

*I want to be ready, I want to be ready, I want to be ready
to walk in Jerusalem, just like John!*

The Significance of Christmas

by Lynn Andrew

If you take exception to Christmas, you can ignore the title of this essay because it has little to do with our Christmas holiday. It is about the significance of the birth of Christ in the biblical context.

We must not make the mistake of beginning the Christmas story in Luke or Matthew. Nothing originates in the Gospels. The Christ child fulfilled a promise and a hope that was hundreds of years old. His mother's paean of wonder that she was favored by God and would give birth to Israel's Messiah is rich in allusions to psalms that foresee Israel being delivered from her enemies.

A modern song asks, "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?" Most certainly she did, for as she related it to Dr. Luke, the angel Gabriel had told her, "Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus. He will be great—called Son of the Highest—and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end."

Mary also told Luke what her cousin's husband Zachariah had said when his son was born: Gabriel had spoken to him too, announcing that John was the Elijah-herald of Messiah, filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Zachariah reminded those near him that the

Lord had promised Israel by prophets going back as far as Abraham, "... deliverance from our enemies and release from the hands of all who hate us ... that we may live before him without fear and serve him all of our days in piety and righteousness."

Mary told Luke about her experiences in the temple when she and Joseph went for her eighty-day purification in obedience to the Levitical rule. She met Anna there, an aged prophetess who was so concerned about the sad state of her country that she never left the temple as she fasted and prayed continually for Jerusalem. The moment Anna saw the baby, she knew this child was the answer to her prayers.

Another citizen of Jerusalem who had not lost hope was there that day. Simeon took the baby Messiah in his arms and prayed, "Now let your servant die in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel."

Those prophets at the time of Jesus' birth agreed with the angel Gabriel, and they all pointed to what the prophets of old had said: Israel would be delivered from her enemies and an everlasting Kingdom would be established and ruled by a son of David.

Throughout its history, the church has largely glossed over the significance of this and put the emphasis elsewhere, detaching Christ from his purpose to restore the nation of Israel, keeping him in heaven, limiting his role to serve the needs of the church, and shamelessly denying what Scripture abundantly says about the day when he will *literally* rule the nations—making his headquarters in Jerusalem.

Had it been said that Mary's baby was born to die for the sins of the world, kings of the world would not have been impressed. But since Jesus was said to be King, king Herod sought to kill him.

Thirty Years Later

Imagine yourself a citizen of Judea during the time when Jesus was becoming famous as a healer and teacher in Israel. You are schooled in Moses and the Prophets. You have memorized portions of Psalms and can quote God's promises to David, such as this one:

I will establish his seed forever and his throne as the days of heaven. If his sons forsake my law and do not walk in my ordinances, if they profane my statutes and do not keep my commandments, I will visit their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless I will not utterly take my loving-kindness from him nor belie my faithfulness. I will not profane my covenant nor alter the promise that has gone out of my lips. Once I have sworn by my holiness, I will not lie to David. His seed will endure before me forever.

You sincerely hope to see the day when Yahweh will bring justice to the world and destroy the evil powers of nations that have abused Israel. You especially like an earlier part of the same psalm:

I will beat down his adversaries before his face, and will smite them that hate him. My faithfulness and my loving-kindness will be with him, and by my name his horn will be exalted. I will set his hand in the sea, and his right hand in the rivers, and he will testify of me: "Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation." And as to me, I will make him firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.

You believe Jerusalem will one day be the capital of the world because the Prophets are very clear about that. And you carry forward this hope as your father and his ancestors did, going back countless

generations. You understand that this has nothing to do with the faithfulness of Israel, because Israel had not been faithful. You understand that certain promises found in the Psalms and recorded in the Prophets are unconditional and depend only on the faithfulness of God and his purposes. You cling to that. You understand about sin and its deadly result, and you know that the payment for sin represented by animal sacrifices does not (as the pagans believe) appease wrathful gods or satisfy some dreadful divine hunger; so you understand that your place in the resurrection depends entirely on the promises and faithfulness of Yahweh. He is your rock, and you have no doubt that the sacrificial system instituted through Moses is effective and sufficient as the means of your resurrection to life. Your trust is based in the love and kindness of God, the one and only true God, who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So you are not looking forward to the coming of Messiah to have your sins forgiven. Some scribe might theorize about the necessity of that, but you are following the law as best you are able and trusting that Yahweh counts you among his faithful worshipers. Whatever arrangements may be needed to complete your salvation are in the hands of God.

What the angel said to Mary about the significance of the day when Messiah comes to set everything right is the important thing, and it is exactly what you have believed all your life. You do not know about Gabriel's appearances; you have never heard of Mary and Zachariah, since those events took place some thirty years ago and were never made known beyond the hill country of Judea—and will not be widely known for another three decades. But the angel was only repeating what the prophets had said centuries earlier.

Lately you have been hearing gossip about an itinerant healer. Little by little he has gotten more of your attention. You are almost certain that this Jesus bar-Joseph is the prophesied one, mysteriously both divine and human—son of David and David's Lord. He does not deny it (according to reports), and he quotes Scripture as if it applies directly to himself. Everyone knows someone he has healed. It is said that he resurrected a friend after waiting so long there would be no question about Lazarus being dead. You are hopeful. You listen to the talk. You remember the uproar last year when the baptizer down by the Jordan announced that the time of Jerusalem's comfort was at hand as Isaiah said.¹ That can only mean Messiah is here.

Naysayers remind you that this is nothing new: others have come forward claiming messiah credentials. But when you question them they admit that they were not fooled: those other candidates were deceiving zealots or tricksters out to mock the prophecies—the ones who were not certifiably mad. They had only their own testimony to offer, while this Jesus is the one that John the baptizer had declared was worthy of all honor.

The Nazarene Jesus truly is something else. Everything he does demonstrates concern for the welfare of people. You would love to be ruled by a King like him! You are realizing what an awesome privilege it is that you live at this pivotal point in history. You are waiting for a chance to see him and hear him speak. He will soon have a high profile in Jerusalem; soon the city will be greatly magnified to serve the

1 When the priests pressed the Baptist, he said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." Looking this up in Isaiah 40, we see that John said more than what appears. The sentence he cited is inseparable from the foregoing context: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and tell her that her warfare has been completed, her punishment has been accepted, and she has received from the hand of Yahweh double for all her sins."

whole world as Isaiah foretold. The armies of heaven are at his disposal! You were thinking that you would know where to find him when that day comes, but now someone has reported that he told the crowds only the pure in heart will see God. So now you wonder.

Being near these events, it is hard to stand back and realize that Isaiah and the prophets have been vindicated. They say Jesus quotes Isaiah often and with respect, which sets him apart from the scribes. Isaiah was scorned by conventional prophets in his day too; they had him tortured and killed for challenging the establishment—sawed him in two with a wooden saw. Only later when some of his formerly ridiculed predictions came to pass were his writings added to the collection of holy writ. Similarly many of your contemporary scribes have shied away from literal interpretations that predict the future. The last third of Isaiah's book must have been written later by someone else, they maintain, because it shows knowledge of events that came after his death. Once again they slice Isaiah in two. But what the baptizer quoted comes from the portion they question. And when Jesus reads or quotes Isaiah from memory, applying the words to himself, he cites the later part of Isaiah's book as prophecy.

Among the learned class the very idea that there could be a divine Messiah has mostly been rejected. That doubt undermines Israel's hope: if Messiah is not from heaven, there is no possibility that he can defeat a Roman army.

Too long Judea has languished in servitude without receiving the successor to David who was supposed to bring justice to the world. Most have resigned themselves to getting along with Rome and calling it good. Some are holding out, it is true, but they are radical zealots, far from being sincerely devoted to God. Only a few still look for a

supernatural Messiah. No one has forgotten the tradition, and most give it lip service, but in truth it has become a joke to the average Israelite. Certainly Sadducees are not looking for a miracle, and the Pharisee party is mainly concerned about preserving every detail of their tradition. (In their defense it must be remembered that the Romans did not approve of anyone wanting a savior of any kind.)

Nevertheless, common people are asking what more could Messiah do to prove himself than the Galilean has done? As one who has read portions of the Prophets, you have confidence in your discernment and are not much influenced by popular opinions that rise and fall from day to day or by the scribes and Sadducees who know everything and seem to believe nothing. You are convinced that this is *that* day, the day Isaiah and the prophets wrote about—as incredible as it sounds to hear those ancient words come to life.

Are you looking forward to having this long-awaited Messiah reveal the secret behind ritual sacrifices in order that you will understand what makes them work? Of course not! That would indicate lack of faith in Yahweh and Moses. If the Mosaic system happens to be an interim arrangement, so what? It was designed by God who give it to Moses. No, the significant thing about the advent of Messiah is the imminence of the Kingdom of peace on earth. No satisfactory interim arrangement for that has yet been found!

(Is it not significant that Jesus had his disciples pray first and foremost, "Thy Kingdom come, and Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?" The Gospels clearly show that Jesus and his disciples were not mainly concerned, as we are, that the ritual sacrifices had to be secured by the blood of the dying Christ. Their view extended beyond that to the Kingdom of heaven and the salvation of their nation.)

The Lamb of God

Though Jesus warned his disciples to expect that he would be put to death, apparently they thought he did not intend it to be understood as an inevitable thing. We can imagine that their expectation of a smoother transition to the Kingdom soared after he routed the temple extortioners. Next he would fire the ruling class and organize his government—with them in his cabinet!

But their expectation was untimely, and events proved they had not been listening.

Jerusalem, the site of the throne the angel had said would be his—his seat of government—decided that her Savior must be sacrificed in order to avoid a disturbance that might irritate Rome. Jesus was executed for speaking as if the temple of God belonged to him and he could have it destroyed and rebuilt at will—dangerous words if the wrong interpretation fell on Roman ears, for he did not deny that he was King of the Jews. Jerusalem's elite labeled it blasphemy to show it was merely religious hyperbole and out of bounds even at that.

Jesus' Father, the God of Israel whom his opposition claimed to represent, could not interfere with their crime. He must allow his Son to be lifted up for the world to see: it was the plan of the ages.

Finally, Peter and John and the others began to understand that the bloody sacrifices faithfully carried out since the time of Abel had their anchor here. The blood, so emphasized in Leviticus, was effective only because it depended on Messiah's precious blood. Now they realized that Isaiah had described this very event when he spoke of the suffering servant. That passage had puzzled rabbis whose many interpretations failed to account for this. Now it all made sense. It had to happen. Their Master had accomplished a tremendous thing.

Over a period of weeks after his resurrection, Jesus Messiah appeared and reassured his followers that all was well. But the day came when he left them and returned to heaven, visibly ascending into the clouds to make a vivid impression, but not without seeing that the all-important promise was reinforced: he would return.

Gradually the disciples gained confidence and went out to alert others that the Nazarene who was crucified on the eve of the Passover was not merely a foreshadowing of a messiah yet to come, but that he had proven himself beyond doubt and promised in no uncertain terms that he would return. They learned from his mother that he was born in the City of David, not Nazareth where he had been hidden and forgotten. This erased the last doubt that he had the right credentials.

And the clincher: he proved the reality of resurrection! Alleluia! Jesus of Nazareth demonstrated resurrection! Thank God!

Thus having proven and accomplished every prerequisite, they had no doubt that Jesus would be organizing his Kingdom that he so often referred to. True, he was away just now, but this would be only for a little while; the Kingdom of heaven was still at hand.

Incidentally, a marvelous thing it was that the remedy for sin had been fulfilled finally and completely in their day and in the sight of the Roman world. The Servant had laid his life down willingly, just as Isaiah had said he would—like a sheep led to the slaughter. Formerly he had eluded rioters by walking away from them as if invisible, but this time he went willingly, in perfect fulfillment of Isaiah's words, suffering death in order to save all we who like sheep have gone astray.

The Baptist had called him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That made sense too. They had wondered why Jesus called John the greatest prophet this side of the Kingdom of heaven.

The Church is Born

At that point the apostles' urgent message was to seek sanctification and obey the authorities while quietly spreading the word that the Lord will be returning to set everything right. It was time to get serious because he confirmed what Isaiah said: he will make a sharp distinction between friends who obey him vs. those who doubt him.

Now that they understood everything and knew for sure he was coming back, they seemed to think nothing else could possibly stand in the way. Of course we know they were shortsighted—again. They thought nothing was lacking and the time had come for the Kingdom's government to materialize and subdue the nations. Israel would be regathered from dispersion to perform all the duties assigned to it.

Had they forgotten? It had been specified that Israel's assignment was to serve as priests for God, not to rule the world. That little detail had been known since the time of Moses. To help them get over this illogic in their thinking, Jesus tapped Paul of Tarsus, an impeccable Pharisee with a zealous disposition, and took him aside to instruct him about the new dispensation: the door was being thrown open to Gentiles, and they were as likely candidates for Kingdom duty as any Jew. In fact, a host of loyal disciples from all nations was to be gathered before the Kingdom would be realized. Well, Jesus had said something very much like that in the hearing of the original disciples.

How many were to be recruited and how long it would take, Paul was not sure. He certainly hoped it would be soon. Paul was also shown that the Levitical system was to be set aside—at least as far as Gentiles were concerned—while new disciples were being gathered into the *church*—not Israel.

That proved to be a bombshell. But why should it have been?

Yes, it was a real scandal. It was no revelation that Gentiles could obtain almost equal footing with Jews in the matter of salvation from the state of sinfulness: a prescription for appending them to the covenant had always been there; droves of proselytes journeyed to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. Neither was the scandal entirely that Paul was telling everyone that Jewish ritual practices were being set aside. Rather, among those who had taken Jesus as their ultimate Lamb, the objection may have stemmed from the fact that according to Ezekiel the Levitical system during the Kingdom age was to be enlarged, definitely not abandoned! If—God forbid—the prophet was a dreamer and Jewish religious law had actually come to an abrupt end by Yahweh's plan—as Paul seemed to think—and never again would there be a religious distinction between Jew and Gentile, the Jew had just lost his special place of honor in the Kingdom that he had been promised for the double chastisement of his people.

It was a package: either the Galilean was the prophesied Messiah and the Law would be upheld, or Messiah had *not* come, and Rome would be installing pagan gods in the temple and demanding emperor worship as they had done in other places to discourage any movement that might make things difficult for the emperor. As those Jews saw it, the Gentiles were not worthy of having the age-old system changed simply for their benefit. Who ever thought Gentiles would be participating in administering Yahweh's theocracy anyway? Whatever services Messiah might require were to be fulfilled in and by Israel.

One thing becomes obvious when you think about it: more halls of administration and courts of justice and departments of police will be required than Israel alone can provide. It will not suffice to wave your hands and say that since God can bring about whatever is needed

without human assistance, we may assume he will exert his supernatural power to administer the Kingdom—or just make everyone nice and therefore require little or no government and everything will be simple. Unless you have a precedent to point to, there is no basis for supposing he will do everything himself. Scripture tells us God designed and created the human being and then became one of us and walked on dusty roads like everyone else. It seems he gets his pleasure when his creation functions as designed—ultimately loving him, honoring him, and obeying him to prove it.

Reason infers and Scripture implies that additional instructed and obedient disciples will be called out from other nations and sanctified to be agents of the government. Yes, the government will rest upon the shoulders of a Jewish King, but the iron rod that ensures peace is too broad and multifarious to be wielded by little Israel even after the nation is regathered and maximized to fill out the Promised Land. More disciples will be needed who are familiar with the territories and technologies they will be administering, which gives the last generation great advantage and importance.²

The discontinuance of the Levitical system in the middle of the first century was a very practical matter. At that time it was insufficient to meet the spiritual needs of the world's population or make a dent in paganism. In fact, Jerusalem would not remain intact much longer, and soon there would be no temple. The inroad Jesus had made allowed the Holy Spirit to push back the pagan darkness much

² The Age of Peace will involve the sort of populace that requires a strong government. Utopia is a man-made fantasy that defeats the main purpose of the Millennium, which is to prove to Satan that enduring peace on earth is possible using obedient servants (that were once fallen like him) and without violating principles of justice. The final evidence for Satan's just conviction and sentence depends on that proof. (Satan might well challenge the justice of God in condemning him for being ungovernable then pardoning others without testing them.)

more effectively than the Levitical system was able to do. By his Spirit, Jesus, lover of our souls, began functioning directly in place of the high priest—in which he had the advantage of not being limited by geography. But this arrangement too is temporary and preliminary to the Kingdom: after these two thousand years its success has been far from complete, and Satan still holds sway in most of the world.

Ezekiel said New Jerusalem would be enlarged; and John agreed. The information they provided was enough to alert everyone to the fact that big changes were coming. Twenty centuries later we know that the Kingdom government will have to be larger than anyone in the first century could have imagined—even allowing for devastating judgments that are predicted to diminish the world's population.

Those appointed to serve at locations around the world will have to remain steadfast and true against all temptations while living distant from the object of their affection and the place they would rather be. Sanctified in their former lives, they habitually depend on the Spirit. Yes, they will be blessed with bodies and brains unshackled from Adam's curse and not prone to the failure modes common to sinful flesh. But no autonomous being is immune to the pride of independence—as Satan demonstrated. Servants will be singled out who proved themselves effective and faithful. If not completely single minded in their former lives, yet when assailed by temptations that caused Satan to fall they remained standing by looking to their High Priest. Experience agrees with the Bible: many are called, the First Commandment enters many ears, but few care to achieve the purity in heart required to be among those who will see God.

Any such argument for an Age of Spirit was irrelevant in the first century because all expectation was that Jesus would be returning to

oversee a resurrection and make up any shortfall in personnel for his administration from the rolls of Hebrew saints. Until such a time, the visible sacrifices would continue to serve the habit of religious Jews, though sacrifices were unnecessary if one depended on the Spirit and drank the cup to remember his blood—"until I come," he had said.

Paul knew that the Holy Spirit could sustain faith by applying remembrances of Christ's death; therefore it was not necessary to force the Law on Spirit-baptized Gentiles. To support this new administration, the apostle rolled out guidelines and set high standards for church members considerably more demanding than the Levitical law as practiced by the typical Pharisee. Both the Pauline system of Spirit and the Mosaic system of works are based on the two commandments to love God and neighbor. Only in the new dispensation the props had been taken out in order to develop specialized disciples. Yet Paul's precepts were not as demanding as those Jesus had preached, for Jesus was speaking of the Kingdom when only the pure in heart—that is sanctified souls in resurrected bodies—will be privileged to see God.

Forty years had passed since the day Jesus departed, and still he had not returned. It had become obvious that the temple's days were numbered. They had to reinterpret Jesus' words about not one stone remaining upon another to mean the Romans would do the toppling—not Messiah in order that it be might be rebuilt on a grand scale. Revolt was brewing in Judea, and it seemed likely that zealots would sacrifice their city as readily as Jerusalem's leaders had sacrificed their Messiah. Although there was no direct conflict with the eventual return of Jesus in this, if he delayed a very long time the temple might be rebuilt by men before his return, in which case it would have to be taken down again to make way for New Jerusalem.

Reinventing the Kingdom

It turned out to be more complicated than anyone had expected. If the promise of the Kingdom was never intended to be literal, it would solve many problems; and as time went on, that came to be the common interpretation: the gospel took in the cross and the empty tomb then handed a kingdom to the church fifty days later.

For this to happen, the prophetic Old Testament Scriptures had to be allegorized again, and for that mistake to be repeated—if it was a mistake—another error had to take hold in the minds of influential church leaders.

Hebrew culture was shaped by the wisdom of God more than any other. Naturally the children of Jacob had a singular affinity for it; they zealously wrote everything down though sometimes they acted worse than pagans, which confuses the issue. Nevertheless, anyone who lacks respect for what God has done through them makes many errors. Third-century theologian Origen lacked that respect when he found a clever way to overlay references to the church onto Hebrew prophecy. Later Augustine adopted a similar view. The Hebrew wisdom that insisted on holiness at all levels and made no wall separating the spiritual from the physical aspects of life was rejected in favor of Greek and even Gnostic ideas that material was inherently sinful and even illusory. The error in this is confusing fallen human nature with the essential creation.

To what extent this was a ruse is unclear. Emperors were in the habit of exterminating any threat to their sovereignty. Did Augustine decide that by promoting Origen's allegorical interpretation he could protect Christians and the Scriptures? After Jesus birth, Herod had attempted to protect his throne by murdering young children in Beth-

lehem. After Jesus became famous by defying death, emperors Domitian and his father Vespasian attempted to track down and execute Jews who were descendants of royalty. Though Augustine lived during a time when the empire had formally adopted Christianity, there was friction between emperors and the church. Not all emperors claimed to be Christian, none of them cared much for Christian moral behavior, and there were anti-Christian elements in the senate. As an insider, Augustine had to defend the church without offending these pagan powers, which he did at great length, putting it down in writing that the kingdom inherited by the church is simply a spiritual thing; and while he affirmed bodily resurrection, its purpose was to fill heaven, not the earth; thus there would be no punishment of, or retribution against, temporal powers. This interpretation of eschatology would help allay the fears of emperors, but was that part of his motivation? If so, he could not mention it; the reader would have to understand the omission or the allegory. Certainly Augustine seemed to be straightforward in his convictions, but sincerity always has its context.

Unfortunately, Augustine's allegorical interpretation became the dogma of the Roman church. If anyone knew it to be a protective camouflage, it seems they neglected to keep the secret alive. And while the plain meaning of prophecy was occasionally restored in freer times, in academia the plain meaning became a plaything. Any wild interpretation is acceptable as long as it does not threaten their establishment.

The ill effects of failing to honestly advertise the Kingdom of God are numerous. If the church had not limited this significance of Christmas, fewer noxious movements would have taken root. The rest of this essay makes that point: much of the world's misery during the Church Age might have been avoided.

Antisemitism

Why are Jacob's descendants so widely despised? It would seem that anyone who takes the Bible as the Word of God must respect God's choice and therefore love Jews in every age whether or not they recognize Jesus as their Christ. Nearly every book in the Bible was authored by a Jew, excepting only Luke and Acts. Yet people who consider themselves followers of Jesus are as prone to scorn Jewry as anyone. There were times and places when Jews were persecuted less under Muslim rule than where Christian culture prevailed.

If Christian leaders had not taught that Israel was no longer a feature of God's plan—that Israel's most-favored status had been permanently forfeited and transferred to a new body of Messiah with a new caste of priests—persecution of Jews would never have been tolerated in Christian lands, much less promoted by church leaders.

Today the Jews, as a result of persecution by people who adopt their Scriptures and profess to worship their God, have no reason to trust Christians. Sadly, unfair treatment at the hands of Christians has persuaded many of them to give up trusting God at all, leaving them with only an empty shell of tradition. Many have turned extremely liberal, having no love for the state of Israel and little for the USA. For spirituality they look to Buddhism, Hinduism, and any other -ism that connects them with another god.

Nevertheless, Jews have contributed magnificently, far out of proportion to their numbers. The influence they maintain in science, entertainment, and banking is legendary. Many famous names are Jewish. They are God's gifted race, but they were marked as devils by Christians. This could not have happened if the Kingdom had not been stolen from them. The damage is incalculable.

Satanism

When antisemitism today is regarded as simply one instance of interracial friction, it reveals a refusal to face the facts of history. If antisemitism is universal to some degree, it is in a class by itself and must have a unique cause.

It goes without saying that Satan has a good reason to hate Jews. Would he not incite those over whom he has sway to follow his lead? This must have been a factor in causing certain church fathers and reformers to reject the plain meaning of the Old Testament prophecies in which Israel is pictured returning to its Promised Land. Certainly none of them would give the devil credit for this, but when a theologian is willing to discredit the sincerity of Scripture and still call it inspired Scripture, the charge has to be seen as a possibility. How could he justify making his "spiritualized" interpretation primary, knowing full well that the author would not agree with him? As mentioned earlier, certain church fathers felt more comfortable with Greek and Roman thought, and that bias gave them the impetus to overrule the Hebrews and substitute a more acceptable interpretation. Did the devil cause them to forget Jesus' words? "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"

Hebrew culture was shaped by God while Greek and Roman culture was limited by the best that man could do apart from God. That is, apart from the true God. If you allow that Satan is the sponsor of pagan religion, then there is a solid connection between Greco-Roman culture and Satan. Platonic idealism may seem more purely spiritual than earthy Hebrew philosophy, but that fact alone does not prove that the Greeks were more godly. Satan is not stupid when he gives his ideas to men.

But this sounds impossible. The pioneers of our faith, who fought heretics and formulated our foundational creeds, certainly were godly, prayerful, and honest men. Yes, but they were human beings living in a cauldron of competing ideologies and subjected to intense political pressures. In Augustine's day the empire was failing to defend itself, and though Christianity had become Rome's official religion, dissenters continued to blame every crisis on Christians for neglecting the Roman gods. Augustine made a defense, pointing out that Rome's troubles were many even before Christians came along. He then went on to defend the doctrine of physical resurrection but somehow to a spiritual body remaining in heaven for a permanent Sabbath rest.

Augustine was on the fringes of dualism in this. Once deeply involved in Manichaeism, he remained partial to that spiritual vs. carnal duality. He admitted that the Old-Testament picture of the Kingdom did not square with his idea of spiritual purity that should characterize the seat of Christ's government. Factor in struggles against his own carnality, and his position begins to make sense. But who gave him the right to reinterpret Scripture on that account? Was he influenced by Satan when he wrote, "*The Jew can never understand the Scriptures and forever will bear the guilt for the death of Jesus*"?

So we must say that antipathy toward Hebrew culture is an element in the church's rejection of the future reign of Christ on earth as well as being one of its results. Satan is behind antisemitism, which fosters antimillennialism, which in turn removes a barrier to antisemitism. He must enjoy watching the cycle of hate perpetuate and intensify itself without him having to lift a finger to keep it going.

The relatively few overt Satanists are the tip of the iceberg of Christian revisionists. If this sounds crazy, read on. It gets worse.

Statism

If the problem of earthly governance is cut loose from the doctrine of the literal Messianic Kingdom, it represents that God is unwilling or unable to bring about peace on earth. The responsibility falls on the shoulders of kings and emperors and ecclesiastical powers to manage the world by whatever means they mean to try.

Even when the church collaborates with government, if the temporal creation is seen as incompatible with the virtues of the Kingdom of heaven, then any effort to moderate evil and facilitate an approximation to heaven on earth will be acceptable and have to approve of means that are contrary to Augustine's principles of the City of God. So Origen and Augustine unwittingly provided a playground for the devil. The Holy Roman Empire that rose from the ruined Roman Empire in central Europe was anything but holy; popes and princes indulged in extreme carnality and fought with heartless brutality.

Augustine was adamant that the church extinguish heretical movements in order to maintain its purity and represent Christ insofar as possible in the world. This policy mushroomed to the point of using extreme force and eventually gave rise to the Inquisitions in which countless Jews and other dissenters were tortured and either forcefully converted or expelled from their homes or burned at the stake.

As they attempted to represent the reign of Christ and bring about peace on earth, Rome and its sequels are by definition a manifestation of the spirit of antichrist: the same spirit that denied Christ's first coming to walk in the flesh denies his second coming to reign on earth. The church is purified by looking forward to Jesus' return in fact, not in fiction. Augustine's mistake was disastrous, and the black mark it left on Christendom will forever be featured in history books.

Utopianism

The secular extreme attempts to make life better by eliminating private property and curing covetousness without the aid of organized religion. The idea is that a carefully-designed totalitarian system will cause people to behave well and be content with little if only economics be thoroughly and equitably managed. The unspoken and fatal assumption is that contentment of spirit flows as readily as does a full belly from a smoothly operating economic system.

Thomas More's *Utopia* published in 1526, a work of fiction often read as political philosophy, captured the imaginations of people who evidently cared little for the Bible's ideal, most likely being ignorant of the fact that Scripture allows private property in the theocracy.

Utopia is an island where strict laws and limitations minimize freedom in order that private decisions not cause conflicts. Perhaps Sir/St More, a brilliant Catholic, was working out what life would be like in a theocracy—without it looking like a theological treatise that might be taken as questioning Catholic doctrine. If so, he misrepresented Scripture when he eliminated each man's own vine and fig tree. (*Utopia* in the title is from a combination of Greek roots meaning "nowhere.")

Peace on earth in the full sight of the freely roaming Satan, and in defiance of warnings in Scripture about the nature of the human soul, is a philosopher's dream. Totalitarian regimes that claim the Utopian model find that by eliminating the opportunity to be selfish, too little human initiative remains to turn the crank of the economic engine.

In the sixteenth century, Catholic bishop Quiroga attempted to create a community in Mexico modeled after Thomas More's *Utopia*. Thanks to the good will flowing from the bishop's beneficent personality, he met with some success—until his funds ran out.

Communism

The soporific tyranny of collectivism plagues the world in part because the church teaches and models and promotes it. If the "pie-in-the-sky," rent-free-mansions version of heaven is a picture of perfection, then it must be good for the temporal world too—an ideal to be emulated as far as possible within the limitations of earthly life.

Is this not what the earliest Christians were doing when they sold their possessions and shared freely according to everyone's need?

If that experiment in communal living is held up as a more perfect model of Christian community, it ignores some facts: 1) they ceased their separate labors under the expectation that they would be ascending as a body to meet Jesus in the clouds very shortly, thenceforth to receive their Kingdom commissions; 2) disorder, drunkenness, and deceit plagued their communal church, even leading to deaths; and 3) the arrangement did not last long. Regardless it is taken out of context and remembered as a good thing: it had to be good because the early church was fresh, alive, and growing rapidly with the explosive power of the Spirit. (In other words the early church is beyond reproach, and we must forget their many mistakes.)

Another notable experiment in communal living nearly ruined William Bradford's Pilgrim settlement in 1620. In that case the equal-share system was imposed by their sponsoring merchants in London. In order to raise their productivity to a level where it fed the colony and paid off the loan that had floated the Mayflower, Bradford had to make an exception to the original arrangement: he allocated private property, which allowed a man to receive direct reward for his labor.

In a minor way the church continues to implement the communistic ideal with formalized tithing and institutionalized benevolence

—“from each according to his means and to each according to his needs.” As in other socialist systems, the church’s output of benevolence depends on a minority who do the work and supply the finances. Church economy is typically weak unless tithing is made mandatory, and its benevolence is strongly self-serving. It could not exist on its own apart from an external productive economy and was never intended to, but the parallel to socialist economies is remarkable.

After rejecting the soundly biblical doctrine of the literal Kingdom, church fathers found themselves under the curse of their antichrist revision as they tried to sponsor governments that made their version of the Millennium come to pass. They had to see that secular authorities cooperated with them to suppress contrary elements such as Jewry, which seemed to empower individuals to acquire wealth and power that was supposed to be limited to divinely-appointed leaders. Later, as technology gave individuals more economic leverage, the church had to guard against powers that naturally spring up when men are free to own the fruits of their labor. The best tool for that is a regime which confiscates the means of acquiring wealth.

If these methods are sanctioned in the Bible, it is only by faulty interpretation. Private property is featured in the Kingdom, and the notion that egalitarianism is a godly ideal has no support in Scripture.

Whether it is to gain and defend economic advantage or to remodel the world according to Satan’s design, all such efforts need a populace made pliant by believing that God has no plan of his own for the earth. These are the people the church has prepared, willing to believe any lie that promises peace. When people are led to believe that God promises no temporal salvation, it leaves a profound vacuum.

Population Control

God plans to make his home here once more. Does he fear the earth's population will become overwhelming before he gets around to making the move? Fear of overpopulation is a symptom of: 1) doubting that God is in control of earth's destiny; and 2) judging the worth of life from a godless perspective that disregards its purpose.

Lacking the Millennium outlook, there is no necessity that anything go well on earth: the planet has no enduring purpose; its destiny is a ball of fire, and it is already heating up to that end. So amillennialists in solidarity with pure atheists and autocrats are prone to take action. As long as they and their children are here, they would like to lengthen the years till doomsday—they say. So they must do whatever it takes to save the planet from the consequences of overpopulation. And how do they define doomsday? Whatever it takes to scare up support even among believers in God. So far all of their overpopulation doomsdays have quietly come and gone, and the world has shown no inability to produce food, fuel, or any other necessity. It makes you wonder whether the devil himself is their inspiration.

The promised theocracy requires that arrangements on earth be fundamentally sound—not irredeemably spoiled by war and not spinning out of ecological balance. Believing his promise, we conclude that population control is God's business, not ours.

The prevalent reasoning that God has laid the burden of controlling population on his creatures is faulty on several counts. If innate limits on reproduction are not working well enough to suit someone's expectation, he is saying in effect that creation is flawed. If he counters that charge by pointing to the animal world to prove that the Creator's method is to allow overpopulation to correct itself by starvation,

he has stumbled into theological wilderness and the camp of evolution. He will have to interpret "be fruitful and multiply" conditionally or figuratively, not literally, even though it is being fulfilled literally. Worst of all, he is making himself the judge of what constitutes overpopulation and then implying that excess births are not important enough to God for him to do something about it himself. No, it is not God's fault, comes the rebuttal: the devil is responsible for skewing the good creation—as if God did not foresee it happening and has no remedy for it now other than to put the burden on his creatures.

Of course, God sees it much differently. Every newborn is a success in more ways than we can imagine—an astonishing miracle if we begin to count what it involves—and the working out of his design in great numbers must be a source of pleasure and gratification to him. When he gave the go-ahead, he knew the outcome would be like the uncountable stars and grains of sand to the minds of his sons and daughters; but to him each one has a name and its every detail is known. God is more concerned about a baby's development than he is about overpopulation. To him the population explosion is success of his design and a certain kind of victory over Satan. The Creator is not subject to the fears that short-sighted men bring on themselves.

In order to take on the responsibility of population control, men and women have to believe that they are the wisest beings in the universe regarding this issue. Certainly they are practical atheists. When something is left up to such sinners, they will employ evil means and follow the council of demons sooner than look to God. So they justify killing babies.

It all comes of the traditional theology that says God is not interested enough to sustain the planet himself, so we must do it for him.

Theological Liberalism

The operation that removed Jews from the purposes of God, as if they were a cancer, had the effect of leaving the Bible open to whatever radical procedure future doctors of theology might wish to experiment with—and make a name for themselves. Thanks to Augustine, the Old Testament had already lost its hold on the New, which left without integral support all the historic episodes involving unnatural elements. Critical eyes saw these as malignant tumors and an embarrassment in the scientific age. So miracles were made innocuous by a face-lift that pulled the wrinkles out of biblical history. Its new face was mythological, and interpretation of the mythology became the baseline of scholarly exegesis. Interpreters found no divinity in Christ, and his future reign on earth was left to the fantasies of unlearned literalists whose reactionary cause deserved no mention. Happy to see another offense eliminated, they stood by as the Bible was neutered.

Consequently much of Christendom languishes under a vague, sentimental, mythological notion of an afterlife that demands no sacrifice. Who wants to work now for a future of retirement with a disposable gold crown for the effort? The Bible of Jesus and Paul—the Old Testament and Gospels—now considered to be fraught with primitive exaggerations, are subservient to the letters of the apostles. The New Testament has been severed from its context, and Isaiah and the Prophets who speak of the Kingdom have been reclassified as apocalyptic radicals whose works must not be taken too seriously. Israel is now a quaint word for Christmas songs only, detached from real geography and history and having nothing to do with the clatter of bones coming together. The liberal Christmas is like a pretty snowflake that melts as soon as it lands, unable to satisfy humanity's desire.

Crippled Christianity

The myopic view that sees the coming of Christ primarily in the manger is not completely corrected by extending Christmas to the cross. The full view of Christmas takes literally "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." Making this prominent theme of Scripture a sentimentalism is bound to have crippling consequences.

The Son of God in the womb of a woman is a wonder too great to fully appreciate: the virgin delivers a human Lamb, rumored but scarcely imagined before, who turns out to be perfectly necessary in order to secure the salvation of sinners. Naturally any detail of the divine sacrifice which opens heaven to us becomes a fascinating focus. Then learning that his Spirit wants to be our permanent aid makes holy life possible. And to know that these gifts are available to Gentiles as well as Jews assures us that we are free to skip the rituals that reserved a place for repentant sinners in the pre-Christian world.

But personal salvation through faith has always been essential and has always rested on the grace of God and was never dependent on knowing exactly how the blood sacrifices made it all possible. The best teachers still do not profess to completely understand it.

So great are these wonders that we are prone to say we have seen enough without speculating on the nature of a future Kingdom. If the history of the church and her effect on society were more noble, an argument could be made that we *have* seen far enough ahead. While it is true that the church has made a profound difference, thanks to some outstanding disciples, her failures are too embarrassing to mention. We have to admit that we have been unworthy of our gifts.

Consider that call to make disciples. It was a command, not a

request or an option. Why disciples? If people are saved for heaven by acknowledging sin and receiving the gift of salvation, need there be any more? Is it not sufficient to live a peaceful life, taking care of one's family, and participating in the local assembly? It may be sufficient for some, but others hear a call to greater purpose. Lacking an inspiring vision of the future, the call to recruit disciples leaves us with personal salvation to advertise but no reason to sacrifice. Hence evangelists fill buildings without making disciples.

Why the omission? Is it that preachers are still afraid to allow Jews their place in God's plans, fearing the dispensationalist brand?

Traditional church dogma is that our essential purpose is to love God and enjoy him forever. Is that as much as can be said? Israel-free theology dares go no further because the biblical data on the subject is full of Jews. If we let the Bible present our future on its own terms—that is as God sees it—the plan is to use Israel to help redeem the planet from Satan's grip and not only reap an abundant harvest of willing disciples from all nations but also to use them to make a new earth under a new administration of heaven—an arrangement including developments far beyond Eden. We miss the point if we fail to see our Lord reaping where he did not sow.

After its initial chapters in Genesis, Scripture unfolds a plan that is all about redeeming the earth from Satan's claim to it: salvation not only to make people ready for heavenly rest but also to make disciples fit to serve heaven's administration—which, in the big picture, is a necessary step in allowing Satan his right to a fair trial. The full gospel includes the good news that the Kingdom of God has a place for you if you have a mind to serve in it.

The earth under Satan's dominion may not be our home, but it was

home to Jesus Christ, and he enjoyed his own creation as a man for a few years. It is easy to conclude from that, added to his willing death, that God has more invested in this earth than we can measure. Scripture declares that together with Israel he will bring some of his Gentile saints back to earth where we will have a chance to serve on earth the one who saved us on earth. What could be more exciting? Sanctification goes beyond pacifying former rebels: holiness is a dynamic of preparation for a great purpose.

Far from being respectful of that vision, the church has effectively usurped Christ's throne or attempted to prematurely force salvation on the world through the arm of flesh—with discouraging results. "Onward Christian Soldiers," once a sincere but misguided cry, has lost its meaning. To the extent that peace on earth has been attempted by the misapplication of Scripture, the gates of hell have prevailed. An honest assessment of the impact of Christendom on the world is not impressive if measured by the blasphemous doctrine that foresaw the reign of Christ as a metaphor for the administration of the church. Quarrels within the church have shredded that doctrine if nothing else has. Even had Christendom been more successful in redeeming the world, there would be no great victory celebration to look forward to, no great squelching of Satan other than testimonies of personal peace in the hearts of saints scattered throughout most of its history and holding on to some expectation of a permanent worship ritual.

We were taught that finality comes with a flurry of judgment in which the evangelistic efforts of mankind are all God gets, after which he burns up the miserable planet as if it were a sacrifice to Satan. Honestly, is that an inspiring vision? No wonder preachers used to prod from behind, using threats of hell for inspiration!

Cultism

The void left by refusing to deal forthrightly with the rich eschatological data in Scripture, while paradoxically claiming to believe every chapter and verse is the Word of God, gave opportunity to unorthodox theologies of which Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are the most prominent victims at present. If Christian orthodoxy had more than a vague, uncertain eternal state to offer, these antichrist formulations would not have had that gaping omission to move into. Using the church's own Bible for legitimacy, they spoke where the church was silent, which helped to make their case that theirs was a more comprehensive and therefore a truer system.

There is no need to wonder why cults took root and grew rapidly in Christian cultures while mainline denominations repudiated the Millennium and refused to offer a relevant interpretation of Revelation. But one must wonder why reformers decided to maintain the eschatological void. If it was so necessary to keep silent, a reason should be given. Or is that disfavor to Israel which happens to be the byproduct of spiritualizing away the Kingdom the unmentionable reason?

The LDS organization, at over six million members in the USA (fifteen million worldwide), is fourth in size after Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, and United Methodist. The UMC is declining at more than 2% per year while Catholics and the SBC increase slowly at around 0.5% per year, neither one keeping up with population growth in the USA. On the other hand, increasing membership in the cults far exceeds population growth. Mormons are increasing at three times the Baptist rate and JWs at about *eight* times the Baptist rate, making Jehovah's Witness the fastest growing religious body in the USA, with Seventh-Day Adventists a close second.

While Mormons include the King James Bible in their canon, they construct and reconstruct their own prophecy, stealing bits and pieces from biblical and pagan sources. The slippery spirit of their founder, who fabricated his own legitimacy, continues to characterize the LDS administration and its members. Mormons claim to be heirs of Israelites and anyone else who is not looking, and they still stand by Smith's ultimate heist: moving New Jerusalem to Independence, Missouri. (Since Augustine had spiritualized it to the heavens, Smith thought it was up for grabs.) Currently Mormonism is mimicking evangelical Christianity and publicly downplaying the pagan-inspired elements in its rites and the outrageous theological statements made by its prophets. Befriending Israel, Mormons masquerade as Bible-respecting literalists in end-time prophecy. The LDS organization resembles a business empire in its operations, slick advertising making Mormons appear harmless. Not only do they fool the naïve, they steal members from churches where the whole Word of God is not taught. Curiously, Salt Lake leads the nation's cities in theft crimes.

JW's Watchtower uses biblical material to promote an attractive earthly kingdom. That it fabricated a partial Second Coming—as if it owns Christ and can make him be whatever is convenient—does not matter to Christians left uninformed by their denominations.

The bizarre replacement eschatology of Seventh Day Adventism is further evidence of the void in orthodoxy. With some twenty million members worldwide, the SDA is adding a million per year.

The cults and Adventists owe their unique theologies to founders who took advantage of unsatisfied curiosity about the future. The cult that is growing most rapidly makes the most use of Kingdom promises traditionally neglected in sermons and denied by theologians.

Globalism

Scripture reveals that spiritual powers lie behind nations, and some of them are distinctly evil. That alone should keep Bible believers from supporting globalization. But after a person has been subjected to public education, believing this is almost impossible. Yet the truth is prominently preserved in the words of the mother of our Lord, right up front in the Christmas story, where tradition ignores significant things and insignificant things are made significant.

Globalism is a movement toward a unified world government. Those who say they welcome this beast assume it will be kind to the earth and generous toward its poorer citizens—"sustainable and equitable" is the motto. Small nations will gain security and stability; defiant autocrats will be deposed by wars and insurrections among them; large democracies must sacrifice, but will be glad to do so after the electorate becomes committed of its duty. Multiculturalism will have syncretized the religions and harmonized their holy books.

After the dust settles it will be said by the globalizers that it is like the reign of Christ which no one thought would be achieved. Someone else is on the throne, of course, a substitute Christ controlling world economy through giant organizations monopolizing technology. Pervasive and artificially intelligent surveillance will identify crime before it occurs, and armies of robots will lock down trouble spots. Advanced subliminal intervention techniques will create artificial euphoria to replace the satisfaction of productive labor while neutralizing the attractiveness of sex. Reproduction will be institutionalized in order to eliminate genetic "defects" and bring the sexes closer to the unisex ideal; abortion will be mandatory for unapproved pregnancies, and absolute population control will have been achieved.

As it was in Utopia, travel will be limited; an artificially peaceful world will be featured in virtual travel. In other words, truth, though artificial, will be back in style. It will be revealed that the genius who brought this together is a descendant of King David, and if you did not realize that he is divine, you have not been paying attention. To make sure everyone shares the fulfilling realization of this, his mark will be written on hands—and if the hands are already tattooed, on foreheads. Persons lacking the mark will be rejected when attempting to make a purchase and will have to depend on the generosity of friends if they can find any who will tolerate someone so politically incorrect.

The new world capital? Some central location where a neutral city can be built. If it has history and worldwide recognition, like Babylon, all the better. Borders will be open, trade will be free, and national boundaries will be dissolved. Jerusalem will belong to the world, not the world to Jerusalem; and of course there will be no state of Israel.

It is a desperate scheme on the part of people who are ignorant of Christ's future Kingdom or would rather have the devil directing a millennium of peace. But who is not desperate? If the reign of Christ will not save the earth, this seems our only hope of saving it from absolute destruction. Thus reasonable people support globalization today—even Christians whose faith lacks substance on the Second Coming—and it will become very incorrect politics to oppose it.

It is hard to imagine what the world would be like politically if the certainty of the Messianic Kingdom on earth had been accurately upheld by the church rather than abandoned some 1600 years ago. At least there would not be the level of fear and despair that the promoters of globalization take for granted. And there would not be so much confusion about Israel and Jerusalem.

Currently many oppose globalization simply because they believe that centralized control cannot be made to work with enough efficiency, even if the tyranny of being totally controlled could be tolerated. But as time goes on and the visionaries promoting the accuracy and efficiency of artificial intelligence chip away at the resistance, the tide will rise in favor of the progressive view. In the religious community the relative few of us who hold to the truth of Scripture's revelations are no match for the Catholic and Reformed Protestant majority who deny it. So why should anyone listen to us? Islam has Jesus returning to set things right too, but they have him living only a short while (which like the rest of Islam does not offer realistic hope).

We know from Scripture that something like this must happen, conservative resurgences notwithstanding. The final push will have to come from a future administration in the USA thoroughly committed to globalization. It is not unlikely that it will be influenced by Jews: the people despised by Christendom want to put an end to true religion. If there is justice in that, there is irony in the fact that they are vindicating Jesus and the New Testament prophets.

What if during every Christmas season respect were paid to the virgin by giving her credit for knowing what she was saying? It would entail not making such a fuss over her hardships but rather listening to her inspired words, understanding their context, and honoring her by accepting the implications.

"He has sustained his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever."

In other words, her son is Israel's Savior. You have to open her Bible to see what that means, but even on the surface it does not appear that she would recommend globalization.

Global Warming

Like overpopulation worries, the computer models that predict devastating global warming by the end of the 21st century have no algorithm in them to model the benevolence of God. Therefore to even build such a model is a blatant act of atheism.

Evidence of "climate change" in weather events is a political artifact; honest scientists tell us there is no evidence. The political motivation has two justifications: 1) action must begin now because reducing the projected increase of greenhouse gasses requires technology and regulation that will take decades to develop and put in place; and 2) socialists see it as an avenue to more governmental control over generators of wealth. Both are disingenuous, which puts them on Satan's side of the political ledger. A non-atheist who supports the climate-change agenda in order to promote socialism should understand that he is making another compromise with the devil.

If you have no confidence in the return of Christ or if your theology says nothing about his future Kingdom on earth, you might be tempted to join the climate crusade on behalf of the scientific camp. Count the cost. You will have to deny the Creator his ability to adjust the output of the sun and increase the absorption of carbon dioxide beyond what is assumed by those who assume the worst because they think there is no purpose or intentional design in the universe—whose point of view ignores the testimony of a myriad of astonishing mechanisms that sustain and embellish human life. Even worse, you will be insulting the genius of the Creator by trusting the judgment of his enemies. There is an intellectual disconnect here which could be merely the result of not thinking it through. Or perhaps it is that anti-Kingdom bias we have traced back to antisemitism.

Divided Jerusalem

If the church had not allegorized it away, Christians would have little to differ with Jews on major points of eschatology, and both would understand the same future of Jerusalem. A united front against anything like Islam might have saved the city from being torn apart.

Jerusalem is center stage in the Bible, and today it often occupies center stage in the world's drama. Currently the Old City is divided in quarters, so called not for their being equal in area or in any other way, but for the four districts: Jewish, Armenian, Christian, and Muslim. Armenians had lived in Jerusalem for nearly a century before the birth of Christ, and they readily received him as their Savior.³ The fifty or so Christian church structures are in every quarter of the Old City and far outnumber mosques and synagogues. But the Muslim quarter is the largest and most populous—of course the others are older.

Jerusalem is like a volcano cone connected to the molten core of the earth, dormant at times yet subject to violent eruptions. Three religions view it as their Holy City. Jesus called it the City of the Great King. Most of his audience thought he meant King David—and so he did—but to those with ears to hear he meant himself too.

Some Jews and Christians realize that Jerusalem belongs to Messiah and believe that he will live and reign there in person; but mainline religions have treated it as a trophy for their cause and from time to time gone to war to prove their dominion. Had the Roman church respected the future of Jews, they would not have taken the city for their own but would have helped defend it against Muslims—if Muslims would even be in that scenario—and Jerusalem would not be fragmented and contested so as to plunge the world into war today.

3 Armenia was the first nation to declare itself Christian.

Muhammadanism

The aggressive political/religious movement that was started by Muhammad owes its monotheism in part to refugee Jews in Arabia who spoke of the coming Messiah. Certain Christians also factored into the circumstances that assured Muhammad that his spiritual proclivity was not linked to demon possession. At Medina (then Yathrob, a prosperous settlement founded by Jews) Arab tribes took him for the Messiah who would conquer the world. But his actual progression from prophet to warrior was propelled by conflicts at Mecca where he riled merchants by preaching that the chief god of Arabian lore known as Allah was the transcendent God of the Jews and Christians and that Mecca must abandon its idols. The year was 622.

Within two years Muhammad had accumulated 300 followers to help him push back. In a battle against an army from Mecca, with his own force outnumbered three-to-one, he came out victorious, which he interpreted as confirmation of his prophethood.

Ultimately his theology did not settle well in Medina either, since Jews ridiculed his revelations. He found that coercion was needed if his campaign was to get anywhere. By extracting tribute and raiding caravans he paid his troops and thereby expanded Allah's dominion.

Islam means "submission," implying submission to Allah. But that entails submission to Muhammad's system, which is a primitive Arabian-style regimen augmented by Hebrew and Christian tradition that he adapted to serve his purpose. His government was to be universal, to bind the world, for it was Allah's will that Islam supersede every religion even though it mirrored the culture of seventh-century Arabia in which thievery and deception were the norm—and of course tax for protection. His system worked, and Mohammad obtained submission.

In the larger context, Arabia was not isolated from the power struggle between Byzantine Rome and Persia that left the two empires severely weakened (both sides had client Arab tribes). Persia, now suffering internal turmoil, was a prize within reach. Muslim invaders got there in 632, and within five years most of Persia had fallen to the Arabs. Within 100 years of Muhammad's death Islam invaders had reached France and by the thirteenth century were at the Pacific.

The Zoroastrian Sassanian dynasty in Persia was Christian Rome's opponent. It was at the end of regimes reaching back to Cyrus II who liberated Jews from Babylon in 537 BC. Sassanian emperor Khosrau II had in his possession a souvenir he took from Jerusalem: the Romans spared no expense in their effort to recapture the True Cross, which they accomplished at the end of the war in 628. Four years later, into weakened Persia swept the Muslim Arabs, supplanting the vastly superior monotheistic religion of Persia that had guided Cyrus.

If Rome had any expectation of an actual return of Christ, they would have had something worth getting excited about. They would have approached the Great Commission differently, realizing that Constantinople was not the capital of the Kingdom. Rome would not have suffered the cost of the wars, and Christians living in Arabia would have had a chance to evangelize idol-weary tribes.

In 335 Constantine had made Jerusalem a worship center, creating the Church of the Holy Sepulcher by remodeling the pagan temple that Hadrian had built. Jews were not allowed to live in the city but could visit Jerusalem one day per year. When the Muslims took Jerusalem in 638 they allowed Jews to live there, but to prevent them from rebuilding the Temple they built the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount. That was 687, and the dome stands there today.

Alarmism

The alarmist pedals fear to eager listeners who prefer to hear what an unlicensed prophet of doom (incidentally introducing his book) says about the future than what God says about it. From political reversal to environmental instability to financial collapse to nuclear holocaust to electromagnetic pulses to robot rebellions, the onslaught of fear mongering proves its profitability, which proves that many of God's people are ignoring the Bible's prophets—because the Bible says in many ways to his people, "Fear not."

Fear not? Doesn't the Bible say that God is going to bring disaster upon the world then burn it up? That time could be now!

There is a precedent when God did bring disaster on the world, but his purpose was not to end the world but to begin it. The new beginning was successful: it produced his mother. By his birth, life, death, resurrection, and dedication of his Spirit, the world has succeeded. It is a beautiful thing, but it takes an elevated perspective to see this, which gives God more credit for managing his creation than the alarmist is able to do and preserve his vocation.

The idea that God is in control is undermined by the lack of a satisfying ending. The amillennial view invites Satan or some cosmic accident or some planned obsolescence to pronounce doom on the Creator's masterpiece. If God values this earth so little, we are right to be fearful of anything that someone says might possibly happen.

The cure for alarmism is an accurate understanding of Scripture. You get that by prayerfully reading integral portions of it, paying attention to the larger context, and understanding where you fit in.

Note the tone of our Lord when he speaks to an obedient person. From Gen 15:1 to Rev. 1:17, the word is "Fear not."

Post-tribulation Rapture

Jesus let it be known that a person who returns him dividends in small matters will have proven an ability and responsibility that will be useful to him; and if you will permit a parable to be direct, it says that such a one will be in charge of cities in the Kingdom.

Let us be honest: Circumstances can inflict permanent damage. No circumstances are as dreadful as those held in store for the Great Tribulation. Even Job's affliction by Satan was limited by God. The Great Tribulation is the outpouring of the wrath of God.

Something is wrong with a theology that has those whom he has called and sanctified and reconciled by the blood of his Son being subjected to his wrath. Would Christ torture his bride? Of course the Bible does not say that.

Even if it would be no violation of justice to punish those whose debts have been paid, there is a practical reason for shielding the true church from the trauma of experiencing the wrath of their heavenly Father: saints living at the end of the age will be especially qualified to serve in the Kingdom because of their modern skills. (Sorry if you think technology is an accident God did not provide for.) Jesus will harvest his last crop at the peak of its ripeness—not trash it! We must be glorified and instructed and trained to take important posts for our King in his Kingdom. This is why the Rapture makes no sense to amillennialists.

Where are the post-tribbers coming from? Beats me. To hear them complain about missing the Tribulation, one would think the outpouring of God's wrath (do they think he will enjoy it?) is more important than his favor. Indeed they sleep in the same bed as the amillennialists and dream the same dreams about heaven.

When you get turned onto this, you see how significant the millennial Kingdom is in the overall scheme of things. It is not the metaphor that so many theologians make of it. These past two thousand years have been preparation for Christ's judgment of Satan and gathering the proof that he is just in judging the devil. Satan's object is to forestall the trial as long as he can.

Everything is preparation for the Millennium. The Tribulation is not a judgment on Satan; it is like the flood, preparing the earth for the Millennium. The Rapture of the church is a preparation for the Millennium, as we have seen. The church age is preparation for the Millennium, not a replacement for it, and the time was needed to bring the world's population and technology to its peak. The First coming of Christ was preparation for the Millennium, not the beginning of it as everyone thought at that time. Even the appointment of Abraham and development of Israel was preparation for the Millennium because the Millennium is the necessary context for Satan's just condemnation and the salvation of the created universe—not primarily from the sin of Adam but from the essential sin of Satan. What God sacrifices and gains in the process is the wonder of wonders.

How qualified for service are those who have no expectation of there ever being an earthly Kingdom? Even if they are innocent of making that doctrine, their ignorance stands in the way of their development here and now. Perhaps they will not be fit to participate and will have to be put out to pasture somewhere.

The believer's outlook before the church fathers took over the interpretation was toward the future Kingdom. Fortunately the Holy Spirit saw to it that his Scriptures were not revised, only misinterpreted by man, leaving the promise of the Kingdom in plain sight.

Santa Claus

When we get past celebrating creature comforts and turn to the sentiments of family and then finally to the "true meaning" of Christmas, we devote some time to admiring religious cards and listening to songs that quote good tidings of great joy that a Savior is born. If we hear this expounded at all, we hear that a Savior was born to bring us personal salvation. As we have seen, there is a degree of sophistry in that, for in those days they did not mean by salvation what we mean by it. It was all about their expectation of the Kingdom. The Cross was still three decades in the future, and none of them suspected it.

Oh, but what about the message Joseph heard from the angel? "Mary will bring forth a son, and you shall name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

"His people" means Israel, of course, and "their sins" refers to the collective disobedience of Israel. It would be meaningless to Joseph if it referred more generally to Gentiles as well, and there is nothing in the context that warrants that interpretation.

Israel's joy was the revival of an old expectation that is yet to be fulfilled. There is more joy in looking forward to sharing it with Israel than hoarding it and completely missing the significant thing about Christmas.

Because the world yearns for justice, it needs more than a babe in a manger, even with a capital "B." Christmas is like celebrating Abe Lincoln's birth on his birthday. So into the church's silence about the full career of Christ and the literal justice he will bring to earth, comes the man from the world's end who knows who is good and who is bad and in one magical night rewards each one justly. When God's people are silent, the stones cry out.

Postscript

I had my friend Richard read this essay because I wanted to find out if it made sense to anyone. When I had not heard back from him after a month, I dropped by his house to see if he was still alive. He said he had read it the same day I gave it to him. So I knew he had a problem with it which he was reluctant to share. What follows is my attempt to get him to tell me what he found that was so objectionable.

"Did you manage to get all the way through it?" I asked.

"Yeah. I read the whole thing."

"What is your feeling about the Millennium?"

"It sounds like work. I'm enjoying being free of responsibilities in my retirement. If I get to go fishing once or twice a year, I'm happy. So I rather prefer the traditional view of heaven as a place of rest."

"I can understand that. But try to imagine how you will feel in your resurrected body with your genome cleaned up and all its defects corrected. Your mind will be clear and active, and your limbs will be strong and responsive. Don't you think you'll get tired of resting?"

"Oh, I suppose so. But you seem to think we'll have positions of responsibility in the government. From the experiences I've had with governments, it sounds like a can of worms. I'll take my can of worms and a fishing pole, and they can leave me alone for a thousand years."

"Would you refuse to serve in the Lord's administration if you were assigned a position?"

"No, I wouldn't refuse, but I'd be wishing I had missed the Rapture and gotten into the Millennium the hard way along with the unbelievers. ... What about you? Are you looking forward to having to solve sticky problems every day, trying to keep quarrels from erupting among the rascals that survived the Tribulation?"

"No, not really," I had to admit.

"And what if you get assigned to some place far removed from your friends and family?"

"I've thought about that, and I think it would work out just fine."

"I must have misunderstood your essay. I thought you were saying everyone would rather live in Jerusalem. I figured you got that idea from the twenty-third psalm. Like David says, 'I'll dwell in the house of the Lord forever'—meaning the temple in Jerusalem, of course."

"You're right. I was thinking of that. But David was a Jew, and that's where Jews belong. The rest of us have the higher privilege of visiting Jerusalem once in a while."

"So what are you getting at?" (It isn't often Richard is puzzled.)

"I'm trying to be realistic. What do you think Jerusalem and the Temple will be like in that day?"

"The city will be quite large, if I can believe what you wrote."

"Remember, the Son of God himself will dwell there. He was born in a barn, but he's the architect of the universe. Every beauty you've ever seen is due to a potential he provided. Every marvel of nature is a mark of his genius. Can you imagine the manifold mystique and beauty of the city when he reveals his personal glory to the world?"

"I guess it would be St. Peter's Square, the Taj Mahal, and Disney World rolled into one," he said with a sly smile.

"Even better than that, right?"

"Right. I meant in terms of what we know, that's as far as I can get. No doubt a person living there would never discover all of it."

"You never spoke a truer word. How often do you go downtown?"

"Never, unless we have visitors and I want to show them the sights. So I see what you're getting at. It's true that the tourist enjoys a place

more than the resident does—in a superficial way, of course.”

“I grant you that,” I said. “But isn’t every day of a vacation trip worth ten days at home in terms of significant memories?”

“Okay. So you spend your vacation time making pilgrimages to Jerusalem. I can see that being fun and interesting for the first and maybe the second or third trip. But if you’re talking a thousand annual trips, it would be a real drag for the last nine hundred and ninety times.”

“Only because you’re not imagining the full potential of this arrangement. In the first place, you might get to see God.”

“Provided I’m pure in heart, right?”

“Divided hearts are a pain I hope we’ll be done with. Let’s say that’s not a problem in our glorified bodies. You may or may not see God on every trip, but you have your traveling companions to look forward to being with.”

“Who are they?”

“I think that’s up to us. Who do you enjoy being with? Who would you like to spend a vacation with? Family? Friends? Someone you’ve admired but never met? Someone you meet in your new life?”

“It might work, and it might not,” Richard said dourly.

“We’ll be wiser and free of the divisive elements in ourselves. That means chances are good that the company will enjoy being together.”

“Wouldn’t it get stale, say after a couple hundred years?”

“I don’t see any reason why there would have to be permanent companies. Think how many people you could get to know well.”

“There are some I know quite well enough already. Sign me up for fishing, will you?”

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