the highest importance, and that the disputed West Bank (which they refer to by their ancient names Judea and Samaria) should be annexed. As for the million or so Arabs living there (who also have a higher birthrate than Jews), they should not enjoy political rights, because they are inimical to the State of Israel. Settlers from the Gush Emunim actively pursue their plans to possess the biblical land of Israel. (The process of settling the ancient land in order to fulfill Israel’s destiny is known as *Hitnakhlyot*.) Their beliefs include the notion that through their settlement—however provocative others may view it—they are hastening the arrival of the Messiah.

On the other end of the Orthodox spectrum we find the Neturei Karta (Guardians of the City). Founded in 1938, this group split from a larger Haredi party and expressed its opposition to the formation of a Jewish state. Neturei Karta believe that only God can restore Israel through the person of the Messiah, and that any attempt by Jews to establish their own state in

advance of his arrival is rebellion against God. Indeed, the movement draws upon a Talmudic interpretation of a biblical passage from the Song of Songs (aka Song of Solomon) :

*“I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, and by the hinds of the field, that ye awaken not, nor stir up love, until it please” (Songs, 2:7, repeated in 3:5, and partially repeated in 8:4)*

According to the Talmud (Ketubot 110-111), these verses are allegorical. Because the Talmud views the entire book as an allegory describing the relationship between God and Israel, the verses represent God’s instructions concerning the behavior of both Israel and the Gentiles during the extended exile of the Jews. Known as the “Three Oaths”, some believe that in this passage, God commands that (1) the Jews in exile are not to return en masse to the Land of Palestine; (2) the Jews living in Gentile nations are not to rebel against those authorities; and (3) Gentiles, in turn, are not to persecute the Jews excessively.

Some Haredi Jews, including Neturei Karta and Satmar Hasidic Jews, view the Three Oaths as absolutely binding until the Messiah comes and restores Israel. Hence, obedience to the Oaths includes opposition to Zionism and the State of Israel. Indeed, believers go so far as not paying taxes and not accepting any benefits from the state. Most recently, radical rabbis within Neturei Karta alienated most other Jews by publicly praying for the health of Yasser Arafat as he lay on his deathbed in 2004 and later traveling to Iran to express support for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his desire to destroy Israel. In recent years, Neturei Karta and similar movements have gained traction with some Muslims and others because of

expressions of sympathy for Palestinians and outrage against Israel's alleged persecution of them.

Other Orthodox Jews believe that the Three Oaths have expired, and that the formation of the State of Israel is both religiously significant and indicative of the beginning of the end times. Hence, within Orthodox Judaism, faithful Jews proclaim widely different perspectives on Zionism, the State of Israel, and God's end times program. Understanding the competing Jewish views on eschatology is thus a crucial factor as American and European politicians try to deal with the explosive issue of Jewish settlement in the West Bank. But most Western officials associate more with Reformed Jews, who have an entirely different perspective concerning ancient prophecy.

### Reformed Judaism

Reformed Judaism began in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and challenged Orthodox teachings by insisting that religion must evolve with human progress and fully embrace modernity. The movement started in response to the trends of political liberalization and the consequent emancipation of the Jews—first in France, then elsewhere in Europe. Emancipation of European Jewry was somewhat conditional, in that the governments involved were friendly to *individual* Jewish rights, but not to a *collective* Jewish identity. Specifically, Europeans remained suspicious of Jewish culture's insistence on recognizing a Jewish "peoplehood", because it suggested that Jews had a double (and potentially dangerous) allegiance—both to the country in which they lived, and to their Jewish brothers abroad. Hence, among the earliest

ideas in the reform movement was the view that Judaism was a religious idea, not a racial or ethnic one. Jewish collective identity, at least for the moment, was abandoned.

Regarding the Torah, reformists believed that the ancient Jewish Law should be viewed more as principles for good living rather than as strict and mandatory requirements. Changes began in German synagogues, in which some rabbis included the playing of musical instruments and delivered sermons in German rather than in Hebrew—two innovations that shocked and offended Orthodox leaders. Other reforms touched upon diet, dress, and the role of women in worship.

In line with their retreat from identifying with the greater Jewish people, Reformed rabbis likewise abandoned the traditional prayers for the Jews' return to Palestine. In their foundational declarations at Philadelphia in 1869 and again in Pittsburgh in 1885, Reform leaders declared:

"The Messianic aim of Israel is not the restoration of the old Jewish state under a descendant of David, involving a second separation from the nations of the earth, but the union of all the children of God in the confession of the unity of God, so as to realize the unity of all rational creatures, and their call to moral sanctification."<sup>1</sup>

"We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community; and we therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning a Jewish state."<sup>2</sup>

Instead, the focus switched to the ethical and moral dimensions of Judaism, rather than its prophetic aspects. Those in the Reformed movement ceased expressing an anticipation of a

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<sup>1</sup> Reform Judaism: Declaration of Principles: 1869 Philadelphia Conference [http://www.zionism-israel.com/hdoc/Philadelphia\\_Conference\\_1869.htm](http://www.zionism-israel.com/hdoc/Philadelphia_Conference_1869.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Declaration of Principles: 1885 Pittsburgh Conference [http://www.zionism-israel.com/hdoc/Pittsburgh\\_Platform\\_1885.htm](http://www.zionism-israel.com/hdoc/Pittsburgh_Platform_1885.htm)

personal Messiah who would restore the ancient kingdom. Rather, they turned their energies toward working within the modern world to better it. Instead of waiting for God’s personal intervention to bring about a violent and glorious end to human history, Reformed Jews came to believe that a “messianic” age would come, and most believed that Jews and others would have a hand in creating it.

As a result of these more moderate views regarding prophecy, many Jews from Reform synagogues today don’t think much about eschatology and the end times. Still, the experience of the Holocaust and the subsequent emergence of the State of Israel caused Reformed leaders to alter their former opposition toward Zionism. Modern Reform rabbis have restored a concern for Jewish people everywhere, and they generally recognize and cherish the Jewish population of Israel. But within Reform Judaism, consideration of the State of Israel has no connection with eschatology or apocalyptic expectations. Because the subject of prophecy is not emphasized in Reformed sermons, many believers may be unaware of their synagogue’s doctrine concerning the future. Reformed teachings instead typically deal with personal virtue for daily living and espouse ideals of peace and love. The violence and racial undertones of apocalyptic literalism is viewed generally with disbelief and distaste.

### Conservative Judaism

Conservative (or Masorti—i.e., “traditional”) Judaism evolved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a middle position between Orthodox and Reformed Judaism. Conservatives, like Orthodox, believe that the law was given by God and should be followed. However, like Reformed Jews, Conservatives are friendlier to modernism and believe that obedience to the Law can

accommodate modern as well as traditional practices. Conservative Judaism thrived in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century until it became the largest Jewish denomination there. In recent decades, however, the trends of both modernism and fundamentalism (see above, Chapter One) have carved into Conservative membership. Groups of believers began to split to the left (toward modernism) and what would become Reconstructionist Judaism (see below), as well as to the right (toward fundamentalism) and the Union for Traditional Judaism. These trends followed the historical course of denominational splits within all three Abrahamic faiths by alternately accusing Conservative Judaism of being too traditional on the one hand and too liberal on the other. Nevertheless, Conservative Judaism remains a strong movement, if diminished in numbers, within North America.

Conservative doctrine is distinguished by the belief that Jewish Law is normative but must evolve with modern developments. Conservatives believe that Orthodox Judaism has artificially blocked the normal progressive development of the Law by insisting on the inviolability of ancient practice. They also believe, however, that Reformed and Reconstructionist Jews have erred by abandoning the authority of the Law. Regarding eschatology, the Conservative movement—in line with its flexible doctrinal stance on other matters—refrains from dogma but anticipates a hopeful destiny for the world. Prophecies concerning the Messiah may be interpreted either literally or metaphorically in a Conservative synagogue, so that some look for a personal Messiah, while others anticipate a messianic age. The obviously dramatic differences between these two ends of the spectrum do not concern most Conservative rabbis. Rather, they see the possibility of a divine intervention in the person

of the Messiah as well as a the possibility of a gradual global evolution toward a Golden Age without a personal Messiah.

Conservative Judaism is closely associated with Zionism. Conservatives believe that the State of Israel is central to the Jewish identity and strive to unite Jews throughout the world to the ancient homeland through tourism and political activity. Because the government of Israel does not support Masorti Judaism with funding (as they do for Orthodox Jews), Conservatives look to financial support from Jews throughout the Diaspora. While early Zionists viewed a Jewish homeland as crucial to the physical survival of Jews hard-pressed in Europe, modern Conservative Judaism sees the State of Israel as a fundamental component of Jewish cultural survival.<sup>3</sup>

### Reconstructionist Judaism

Reconstructionist Judaism originated in the United States and represents much more moderate views regarding the Tanakh and Talmud. The movement began in 1963 when Jews affiliated with Mordecai Kaplan split off from Conservative Judaism to form their own movement. In 1968 the new denomination became official with the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Kaplan taught that Jews should be respectful of the Law and consult it for guidance, but that the ancient Law was not binding. The Law, according to Kaplan, “has a vote, but not a veto.” Instead, the Reconstructionist movement is centered on

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<sup>3</sup> See MERCAZ <http://www.mercazusa.org/mission.html>



Jewish community and the practice of Jewish ideals and ethics. It is friendly to modernism and insists that Judaism must evolve with and adapt to human progress.<sup>4</sup>

Reconstructionists do not believe in a futurist, literal interpretation of the ancient prophecies at all and some even question the personal existence of God. Although they do not anticipate either a personal Messiah or a messianic age, they do believe that individual Jews can help improve the world through beneficent behavior. Reconstructionist Judaism embraces Zionism, but, as with the Conservative viewpoint, it cultivates a wider understanding of the term. Mordecai Kaplan insisted that Jews ought to be devoted to the ancient homeland as the source of Judaism's essential mythology and historical experience. But he also believed that Zionism should include respect for all the Jewish communities in the Diaspora as being a relevant part of Jewish "peoplehood". He deprecated the religious monopoly that he saw in Israel, with the Orthodox community—which he described as hostile to democracy and egalitarianism—precluding meaningful participation by other religious viewpoints. He also called for social justice within Israel, both for Jews and non-Jews.<sup>5</sup>

### Jewish Eschatology and Policy

Judaism includes many more denominations, sects, schools, and institutions other than these basic four, but the above description provides a general breakdown of Jewish thought concerning the end times and the State of Israel. Jews in Israel and across the globe thus hold very diverse ideas on eschatology—both its content and relevance. Some live in daily

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<sup>4</sup> For a full description of Reconstructionist Judaism, see the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation <http://jrf.org/showres&rid=141>

<sup>5</sup> "Zionism and Communal Covenant: A Reconstructionist Approach to Essential Jewish Principles" <http://jrf.org/resources/files/Zionism%20and%20Communal%20Covenant.pdf>

anticipation of the Messiah's arrival and God's dramatic intervention into human history.

Others foresee a future Golden Age but believe that God intends for believers to achieve it. Still others dismiss such prophecies altogether or view them as nothing more than interesting anachronisms.

Jewish views concerning the State of Israel likewise are diverse. A minority of Orthodox believers deny the legitimacy of the state as an intrusion into the prerogative of the coming Messiah. Most often associated with the Haredi Ultra-Orthodox, these Jews draw support from Arab and Islamic communities if not from their own countrymen. They also enjoy some confluence of energy from non-Jewish communities around the world who deprecate what they consider to be Israel's harsh treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories. Most Jews support or are neutral toward Zionism and concede the legitimacy of the state, but differ considerably as to how the nation should be constituted, how it should relate to its non-Jewish citizens, and how it should deal with Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world. Some take a hard line regarding Israel's right to rule in Palestine, and in part draw their justification for their position from Jewish eschatology. Others call for a secular, pluralistic, even non-ethnic Israel and call upon Biblical ideals of social justice to support their views.

These various views find political expression within Israel today. The Israeli Knesset (parliament) consists of 120 representatives directly elected by citizens at least 18 years old. The latest elections in February, 2009, resulted in a close race between Kadima (a strong center-left party founded by Ariel Sharon) and Likud (a strong center-right party), and the resulting government of Benjamin Netanyahu was based on a coalition among Likud, Labor, Yisrael Beiteinu (hard-line, anti-clerical party), Shas (conservative party with strong Orthodox

constituency), and smaller parties. Among the parties that populate Israeli politics, the stronger ones (Kadima, Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu, and Labor) are secular, although Likud has been somewhat connected to Religious Zionism in the past. As of this writing they control 83 seats. (See Figure 3.) Of the 37 remaining seats, 19 are controlled by parties with strong religious platforms (Shas, United Torah Judaism, and the Jewish Home). These parties often exert disproportionate influence in Israeli politics, because they can tip the balance among the bigger parties. Hence, members are frequently found in coalition governments.

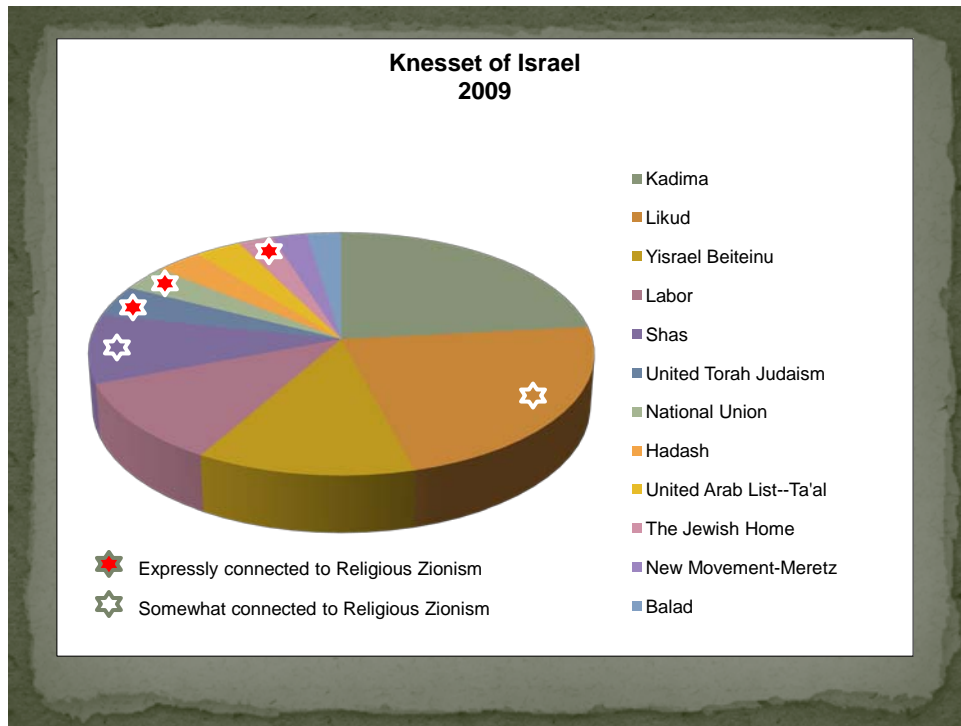


Figure-3. The Knesset of Israel

Shas, a religious party popular with Sephardic Jews, was a late convert to Zionism, joining the World Zionist Organization in 2010. The party represents Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Jews and others who favor a conservative social agenda. At the same time, they have

historically been balanced regarding the peace process with the Palestinians. Although leaders have recently expressed loyalty to Religious Zionism, others in Israel doubt their sincerity.

United Torah Judaism is a political alliance of two Ultra-Orthodox parties whose main concern is the close integration of Jewish Law and the state. Their statements and positions on the peace process have varied. They strongly support the State of Israel, but they oppose the drafting of Ultra-Orthodox men into military service—a position that distinguishes them from most Religious Zionists. Despite their staunch views on the centrality of religion, they have been willing to join coalition governments that they see as useful to achieving their goals.

Religious Zionism finds its strongest political expression through Habayit Hayehudi (The Jewish Home), also called the New National Religious Party. Although technically a merger of three parties, the primary influence after two of the three deserted to other blocs remained those committed to Religious Zionism. The Jewish Home is associated with the settlement movement, which in turn is deeply influenced by the teachings of the late Rav Kook and his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda, founder of the Gush Emunim movement. Like other religious parties, The Jewish Home finds itself forced to cooperate with moderate or even secular political blocs, but its leaders represent a religious outlook that relates Israeli policy to the imminence of the Messiah's arrival.

The February, 2009 elections resulted in the formation of two general blocs within the Knesset. The so-called “Nationalist/Religious” Bloc, and the “Left-Wing” Bloc. The former included Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu, Shas, National Union, The Jewish Home, and United Torah Judaism and counted 65 total seats, compared to the Left-Wing Bloc's 55. The 19 seats held by

religious parties thus were critical in establishing Likud's victory over Kadima. Religion and Jewish attitudes concerning the end times remain key factors in determining the direction of Israeli policy.

Meanwhile, on the ground in the occupied territories, Jewish settlers—some motivated by an intense expectation of the Messiah's imminent arrival—continue to dominate headlines and confound political leaders around the world. Among their most outspoken foes, surprisingly, are fellow Jews, also looking for the Messiah's intervention. One side is convinced their settlements are helping to speed the coming of the Anointed One; the other is equally certain that they are an insult to God.

As Western leaders strive to find credible solutions to the turmoil in the Middle East, it is clear that they must understand the role of religion and the competing Jewish views about the end times. A policy based upon moderate, ecumenical ideals will founder on the fundamentalism that is at the root of the settlement issue and the Palestinian conflict. By better understanding the apocalyptic views of the actors involved, we can more effectively communicate with them and perhaps achieve agreement.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Thy Kingdom Come

#### Christianity and the End Times

- **Why does the United States consistently support the state of Israel, despite the diplomatic cost of doing so?**
- **Why have American presidents—both liberals and conservatives—believed for over two hundred years that the United States is destined to bring freedom, prosperity, and democracy to the world?**
- **Why do Western powers cultivate an optimistic vision of world peace and human rights, while some political leaders perceive a pervasive evil at work in the world?**
- **While pursuing their optimistic world view, why do American governments—both liberals and conservatives—continue to invest so heavily in military capability, all in the name of peace?**
- **Why has a previously benign theological argument over the question of the rapture of the church recently become a political argument?**

Christian eschatology has had a strong and persistent influence in Western thought for the past two millennia. Events in the fourth century led to the Christianization of the Roman Empire, and that in turn brought about the assimilation of Christian ideas, including prophecy about the end times, into matters of state. The nations and states that succeeded the empire remained under Christian influence ever since and continued to integrate various

interpretations of prophecy into national ideologies. The Founding Fathers of the United States embraced these Christian traditions and integrated them into their concept of American exceptionalism. Over the course of two hundred years politicians have followed the basic tenets of this amalgamation of Christian prophetic tradition and American ideology to the degree that the religious provenance of United States foreign policy ideas is all but forgotten. It is at once obvious that neither Christian ethics nor Christian eschatology is the sole determinant of American foreign policy, but long-revered Western political philosophies that emanated from Church traditions and the interpretation of prophecy remain a strong influence in the way Americans think about the world around them. Today the United States pursues a global foreign policy that is shaped by two dominant but opposing lines of prophetic interpretation, and as a result American foreign policy develops along a dynamic dialectic—pulled in one direction by postmillennial Christian thought, and pulled in the opposite direction by premillennial ideas.

### Christian Prophecy

Christian visions of apocalypse derive from four major Biblical sources: Old Testament prophecy, the Gospels, the New Testament Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. The writers of the New Testament regarded the Jewish prophecies as authoritative but largely misinterpreted by Jewish authorities. Paul, the Pharisee-turned-apostle of Jesus, explained that even though the nation of Israel did not recognize Jesus when he came to them, he was, nevertheless, the long-awaited Messiah. Instead of immediately establishing the kingdom as called for in the Jewish prophecies, he first had to atone for the sins of Israel and the world by dying on the

cross. Having thus accomplished God's salvation program, Christ was resurrected, ascended into Heaven, and seated at the right hand of God the Father to await the end times. A literal reading of prophecy indicates that he will then return to earth to conquer his enemies, restore Israel, and reign for a thousand years.

This interpretation of Jewish prophecy in the light of Jesus of Nazareth was the foundation for the detailed eschatology that was then further developed in the Gospels—especially the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the narrative, Jesus explains that the anticipated “kingdom of God” was not going to happen immediately, but that its fulfillment would have to wait until the time of God's choosing. Unlike the dramatic, immediate revolution envisioned by Jewish Zealots, Jesus stated that:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. 'The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'” (Matthew 13:24-30)

“The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:37-43)



Toward the end of his life, the Gospels tell us, Jesus traveled to Jerusalem accompanied by his disciples. While there he discoursed concerning the end times, predicting a time of great tribulation and judgment, followed by his return in glory.

“Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.” (Matthew 24:4-8)

“For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now-and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.” (Matthew 24:21-22)

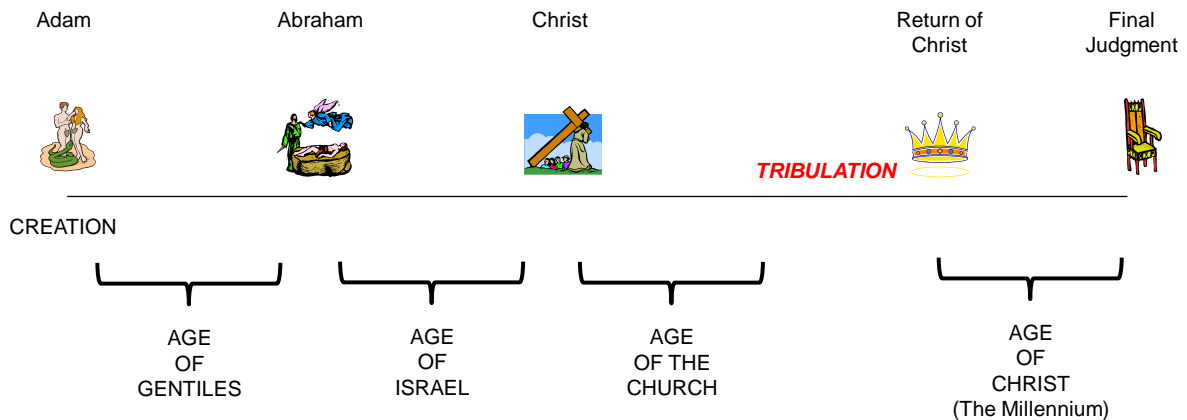
“Immediately after the distress of those days " 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.' At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:29-30)

The prophetic storyline thus anticipated a period of tribulation followed by the return of Christ, but the precise (or even general) timing of these events was left a mystery.

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Matthew 24:36)

# Christian Prophecy About the End Times

- Christian eschatology draws from Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the four Gospels, the New Testament Epistles, and the Book of Revelation.
- Christian denominations differ widely on interpretation of the prophecies.
- This figure depicts a general timeline of prophecy in line with “dispensational premillennialism”.



- Some believe that the Tribulation and Return of Christ happened in the past (preterism).
- Others believe that the Age of the Church corresponds with the predicted Millennium and that Christ will return at the conclusion of the Millennium before the Final Judgment (postmillennialism).
- Still others believe the prophecies are metaphorical and not to be interpreted literally.

Figure-4. Christian Eschatology

The events of the Tribulation are summarized in the Gospels but spelled out with great detail in the Book of Revelation. Those espousing a literal interpretation of John’s Apocalypse foresee a period of seven years during which the devil’s agent on earth—called the Beast or the Antichrist—tries to consolidate his hold over the nations. Against the backdrop of God’s increasingly severe judgments on the earth, the Beast, who rules a confederation of European nations, eventually betrays Israel and marches into Palestine, occupying Jerusalem, and declaring war on the Jews as well as on Christians. The last three-and-one-half years of the Tribulation are especially hard because of God’s wrath against the Beast and his agents and

because in desperation the nations of the world begin to gather armies to oppose first each other, and later the returning Christ.

After the Tribulation Christian prophecy describes the return of Christ in glory, followed by his reign on the earth for a thousand years. The “Millennium” corresponds to the Golden Age predicted in the Hebrew scriptures—a time of blessing, prosperity, peace, and joy. After the Millennium, which is punctuated with one final rebellion against God, prophets foresaw the final judgment.

This basic timeline has been subjected to many different approaches to interpretation over the past two thousand years. Competing methods of hermeneutics (i.e., the science of interpretation), the influence of Greek philosophy, and the political ramifications of the Christianization of the Roman Empire all came to bear on the problem. The Protestant Reformation likewise injected new energy into the subject, and the multiplicity of denominations that grew from the religious conflicts added yet more schools of thought concerning the Apocalypse. In order to understand how these beliefs play out in today’s world, we must understand the basic controversies.

### Schools of Interpretation and the Main Controversies of Christian Eschatology

Christian thinking concerning the end times has a long and complex history, but by setting aside the nuances of various denominational interpretations, we can focus on the

fundamental distinctions among the major lines of thought. These main controversies center on three issues:

- The timing of the return of Christ: Premillennialism vs. Postmillennialism; and the related question of how to interpret the Book of Revelation: Preterism, Historicism, Futurism, or Idealism
- Israel and the Church
- The Rapture Question

### When Will Christ Return?

Christian prophecy anticipates an age in human history filled with peace, prosperity, and happiness. Because Revelation describes the return of Jesus Christ and states that he will reign for a thousand years, this “Golden Age” became known as the Millennium, from the Latin *mille* (“thousand”). Beliefs in the prophecies of the Golden Age are termed “millenarian” or “chiliastic” (from the Greek χιλιά, which also mean “thousand”).

The most fundamental question in Christian eschatology has to do with the timing of Christ’s return vis a vis the Golden Age. Specifically, will Christ return *before* the Millennium or *after* it? The two major schools of thought on this issue are called “premillennialism” and “postmillennialism”. A third interpretation—“amillennialism”—is closely associated with the postmillennial viewpoint. Basically, premillennialism states that Christ will return to the earth in the future, intervene into human history in a dramatic episode, and then set up his kingdom and bring about the Golden Age. Postmillennialism, on the other hand, states that Christ’s

return to the earth will be after the Golden Age and that, rather than an episodic future intervention, Christ is active on the earth now through the agency of his Church. It is the beneficent influence of the Church that will bring about the Golden Age gradually. Thus, Christ's return will come only after the successful inauguration of the Millennium in order to supervise the final judgment of mankind. Amillennialism takes a similar approach in that it does not anticipate Christ's personal intervention until the final judgment. The Roman Catholic Church holds to an amillennial approach, while many churches of the Reformed tradition teach postmillennialism. In this essay, I have chosen to associate these two ideas and develop them under the overarching term of postmillennialism because although they differ in some details, they are similar in that they both reject premillennialism; they both believe that Christ's personal return will be after the ideals of God's kingdom have been accomplished on earth; they both believe that the "Kingdom of God" is more a spiritual concept rather than a physical, political concept; and both believe Christ will return to perform the final judgment and *not* to rule personally on earth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "We have defined Postmillennialism as that view of the last things which holds that the Kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized, and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the 'Millennium.' It should be added that on postmillennial principles the second coming of Christ will be followed immediately by the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the introduction of heaven and hell in their fullness.

"The Millennium to which the Postmillennialist looks forward is thus a golden age of spiritual prosperity during this present dispensation, that is, during the Church age, and is to be brought about through forces now active in the world. It is an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal one thousand years. The changed character of individuals will be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political and cultural life of mankind. The world at large will then enjoy a state of righteousness such as at the present time has been seen only in relatively small and isolated groups, as for example in some family circles, some local church groups and kindred organizations.

These two basic schools of thought—premillennialism and postmillennialism—frame all of Christian eschatology, and they manifest themselves politically both through domestic and foreign policy. In order to see how they affect our world today, we must understand a little about how these two competing ideas came about. Although the earliest church leaders believed in a literal, future return of Christ followed by his reign on earth, the Roman Catholic Church moved away from that interpretation. From the earliest Christian centuries there were two dominant trends that shaped schools of theology away from the literal toward allegorical hermeneutics, and away from premillennial to postmillennial interpretation.

The first trend was philosophical. From the period of the Maccabees (164-65 BCE) onward, Palestine struggled with the influence of Hellenistic philosophy and culture. Gradually, the attraction of Greek language and philosophy permeated the ancient Near East and infiltrated both Judaism and Christianity. Many of the New Testament epistles dealt with this threat. A contemporary of Jesus, Philo of Alexandria, was a Jewish thinker who aimed to advance the Jewish religion by merging it with Greek philosophy. His chief tool for achieving this synthesis was allegory, and he set himself against his opponents' insistence that the sacred

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"Amillennialism, too, differs from Postmillennialism in that it holds that the world is not to be Christianized before the end comes, that the world will in fact continue much as it now is, with a parallel and continuous development of both good and evil, of the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. It agrees with Postmillennialism, however, in asserting that Christ does not establish an earthly, political kingdom, and that His return will be followed by a general resurrection and general judgment. Post- and Amillennialists thus agree that the Kingdom of Christ in this world is not political and economic, but spiritual and now present in the hearts of His people and outwardly manifested in the Church."

Lorraine Boetner, "Postmillennialism"

<[http://www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/last%20things/Postmill\\_Boettner/c.html](http://www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/last%20things/Postmill_Boettner/c.html)>

scriptures must be interpreted literally. Instead, he taught that scriptures had both a literal and an allegorical meaning, and that the latter was the deeper and more important.

If Philo was not successful in converting many of his fellow Jews in his lifetime, his influence grew after his death in 50 CE. Emphasis in allegorical interpretation found its way into both the Jewish rabbinical tradition and early Christianity. A school of Christian interpretation based in Antioch tried to maintain a standard of literal hermeneutics, but more prominent Christian leaders increasingly gravitated toward the allegorical method, particularly when dealing with matters of eschatology.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Clement of Alexandria, a converted Stoic, believed that Greek philosophy emanated ultimately from the Law of Moses and that, consequently, the scriptures were a viable part of God's message to the world. The Torah could be viewed as relevant for the world only by foregoing a literal application and instead resorting to allegorical interpretation. Many of the early church fathers found this formula convincing, and they integrated it into nascent church doctrine. In order to truly understand the Bible's deeper truths, according to this line of thought, it must be interpreted allegorically.

Clement's ideas prevailed through his successor in Alexandria, Origen (185-254 CE). Origen mastered both Hebrew and Greek and reputedly authored some six thousand works in his lifetime, including everything from letters to major theological treatises. Influenced by Greek philosophy, he came to deny the literal eschatology of his contemporary, Tertullian, because it emphasized an earthly kingdom, which Origen felt was too materialistic to be in God's plan. Origen's ideas continued to influence Christian thinkers long after his death, even

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<sup>7</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: a study in Biblical eschatology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964. See pages 16-25.

though by the sixth century the Roman Catholic authorities turned against his doctrines (more specifically those of his later disciples) and declared him anathema. The debate between the literalism and allegory played out in the first several centuries of the Church, but by the time Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, the apologists for literal interpretation had lost the fight. Their decisive defeat was due to the second major trend: politics.

Following the horror of the last and greatest Roman persecution of Christianity under Diocletian, Constantine became Caesar in the West (306) and later converted to Christianity after his military success at the Milvian Bridge (312). Soon after, the Edict of Milan promoted Christianity from its proscription to one of the tolerated religions of the Empire. The Church began to ally itself more and more with the Empire, and the Christian emperors (Constantine, Theodosius, and Valentinian III) treated heresy as a crime against the state. Under Constantine, Christian churches were permitted to benefit from unlimited bequests and began to accumulate great wealth. Theodosius I eventually prohibited pagan worship (391). Thus by the end of the fourth century, Church and Empire had become partners.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), one of the most prominent doctors of the Church, witnessed not only the triumph of Christianity but also the trials of Rome, including the Visigoths' sack of the ancient capital in 410. Friendly to Neo-Platonism, Augustine was a solid proponent of the allegorical method, warning his contemporaries to avoid literalism, especially in those cases when scientific facts seemed to contradict the scriptures. He also positioned himself as an apologist for the Church after the Catholic tradition. Thus, in matters of



eschatology, he could not allow himself to envision the scenario described in Revelation, in which earthly authorities opposed God's people, only to be destroyed when Christ returns. In Augustine's world view, Rome was the ally of the Church, not the enemy.

From his earliest inclinations toward believing in a coming earthly kingdom under Christ, then, Augustine moved decisively toward amillennialism—i.e., the denial that there was to be any future golden age. Rather, Christ would work through the Church to spread the benefits of God's love through human history until the final judgment. Roman Catholicism continually endorsed this view all the way through the Reformation.

The rise of the papacy is associated with Gregory I "the Great", who served as pontiff from 590 through his death in 604. An able administrator, effective diplomat, and virtuous steward of the Church, Gregory's influence grew in the West as the emperors in Constantinople gave less and less attention to the dire conditions in Italy. Gregory took it upon himself to seek peace with the invading Lombards, cultivate allies among the Merovingian kings, and send missionaries to England. By the time of his death, popular regard for the leadership of the Bishop of Rome was growing, and the foundation was laid for the papacy as the rightful ruler of Christendom, at least in the West.

This evolution of the Church from a despised and persecuted cult associated with the Jews into the medieval Roman establishment with ambitions toward universal rule in the name of Christ had predictable ramifications for all aspects of theology, including eschatology. Ignoring for a moment the many details of Christian prophecy (which remain subjects of dispute down to today), the basic storyline is clear: Jesus (and other prophets and apostles)

predicted a time of great distress, followed by his victorious return in glory to rule the world. At the conclusion of his reign, he would conduct the final judgment of mankind and usher in the eternal state. The dramatic and violence-laced language of both Old and New Testament prophecies underscored the point: Christ would return and destroy the evil establishment and supplant it with his own kingdom.

How were believers to regard this prophecy? The simplest way to understand the various schools of thought that emerged is to look at the degree to which individuals and institutions were invested in the establishment. If you are a member of the establishment, you do not anticipate its destruction with joy. If you are outside the establishment (or worse, a victim of it), you do. The Presbyterian Church expressed a similar way of looking at eschatological interpretation:

Across the ages of time, circumstances of persecution and peril on the one hand or peace and progress on the other have inspired various interpretations of the Consummation to meet those conditions; the first in terms of imminent rescue of church and world by the Second Advent, the second in reaffirmation of faith in the Divine instrumentality of the church to prepare or introduce either the temporal Golden Age or the Final State.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, believers and churches that experience the success of Christianity—either in the Church’s beneficent influence in the world or its integration with political authority—tend to view the kingdom prophecies as present realities, at least in part. Those

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<sup>8</sup> *Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Things* [Web Extra for January/February 1999] Reprinted from the Minutes of the General Assembly – Journal Presbyterian Church in the U.S., 1978 pp.208ff. <<http://www.pcusa.org/today/archive/believe/wpb9901b.htm>>

who experience persecution or suppression of Christianity tend to look for a future kingdom that supplants the present condition.

Hence, the politics of the medieval Church influenced its leaders toward a view of prophecy that interpreted the catastrophic intervention of Christ as something other than a future prophecy. Instead, the Church, through its best thinkers, chose to view the promised Golden Age as a present reality, with the established papal hierarchy ruling as Christ’s vicar. This approach became characterized as amillennialism. Much later Protestants in the Reformed tradition developed similar ideas under the rubric of postmillennialism.

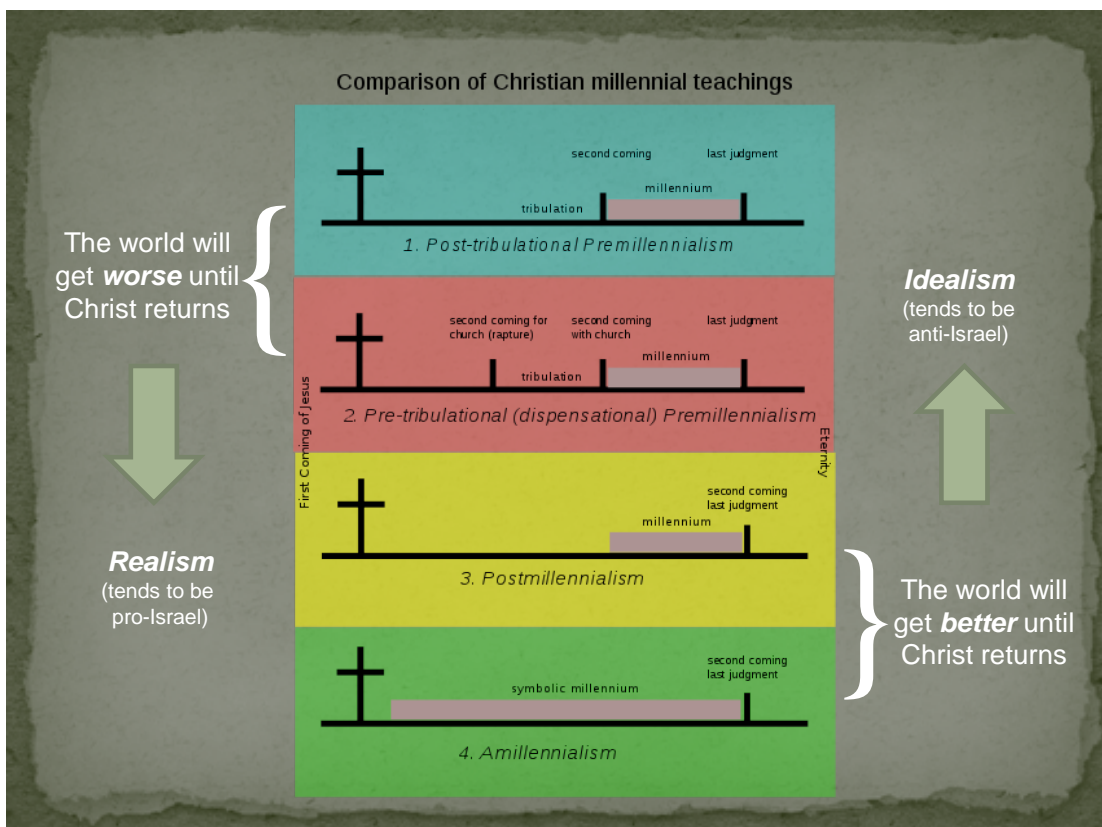


Figure-5. Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, Amillennialism

The medieval Church, well established and influential within the bounds of the old Roman Empire, clung to an amillennial viewpoint, in line with Augustine and other Church Fathers. Indeed, the Council of Ephesus in 431 outlawed premillennialism. The greatest challenge to this interpretation came with the Reformation. By the dawn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Catholicism and the authority of the pope had already met two significant challenges: the first from English theologian John Wycliffe and the Lollards, and the second from the Hussite Revolution in Bohemia. The former conflict saw the would-be English reformers suppressed and pushed underground, and the latter, after much violence, settled down into an uneasy compromise. But with the invention of the printing press and the deepening of German antipathy towards Rome, the ranting of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin triggered an avalanche of reformation across northern Europe and forever changed the organization of Christianity.

The reformers experienced a remarkable and disproportionate response to their theological innovations. Luther himself transformed almost overnight from an obscure, obedient monk into the leading figure of the Reformation. It would have been impossible for him not to interpret his circumstances in apocalyptic terms. Many reformers thus came to believe that they were prophets heralding the Last Days. Since their chief enemy was the pope, Luther and others came to a new conclusion about the prophecies of Revelation: they were all about the struggle for orthodoxy with the Church. The “Beast” of Chapter 13 was none other than the pope himself, and the entire narrative of Chapters 4-19 described the history of the Church from the apostolic age down to the Reformation. The essential struggle was Christ working through godly men on earth to destroy the devil and his agents, some of whom had

infiltrated the Church. This view of prophecy became known as the “historicist” interpretation. Although historicism had earlier proponents, it became a prominent theme among some Reformation churches.

Partly in response to this anti-papacy interpretation, the Catholic Church developed a school of interpretation known as “preterism”. The brilliant Jesuit theologian Luis De Alcazar is credited with formulating the doctrine during the Counter Reformation. Deriving from the Latin word *praeter* (“beforehand”), preterists believe that all or most of the prophecies of Christianity were already fulfilled in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. According to this view, the Romans’ destruction of the Temple in 70 AD was the culminating event in the history of Israel, and the time of tribulation predicted by Christ and in Revelation was referring to the period of the Roman persecution of the Church. Preterism is closely associated with “replacement” theology concerning Israel (see below), and takes either a postmillennial or amillennial view of prophecy. This school of interpretation avoids the ramifications of Jesus returning in the future to destroy the establishment, and it also vindicates the established Church in its role as the Kingdom of God on earth. While most preterists believe that Christ will still return in the future, his role will be to conduct the final judgment of mankind, not supplant the establishment with an earthly kingdom.

Regarding millenarianism, the Protestants and Catholics found common ground in the aftermath of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Building upon the influential teachings of Augustine, both sides embraced a postmillennial/ amillennial viewpoint of prophecy and dismissed premillennialism as wicked, foolish, and a vanity of the Jews. Instead,

Christian leaders on either side of the Reformation believed that the Church was the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Kingdom of God, that the Jews had been set aside in favor of the Church, and that believers were not to expect a future Golden Age on the earth.

Postmillennialism foresaw the eventual mass conversion of the Jews prior to Christ's return.

In the nineteenth century a new school of interpretation arose to challenge this perspective of both preterism and historicism and their postmillennial conclusions. It became known as "dispensational premillennialism"—a reference to a belief that God deals with mankind according to various dispensations of his grace. The main theme of a premillennial return of Christ marks this school of interpretation as the polar opposite of postmillennialism and amillennialism. A premillennial return of Christ (deriving from a literal interpretation of Revelation 20 and other scriptures) implies that rather than the world gradually getting *better* under the beneficent administration of the Church, instead the world would get *worse*—more evil, more crime, more war—until Jesus returns in glory to institute his perfect government. Although some early Church leaders held to a premillennialist view (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, et al.), and chiliasm continued to hold sway among some denominations throughout European history, the revival of premillennialism in the modern age introduced a sustained new approach to interpretation of scriptures in general, and prophecy in particular.

John Nelson Darby, an English Calvinist theologian and later founder of the Plymouth Brethren, is credited with formulating the modern foundations of dispensational premillennialism. A key tenet of this belief is that Israel and the Church are distinct entities and that God's eschatological plan includes separate roles for both. (This flew in the face of

“replacement” or “covenant” theology that taught that the Church had replaced Israel in God’s future plans.) Darby and his later disciples—chiefly C.I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer—taught that Jesus Christ would return to earth not just for the final judgment of mankind, but rather to set up a literal kingdom on earth. During the seven-year tribulation before his arrival, Israel would suffer temporal judgments that would prepare her for the Messiah’s return, and a believing remnant of Israel would thus welcome Christ when he arrives. The Church, on the other hand, would be miraculously removed from the earth either prior to, during, or just after the tribulation and would accompany Christ in his triumphant return. Premillennialism thus walks hand-in-hand with “futurism”—i.e., the belief that most or all of biblical prophecy addresses the future, not the past (as believed by historicists and preterists).

The nationalistic conflicts that erupted in the nineteenth century, culminating in two catastrophic world wars and the cold war that followed, lent strength to the fundamental pessimism of premillennial interpretation. Following one hundred years of relative peace after the fall of Napoleon, the world seemed to descend into a chaos of violence almost unimaginable in the Enlightenment mindset. The horrors of Wilhelm, Hitler, and Stalin, along with the apocalyptic potential of nuclear weapons, seemed to contradict postmillennial optimism. Was the world careening toward a literal playing-out of the violence of Revelation? Suddenly, the morbidity of premillennialism seemed much more plausible.

The revival of premillennialism found expression in several mainstream Protestant denominations, and there are some sects within Catholicism that embrace it today. In the United States, prominent seminaries, including Dallas Theological Seminary, became bulwarks

of premillennial and dispensational scholarship. As a result, premillennial interpretation of prophecy is part of the theology of many fundamentalist and evangelical churches in the United States and throughout the world. Recent books and movies seeking to dramatize the future events of the end times have popularized the subject—and also stimulated vigorous reaction from opponents.

The final school of interpretation to consider is called the “idealist”. Idealism simply states that the prophecies in general and the book of Revelation in particular are meant to be understood as non-literal symbols of Christianity’s ultimate triumph on the earth. This method of dealing with prophecy stands most conspicuously against premillennialism and its anticipation of God’s future, imminent, and violent intervention into human history. Idealism is more comfortable with postmillennialism and amillennialism, because all three beliefs avoid the drama and conflict described in Revelation.

In summary, among the many approaches to interpretation of prophecy, there are two distinct camps. On the one side is premillennialism (including futurist and dispensational ideas) that predicts a future return of Christ, who intervenes violently to establish his kingdom on earth. On the other side is postmillennialism (and its cousins—amillennialism, preterism, historicism, and idealism), which deprecates the idea that Christ will someday return and destroy the establishment, but instead believes that the role of the Church is to spread Christ’s love and improve the world until he returns for the final judgment. These two competing ideas about Christian prophecy have enduring influence on policy in the Western world.



## Political implications

Throughout the history of Christianity there has been a sustained argument concerning the proper relationship between the Church and civil society—especially civil government. From the fourth century the medieval Church cultivated a close (though often conflicted) relationship with civil authority, with the result that many Christians believed that the Church should have strong, if not decisive, influence over governmental policy. Others—especially those opposed to the wealth and power of the papacy—called for a reversion to the apostolic days, when the Church was poor, despised by Rome, detached from political matters, and focused on evangelism and caring for its own. The Reformation gave rise to sustained opposition toward the papacy and Roman Catholicism, but most reformers still clung to the paradigm of the Church having a leading role in governance.

The religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries tempered those doctrines and led to the concept of privatization of religion, but Christian ideals and beliefs have continued to wield enormous (if often tacit) influence over Western governments. Even today American politicians must daily struggle with the dialectic between a foreign policy that is *interests*-based and one that is *values*-based. The former can be the produce of cold calculation; the latter is heavily influenced by our Judeo-Christian heritage—a heritage that includes prophetic visions of the end times. The question is: in what direction does that influence lead? Much of the answer depends upon whether postmillennial or premillennial interpretations of prophecy prevail.

Christian ideology offers much to those with political authority. A large portion of Christian teaching revolves around the virtues, ethics, and morality of Christ that believers

should emulate. Ideals of Christian love, mercy, and benevolence have had demonstrable impact upon leaders throughout the world. But the focus of this essay is not upon the policy implications of Christian *beliefs*, but more specifically, Christian *eschatological beliefs*. Do the nuances between pre-and-postmillennialism have any effects upon the history of Western civilization and government? In fact, they have enormous influence.

Postmillennial, amillennial, and idealist eschatology point to (or at least allow for) an optimistic view of human civilization. The fundamental tenet of postmillennial belief is that Christ, through the agency of the Church, is going to gradually improve the world. This type of belief regards the predicted Golden Age as either a present reality, or one that is developing in today's world. Setbacks, tragedies, and the temporary triumph of evil may occur, but in general things are getting better and must ultimately achieve the ideals expressed in ancient prophecy: the eradication of war, poverty, crime, and disease.

Premillennialism, on the other hand, insists that evil is alive and well—indeed, it is on the rise and will culminate in the Tribulation. Individual believers and churches can certainly act to bring good to the world, but only in a temporary way; ultimately mankind and the Church will fail to redeem the devil's world. Christians can help relieve poverty where they find it, but, in the words of Christ, "You will always have the poor among you..." Christians can strive for peace among nations and can protest wars, but only the Prince of Peace will be able to establish a kingdom in which men "bend swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks." Similarly, Christians can lend a hand in cleaning up pollution, fighting disease, and

suppressing crime, but a premillennial approach to prophecy insists that only the Messiah will truly solve these issues. The world that Christ returns to will be a mess.

The United States is not a Christian nation—the Bill of Rights guaranteed against that—but much of American culture derives from Judeo-Christian roots. From before its foundation, the United States was an amalgam of various Christian traditions mixed in with smatterings of other cultures. Hence, Christian thinking was formative in American policymaking from the start of the nation. This influence is evident not only from the biblical iconography employed by politicians including Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and every other president since, but also from the actual directions taken by American foreign policy. If Christian eschatology features a prolonged debate between postmillennial and premillennial ideas, then which of the two has influenced America? The answer is both.

Postmillennial trends in American policy (including foreign policy) are those that seek beneficent goals for all mankind. Pacifistic impulses resonate with biblical expressions about Christ as the humble peacemaker. Governmental aid to the poor finds justification in the words of Jesus, Peter, John, and Paul. From the earliest days of the Republic, Christian American politicians accomplished a remarkably easy transition: applying the ideals of Christianity to the ideals of the United States of America. Christ enjoined his followers to bring the light of the gospel to the world; American idealists see the fulfillment of that mission in the role of the United States bringing democracy, human rights, economic prosperity, and peace to the rest of the world.

“The station which we occupy among the nations of the earth is honorable, but awful. Trusted with the destinies of this solitary republic of the world, the only

monument of human rights, and the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government, whence it is to be lighted up in other regions of the earth, if other regions of the earth shall ever become susceptible of its benign influence.” (Thomas Jefferson)<sup>9</sup>

“When our strength will permit us to give the law of our hemisphere, it should be that the meridian of the mid-Atlantic should be the line of demarcation between war and peace, on this side of which no act of hostility should be committed, and the lion and the lamb lie down in peace together.” (Thomas Jefferson)<sup>10</sup>

Jefferson gave voice to one of the salient characteristics of the new republic: the United States of America was special—an aberration from the venality of the rest of human history. The United States wasn’t to be just another power competing for supremacy among the community of nations. Rather, America was the Great Experiment, the last, best hope for the world, a light to all others. Having been chastened concerning religious conflict from the bloody European experience, this new nation would embrace no state religion, nor tie itself too closely to any particular creed. But it would, nevertheless, be energized by its own peculiar form of missionary zeal: bringing the light of freedom to a fallen world. Jefferson’s use of biblical quotes about the prophetic Golden Age was a legacy of the postmillennial idea that Christ was working through the enlightened Americans to heal the planet.

In this quest, American leaders easily associated their efforts with the approbation of God. A postmillennial view of history reinforced the notion that God was using faithful men—first through the Church, lately through the United States—to make the world a better place.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson, R. to A. Citizens of Washington. Washington ed. viii, 157. (1809)

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 1820.

Long after the founding fathers worked their way through this new formulation, one of the greatest presidents still had the same perspective when he sought to emancipate the black slaves within a divided republic.

"In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free - honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just - a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless." (Abraham Lincoln)<sup>11</sup>

Regarding foreign policy, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries found America too weak and initially too wary to engage the world with its military strength. Instead, insularity married itself to postmillennial ideals of peace, at least with European powers. On those occasions when Americans fought, they considered those wars defensive, thrust upon them by morally debased Old World tyrants. As for their treatment of indigenous populations, American expansion at the expense of Native Americans fit comfortably into the paradigm of missionary work: bringing both the gospel of Christ and the light of modernity to pagan cultures. The violence that both foreign and domestic policy engendered was regrettable—a temporary condition that would eventually fade away in favor of the harmony of democracy, freedom, and peace.

On the verge of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having resolved the inherent contradictions of the Constitution through a civil war and reconstruction, the young republic grew in economic and industrial strength. The result was a century of more aggressive foreign policy. A long tradition of pacifism and detachment worked to restrain impulses toward a more active role in the world, but the global forces of economics and the unprecedented threats of German and, later,

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<sup>11</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Second Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862.  
<http://home.att.net/~rjnorton/Lincoln78.html>

Japanese aggression overcame history. The United States became a world power. But even that remarkable evolution failed to quench the missionary zeal of the Americans and their ability to see the role of the United States in biblical terms.

"[The Bible is] a book which reveals men unto themselves, not as creatures in bondage, not as men under human authority, not as those bidden to take counsel and command of any human source. It reveals every man to himself as a distinct moral agent, responsible not to men, not even to those men whom he has put over him in authority, but responsible through his own conscience to his Lord and Maker. Whenever a man sees this vision he stands up a free man, whatever may be the government under which he lives, if he sees beyond the circumstances of his own life." (Woodrow Wilson)<sup>12</sup>

"The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving and now demanding their place in the sun – not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights. The passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no nobler nor more ambitious task for America to undertake on this day of a new beginning than to help shape a just and peaceful world that is truly humane... I would hope that the nations of the world might say that we had built a lasting peace, built not on weapons of war but on international policies which reflect our own most precious values." (Jimmy Carter)<sup>13</sup>

"I've spoken of the Shining City all my political life. ...In my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still." (Ronald Reagan)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Woodrow Wilson, speech on the tercentenary of the King James Bible, 7 May 1911  
[http://www.adherents.com/people/pw/Woodrow\\_Wilson.html](http://www.adherents.com/people/pw/Woodrow_Wilson.html)

<sup>13</sup> James Carter, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1977 < <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres60.html>>

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address, 11 January 1989 < [http://www.ronaldreagan.com/sp\\_21.html](http://www.ronaldreagan.com/sp_21.html)>

“It [the Church] had to serve as the center of the community's political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. In the history of these struggles, I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world.” (Barrack Obama)<sup>15</sup>

Postmillennial eschatology is optimistic, energizing, full of hope, and focused on a glorious end state: a unified world full of peace, prosperity, and joy. The snapshot of this goal emanates directly from ancient prophecy, but the means to achieve it remain in dispute. Postmillennialism insists that God will lead mankind toward accomplishing the Golden Age in a sort of natural, historical evolution. This interpretation is compelling, and inherent in it is a persistent call for recruits to the cause. The postmillennial vision of the future envisions a world in which all mankind (especially Christians) work together toward the goal. It is not, strictly speaking, *apocalyptic*, because it does not anticipate a violent intervention by God, but rather a gradual process of reform and progress.

But there remains a very different perspective on how to reach the desired end. Premillennialism shares the same snapshot of the Golden Age, including world peace, universal prosperity, and joy. But the premillennial interpretation is not about masses of humanity joining together to achieve it. Instead, it anticipates one human being—the God-Man Jesus Christ—as the one who ushers in the Millennium. Indeed, as Christ arrives to supplant the Devil’s kingdom with his own, he has to fight and destroy much of humanity in the process. How does this dramatically different version of the end influence American foreign policy?

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<sup>15</sup> Barrack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, as quoted < <http://robtshpherd.tripod.com/illinois.html> >

Premillennialism draws heavily upon biblical passages that insist that man is fundamentally sinful.

“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

“The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.” (Psalm 14:2-3)

“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (Romans 3:23)

Popularized by the writings of John Calvin and his Reformed Protestant disciples, the concept of “total depravity” suggests that mankind is incapable of any meaningful or sustained righteousness. Instead, he is inherently rebellious toward God, even despite his own occasional impulses for good. The apostle Paul struggled with his baser nature, describing in his letter to the Romans that “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” (Romans 7:15) Premillennial theology sees this inescapable fallen nature come to fruition in the years leading up to the return of Jesus Christ.

The Tribulation, when viewed from the futurist interpretation, is a time of unspeakable violence, evil, and antipathy toward God. Believers who suffer through this period are hunted fugitives, fleeing from the devilish political authorities determined to destroy the faithful Christians along with those Jews who do not accept the diabolical “new world order”. Since the premillennialist anticipates such conditions prior to the arrival of Christ, he views attempts to improve the world now with some suspicion, or at least a sense of ultimate pessimism.



Virtuous people—especially Christians—can and ought to contribute to society, at least at the individual or community level. But no government, except that of Christ’s millennial kingdom, will ever be able to solve poverty, pollution, crime, or war. In fact, premillennial scenarios trigger a sense of paranoia toward any government that cultivates a vision of the Golden Age, because they anticipate that the Devil and his agents will dupe the world into believing in their beneficent intentions during the Tribulation.

Since human history is winding down toward the temporary triumph of evil in the end times, it is natural to expect that evil is alive and well in the world today. The Church—rather than being at the forefront of some ecumenical charge into the Golden Age—is instead engaged in a relentless battle against the agents of Satan, who are often found at the head of foreign governments. The premillennialist, although he does not avoid pitching in for the common good at the local level, sees it as the Church’s mission to evangelize the world’s inhabitants, saving those who can be reached, and defending against the many forms that evil takes. The world as a whole cannot be “fixed”. But the saving gospel of Christ can swell the ranks of believers, all the while the devil is increasing his grip on the nations of the world.

Even the gospels of the pre-and-postmillennialists are different. The latter wants to spread the good news not just of Christ’s atoning work on the Cross, but also of his moral and ethical teachings, and his example of humility, love, and nonviolence. The postmillennialist expects to see the gospel in action in the curing of poverty, crime, pollution, and war. The end result of the gospel message is a better world. As regards the violent imagery of Christian

prophecy in the Gospels and Revelation, the postmillennialist insists that the events described are either past already, or that they are metaphors and not intended to be taken literally.

The premillennialist, on the other hand, brings with him a gospel that despairs of this world. The “good news” is about the opportunity that everyone has to experience personal salvation through faith in the atoning work of Christ. As for the teachings of Jesus, they apply to one’s personal life, and, in a greater sense, to the glorious kingdom that Christ will one day establish. But they are not a prescription for fixing the Devil’s world, and certainly not a basis for American foreign policy. The bloody prophecies of the Bible, according to this view, are not metaphorical, nor comfortably situated in the past, but rather an accurate description of a future conflagration. Indeed, the violence of the premillennialist vision of apocalypse serves as a motivator for seeking salvation in Christ.

The premillennialist thus takes an altogether different view of the problems of our day. He would like to see the end of war, but he knows that until Christ intervenes in the apocalypse, war will continue. Hence, the United States is not destined to eradicate military conflict, but rather must use military strength to defend freedom within its own borders, and defend the real interests of the country abroad. Whenever he feels the nation is strong enough, the premillennialist can even condone an offensive war aimed at the removal of an evil regime. Even this triumph, however, will not solve anything permanently nor lead to a cessation of violence forever, as his naive postmillennialist colleague hopes. Rather, such successes only temporarily guard freedom, and each generation will have to rise to the occasion and take up arms to defeat evil’s next nefarious assault.

Do such views find expression in American foreign policy? They do, but they are often mixed with postmillennial ideas as well. Thus, President George W. Bush was able to perceive the existence of an “axis of evil”—a reference to the offending regimes in Iran, Iraq, and North Korea—while at the same time cultivating a world view laced with postmillennial terms—peace, prosperity, and human rights for all. Even before 9/11, in the early months of his presidency, Bush and his foreign policy team derived a series of new initiatives that reflected the president’s suspicion of internationalism: refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol, pulling away from the anti-ballistic missile treaty with Russia, and opposing the formation of an international court on war crimes.

Why would someone who espouses premillennial views employ postmillennial images of the world achieving a Golden Age? The answer is in the nature of these two belief systems. Postmillennialism is optimistic and focused on a lofty goal: fixing the world for the good of everyone. It is a belief system that easily lends itself to ecumenical endeavor. Expression of postmillennial eschatology insists that God is the driving force in improving the world, but because this viewpoint derives from a non-fundamentalist approach to the scriptures, it is open to talking, praying, and working with other religions as a rule.<sup>16</sup> Even an atheistic regime would be welcome to join the cause. When the Soviet Union sought to contribute to the United Nations’ ideal of world peace, they donated a statue inscribed with the words from a prophet of the God they officially disbelieved: “Let us bend swords into plowshares.” Postmillennialism

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Lorraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism”  
[http://www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/last%20things/Postmill\\_Boettner/a.html](http://www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/last%20things/Postmill_Boettner/a.html)

does not emphasize dogma or orthodoxy, but rather seeks to practice Christianity in action by helping others and demonstrating Christ's love. In short, it is politically correct.

Premillennialism suffers from the converse of these characteristics. It is a pessimistic belief (at least as regards today's world), and any politician who espouses it will have difficulty recruiting followers to join him in a quest that will pay off only in the next life. Deriving from fundamentalist views of scripture, premillennialism tends to be very suspicious of other religions—even of other denominations within Christianity. It is strong on dogma and orthodoxy, because it views doctrinal truth as the ultimate vaccination against the Tribulation's global deceitfulness. Premillennialism doesn't play well with others.

The result of this doctrinal dialectic is that advocates of premillennialism often mask their beliefs by borrowing postmillennial imagery. President George W. Bush believed in the premillennial scenario, but he nevertheless spoke of striving for a world in which freedom, justice, prosperity, and peace were the rule. The alternative would have been to insist that his constituency follow him into a narrow orthodoxy concerning the ultimate end of the world—a belief system bound to be rejected by members of other faiths, and even by many within Christianity. Hence, premillennialism in American foreign policy has often disguised itself in postmillennial costumes.

The postmillennial view has had its share of troubles as a guide to US foreign policy. Woodrow Wilson's Presbyterian background and postmillennial views energized his foreign policy. He led the nation, reluctantly, into war against Imperial Germany, willing to accept what he knew would be catastrophic sacrifice, but only with a lofty goal in view: the establishment

of a league of nations that would thereafter preserve the peace. He insisted that the “war to end all wars” would do just that, and that it would likewise make the world safe for democracy. He called for a treaty of peace that would allow for no victors and no vanquished, so that there would be no seeds for future conflict. In all these endeavors Wilson’s policy failed. The ideals of God’s kingdom foundered on the sea of *Realpolitik*.

An equally ideological leader, President Jimmy Carter explained his views on Christian eschatology in his book *Our Endangered Values*. He made it clear that he espoused a postmillennial view of prophecy, and that his belief system was part of his motivation for his foreign policy initiatives—especially for his devotion to human rights. He also deprecated the rise of Christian fundamentalism and distinguished it from his own evangelical background.<sup>17</sup> But his well-intentioned efforts to push a human rights agenda foundered on Soviet intransigence and, more dramatically, on the Islamic revolution in Iran. Advocates and apologists for Carter’s administration can point (with some justification) to human rights successes. But election results in 1980, along with harsh criticism from many pundits and historians, indicated need for greater pragmatism in American foreign relations to avoid the embarrassment and perceived weakness of Carter’s setbacks.

The administration of George W. Bush likewise pursued a foreign policy that derived from a strong sense of values, including religious beliefs. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush addressed a gathering at the National Cathedral that made clear his viewpoint concerning the nature of the world:

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<sup>17</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values*. See especially Chapter 3.

“Just three days removed from these events, Americans do not yet have the distance of history. But our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”<sup>18</sup>

In his first State of the Union Address after the attacks, President Bush stated flatly that:

“Evil is real, and it must be opposed.”<sup>19</sup>

George Bush described himself as an evangelical Christian, and he attracted the vote and enthusiasm of many on the so-called “religious right”. Fundamentalist eschatology, much of it based on dispensational premillennialism, is inherently suspicious of internationalism and of international organizations. Since one of the main themes of prophecy concerning the Tribulation in the Book of Revelation has to do with the “Beast” and his rise to the head of an international confederation, fundamentalists fear the loss of American sovereignty in the surrendering of authority to international organizations. The United Nations heads the list of the distrusted. Thus, when President Bush led the nation to war in Iraq and many of his political opponents decried his departure from international norms, fundamentalists sided with him.

Princeton University professor of ethics, Peter Singer, characterized the eschatological beliefs that motivated George Bush:

One of the signs of the apocalypse that will precede the second coming of Christ is the rise of the Antichrist, the ultimate enemy of Christ, who heads Satan’s forces in the battle that will culminate in the triumph of forces of God, and the creation of the Kingdom of God on Earth. Projecting this prophecy onto the world in which they live, many American Christians see their own nation as

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<sup>18</sup> George W. Bush, September 14, 2001, Address at the National Cathedral. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-2.html>

<sup>19</sup> George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, January 30, 2002. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>

carrying out a divine mission. The nation's enemies are demonized. That is exactly what Bush does.<sup>20</sup>

Far from seeing the postmillennialist's world in which Christianization is gradually moving the world toward international peace, prosperity, and righteousness, the premillennialist sees the world as a stage upon which good and evil fight each other until the culmination that the return of Christ will bring. It is, therefore, hostile to international organizations that impinge upon national sovereignty. Indeed, the Christian who compromises with the UN or any other international body is one step away from betraying the faith. Because American foreign policy has for two centuries been heavily influenced by postmillennial eschatology, fundamentalists and premillennial evangelicals find it difficult to forego the rosy language of the ideals of universal peace. But at a deeper level, they believe that only the Messiah will achieve it. In the mean time, "Beware that no one deceive you..."

This suspicion of internationalism was reflected in the Bush administration's retreat from the Kyoto Protocol, the ABM Treaty, and the International Criminal Court, despite his claim that he was a fervent internationalist in the image of Woodrow Wilson. He showed himself ready to refer the Iraq situation to the UN, but when the international community balked at the new American militarism, Bush and his fundamentalist allies shook the dust from their feet and proceeded to advocate war.

The Bush doctrine of preemptive war was likewise an outgrowth of premillennialism or at the very least, a rejection of the postmillennial position. Christians striving to achieve the

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil* (New York: Penguin Group), 207-08.

Golden Age on earth have long pushed for international peace and sought to systematize it through legislation. From the signing of the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928 that outlawed the use of war as an instrument of national policy (a treaty still in effect and thus a binding law for the United States) to the publishing of the UN Charter which calls for members to use or threaten war against another state, Western civilization—with the hearty approval of Christian postmillennialists—has tried to restrain itself from violence. This effort is in keeping with the postmillennial view that Christians will ultimately lead the world into the Golden Age and “beat swords into plowshares”. But the premillennialist is certain that such efforts are misguided, futile, and even dangerous. Instead, nations must go to war to defend themselves, their interests, and their ideals. Only the Prince of Peace will be able to permanently eradicate war. Until he arrives, vigilant Christians must be on the lookout for evil, and preemptive war remains a viable instrument of policy when necessary.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 was in large measure a popular reaction against the policies of the Bush administration. Foreign policy was at the top of the list of grievances of many who voted for Obama. In place of the perceived warmongering of the Bush years, liberals demanded a president who would recover American prestige by rejoining the international community. While Christian fundamentalists harbored suspicions that Obama was a closet Muslim, many in the Christian community, including those from a postmillennial tradition, welcomed him. The young senator from Illinois insisted that he was a bona fide Christian, but also that his faith led him in an altogether different direction that his predecessor had taken. Obama believed that Christianity was about peace, love, and beneficence, not a violent crusade against evil. He believed that genuine Christian faith included tolerance of others and an active



(and ecumenical) international effort to solve common problems. Like many presidents before him, he saw the world in postmillennial terms, but the urgency of Islamic issues has forced him to move away from any initiatives that would make him look like a champion for Christianity. Since Obama has distanced himself from any intent to Christianize the world but instead welcomes people of all faiths to cooperate, his foreign policy would be better characterized as amillennial.

As of this writing the verdict is still out on whether the world's Muslim communities will respond to Obama's good wishes. Ongoing disagreements between the United States and Iran have led the conservative and fundamentalist leadership in Tehran to brand the Obama administration an enemy. Al-Qaeda and associated movements continue to deprecate the new president because he continues to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. As for the rest of the Muslim faithful, those espousing moderate, non-fundamentalist interpretation of prophecy will likely be more inclined to work with an America that takes similarly moderate views concerning Christian prophecy.

One issue that strikes at the heart of the premillennial-postmillennial conflict is America's relationship with Israel. While the Obama administration goes to great lengths to insist that relationship is strong, there are signs that it is not. Benjamin Netanyahu elected not to attend an international conference on nuclear weapons that Obama sponsored in Washington in April, 2010. His decision was reportedly based on his fear that Egypt and Turkey intended to call his government to task on their ambiguous nuclear weapons policy. It was also likely tied to President Obama's adverse reaction to Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem.

While Secretary of State Hillary Clinton casted about for some basis of agreement between the two nations, the Israeli question continues to bedevil an American foreign policy that is built on a conflicted religious question about God's chosen people.

### Israel: Still God's People or Lost?

Almost from the beginning of Christianity—and especially after the fourth century—believers had to confront the question of Israel. Jesus, after all, was a Jew himself and the central figure in God's program for mankind. What then of his nation, Israel? After the Jews' collective rejection of Jesus, were they lost irrevocably from God's salvation, or would they, as part of the end times program, be redeemed? What may seem a purely theological issue took on political dimensions as Christianity triumphed in the West and merged into an alliance with civil authority.

From the time of Rome's first involvement in Palestine (64 BCE), Jews resisted Roman rule. Throughout the early years of Christianity, Roman rulers and their surrogates attempted alternately to appease or crush their Jewish subjects. Revolts were common, the two most serious—the Great Revolt of 66-73 CE and the Simon bar-Kokhba Revolt of 132-136 CE—resulted in horrendous bloodshed and an enduring enmity between Rome and the Jewish people. As a result, Roman rulers undertook serious measures to monitor and repress their Jewish subjects.

Enter Christianity. Romans viewed the new Christian movement initially as a Jewish offshoot, which, in some ways, it was. But as Christianity grew in popularity and suffered through

Roman persecution, some Christian leaders began to see the need to distance themselves from Judaism and the Jewish people in order to gain some measure of acceptance from Rome. This effort was facilitated by the fact that Jewish synagogues had already begun to expel followers of Jesus from the first century CE. To make the break clearly, Christians established Sunday as their special day of worship in order to distinguish themselves from the Jews, who worshipped on Saturday. In addition, some Christians were ready and willing to support Roman repressive policies against Jews, motivated in part by the Gospel narratives that laid at least part of the blame for the crucifixion at the feet of the Jewish people, and in part by the need to mollify Rome.

Thus, a theological issue with serious political ramifications arose: are the Jews still God's special people, or have they been replaced by the Christian Church? As Christianity gained in both numbers and recognition within the Roman Empire, the most prominent Christian leaders chose the latter interpretation. Jews were the "Christ-killers" and hence were lost as a people. This idea became known as "replacement" theology and is also associated with "covenant" theology.

Even the Apostle Paul—himself a Jew—had harsh words for his countrymen because of their persecution of Christians:

"You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last." (I Thessalonians 2:14-16)

But if, as some supposed, the nation of Israel was doomed, then what of the numerous prophecies of the Old Testament, many of which predicted the eventual restoration and glorification of the Jewish nation? In order to account for these prophecies while at the same time condemning the Jews, Christian leaders proposed that because of the Jews' culpability in the crucifixion, they were supplanted in God's economy by the Christian Church. All the prophecies in both the Old and New Testament that spoke of Israel's future redemption were in fact referring metaphorically to the "New Israel"—i.e., the Church. Once this form of replacement theology took hold, the final break between Christianity (especially its most dominant form, Roman Catholicism) and the Jews was complete. From this institutionalized ban against the Jews arose two millennia of European persecution of the Jewish people.

Despite this trend of Christian anti-Semitism, there have been scholars, priests, and other leaders throughout the history of Christianity who chose a different interpretation of the issue. Jews were not irrevocably lost, but only temporarily in rebellion against God's chosen one, Jesus Christ. Indeed, as the Apostle Paul explained in his letter to the Romans, God used the Jews' rejection of Christ ultimately for good—specifically, to spread the Gospel to the Gentile world.

"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob'...As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." (Romans 11: 25-29)

Following this line of thought, some Christians believed that Israel would continue to experience discipline from God for the duration of the Age of the Church, but that as the end of human history neared, Christ would return and be recognized by Israel. In return, God would restore the nation to prominence, peace, and prosperity. According to this line of thinking, the Old Testament prophecies in fact referred to literal Israel, not the Church. Instead, as modern dispensational premillennialism teaches, God has a plan for Israel and another for the Church. Those Jews who accept Christ as their Savior and Messiah will enjoy the blessings of Christ's millennial kingdom, while the Church will be removed prior to the establishment of the kingdom and will reign with Christ.

Following the Protestant Reformation, Christian denominations multiplied, each with various nuances concerning theology, soteriology (i.e., doctrines of salvation), and eschatology. Replacement theology continued as the foundation of eschatological beliefs both within Roman Catholicism and in Reformed Christianity. The postmillennial view of the latter foresees a mass conversion of Jews (and the rest of the world) prior to Christ's return, while the amillennial view of the former does not. In any case, all three Christian perspectives agree that Jews who continue to reject the Messiah are lost.

The long travail of Jews in Europe remains a dark chapter of the history of the West, but a number of factors coalesced to balance the inherent antipathy of replacement theology in favor of the Jews by the nineteenth century. First, some Jews continued to wield great financial power through their traditional association with the banking industry. Second, the very persecution of Jews in Europe led some Christians of conscience to react against it. When

British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur Balfour led the effort to support a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he declared, “The treatment of the [Jewish] race has been a disgrace to Christendom.”<sup>21</sup> Finally, the emergence of dispensational premillennialism (see above) led to some believers seeing Jews (and later, the nation of Israel) as still in God’s program and thus worthy of support.

This phenomenon, along with similar trends toward restoration of the Jews throughout history, led to the idea of Christian Zionism—i.e., a belief that Christians should support the Jews having a homeland in Palestine. The motivations for Christian Zionism include a general respect for the people from whom Christ came, as well as the horror felt at the revelation of the Holocaust during World War Two. But another strong factor in favor of the movement was the eschatological implications of dispensational premillennialism. The argument of this school of interpretation is that restoration of the Jews to Palestine is a prerequisite for the end times program to occur. There are, naturally, many variations of that line of thinking, but the basic idea emanates from numerous prophetic scriptures concerning the eschaton that indicate that Jews will be (at least partially) gathered in Palestine as the apocalyptic drama unfolds. Indeed, Revelation 11 indicates that there will be a functioning Temple during the tribulation. The storyline suggests that in the final years leading up to the return of Christ, many Jews will have converted to Christianity, while many others remain defiant. When Jesus arrives, one of his tasks will be to gather Jews from throughout the Diaspora back to Palestine, there to divide them into those who believe and those who do not. The former are welcomed to share in Christ’s earthly kingdom; the latter are banished to Hades to await final judgment.

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph, *Jewish Literacy* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 274.

Israeli citizens today are appreciative of Christians who favor restoration and support the state of Israel, but they are also wary. Both replacement and dispensational theology ultimately call for “true Israel” to turn to Christ in the end. Hence, the very Christians who favor Western support for Israel also seek to proselytize them, which enrages religious Jews and even offends conservative and reformed Jews. In the end, American and European foreign policy toward Israel remains in the grip of a dramatic dialectic—pulled in one direction by replacement theology and in another by dispensational premillennialism. Since the postmillennial/amillennial view sees no particular eschatological significance in the State of Israel, believers of this interpretive tradition view issues in the Middle East from an ethical, not apocalyptic perspective. The premillennialist, on the other hand, weds the success of Israel with the detailed narrative of the end times and thus tends to favor the Jewish state over its Muslim rivals.

As an example of the former trend, the Presbyterian Church recently released a report by their Middle East Study Committee. The report calls for Israel to dismantle the settlements in the occupied territories as the foundation for a just and lasting settlement and deprecates the human rights abuses that occur there.<sup>22</sup> Many Jews, including Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed consider the report to be prejudicial and an expression of Christian anti-Semitism. On the other end of the spectrum, many fundamentalist and evangelical Christians consider it the right of the Jews to possess the ancient land of biblical Israel. Within the premillennial community there are wide differences as to how the geographical extent of Israel relates to the

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<sup>22</sup> “Breaking Down the Walls”, Report of the Middle East Study Committee to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) <<http://www.pcusa.org/middleeastpeace/>>

coming of the Messiah—some insisting that Greater Israel is a prerequisite to his return, and others believing that the Israel of the Tribulation will have far less territory than how the Bible describes the kingdom of Solomon.

From this ancient theological argument came the policy trends that eventuated in modern Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel. Dispensational premillennialists—whose predecessors in generations past continually foresaw the return of Christ in their own day—remain excited about the existence of the Jewish state, because it seems to them to be a clear sign of the impending apocalypse. American politicians must wrestle with these two opposing lines of Christian interpretation in deriving an Israeli policy that will garner the requisite domestic and international support.

### The Rapture Question

Among the more dramatic controversies in Christian eschatology today is the question of the Rapture of the Church. Popularized by the “Left Behind” series of books and movies, what was once an all-but-ignored curiosity of prophecy has become a major topic of discussion in churches and even a hot-button in American politics.

The New Testament hints about a “snatching away” (Greek: HARPODZO; Latin: RAPTURE, from which we derive the English term ‘rapture’) of believers—both those who have already died and those still living on the earth.

“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound,



the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” (I Corinthians 15:51-52)

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. (I Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Several other passages (e.g., II Thessalonians 2:1-12, Philippians 3:20-21) are taken by some to refer, somewhat mysteriously, to the Rapture as well. Finally, believers in this future phenomenon point to the fact that the Church (Greek: ECCLESIA) is not mentioned at all in the Book of Revelation’s description of the dramatic events of the Tribulation (Chapters 4-19), thus arguing from silence that the Church will be removed from the earth in advance of the time of trouble.<sup>23</sup>

Based on this limited evidence, believers in the Rapture look for a future “rescue” of the Church in whole or in part as Christ miraculously and instantaneously snatches them into heaven. Among evangelical Christians, there remains much controversy regarding the timing of the Rapture. The “Pre-Tribulation Rapture” removes the entire Church just prior to the seven year Tribulation. The “Mid-Tribulation Rapture” calls for the Church to suffer through the first

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<sup>23</sup> Some also believe that Matthew 24:31, 40-41 and similar passages in the other synoptic Gospels also address the Rapture. Others, including most dispensational premillennialists, believe that in these passages Jesus is referring to the judgment of Israel following the Second Advent of Christ and that the Church is not in view here.

three and one-half years of the Tribulation before being rescued. The “Pre-Wrath Rapture” proposes that the Church will suffer through most of the Tribulation but be removed prior to the “Bowl Judgments” described in Revelation 15 and 16. Finally, the “Post-Tribulation Rapture” calls for the Church to endure the entire Tribulation and predicts its removal as part of the return of Christ. In addition to these four major schools of thought, there is speculation as to whether the Rapture will include all believers or only the most faithful ones (the “Partial Rapture” position).

Apart from popular fascination with the concept of the Rapture, this eschatological oddity has recently attracted political reactions as well. In the late 1990s, evangelical authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins began to publish a collection of books known as the *Left Behind* series. The books present a dramatic interpretation of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture position and focus on the diabolical rise of the Anti-Christ and his persecution of Christians who come to salvation after the sudden, miraculous removal of the Church. The books spawned a number of movies as well, and together the works attracted both devotion from evangelical Christians and mockery and contempt from others, including Christians from the postmillennial and amillennial positions.<sup>24</sup>

Barbara R. Rossing, a Lutheran minister and educator, for example, wrote *The Rapture Exposed*, a vituperative response to the *Left Behind* series. Rossing employs a postmillennial, metaphorical interpretation of the Book of Revelation and deprecates those who interpret the book literally. To Rossing, the violence, bloodshed, and horror of the events described in

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<sup>24</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: a novel of the earth's last days*. Tyndale House Publications, Inc., 1996.

Revelation are to be interpreted as part of God's injunction to Christians to strive for peace, justice, and love. The symbols and prophecies of the book are not to be interpreted as a future timeline of tyranny prior to the bloody return of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

Rossing goes on to state that believers in the Rapture are not only in error, but they constitute obstacles to progress in the building of God's Kingdom on earth. Because these misguided believers anticipate miraculous rescue from the catastrophes associated with the end times, they do not place enough importance on working to solve crucial issues such as pollution, crime, poverty, and war.

"The Rapture is a racket. Whether prescribing a violent script for Israel or survivalism in the United States, this theology distorts God's vision for the world. In place of healing, the Rapture proclaims escape...glorifies violence and war...Rapture theology is disastrous for the Middle East and it is even more dangerous for planet earth."<sup>26</sup>

Some within the evangelical world take a similar view of prophecy. No less a figure than President James Carter expressed his contempt for premillennial beliefs in the Rapture and Tribulation. In his book, *Keeping Faith*, he describes his understanding of dispensational premillennialism thus:

"One of the most bizarre admixtures of religion and government is the strong influence of some Christian fundamentalists on US policy in the Middle East...Their religious premise is...[w]hen the Messiah returns, true believers will be lifted into heaven, where, with God, they will observe the torture of most other humans who are left behind...It is the injection of these beliefs into America's governmental policies that is a cause for concern. These believers are convinced that they have a personal responsibility to hasten this coming of the

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: the message of hope in the Book of Revelation*. Oxford: Westview Press, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, Chapter One.

“rapture” in order to fulfill biblical prophecy. Their agenda calls for a war in the Middle East against Islam (Iraq?) and the taking of the entire Holy Land by Jews (occupation of the West Bank?), with the total expulsion of all Christians and other gentiles...At this time of rapture, all Jews will either be converted to Christianity or be burned.”<sup>27</sup>

Carter follows this dubious interpretation of premillennialism by charging that Christian fundamentalists (during the administration of George W. Bush) had been lobbying in favor of the war in Iraq, visiting Israel, and helping to fund Israeli settlements in the West Bank. In later chapters he blames fundamentalism for distorting the War on Terror into an attack against Muslims and contributing to the abusive mentality of some that led to Abu Ghraib and alleged human rights violations at Guantanamo, Cuba.

The Rapture question has thus found a place in American political discourse. It remains at the forefront of the religious debate between the premillennial and postmillennial views. In part because of the popularity of the subject, it will likely remain a key political issue for believers and continue to color their vision of what the world will look like when Christ returns. Those who disbelieve the “Rapture racket” will continue to cultivate a belief in a gradually improving world; those who anxiously await the Rapture will turn their energies toward evangelizing the devil’s world, certain that things will only get worse until that day.

## Conclusion

Christians in the first few centuries after Christ looked to the subject of prophecy for inspiration and encouragement as they suffered persecution. To the earliest Church Fathers, it might have been inconceivable that their nascent schools of hermeneutics would someday

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<sup>27</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005. Chapter 11.

come to command major policy trends across the globe. But European and American foreign policies have, at their roots, the postmillennial and premillennial interpretations that grew throughout medieval and early modern times. There can be little doubt that the political traditions that sprung from Christian eschatology will continue to dominate Western policy formulation even as devotion to the Christian religion wavers and disappears in some parts of the world and waxes stronger in others. By understanding those roots and how ancient prophecies underlie policy perspectives today, leaders can better come to grips with the problems of international relations.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Awaited One

#### Islam and the End Times

- **Why has a new generation of Islamic writers sprung up to inflame the Muslim world with declarations about the end times?**
- **Why does Hamas declare that negotiations concerning the Palestinian conflict will ultimately be fruitless but that the problem can only be resolved in the end times?**
- **Why are so many Muslim communities and mosques comfortable with their leaders' calls for extreme violence against the Jews?**
- **What connection is there between a 9th century imam and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?**
- **Why has Ahmadinejad allied himself with a religious school that approves of the use of nuclear weapons?**
- **Why does the city of New York attract such persistent attention from Muslim terrorists?**

We have seen how within both Judaism and Christianity, believers populate a wide spectrum of thinking about the relevance of ancient prophecy, with some believing in a literal, personal Messiah, others believing in a messianic age, and still others dismissing prophecy

altogether. But within the population of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims, the divergence of faith concerning the fundamentals of eschatology—belief in a divinely commissioned future ruler and a final judgment for mankind—is much narrower. Almost all Muslims believe in the future arrival of Al-Mahdi al-Muntadhar, the Awaited One, and they anticipate an apocalyptic resolution of history resulting in God's victory over evil. (The person of the Mahdi, however, is not mentioned in the Qur'an; his identity comes from hadiths.) A number of factors play into this remarkable convergence of belief. Islam is a comparatively young religion—its founder lived two thousand years after Moses, and six centuries after Jesus. Although Islam has endured many religious upheavals and changes over the past millennium-and-a-half, it has not suffered on a scale similar to the Jewish Diaspora or the Christian wars of religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. For Jews and Christians, these disasters fundamentally changed their religions and served as catalysts for significant denominational splits. The violence that they both perpetrated and suffered was transformational, leading to previously unheard-of concepts, including the privatization of religious beliefs, freedom of religion and conscience, and the separation of church and state. It also led to the development of dramatically different schools of interpretation concerning apocalyptic prophecies. Muslims have likewise suffered catastrophes throughout their history, but none of them led to permanent and fundamental changes that altered the way the faithful think about the end of history. Similarly, although many Muslim communities exist within modern, democratic societies, a majority of believers do not hold to the “sacred tenet of secularity” within the Western world. Instead, they believe that governance and Islam should be connected, and this idea is a major theme of Islamic eschatology.

If belief in the end times prophecies of the Qur'an and hadiths is practically universal within Islam, the study and teaching of eschatology historically remained the purview of conservative scholars from classical times to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Apocalyptic beliefs would on occasion excite some popular movement within the community of the faithful (or on its fringes); would-be Mahdis occasionally arose and were disposed of. But in general only recognized scholars had the authority to pronounce on matters of prophecy. The Six Day War changed all that. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 was a cataclysmic event for Muslims in general and Arab Muslims in particular. The Israelis' rapid and decisive defeat of the Arab alliance shattered the hopes and pride of many and led both to societal introspection and a renewed determination to continue the resistance against Zionism. In the wake of the disaster Arab aspiration shifted away from previous devotion to socialism and post-colonial nationalism and instead sought answers from within the Muslim religion. There, it found a system of thought that could accommodate perpetual warfare. There, also, it found a narrative about the future that seemed to fit current events and give believers hope when their own governments failed them.

With renewed popular fervor for literature about Islamic prophecy, bearded scholars trained in classical methods no longer enjoyed a monopoly on studying, writing, and teaching (not to say agitating) about the subject. Instead, a generation of radicals—few of them trained in the old traditions—have taken pen in hand and composed a seemingly endless stream of exciting, innovative, and compelling narratives about the end times. Most agree that the apocalypse is happening now or in the very near future, and Muslim readers look to the current plethora of books on the subject for entertainment, comfort, and liberation from the drudgery



of daily life. The topic found its way into the Hamas Charter, policy discussion in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and onto Arab streets, where it became the hand-maiden of jihad. Islamic thinking about the end times remains a force in the world today, shaping policy and impacting racial, religious, and cultural conflict.

### Sources

About one-third of the Qur'an relates to matters of eschatology, with the main focus on warnings and encouragement concerning God's final judgment of man and the perpetual bifurcation of the human race into those suffering perdition and those enjoying the blessings of heaven. Regarding the details of the end times sequence of events, however, the Qur'an does not offer much. Instead, these issues are dealt with in the hadiths, most of which date to the 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Because the hadiths comprise statements without context, interpreters can infer meaning and application with a relatively free hand. The verbiage of classical Islamic literature reflects the geopolitical situation at the time of writing, so that the enemy of the Muslims is most often identified as the Byzantines. Modern apocalyptic writers use this term as a catch-all for any perceived enemy of Islam: Christians, the West, the United States, and others.

Jewish and Christian scriptures and other writings were a major influence in the development of Muslim apocalyptic literature.<sup>28</sup> Beyond general and vague descriptions of the end times, the Qur'an and hadiths do not offer a fully descriptive apocalyptic scenario.

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<sup>28</sup> David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 5-10.

Medieval Muslim writers filled the gap by importing prophecies from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. To do so successfully, they viewed the prophecies that Jews and Christians consider to be about themselves as, in reality, about Muslims. Further, if biblical prophecies did not fit into the writers' desired scenario, they dismissed the offending passages by explaining that the original text has been accidentally or deliberately corrupted by the enemies of Islam. Thus many of the major trends within the various Muslim apocalyptic scenarios derive from Jewish and Christian sources.

The final source for radical Muslim apocalyptists is popular culture, including speculations about UFOs and their connection to the end times, conspiracy theories (mostly involving Jews), and Christian eschatology. Just as Christian writers have found renewed interest and enthusiasm for matters of eschatology, Muslim writers are reaching ever-growing audiences whose thirst for exciting and liberating visions of apocalypse has not abated. Capitalizing on the commercial success of Christian books and movies on the subject, Muslims often point to Christian works as proof of the Crusader-Jewish conspiracy that figures prominently in Muslim eschatology, or as truth that has been corrupted and wrested by the Byzantines for their own nefarious purposes. As with the use of the Bible, classical Muslim scholars deprecate the use of any non-Muslim sources.

### The Prophecies

Islamic eschatology revolves around the final judgment, al-Qiyamah, in which Allah will punish sinners and bless the faithful. Just prior to this, the Mahdi (the "rightly guided One") will

reign on the earth following a cataclysmic battle (equated with Armageddon) between the faithful Muslims and the forces of the Antichrist (ad-Dajjal). Jesus, the Son of Mary (Isa Al-Maseeh) also figures prominently in Islamic eschatology, because he descends to earth in advance of the Mahdi in order to encourage the faithful, demonstrate to Christians and Jews that they have erred, and kill ad-Dajjal. Finally there is reference to a figure known as Sufyani, which some believe will be an Islamic hero in the end times, while others see him as a villainous anti-hero. Together these major events are called the Greater Signs.

The Mahdi will be one descended from Muhammad and Fatima, and his name will be the same as his famous ancestor. He is regarded as the final and greatest caliph. In that role he is destined to rule the entire world and defeat all other religions—some through conquest, others through peaceful assimilation. What follows is a period of worldwide justice and righteousness, and the Mahdi will distribute great wealth to all. He will excavate and bring out for the world to see lost copies of the Torah and the Gospels, and he will also find the original Ark of the Covenant. With these sacred items he will demonstrate the falseness of Judaism and Christianity. Most Muslims believe he will have supernatural powers.

There are also Lesser Signs that are descriptive of conditions on the earth or within Islam as the end times approach. The Lesser Signs include general observations like an increase in fornication, arrogance, singing, and lying, which obviously can apply to virtually any time in human history. But they also enumerate peculiar circumstances, such as women outnumbering men by a factor of fifty-to-one, animals speaking to humans, and the Muslim conquest of both India and Constantinople.

Regarding the detailed schedule of end times events, modern writers differ considerably. Most posit a series of wars between the West and Islam, culminating in the revealing of the Antichrist and the commissioning of the Mahdi. The Awaited One becomes—some believe unwillingly—the last and greatest caliph, who wins the loyalty of true Muslims and then proceeds to conquer Africa, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. After he sets up his headquarters in Jerusalem, the Mahdi and the faithful prepare for the final assault by the Antichrist and his allies. The battle of Armageddon results in the destruction of the Mahdi's enemies, after which he conquers Europe and visits catastrophic destruction on the United States. His reign after these events is generally considered to be a short one, and it is followed by the final judgment.

Within Shia Islam the majority sect, the Twelvers, believe that the 12<sup>th</sup> imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who was born in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century CE, is the coming Mahdi. According to this belief, he remained alive and on the earth but is hidden until the end times. When Allah directs, the hidden imam will be revealed and, along with Jesus, will usher in a time of peace and justice.

As with both Judaism and Christianity, there are some Muslim believers who believe and preach that the faithful can affect the timing of the apocalypse. Indeed, some scholars have pointed to al-Qaeda's actions to provoke the West as an outgrowth of this idea: by inflicting extreme violence on infidels and their regimes, faithful Muslims can, in effect, jump-start the end times. More moderate Muslim scholars reject this notion and the violence it begets.

## Recent Muslim Apocalyptic Writing

With the popularization of eschatological literature since 1967 the Middle East has witnessed a huge out-pouring of books about the end times. Often straying far from classical Islamic teachings, these new writers compose provocative and almost always contradictory stories about how the near future is to play out. Most of the popular literature on the subject contains strong themes of anti-Islamic conspiracies all over the world, with special attention paid to the diabolical role of the Jews, Masons, Western politicians, and corrupted Arab leaders.

Influenced heavily by regional resentment at the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, recent Islamic apocalyptic writing is characterized by an extreme anti-Semitism. The bitter verbiage that results emanates not only from what many perceive as ill-treatment of Palestinian Muslims, but also the greater crime of taking land that was once Muslim and making it non-Muslim. This “dagger in the heart of Islam” and its forcible removal is a strong theme in Muslim apocalyptic writing. Virtually every apocalyptic writer draws from the most infamous anti-Jewish haddith:

“The Day of Resurrection will not arrive until the Muslims make war against the Jews and kill them, and until a Jew hiding behind a rock and tree, and the rock and tree will say: 'Oh Muslim, oh servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him!’” (Sahih Bukhari 004.52.176)

Other trends in recent writings include the repeated observation that the end times are now. Writers point to the series of wars involving Byzantines (i.e., the West) and Muslims.

These include the two world wars, the Gulf War, the war in Bosnia, and, of course, current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Together, these conflicts prove both the global conspiracy against Islam and the impending nature of the apocalypse.

“All of these wars were incited by the secret Jewish world government under the leadership of the Antichrist, with the aim of uprooting Islamic societies or even Islamic blocs of peoples in Europe so that they would not have an independent state, so that their governments could return to the *shari'a* someday. Since the Kuwaiti war between the Byzantines and the Muslims was the first apocalyptic war, it was one of the signs.”<sup>29</sup>

Writers in this vein reserve a special contempt for the United States, which, they claim, is under the control of Jews and deeply involved in the world conspiracy to deprive and destroy Islam. Making use of various hadiths that associate tall buildings with human arrogance (cf. the Genesis account of the Tower of Babel), Muslim apocalyptists focus their contempt on New York City. The 9/11 attacks and the repeated attention of would-be terrorists there emanate in part from the hatred inspired by these writings.

### Muslim Eschatology and Policy

The drama and ultimate victory for Islam envisioned by the Qur'an, the hadiths, and recent apocalyptic writings have served as an inspiration and hope for Muslims throughout the Middle East and the world who are unhappy with their current circumstances. The most severe conditions, of course, relate to the presence of the state of Israel in Palestine, and since 1948 Muslim resistance against Israel has had a strong religious component. The most obvious

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<sup>29</sup> B. 'Abdulla, as quoted in David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 57.

example of this is the Hamas Charter of 1988. The charter includes lengthy sermons on the evils of infidels and the occupiers:

“In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate You are the best community that has been raised up for mankind. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allah. And if the People of the Scripture had believed, it had been better for them. Some of them are believers; but most of them are evil-doers. They will not harm you save a trifling hurt, and if they fight against you they will turn and flee. And afterward they will not be helped. Ignominy shall be their portion wheresoever they are found save [where they grasp] a rope from Allah and a rope from man. They have incurred anger from their Lord, and wretchedness is laid upon them. That is because they used to disbelieve the revelations of Allah, and slew the Prophets wrongfully. That is because they were rebellious and used to transgress.” Surat Al-Imran (III), verses 109-111 Israel will rise and will remain erect until Islam eliminates it as it had eliminated its predecessors.” (Introduction)

Subsequent Hamas leaders have tried to distance themselves from the extreme language of the Charter when dealing with Western leaders, but the major themes of opposition to Jews (as opposed to simply the State of Israel, as some have claimed), and the anticipation of a violent liberation of Palestine are clear from the text. The writers of the Charter likewise saw Hamas as the vanguard of a much wider Arab and Islamic alliance.

“For our struggle against the Jews is extremely wide-ranging and grave, so much so that it will need all the loyal efforts we can wield, to be followed by further steps and reinforced by successive battalions from the multifarious Arab and Islamic world, until the enemies are defeated and Allah’s victory prevails. Thus we shall perceive them approaching in the horizon, and this will be known before long: “Allah has decreed: Lo! I very shall conquer, I and my messenger, lo! Allah is strong, almighty.” (Introduction)

A curious aspect of the Hamas Charter—and one that makes it of particular interest in this essay—is its linking of the liberation of Palestine to the end times. The Charter quotes the most infamous of anti-Semitic, apocalyptic prophecies (mentioned above) to illustrate its vision of the end of Israel: “The prophet, prayer and peace be upon him, said: The time will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: O Muslim! there is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!” (Article 7). Further, the Charter reiterates the belief that the rightful status of Palestine has been established through Islam’s military conquest of the country, and that based on that conquest, Palestine will remain legally an Islamic territory throughout history to the Day of Resurrection. This absolute declaration leads to a discussion concerning the futility of compromise or peaceful solutions to the conflict.

“[Peace] initiatives, the so-called peaceful solutions, and the international conferences to resolve the Palestinian problem, are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement. For renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of the religion...” (Article 13)

“There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad. The initiatives, proposals and International Conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility.” (Article 13)

Article 15 of the Charter discusses the involvement of the “Crusaders”—a reference to the West in general, and the Allies of World War One specifically. In their persistent determination to seize Palestine for the Jews, the Crusaders have engaged in both military



aggression and ideological trickery to weaken and conquer the Muslims. One of their tools is the ideology of imperialism. The answer, according to the Charter, is religion.

“We must imprint on the minds of generations of Muslims that the Palestinian problem is a religious one, to be dealt with on this premise. It includes Islamic holy sites such as the Aqsa Mosque, which is inexorably linked to the Holy Mosque as long as the Heaven and earth will exist, to the journey of the Messenger of Allah, be Allah’s peace and blessing upon him, to it, and to his ascension from it.” (Article 15)

The Charter directs that members of Hamas pay particular attention to the education of the young in the traditions of Islam. Concurrently, however, they must also study the ways and means of the enemy. This conscientious surveillance includes not only modern science, but also a constant monitoring of any groups associated with Zionism, including Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, and pervasive spy networks. The arts likewise have a part to play in perpetual jihad, as long as the subject books, movies, and songs are Islamic. The Charter adds a warning against jesting, since jihad is serious business.

Article 22 offers a detailed explanation of the long-running conspiracy of unbelievers, both in the democratic West and the communist East, who take turns victimizing Muslims. The Balfour Declaration, the League of Nations, and World War II were all manifestations of the conspiracy that is alive and operating today. Armed with such a world view, convinced of conspiracy, paralyzed by paranoia, and obsessed with religious rectitude, the writers of the Charter could scarcely have imagined that ten years later they would achieve a political victory of sorts in Palestine and become a quasi-legitimate government in the world community. Thus Hamas demands to be taken seriously as a movement with aspirations for political power, but

at the same time it quotes *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as proof of the Zionist conspiracy to rule the world.

Finally, Article 31 states plainly that Hamas is not hostile toward other religions. Indeed, it states that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism can peacefully co-exist, but only under the enlightened rule of an Islamic regime.

The writings of radical Muslim apocalyptists have clearly informed and motivated the founders of Hamas. Indeed, the language of the founding Charter is very similar to the didactic sermonizing found in recent works about the end times. There is a double dynamic at work here. First, sensational apocalyptic writing lends credence to the idea that the Palestinian conflict is a sign of the impending end of history. Secondly, the urgency and drama of the conflict cause many frustrated Muslims to turn to the apocalyptic writers to find meaning and hope for the future.

As Hamas has evolved from a small insurgency into a multifaceted political player in Palestine, its leaders have sometimes tried to portray themselves as more moderate than the language of the Charter would suggest. Taking on the burden of governance often serves to quench the confident and violent spirit of the revolutionist, so this trend is not surprising. Both fundamentalist and moderate trends are detectable within Hamas today, and apocalyptic anticipation must now contend with the duller realities of day-to-day administration. In another quarter of the Middle East, however, visions of apocalypse are achieving more influence over policy—at the rhetorical level if not beyond.

## Ahmadinejad and the Haghani School

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad remains one of the more controversial figures on the world stage since his election to the presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2005, and his troubled re-election in 2009. His provocative stance against Israel, coupled with his dogged pursuit of nuclear technology, is a cause for great concern among his neighbors in the Middle East and throughout the world. There are historical, economic, and security factors that play upon the conflict between Ahmadinejad and his adversaries, and if these issues were the sole determinants of any future action he might take, the conflict could likely be managed by all parties toward some compromise. But there is evidence—including his own words—that indicate another formative influence over the president: his religious beliefs, and specifically his beliefs concerning the end times.

Ahmadinejad came from a family fervent in their Shiite religious beliefs. Though not as poverty-stricken as he sometimes claims, his family was working class and conservative. His mother claims direct descent from the Prophet through Fatima, and his father changed the family's name to Ahmadinejad, which means "people of Ahmad (i.e., Muhammed)". In accord with the state religion of Iran, he is a "Twelver"—i.e., a believer in the 12<sup>th</sup> "Hidden Imam" of Shiite Islam.

In a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2005, Ahmadinejad concluded his address with a religious observation and prayer:

"Dear Friends and Colleagues,

"From the beginning of time, humanity has longed for the day when justice, peace, equality and compassion envelop the world. All of us can contribute to the establishment of such a world. When that day comes, the ultimate promise of all Divine religions will be fulfilled with the emergence of a perfect human being who is heir to all prophets and pious men. He will lead the world to justice and absolute peace.

"O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace.<sup>30</sup>

His other speeches feature similar devotion to the Hidden Imam. Twelvers believe that the 12<sup>th</sup> and final imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who was born in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century CE, remains alive on earth and has been hidden since medieval times. This "Occultation" will end and the Mahdi will be revealed as part of the end times program predicted in Shiite prophecy. Ahmadinejad has persistently expressed his singular devotion to the Hidden Imam, claiming that it is Iran's duty to pave the way for his arrival.<sup>31</sup> Some allege that he claims to be in communication with the coming Mahdi and that he believes himself to be chosen by Allah to prepare the Muslim world for the apocalypse.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, September 17, 2005. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/iran-050918-irna02.htm>

<sup>31</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "In Iran, Arming for Armageddon" *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/15/AR2005121501428.html>

<sup>32</sup> Joel Rosenberg, *Epicenter* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2006), x.

But of greater concern to his opponents is Ahmadinejad's connection to [Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi](#), the founder of the Haghani School and spiritual mentor to the president. Mesbah is a hard-line Twelver cleric who occupies the far right of the Iranian political spectrum—an ultraconservative fundamentalist. He advocates a return to the “pure” principles of the 1979 Khomeini revolution and opposes calls for democratic reform. His opponents claim that he has been linked to violent agitation against reform movements in Iran as well as to assassinations of political adversaries.

Mesbah was a co-founder of the Haghani School in Qom—an institution designed to develop clerical leadership for Iran. The school offers both secular education, including math and sciences, and clerical training. Despite Mesbah's explicit devotion to Khomeini, the late leader of the 1979 revolution considered the Haghani School to be dangerous, primarily because several of its leaders claimed to be in contact with the Hidden Imam. The school's ideology includes an urgent attention to eschatological matters and the belief that Muslims must act to speed the arrival of al-Mahdi. Of greatest concern is the teaching that the Imam will be revealed following a period of catastrophe and chaos—alluding, some suspect, to nuclear war.<sup>33</sup>

Mesbah's own website contains but one English article, and it combines the poetical praises for Allah, the Prophet, the Hidden Imam, and the Iranian scholars who follow Khomeini's doctrine of clerical rule (*velayat-e faqih*) with calls for holy war against the devilish forces of the infidel:

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<sup>33</sup> Mohebat Ahdiyyih, *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2008, pp. 27-36. <http://www.meforum.org/1985/ahmadinejad-and-the-mahdi>

“In the light of these acrimonious realities, it is our pressing obligation to prepare ourselves—men and women—for a wide-range struggle against this all-out attack by the infidels and the arrogant forces. And if some sorts of jihād were restricted to men, the cultural jihād is open to all sexes, races, nations, and communities. And this war needs cultural weaponry, proper maps and plans of action, collective efforts, and incessant attempts, as it requires sincere intention, inflexible determination, vast information, and modern media for communication. Above all, such an endeavor demands serious and influential teachers who enter this struggle by sacrificing their wealth, benefit, comfort, and even their lives and souls for their sacred goals purely for the sake of Allah’s satisfaction.”<sup>34</sup>

Ayatollah Mesbah openly supports Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, as do several other high-ranking Haghani clerics. Since graduates of the Haghani School are found in Ahmadinejad’s administration, there is grave concern that the president may be following a messianic, apocalyptic agenda that includes several key components: (1) acquiring nuclear weapons while deceiving the infidel nations (*taqiyya*—an Islamic concept of allowable dishonesty to hide one’s true beliefs and intentions); (2) the violent eradication of Israel, seen to be the epitome of evil in the world, which would cause international war and chaos; followed by (3) the revelation of the Hidden Imam and Jesus Christ, who will then usher in a period of justice and blessing. Ahmadinejad has openly associated himself with clerics who espouse this agenda. The question remains whether he is sincere in his beliefs, and whether he will act in accordance with them. This issue is at the heart of internal political power struggles within Iran, and it underlies Iran’s troubled relations with the West and Israel.

Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric and actions are deliberately provocative and frequently outrageous. He has suggested that the solution to Iran’s economic woes is “a culture of

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<sup>34</sup> Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, “Towards a Comprehensive Defense of Islam and Islamic Culture” <http://mesbahyazdi.org/english/index.asp?speeches/lectures/lectures1.htm>

martyrdom”, and his call to remove Israel (the translation of which has been disputed) led to a sustained security stand-off with Israel. In 2006 he sponsored the International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust, which attracted attendees like Yisroel Weiss of the Neturei Karta, and David Duke, former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. With such a record, Ahmadinejad continues to defy the Obama administration’s attempts to engage Iran constructively. Whether his words are indicative of a populist politician attempting to garner votes or a messianic prophet with an apocalyptic agenda requires incisive and accurate analysis and evaluation.

### Conclusion

As with both Judaism and Christianity there is within Islam a moderate band of prophetic interpretation. The form that moderation takes, however, is not to disbelieve in the coming Mahdi nor in his eventual defeat of other religions. Rather, it is a matter of emphasis and timing. Moderate clerics focus their teachings on other aspects of Islam—principally ethics and morality. Believing in the essential eschatology of the Qur’an and hadith literature, they do not hold to the idea that Muslims must have a hand in altering the timetable through violence. The current national security problem for the United States and its partners, however, is that the moderates’ voice is largely drowned out by the fundamentalists.

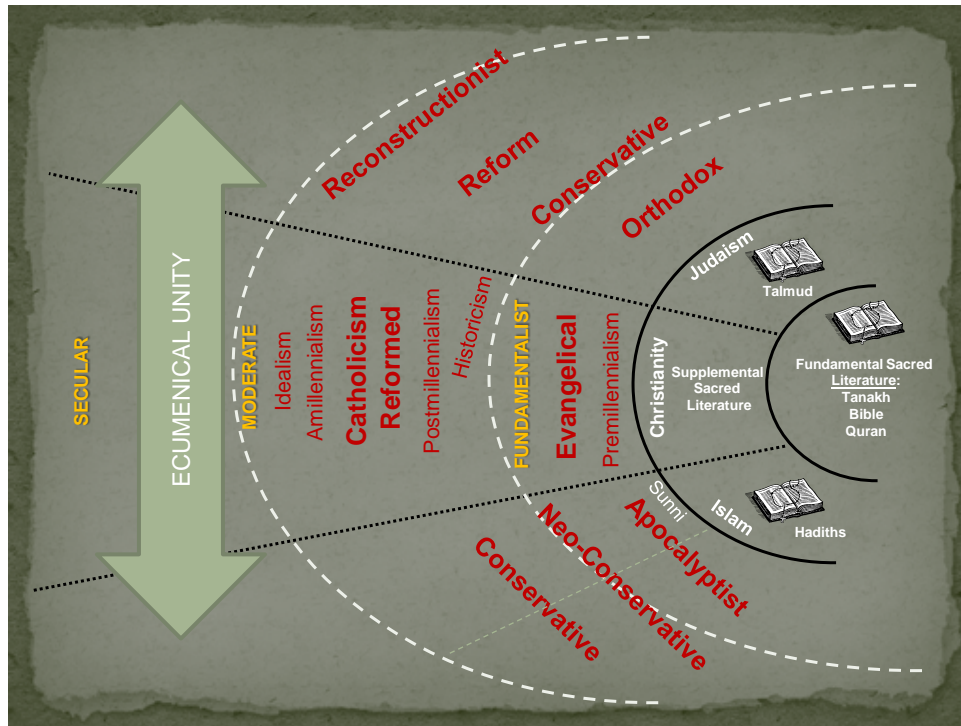


Figure-6. Bands of Interpretation

Islamic eschatology remains a highly charged, exciting topic for those Muslims who look to it as the only viable solution to their problems. Perceptions of repeated humiliation at the hands of the Byzantine West in partnership with Israel have energized many within the *Ummah*, including those few who choose terrorism as the expression of their politics and faith. Islamic visions of apocalypse by no means mandate personal violence, but the narrative that emerges certainly finds an audience within the ranks of the radicals. The temptation to abandon this world and merge one's personal biography with the dramatic tale of history's end has compelled thousands to violence. It remains a viable force for disaster in the world today, the more so if it is misunderstood or ignored.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion: The Crucible of Prophecy

The three Abrahamic faiths include eschatologies that impact our world. All three religions birthed prophecies that predicted an end to human history. All three likewise foresaw the arrival of God's agent who will bring about a Golden Age on earth. Were that the sum total of apocalyptic predictions, the adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam might have much in common. Instead, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim prophets also offered visions of a potentially violent path to the end state—a path calculated to exclude those who wandered from orthodoxy.

It is not the prophets themselves—from Isaiah to John to Muhammad—who command our attention but rather the schools of interpretation that followed in their wake. Each of the faiths gave rise to fundamentalists—i.e., those who believe in the literal interpretation of the prophecies—and each also gave rise to more moderate followers who treasure and respect the ancient predictions but who allow room for a more ecumenical, peaceful, and optimistic interpretation. Because these faiths were so influential in the state ideologies that underlie the political realities of our day, their disparate views of the end of human history continue to influence our world.

Political science offers a definition of a nation as “a group of people who share a common past and a common vision of the future.” When overlaid on top of the compelling eschatologies of the Abrahamic faiths, it is the vision of the future that impels modern nations

(both state and non-state) toward peace, cooperation, and optimism on the one hand, or war, suspicion, and pessimism on the other. In a general sense, the multifarious descendents of Abraham—Jew, Christian, Muslim—today organize themselves into two opposing camps. One invests in the establishment and focuses on improving the world and ameliorating the dour circumstances of poverty, war, disease, crime, and hatred. The other despairs of the world and clings to the hope of divine intervention, foreseeing the inevitability of heavenly violence to eradicate unbelief. Both camps read the same prophecies but understand them in diametrically opposite ways.

As a general rule, those nations, states, and religious groups that experience success tend toward a moderate and optimistic way of interpreting prophecy. They see God at work in a gradual, anthropocentric operation that capitalizes on evolution and patience. They view teamwork—among the faithful, among communities, and ultimately among mankind—as the essential dynamic for God’s work to be done. Through long experience, they have come to realize that teams are composed of many different players from disparate backgrounds, and so they are friendly toward ecumenical endeavor. Some in this camp are ready to bend swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks immediately. Others share in the hope for world peace but see a continuing, temporary need for armed vigilance. The weapons of war, if necessary for today, are certainly not to be used for aggression or selfish pursuit of advantage.

The ideology of this way of thinking pervades public expressions of American strategy and foreign policy. The successive National Security Strategies of the United States express hope for the future and see American foreign policy in terms of benevolence, defensive

posture, and pacific intent. Recognizing and deprecating external threats, American ideology naturally views the United States as the defender against aggression and never the aggressor itself. The Quadrennial Defense Review likewise lists and categorizes the various threats against national security evident in the world today and in the near future, but it mirrors the hopeful idea that international cooperation in matters of defense will prevail and characterize the future. The massive investment in manpower, infrastructure, procurement, and research that the QDR calls for—enough to delight any despot or warlord throughout history—is intended to reinforce, extend, and defend peace. This ideological foundation, though in large measure sincere, is viewed by adversaries as hypocritical, deceptive, and even devilish.

Believers in those nations, states, and religious groups that face foreign domination, marginalization, or failure tend toward a fundamentalist interpretation of prophecies. The status quo is neither acceptable nor likely to improve, and so the prospect of a dramatic divine visitation is welcome. They see the devil at work in the world today, while God patiently waits for the day of his wrathful intervention. The fundamentalist trend tends toward exclusivity, because enemies abound, and doctrinal orthodoxy is key to remaining within the bounds of God's apocalyptic solution to human history. Power politics can even intrude and exacerbate the situation as charismatic leaders, competing for control of the core of impassioned believers, define themselves by deprecating the other's heresy.

What fundamentalists lack in ecumenical appeal and political correctness they make up for in energy, endurance, and passion. Sincere expectation of imminent divine intervention liberates and empowers the faithful, impelling them toward self-sacrificial, even heroic (or anti-

heroic) endeavor. Fidelity toward God walks hand-in-hand with guarded suspicion of mankind, because the ancient prophecies all agree that the end times will feature godlessness, deception, and tyranny. (Otherwise, no intervention would be necessary.) As the faithful go about their lives, ever watchful for encroaching heresy, some ponder the question of whether they themselves can affect the timing of the end.

This general description of two trends within the Abrahamic faiths is not descriptive (and does not try to be) of individual believers, institutions, or nations. Within any given group, political or religious, there is almost always variation in beliefs. Within the United States Jews, Christians, and Muslims of both moderate and fundamentalist bents mix with atheists, agnostics, and devotees of many other religions. Within their own synagogues, churches, and mosques, those believers worship next to fellow believers who have differing views of the relevance and correct interpretation of prophecies. Even within each individual believer, the trends of interpretation can conflict and pull one's beliefs in one direction and then the other.

Nor was the point of this essay to deprecate or promote any particular schools of interpretation. Popular culture at times creates labels and generalizations to marginalize certain beliefs: fundamentalist Christians are dismissed as illiterate and backward; apocalyptic Muslims are assumed to be easily duped by evil clerics; Orthodox Jews are regarded as uniformly poor and uneducated. None of these caricatures are accurate or useful. In reality, both moderates and fundamentalists of any faith can be scholarly and circumspect, or superficial and inattentive. Their faith can be the product of sincere investigation or inherited

from their parents—sometimes both. Beliefs at both ends of the spectrum can motivate both benevolence and violence in different circumstances.

Rather the thesis of this work is to make clear that these two trends of eschatological interpretation are alive and well in our world, and that they affect how nations, states, and groups interact, perceive each other, and either cooperate or engage in conflict. Understanding the perspectives and ramifications of both moderate and fundamentalist eschatology is crucial to effective communications. A fundamentalist pursuing and defending his agenda will have little influence on moderates unless he understands them, and vice versa. American presidents who operate from within a centuries-old context of postmillennial American world-view will have little influence over—and likely bitter reaction from—a fundamentalist Orthodox Jewish settler who thinks of his life as a vital piece of the apocalypse. Cynical pundits who boast academic degrees earned during the Cold War and who insist that Iran’s nuclear program can best be dealt with through the “proven” strategies of mutual assured destruction and nuclear deterrence have failed in their calculations if they have ignored the Occultation of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam. The strategist that reposes in anecdotal expressions from America’s insular and imperialist past—“There is no substitute for victory!” etc.—will have little influence if he fails to perceive the durability and direction of postmillennial thinking and its vital connection to 21<sup>st</sup> century internationalism.

Eschatology matters, quite apart from the possibility that the ancient prophecies may be true. Nor does it matter which school of interpretation is the more accurate. What does matter is that visions of apocalypse underlie much of what happens and will happen in our

world. Comprehending those visions, understanding where they come from, and considering how believers have come to interpret those visions and why will undergird our ability to perceive and analyze our environment.