Apocalypticism Explained

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I. The Jews and the Birth of Apocalyptic Thought

The Political History of the Jewish People

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Tell me the story about how the Jews and the Israelites ended up being defeated and enslaved by the Babylonians.

Answer: It's important if we're going to understand apocalyptic thinking to realize that the political history of the Jewish people is central to the story. And it really begins in the year 586 B.C when the Babylonians, under the famous King Nebuchadnezzar, conquer the city of Jerusalem itself and in the process destroy Solomon's Temple. This particular event really is what separates the period of ancient Israel's freedom and national identity from what will become Judaism. And in the process also sets in motion this thinking about what will be the future of this city, Jerusalem, in the plan of God for the people of Israel.

After Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Israelite armies and Jerusalem was destroyed, quite a large proportion of the Israelite people were deported to Babylon itself. And the estimates vary significantly. Some say as few as ten percent. Some of the numbers that we get from the ancient history say almost all the people were taken away. No matter how many were actually taken, it is a significant experience that the people had to go away and live in a foreign land. And we have quite a number of poignant scenes from the Hebrew scriptures which reflect the trauma of this event of being separated from Jerusalem, and how we will worship our lord in a foreign land.

What kind of a place was Babylon in those days?

Answer: Babylon was a magnificent city for its day. It's perched right on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in an extremely important strategic location. And it's a massive city with huge stone walls, great wooden gates, studded with gold and bronze and decorated with these enormous gorgeous pictures of winged beasts and powerful images of the kings of the Babylonian empire. If you think about the imagery of demons and dragons and winged beasts that we find so commonly in apocalyptic literature, some of it comes from this very experience of seeing the powerful images of the enemy of Babylon.

And then when the Jewish people found themselves subject to this all-powerful Babylon and these great images of power did this lead to a sort of agonizing reappraisal about what their own God was worth or meant or how powerful he must be?

The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar had a profound effect on Jewish thinking and theology. For one thing, the promises that had been given to David now had to be questioned. What did God mean by saying the throne of David would last forever, when obviously it had just been toppled? So the Babylonian exile is really an important watershed in the development of Jewish theology as they began to think, what went wrong? Has God abandoned us? Is [the Babylonian god] more powerful than our God? Or is there some other reason why this fate has befallen us? Maybe it's not God's fault. Maybe it's our fault. Maybe it's our sins that have caused this. And in the process of this thinking they start to take the trauma of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and turn it inward as theological reflection. There's a profound effect on all later Jewish and Christian theology.

Babylon and Jerusalem now stand for two polar opposites in terms of good and bad. Tell us what Jerusalem and Babylon came to symbolize since then.

So if we think about the political struggle that has just taken place with the defeat of the Israelites' Jerusalem, the city of God has been conquered by Babylon, the city of the enemy of God's people. Jerusalem and Babylon then forever thereafter will stand as the symbols of this opposition. The forces locked in a battle of good and evil for all eternity. If we imagine the experience of the exiles living in Babylon, the idea of Babylon itself comes to symbolize enslavement. Oppression. The notion of exile or alienation. In contrast to Jerusalem which is home. So these two symbols, really--Jerusalem home; Babylon exile, enslavement, oppression--will always be at the center of a lot of the trauma of apocalyptic experience. And the hope that it also provides for that idea of release, triumph and going home.

As a result of the defeat by the Babylonians, Jewish tradition both during and after the exile really has to rethink its history. And this rethinking of history of the story of the people from times past is carried out by actually writing or in some cases rewriting parts of the biblical text itself. And so in fact much of what we think of as the Hebrew scriptures or the Old Testament as it is called by Christians is really a product of the re-thinking that occurs after the Babylonian exile.

The process of re-writing the scriptures is somewhat easy to understand if you think about it. Here is a story that starts with God choosing Abraham and leading the people out of exodus and into a land of promise, and selecting a king, David. But after the fall of Jerusalem that story now obviously continues. At the same time though that they continue writing the history they go back and reflect on how the earlier story must be understood. So whereas earlier it's a story of God's promise to Abraham and David, after the exile the new theology tends to emphasize, well, that promise is conditional. If we don't live up to our end of the bargain, if we don't remain faithful to God, God will allow us to be punished. And this new way of thinking about the theology--what we call the covenant theology--is an important new dimension of Jewish thinking. And it's filtered through all of the biblical books that are put together in this period after the exile.

Now, in a sense the Jewish oppression at the hands of the Babylonians didn't last very long because, what, about fifty years later or so the Persians overran Babylon. In your own words, tell us how the Persians conquered Babylon and what happened to the Jews.

The Babylonian empire that conquered the nation of Israel, despite its opulence, nonetheless had a rather a short reign thereafter. Within approximately fifty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian empire, itself, had been overthrown by the Persians who had moved into the Mesopotamian region from farther east beyond the Persian Gulf. The Persians overran the city. It's quite an amazing story. As the story goes, they actually dam up the canals that feed the city and come in through the water channels, invade the city secretly, throw the gates open and a massacre ensues. So this great city of Babylon, the city that conquers everyone else all of a sudden is conquered itself. And this reversal, this rapid change, comes to be viewed in a new way even by the Jewish people. God got his revenge at last. For example, in Isaiah, chapters 44 and 45--a portion of the book of Isaiah actually written during the exile itself--we hear of Cyrus the great Persian king referred to as God's anointed one. The Lord's Messiah. And it even goes on to say he will be a shepherd for my people. Now this is God speaking. He, Cyrus, will be a shepherd for my people and he will be the one to rebuild Jerusalem.

So here's what this text from Isaiah is beginning to show us. A new way of thinking. Now instead of just feeling traumatized over the destruction of Jerusalem, now one can look back and say, "Oh, maybe there was a plan of God all along. Yes, our God, in the final analysis, is in charge of all human history. Look, he even directs foreign kings to do his will for our benefit."

The Persians, having overrun Babylon and released the Jews, also made a big impact on Jewish religion. What was the nature of the Persian empire's influence on Jewish religion?

So following the age of Babylonian control in the Middle East, the Persian is really the next great empire. Interestingly enough, part of the story of the Jewish people throughout this ancient period is that, after the Babylonians, the Jews will almost always be under the thumb of one or another of the world's great powers of the ancient history. And that's going to create new influences [The Persians], in fact, are a source for a major new component. One of the important features of Persian religion, the religion that we usually refer to as the Zoroastrianism, named after the great prophet of this tradition, Zoroaster--or sometimes called Zarathustra. Zoroastrianism has a much more dualistic way of looking at the world. In the Persian mythological tradition we have Ahriman, the evil god who is at war with Ahura Mazda, the good god, the god of light. Good versus evil. Now, on the one hand this has some similarity to the combat myth that we hear of in other ancient near eastern societies. Only now it's the good and evil themselves thought of as abstract entities that dominate the world. That gives a new dimension.

After the Persians basically allowed the Jews to go back to Jerusalem and they rebuilt their lives there, another sort of wind swept to the middle east. What happened? How did Alexander the Great change the ancient world and how did he change the ancient world for the Jews, in particular?

After a century of war between Greece and Persia, finally, Alexander [sweeps] through the Middle East, defeats the last of the Persian kings, Darius III. And instead of stopping, [Alexander the Great] continues to conquer much of the rest of the Middle Eastern world all the way over to the Indes River Valley. Egypt, Syria, Palestine, all fall under Alexander's power.

One of Alexander's self-conscious policies is, as far as we can see, to bring Hellenistic culture to these conquered peoples. There's a great deal of emphasis on imparting Greek ideals and Greek culture throughout this new empire of Alexander. One good example of the emergence of Greek influences in Jewish tradition, after the conquest of Alexander the Great, is the document that we know as First Enoch. Now First Enoch was written somewhere between around 250 BCE and 200 BCE, in the early phase of Greek control of the Middle East. And First Enoch reflects the tensions that face Jewish tradition as a result of these Greek influences. On the one hand, First Enoch is extremely, intensively Jewish. It is a retelling of the biblical creation story and the early chapters of Genesis with an idea of our God being in control. So in that sense, it's very traditional. On the other hand, the way it tells that story of Genesis clearly has elements of Greek influence within it. It's the story of Enoch, one of those characters before the flood. Genesis Chapter 5. And in this story Enoch is taken away to heaven. Now what he sees then is something that the biblical story doesn't describe. He sees the rebellion of the angels. This too is based on Genesis, from the story in Genesis 6 where the sons of God rape daughters of men and produce a race of giants. Only now in First Enoch this is the rebellion of the angels under their leader, Azazel, whom we'll later call Satan.

So First Enoch gives us some of the most important components of what we think of as later Jewish and Christian apocalyptic tradition. We have God and Satan, good and evil. We have angels. The story of Genesis about the sons of God now have become the angels. In fact in the book of First Enoch, these angels are also called the watchers. They're the stars in heaven. At least the ones who don't fall. The others are the demons of hell. And importantly we have a cosmic battle thought of in these very dualistic terms where the forces of God and the forces of Satan will fight for control of the universe. But the stage for this battle, the battleground itself, is earth.

Now, initially, the Greek influence is relatively benign, but things turn ugly, don't they? Tell us about the Maccabean Revolt, what was that about?

The Jewish experience under Greek rule initially seems not to have had a kind of political resistance. There's a strong emphasis on retaining Jewish religion and identity, but they're not talking about the Greeks as oppressors, and certainly not as an evil empire. That perspective will change radically about the beginning of the second century BCE, around the year 200 when the Ptolamaic Greeks, that is the Greeks from Egypt, who had previously been in control of Jerusalem and Judaea, gave way to the Seleucid Greeks in Syria. And under Seleucid rule the experience of Jerusalem and Judaea will be quite different. In part because the program of Hellenization of the Seleucid Greeks is much more oppressive, and it's much less tolerant of Jewish religion and identity and that's where we're [going to] get some really important new tensions that are [going to] shape the political experience of the Jews thereafter.

The key story related to this is of course what we know as the Maccabean Revolt. And here's basically what happened. The Seleucid King Antiochus the Fourth comes through Jerusalem,

and because the Jewish people are in resistance to some of his oppressive policies he decides to make a show of his power, and to make an example of the Temple. As the story goes, he then marches into the Temple, desecrates the Temple, puts a pig on the altar of sacrifice and generally does everything you shouldn't do in the Temple of Jerusalem. This experience is really one that galvanizes most of the negative reaction that we hear in later Jewish tradition. It also galvanizes a political response. Shortly after his desecration of the Temple, a small band of warriors under Judas the Maccabee--his name literally means Judas the hammer--began a kind of guerrilla war against these Greek armies. And interestingly enough they managed to win a lot of battles, quite surprisingly from the size and strength of the Greek army. The culmination of this story is when in the year 164 a small band under command of Judas himself actually manages to retake the Temple and, while holding off the Greek armies, proceeds then to repurify and rededicate the Temple. That is the event celebrated as the feast of dedication, better known as Hanukkah.

For the first time since the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem the Jewish people are facing a power that, as it would seem, wants to destroy them and their religious tradition. So the responses that we get in the Maccabean Revolt are extremely influential later on. On the one side we have the response of Judas and his followers. To fight, to defend the land and its traditions. The theology of the Maccabean revolutionaries is, "God helps those who help themselves." But the other response equally caught up in these ideas of the tension between good and evil and of preserving nationhood is the response that says we have to remain faithful and God will deliver us. And that's the response that we get in the Book of Daniel which takes it even more into an apocalyptic vein.

The Maccabean Revolt was largely successful in creating a new independent Jewish state, sometimes referred to as the Second Hebrew Commonwealth, and for roughly the next hundred years the Jewish people were ruled by the descendants of Judas the Maccabee, referred to as the Hasmonean kings. But by the latter part of that rule there is a new force coming on the horizon as Rome begins to extend its power into the eastern Mediterranean. This will come to a head in the year 63 BCE when the great Roman general Pompeii is in Damascus, having conquered a number of the provinces of Syria. In Judaea at precisely this time, the last two heirs of the Hasmonean dynasty have entered into a kind of civil war against one another, each one wanting to be the new king. And so, as by a fluke of history, the Jewish people, the city leaders of Jerusalem actually appealed to Pompeii the Roman, "Would you come over here and help settle this war?" The only problem is that they didn't expect Pompeii and the Romans to stay around, and unfortunately they did.

This period of Roman expansion is one that will lead up to what we think of as the beginning of the Roman Empire. It starts with conquest, with the expansion of empire under these late republican generals like Julius Caesar and Pompeii. They acquire land, provinces. After the assassination of Julius Caesar, however, in the forties, there will be a new turn that is taken in Roman political history when Julius Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, assumes the title of Augustus and proclaims himself emperor of the Roman Empire. After his famous conflict with Anthony and Cleopatra, he will now not only control Rome but its vast empires all the way from Spain and Britain in the west to the Persian Gulf in the East, and the prize in part is Egypt itself. But one of the gateways to the East is the land of Judaea on the eastern Mediterranean shores, which becomes one of his points of entry into this political realm. So here, once again, is, and we see throughout this period of history, little Judaea is central to the story of politics and power throughout the Mediterranean world.

Now because of the sense of building the empire and the glory that's created under Augustus, the Romans start to have what we might call an ideology of empires, sometimes referred to as the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. But there is a sense of what we might think of as manifest destiny. It was the will of the gods that this should happen. It was our role in history because of our virtue and our strength and our nobility. Now we have to put this way of thinking along side of Jewish sense of destiny, a destiny often reflected as a plan of God worked out through a revealed sense of history, in apocalyptic tradition. But now we're watching that Jewish sense of destiny run into conflict with the Roman sense of destiny.

It's precisely in this period under Roman rule that the Temple itself was being rebuilt once again. On the one hand, this was a lavish building program under the infamous Herod the Great. It was to be really kind of a hallmark of Jewish identity that we would have this great temple. On the other hand, the rebuilding and Herod, himself, was a symbol for many of corruption and perversion. And thus, the Temple at Jerusalem becomes a symbol. A symbol of national identity, a symbol of hope, a symbol of all that is good and true and divinely ordained in God's will. On the other hand, for some, it's a symbol of corruption and evil and the seat of a coming battle between good and evil.

So what did some of them do?

Some people then left Jerusalem entirely. This is what the Essene [group] seems to have done. They moved off to the to the Dead Sea to form a pure priestly community until such time that the Messiahs would come, recapture the Temple and restore it to its purity. So they're really looking forward to a time when the forces of God will take Jerusalem once again.

The Essenes themselves think they are a prophetic community, operating under the plan that God has set in motion from ages past. Quite literally, they think they are fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah by going out into the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. And when we go to the Dead Sea and we look at the Essene community we can see the wilderness that they have entered. Because as you leave Jerusalem you go off to the east, within only about thirteen miles you drop off from the mountain tops into the rugged prairies, and the land is desolate and harsh. And then as we get to the banks of the Dead Sea itself, the bottom drops out from in front of you and we have this lake that sits nearly fourteen hundred feet below sea level. It's all those cliffs of the Dead Sea and this extremely harsh wilderness environment that the Essenes, following the plan of Isaiah, sought to build the pure community where they would await for the coming of the Messiahs.

What were the Dead Sea Scrolls?

The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in 1947 in caves along the banks of the Dead Sea near where the Essene community was founded, contained a number of different documents. Many thousands of fragments have actually been discovered. But basically, [there are] three key types. First, copies of all of the biblical texts from the Hebrew scriptures, including text of First Enoch and other apocalyptic literature of this period. In most cases, these manuscripts are our oldest known copies of all the ancient biblical literature. Secondly, it contains commentaries on these texts. And a particular type of commentary, the Essene style of commentary called [pesharim]. It's from the word which mean, "this is interpreted." The pesher is a way of doing commentary where they take passages from older scriptures and say how they are to be interpreted for the present day. The third type of literature that we have among the Dead Sea scrolls is what is usually referred to as their sectarian writings. These are scrolls that refer to the community themselves and how they live and how they think. One of these is called the Rule of the Community and explains the very difficult procedure of getting in and how you have to go through several stages of initiation and rigorous kind of examination and it sounds somewhat like a monastic community. Another document out of this group is what's called the War Scroll. And it is quite literally their battle plan for the battle at the end of the ages. It starts off this is the war of the sons of light against the sons of darkness. And they think of it quite literally as the way the final battle will be carried out.

They, themselves, are getting ready to fight this battle?

They take this quite literally, they're planning to fight this battle and indeed, in the war of 66-70, the first revolt against Rome, the Essenes themselves, following this battle plan, literally marched out to war against the Roman soldiers and were annihilated. As we see in the War Scroll, the Essenes expected a final battle led by the forces of God to bring a triumph very soon. This is what we see in the apocalyptic tradition known as eschatology, that is, thinking about the last things or the end of the ages. It's very important to recognize that this eschatology that they're talking about is not the end of the world, even though they use a lot of last things or end of the ages language. What they're referring to in traditional Jewish apocalyptic is the break that occurs between the present evil age and the coming golden kingdom. It's a kind of dualism of the ages; the eschaton, the end is the break between the two.

Were John the Baptist and Jesus in the same traditions as the Essenes?

The Essenes weren't the only such new voices of protest and expectation at this time. We hear of quite a number of others some of them calling for different kinds of religious reform and different kinds of ways of looking at the hope of Israel. And two of the best known figures of this period are John the Baptist and Jesus, both of whom come out of this early very Jewish apocalyptic tradition, both calling for an expectation of a new kingdom. The classic formulation of John the Baptist is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Let's return to a pure nation of Israel." And in the case of Jesus it's also, "The kingdom is at hand." But the classic statement of Jesus, more profound and in some ways more problematic later on, is the one that looks down the road for the kingdom to come. In several passages we hear it something like this. "For some of you standing here," and he's talking to his own group of disciples around him "will not taste death until you see the kingdom come with power." But they expect something to happen soon. Even a full generation after the death of Jesus they still think that the second coming of Jesus and the arrival of the kingdom would be something that's just around the corner.

Now in what way did apocalyptic expectations like these lead to the Jewish revolt, and how did that end?

Diverse as their religious outlooks may have been, these different streams of apocalyptic expectation all came together in about the year 66 when there was an outbreak of war against the Romans. This war would last for four years, and it would result in a devastating destruction of Jerusalem once again. But it [had] more clearly been fought as a war against Roman oppression, where the Romans are viewed as the evil empire, the forces of Satan, and the Jewish armies then see themselves as the forces of God trying to expel them. The Jewish War began with a great deal of hope and expectation. This was to be the messianic war. This was to be the triumph of Israel. The war ended on a very different note. After successive losses and some devastating battles with massive loss of life, eventually the Roman armies bottled up the remaining revolutionaries in the city of Jerusalem itself. Then there was a long and protracted siege which had the result of greater loss of life and starvation and horrendous stories of death. And in the end a final siege where the Romans broke through the city walls, burned and destroyed the city and worst of all destroyed the Temple itself once again. So from the perspective of the Jewish mind, and for very many people in this period, the hope of triumph and victory is has now been dashed with the very thing they thought could never happen again. Namely the Temple destroyed. And the trauma of that experience, then the trauma of rethinking what it means for our understanding of what God has in store for us had to be tremendous. For some it was another moment where they had to say, "We've done something wrong, we must have sinned. " For others maybe it's only the beginning of a new stage of history where the final victory is just about to come.

Does this lead to yet another phase of reinterpretation of their own history? Another burst of apocalyptic writing or something?

The destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. leads to yet another stage of apocalyptic reinterpretation. They have to retell their story. They have to rethink their own past. In the period between roughly 75 and 100 CE we have a proliferation of new Jewish apocalypses, documents like Fourth Israel, or Second Baruch, or the Apocalypse of Abraham. All figures from ancient Jewish history now are the sources for a new understanding of the future.

Does the New Testament itself reflect this period of re-evaluation?

In a similar way the early Christians, who at this point in time are largely still within the larger framework or Judaism, also have to reinterpret their understanding of history. Some of their expectations for the war did not come to pass. Many of them apparently thought that this was going to be the return of Jesus, and that Jesus was at this time going to restore the kingdom to

Israel. So it is in the period, between roughly 70 and 100, on the Christian side that we find a new conceptualization of apocalyptic tradition, a new sense of what will be God's plan for the future, and for the eschaton. Among the writings that we have in this period are the gospels. And in all of the gospels of this generation, we hear of attempts to explain what Jesus really intended for the eschaton, and what was misunderstood by people of an earlier generation. We get new writings attributed to Paul or Peter to explain eschatology. Some of these also are in the New Testament. And then we get the Book of Revelation.

Jesus and John the Baptist

John Collins: Professor of the Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago Divinity School

Jesus and John the Baptist I think can accurately be described as either as eschatological or even apocalyptic prophets. Meaning that they were people who expected an abrupt and decisive change, that you might describe as the manifestation of the kingdom of God. Now you can quarrel as to whether apocalyptic is quite the right word for them, but they at least had that much in common with most apocalyptic literature, that they expected some big overturning. Now, one has to realize, though, that there were many kinds of people in Palestine in the first century, or around the turn of the era, who expected some big upheaval, who expected some massive change. And within that umbrella, they might have disagreed most vehemently with each other. Many of the Pharisees might have had apocalyptic beliefs. Might have expected the resurrection of the dead and a great overturning of the status quo, but they and the Essenes hated each other, basically. What makes the difference, for an apocalyptic group, is not whether you believe that there was an end coming, but who you think will be vindicated at the end. You all believe that there will be a judgment, but the question is, "What will be the criteria for the judgment.? Whose interpretation will stand?"

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

Is it fair to describe John the Baptist as an apocalyptic preacher?

I think the texts that have survived in Christian scripture certainly present John as viewing Christ as the figure who will bring on the kingdom, who will bring about this glorious moment of transformation. What John actually said, who John actually was, what his message was, is very difficult to recover at this point, but his role in the Christian scenario certainly has been that of foretelling the coming of the Messiah, and that then is a step toward the ultimate triumph of righteousness.

Did Jesus himself believe the ending was near?

There are certainly passages in the Gospels that make it clear that Jesus is anticipating an imminent moment of apocalypse. That the end is very near. Certainly the earliest Christians took away from his message the belief that his return would occur in their own life time. And in his final sermon to his disciples before his arrest, when he's asked, "What are the signs of the end times?" He tells them about wars and conflict and wickedness and evil, that then ends with the promise, "All these things shall be fulfilled in your own time. So yes."

It was a very serious issue for the early church because Christ after all said to his disciples, "This generation shall not pass away before all of these things have been fulfilled." That's a fairly explicit promise. And there's considerable evidence that the early Christian church was rooted in an intense apocalyptic anticipation. That indeed the end could come, at any moment. And when the decades past, and the first generation did pass away and the Second Coming did not occur, Christianity went through a sort of major period of re-assessment. And what emerged from that I think was a reinterpretation of these apocalyptic texts, taking a much longer view of things, and in fact the early church as it becomes institutionalized in Rome discourages apocalyptic speculation. They viewed it as dangerous, and basically take the view that Christ's kingdom will gradually unfold over time. There will be a culmination of righteousness at some point in the future. But we don't know the precise details. So you can see a quite dramatic change in Christian theology from the very earliest Christians to the medieval church.

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The best evidence we have as to what the followers of Jesus thought about the imminence of the end after his death is clearly Paul. We have very early letters from Paul. They date from the 50s AD and they're first hand, they're autobiographical. They're undisputed. And they say the most startling things. For example in First Corinthians, which we date about 54 AD, Paul says that it's better not to get married. The end of all things is at hand. In view of the present distress that he thinks is coming on the world, he's actually advising people, "Slaves, remain a slave. Don't try to really change the social order, because everything, very rapidly, is coming to an end." One of his phrases is that "the appointed time has grown very short." It's a phrase right out of the Book of Daniel, about the appointed time, the time of the end. He's our earliest and best evidence. So that tells us that in the 50s, around the Mediterranean world, Christian communities are sprouting up, believing that Jesus is the messiah. That he's going to come again, probably in their lifetime and that they shouldn't really worry too much about their economic and social order, and even their marital state, because the end is coming so soon.

What did Jesus warn about the end time?

When you read the gospels and try to discern what Jesus actually said about the end, particularly what we call the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, he really says two things. One's very specific and one's more general. The specific thing he predicts is right out of the Book of Daniel and that is that a foreign power would invade Palestine, presumably Roman, because that's his time, but would set up what he calls a desolating sacrilegious statue of some type in the very temple, the Jerusalem Temple, the Jewish Temple. That's the specific thing. And he says, "When you see this, leave Judah, people should flee, they should go to the mountains. Don't even go back in your house, then everything will come to an end." As far as when this is going to come, that's the more general prophecy. He simply says, "This generation will not pass till all of these things are fulfilled." Now that statement of his caused a great deal of problems for the early Christians. If a generation is forty years

and it's been fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, a hundred years, how do we read that? It created a kind of a crisis, I think, for the Christians. The end should have come and yet it didn't.

If you look at some of the later letters of some the New Testament, Second Peter for example, he begins to say something rather amazing. "A day with God is a thousand years, and a thousand years is a day," which is this typical kind of adjustment--it's only been one day, but maybe a day is longer than we think, so how do we really know? Even in the later letters of Paul, which we think were written by a Paulean school actually, Timothy and Titus, you don't find any more waiting for the end, we find Paul talking about his own death and then he says, "And in that day, whenever that might be, I will come before Jesus to be judged." But he's not telling anybody any more "don't get married." He's establishing a system of church government. It looks like the movement is more in for the longer haul. We don't find those sorts of apocalyptic statements in some of the later books.

Paula Fredriksen: William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture at Boston University

I think that it's impossible to look at the New Testament evidence and read it as a non-apocalyptic text. Most Christians, or most Christians I hang around with who are academics, have no problem looking at the New Testament and seeing it as the language of authenticity, nice ethics, doing good and being good. But in fact if you look at the idea of the Kingdom of God as it functions in the first century, and the Kingdom of God as the phrase is attributed to Jesus in the New Testament text, the way the Kingdom of God is used in the letters of Paul who stands closer to Jesus than the authors of the gospels do, that idea is an apocalyptic idea. I think that when Jesus says, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand," he means something. For him to have been understood by his own Jewish contemporaries he must have meant what they meant by that phrase. And when we look at the broad range of evidence we have, the Kingdom of God means the end of normal time, and the beginning of a reign of goodness and peace. Yes, I think Jesus was apocalyptic.

There's a rebellion against Rome in the first century. It breaks out in 66. It finally terminates in 74. And in the course of the revolt against Rome, in the year 70 Jerusalem and the Temple are utterly destroyed. This is a tremendous watershed, not only in the history of Judaism but also in what will become the history of Christianity. The Temple's destruction is something that immediately resonates, if you have a bible. Because the Roman destruction of Jerusalem immediately sets up a vibration with the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem half a millennium earlier. So once you have those two events, you have the re-articulation of the apocalyptic idea. In the aftermath of the revolt, with the destruction of the Temple, many Jews, including those Jews who were Christian, interpreted the destruction of the second Temple as an apocalyptic signal that the end of time is at hand. And that's what we get in the gospel of Mark.

The gospel of Mark is the shortest, sparest, most muscular, most tightly-written of the four canonical gospels. What the gospel of Mark does, the evangelist lines up Jesus' prophecy of the coming Kingdom of God with the apocalyptic event that Mark knows happened: the Temple is destroyed. And what he does is put into the mouth of Jesus the prophecy that the Temple will be destroyed. This is in Mark 13. What Mark's Jesus talking about, is a reference to the Book of Daniel. That when the temple is destroyed, the Kingdom of God will arrive. And that's what Mark has his Jesus announcing. But Mark is a Christian Jew, not a non-Christian Jew. So what the Kingdom of God means for Mark is not only the destruction of the Temple as the immediate foregoing event before the kingdom comes; he weds the idea of the Kingdom of God with the Second Coming of Jesus.

If we take Jesus of Nazareth as the starting point for Christianity, Christianity is apocalyptic in its origin. If we take Paul's letters as the starting point of the New Testament, then the earliest textual level, the kernel, if you will, of the New Testament collection is apocalyptic. If we take the New Testament canon as beginning with Matthew, but ending with Apocalypse, then the entire New Testament canon is apocalyptic. In other words, apocalypticism is Christianity. That's what distinguishes it from other forms of Judaism in the first and second centuries. Apocalypticism is normative. It's a perpetual possibility within Christianity itself. If you think of the shape of the Christian story, Jesus doesn't only come once. He was crucified the first time he came. He has to come back a second time to finish what he started. This is the point that Paul makes in First Corinthians 15. That the Kingdom hasn't been established until Christ comes back. So if you will, in the Christian idea of history, as opposed to the Jewish idea of history, which is its foundation, the church lives in this charged period between two poles of the First and Second Coming, so this idea of the Second Coming is intrinsic to the idea of Jesus Christ as a universal savior. And in that sense, it's available constantly. In antiquity in particular, the vivid belief in a Second Coming was traditional Christianity. It seems otherwise to us, because Christianity had another fifteen centuries to develop. When I was being trained for my first communion, way back in the 1950s, I certainly wasn't taught to stay up late at night waiting for Jesus to come back. And certainly many of my friends who are professional theologians, they're not apocalyptic. But once I was giving a lecture on precisely this topic, Christian apocalyptic, to a pastors college. We were together for four days, and I was talking to these churchmen, these are pastors. I was talking to these churchmen about apocalyptic and I did this liberal arts, comparative, secular review of the Book of Daniel, the Book of the Apocalypse, and he was wrong and these people and Montanus, they were wrong, on and on and on and on; four days of listening to these wrong prophecies that described the history of Christian apocalypticism. I should add that I was doing this during Operation Desert Storm. When I took questions, the first one was from a pastor in the back of the room who said, "Yes, Professor Fredriksen, but now that Saddam Hussein is raining nerve gas down on Israel, now that he's the power from the north raining fire from the sky on God's elect, isn't it clear that now is the time of the Second Coming?" Nothing I had said touched his belief. The amazing thing about apocalyptic thought is that a specific prophecy can be disconfirmed, but the idea can never be discredited. You just recalculate.

Apocalyptic thought is native to Christianity. Nothing will ever end Christian apocalypticism, especially now, with literacy at the high level it is. Where people who were even brought up on non-apocalyptic Christian traditions, like I was, all you have to do now is pick up a bible and read it. And if you're not familiar with the elite reinterpretation of those texts, the proclamation of

Jesus' Second Coming is right there, waiting for you. It's the last line in the New Testament. "Come Lord Jesus."

The Significance of Jerusalem in Apocalyptic Thought

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

When you open the Book of Daniel or the Book of Revelation and read them, there's absolutely no question that the stage is the ancient land of Israel, with the capital of Jerusalem. All the scenarios absolutely center on this, if read literally. When fundamentalist Christians read the Bible in the 20th century, something has been fundamentally changed, just in the last 50 years in particular. And that is, they're able to open texts for the first time in 2,000 years--texts like Revelation, texts like the Book of Daniel, all the prophets--and they can begin to see the possibilities of a literal fulfillment, not a symbolic fulfillment as in the past. That is, Jerusalem would mean Jerusalem. The Jewish people would mean literally the Zionists and the Jewish state that now exists. In June 1967, at the conclusion of the Six Day War, the Israelis found themselves, for the first time in 2,000 years, in control of the Old City of Jerusalem. Jews could go to the wall and pray. There was this euphoric sense of victory and even survival after this war, from just a Jewish point of view, from an Israeli point of view.

Christians, however, who were fundamentalist interpreters of the Bible, had a completely different take on this. It's quite interesting. Not only did they laud and applaud the Jewish sovereignty, but they understood this as the beginning of the end, as a potential fulfillment of Bible prophecy, because in fact every scenario that you can read about in the prophets, from the Book of Revelation back to the Book of Daniel, implies that in the last days Jerusalem would be ruled and controlled not by Turks, not by British, not by all the various cultures that have controlled Jerusalem for the centuries, but by, in fact, a sovereign Jewish population. And so in fact, this was true again. Now, the big event that these interpreters were waiting for would be the rebuilding of the Temple, the so-called Third Temple.

One of the strangest and most unusual symbiotic relationships that has developed from the Six Day War is that fundamentalist Jews and fundamentalist Christians have something in common. You would not expect this to happen. But after 1967, with Israeli control over the holy places, and the Temple Mount in particular, here we have a double interest. On the one hand, we have fundamentalist Jews who believe that the destiny and future of Judaism and of the Jewish people is the rebuilding of the Temple up where the Dome of the Rock is, where the mosque is. Now, why would Christians be interested in this? Traditionally, Christians have had no interest in the Jewish Temple. And this is what we've seen develop just in our time. When Christians read the Book of Revelation, they read about a figure coming into Jerusalem from the outside and occupying Jerusalem, and in fact, sitting in a temple of God, claiming to be God, stopping the Jewish sacrifices. And so it's a simple matter of literal reasoning. If in fact the world is going to end, if Jesus is going to come back, if these things are going to happen, we have to have a temple. And so we have Christians interested in seeing that the Temple is built, in some cases even willing to raise funds and even pay for this to be built. Gershon Solomon, who is one of the most vocal advocates of rebuilding the Temple, does much of his speaking not at synagogues, when he comes to the United States, but in Christian churches. He draws thousands of people that want to hear the latest news about the potential rebuilding of the Temple on the Temple Mount. And so it is one of the strangest things, I think, that we've seen develop in our own lifetime.

One of the prerequisites for building this Third Temple is not only Israeli sovereignty over the city of Jerusalem, as we've seen since 1967, but a very strange rite in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Numbers, where a red heifer is to be produced and then sacrificed and burnt into ashes. And these ashes are used to purify, mixed with water. Until this is done, the Orthodox rabbis in Jerusalem will tell you, there can be no Third Temple. Now, you would expect this to be a very Jewish kind of an affair. What do rabbis know about cattle raising? In fact, we've had reports in Israel of Israelis raising cattle, trying to produce this red heifer.

"Red heifer" refers to the idea that this heifer would have a reddish color with not a single black hair or any other color anywhere on its complete body. But one of the oddest things that has developed is that Christian fundamentalists here in the United States, such as Clyde Lott from Mississippi, who is a cattle man, has got into this as well. He believes that his calling and his destiny is to cooperate with the Jewish people and perhaps even give them a gift of one of these red heifers. And so here we have a very specific example of how one form of religion, Orthodox Judaism, which would have nothing to do with fundamentalist Christianity, or vice versa, are cooperating together in the city of Jerusalem to fulfill what both consider to be an apocalyptic vision of the end and of the future.

This matter of making any move or attempt to actually build the Third Temple is obviously extremely volatile. In the early nineties, the movement led by Gershon Solomon had prepared a cornerstone. They literally brought it in on a pickup truck, and were going to wheel it up and try to take it up to the Temple Mount, and at least symbolically lay the cornerstone of the Temple. I don't know that they even thought that they would really succeed, but they wanted to make this move.

The Muslims up around the Dome and the Mosque got word of that the Jews are coming and they plan to lay the cornerstone of the Temple, and complete chaos broke out. Rocks were thrown down, bricks, large stones on the Jewish people praying down below at the western wall. The police reacted to that by sending up Israeli troops to try to quell the rioting. People were running about and screaming and yelling, and several people were shot and even killed, simply over the rumor that something like this might happen. Every year since the early 1990s, Gershon Solomon and his Temple Mount Faithful followers have attempted to march up onto the Temple Mount and pray, and if possible, even to bring a cornerstone that they prepared, a huge rock that's cut, to lay the foundation of the Third Temple. And each year, they get stopped and they're turned away. And they simply try again the next year. They have tremendous Christian support among those interpreters of the Book of Revelation that in fact some day believe that such a temple will be built. So maybe this is what God is going to use. Here are some Jews who want to build it. Here's the text that says it will be built. It has to be built in order for Jesus to return. All of these things have to be

fulfilled. So their understanding is: Who's to say who will actually play a part in bringing about this inevitable scenario of events that will usher in the end?

Richard Landes: history teacher at Boston University and Director and co-founder of the Center for Millennial Studies

The year 2000 in Jerusalem for millennial scholars is what the Galapagos was for Darwin. We're gonna see all sorts of fauna and flora, and not just the sort of traditional stuff like, like Christian pre-millennial fundamentalists who come here because they think Jesus is gonna come down. There are already some people on the Mount of Olives who are there waiting. As one of them put it to me,"If you go in a building you want to get to the top floor, you stand in front of the elevator. Well, this is the elevator to heaven." One of the Christian beliefs--and we see this in the year 1000--is that Jesus went up from the Mount of Olives and that's where he'll come down. So when you think the end of the world is coming, the Mount of Olives is the place you want to be, if you're a Christian. But we're gonna see all sorts of New Age types, we have UFO groups who believe that the aliens are gonna land in Jerusalem, that they have to build an embassy for them in Jerusalem and so on.

Are some of these fringe groups potentially dangerous?

Millennialism has traditionally been a very volatile belief, and it can, shall we say, go toxic. In particular, apocalyptic movements tend to get violent, not in the initial upswing of enthusiasm, then some of these people are very sweet, they tend to be very open hearted, they love their enemies, they turn the other cheek. I mean, it's easy to be generous when you think God's about to intervene on your side. Ok, but when God doesn't intervene, and you've burned bridges and you've made a fool of yourself, and you've committed yourself, then, one of the possibilities is to get frustrated and angry, and aggressive. That aggression can be turned against the self, and you get suicides. Or it can be turned against others, and you get what I call apocalyptic blaming, apocalyptic scapegoating, and traditionally that's been one of the patterns for Christianity. It's philo-Judaic in the upswing, and then in the downswing it's bitter and it says if only the Jews had converted, Jesus would have come. It's their fault he didn't come. So in the Middle Ages when you get like in the Crusades a movement where Jews are given the choice of conversion or death, I would say, dig here and you'll find apocalyptic expectations.

The authorities in Jerusalem actually want to know whether they should be alarmed or concerned. They're certainly aware, they're alert to it, they've been attending conferences in which these kinds of things are discussed. Whether they figured out exactly how to deal with it, is another question. There's a tremendously thin line that has to be walked here between religious freedom on the one hand, and keeping track of the possibility of a group going toxic. And of course you know this is the first time in the history of Christianity, that you've had a great moment like this. A millennial moment, when the Jews have sovereignty over Jerusalem, this is total anomalous situation. Right now most of the apocalyptic enthusiasts in Christianity, at least the ones who are interested in Israel, are philo-Judaic, but, if we get disappointment, if we get bitterness, if they turn and blame the secular Israeli government for all sorts of things, if there's a peace accord that gives some of Jerusalem back, all of those things can turn the tide and things can get, shall we say, unpleasant.

II. Apocalyptic Literature

The Book of Revelation

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

When people read the Book of Revelation they encounter this vast array of symbols. Some have become quite well known to the public, particularly in the late twentieth century. The mark of the beast, which the book talks about as some sign or mark that people receive on their hand and their forehead. Even the number of this beast--the beast being some military ruler that controls the world at the end of time--as being 666.

It's a sealed book. It's a scroll with seven wax seals. As you begin to open it, you get this unfolding scenario of events, beginning with war and famine and disease and earthquakes and heavenly signs. It's fairly standard. And then you begin to get these characters introduced, and there are five or six main characters. One would be the false prophet. He's like a dragon, but he speaks like a lamb. He has horns. A beast that is non-descript, some sort of horrible creature that appears to stand for the Roman government to the early Christians, but today could be any power some sort of evil empire of some type. And then you have the saints or the Christians,

the faithful followers of God, that are being martyred. You have two people that are very interesting, that many modern interpreters are interested in called the two witnesses in Chapter 11. These are, I guess you could say the two final prophets that the book expects to appear on the earth, like Moses and Elijah of ancient times in the bible. You have a dragon, who's actually identified as the devil behind the scenes, and of course you have Jesus Christ, the lamb. So it's as if there's a whole stage set with these characters, and then things begin to unfold one by one, in terms of what's supposed to happen.

If you open the Book of Revelation and simply begin reading it as an unfolding scenario, it goes something like this. There will be wars and famines and disease epidemics and heavenly signs that will alert the world to some sort of crisis. Then will come an Antichrist as he's called, or a political ruler, that will establish control over the whole earth. He'll be backed up with a religious ruler, who's called the false prophet. They together establish a unified social, economic and religious system that dominates the world. The only thing opposing them are the people of God and these two prophets, they're called the two witnesses, who appear in Jerusalem, and begin to speak against this power. The rest of the book, really the last half of the book is about the overthrow of this system. The beast, the false prophet, who has the number 666, the Antichrist, is overthrown with judgments and plagues. Most of them are very cosmic. Asteroids hitting the earth. The water turning to blood and that sort of thing, until finally, Jesus Christ returns as a warrior on a white horse and sets up the kingdom of God.

Give me a sense of what the tone is.

If a modern secular reader sat down and read it through for the first time, my guess would be they would find it to be extremely violent. Someone once tallied up the death count and projected it

on a modern world such as ours, with five billion people, and it's absolutely a horrible kind of a statistic. You come up with maybe four billion dying of famine, war, earthquake, plagues.

Essentially it's a book about the wrath of God being poured out upon the world. People not repenting except for the small group of faithful followers of God, and this awful wicked beast power ruling the whole world, and defying God, shaking his fist at God. And finally Jesus coming, not as a Prince of Peace at all, not as a lamb, but at the end of the book, as a rider on a horse, a warrior with a sword, to smite the nations. In one of the quotes that comes to my mind it says, "He will rule the nations with a rod of iron, as a potter strikes a pot with iron and it just completely shatters." So I think that would be the dominant impression someone would get, maybe a book you'd want to close and put away and not even think about. The book that might give you nightmares at night, in terms of all of these bizarre creatures.

Paula Fredriksen: William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture at Boston University

Can you convey the atmosphere of Book of Revelation?

One of the emotional satisfactions of having good triumph over evil is knowing how evil evil is. And one of the devices used by the author of the Book of Revelations is also something that happens in history. When evil is flourishing it's very bad indeed. And what you get in Apocalypse is a vision of the suffering that people go through before the happy resolution. You have the suffering of the righteous, you have cosmic cataclysm, you have social cataclysm. Disease, earthquake, everything you can imagine. When [things get] as bad as you can possibly imagine, that's your clue for knowing what time it is on God's clock, and things are about to turn around. And Apocalypse in a sense presents to the western imagination a blueprint for reading the signs of the times.

Eugene Gallagher: Rosemary Park Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College

I think that the key to the Book of Revelation is that it has an incredibly ornate and lush imagery. You encounter these fantastic figures who play some role in the drama of the end, whether it be in chapters 4 and 5, this wonderful vision of God sitting on a throne in the heavens with seven seals, or in the ensuing chapters, what happens when each of those seals is open. Then, towards the end, you have Gog and Magog, you have the mark of the beast, you have the whore of Babylon, you have all of these wonderfully symbolic figures, who through their vagueness and their being charged with meaning,

are very, very adaptable. We can play "Pin the Tail on the Antichrist," and find any number of people throughout history, who have been so designated. We can say, "Who has the mark of the beast?" and get another long list of people. So the lush imagery and the complicated imagery of Revelation, has been one of the things that has kept people reading it. Because it can always be renewed. It can always be applied to a new situation.

As soon as the Book of Revelation is written it makes a synthetic whole of apocalyptic ideas available to readers. It accumulates bits and pieces and puts them into an accessible sequence of events. Then the question becomes simply to match up its admittedly vague utterances with historical events. When it doesn't seem to accurately predict the end at its time of writing, it gets taken up again in the second century by people like the Montanists. It gets taken up in the Middle Ages by all kinds of people, and it gets taken up very prominently in the contemporary period by Protestant Evangelicals like Hal Lindsey, whose book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, is one of the best selling religious books ever, if not the best selling religious book. So it essentially offers an arsenal of apocalyptic images and predictions that can be used to target any specific time as the apocalyptic moment.

L. Michael White: Professor of Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin, and acted as historical consultant for "Apocalypse!"

What is the Book of Revelation?

The Book of Revelation in the New Testament has the literal title in Greek, the "Apocalypse of John." The word apocalypse means revelation. That which is uncovered. It comes from the Greek word which literally means to pull the lid off something. So that which is revealed is central to the way that apocalyptic literature works. The word "apocalypse" refers to a genre of literature like the Book of Revelation itself. They are pieces of literature that start by revealing something or seeing visions or having individuals be taken up into heaven where they can see what's going on from that vantage point.

Scholars also talk about "apocalyptic" or "apocalyptic environment," or "apocalyptic outlook." In this sense the word "apocalyptic" has a slightly broader meaning, and it refers to the spirit of the age that especially became prominent roughly between the years 300 B.C. and 200 C.E., the very years in which Judaism itself went through some cataclysmic changes, when the Temple was destroyed once again and importantly when the Christian movement itself was born and Jesus was executed.

Is John's Apocalypse unique?

The Revelation of John, the Apocalypse, also must be looked at from the perspective that it's not the only such piece of apocalyptic literature that we have. In fact there are lots of apocalypses. Some thirty or forty of them from the ancient world that we know by name and we can actually read still to this day. So when the author of the Book of Revelation sat down to write, there was a very strong paradigm of what revelation literature should look like and sound like. The stock of characters, the list of images, the symbols one uses are pretty commonplace, if you're in that environment.

When was the Book of Revelation written?

The Book of Revelation was written probably in around the year 96, right at the end of the first century. The traditional story of the Book of Revelation is that it was experienced by John the Apostle while he was in exile on the Greek island of Patmos. As the story goes he was in a cave, his prison, and in a dream he began to see a vision wherein it was told him what to do. What then we begin to get is this revelation of the future of the world. In John's own account, he is in the spirit on the Lord's day and begins to hear a voice, and he begins to see a vision of a lamp stand and lights, and this is what opens up the beginning of the revelatory experience in the book. When John begins to see his vision, the first thing he's told is to write letters to the seven churches of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These are some of the most important cities in the province of Asia, and in the writing of these letters, John is addressing what Christians are supposed to be doing in these cities. What makes these seven cities important is that they are some of the most important cities in the provincial administration under Roman government and also for [the] imperial cult, that is, the centers for where the Emperor is worshipped as a divine entity.

Adela Yarbro Collins: Professor and Chair of the Department of New Testament and Early Christian Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School

Does John have, in Apocalypse, an attitude towards the imperial cult?

John was different from many other Jews and Christians who kind of overlooked the pagan worship of the emperor and developed their own version of imperial cult, which was basically obedience, trying to be a good citizen in the Roman empire and praying for the emperor. John, on the other hand, took the position that Roman power was illegitimate and that the worship of the emperor was idolatry. The image of the Harlot of Babylon--in effect what he is saying is that Roma is not a goddess, she's a whore. That, I think, encapsulates his attitude, his very belligerent and pejorative perspective, on Rome and its institutions.

How exactly did Babylon become equated with Rome?

In the prophetic books and the historical books of the Old Testament, Babylon is described primarily as the one who destroyed Jerusalem. And for John, writing after 70, Babylon then becomes a code name for Rome, because it was the second city to destroy the Temple. "Babylon" is the most common phrase that John uses to refer to Rome, and at first he introduces that term very briefly and indirectly. And the place where it's elaborated is Chapter 17, the vision of the Great Harlot. Babylon is a city with overtones of imperial might and destructiveness, conqueror of other cities. Then you have the harlot with her golden cup, her purple, or scarlet clothing, her jewels sitting on seven hills. He hints that it's Rome in several ways. One, that she sits on seven hills, and Rome was famous as the city of seven hills, and several times in chapters 13 and 17 it's talked about as ruling all the peoples of the earth. And there was only one possibility in John's time, that has to be Rome.

L. Michael White

What is the structure of the Book of Revelation?

One of the difficulties for people now who try to read the Book of Revelation is that it's not written as a kind of linear story. This is especially difficult for people who try to use it as a prediction of historical events in the future. It doesn't work so that things at the beginning of the story are necessarily in order one after another leading to the end of the story. The way the Book of Revelation is actually written is as a series of kind of unfolding revelations, each one of which gets to something deeper in the story. Basically there are three sections after the letters to the seven churches.

The first section is in chapters 5 through 11, and in this we have John being shown a series of visions symbolized by the seven seals and the seven trumpets. But if we kind of look at how these things are working, each one is a box within a box, it's sometimes really thought of that way, as a series of Chinese boxes. You open the seals and when you get to the sixth seal things are looking really bad and when you get to the seventh seal we find that the seventh seal is actually the seven trumpets and we start all over again going deeper and deeper into the story. Then when we get to the seventh trumpet in chapter 11, the trumpet blows and heaven opens and you see the revelation of the dragon and the woman. So chapters 12 through 14, the woman and the dragon and the beast, really is centerpiece of the story. And it is the underlying cosmic drama that John is showing, which reveals the principals, the combatants upon which the rest of the story is being played out.

Then as we go from chapters 15 onward, we're told that those who are on the side of God and the angels, over against those who are on the side of the dragon and the beast, these combatants will come to a final battle and another series of seven plagues and another series of seven responses that will carry out the story to its natural end. So in the final analysis then the sevens that are opened up at the beginning of the story and the sevens that are opened up at the end of the story are really the same point, now able to be seen through a different understanding because of the central revelation of the dragon and the woman.

What's not in the Book of Revelation?

Sometimes people are surprised that when they actually read the Book of Revelation of what's not there. Things that are typically associated with end time prophecies and typical language actually is not found in Revelation at all. Notably there's no reference whatsoever to the Antichrist. That terminology only shows up in two places in the entire New Testament. One time in First John and one time in the Second John, but not in the Book of Revelation itself. The other terminology that [is] sometimes thought to be in Revelation is the Rapture, that is, the snatching away of Christians just at the last moment before the Tribulation occurs. That, likewise, is not actually in the Book of Revelation itself, that actually comes from a passage in First Thessalonians. And so what we have to realize is that in some interpretations of the Book of Revelation--in fact most of them--the interpretation is created by bringing things into the Book of Revelation, into its scheme, that are not actually there and reading them as a kind of a jigsaw puzzle of eschatology and last judgment.

What did John expect when he talked about new heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem?

The end of the Book of Revelation sees a new heaven and a new earth coming down and a new Jerusalem being established. What John seems to be suggesting in the original meaning of this work is that when the triumph of God comes over the dragon, over the forces of the devil, and the Roman Empire is toppled, a new heaven and earth will be created and that's the kingdom coming on earth. [He] anticipated a rebuilding of the real city of Jerusalem as part of this eschatalogic expectation. So John is looking for Jerusalem to be re-established soon, a new Temple to be built soon, and for this to be the symbol that God's kingdom is finally being established on earth, a pure kingdom of goodness in contrast to the kingdom of Satan that has been destroyed in the person of the Roman emperor.

Who was Montanus?

Montanus was a Christian living in the latter half of the second century of the Common Era, somewhere between 160 and 180, roughly. He's from an area of modern day Turkey called Phrygia. Montanus at some point comes to the realization that the world is about to end, or that things are getting bad, just like the Book of Revelation seems to predict. What leads him to this? Well, we know in fact that there's a massive plague that breaks out in 160. In fact, it's the first time that smallpox enters into the western world just at this time. They don't know what to call it, but they know it's devastating and [it would be] the kind of plague that the Book of Revelation seems to describe.

He takes that and other kind of indicators to suggest that the end times are near. Montanus believes quite literally that Jesus is returning soon and will inaugurate a thousand year reign on earth. He seemed to expect that literally a new Jerusalem would descend physically out of heaven and land on a mountain top in central Turkey at his own town. Needless to say, it didn't quite happen that way but, nonetheless, a number of followers were attracted to it.

Montanism lasted for several hundred more years as one of the forms of Christianity that a lot of people knew. It was considered, of course, heresy. It was stamped out at various times but it remained fairly popular in certain regions of the empire for quite a long time. For one thing, Montanism took very seriously this radical anti-worldly stance that the Book of Revelation makes central to its understanding: don't give in to the world, resist the Roman empire, stand apart as the righteous remnant of God.

The key point is John's Revelation is not mainstream, and, right from the beginning, was rather seen as subversive to authority, and a dangerous book, isn't that how it was seen?

Yes. John's antagonism towards the Roman Empire is not a view that other Christians felt very clearly. His view was subversive of authority, whether it is political authority or ecclesiastical authority. Montanus is a good example of someone who takes it and continues to use it as a subversive outlook. The response, of course, is that that's a heresy against Christianity and not acceptable within the church. Montanus is probably the first example that we can see clearly in Christian history--but we'll see a lot more of them later on--of someone who comes and reads this book, takes it very literally, but says that, "The predictions of John are only now coming to fulfillment in my day, and if that's the case and because I understand this, I am carrying on the tradition. I have the key to unlock the revelation and I am an agent of God's plan to bring the world to an end." We find that down to very recent times with some one like a David Koresh who sees himself as a new messiah figure carrying on the tradition just as in the Revelation of John.

The various misinterpretations of the Revelation of John did not stop with the experience of Montanus. Roughly a century later, in the middle of the third century, we have another outbreak of literalistic interpretation. It all seems to have begun around the year 246 when the thousandth anniversary of the Roman Empire was going to be celebrated. This was going to be a massive celebration in many, many cities round the empire. The imperial cult was in full swing, and the cities were being rebuilt and it was [going to] be a good party. But it was also a party at the thousandth year, and that combined with some other elements, seems to have prompted some Christians, especially in the Eastern part of the empire to say, "Maybe this is the event that John was talking about in Revelation."

Within only a couple of years after the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Rome, something else begins to happen that sparks Christians' attention. The Emperor Decius proclaims an empirewide sacrifice, and this really is the event that for the very first time will be the occasion of persecution of Christians throughout the empire. All Christians are expected to sacrifice or be liable to imprisonment or death. So the question will be--will they sacrifice to the emperor or remain faithful to Christ? And so, in the light of that kind of expectation of what they should do, reading it now in the context of the Revelation of John, on the heels of the first time a thousand becomes a significant number in their experience, some people at least in the Eastern part of the empire begin to say, "Wait a minute, this looks like things that John predicts for the end of time."

And then the signs become even more clear from their perspective. Not only is there persecution, there's another plague that breaks out in this period. Then the Emperor Decius goes on a campaign in the eastern provinces and is actually killed by the Persians. Some people were glad and say the Persian army is kind of resembling the locusts described in the Revelation of John.

Fifty years after the persecution by Decius, another persecution breaks out the Great Persecution under the Emperor Diocletian, and it runs roughly from 303 to 313 CE. It's the one time really where there is not only a proscription of Christianity, large arrests of Christians and martyrdom of quite a number, but even destruction of church buildings. It's at the end of this that Constantine the Great will come forward and not only defeat some of the other imperial claimants but will also then turn around and declare Christianity a legitimate religion of the Roman Empire.

As long as the empire was pagan, Rome could be an historical stand in for Babylon. After all, that's what the text of apocalypse says. The awkwardness for Christianity, with its own apocalyptic heritage, comes with Christianity's political success. When Constantine converts to one, remember, just one form of Christianity in 312, from the perspective of John, the writer of Apocalypse, the beast has entered the church. But from the point

of view of Eusebius, one of Constantine's Bishops, it's God's working in history. It's the revelation of the messianic peace that Isaiah talked about. From Eusebius' perspective--I mean we're used to thinking of the empire being Christian, they weren't, it just happened in their lifetime--this is an unthinkable thought and yet it occurs.

So Eusebius, looking at these traditional apocalyptic texts, knows that the traditional apocalyptic reading has to be wrong, because now the empire is Christian. The empire isn't God's opponent, and therefore, interpretations that look at these text as speaking about God defeating the evil empire of Rome are clearly wrong interpretations, because now God's servant is himself the emperor.

So what Eusebius will do is, he's one of a number of Christians who begin to discredit an apocalyptic frame of mind, now that Christianity, in a sense, with the consolidation of power under Constantine, settles down into history. Apocalypticism, for people who are prepared to settle down into history, is something that is old fashioned, is clearly wrong and is therefore heresy.

Is there a move to exclude Apocalypse from the New Testament?

The Book of the Apocalypse has a checkered career in the history of the New Testament canon. Canons themselves are local. In some places in the empire, Apocalypse is in the collection, in other places it isn't. Different cities have different gospels, and there is no central power, so there is no single agreed upon canon. What you get when you have the Constantinian revolution is a principled opposition to the Book of Apocalypse. Once the weight of communities decide that the book is going to be kept in the collection, then your option is no longer to drop the text, your option is to reinterpret it, and that's what people do next.

When does John's view of the Roman Empire, the evil empire, become most in conflict, if you like, with the majority of Christianity? When does it become a real embarrassment?

The apostle Paul, in Romans 13, advocated obedience to Rome. And advocated living quietly in peace with non-Christians in the Roman Empire. John advocated resistance. Other letters in the New Testament advocated peaceful coexistence. So John's book was likely controversial all through the time that Christians were not an officially recognized or legitimate group. Once Christianity became legitimate, and recognized by Constantine, then the Book of Revelation was a problem. Because one didn't want to insult the city of Rome or the Roman emperor. And it's very interesting the reinterpretation that occurred at that time. Instead of being read as a dichotomy between God and Christ as ruling in heaven, and eventually on earth, and this evil Roman power on earth in the meantime, there came to be a compilation of the two. That the Roman emperor came to be seen as a representative of Christ. And Christ came to be understood as, as ruling on earth through the current political system.

Who was Augustine?

Probably more than any other figure of the early Christian period, Augustine of Hippo is one of the leading thinkers. His importance really cannot be underestimated for the reshaping of Christian tradition. It is largely to the work of the Augustine that we owe the fact that the Revelation of John is even in the New Testament at all.

How did that come about?

Augustine adopted the Book of Revelation partly because it had been so troublesome and its place needed to be stabilized. And partly because it helped him solve some other theological dilemmas that he was wrestling with in his own studies. So around 393, 394 it seems there were several councils that were being convened in his own region where debates with people who believed in greater degree of free will and other kinds of theological issues were all taking place. And during this context of these councils the decision on which books to use in the New Testament as the authority, behind which all other Christian theology would be worked out, came up. Augustine championed using the Book of Revelation within the New Testament, assuming, as others had, that it was actually written by the Apostle John, therefore carrying authority.

What Augustine does by helping put the Book of Revelation in the Bible really accomplishes two things. One, he provides what will become, at least eventually, the normative reinterpretation of the book by reading all of the symbolism in it as just that, symbolism and not literal history. Now, that doesn't happen overnight, but his view is the one that will eventually carry the day throughout most of later Christian tradition.

The second thing that he does in canonizing the Book of Revelation is they put it at the end of the New Testament, and this also has a very significant symbolic force. Because at the end of the Book of Revelation, we have a strong warning, "You may not add to or take away from any thing in this book." Now originally in the Book of Revelation that refers to the revelation that John himself saw--write it, seal it, don't do anything more with it, it's over. But when you take that put it at the end of the New Testament, it has the double force of saying John's revelation of the end is sealed up but also this is the end of the New Testament, there will no longer be any future revelations from God that will stand alongside of the New Testament itself.

But doesn't putting this book right at the end suggest that the end of the world is yet to come?

In Augustine's reinterpretation of the Book of Revelation what this actually does is to say that the symbolism, all the vivid elements that some people before had been taking literally, none of them were literal. He did not believe in a literal thousand year reign. He did not believe in a literal figure that would come as a kind of Antichrist or any thing like that. What he says essentially is that all of that is really about the church, it's the church that is the thousand year reign of Christ on earth, beginning at the resurrection of Jesus himself. And the symbolic thousand years will come to end only when Christ returns at the end of the world and takes the kingdom away to heaven.

What finally forced Augustine to this much more spiritualising or symbolic interpretation of the Book of Revelation is not only that he was facing heresy and he was having difficulties with people who thought it was coming any day, but another major political event that occurred in the year 410 when the Visigoths, under Alaric, actually sacked the city of Rome. The city of

Rome, that had been [thought of] since the days of Constantine as now being the protectors of the church, the ones who would make the church the kingdom on earth, had failed. And Augustine looks at the destruction of Rome kind of like the destruction of Jerusalem for an earlier generation and says, "How could this happen?" His response is as he writes in his very important work, the City of God, is to realize that the city of Rome [is not], and indeed no political entity is, the true city of God. The city of God is the church. And it's only that city that will be preserved inviolable until the end of time when Christ comes in judgment. For Augustine, then, the city of God, the church, is the new Jerusalem on earth and anticipates the final new Jerusalem in heaven.

The crucial term in Augustine's interpretation is he sees, in the Book of Revelation itself, that there are two resurrections. The one resurrection that comes at the beginning of the thousand year reign and another resurrection when Christ comes again and establishes the new Jerusalem. Augustine. though, takes that to mean the first resurrection is when one is born into the church. For him, symbolically the thousand year kingdom on earth is the church, so when you're going into the church that's your spiritual resurrection into the kingdom. But the second resurrection will be the one that comes at the end of the world, when Christ literally does come again and establishes finally his new heavenly kingdom.

For Augustine, the new Jerusalem is explicitly and exclusively a heavenly Jerusalem, not an earthly one. To join Christ there is to ascend into heaven. But before one can do that must come the resurrection and the judgment by Christ. He then takes the story of the judging between the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 where Jesus sits in judgment and says that's the scene that will take place when Christ comes again to establish the final kingdom at the end of the world.

Is there any reference to judgment in the Book of Revelation?

Augustine uses the sense of a final resurrection and a final judgment as we find it in the Book of Revelation, especially in chapter 21, as the occasion we're talking about: Christ coming at the end of the world to judge the quick and the dead.

How important was Augustine's conclusion about the final judgment?

For the rest of Christian history, this notion of a final judgment at the end of the world where Christ himself comes back to sit enthroned and read out judgment to the good as well as to the evil, will become the major expectation of all Christianity thereafter. And [the] Augustine synthesis really is the one that establishes that connection for later Christianity.

How has the Book of Revelation been interpreted through Christian history?

The complexity of the structure of the book and the difficulty of interpreting it is something that many Christians have tried to deal with throughout the subsequent centuries. In part, it is maybe even more problematic because the expectations of John of an imminent overthrow of the Roman Empire within only three and a half years didn't come to pass. The Roman Empire lasted for a great deal longer, so how do we understand this? How did Christians think about it, in the light of the fact that this claims to be a revelation from God himself given to John ?

Essentially we can think about the different ways that this book has been interpreted in Christian history as breaking out into two basic categories. First, symbolic interpretations [in which] all of the images, all of the elements in the story of John are merely symbols of the experiences of the Christian Church throughout its history, but with no specific implication for time. This is actually the view that will be taken by Saint Augustine, that there is nothing predicted in absolute historical terms anywhere in the Book of Revelation; it is all mere symbolism. It is also one of the common modes of interpretation that is popular among many Christians today.

The other mode of interpretation is what we might call a literalist mode, where it is assumed that at least some events in the Book of Revelation are literal historical events that have played themselves out in human history, or will do so. There are basically three types of this literalist reading of the book. The first is what we might call the continuous historical literalism. It assumes that some events described in the Book of Revelation actually took place in John's day, but that other events will carry on in future history down to some later period of time, in fact, down even to the end of the world. And so they would look at, let's say, current events of their own day, whether it's in the period of the Crusades or in the period of the Protestant Reformation or even down into the nineteenth and twentieth century, as being fulfillment of what John predicted way back at the end of the first century. This is a mode of interpretation that we find quite a lot in the Middle Ages and in the Reformation period. It's somewhat less used these days, but it is still around and it tends to look at, especially, the end of the world, as the kind of final event that's described in the Book of Revelation and also the thousand year reign, when Christ will rule, as another key and very literal experience.

Another mode of literalist interpretation is what is referred to as the futurist school. The futurist would say that nothing in the Book of Revelation past chapter 4 has yet been fulfilled. Everything is coming in the future, and most of it is in the final days before the eschaton itself, before the return of Christ and before the beginning of a literal thousand year reign on earth. So this school of interpretation sees all of the later material as something that we're watching for. What's been very important about this particular school is it looks ahead for signs so that we know when the clock will begin ticking.

And then the third kind of literalist interpretation is one that says that all the events in the Book of Revelation are literally historically true, but that almost all of them have been completed in the past, either in John's day or within the early years of Christian history, with the possible exception of the end of the world itself. Now it's this last interpretation where most scholarship on the New Testament in early Christian history actually is located. Almost all the scholars would say that either John was talking explicitly about his own days and had a very limited expectation of the future, or that the Revelation of John was predicting events, basically down to the time of Constantine and nothing beyond except for an expectation of the end of the world.

What is the central message of the Book of Revelation?

With a book like the Book of Revelation, you will inevitably have several central messages depending on the angle from which you look at them. Some people see it primarily as a political statement, where the central message is resistance to tyranny, as exemplified in that case by the power of Rome. Other people would see it as a more spiritual book where the emphasis is on the end product, where everybody gets to sing like the angels in heaven and where detachment from this world is the central point of it. I suppose you would have to say that the central message encompasses both of these. That on the one hand there is there a rather terrifying vision of this world, as a place that is brutal, where savage powers are let loose, but also then that sees this world in perspective, where the powers of this world are passing away, and I suppose I would say at the end of that is the basic message of the book. That the powers of this world, no matter how terrifying they may be, are passing away and that in the end righteousness and justice will prevail.

To what extent is the Book of Revelation a political tract?

Well, in the ancient world, when early Christians were interpreting the book, there was one group who read it as having to do with this world and who read the messianic reign as having to do with a pleasure, with a great feasting and fulfillment of the promises, reward for the faithful, and this involved the downfall of Rome. And there were others who thought that that kind of reading was unworthy. It was too material, too self centered, and they were the ones who initiated what we would call an allegorical reading, as a struggle between good and evil in general, not good and evil in particular. In [that] sense the book is a political tract. And I think that's one of the strengths of the modern fundamentalist readings. Hal Lindsey and his ilk. They see that it's about politics, whereas the more spiritual mainline church reading misses that aspect.

Is the Book of Apocalypse a unique work?

The Book of Revelation is not a unique book. It does belong to a tradition of apocalyptic writing, which began in Judaism in the Second Temple period. So the Book of Daniel would be the only other apocalypse in the canon, but there were many other books from about the same period that shared this literary form in this perspective. The prophetic books are based on the idea that God selects certain human beings to speak to and to send them out as spokespeople for God. The typical literary form of a prophetic book is an oracle. "Thus says the Lord." And then an announcement of God's word. It might be an announcement of judgment, or an announcement of salvation, or an admonition, an ethical admonition. And the apocalypses tend to be less straightforward. Less a simple proclamation of God's words spoken to an individual, and more complicated, more of a narrative. And apocalypse is a kind of narrative account of how revelation came to the seer.

When some people hear the word prophetic, they think it means something in the future, what's going to happen next.

Prophecy and apocalypticism share a hope on the future, and theologically speaking, in the twentieth century, many mainstream or liberal pastors and theologians have argued that prophecy is not primarily prediction of the future, it's much more an advocacy of certain moral positions. For example social justice for the poor. But I think that prediction of the future is an important element in prophecy. That's not all they are, but that's an important element.

And John's Apocalypse is in some sense prophetic in the usual sense of the word.

John's Apocalypse also relates to the future, but not a future historical event. The Book of Revelation has come to be read as prophesying the events of the end of history. A general resurrection, a general judgment and a new age.

Can you describe the way in which some people, literalists if that's the right word, read the book quite literally?

On the one hand the Book of Revelation I think needs to be taken seriously as grappling with history and with actual events, but a fundamentalist or dispensationalist reading tends to impose a schemer on the text that isn't there. I would say that [with] Hal Lindsey, for example the problem is not so much that he reads it literally, is that he reads it in a kind of flat way. That he sees the images as simply code language for certain events in the future, and misses the overtones of symbol and myth.

The Book of Daniel

Norman Cohn: Fellow of the British Academy and Professor Emeritus at Sussex University

We know quite a lot about how the Book of Daniel came to be written. It was written about 164 B.C., probably by several authors. And its background was what was known as the Antiochan persecution of the Jews. After Alexander the Great conquered that whole area of the Near East, he left behind him a number of successor kingdoms, one of which was based in Syria. It was known as the Seleucid dynasty, and one of the monarchs, a particularly nasty one, was called Antiochus Epiphanes IV. And he did exercise a very real tyranny over the Jews. On the whole, these ancient Near Eastern empires didn't persecute people for their religion. They could be nasty to conquered peoples as conquered peoples, but they left their religion largely undisturbed. But not so this man, who desecrated the Temple and forbade all Jewish religious practices. The answer to this was that those Jews who wouldn't compromise in any way started a war, known as the Maccabean Revolt, and in the end won. And they defeated Antiochus, and reconsecrated the Temple, and it was during this war that the Book of Daniel was composed. It wasn't, however, composed by the Maccabeans. Any idea that is was a kind of recruiting manifesto is now discredited. It wasn't that. It was simply a prophetic writing. Saying that we're going to defeat Antiochus and beyond that lies a world in which the Jews will be recognized as God's chosen people, and will really dominate in their turn.

Was Daniel the first apocalypse?

It seems to be so. If by apocalypse, one simply means works which are based on divine revelation, but, above all, divine revelation concerning things to come, then I would say, that the Book of Daniel is the first real apocalypse.

How about Ezekiel and Isaiah? Was he writing in the tradition of Ezekiel or Isaiah? Do they have apocalyptic elements in them?

It could be said that there are parts of the Old Testament, in the prophetic books Ezekiel, Jeremiah, which are apocalyptic in the sense that they are prophecies of a benign future. They haven't got the world-wide scope, the idea of a totally transformed world, which you get in the Book of Daniel, and which is passed on, of course, to the Book of Revelation, and which is central to Christian apocalyptic beliefs.

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The Book of Daniel is the apocalyptic book of the Hebrew bible. Its sister book would be the Book of Revelation. And in fact the Book of Revelation is largely a Christian interpretation of the Book of Daniel. Daniel [the character] comes to us from the Babylonian exile. Most academic scholars who study it believe that it was actually composed about 150 years before the time of Jesus, much later than the Babylonian exile. So the actual setting of the book appears to be the what we call the Maccabees. And this has to do with a Syrian-Greek force coming in, suppressing Jerusalem and the Temple. It's a very similar kind of scenario [to the Babylonian period], and this gives rise to the Book of Daniel. That there's going to have to be some sort of a salvation that would come and a redemption that would come, in view of this terrible evil, represented by Antiochus Epiphanes who was the Greek ruler.

He becomes our first Antichrist, really. He becomes the first one in history we can put a finger on and say this is the type of ruler that these apocalyptic books picture as the ruler of the final end time.

What makes the Book of Daniel different from all other books, is it's built around a series of five dreams, or revelations, that purport to lay out, in step by step fashion, what will actually happen in the last days. And the fifth one, which is right toward the end of the book in chapter 11, is so detailed, it's the longest prophecy in the Bible. It literally details troop movements in the Middle East, the invasion of Jerusalem, all the things that are supposed to happen right before the end. What makes Daniel different from the other profits, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, is its specificity in contrast to the other prophets, which in the most general sense predict a time of peace and a re-gathering of Israel, but not these specific scenarios. The signs of the end. What would actually lead up to this coming about. That's what makes Daniel unique.

L. Michael White: Professor of Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin, and acted as historical consultant for "Apocalypse!"

Daniel is actually a figure from the Babylonian exile. In fact, he spends his entire life in Babylon. But the Book of Daniel attributed to him is actually written during the Maccabean revolt. Most scholars would say it's written about the year 165 BCE. and it uses the figure of Daniel as a way of reflecting and intensifying the experiences of the Jewish people in the middle of this crisis.

Now who was Daniel? Well, Daniel, himself, is known as first of all as a very pious character. Secondly, Daniel has visions and can interpret dreams. So, we have really two parts of the book of Daniel. One, the legends about Daniel the pious young man. A kind of model Jew resisting the temptations of acculturation to this outside society. The latter half of the Book of Daniel, however, is Daniel's visions, which gives us a way of thinking about what will be the future of Israel after God triumphs over the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes. So the visions of Daniel are really one of our first important pieces of apocalyptic literature, responding to a period of crisis and oppression and using apocalypse as a way of saying, "Hold fast. Stay faithful, God will triumph."

Daniel is a character from ages past who is the mechanism now for telling the story of the history of the Jewish people from that time to the present. And this is really how all apocalypse literature works. It gives the story to some past figure and lets him or her carry the history down and explain the history to our present moment. And in the process of doing that, it interprets the history in a way that becomes intelligible. It becomes understandable from a theological perspective for how God is directing the course of human events for the faithful.

Is that why it appears to be looking forward ?

It's that exactly. This motif of pitching the story back and then carrying the history forward is really what gives apocalypse literature its predictive and prospective quality. It's always telling the story from some past time and bringing it all the way down. That's why some people call it prophecy, but it's really a new genre of literature. A new way of thinking about the story. And of course it's what gives it the ability to be thought of as something that's [going to] happen in the future for us.

Some people have referred to this motif of apocalypse literature as "prophecy after the fact," because by putting it in the mouth of a person who ostensibly lived a long time ago and letting that person tell the story it has the quality of predicting the future. Well, if he was right about those events, just think about what he's telling us about our own future and he gives us the confidence that we know what God has in store for us, that we know the plan of God for human history.

Daniel tells the story of the collapse of Colossus. Tell us that story, and then what [Daniel] meant by it.

Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, and he asked his court wisemen to interpret it, but none of them can. Only Daniel has the power to understand this dream. And the dream is of a giant statue, a colossus, made of different metals. The head is of gold, the shoulders and chest are of silver, the waist is of bronze, the legs are of iron, the feet are of iron mixed with clay. And these different metals represent different kingdoms that will succeed one another in the history of the world. In Daniel's interpretation, however, these refer to the succession of kingdoms after the Babylonians, the very kingdoms that are in charge of the Jews, ending with the Seleucids, who are the feet of clay, whom the forces of God crumble, cause the statue to collapse and this gives rise to a new kingdom of Israel.

Is apocalyptic writing always a response with concrete [circumstances], or is it more mystical?

Really, all apocalyptic literature is much more a response to a concrete set of circumstances, often political circumstances that drive this sense that we have to look for a mode of deliverance from God. And Daniel was, as a book, really responding to the political crisis of Antiochus Epiphanes and the political forces of

war that are all about. For the people of this period there's really no difference between religion and politics. We can't simply look at this work as if its symbolism of good and truth and beauty are divorced from the political reality that's all around them.

III. Apocalypse in Europe

The Antichrist Legend

Norman Cohn: Fellow of the British Academy and Professor Emeritus at Sussex University

The roots of the Antichrist idea go back to the Bible. In fact, in a sense they go back to the Old Testament and the Book of Daniel. And they're reinforced by certain passages in St. Paul, in the New Testament, and greatly elaborated down the centuries, including quite early in the Middle Ages. The idea was that Antichrist could be a human being, could be a man who would incorporate everything that was opposed to the true Christ. And he would deceive the world. He would be apparently very good, and would establish a reign which seemed to be just and prosperous and so on. But this would all be false pretense. It would all be a way of seducing mankind from the true Christ. And then the true Christ would appear and annihilate him. And then that would be the Second Coming.

Bernard McGinn: professor of Historical Theology and the History of Christianity at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago

The key figure to what [I] could call the coalescence of the Antichrist legend is a monk of the 10th century named Adso, a French monk. And he writes a famous letter on the Antichrist to the Queen of France, in which he summarizes all the ancient traditions from the West about Antichrist. But he does so in a very interesting form. He uses the form of a saint's life, a saint's life in reverse. And I think we have to remember that saints' lives were the movies of the 10th century. It was the most popular form of literature. It was the form that Adso used which made his famous letter on the Antichrist such a important document in the history of apocalypticism. Hundreds of manuscripts of this survive, translations into vernaculars, etc., etc.

The Antichrist is not mentioned in the Book of Revelation. How at this time does an idea about the Antichrist begin to form?

The term "Antichrist" doesn't occur in the Apocalypse. It only occurs in the epistles ascribed to John in the New Testament. But nevertheless, the image ofx the beast, particularly in the 13th chapter and later in the 17th chapter, was always interpreted as a symbol of Antichrist in Christian tradition. Antichrist traditions then are very powerful throughout the history of Christianity. What made Adso in the 10th century so important is that you have an easy, comprehensible picture of Antichrist, his whole life from birth to death, presented to a general audience, and if you will, therefore solidified for popular appeal.

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

There's been a very profound link between Antichrist belief and anti-semitism historically. The origin of this, I think, is that the assumption was that the Antichrist would be a demonic twin of Jesus, and the fact that Jesus was Jewish gave rise to the conclusion that therefore the Antichrist will be a Jew. And in medieval Europe we see close connections between apocalyptic belief and belief in the Jews as demonic and sinister. So for example, when the Crusades were getting underway and Christians were going off to Jerusalem to redeem the city of Jerusalem from the heretics, at the same time we see horrible, horrendous anti-semitic persecutions breaking out in some of the cities of Germany, for example. There's a close connection in people's minds between the sinister Jew and the Antichrist. And that theme continues really in prophetic popularizations right down to the present.

Hildegard of Bingen is one of the most interesting figures in the whole history of apocalypticism. A German abbess, obscure, but very brilliant, a very talented, multi-talented woman, and a deep believer in Bible prophecy. And she presented her vision, her understanding of the prophecies, in different media. She wrote music. She created paintings in which she tried to capture the visions she had had of the reign of the Antichrist and the Last Judgment. And these really penetrated into European culture, in her own day and afterward.

Hildegard of Bingen is very significant because it reminds us that the history of apocalyptic expectations is not just a male phenomenon in the history of Christianity and her unique view of the theology of history and of the end times, the picture that she has of the Antichrist, for example, as part of this play or scenario, is one of the most inventive of the entire medieval period.

Well, Hildegard of course gives us several pictures of the end times. But the one that was most.. powerful, I think, is the picture in her book Scivias, the visionary book that she wrote in the 1140s. And this is a series of visions, many of the connected with the heavenly world, but others dealing with the course of history. One of these famous images is the picture of the kingdoms of the end time and the birth of Antichrist from the Church. This is a powerful image of a vast female figure representing the Church, with this horrible monstrous head being born from the woman. And that of course is the image of the Antichrist, who will be born from the Church, who will persecute believing Christians, and who will try to pretend that he is divine by ascending into heaven. And so in the image you have this monstrous head on the top of a mountain, and then being cast down and destroyed by divine power from above.

What is *Scivias*?

This was Hildegard's first great visionary work. And the term "scivias" means "know the ways of the Lord." And Hildegard tells us that when she was 42 years of age, she began to receive these visions and write them down, and then explain them. Then the book was put together along with illustrations of the visions that she had seen within her mind. And the Scivias can be described as a kind of universal theology, talking about God's creation of the world and the course of sacred history down to the end times. And it's within that framework of a cosmology and history and eschatology that she presents her unique picture of the Antichrist.

What role does Hildegard ascribe to Jews in her version of Antichrist?

Hildegard, like many others, pondered the role of the Jews in the end times. And often basing themselves upon Paul's prediction of the Jews returning to Christ in the Book of Romans, many later commentators saw the Jews as coming into the Christian fold at the end times. And I think that we have to put Hildegard within the context of continuing Christian speculation about the role of the Jews at the end period.

Does she associate the Jews particularly with the Antichrist?

No. For Hildegard, Antichrist is born from the Church. That's very crucial. Because there are two traditions really in Christianity, at war with each other for many, many centuries. One is that Antichrist will be born a Jew. The other one is that no, he won't be a Jew; he will be born out of the Church. He may convert the Jews briefly to himself, but many also believed that the Jews then, even the ones who were converted to Antichrist, would repent before the doomsday.

Is there a mirror image she sets up about the birth of Antichrist and the birth of Christ?

I think that Hildegard taps into the very ancient tradition of what I would call Antichristology. Just as in early Christianity the theological speculation about who is Christ, what has he done, what are his powers, how does he redeem, just as that developed in a very powerful way, as its opposite side, we have the development of an Antichristology that adds onto the scriptural data a whole history of the Antichrist and his powers and his persecuting times. Hildegard continues that tradition in very powerful ways, particularly of course by emphasizing how Antichrist will create a parody of the great events of the end of Christ's life, that is, his death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and giving of the holy spirit. For Hildegard, Antichrist will pretend to die and then, in a culminating moment, when he tries to ascend into heaven and parody Christ's ascension, he'll be cast down and destroyed.

Joachim de Fiore

Bernard McGinn: professor of Historical Theology and the History of Christianity at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago

Who was Joachim of Fiore?

Joachim of Fiore is the most important apocalyptic thinker of the whole medieval period, and maybe after the prophet John, the most important apocalyptic thinker in the history of Christianity. He's born in Calabria, some time about 1135, from what we would call a middle class family today. And he was an official in the court of the Norman kings of Sicily when he had a spiritual conversion, and went off on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a mysterious time about which we know little. When he returned to Calabria, he lived as a hermit for a number of years before eventually joining the Cistercian Order. Joachim, like many 12th century monks, was fundamentally a scriptural commentator. And he tells us that he was trying to understand and write a commentary on the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, and finding it impossible. The book was too difficult. He couldn't figure out its symbolism.

And he wrestled with this (he uses the term "wrestling" with it) for a number of months. He tells us that he had been stymied and given up the attempt to interpret the book. And then, one Easter morning, he awakened, but he awakened as a new person, having been given a spiritual understanding ("spiritualis intelligentia" is the Latin), a spiritual understanding of the meaning of the Book of Revelation and the concords (that is, the relationship of all the books in the Bible). And out of that moment of insight, then, Joachim launched into his long exposition on the Book of the Apocalypse, one of the most important commentaries ever written.

Joachim's great insight about history is what is often called his view of the three statuses, or three eras of history. And it's fundamentally rooted in the Trinity. If Christians believe that God is three-fold (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), Joachim then said that the Bible reveals that if the Old Testament was the time of the Father, the New Testament the time of the Son, there must be a coming third status or era of history that is ascribed to and special to the Holy Spirit, who gives the deep understanding of the meaning of both Old and New Testaments. And so Joachim returned to a more optimistic view of history, that after the crisis of the Antichrist (which he thought as imminent, as right around the corner in his own days), there would come a new era of the Church on earth, the contemplative utopia of the Holy Spirit, a monastic era of contemplation. That's the heart of Joachim's great vision and contribution to western apocalypticism.

Like Hildegard of Bingen, Joachim is a great symbolist, a picture-thinker, in a sense. His writings, his Latin writings, are very complex and difficult to read. I'd call them opaque, actually. But he had a wonderful symbolic imagination. And so Joachim created figures, as he called them. The Book of Figures, which goes back to his own work but was added to by his disciples, is really the best way into Joachim's thought. So, for instance, when we talk about the three eras or the three statuses of history, it's very difficult to take this out of the texts themselves. But when we have the picture of the three interlocking circles, or when we have the image of what are called the "tree circles," where the two trees representing the Jewish people and the Gentile people grow together through the three ages of history, we get an immediate visual understanding of what Joachim is trying to convey in his often obscure writings.

What is he trying to convey about the three stages?

Joachim believes that history is trinitarian, consisting of three status or eras, as he calls them. The first status is the time of the Father, and that's the Old Testament, lasting for 42 generations. The second status is the time of the second person, the Son, and the time of the New Testament, also 42 generations. Joachim's calculations led him to believe that he was living at the very end of that period, and that no more than two generations at most--that is, no more than 60 years, and possibly less--would see the end of the second status. The end of the second status, of course, would mark the seventh head of the dragon, that is, the Antichrist, and Antichrist's persecution. But for Joachim, that wasn't the end of history. A third status, the status of the Holy Spirit, a time of contemplative ecclesiastical utopia, was dawning.

Joachim's view of history was deeply organic. And this is why he loves images of trees and flowering in order to present his message. So that there's no clear break or definitive fissure between the first status and the second status. The second status

begins to germinate in the first. And the third status, the monastic utopia that I talked about, is germinating in the second status with the monastic life, beginning from Benedict, the founder of monks in the West. And another part then, I think, of the power of Joachim's view of history is its organic growing motif.

Joachim's view of the opposition between good and evil was, of course, central to him, as it is to any apocalyptic thinker. But Joachim wasn't into what we might call active apocalypticism, that one must take up arms against the forces of evil. Joachim felt that God controlled history, and that good would need to suffer, and the good **would** suffer indeed from the persecuting Antichrist, but that God would be the one who would destroy Antichrist and bring about this third status in history. So Joachim felt that the role model of the forces of good was that of the suffering, the persecuted, not of those who would take up arms against the beast of the apocalypse.

How did this view differ from Augustine's?

Apocalypse commentators for many centuries before Joachim had ruled out any attempt to use the apocalypse as a prophetic book, either about the history of the Church that was going on, or of future ages to come. That was, of course, something that Augustine had insisted upon; that the book can't be read in that literal fashion. Joachim broke with that, by finding in the images and symbols of the Book of the Apocalypse the whole history of the Church: the past, the present that he was living in, and the future to come. So he historicizes the book, in the sense that he ties it to actual historical events. This is what Augustine had ruled out.

What signs did Joachim see? And what was his sense of the nearness?

Joachim was a real apocalypticist in the original sense of the prophet John and others, because he believed the current events that he saw around him, particularly events connected with persecution of Christians, were signs of the times, signs that had been predicted in the Book of the Apocalypse and now were being fulfilled.

This is what Augustine and others had ruled out, but Joachim felt was a part of Revelation itself. A good example of Joachim's reading the signs of the times would be his emphasis of the figure of Saladin, and Saladin's reconquest of Jerusalem in the year 1187. When Joachim comes to interpreting the 12th chapter of Revelation, he sees the seven-headed dragon as indicating seven heads of concrete historical persecutors through the course of history, and not just as a general symbol of evil. He identifies the sixth head with Saladin--he Islamic leader who reconquered the city of Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the year 1187--and sees him as immediately preceding the coming seventh head, who will be the Antichrist, the last and greatest persecutor of the second status of the Church.

Joachim had an international reputation in the late 12th century. We know that he functioned as what I have called an apocalyptic advisor to a number of the popes of the 1180s and the 1190s. Despite living on a lonely mountaintop in his monastery in Calabria, the prophet's fame had spread very wide. And so it shouldn't surprise us that King Richard the Lion Hearted, when he's on his way to the Third Crusade and he has to spend the winter in Sicily (because of course you can't sail during the winter on the Mediterranean), when he stops there in Messina, he calls for Joachim, the famous prophet, and asks for his prophetic advice about what will happen. And Joachim travels to the palace there in Messina, in the winter of 1190-1191. And we have the accounts of his preaching to King Richard, and Richard's questions to him.

What would somebody like Richard the Lion Heart ask Joachim? What kind of advice could Joachim give?

Well, Richard, like any medieval figure, did believe in prophecy. And he felt that God did indeed send visions to certain inspired figures, and that these visions could sometimes give one a hint, or even more than a hint, about what was to come. Now, one of the accounts emphasizes that Joachim predicted a victory for Richard. And we know Richard achieved at best a kind of Pyrrhic victory. But I see no reason to doubt that Joachim prophesied something to Richard, probably in a vague enough fashion so that if it didn't fully come out that way, he was, in a sense, covered.

The Crusades

In November 1095, Pope Urban II delivered a famous sermon at the Council of Clermont in which he called for Christians to unite and recapture the city of Jerusalem from Muslims, inciting the First Crusade.

Norman Cohn: Fellow of the British Academy and Professor Emeritus at Sussex University.

What Pope Urban II had in mind when he preached the First Crusade was, I think, a variety of quite practical things. He hoped for the reunion of Christendom, which at that time was divided between the Latin Church and the Greek Church. He hoped also to recapture Jerusalem, which had been under Muslim rule for many centuries. And it was also a matter of giving the largely unemployed and over-aggressive nobility of France something to do, get them out of Europe and stop them devastating the lands. All these factors played a part in his mind. Whether he himself had any particular beliefs about the imminence of the End, that's really doubtful. But that is what was read into his speech by many uninformed people. He undoubtedly wanted the knights to go on this great military expedition. He had not foreseen that they would be followed by a mass of upstart peasantry. That, however, is what happened. And it was the peasantry which wreaked the great destructions, the murder of the Jews all down the Rhine and the savage assaults on Muslims by those who got to Jerusalem.

What had Urban offered to the knights? What kinds of incentives did he offer?

Well, from his point of view, it was, I think, a matter of salvation, that they could earn their eternal salvation in this way. What many of them looked forward to was getting an estate somewhere in the Holy Land, which many of them indeed managed to do.

Tell me about those hordes and masses who joined along. And tell me a little bit about the destruction they wreaked, and where it happened, and about the first mass killings of the Jews that took place.

The first mass killing of the Jews was carried out by the so-called People's Crusade, which attached itself to the army of knights and followed on behind them. They came largely from Flanders. [But] they proceeded down the Rhine, where there had been large Jewish settlements, ever since Roman times, the oldest Jewish settlements in Europe. And they were really destroyed by these hordes, who felt that as a necessary preliminary to the Second Coming, it was necessary to kill all Jews. This was not the official Church doctrine. The official doctrine was that all Jews must be converted to Christianity before the Second Coming. But one way of settling this matter was to kill them, and there would be no unconverted Jewish left. And that's what they did, in very horrible massacres.

Bernard McGinn: professor of Historical Theology and the History of Christianity at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago

I often describe the Crusades as the foreign policy of the new reformed papacy of the late 11th and the 12th century. It was the papacy's attempt to reunite Christendom by bringing Eastern Christians back and by reconquering the Holy Land and especially the sacred city of Jerusalem from Islam. And in that sense, it was the genius really of Urban II to create a new form of lay piety. Whether we like this or not, it was an important form of lay piety that combined holy war with the idea of pilgrimage, and perhaps with certain eschatological and apocalyptic overtones, that so galvanized Europe that hundreds of thousands went off marching to the East to recapture the sacred apocalyptic city.

What are the apocalyptic overtones of the Crusades?

Some scholars have argued that the First Crusade was fundamentally an apocalyptic event, and that those who went believed that they were initiating the end times. I don't think the evidence supports that. One of the accounts of Pope Urban's speech does indeed have him emphasizing apocalyptic motifs, but that particular account of his speech was written some 15 years after the speech. And we have five different accounts of his speech, and they all emphasize different motifs. I do think the image of the apocalyptic city was probably important for some of the Crusaders. But I think that the reconquest of Jerusalem, the conquest in the year 1099 (we're just celebrating the anniversary) did a lot for emphasizing the centrality of Jerusalem in later apocalyptic traditions. And that may be the most important contribution of the Crusades to the apocalyptic mentality of Europe. Not so much that the Crusade itself was an apocalyptic event, the First Crusade; but that the reconquest of Jerusalem emphasized its centrality. And then when Christians lost the city to Saladin in 1187, the necessity of reconquering it often took apocalyptic aspects or apocalyptic overtones.

Did Urban have a certain kind of war or crusader in mind?

Pope Urban wanted only the knightly class to go off on the Crusade, and he felt that he was appealing to their religious motivation to become both pilgrims and warriors. But what he got was something quite different. He got a vast mass movement, which we know included many, many thousands of people who were not part of that knightly class. And I think that shows us just how significant the appeal to the Crusade actually was among all ranges of European society.

For a knight, there were indulgences of a certain kind being offered. But did peasants see it in another way?

Well, I think it's quite possible that some of the masses of peasants saw the Crusade in a rather different sense, and perhaps had a much more apocalyptic dimension to them. We have to remember, the status of the peasant in Europe at the end of the 11th century was really quite a difficult and impossible one. And the vision perhaps of going to Jerusalem and in some way sharing in some kind of millennial kingdom may have been far more powerful with the peasants than with the knights. But once again, our evidence is in many cases rather fragmentary about what motivated the peasants especially. We often know much more about what motivated some of the knightly participants.

What happened in some of those cities, particularly around the Rhine?

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the whole crusading movement, of course, was the fact that it marks, as many scholars have maintained, a significant change in the relationship between Jews and Christians, and some of the beginnings of the most savage persecution of Jews by the Christians in the massacres that took place along the Rhineland cities as the crusading peasant groups especially-- not so much the soldiers who wanted to get money from the Jews, but the peasants-- took on the terrible task of pogroms that slaughtered many thousands of Jews. Now again, if that can be tied to apocalyptic expectations, as some have argued, that is extremely significant. But the evidence is doubtful.

What were the motivations for those massacres?

I think the motivation for the massacres is really tied to the sense of "us" and "them." And if Christians were going off to reconquer the Holy Land from Islam, seen as the enemy of Christianity, it was a very easy but terrible step to take that any enemy of Christianity therefore was in the way, and should be destroyed.

Do these massacres mark the beginning of a tradition of anti-semitism?

I think that the great slaughters, the terrible pogroms of the First Crusade—crusaders massacred jews along the rhine—are a significant stage in the anti-semitism of later Western history. Now again, there's been some debate over that recently among historians. But nevertheless, the intensity of these forms of opposition, I think, is significant for history getting worse in terms of relationship of Jews and Christians.

What happened when the crusaders conquered Jerusalem?

Well, I think what's amazing when we think about it here as we celebrate the 900th anniversary of that conquest--July the 15th, 1099--is that it succeeded. Because of course, to march armies of tens of thousands, both of knights and non-combatants, all the way across Europe, to have maybe one in 20 survive, and then to conquer the city of Jerusalem, seemed like a miracle. It even seems like a miracle to us today. But it was that miracle, of course, which gave Christians--unfortunately, I think--in the 12th century this sense of divine providence, that the city of Jerusalem was theirs; and of course then when the city was lost in 1187, made it an even more critical moment in Christian views of history and its coming end.

When the crusading armies arrived at Jerusalem finally in mid-June of 1099, one of the things that they did was to immediately have a religious procession around the whole city, a penitential rite, because Crusade was also pilgrimage; and then to have an immediate assault on the city, because they felt again that God was on their side. That assault failed. And so then the Christians began to build siege machines in order to attack the city over the next few weeks. And then finally, in the middle of July (July 12th and 13th through the 15th) the siege machines enabled the city to be breached, the crusaders to rush in, and then the most terrible thing to happen: a slaughter, almost universal slaughter of Muslims and Jews in the city, which is still the worst stain on the Crusade, I think, that history leaves to us.

How many people killed?

It's difficult to know exactly how many people were slaughtered at the conquest of the city, but it seems to have been some tens of thousands. Crusading chronicles say that the blood from the slaughtered reached up to the knees of their horses.

What is the legacy of the taking of the city for Christian apocalyptic mentality?

Well, we have to remember that the city of Jerusalem is the apocalyptic city par excellence. And it's not just the heavenly Jerusalem, but it is the earthy Jerusalem. And so the miracle of the conquest of the city in 1099, and having it once again back in Christian possession, I think, enhanced the position of the earthly Jerusalem as the apocalyptic city, and gave it then a centrality that was even more powerful than it had previously.

Martin Luther

Mark Edwards, Jr.: President of St. Olaf College

What was Luther's message?

Luther had many messages. When Luther wrote, he wrote about specific issues or problems. But he had one over-arching message. And that one message, he put in his pamphlets, he put in his longer treatises, he put in his hymns. And that was: Christ died for you. If you can believe and have faith, you are saved. There's nothing that you can do on your own to be saved. In fact, even believing is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But if you believe, you are saved. And all the paraphernalia of the Catholic Church of the time, where you could help and cooperate in your salvation, made no sense any more.

Martin Luther's criticism of the Church initially was that the Church was sending the wrong message, that the Church was giving to people the sense that they could save themselves by using the various things the Church offered, including indulgences. And the proper message was: No, you couldn't do that. In order to be saved, you had to leave it to Christ, and you had to simply cling to what Christ had done for you. That was his original complaint with the Church. But when the Church did not listen, he came reluctantly to the conclusion that the Church, especially the office of the papacy, was the Antichrist, and that what it was doing was deliberate. It was the devil's attempt to subvert, to submerge the good news, the gospel. The devil was working within the Church. And once he was convinced that that was happening, the papal office was the office of the Antichrist, and he saw the end time near.

What were indulgences?

Indulgences were a means to spend less time in Purgatory. This was a time when the worry was not you're going to hell, but you're going to spend a long time in Purgatory. And so if you were able to purchase an indulgence, you could get out of Purgatory. [Indulgences] also were extraordinarily important for the papacy, because next to its own lands which it owned (and it was a large state), its major source of income was indulgences. The papacy during this time was building St. Peter's. Indulgences were used really for two things: major building projects, and to finance wars.

What did Martin Luther think of indulgences? What was his gripe?

The issue of the indulgence raised the Question:
How was someone saved? Was someone saved by what they did, or what the Church did for them? Or were they saved because of what Christ had done (die on the cross)? And so that was the issue that was at stake. And for Luther, the most important thing was to realize that Christ had died for you and you were saved by that death, not by anything that you did or anything the Church did, but only by what Christ had done. And you had to accept that gift in faith.

So what did Luther set out to do?

Luther set out to reform the Church, to bring it back to what he saw as its proper mooring. The Church, as the institutional Church, saw him instead as a great threat to their income and a heretic teaching things that they had not taught, and which they saw undermined the Church, both in its spiritual form but also in its financial and political form.

Coincidentally at this time, the printing press comes into play. How?

The printing press is discovered and put into action in 1450. Luther would have just been one more reformer in a small area if it had not been for the printing press. But thanks to the printing press, Martin Luther became the bestseller throughout the empire. He out-published all of his Catholic opponents. He discovered the power of the press in ways that no one else had used it up to that point: everything from woodcuts being used in a polemical way, ditties and rhymes. He mastered this new medium; he used it to spread and turn what would have been a local affair into an international movement.

Martin Luther first published in Latin, which was the language of the learned. But then he began publishing in German. And he was extraordinarily successful. He found his own voice. And the voice was the voice of the people. He later talked about how he listened to the way the people spoke, so he could use their language and not the elevated language of princes. He deliberately picked a German that could be understood by more people than any other form of German. And he used this German in an extraordinarily effective way.

Why does Luther choose to translate the Bible into vernacular German?

Luther chose to translate the Bible into vernacular German because he believed the common people needed to hear the scripture. The watchword in the early Reformation, even more

important to other Protestants to Luther himself, was "scripture alone." Scripture was the only source. It was not the Pope making up his mind. It was not a church council. It was the scripture. And individual believers needed to read the scripture and see what the truth was for themselves.

What was the effect for Luther of putting the Bible in people's hands?

When Luther translated the New Testament and ultimately the whole Bible into German, he wanted to make it available first to preachers and to those who could read, and then secondarily to everyone else. He thought that if the Bible was made available in the vernacular, with the assistance of his forwards and his marginal comments, everyone would read it the same way he did. The irony is, of course, they didn't. Within even a few months, people were reading it differently. Luther had released a genie. And once the genie was out of the bottle, Luther, try as he might, couldn't get the genie back in again.

Where did put the Book of Revelation in his Bible?

When Martin Luther first translated and published the New Testament, he thought that Revelation should not have the same status or authority as the gospels or the letters of Paul or Peter. And so he put it at the end, but he didn't number it. He didn't put a "saint" in front of [John's] name. He thought it was an edifying book, but not of the same status. But what's interesting, even though he felt that way, it's the one book that he illustrated, where he put woodcuts, because Revelation allowed him to make one of his central points, which was that the papacy was the Antichrist, and the end of the world was coming. And so there you see the only woodcuts in the New Testament. You see the whore of Babylon wearing a papal crown. You see the seven-headed beast wearing a papal crown. The message was clear. You didn't have to read (as most people didn't). You got the message. The papacy, the papal office--not the individual popes but the papal Church--was where Satan was working to undermine Christendom. And the fact that Satan was there meant the world was coming to an end soon.

Was Luther conflicted about Revelation? Was he uncomfortable with the book?

When Luther began, he was uncomfortable with the Book of Revelation. But as the Reformation went on and more and more opponents sprang up, he had difficulty, he became more and more interested in Revelation. And later in his life, he took it with the utmost seriousness, and even tried to figure out all the symbolism in it, to determine when the end of the world was going to come.

How much did Luther think he was living in the end times?

Luther thought he was living in the end times. And that belief, that conviction, was central to almost all that he did. Because his understanding of scripture and the way he preached from the pulpit and what he wrote was colored by the notion that the biblical story was also his story, and that what was happening to him could be used to understand the story in the Bible, but what was happening in the Bible could be used to explain what was going on in his own day. And Revelation was the key to this. It was the symbolic story that tells you how the whole thing is going to end.

What was Luther's attitude toward the Jews?

Martin Luther, when he put his whole world into the context of the biblical story, identified many different enemies. And one of the enemies were the Jews, the Jews of his own time. Now, the Jews of the Old Testament were heroes, but the Jews of his time were an example of a people who rejected the Messiah and therefore suffered under God's wrath. They too had a role to play, a very unhappy role to play. And Luther's apocalyptic vision and the vision of their role--it was broadly shared by both Catholics and Protestants--justified the mistreatment of Jews during this period.

How does Luther come to think of the pope as the Antichrist?

Luther came to think of the pope as the Antichrist because, first, of what the general tradition was about where to find the Antichrist. The Antichrist was someone subverting the Church from within. That was the expectation popularly. And when he saw the papal office and read the histories and saw it subverting the gospel as he understood it, he became convinced that that was the proof that the papal office was the office of the Antichrist, trying to destroy God's church from within.

The pope claimed to be Christ's representative on earth. Luther became convinced that the pope was the devil's representative on earth. And that took graphic form very early in the Reformation with one of the most effective pieces of propaganda in the early Reformation: a series of 26 woodcuts that juxtaposed some action in Christ's life with something in the papacy. Christ carrying his cross to be crucified; the pope being carried in his throne on the backs of people. Christ washing the feet of the disciples; the pope having his feet kissed. And over and over again, scenes from Christ's life juxtaposed with scenes from the papacy. Christ was always humble and serving; the papacy, the pope was always lordly and [lording] over others. Christ is Christ; the pope is Antichrist.

At the end of his life, Martin Luther decided he had to issue his final testament against all the enemies of the gospel. And he published treatises, he encouraged people, but words were not sufficient. He also had to use images. And so he asked his friend, the painter Lucas Cranach, to do a series of woodcuts, and Luther wrote the verses for them. And these woodcuts were designed to show as graphically as possible, to those who could read and those who couldn't, what Luther thought of the papacy. So for example, there's a woodcut which shows the pope on his throne and peasants with their tongues out, their trousers down, farting in the pope's face. Another one shows the pope riding an ass, holding a pile of dung in his hands, saying "The pope is offering a counsel." And another that shows the German emperor lying on the ground with the pope with his foot on the emperor's neck, which shows, once again graphically, Luther's belief that the papacy was trying to control secular authority throughout the world. These were all actions of the Antichrist, and Luther wanted to make it clear what he thought of the pope.

These were the pictures of a very angry man, who saw himself as a soldier in that final climactic battle at the end of the world. And he had to strike with every means at his disposal. If he pulled back at all, he was like a soldier in a battle between light and darkness, who withheld his punches. And so Luther did not

hold back. He went with all that he had, attacking Satan and the Antichrist before he died.

Thomas Muentzer

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

Tell us about Thomas Muentzer and how he comes from being a protégé of Luther to something altogether different.

Thomas Muentzer is an example of what can happen when apocalyptic scriptures become widely accessible. Muentzer took the images of the apocalypse, the images of a desperate struggle between the forces of righteousness and the forces of evil, and applied it to the peasantry of Europe in his own day. And he preached to the peasants that the wealthy people of the day are in fact the evil ones whose destruction is foretold in the Book of Revelation. And thousands of peasants followed him, and in fact there was a tremendous slaughter. Thomas Muentzer had assured his followers that their struggle against the landowners, against the rulers and the leaders of the day, was a divinely ordained struggle, and that in the war that would follow, they would be spared, that God would intervene.

When the final showdown comes in 1525, the peasants are arrayed against the German princes and their army, and Thomas Muentzer continues to assure them, even at the last moment, that Christ will intervene on their side. This is the apocalyptic moment foretold in the Revelation. They're singing hymns. They literally are awaiting a glorious triumph. Muentzer assures them that he will catch the cannonballs in his shirthhsleeves. Of course, it turned into a slaughter. Five thousand ill-equipped peasants were slaughtered. The Peasants' Revolt was utterly destroyed. It was one of those incredible explosions of apocalypticism that arise in history.

Mark Edwards, Jr.: President of St. Olaf College

Who was Thomas Muentzer?

Thomas Muentzer started as a follower of Martin Luther's. He may have even heard some of Luther's lectures. He certainly read Luther. The message he got from Luther, above all, was "scripture alone". And when he read scripture alone, he went his own way. For Luther, Thomas Muentzer was the epitome of someone who misunderstood the message. Luther saw this as a spiritual battle. Thomas Muentzer was not willing to make the distinction between spiritual and worldly that Luther was. So Thomas Muentzer, in reading the Bible and especially the Old Testament, felt that to be a good Christian you had to change society in various ways, and that just like the prophets had used force to convert the infidels in the Old Testament, that Muentzer and his followers had the right to use force to deal with those people who opposed the gospel. Luther did not believe in that. For Luther, that was Satan at work. And he called Thomas Muentzer the Satan at Allstadt (that's where Muentzer was preaching).

Tell me about Muentzer's role in the Peasants' War.

Thomas Muentzer had a role in part of the Peasants' War. The Peasants' War occurred over large parts of the empire. But in one part in the north-central area, Thomas Muentzer was the leader of a band of peasants. And for those peasants, he was taking the Old Testament images and bringing them to life, and telling them that just as all Christians were supposed to be free spiritually, they also were all to be equal and free economically and politically. This was the rallying cry that galvanized his supporters. This was the rallying cry that brought the princes together to oppose it.

One of the most famous battles in the Peasants' War occurred at Frankenhausen, where the armies of the princes in the cities met the peasants' bands led by Thomas Muentzer. The princes, by one report, attempted to find an end to the fight. The peasants, however, saw a rainbow in the sky, and Muentzer's flag had a rainbow on it, harkening back to the rainbow that Noah was given, the covenant with God. And so as the princes load their cannons and the cavalry gets ready to charge, the peasants are singing, "Come, Holy Spirit," believing that this battle is the final battle of Armageddon, and that God was going to break in and stop it right there. But instead, the cannons fired. The knights charged. Of about 8,000 peasants, about 5,000 lost their lives. And Muentzer himself was captured, cowering under a bed; tortured, executed. That was the end of Muentzer's apocalyptic vision.

What has Muentzer's legacy become?

Muentzer is important largely because the East German state in the 20th century, borrowing from Engels and Marx in the 19th century, needed their own hero. They needed their own usable history for their own apocalyptic vision of how history was going to go. And so Thomas Muentzer became for Marxist history the Martin Luther. And that's why he's important. If it had not been for Marxism, we would hardly talk about Thomas Muentzer. But because of the Marxist view of how histories work, they needed someone who stood for the proletariat, and that was Thomas Muentzer.

Marxists have their own view of history, which is apocalyptic in a secular sense. And in that history there are developments that go along. And you can read history in the same way you do with religious apocalypse. And in reading history, they needed a figure early on who stood for the common people. And in the Reformation, since Martin Luther was seen as the person who led the bourgeoisie, Thomas Muentzer was seen as the person led the proletariat. And so for Marxists, in their reading of history, Thomas Muentzer is central as part of this longer move towards the eventual proletarian state.

When Marxists speak of "Workers of the world, unite," they're talking about that final end, of the apocalypse, the end where history reaches its end in the proletarian state, where the workers own everything and they run everything. That is the goal, the apocalyptic goal. It's seen as foreshadowed in the abortive attempt of Muentzer to unite the peasants together. But Muentzer was too early, in terms of the way history works, and so he had to fail.

When East Germany was still Communist, they told a story which was to encompass everyone and make sense of their history, and through that history to say that East German state was inevitable. And one of the great heroes in that was Thomas Muentzer. He was a tragic hero because he died. But he was part of history's inevitable, inexorable move towards the East German state.

L. Michael White: Professor of Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin, and historical consultant for "Apocalypse!"

Thomas Muentzer started out as a follower of Martin Luther. In the early stages, he takes up Luther's call for the Church to be reformed. Over time, however, Muentzer takes a different interpretation of the prophecies of the Bible, and carries the call for reform on to a new level of polemic, not only against the Catholic Church but eventually against Luther himself. Whereas Luther saw the battle of the end times as being primarily a spiritual and theological battle, for Muentzer it's a real political and military revolution. In his interpretation of the Book of Revelation, and more generally his apocalyptic framework, Thomas Muentzer is clearly borrowing the tradition of Joachim of Fiore. He talks explicitly about the three ages and the transformations of the last age. The end time, the one he is expecting right around the corner, is to be a revolutionary change. That's very important for Muentzer.

Muentzer has a very specific interpretation of the end time expectations that he draws from scripture. He combines the passage from Matthew 24, where you have the harvest at the end of the age, with the passage from Revelation 14, the "grapes of wrath" passage where the angels swing the sickle and gather in the harvest. He really understands now that this is the time when only the elect will be left behind. Everyone else will be taken away to torment. And then he adds another element. He sees himself as the divinely appointed, divinely inspired agent of God. He even says, "Now is the time of harvest. God has appointed me for this task. I've sharpened my sickle."

Why are peasants in particular drawn to Muentzer's apocalyptic vision?

In a way very different from others of the time, Thomas Muentzer sees the revolution at the end of the age to have a very particular social and economic impact. It's not a moral reform. It's not a spiritual form. It's economic. He's worried about the poor. And the working classes, especially in the growing cities of that time, were particularly drawn to his message. This was going to be a class revolution.

Despite [the] horrible defeat that [Muentzer and his followers] faced, Muentzer's legacy is not one that disappears so easily. Later generations, particularly in Germany, would look at him.. as a hero, as a proletarian rebel. Marxism would come along later and think of him as a saint, as a martyr to the cause. The very fact that the state, the symbol of oppression, are the ones who had killed him, only proves the fact that he's a prophet, that he's the one really calling for the people to rise up against big government.

Nazism and Marxism

Norman Cohn: Fellow of the British Academy and Professor Emeritus at Sussex University

Can you talk about what these two ideologies, Marxism and Nazism, have in common, in terms of their apocalyptic sense?

Both Nazism and Communism had an ideology which was ostensibly scientific, because the Nazis even believed that their racist doctrine had a scientific basis. They even tried to prove it by measuring skulls and God knows what else. And the Communists, of course, believed that their idea of the progress of history was based on scientific analysis. They claimed to be able to foretell the future, the fate of the class struggle. They were always wrong, most notably in Germany in the 1930s. They were always wrong. But they did believe that they had the key, a scientific key to the understanding of past and even future history. So both were, in effect, pseudo-scientific ideologies. But both share an apocalyptic view, and more than that, a millenarian view, because they both look forward to a final struggle, a great judgment visited upon an evil world, out of which will emerge a purified world. [And it] is this fantasy of a purified world, a cleansed world, which is so enormously pernicious and which has brought so much catastrophe upon us in this present century.

In the 20th century, those of us who are not Communists or Nazis, people who (in the broad sense of the word) belong to the liberal, democratic tradition, find something very strange in these creeds. And the more they look at them, the stranger they appear. One has to remember, they wouldn't have appeared strange in the Middle Ages, because the basic apocalyptic fantasy was everywhere. What is new, as compared to the Middle Ages, is that whereas at that time the Last Judgment was to be carried out by God, and to be brought about on this earth by the returning Christ, but after that everything was to be off this earth--in heaven, in hell, in another sphere, and beyond history, beyond time--what has happened now in this century is that the Last Judgment has been something which has been wrought on this earth by human beings against human beings, which is quite a different matter, and far bloodier.

Mark Edwards, Jr.: President of St. Olaf College

How is Marxism an apocalyptic world view?

Apocalypse always is an attempt to take an individual circumstance and put it into a large history, a universal history. Marxism does the same thing. It starts with feudalism, moves into the [era of the] bourgeoisie, then into the proletarian utopia. And so it's a secular form of apocalypse, because you can read when this transition is supposed to occur from one to the next, and you can identify who the good guys are and the bad guys. And as apocalypse always does, it has the appropriate roles for everyone to play, and brings them all together in a universal drama which is going to reach a culmination in some utopia, either the Kingdom of God or the perfect socialist state.

Wasn't Marx anti-religious? It's interesting that he draws on religious rhetoric.

Yes. Marx is very anti-religion, but he cannot escape the fact that religion provides the images and the vehicles by which he expresses his ideas. He's strongly influenced by Christianity and by Judaism. And he borrows heavily from these, even as he rejects the notion that there's a God.

Nicholas Campion: teaches history at Queens' College in Cambridge and history and politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London

When we look at Marxism and Marx's theory of history, we can draw connections which go right back to the Book of Daniel. The standard version of Marx's theory of history is based on four

great periods of history, the fourth of which is capitalism (in other words, Marx's version of the Roman Catholic Church). And the overthrow of capitalism will then lead to the return of the great golden age of communism. To look at Marx's four stages of history superficially, you wouldn't think that there was a connection with the Book of Daniel. But when Marx divided history into four epochs, he was deeply influenced by Hegel, the main German philosopher at the beginning of the 19th century. And Hegel was working within a tradition in Germany in which it was standard to divide history into four great phases. And that tradition was established in Reformation Germany by Thomas Muenzter, directly reading from the Book of Daniel. So Marx's theory of history, even though it was fleshed out with enormous numbers of facts, was essentially taken from Jewish apocalyptic tradition.

Perhaps it was central to Marxism's appeal that on the one hand Marx, in his incredibly detailed scholarship, promoted himself as a scientist, and so his followers came to accept his forecast of the future revolution as a scientific one, and therefore destined to happen. It was perhaps the fact that his work was presented in such a scientific manner, and hence so accessible to 19th and 20th century people, plus the fact that he'd used, from ancient millenarian tradition, this Jewish apocalyptic prophecy of the golden age, perhaps it was the fact that he brought those two together, which is one reason for Marxism's amazing appeal.

Can you describe his sense of an apocalyptic vision that happens on earth instead of in heaven?

The communist prophecy was of the kingdom of humanity on earth, an earthly paradise. It dispensed with God altogether. What had happened over previous centuries was that people had just eventually become disillusioned with the prophecies that Christ was going to return. They were fed up with waiting for divine intervention. And the idea developed that it was essentially up to people themselves to work for a better and more just world. And when they'd done that, then Jesus would return. And eventually, the early 19th century socialists gave up on Jesus and God altogether, and said, "Look, the creation of the earthly paradise, of a just and equal society, is a good and a noble end in itself. It has to be done." And Marx then gave this view the stamp of his apparently scientific work in history, and of his reworking of the "four empires" model and Jewish apocalyptic theory. Marx believed that when the workers rose up, when socialism was established, then essentially the degenerate processes of history would come to an end and the earthly paradise would be established. And you know, we have the words of the Internationale, the Communist anthem: This is our last and final struggle. After then, there would be no more struggles. All would be peace.

How did that secular apocalyptic notion play itself out in revolution?

Around the beginning of the 20th century, just before the First World War, most Marxists thought that the coming of socialism was somehow inevitable. They could just sit back and let it happen. And this is the origin of social democracy, socialism achieved through parliamentary means and gradual legislation. The innovation of Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks was to come along and say, "No, we've got to force the pace of history." I mean, Lenin was essentially a religious evangelist, an atheist one perhaps, but a religious evangelist nonetheless. And he said, "Look, we've got to leap into the next stage of history." He pushed the Russian Revolution into Communism, with I think what many people would now agree were disastrous consequences.

Lenin believed that he could actually create a paradise on earth. [It] was going to be a paradise in which there was total equality. There was no private property, no money. The land was held in common. The factories were owned by the workers. And he believed that this would mean an end to war and an end to suffering, and as Marx had put it, an end to the alienation of humanity from nature. So just as Christians who had talked about the Fall and the alienation of humanity from God had seen the restoration of that human contact with God as essential to the coming age, Marx and Lenin turned that around and somehow they were talking about humanity becoming one with nature again. That was their goal. And it was essentially, albeit an atheist one, a religious goal.

There are two great secular apocalyptic traditions in the West in the 20th century. One is Marxism. The other is Nazism. And the Nazis, too, went back and wanted to find a usable history, a usable past. And they looked for turning points that led ultimately to the Third Reich, the third empire, and the thousand year empire (which is a very apocalyptic idea). And in looking back, one of the key elements (and a tragic element) was Martin Luther's anti-Jewish writings. Because in 1938, on Luther's birthday, Nazis and their supporters went throughout Germany and broke Jewish shops, destroyed Jewish synagogues. [It] was the "night of broken glass," the Kristallnacht. And that same day, one of the Nazi bishops published a treatise with excerpts, some of the most horrible excerpts from Luther's anti-Jewish writings. And in the preface, he said, "At the time the western democracies are criticizing us for the treatment of the Jews, it is time for the Germans to hear from that great German hero, Martin Luther, the great warner of his people against the Jews." And the irony once again of apocalypse and using history is that those anti-Jewish writings had not been published, except in critical editions of Luther's works, for several centuries. They're revived and excerpted in 1938, as one tool of showing that the Third Reich has arrived and the thousand year reign had begun. And the Jews were the enemies of that reign. It was ironic and tragic that the Nazis used Luther this way--first with their secular apocalypse. They didn't believe in Christianity. Second, Lutheran Christians and Christians generally had been ignoring Luther's anti-Jewish writings for several centuries. These are being misused in order to support an apocalyptic view that Luther himself would have condemned, and that led, of course, to the Holocaust.

What was Hitler's apocalyptic vision?

The apocalyptic view that Hitler worked with was based on the notion that the Aryan race was the proper race to bring in this thousand year reign. And the enemy of the Aryan race, for Hitler, was the Jews. And so in order to realize his vision, he had to get rid of the Jews. And that, of course, is what he attempted to do in the Holocaust.

What language did he use? In *Mein Kampf* he says he's carrying out the Lord's work. Hitler is not a religious man, and yet he refers to religious rhetoric. Why?

Adolf Hitler was one of the great leaders of the 20th century. Not great in the sense that he was good, but great in that he was able to tell a story which captured the imagination and excited people and moved them forward in his own particular program. And in this image, in this rhetoric, in this story that captured people, there was both the apocalyptic notion of the thousand year reign, but there also were the enemies that had to be overcome in order to bring that reign about. And those enemies, of course, were the Jews. And religious language is the language of the West to explain these over-arching goals and to mobilize people. And so even secular ideologies cannot escape religious rhetoric in order to mobilize, inspire, and impel people to act. Hitler would talk about things like "the Lord's work." Hitler would talk about history as if it were a personal force that drives things on. Hitler could use images of the devil or of Satan, at least in a metaphorical sense. The notion of opponents, and opponents with almost superhuman power. The Jews, in Hitler's vision, were given powers that no human beings have. That made them so satanic, and the struggle against them so righteous, in his particular vision. By offering this vision in which the Jews are no longer human beings but are almost a supernatural force opposed to the progress of history, by making the Jews more than human or less than human, it allowed people to treat them as less than human, and give them the justification that they were doing the Lord's work themselves. Even though they found it distasteful, they felt it was necessary to bring about that which was far better.

What was the logic of the Third Reich?

Hitler did produce a historical logic for his Third Reich. He said that the German empire established by the Kaisers was the second Reich, and that the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne was the first Reich. But really what he was really doing was evoking this idea which was this deep current in European millenarian thought, that the coming of the third age was imminent and inevitable, and that it was going to be a glorious age of peace and harmony. Of course, in Hitler's case it was only going to be an age of peace and harmony for some people.

IV. America: The New Jerusalem

Christopher Columbus

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

Did Christopher Columbus see himself on an apocalyptic mission?

We tend to think of Christopher Columbus as an explorer, a discoverer. In reality, while that is all true, Columbus was also a man of his day, which meant that he was a man who took apocalyptic teachings, who took biblical passages very, very literally. And in fact, we have in his own autobiographical writings, toward the end of his life, and in his messages to Ferdinand and Isabella, proposing yet another great enterprise. This time it will be to restore the Holy Land as a fulfillment of prophecies in the Book of Isaiah and elsewhere of the end time events. He believed that gold from the New World could be used to finance this great crusade to the Middle East to regain Jerusalem.

So in addition to everything else, Christopher Columbus is very much a prominent figure in the history of apocalyptic belief in Europe. I think Columbus very much did have a sense of millennial fulfillment, that from his voyages, from his discoveries, and what he saw as the capstone event of his career, which would be the final expedition to the Middle East, as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies that would lead to the millennium.

Bernard McGinn: professor of Historical Theology and the History of Christianity at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago

Did Christopher Columbus see himself in apocalyptic terms?

Christopher Columbus is often viewed as the hard headed navigator, a kind of modern man breaking with the past. But if we look at the history of Columbus and some of his writings, particularly his letters and in the Book of Prophecies that he put together, we can see that Columbus thought of himself very much in terms of the apocalyptic tradition. And he felt that his voyages of discovery were ushering in a millennial age, an age of a Last World Emperor, a Spanish Last World Emperor, who would recapture the holy apocalyptic city of Jerusalem and initiate a messianic period. And he had studied prophecies very, very carefully as he put together this *Book of Prophecies*, in order to sell his programme to Ferdinand and Isabella. And it's not that he was using this. He believed it. And he felt that they should believe it as well.

He was not an original apocalypticist. His *Book of Prophecies* is a compilation of a whole range of prophesies, texts from the Old and the New Testament, along with more current prophesies. What he's trying to do is to create a kind of handbook of prophesies that he can use in his attempts to get new funding from Ferdinand and Isabella. One of the prophesies that he fastens upon is a prophecy of a coming last emperor who will reconquer Jerusalem, who is very specifically a Spanish ruler. And we know that he ascribes this prophecy to Joachim of Fiore, but Joachim didn't write it. It was actually a Spanish prophecy from the early 14th century. But Joachim's reputation as the medieval prophet was so large that of course many later prophesies and visions were ascribed to him in pseudonymous fashion.

How does Jerusalem begin to figure into Columbus' discovery of the New World?

Well, Columbus felt that he was able to go around the world to get to Jerusalem, and that going around the world to get to Jerusalem would allow and facilitate the conquest of Jerusalem by a Spanish Last World Emperor. The way to Jerusalem had been blocked by the Turks and others. But the gold that he felt he would discover in the Indies was the money that would be needed to mount the military expedition that would reconquer Jerusalem and, as I said, issue in a universal messianic rule in which Christianity would triumph under the leadership of a Spanish last monarch.

The Puritans

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

What did the Puritans think about God's ancient promises to Israel, and how they fit into that?

The Puritans are a really interesting group in apocalyptic history, because they really saw the prophecies of great blessings to the ancient Israelites applying to themselves. And they read the prophecies in terms of the political crisis of the mid-17th century in England, and viewed not only the Roman Church but the leaders of the Church of England in apocalyptic terms, as a kind of demonic force that had perverted the true faith, and that it was their mission as Puritans to literally purify the Church of evil and to bring about the kingdom of Christ, the true kingdom of Christ. So mid-17th century England was another one of those moments when apocalypticism really bursts through into the public realm. The energy of Puritanism was really an apocalyptic energy. The Puritans, coming out of the intensely apocalyptic political climate in England, in their own day, see now the possibility of literally creating, in what they saw as a new and empty world, the millennial kingdom, the vision of a truly righteous nation that had been perverted first by the Catholic Church and then by the leaders of the English Reformation. Now, in New England, this vision could be realized.

There [are] really two strands of apocalypticism, I think, in New England Puritan sermonizing. There's the vision of the New Jerusalem, the city on a hill. This is the chosen land for the new Zion. Increase Mather, the father of Cotton Mather, certainly expresses this theme in his sermons. There's also the darker, more apocalyptic and frightening vision of a time of destruction coming. And Michael Wigglesworth, for example, prominent New England Puritan, in his book The Day of Doom, describes the moment of Christ's return and the shock of those who are unprepared for the return. The Day of Doom was a bestseller in Puritan New England.

What was this idea of a New Jerusalem about?

The idea of the New Jerusalem arises from very powerful and moving descriptions in the Book of Revelation that in the last days, literally a New Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth, shall be created. The old earth shall pass away and shall be no more. These are tremendously powerful images. And New England Puritans--at least some of their leaders--were convinced that this moment had come; that God was preparing the way for the creation of this New Jerusalem in New England.

Is there a legacy of this idea of the New Jerusalem as a beacon for other countries, that exists even today?

I think the vision of the New Jerusalem that in the 17th century is a quite profoundly theological vision, rooted in scripture, with the passage of time becomes increasingly generalized and secularized, and becomes transformed into a kind of vision of America having a redemptive role in world history, simply by being America, simply by being the kind of nation it is, without the explicit apocalyptic theological foundation. So at the time of the Civil War, we see Julia Ward Howe writing the great anthem of the Civil War, which is really an apocalypse: Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. At the time of the First World War, we see Woodrow Wilson offering a vision of American democracy redeeming the world, making the world safe for democracy. And even in our own day, one of Ronald Reagan's favorite themes was the "city on a hill." He referred to it frequently in the context of the Cold War. So this theme, which has a theological and apocalyptic source, really becomes a part of American civil religion, and I think, remains very strong even today.

James West Davidson: an historian whose books include *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth Century New England*

How did the first generation of Puritans in America view themselves?

The Puritans have very much a sense of being an oppressed people, that they are being driven out by King James and the Anglicans who are refusing to reform the church the way they wish it reformed. And so they come out with what on the face of it seems to be a paradoxical confidence. You would think being driven into what they considered a howling wilderness would be a sign of defeat. And yet, as they began to muse upon it, as John Winthrop told them in the "Arbella" as he led them across the Atlantic, in a sermon he gave to them, he said, "The eyes of the world will be upon us. We are as a city upon a hill, raised up. You may think we're in the howling wilderness. You may think we're out beyond the farthest beyond. But in fact, God's providence is such that as the latter days begin to unfold, this may indeed by the city, the new Jerusalem that's unfolding before not only our eyes but the eyes of the world."

And so when the Puritans arrived on the shores of New England, even though they were in one sense oppressed and persecuted, in their own eyes, at the encouragement of people like Winthrop, they viewed themselves as a shining example to the rest of the world.

What meaning do the Puritans find in their own experience, in terms of apocalyptic explanation?

Because the Puritans sense that history is moving with them, and because their own experience is shaped by this notion of their own personal conversion, they know that to be born again, to have the new birth in Jesus Christ, you have to go through this agonizing sense of conviction, that the trial, the dark night before the new birth breaks upon you. They come out of this experience with the sense that history is very much like that as well; that the unfolding of God's plan, as awful and as desperate as sometimes history seems, with its tragedies, its trials, its tribulations, that somehow out of this mix of tribulation there will come a sense of release, redemption, and indeed a kingdom that will spread throughout the world.

Tell me about the concept of the New Jerusalem and the Puritans.

The notion that America was the New Jerusalem was something that had to be asserted with some modesty. Americans still were very much provincial and aware of the fact that they were on the periphery of what they considered civilization. To confidently assert that this is the New Jerusalem is something that most of them would not say baldly. But they couldn't help thinking, you know: Here we are. Even though we're at the edge of civilization, perhaps this is the New Jerusalem. For them, it

really was this sense of a kingdom of believers whose conduct and whose vision of salvation would come to define a kind of holy commonwealth.

L. Michael White: Professor of Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin, and historical consultant for "Apocalypse!"

What is the line in Revelation that reflects the Puritans' fascination with the idea of building a new Jerusalem?

When the Puritans talked about founding the New Jerusalem in the American colony, they're really harking to the language of the Book of Revelation. Revelation 21:10 talks about Jerusalem descending from the heavens at the end of times. They see themselves really as bringing the last days, the end of time, into reality by founding this new religious experiment.

What about the real Jerusalem? Is this an abstract concept they're talking about, or what?

In their view, the real Jerusalem, the historical Jerusalem, is a long way away. They don't worry about that. God can do it here. God will bring it now. It's the perfect spiritual city that they're looking for. But in reality, they think it's going to be their own backyard, in the Americas.

What did the Puritans think was going to happen? What did they expect?

The Puritans really expected the end of time to come very, very soon. They viewed themselves as being really in the last stretch, the last few years of the millennium, the millennium that had started with the founding of the church at some point earlier in time. The millennium is something that's coming to an end. And the only thing left is the Last Judgment, the destruction of the earth, the descent of Christ from the heavens, and them (the elect) being taken away to their eternal reward.

Tell me about one of the preachers, Cotton Mather, and his influence.

We hear various preachers among the Puritans talking about how soon the end is coming. And naturally, if you keep talking about it enough, somebody's going to come along and say, "Well, how do you know? When will it really happen? Can you tell me more precisely? What's the date?" And they start to predict some dates. One of the people most known for this is Cotton Mather, the preacher at the First Church in Boston. And Cotton Mather begins to look at the Bible and its prophecies, and tries to interpret it in order to come up with the precise date. On the basis of his study of the scriptures, he comes up with several date calculations that he starts to put forward. First it's 1697. And then when that date passes, he has to recalculate his prophecies accordingly. Next he comes up with the date 1736. And then he recalculates that. Now it's 1716. 1716 was a very important year. People in Boston really did go into that year and through that year with a great deal of anxiety and expectation. And when the year passed and nothing happened, you know, people began to say, "What happened here?" So then he rolls it forward one more year, 1717. And finally that date passes. Till the end of his life, he keeps thinking it's right here and we ought to be able to know. In 1727, just before his own death, there's an earthquake in Boston. And he stands up and says, "This is it. Everything is now fulfilled. This is the end."

What is the Great Awakening? Why did that happen?

As time went by, the vision of the "city on the hill," that sort of shiny apocalyptic hope, fades, as it often does, and we see New England life falling into a kind of more conventional mode of farming and commercial activity, with periodic surges of religious energy trying to recover it. One such surge came in the 1730s and 40s and is called the Great Awakening. It was an outburst of religious revivalism, an attempt to recover authentic spiritual experience in the midst of the kind of routines of life. And it's linked, I think, to that apocalyptic vision that had come at the very beginning of the Puritan settlements in New England.

The first generation of Puritans are arriving, in effect, with a kind of red hot conviction that the end times may be near. It very much informs the first generation. The second generation comes. We're still here. And history is still moving on. The second generation (and these are people like Increase Mather and Cotton Mather) are worried about the declension. "Declension" was a key Puritan terms. We live in declining times. We're not as good as the founding fathers. And there is a considerable worry about what's going to happen to New England.

In the midst of this, in the 1730s, when many ministers are worried about declining times, we have a series of revivals break forth, the Great Awakening, as they're called. The awakenings that spread from one congregation to another. Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts, is one of the early ministers who has success in bringing his listeners a sense of their own sins, that they cannot go on as they have been day after day, dead to Christ. And so all of a sudden you have breaking out here and there these small revivals.

These, significant as they are in stirring up and having a sense that something's happening, pale in comparison to the revivals set forth when the first Great Awakening gets underway in earnest, in 1739, when George Whitfield comes to the colonies to preach to crowds of hundreds and thousands, people coming from miles around to hear him in large cities like Philadelphia, where Ben Franklin listens along with thousands of others, and empties out his pocket to give to Whitfield because he is so convincing. The awakening spreads all up and down, and in a sense, reinvigorates this millennial sense that there is a place for North America in this scenario of God's latter days.

Who is Jonathan Edwards? What is his place in all this?

One of the leading lights of the Great Awakening is Jonathan Edwards, a preacher who is in little-known Northampton, Massachusetts, a country place, in a sense, and yet whose mind was one of the sharpest and most brilliant probably in American history. A great sense of theology and philosophy, but also someone whose spiritual sense put him in a place where he could lead the revivals and give a sense of larger meaning to American history through the prophecies.

Jonathan Edwards wrote perhaps one of the memorable sermons--certainly of New England--titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," where he held out this view of each of us being like the spider that dangles over the pit of hell, the burning fires, with only one string holding you up. And there but for the grace of God--quite literally, for the Puritans--go I. Conversion involved this very dramatic and seemingly harsh sense. But Edwards was someone who really loved to revel in the sense of

divine beauty as well. Paradoxically, the man who sees sinners hanging over the pit of hell sees this as part of a more grand and beautiful design of God, because out of this sense of sin and conviction there will be, for the individual, a new birth, a conversion; and in terms of history, that same process will take place. History must be tried in the fire. And it's the darkest before the dawn, in terms of when the millennial paradise will come about. So just as the individual sinner needs to make that pilgrimage down into the depths of agony, hanging by that slender thread, so it must seem that history must unwind in that same way, that at the last moment God snatches victory from defeat.

As Jonathan Edwards saw this vast awakening taking place around him, up and down the Atlantic seaboard, he, like many other divines, began to feel that he was seeing the latter day prophecies unfold. The Revelation speaks of many obscure events. One is a series of pouring out of vials, seven vials, which are symbols of overturnings and shakings in the world. Constantly Edwards is trying to decide whether the fifth vial has been poured out. Many people believed that the fifth vial was the Reformation, striking a blow against the papacy. And then the sixth vial. What could the sixth vial mean?

Edwards begins what he calls his Notes on the Apocalypse, which was not an abstract scriptural commentary, but really a notebook of current events. As newspapers would come in, he would eagerly look for events and try to tie them into God's plan for redemption. So if you look at his notes, you'll see in the notebooks: A Jesuit seminary is struck by lightning and the library is burned. France institutes new tolls, driving the economy down. All these things, whether it's political, whether it's economic, whether it's natural catastrophes, all these things are a working out of God's plans. And Edwards keeps this notebook to see how things are going, and try to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

The idea of the Great Awakening really is as a return to the original impulses that founded the Puritan colony. They want to get back to that idea that they can create the theocracy of God; they can help bring the new kingdom into effect. It's been over a hundred years now. Many would say that they've lost that goal. They've not really brought it about. Some would say they've become too worldly, themselves. And people like Jonathan Edwards really preach that it's time to return to that spirit. It really re-emphasizes, takes them back to that apocalyptic mentality that got them there in the first place.

What impact would preachers like Edwards have on the idea of an American revolutionary movement?

By the middle of the 18th century, the Great Awakening really was having a major impact. Jonathan Edwards himself even thought that it was so significant that the revival was really bringing them to the brink of the last days. They really are getting somewhere, or so they think. And within only another generation after Edwards himself, a new experiment starts to come into the picture: the American Revolution. Now, not only are they going to have a pure colony; now they're going to be a pure nation. And this idea of the nation as the city set on the hill is going to be extremely important, both in the rhetoric of the American Revolution itself and also in the defining of a new sense of national identity.

The American Revolution

James West Davidson: an historian whose books include *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth Century New England*

How does apocalyptic rhetoric and belief come together with revolutionary ideology? What's new about that?

The Great Awakening provided a sense of expectation among many millennial scholars and among ordinary people, that this kingdom, divine kingdom, was expanding. The American Revolution changed, in a sense, the direction of how that kingdom was perceived. In the Great Awakening, you're dealing primarily with a question of spiritual conversion. There's a sense that if enough people experience the new birth, we're going to have a kingdom coming on, spreading gradually through what has amounted to a worldwide revival. The American Revolution changes the sense of what it means to bring this kingdom about, or what this kingdom entails, what's at the center of it. It's not simply a matter of personal conversion now. There is a sense of political as well as spiritual liberty; that you must have the freedom to govern yourselves in a political, in a civil sense, as well as in a religious sense, to have the religious freedom that is your due. And therefore now there is both a civil and political side to this religious vision.

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

I think at the time of the American Revolution, there was an interesting process of a coming together of apocalyptic understandings of what the meaning of the American experience was, with some very genuine political grievances against British government of the late 18th century. So sort of underlying the political debates of the Revolutionary era was another discourse of prophetic meaning, that this struggle with England was not simply a political struggle about whether they have the right to impose certain taxes on the colonists, but it quite literally was a struggle to determine what the future of America would be.

Would America fulfill that vision that the Puritan founders had created of the city on a hill, the New Zion? And it was really quite literally, at that level, a struggle about the future, and the apocalyptic future of the nation.

The Stamp Act was really important from that point of view, because here was a specific piece of legislation that required the colonists to have on all their legal documents, to have on all their newspapers, a stamp for which they would pay. And given a culture in which the idea of the mark of the Beast was very much a part of their thinking, the Stamp Act became a kind of particularly outrageous and literal example of this sort of demonic power that is threatening virtuous, righteous America.

There are fascinating continuities here when you stop and think about it, because in the 1760s, the colonists saw the Stamp Act, the requirement of the stamp on legal documents, as possibly the mark of the Beast. In the 1930s, in the Depression era, some writers said it's the union label that's beginning to be put on products. It's the NRA blue eagle. In the contemporary context, it's the consumer product code. So there's a real continuity here of efforts to find a kind of literal representation of this account in the Book of Revelation of the mark of the Beast, the mark of the Evil One.

Apocalyptic rhetoric could be used in any number of ways to bolster this sense that this was not just a simple political dispute; this was the history of redemption in the balance. That King George was not just some sort of well intentioned but obtuse king--King George could be seen as the Antichrist. The Stamp Act was not just some piece of bureaucratic legislation. This was the mark of the beast being put upon all those who followed it and accepted it. All of this creates the sense of polarization, the sense that things are coming to a height. It's not just a matter of reasoned political discourse, but much larger issues in the balance.

On the positive side it's not simply that antichrist is Britain, but it is that this is something worth fighting for in a positive sense; that this is a kingdom that is evolving and spreading. And it almost comes to Americans with sort of a breathtaking surprise. All of a sudden we are not English citizens any more. We are Americans. And there may be a sense in which this is God's plan. That there is a grand empire, and it need not be a British one. It may be an American one, and we are pioneering new ground here.

The American Revolution provides a new timbre to apocalyptic thinking, because it combines what is the traditional religious sense of conversion, spiritual conversion and new birth with a political sense of a civil liberty. The Stamp Act, the Intolerable Acts, all these controversies that the colonies have with Great Britain are now melded into this vision which says: This is not simply a divine empire of religious belief, but also a political sense of liberty that goes on; that we are seeing something here we have not seen in the world before, and that this new young nation in North America is going to show the world the way to the New Jerusalem.

Because millennial rhetoric is woven into the warp and woof of colonial culture, even people like Paul Revere, whom we know as a patriot and a talented silversmith--not what you would call a card carrying millennialist-- [drew on apocalyptic imagery]. And when the Stamp Act came and mobilized the colonies, Revere did a wonderful engraving, trying to convince people not to use stamped paper. And there he used for his imagery a beast-like dragon, very much like the beast in Revelation, with wings of a dragon, a fierce tail, talons clutching the Magna Carta and ripping it to shreds, and the colonists being ground underfoot. All imagery that just naturally came to Revere as something you could use for the ordinary person, perhaps the people who didn't read, as a way to say, "Don't use stamped paper. This is the mark of the beast."

For preachers, the Revolution was something they firmly grounded in the prophecies, scripture. But there was a message for many Americans that went beyond that strict biblical, church-oriented millennialism without talking chapter and verse about the prophecies, there is this sense that America is exceptional; that it's born out of this religious conviction; that there is, in a broad sense, an American tradition of liberty yoked with religion and a divine plan that gives the United States and its citizens the confidence to spread out into the world and bring this message of democracy and freedom all across the globe.

Colonials come out of the America Revolution with a new sense of possibility. One might almost say, a millennial sense of what is possible. So much so that they are comfortable in the 19th century of speaking of a manifest destiny, that this tremendous republic, which has won a revolution against all odds, has now the opportunity to become a republic that will spread all the way across the North American continent, and by its example, bring wisdom, religious belief, and a sense of millennial possibility to the rest of the world.

Prophetic Belief in the United States
William Miller and the Second Great Awakening

L. Michael White: Professor of Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin, and historical consultant for "Apocalypse!"

In the early 1800s, really in the years right after the Revolutionary War, there's a massive new expansion of the country, the great push westward. And this period sees a number of new developments happening, especially on the religious front. And many of them have apocalyptic overtones to them. In fact, this is the period that gives rise to what is known as the Second Great Awakening. Like the first, it's a period of revival. But it's being put forward as a sense of the great expansion of the country as well.

One of the interesting things about the Second Great Awakening is, it gives rise to a number of new religious sects within the American cultural experiment. This is what some people have called the rise of a free market religious economy in America. But new groups are popping up all over the place. We hear of utopian groups that move to places like Amana and Oneida. New York itself is known as the "burned over district" because so many revivalist preachers come from that area. And in fact, it gives rise to several other groups that still exist to this day, including the Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventists, and others who came out of that revivalist temperament of the early 1800's.

One of the most significant figures to come out of this revivalist spirit of the Second Great Awakening is a farmer from upstate New York by the name of William Miller. Miller begins to read the Bible, and he undertakes a new sense of understanding of how to interpret prophecy and the Book of Revelation itself. The most important thing that William Miller brings to the discussions of the Book of Revelation is his new sense of how the events are going to unfold. In contrast to earlier interpreters, Miller argues that the Book of Revelation is completely unfulfilled. All of the events described there are things that will occur at the end of time, whereas earlier interpreters had seen events unfolding throughout Christian history in the past. The crucial change in Miller's interpretation of the Book of Revelation is that he sees all of those events as still to come in the future. Nothing there-- maybe the first chapter alone, but nothing in the rest of the book has been fulfilled.

Now, what Miller thinks is going to happen is that the prophecies of Daniel will be fulfilled in the end that's just about to come. This is when the Second Coming of Christ will occur, what he begins to call the Advent. In fact, that's what his movement comes to be known as: the Adventists' movement. But the Advent or the Second Coming of Christ will occur in 1843. And then, in a significant twist in interpretation of the Book of Revelation, he says that's when the thousand years, the millennium, will commence. So he places the events in the Book of Revelation and all of that expectation as a coming event after

the return of Christ. This new interpretation, where all of the events in the Book of Revelation begin to occur only after Christ returns, and the Millennium, the thousand year reign, is a reign on earth after the return of Christ, that kind of interpretation comes to be known as pre-millennialism. And it's one of the important new developments in American religious history. And of course it still survives to this day, and is very influential.

What are the key passages in Revelation that are meaningful to Miller?

For William Miller, most of the Book of Revelation has not yet come to pass. But in particularly, he really looks at the section between chapters 12 and 21, commencing with the great beast, the Antichrist, who arrives. And then the war, the battle of Armageddon in chapter 20. And in chapter 21, the New Jerusalem. These are the things that he thinks are going to be fulfilled at the Second Coming of Jesus and with the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth.

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

How does the Miller movement gain momentum?..

The Millerite movement gained momentum by utilizing the latest technologies of the day, of mass communication. The high speed printing press, for example, was very important in promoting pamphlets and newsletters and newspapers and colored charts that illustrated Miller's system. Miller himself was not a great preacher. He was not a great evangelist. His meetings were more like lectures. He was a teacher, and he would turn people to the Book of Daniel, and he would walk them through his system. And he was very fortunate in his lieutenants, particularly a man named Joshua Himes in Boston, who was a very skilled promoter and really turned the Millerite movement--helped do it, at least--into a mass phenomenon.

Did Miller see himself as a prophet? Or did he just feel he found the code?

I don't think Miller saw himself as a prophet. I don't think he believed that he had received some special revelation from God. Miller was a Bible student, and he believed that through careful analysis of the texts, particularly in the Book of Daniel, it was possible to develop a chronology that would lead you inevitably to the moment of Christ's Second Coming. So he was in the tradition of biblical interpreters, rather than in the tradition of prophets who receive a special vision.

Do you know the circuitous, complicated math he's doing?

The details of Miller's system are extremely complicated. They're difficult to follow. He drew upon passages in the Book of Daniel that refer to 1,260 days, and translated the days into years, and used as his beginning point the command to rebuild the Jewish Temple after the Babylonian captivity, moved forward from that, and by a really very elaborate and somewhat circuitous system, came up with the year 1843. It was an interpretive system that he found convincing, and that evidently many thousands of Americans of his day did as well.

Does that put him on the absolute cultural fringe, or does he represent more of the mainstream?

We tend to marginalize prophecy believers as cranks, people on the cultural fringe. The Millerite movement is a good antidote, I think, to that marginalization, because it's very hard to find how the Millerites were different from other Americans. They were ordinary Americans. Many of them were involved in other reform movements. Joshua Himes in Boston, for example, was also involved in the abolitionist movement. Sarah Grimke was involved in the women's rights movement and the anti-slavery movement. People were drawn to Miller out of a larger cultural climate of the moment. And they were not cranks. They were not fringe people. They were ordinary Americans who found his interpretation compelling.

As March 1843 approaches, how is the movement covered in the news? How does the greater society view them? There were some circulation wars built around this idea, weren't there?

Well, of course, inevitably the Millerite movement attracted a great deal of attention. Some of it was skeptical. Some of it was in the tone of ridicule. Others took it rather seriously. I think everyone recognized its importance, not only religiously but economically. These rallies were attracting many thousands of people. The Millerites really pioneered mass journalism in many ways, in getting the message out through their publications.

So what happens when the first disappointment comes?

When the first disappointment came in 1843, they went back to the drawing board, and they realized that they had made an error of one year by neglecting to take into account the transition from BC to AD, and because of that, they had gotten it off by a year. So they simply moved it forward one year to 1844. So that extended the excitement for one more year. But then at that point came the Great Disappointment, and the movement simply fragmented for the moment.

How do they prepare for that final day? Tell me about the Great Disappointment.

After the Great Disappointment, we have very poignant accounts of believers who describe the dismay, the weeping, literally the disappointment they felt. They had anticipated that they were going to be carried into heaven. It didn't happen. The world went on as before. Life went on as before. And it was a very traumatic experience for those who had been caught up in the movement.

What then becomes the lesson about date setting that people learned from Miller?

People learned from Miller a very important lesson: the dangers of date setting. There are warnings in scripture about date setting. Jesus tells his disciples, "No man knoweth the day nor the hour of my coming." But that lesson had been lost by the Millerites. After the Great Disappointment, prophecy interpreters for the most part avoided date setting. The argument that was now made was: We must look at the signs of the times. We know the end is near, because all the signs are coming together, but we don't know the exact date. We must be ready at any moment for the end to come. And that creates a powerful psychological dynamic of expectation, but expectation of an event whose precise date is unknown. And the inherent tension in that mindset is very, very great. But the avoidance of date

setting was a very powerful lesson that emerged from the Millerite movement.

Was there skepticism about prophecy belief after Miller?

After the Great Disappointment, there was a great deal of skepticism about prophecy belief. I think there was a period when it was really discredited. And it was at that point, in the mid-19th century, that John Nelson Darby, a brilliant British theologian and preacher, emerged with a new system, premillennial dispensationalism, in which he offered an interpretation of the prophecies that was really quite different from Miller's. Miller saw the prophetic scheme unfolding over historical time and ending at a certain point. Darby sees a series of dispensations, which will culminate in a dramatic moment, the moment of the Rapture, when true believers will be taken from the earth. And at that point, the prophetic clock will begin to tick again, and a series of events will then inevitably follow: the Great Tribulation, the second coming, the battle of Armageddon, and so on.

John Darby's prophetic scheme really, in some ways, echoed that of Joachim of Fiore, centuries before. Joachim had also seen human history unfolding in a series of stages or dispensations. In Joachim's case, it was three great stages, based on the Trinity. And the millennial stage, the Age of the Spirit, still lay in the future. With Darby, again, he sees human history segmented into a series of stages, in each one of which God deals with humanity in a different way--the means of salvation differ: the period of the Garden of Eden, the period before the Flood, the period after the Flood, the era when Christ walked on earth, and then the Church Age. And that was the dispensation that we were in, and in fact are still in, according to this system. The next dispensations lay in the future. Darby called the Church Age the Great Parenthesis, because this was a period when, in a sense, the prophetic clock had stopped. With the coming of Christ, the first coming of Christ, a key prophetic stage had been fulfilled. Then Christ is crucified and ascends to heaven, and the Church Age begins. And the Church Age, he called The Great Parenthesis, because while Christian effort is going on and so on, prophetically it is not a dispensation full of great significant events. But toward the end of the Church Age come a series of events that signal that the end of that dispensation is near. And the key dividing point that would mark the beginning of the next dispensation, was an event that Darby derived from a passage in the Book of Thessalonians, describing the Rapture, the moment when the saints will be taken, snatched from the earth. And here is where Darby and his followers paid great attention to the signs of the times. Wars and rumors of war, increasing wickedness, new technologies, the age of steam, the age of electricity, the coming of the telephone and the telegraph. These are all signs that the end times are being prepared, and the Rapture could come at any moment.

Explain Darby's scenario for the end. What exactly happens?

Darby's scenario for the end is a very dramatic one. The first event that will happen is the Rapture, the saints taken to heaven. Then a 7-year period, the Great Tribulation: the Antichrist arises, tremendous persecution; the number 666 is emblazoned on the forehead and the hands of his followers. Then the battle of Armageddon. Christ returns from the skies with his saints, as the Antichrist and his army gather at Armageddon. Antichrist and his armies are destroyed. Christ establishes in Jerusalem the Temple, and the thousand year reign of justice and righteousness, the Millennium. At the end of that period on earth comes the Last Judgment: all those who have ever lived will be consigned either to heaven or hell. And essentially then human history ends. The great drama that began in the Garden of Eden comes to its close. A new heaven, a new earth are created, and essentially the great prophetic scheme has been fulfilled.

How did the Rapture end up solving the problem of date setting? What does that mean about how Christians would have to live?

I think the doctrine of the Rapture is a tremendous breakthrough in the history of prophetic teaching, because with it Darby avoided the problem of the Millerites, the problem of date setting, but at the same time the doctrine of the Rapture holds believers in a state of constant readiness. They could be snatched from the earth literally at any moment. So one must always be observing one's behavior. What would happen if the Rapture occurred at this moment? But on the other hand, it may be far in the future. So one must live a responsible life; one must be a good citizen; one must obey the laws. It avoids the other risk of irresponsible behavior, because if the end could come at any moment, who cares about keeping my house in repair; who cares about buying life insurance, or educating my children? So it provides both that sense of readiness for a dramatic breakpoint in history, but also provides for the possibility that life may go on very much as it always has.

Tell me about the Tribulation, and the role of Jews.

The Great Tribulation in Darby's scheme will be a 7-year period. Initially a figure will arise, a man of peace. But halfway through the Great Tribulation, this person will reveal himself as the Antichrist, the enemy of righteousness, and will bring a period of horrendous persecution and suffering to the earth. Historically, many prophecy believers have taught that the Antichrist will be a Jew. And it makes sense logically, because the Antichrist will be a mirror of Jesus. Jesus was Jewish, therefore the Antichrist will be Jewish. So we have, for example, the televangelist Jerry Falwell very recently announce that he believes that the Antichrist is a young Jewish male who is probably alive today. That got a lot of attention, but in fact it was very much in the tradition of this strand of prophetic belief that the Antichrist will be a Jew, and that the end could come at any moment.

Why have Darby's views come to dominate prophetic belief in our time?

I think Darby's views have come to dominate prophetic belief, certainly in America in our era, because first of all it's such a powerful and appealing system in terms of the drama of the events that are described. In Darby's system, human history takes on meaning, and it has an end point. Events are leading toward a final culmination. And also, his system is very appealing because it avoids date setting. It avoids that risk of pinning the system down to a precise date, and therefore it's not falsifiable. There's literally no way to prove Darby's system false, because it involves events that lie in the future. Combine that with the tremendously powerful engine of American mass culture, with

paperbacks that can be sold by millions of copies, televisions, videos, movies. There's just a tremendous coming together, it seems to me, of theological and cultural forces propelling this belief system.

America's Doom Industry

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

Tell me about the rise of the apocalypse industry, if you will.

What we see in contemporary American mass culture really is that apocalyptic belief has become big business. It's become an industry. It's a subset of the publishing industry. And books that become successful literally sell millions of copies. And what we're seeing is a kind of synergistic process where a successful televangelist will publish a book which is successful, which will then spin off into videotapes and movies and sometimes prophecy magazines, and even we have bumper stickers and wristwatches and other kinds of material, all of which reinforce popular belief and interest in Bible prophecy.

Who is Hal Lindsey?

Hal Lindsey is one of the most fascinating figures in the whole history of contemporary prophecy belief. A person of very obscure origins. Very little education.

Late 1960s. He's a campus preacher out in southern California. 1970, publishes a book, The Late Great Planet Earth, which is really a popularization of John Darby's system. Theologically, there's nothing new there. What he does is link it to current events: the Cold War, nuclear war, the Chinese Communist threat, the restoration of Israel. All of these events, he links to specific biblical passages in the classic fashion of prophecy popularizers. And he and his ghost writer write the book in a very almost slang-like, very accessible language. It's not a heavy theological book at all. It's a popular book. And this book just took off and became the all-time non-fiction bestseller of the entire decade of the 1970s, and it represented the point at which publishers began to realize there's tremendous potential in prophecy books. And so many other writers begin to write books in the same popular way, that have an enormously broad appeal.

The significance of Hal Lindsey, I think, is he represents another one of those moments of breakthrough, when interest in Bible prophecy spills out beyond just the ranks of the true believers and becomes a broader cultural phenomenon. And people who had never paid much attention to prophecy at all hear about this book. They pick up the paperback. They see the way Lindsey weaves together current events and finds Biblical passages that seem to foretell those events, and they say, "Wow, this is amazing. There must really be something to this." So Lindsey's a very important transitional figure, I think.

Hal Lindsey seems to have had considerable influence not just on the part of the public as a whole, but at some of the highest levels of government. He's a somewhat boastful person, and it's not entirely clear how much to trust all of his stories, but he does tell of giving seminars at the Pentagon, seminars at the National War College, that were crowded, thronged with people. So there does seem to have been in the 1970s a considerable interest in prophetic interpretations, particularly as they related to Russia and the Cold War, at some of the highest levels of government.

Go through the 50s, 60s, and 70s, and give a general thought about how popularizers turn to film, TV, paperbacks, and what's happening to the new way of disseminating an apocalyptic message in that time.

Prophecy believers since the time of the Millerite movement, the 1840s, have been extremely skilled at using the latest technologies. And that's been very much true in our own day. It's fascinating to see how this ancient belief system is being spread, really worldwide, by all the technologies, from mass paperback books to the Internet, World Wide Web sites, videotapes, even feature length films. The entire apparatus of modern mass culture is accessible to those who are believers and who wish to spread their message. It's also interesting to see how the prophecy popularizers view modern technology. On the one hand, they see all of these systems of mass communication preparing the way for the Antichrist. But in the meantime, they're quite ready to use these same technologies themselves, to spread the word of their particular interpretation of Bible prophecy.

Again, Hal Lindsey and The Late Great Planet Earth sort of set the standard for this, because Lindsey proved to be an enormously successful marketer of his product. And The Late Great Planet Earth, published initially by an obscure religious publisher in Michigan, is taken up by a mass market publisher and produced in a mass market format that is sold in supermarkets and airports and so on. A film is made of The Late Great Planet Earth narrated, actually, by Orson Welles. So it set the pattern of a multimedia phenomenon that we now see with a number of prophecy popularizers today.

A perfect example of the mass marketing of prophetic belief is the Left Behind series that is now selling by the millions of copies in modern America. It's by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, and it's a series of novels which deal in fictional form with pre-millennial dispensationalist beliefs. It begins with the Rapture. It deals with a small group of so-called Tribulation Saints that find each other during the period of the Great Tribulation and try to survive the rise of the Antichrist. They're very readable. They're very well written. And they are being marketed in a very powerful and successful way. The publisher has a web site. You can comment on the book. The publisher has produced a children's version of four kids going through the Great Tribulation. I understand that a film version is in the works. So the Left Behind phenomenon is a classic example of the way a very ancient belief system has broken through into the mass market of modern America.

What does the *Left Behind* series tell us about the way prophecy believers are using the media today?

The *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, I think, tells us some very interesting things about the way prophecy belief is being used today in this post Cold War period. For one thing, it deals with contemporary themes: the new communications technologies. The characters in the novels are all using the Internet and communicating by e-mail, and so it's very up-to-the-minute in terms of the cultural material that's described. And yet it deals with a sort of fictionalized version of a very ancient traditional system of Bible prophecy interpretation: the Rapture, the Great Tribulation, the rise of the Antichrist. The religious themes, the apocalyptic themes of the

series are very well known, very well established. But they're combined with these contemporary allusions that give the series a very up-to-the-minute quality.

Is there a contradiction between these stories both using and featuring today's latest greatest technology (Internet etc.) and being true to the story of the Book of Revelation?

I think there's inevitably a kind of distortion and trivialization of what in some sense is a very profound insight. The apocalyptic world view is one that speaks to the human condition in very profound ways, in terms of the opposition of forces of chaos and order and so on. When it's translated into the world of contemporary mass marketing, contemporary Hollywood film techniques, inevitably, it seems to me, much of the depth, much of the complexity, much of the meaning that it might have for people in terms of encouraging them to really think about the nature of the world that we live in, gets lost, and it simply becomes another product to be consumed and forgotten.

Doomsday Cults

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

I think what we've seen in recent years is the emergence of a number of subgroups in different cultures--even in Japan, but certainly in American society--that apply in a kind of literal way the idea that contemporary society is evil, contemporary society is corrupt, the American government in fact is part of the vast conspiracy, and take that simply one step further and conclude that therefore we must literally, physically withdraw from society.

What are we to make of those things that taken together could be called doomsday cults?

I think doomsday cults are very significant. I see them in some ways like the canaries that used to be taken down into coal mines. If the canary died, you knew that there was a buildup of dangerous gases and you'd better be careful. It seems to me that doomsday cults tell us something about a contemporary cultural climate of anxiety, of apprehension, of uneasiness about trends in our contemporary world. And some groups, usually under the influence of a very charismatic and potent sort of leader, withdraw from the larger society and act on their belief system in a quite literal and sometimes catastrophic fashion.

I think it's also important, though, not to reduce apocalyptic belief to the doomsday cults. These beliefs are very pervasive in our culture. Many of people we deal with every day, in fact, if you talk with them, you realize, hold beliefs that are drawn from particularly interpretations of Bible prophecy. So doomsday cults are one subset of a far vaster company of contemporary Americans who take apocalyptic beliefs very seriously.

What about this idea of separating themselves out from society?

The idea of separation from the world is a very deep one in the Christian tradition. Biblical passages: Come ye out from among them and be ye separate. It's been an appeal within the Christian tradition from the beginning. And the monastic tradition is in a way an expression of that. It's been resisted traditionally by those who say, "No, we must be a part of the world. It's not our duty to simply withdraw." But some groups in our contemporary society have acted upon that tradition of withdrawal, of separation, and increasingly have viewed the outer world not as an arena to be won over, to be reformed, but as an evil arena to be rejected, to be shunned. And out of that insight comes the impulse to form the small community of true believers that we see occasionally in these doomsday cults.

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The person we know as David Koresh was born in 1959. His original birth name was Vernon Howell. He was born in Texas, and he was part of a Seventh Day Adventist family. He grew up attending church. His mother has reported that he was a devout young man, fervent, memorized the scriptures. And the Adventists are part of the Millerite movement, which is from the 1830s and forties, an apocalyptic, end-of-the-world movement, that 150 years later had settled down considerably in terms of predicting the end. But David, from the start, grew up with that kind of context of interpreting the Bible. The Book of Revelation and the Book of Daniel are absolutely the key texts within that tradition, in terms of giving that movement their identity.

David Koresh was part of this Branch Davidian group, an offshoot of the Adventists. And one of their hallmarks was the very literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation. And when you open the Book of Revelation, it describes places, namely Jerusalem. Most of the scenes take place in Jerusalem. And here's this American Seventh Day Adventist Branch Davidian in his twenties, who decides in 1985: I'm going to go and see Jerusalem. What does it really look like?

What David did was read the Book of Revelation very literally, but he also combined it with all the other texts of scripture, such as the prophecy in Zechariah. Both of these texts speak about measuring the city in the last days. And so he went there with the intention of actually looking at it and walking the city, particularly up by what's called the Temple area, where the mosques are today, to see whether 144,000 people could actually fit up there. And this number comes from the Book of Revelation, chapter 7, where the prophet who wrote John says that he saw 144,000 standing on Mt. Zion.

When David arrived in Jerusalem and went up to the Temple area, the Temple Mount and looked at what he understood to be Mt. Zion, he faced a kind of a crisis, because by his estimation, looking at the size of it, the length, the breadth (as the text says), he concluded that 144,000 people could not stand on Mt. Zion. And he wondered then: Well, can the interpretations of the Bible be taken literally after all? And he went to the text, Zechariah chapter 2 and he found, as he continued to read the chapter, his answer: that at this time when Jerusalem is measured in the final days, that it will be "a city without walls; that it will be exalted and lifted up." It was like a light going on for him. He thought: Ah! It is literal. It is exact. And yet it will be transformed. And it's that flexibility between the text and the actual situation on the ground, I think, that helped create the dynamics of interpretation for him. He could always find in the text something that would fit. And in turn, things that he was seeing could be altered if needed.

David lived in Jerusalem for about six months. And one of the things that he did was to visit the yeshivas, the Jewish Orthodox schools of rabbinic learning in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the Jewish quarter. And I've interviewed some of the rabbis there that remember him. And they talk about him coming. I think he pictured himself as somewhat like the young Jesus, who would go up to the doctors of the law in the Temple (although there's no temple, it's the same area, anciently) and impress them with his knowledge and wisdom of the scriptures. And they do indeed report that he had a phenomenal memory of the texts.

Do we know what he planned to do?

We don't know how long he planned to stay. He ended up staying about six months. But while there, he had this extraordinary experience. We don't even know exactly when it happened. But some time during his time in Jerusalem, he had the experience that changed his whole life. He was known then as Vernon Howell. But he reports the experience of ecstatically being caught up into heaven, like the author of the Book of Revelation, seeing heaven open. And he says that he was given a scroll or a book, and he was told to eat the book. This is in Book of Revelation chapter 10. So he identified himself with this figure in Revelation 10, who's called the seventh messenger, who eats this scroll. And eating the scroll symbolizes that you completely take in the entire message of scripture. And David reported the rest of his life, even to the FBI at the siege at Waco, "From that moment on," he says, "I instantaneously and suddenly in a moment understood completely all the mysteries of the Bible."

We have a few examples of David talking about revelatory experience that he had in Jerusalem in 1985. One of the more interesting ones is when he's actually talking to FBI agents late on the telephone during this 51-day standoff at Waco. And I remember he says to one of the negotiators, "Don't you remember back in 1985 hearing about the cosmonauts, the Russian cosmonauts and the Sputnik reporting that they had seen seven angels or stars appearing in the sky?" And the negotiator kind of shakes his head and says, "No, I don't remember that." And David says, "Well, it was in Life magazine. Check it out." This is actually what happened. He said, "Those were the seven angels that brought to me my revelation." And so he had this strange way of mixing certain phenomena that he'd read about in the news, cosmic phenomena, a constellation or these Russian astronauts reporting that they had seen something out the window of the satellite that they were in, or the Sputnik, and his own experiences in 1985.

How was he changed afterward?

When David returned to the United States after his experiences in 1985 in Israel and in Jerusalem, he went back to Texas, and he rejoined his Branch Davidian community outside of Waco. And all the Davidians report, even to this day, that he was absolutely a different man; that before, he had been very plodding and very sincere and earnest, but even somewhat boring in his ability to teach the scriptures, nothing particularly impressive; and that now he had this completely transformed knowledge of scriptures, that he simply was able to put together everything from Isaiah and Jeremiah and Zechariah and Haggai and the Book of Revelation and Daniel into this grand synthesis. And it was this ability to weave a complicated interpretation that impressed them.

Who did Koresh think he was?

During the 51-day siege at Waco, the only public word that the government continually gave out was that David Koresh claimed to be Christ. And this was understood, I think, generally by the public to mean that he thought he was Jesus, that somehow he was an incarnation of Jesus. And actually, we know now that this is incorrect, from all the materials that have survived--the tapes, the letters, the sermons. What David believed was that in 1985 he became the seventh and final messenger. He was a Christ, in the sense that "Christ" really and literally means an anointed one, a chosen one. But he didn't believe that he was Jesus Christ... He believed that Jesus Christ was, in fact, the Messiah, but he did believe that he, himself, was the final Messiah. And this final messiah is also called in the Book of Revelation one of the two witnesses. This is chapter 11 of the Book of Revelation. And these figures that are to appear at the end, and witness it, are in fact Messiahs as well. And he believed he was one of those, and that he was going to bring the final revelation.

How did the events at Waco actually surprise David Koresh? What did he expect?

Well, David Koresh had worked out a very elaborate scenario as to how the Book of Revelation and all the prophets of the Bible would unfold. And it certainly did not include anything happening in Texas or United States. But he envisioned his group actually ending up in Jerusalem, and he being the final prophetic figure on the streets of Jerusalem, actually confronting the Antichrist figure and dealing with all the great events and dramas that are in the Book of Revelation. And so Waco in '93, for him, was clearly a surprise. The BATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) raid on that Sunday morning caught him completely off guard, and he really didn't know what to think of it. It didn't seem to fit any prophecies of the Bible that he had expounded.

If we could go back and interview David Koresh a month before the ill-fated raid on the Branch Davidian community, he would not have known the future. He would have said, "Some day, my group will end up in Jerusalem, and I will be known around the world, and I indeed have received this revelation. I am the final prophet, the final messianic figure that's to come before the end." But he wouldn't know how it's all going to work out. He would just believe that that's the case. After the raid, when he suddenly is given this worldwide attention with this media circus, being mentioned hourly on CNN, appearing on the covers of all the major news magazines, David began to think, "Well, maybe this is what God has in mind. I know I'm the prophet. I know I am this figure. Through this notoriety, I will be able to reach the 144,000 who are the final group that are supposed to respond to this message, and we'll all end up over in Jerusalem." But he didn't know exactly how it would out. But in that strange way, the events at Waco, as tragic as they were, in the early days he was trying to process, and began to think, "Well, maybe there was a purpose in this."

What did he think events in Jerusalem would have been?

David had a fairly standard, literal way of reading the Book of Revelation, similar to what many interpreters of the more fundamentalist variety would have. And that is that Jerusalem would be surrounded by hostile powers. He speculated that maybe it would be the United Nations, with some sort of decree to give land back to the Palestinians. He would be in Jerusalem with his followers, and in solidarity with the Jewish people, would stand up and oppose these outside powers of Europe and perhaps even the United States (if it happened to be the UN). He would eventually be killed. This is all the scenario of chapter 11 of the Book of Revelation. It's an absolutely key chapter for all of these interpreters. His body would lie in the streets of Jerusalem for three days. And then at the end of that period, he would be taken up to heaven. And according to the Book of Revelation, that's when the end comes. That's when the final judgment comes.

How did the government's actions at Waco reinforce the apocalyptic idea?

The way to understand David Koresh is to understand that he is one of a string of Bible interpreters that reads these texts, particularly the Book of Revelation, in the most literal fashion. So he knew very well that Waco, Texas, 1993, with a siege and a standoff, was not mentioned in the Book of Revelation. That's not Jerusalem. It's not the end of time. The government, however, in dealing with the situation as what they called a hostage barricade situation, with the tanks, with the tactical people, the psychological warfare with the tanks and the noise and the lights at night, pressing the group, he had to go back to his texts and wonder: "Well, maybe this is the end. Maybe there's something I've missed." You see? And so by handling the situation in the way that it was handled, the government really delivered to David,I guess we could call it an early apocalypse, instead of backing off and making the situation more normal, which would have, I think, been the way to go.

V. The Apocalyptic Sensibility

The Resiliency of Apocalyptic Beliefs

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

I think there are some very deep human needs that are met by the prophetic belief system. Prophetic belief gives meaning to history. It gives a sense of drama to history. It gives an order and shape to human experience. We need beginnings. We need endings. Prophetic belief provides that. It also, if you accept certain interpretations that are being presented, gives meaning and a sort of coherence to current events, world events, and what's happening technologically and politically in the world.

It all fits into a kind of master plan that is unfolding, and I think for many people it's very reassuring to have that sense that someone is in charge.

One of the things I find most interesting about prophetic belief viewed historically is how in every time period of history there have been groups, there have been individuals who have looked at the events of their day and concluded: This is it. This is the moment. And you can trace that from the medieval period, from Joachim of Fiore and Hildegard of Bingen, through the Reformation period, the incredible crisis, the sense of crisis that the Reformation brought to Europe. Seventeenth century Puritans in England were convinced that the corruption of the Catholic Church and the corruption of the Church of England were signs of the end times. Right down through the crisis of World War I and the crisis of World War II, the Cold War period, each generation somehow has found circumstances that are convincing to them that the end times are upon us.

When we talk about prophecy belief, what are we talking about?

Prophetic belief is a belief that human history has a meaning, a divinely ordained meaning, and that that meaning is embedded within sacred texts; and that through interpretation, through proper understanding of those texts, one can understand the pattern of history as it has unfolded in the past, and even more importantly, as it will unfold in the future. Perhaps not precise dates, but the general pattern becomes clear from a study of prophetic scripture.

What do we not understand about the staying power of these ideas?

I think a lot of us have tended to assume a kind of progression of human history, that religion gradually fades out with the rise of science and the rise of different understandings of our natural world. A kind of secularization model of history has been very pervasive in the teaching of history. What we're seeing is, the secularization model really doesn't work. Belief systems, including this biblical prophetic understanding of history, have enormous staying power, even in an era of high technology and advanced science. Why? It appeals to some very basic human needs. History is meaningful. History has a beginning. History will have an end. And history will culminate in a glorious era. Beyond the horrors of the Great Tribulation lies the Millennium. So at its deepest level, this is a utopian belief system. It speaks to the human need to believe that life somehow must be better than we're experiencing it today; that a very different kind of society must be out there somewhere, if only we could achieve it. The prophetic belief system speaks to that need in a very profound and direct way. And I think that helps us understand its remarkable staying power.

Where does the power of this apocalyptic message come from?

The apocalyptic message has enormous power for various reasons. One is, ironically enough, the terror that it inspires. The vision of the future that's embedded in the apocalyptic world view is really a frightening one. But yet, combined with the fear, is a sense of meaning, and also the sense that as individuals we can escape the true terrors that lie ahead. And that's where the Rapture belief becomes so important, because horrible events will be unfolding in the future, but true believers will be spared all of that because they will be taken in the Rapture and spend that time with Christ in the skies. So there's the sense of fear that comes with thinking about those events, combined with the sense of escape, the sense of personal redemption from all of that, that I think is one of the sources of strength of this belief system.

Nicholas Campion: teaches history at Queens' College in Cambridge and history and politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London

What are the circumstances that can tip people into a millennial or apocalyptic world vision? What are the forces that come together to push people toward an apocalyptic view?

Apocalyptic beliefs feed, I think, partly on social-economic circumstances. So we have the most recent example of 1930s Germany, where Nazism and its prophecy of the Thousand Year Reich flourished in economic collapse. We get similar instances in the Middle Ages. But there's also the question of belief, and why should be attracted to particular prophecies, particularly prophecies of the end of the world. And I think that social-economic pressures themselves don't really explain why the beliefs take particular forms. We can see that they might indicate periods of popularity, but not the nature of those beliefs.

Apocalyptic belief thrives in oppression. For oppressed people, a prophecy of the end of the world offers relief from their suffering and hope that their suffering will come to an end. So the Book of Daniel was written to encourage the Jews in their revolt against the Greeks. Christianity, which is the apocalyptic religion par excellence, actually developed out of Judaism partly as a result of the Roman conquest of Palestine. And then we can move down through Reformation, when the German peasants flocked to the reformers' standards in order to try and release themselves from feudalism. And then to the 20th century, where we have Marxism explicitly appealing to the oppressed of the world, and the great classic slogan: Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains. And then finally the success of Nazism taking root in the economic and social collapse of Germany between the wars.

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

What I would characterize as the problem of apocalypticism is something just absolutely astounding when you think about it. It's a system of thought that has a 100 percent failure rate; that would be one way to put it. That is, you think of all the vast range of history and which scenarios have been put forth: This is the Antichrist; this is this; or this is that; this is going to happen. None of those things have turned out to be the case. And yet the pieces get picked up again. People open the Bible again. They read it in a new way, in a new situation. And I think that has to do fundamentally with the dynamics of the Biblical text itself, that these set pieces can move on through history, and the Bible and the place that it has in our culture ensures that this will go on indefinitely, I think.

The idea endures because it's in the Biblical text. And it's the text of the Bible, I think that gives power to these possibilities. But to fit these possibilities with the real world, there's such a juxtaposition and such a disjoining of events with fulfillment that prophecy is always reaching forward and predicting, but then the events themselves don't necessarily follow. So the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein is going to invade Jerusalem, take over, and become the Antichrist. But instead, he's defeated. So he's not the one. In World War II, Adolf Hitler. What a perfect Antichrist, even a persecutor of the Jewish people. But he commits suicide and is defeated by the Allies. So again and again, we have this crescendo of possibilities that then become falsified by the reality of history. And that's the pattern that we've faced throughout the ages. And yet the texts are still there, predicting (if they're read literally) that this is the way that things will wind up, this is the way the end will come.

Bernard McGinn: professor of Historical Theology and the History of Christianity at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago

Apocalypses are deeply symbolic, deeply mythological. Apocalyptic literature is a re-invention of the mythological motifs going back to the ancient dragon conflict, of Sumarian mythology. So apocalyptic literature doesn't work through discursive, rational presentation. It's symbolic, it's recapitulative or repeating, and it's deeply emotional, in its appeal.

The great motifs of the conflict between good and evil, that according to the combat myths, shaped the beginning of history, in both the Jewish religion and later in the Christian religion, are shifted, in a way, towards the end, so that history has a continuity, and it demonstrates the on-going conflict between good and evil, which will reach a final goal, a final solution if you will, when evil is ultimately defeated. So in a sense it's about odyssey, it's in a sense proving that God does indeed have control over history, and explaining why there is evil and conflict in the world at present.

I think it's crucial to our thought today. Even when we have secularized versions of the apocalypse as we often see today. That is, we need to make sense out of history. Both the individual history of our own lives, and the history of the race, and the history of the cosmos. And one of the fundamental ways to do that, was the way of the apocalypse. It's not the only way, other societies have envisaged other modes of history, cyclical modes of history or the like. But the apocalyptic mode is crucial to much of western history, and the three monotheistic religions.

I think the central message is God's absolute control, or lordship over history. John would say that even though the history that we live in at the present, is a history of dire crisis, with the conflict between good and evil, nevertheless, he's holding out the hope, the sincere hope to Christians that God is in control over that history. And through tremendous trial and tribulation, and a certain kind of judgment and crisis, there will be a triumph that is sent to the heavenly Jerusalem.

I think a lot of us are trying to make sense of life. And we know that life begins at birth, and ends in death. And in between that, that expectation, of death gives structure to the way in which we live. And in that sense, what the apocalypse does, and the apocalypse mentality does, is to expand that individual sense of process, towards a goal, and try to incorporate history within that understanding.

Eugene Gallagher: Rosemary Park Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College

The failure of things to happen at a certain date, doesn't squash the human desire to make it good, just, a true world, and to make people at least more perfect than they are now. So as long as there is a human desire to renovate the world, and to renovate individuals, there are going to be millennial movements. So in some ways, the date is a non-issue, because that human desire will always be there. The date focuses people's attention and sometimes their activities and might raise them to a higher pitch. I think what matters most in apocalyptic or millennium

movements is that they are either dourly optimistic, or sunnily pessimistic. That is, they know we're in a bad time now, but things will be better, immensely better, almost immeasurably better in the future. REM had it great. People who believe in apocalyptic teachings say things like, "It's the end of the world as we know it, but I feel fine."

The Year 2000

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

With all of this interest at the end of this millennium, what is the difference between the millennium, the year 2000, and when we talk in apocalyptic terms about the Millennium?

There's a lot of confusion about the meaning of the word "millennium," because literally it simply comes from the Latin word for one thousand. So every time the calendar turns over a thousand years, a new millennium is beginning. There's another meaning entirely, which is the sacred meaning from the Bible. In the Book of Revelation we find reference to the thousand year reign of Christ when he returns to earth. That's the big Millennium, the Millennium with a capital M. I think what's happening in the popular mind perhaps is a confusion between this small-m millennium, the year 2000 beginning, and the biblical thousand year reign of justice and peace.

How prevalent is the belief that the year 2000 will coincide with the Millenium, do you believe?

On New Year's Day in 1987, and I was picking up a friend in Los Angeles at the airport. And being a good academic, I had taken along some research to do. And I happened to be reading a paperback called How To Recognize the Antichrist. I went into the lounge to wait, and there was a couple at the bar, having a drink, laughing, talking, not paying any attention to me, so far as I could tell. As they left, the man approached me, saw what I was reading, and said very seriously, "Do you think you will recognize the Antichrist?" And I said, "Well, I'm not sure. I haven't finished the book yet." And he continued in a very serious vein, and said, "Well, I think he's coming very soon, and so far as I'm concerned, the sooner the better," and disappeared into the crowd. It was one of those moments when, you know, all the research I had been doing sort of suddenly connected with the real world. And I realized, yes, there are millions of people who take this belief system very, very seriously.

I think there are probably people who believed that Bible prophecy belief was going to gradually fade out, particularly with the end of the Cold War. I don't see it. As I sort of sense contemporary trends in our culture, it strikes me that if anything, it's gaining momentum. Certainly the fact that the year 2000 is nearly upon us, the fact that there's so much attention to the Y2K issue, has added to the general sense of apprehension, the general sense of edginess in our culture. Assuming we get safely past the year 2000, it may be that there will be a slackening off. But at present, it seems to me, the level of intensity associated with apocalyptic belief is really almost at an all time high in our culture.

Eugene Gallagher: Rosemary Park Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College

What do you think is going to happen in Jerusalem at the year 2000?

Among the things that might happen, with the year 2000, maybe not precisely on January 1st, or the December 31st, - January 1st period, but throughout the dates that would mark significant events in the history of Jesus, for example, is a large influx of Christian pilgrims into Jerusalem. Some of those Christian pilgrims, some authorities fear, may want to hasten the end of the world by taking some kind of action, either against Jewish holy places or against Muslim holy places, or simply at Christian holy places. If those things turn violent, that would be a problem. I think that is widely acknowledged to be an expectation only of the most marginal members of the Christian groups that will be coming to Jerusalem for the year 2000.

Be prophetic for a moment. What's going happen over the next couple of years? There's a lot of expectation focused on this time.

I tend to think that what characterizes this apocalyptic moment is more the general public's awareness of the moment, than the rate or sheer number of apocalyptic movements. I think that apocalypticism has been one of the most powerful streams of thinking in western history, and it has rarely been absent in any decade for twenty-five hundred years or so. But that the government's and general public's attention to apocalyptic movements has ebbed and flowed. So what I think characterises this moment, now, is that more people are paying attention to it. Not necessarily that more people are doing it. What's happening is that we have an apocalyptic spotlight being turned onto groups that have previously acted in the shadows. Now the question becomes whether that inflames the groups and drives them to more apocalyptic fervour, or whether it simply just brings them to our attention. And that's something that we won't know until things play themselves out. I expect that there will be certain prominent apocalyptic incidents in the next year or two. I certainly hope they don't involve any loss of life, either through groups turning against themselves, or through less carefully thought out responses by law enforcement and governments. But I think that when the year 2000 starts to fade into the distance behind us, that doesn't mean at all that millennial groups will do the same. They'll still be there. The general public might not be paying as much attention to them, but they'll definitely still be there. They're not gonna go away.

Signs of the End of Time

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

It's extremely important to prophecy believers to be able to read the signs of the times, that is, events that are signalling to us that the end time is near, and such events as wars, conflicts, increasing levels of evil and wickedness in the world, rising environmental hazards, the emergence of a global economy--all of these are seen as signs of the times that signal to us that the Rapture is near; the final sequence of events could unfold, at any moment.

So prophecy believers are very careful readers of the newspapers. They're very careful observers of current events. And they view those events through a particular prism of biblical

interpretation that they are convinced tells us the true meaning of these unfolding events.

What about signs of social decay? How are present day moral values seen as signs of the end?

When Christ met with his disciples just before his arrest, the disciples said, "Lord, tell us the signs of the last days. What will be the signs of thy coming?" And one of the signs that Christ mentioned to them was wickedness. "As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the last days." Well, what were the days of Noah? They were days of sexual excess, days of total license in terms of sexual behavior. So when contemporary popularizers of Bible prophecy look around them at our contemporary world, in terms of what you can see on television, what you can see in movies, kinds of behavior that go on in contemporary culture, they say, "Clearly, these are the days of Noah. The days of wickedness foretold by Christ 2,000 years ago are here. They are present."

What effect did the bomb have on people's end time thinking?

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, had a profound effect on prophecy believers. Almost within hours of the news, prophecy believers were turning to their Bibles and finding references in, for example, the Book of Second Peter--describing that the earth shall be destroyed by fire, the earth shall melt with fervent heat; and saying, "Now we know how this could come about," that nuclear destruction can in fact bring on the destruction of the earth that is foretold in the Bible. So throughout the period of the nuclear arms race, images of atomic destruction, global thermonuclear war are woven through popularizations of Bible prophecy as the scientific means by which this prophesied destruction will occur.

Does the bomb also raise the apocalyptic consciousness of people who are not prophecy believers? Does everybody in the world, in some sense, become more susceptible to apocalyptic thinking?

Yes. Right after World War II, right after the knowledge of the atomic bomb became worldwide, there was quite a surge of interest in biblical prophecy. One prophecy writer published a small book called This Atomic Age and the Word of God, which was actually condensed in Readers Digest. It entered into the secular realm of American culture, and even global culture, I think, in a way that had not been true before. So the atomic bomb is a very important event in terms of the history of apocalyptic belief in America.

What effect does the Cold War have on prophecy belief?

The beginnings of the Cold War in the 1940s was also viewed as extremely significant by prophecy believers. For a long time some prophecy writers had speculated that Russia is alluded to in the Book of Ezekiel in chapter 38, when we read of a kingdom of the north invading the land of the Jews and then being utterly destroyed as a result of that invasion. As early as the early 19th century, some interpreters had said the kingdom of the north is Russia. And certainly after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, they had said that.

With the beginning of the Cold War, now it was possible to link Russia very directly to the kingdom of the north whose destruction is foretold in Ezekiel 38. And countless paperback books and countless evangelists touring the country throughout the period of the Cold War build their message around this theme, the coming destruction of Russia.

What about events in the wake of the bomb?

Right after World War II and the atomic bomb, showing how the destruction of the earth might occur, the re-establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 was viewed as a prophetic fulfillment of very great importance. In Europe, the rise of the European Common Market was seen as laying the groundwork for the rise of the Antichrist.

It seems that for many people, with the fall of Communism, much of this kind of prophecy interpretation that had become so popular in the wake of WWII, the wind must go out of the sails. What happened?

Well, during the period of the Cold War and the period of the nuclear arms race, a particular interpretation of Bible prophecy gained tremendous popularity that assumed the coming destruction of Russia, assumed possible nuclear war in the future. We've now entered an era when world realities are very different. The Soviet Union doesn't exist any more. The nuclear arms race doesn't exist in its classic form. And you might have anticipated, "Well, Bible prophecy belief is going to fade."

In fact, it seems to be increasing in interest. And what we're seeing is a reworking of the scenario, drawing upon current events as they are today. So for example, there's much more attention today given to Islam and fundamentalist Islamic terrorism and so on. A lot of attention to Saddam Hussein and the rebuilding of Babylon. And an enormous amount of attention to the rise of the new global economy, multi-national corporations, mass communications technologies. These are seen as preparing the way for the Antichrist....

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

What has changed in modern times concerning how we deal with Revelation?

A hundred years ago, 200 years ago, really, throughout modern history, people have had the same Bible, they've had the same texts, they've read them, they've wondered what they might mean. But in the 20th century, particularly, the last half of the 20th century, everything has changed. This is really the age of Biblical apocalypticism. The 20th century, and particularly the last half of the 20th century, has opened up a whole new range of apocalyptic possibilities. And that has to do with the possible literal interpretation of the words of the prophets. For example, there is a state of Israel. Israel is in control of Jerusalem. There's a possibility perhaps of a Temple being built some day. And so people are able to read these texts of scripture that anciently might have been seen as symbolic, as not literal, in the most literal way.

One of the things that is required for a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation is the kind of global economic network, both communications and finances and political alliances, that could only be possible now in the late 20th century. And when you read in the Book of Revelation about a worldwide power that causes every person on earth to be marked with a certain mark,

clearly interpreters in the late 20th century think of things like computer chips and bar codes and that sort of thing. That would have been completely unimaginable 100 years ago, and the texts were read in a more symbolic way, not a literal way.

The Book of Revelation is somewhat like a downhill slide. Once you have an identification of your main characters, the two beasts and the two witnesses in Jerusalem and some military power controlling the Middle East and finally the whole world, then it moves very rapidly. But presently on the world scene, none of those things exist and so the interpretation of Revelation becomes very speculative. That is, there are not many events that people can point to and say, "See--here actually is the beginning the end." So it's almost the beginning of the beginning of the beginning of the end. It's this speculative possibility. Saddam Hussein. Maybe he will rise up and be the one to march on Jerusalem. But the fact is he hasn't, and he was utterly defeated in the Gulf War, and maybe we'll never hear from him again.

And so that's the kind of problem that interpreters have. So to put an actual time on it, is very difficult, and most of them don't do that. Date setting has pretty well passed from the Evangelical fundamentalist Christian scene. I don't think you're gonna find many preachers, or even avid interpreters of Revelation for our time, willing to put any kind of dates. You hear them talking in terms of "in the next few years," "over the next few decades," or "perhaps we're entering into a time when some of these things might take place."

Can you summarize the signs that would make most people think that the apocalyptic clock is ticking?

There are some general conditions in the late twentieth century--I wouldn't necessarily call them signs of the end--but they have provided a context through which one could read the Book of Revelation more literally.

For example, the Book of Revelation talks about the massive and sudden destruction of millions of people. Well, this couldn't have been done in the past by ancient means of warfare, swords and arrows and so forth, and yet now it could be. The Book of Revelation presupposes some kind of world wide communication system. For example, when the martyrs, the two witnesses, are killed in chapter 11 of Revelation, it says the whole world will gaze at their dead bodies. I've seen many interpreters quote that and say, "Well, see this is CNN and Global News networks and satellite TV.". I think most prophetic interpreters of the Book of Revelation who read it literally and expect it to be talking about the near future, would point to the following things: the atomic bomb and the hydrogen bomb, which make mass destruction capable on the levels that you read in this book, a death count that high. Asteroids potentially hitting the earth, there's a lot of attention now about that. A geo-political power or force that could actually control the entire world with global communications.

[However], the things that are supposed to happen, by a literal reading of the book, that would really bring it on, are not on the horizon. I think you could say a stage has been set, as these interpreters would understand the world scene. That is, Israel does exist. The Israelis do control Jerusalem. Therefore, there's the possibility of other things happening.

In terms of what's supposed to happen, I think it's mainly three things--none of which have happened. There has to be a third Temple built in Jerusalem. There has to be a military ruler coming from the north, perhaps from Europe, to invade the Middle East, and enforce a world-wide system of religion on the world. That's certainly not happened. And there's got to be these two prophetic figures showing up, speaking from God's side, that would cause all sorts of droughts and plagues to come up on the world as reported in the Bible from the time of Moses and Elijah. None of those things have happened, and until those things happen, you really don't get going with interpretation. It's as if you're waiting and expecting and wondering--could these things happen? But nothing's moving on the stage you might say. It's all just in place, but the drama hasn't really begun.

James Tabor: professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The Book of Revelation belongs to a genre that we call apocalyptic works and writings. This is a certain view of the world that begins to arise about a hundred, hundred and fifty years before the time of Jesus. We find it in the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find it in other Jewish writings that have survived. The Book of Revelation becomes for Christians the most prominent example of that kind of view of history, but certainly not unique. [There are] at least a dozen or so other books that are very similar to this book.

The common elements that all of these apocalyptic books seem to have are the stark contrast of forces of evil and forces of good lining themselves up against one another in a final cosmic conflict that spreads throughout the whole earth, followed by the overthrow by God. So there's always this element that things will get very, very bad, very quickly, almost like a climax of evil, and then good will suddenly intervene and triumph, and bring about the kingdom of God.

Does anyone read the Book of Revelation literally today?

Certainly in the United States, you can talk about the Bible prophecy movement, witnessed by the astronomical sales of books like the Late Great Planet Earth, that I think sold twenty million copies in the 1970s. Best seller on the trade market. Some current books that are out, Tim Lahaye's book Left Behind and so forth, that have sold in the millions. So I think we can say that there are millions of Christians sitting in pews who wonder, could it be that the bible should be taken literally in this regard? I don't think it is just a isolated fanatical fringe group in a mountain somewhere, on a compound waiting for the end.

Paul Boyer: Merle Curti Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

I think it's really a misreading of things to view prophecy belief as simply a matter of fringe groups, isolated cranks. Bible prophecy belief is very pervasive in contemporary American culture. A significant proportion of American Christians, and Americans in general, I think, believe that the world could end in their own time. One poll figure that I've seen suggests that about forty percent of Americans when asked say "Yes, the world will end at the battle of Armageddon between Jesus Christ and Antichrist." This is not to say that that great number of Americans are walking around day in and day out obsessed with Bible prophecy.

I think there's a core group of believers who are deeply immersed in prophetic questions, and a larger group of people who are interested in prophecy. They believe there is something to prophecy, they may not be sure just what it is. But putting all of these groups together, a tremendous number of Americans I think, are certainly interested in apocalyptic things.

Is this phenomena confined to America?

No, it's certainly not confined to America. One finds it in parts of Europe, and certainly it's very pervasive in parts of the world where American fundamentalist missionaries have spread the word, through parts of Latin America, through parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Could you describe how people interpret the book of Apocalypse as pre-written history and what does that mean.

The most widespread prophetic belief system in America today doesn't draw upon just the Book of Revelation. It draws upon a number of biblical texts scattered throughout both the Old and the New Testaments, and putting specific passages together the end time belief involves a series of events that will occur very soon. We don't know when. But the first of these will be the Rapture, when all true believers will be taken to meet Christ in the sky. Then will follow a seven year period, the great Tribulation, a period when a demonic figure, the Antichrist, will arise and will rule the world. He will introduce horrendous persecution and suffering. At the end of that period comes the battle of Armageddon. Jesus Christ returns at Meggido in Israel, with his saints, the armies of Antichrist have gathered at Meggido, a two hundred million man army is marching in from the East, crossing the Euphrates, and at this apocalyptic moment in human history, the forces of evil will be destroyed by Christ and his armies and at that point the Millennium, the thousand year reign of justice, peace, harmony, will be established on earth with Jesus Christ ruling Jerusalem in a rebuilt Temple.

How has the apocalyptic world view influenced western thought?

I think the apocalyptic world view actually has profoundly shaped western thought in ways that are very difficult to identify, but are clearly very important. A kind of secular apocalyptic world view, I think, is woven through a number of reform movements. Marxism, for example is often thought of as an apocalyptic scenario of human events, a series of great unfolding clashes of powerful forces culminating in a kind of utopia. I think the apocalyptic world view, the sense of history being a story of conflict between great and powerful forces that gives meaning to history, is one that goes very deep in western thought.

A kind of secular apocalyptic sensibility pervades much contemporary writing about our current world. Many books about environmental dangers, whether it be the ozone layer, or global warming, or pollution of the air or water, or a population explosion, are cast in an apocalyptic mold. That is, a crisis is looming. We're on the verge of some horrendous catastrophe and we must do something. That's the secular apocalypse, apart from the religious apocalypse, because the religious apocalyptic writers say disaster is looming but there's not much we can do except see to our own personal salvation. These other writers propose strategies for avoiding the crisis that lies ahead. But they have in common, I think, an apocalyptic sensibility.

John Collins: Professor of the Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago Divinity School

A number of apocalypses arise out of specifically political circumstances. Many people would say that apocalyptic literature is crisis literature. And it is true that at least many apocalypses are. I don't think all of them necessarily are. But the big ones, like Daniel, is written in the heat of the [Maccabean] crisis, and the persecution there. The Book of Revelation, in the New Testament, is after the destruction of Jerusalem. In both cases there are political forces at work. These are not the only kinds of crisis, though, that generate apocalypses. What you have to have to generate an apocalypse, is a sense that this world is out of joint, and that we had better look to a different world if we want to be saved.

I suppose the most widespread, fundamental influence that apocalyptic literature had on western culture as a whole is the idea that history is moving towards an end. Now, you find this in many forms, many of them secularized. Marxism has often been said to be influenced by it. Not necessarily influenced by the specific Book of Revelation, but by this mentality. If you live in the western world, you think this is just the way things are, that it's obvious. But in fact it wasn't always obvious and it isn't always obvious in other cultures. Other cultures have gotten along just fine with cyclical views of history. Norman Cohen in his book *Chaos and Cosmos*, raises the question. Where does this linear view of history come from? And he argues in that book that it really comes from the Persians, that they were the ones who developed it first. He may be right, but I would say regardless of who developed it first, the way it came to be influential was primarily through the Bible, and within the Bible through the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation. That these were the books that had widespread influence in the western world and that they instilled that kind of teleological view of history into western consciousness in a way that leads us to think simply that that's the way things are.

End of Interviews