

Bible Prophecy And End Times

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John Jones

It may seem strange that a person could go from consciously following Satan to being a spiritually reborn Christian in just one instant of time, through the preaching of only one bible verse and via someone not even walking with God themselves; yet that is exactly how I was saved.

After a year's downhill slide into alcohol, drugs, crime and eventually madness (perhaps even demonic possession), God simply reached down and plucked me out of the pit. All the rushing, the shifting sands of personality, outrageous pride and crazy thinking were swept aside in a moment and replaced with complete stillness, peace and soundness of mind. And I knew right then that the God of the bible, the very one I had never believed even existed, was indeed God. Afterwards I wasn't able to recall the words my friend had spoken, though I knew he had said something simultaneous to God's spirit coming upon me. However I did ask him later the same evening what he'd said and he replied that he'd just responded to my words (which I think were highly blasphemous) by saying, "John, we never know the day nor the hour", by which he meant 'the day or hour of the Lord's return'. (While he may have been very much separated from God in his lifestyle, he'd been raised in a Christian family and did believe.)

After that, eighteen years passed during which I married a Christian girl with a tremendously kind heart and genuine faith, received the very great blessing of four wonderful children, absorbed God's word through much bible reading, got involved in a range of informal ministries, was convicted NOT to go to bible college, experienced up's and downs in my walk yet slowly matured in consistency, and also came to really appreciate what you might call "the ordinary Christian life". Throughout most of that time I read and studied a lot, first just to understand the basics of the faith, then to delve deeper into God's word. About a year into being a Christian I decided to read up on the subject of prophecy, my simple thought being that if prophecy taught us what God planned to do in the future then I wanted to know about that. I never really intended this study to span more than a few months and certainly had no idea that it would become a particular interest from that time on. All I wanted to achieve was to understand for myself, out of the word of God, the teaching of the Church I was in (which taught a classic evangelical pre-millennial & pre-tribulation rapture based view of prophecy). Now most of it really did make good sense, but one or two parts not only seemed a bit speculative, but also some of the supporting verses for them appeared to be getting used out of context. I guess it was trying to dig out the truth on these matters that drew me much deeper into

the topic than intended. Interestingly enough it seldom occurred to me that the words spoken at the moment of my conversion were in any way significant to God's calling. Only recently have I really started to wonder if my interest in prophecy has more behind it than just a personal fascination. Anyway, after years of testing various prophetic views against the word, and also just repeatedly rereading prophetic passages trying to grasp how they fitted together, I eventually started to gain more and more clarity on the subject. In about 2005 I started collecting some thoughts on paper, then later wrote a few notes aimed at teaching my children and a couple of their cousins. Later I added some more sections for a bible study I ran for a while and the material started to build up. Realizing that I had a decent pile of notes I then hashed them together into an eBook which got a about 10,000 downloads in its first year online. However even at that point I was unsure about the project, still asking God for re-assurance that I was on the right track, or for correction if I wasn't.

The real turning point towards this becoming a more serious project was when I went to a church leadership conference in 2010. Though not cessationist I am not at all Pentecostal in church background so I was not particularly wired to expect what occurred there. You see I was praying earnestly for guidance that day, praying that God would show me where to invest my time and energies and how to be fruitful for him. At one particular point in the day this book project came to mind and I was really struggling with whether there was any value in taking it further. First, despite believing myself to be on the right track with prophecy, how could I really be sure? Second, most people didn't seem very interested in the subject. Third, I knew it would be a lot of extra work to complete to a reasonable standard and wondered if this was really the best use of my time. So I was praying hard about it and eventually just said to the Lord, "I really don't want to do this unless it's of you. If it's not I'll just dump it – no questions, just show me what you want". So after really placing the matter in God's hands like this the next prayer offered up in the room struck me like a thunderbolt. A man on the other side of the room was praying out loud saying that the Lord was telling him that someone in the room was thinking of writing a book and that the Lord wanted to say to that person "Just go ahead and do it, this work is of Me and I am with you". (Shortened version, I didn't write down his exact words.) In seeking out the person who had prayed this afterwards I have to admit I partly wanted to make sure they weren't a nutter or something, but the guy turned out to be a humble, grounded and mature servant of the Lord who had just felt this impressed strongly on his mind to say. Looking back I very much doubt that I would have continued with the project if it wasn't for this remarkable encouragement.

Despite receiving further reassurances myself in prayer concerning this work as a whole I do not claim to be right about everything. However I do believe that what I've put together represents the

clearest, least overworked, most directly “fallen out of the pages of the bible” interpretation of prophecies related to end times. Most of all though I want to emphasize to readers that the one thing I am really certain of is that some aspects of the unfolding of prophecy will take everyone by surprise and that, while we can know a lot in advance, many of the details will only become completely clear when fulfilled. For this reason I stress that we must all keep somewhat of an open mind and not be locked into rigid denominational or personal perspectives.

I really would value your feedback, both encouragement and constructive criticism, so if you have any thoughts that arise from reading this book please feel free to email me at **john@straightforwardprophecy.com**.

FOUNDATIONS

A significant foundational prophecy appears to be infused into words spoken by the Lord right back in the Garden of Eden. Consider whether God had a secondary meaning in mind as he pronounced his curse on the serpent saying:

... "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life.

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

(Gen 3:14-15)

That last sentence must certainly be taken as prophetic, even if only concerning the future conflict between mankind and serpents. How many times since then have people been bitten on the feet by snakes? And how often have people protected themselves by crushing a snake's head? But surely there is more to the verse's meaning than this mundane interpretation. Since Satan was personified in the serpent, wasn't God alluding to something of much greater significance. In the verse God says that the seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head, while the serpent would bruise his heel. Some translations use the word "strike", which is probably a more accurate depiction; snakes strike rather than bruise. The most direct interpretation of this verse is that it's prophetic concerning Satan and the Messiah. Satan would strike the seed of the woman (the one born of a virgin), inflicting a fatal injury, nevertheless in that same event the seed of the woman would destroy the power of the devil (Hebrews 2:14-15), ultimately crushing him completely. Alternatively, if we take "the seed of the woman" to refer to mankind in general then it seems reasonable to take from it that God may have been telling Adam and Eve, right back at the fall, that Satan would afflict the human race but that a descendant of theirs would ultimately crush Satan's head. There's not enough biblical evidence to cast these interpretations in stone, but it's beautiful to consider that even at that dark moment in time, even as the very curses due to sin were being pronounced, God was also revealing the future redemption of mankind.

WHAT IS PROPHECY?

From these Genesis chapter 3 verses we gain some insights into the topic of prophecy more generally. First we see that prophecy is God revealing some aspect of the future, either blatantly or subtly. Secondly, we see that in some cases prophecy can have layers of interrelated interpretation; or may even reveal not just an event but a pattern. (Over and over the relationship between mankind and serpents was to be played out.) Thirdly we see that prophecy often uses symbolic language; though we'll find as we go on that most symbols are specifically defined, or reasonably clear in their meaning, from cross-referencing other passages.

All up prophecy is an amazing treasure; revealing the future, the spiritual patterns of this world and also at times challenging and convicting us. The threads of prophecy run through the vast majority of books in the bible; indeed God's prophetic plan actually forms the very superstructure on which everything else hangs. Therefore it follows that if we do not understand prophecy correctly then we can't fully understand the biblical story of God's work with mankind. On the other hand it is true to say that if we don't genuinely, and as little children, believe the bible then we will not rightly understand prophecy. Prophecy is a mystery that is specifically hidden from that natural man, the purpose of which no doubt is to avoid the revelations from distorting the unfolding of the future events they speak of.

HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH PROPHECY?

The principle of scripture being hidden to worldly wisdom is broadly illustrated by what Jesus said of his own teaching:

In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight.

(Luke 10:21)

This is a recurring principal in the New Testament; effectively telling us that the revelation of the mysteries of God cannot be understood by intellectual powers alone. In fact, over intellectualizing Christ's teachings can quickly take away their obvious meaning and replace it with the foolishness of mans reasoning. While some understanding of context and the culture of the times is definitely helpful to our understanding, we also need to make sure we keep that which is simple simple. We must come to Christ with plainness of thought and readiness of heart like a small child, along with the childlike humility to know we need the father, and that we need his Holy Spirit to enlighten us.

This is true for most of what Jesus taught, our approach to the bible as a whole, and in particular to our understanding of prophecy.

Sadly though, far from being generally Holy Spirit led, prophecy has the distinction of being the most abused topic in the bible. While mankind has abused every topic of the bible in the pursuit of his own vain thinking, prophecy stands out in that unlike other topics it is subject to a lot of misuse even within otherwise sound, bible believing and spiritual Christian circles. Hype, speculation passed off as fact and mistaken context have often been not just accepted but swallowed without discernment. Excessive excitement has allowed notions in that would have been exposed and thrown out if applied to any other area of bible teaching. What is the essential fault? The number one culprit would appear to be that of trying to get more detail out of prophecy than what God has made knowable in advance. Prophecy may predict many aspects of the future but one of its greatest purposes, in times past and for times yet future, is of providing those living in the days of actual prophetic fulfillments with an understanding of the times and seasons they are in. Many exact details are not really knowable beforehand, but can only be fully understood as they come to pass. This is easily demonstrated by the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus first coming. Some were utterly predictable from what was revealed beforehand in the Old Testament, such as the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Others would never have been guessed, like the future prophetic significance of God saying that he had “called his son out of Egypt”. In its original context this was speaking of Israel coming out of its time of slavery in Egypt, but we discover by its use in the New Testament that it also foreshadowed the fact that Jesus, much like his nation, would spend his early years in Egypt before returning to the land of Israel. So bearing in mind previous abuses, especially the tendency to see more than is actually revealed in advance, one of the objectives of this study is to stick to a clear, biblical and un-hyped approach to prophecy.

THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

Now, when you build a house it’s good to start with the foundations. So it is with prophecy; laying the foundation correctly goes a long way towards ending up with a stable and coherent result. With this in mind let’s take a look at one of the key foundational prophecies contained in the bible, the Genesis account of God’s promises to Abraham.

Now the Lord had said to Abram, “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.

I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

(Genesis 12:1-3)

God calls a man, Abraham. He blesses him and promises to make him a great nation. From this we know the pathway that God’s blessing flowed down at that time. When it was spoken it was prediction, but for us it’s now a validation that God’s hand was in a special way behind the nation that eventuated. We also discover in the passage that God set up an enduring pattern, a principal concerning Israel – “those who bless you I will bless, those who curse you I will curse”. One of the beauties of understanding prophecy is the opportunity to align with God’s will. Israel exists in the world today, so should we bless it or curse it? Hopefully Christians will bless it with the same blessing that it originally blessed us with, the knowledge of Messiah. That God’s blessing to the gentiles would come through the Messiah of Israel, the descendant of Abraham, was also pointed towards in the very verses we’re looking at here when God said to Abraham, “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”. So, far from being surprised when they realized that God had opened the way of life to the Gentiles the apostles should almost have expected it, both from this and many other Old Testament passages that one way or another made the same prediction.

HAS GOD FINISHED WITH ISRAEL?

Unfortunately you don’t go far into prophecy without stumbling on controversy. In this case the key issue is that some suggest God has now cut off his blessings from Israel, from Abraham’s seed, and given them to the “spiritual children of Abraham”, the church. They claim that this has come about due to Israel’s national rejection of their Messiah. Proponents of what is often called “Replacement Theology” may justify this idea by pointing to Romans 11:17 which says that some of the natural branches were broken off from the root and fatness of the olive tree that the gentiles might be grafted in. They may also point out that Galatians 3:7 says that the true children of Abraham are those who have faith, and other verses that appear to support their position. Certainly a rational argument can be built to support this point of view, yet it is plainly not biblical when taking into account the fullness of God’s word.

For instance, in Romans 11 Paul says:

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "the Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;

For this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins."

(Romans 11:25-26)

This passage, following the section about the branches being broken off, would have been the perfect opportunity for Paul to explain Replacement Theology, but instead he does the opposite. He tells us that the blindness of Israel nationally will only continue until the fullness of the gentiles have been gathered, and that Israel will then be grafted back in. In explaining this he refers back to Isaiah.

"The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," says the Lord.

"As for Me," says the Lord, "this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants," says the Lord, "from this time and forevermore."

(Isaiah 59:20-21)

Paul interprets these verses as being yet future to his time, not part of the blessings to the church or something that happened at the time of Christ's first advent, but something that will occur in the future concerning the redeemer coming to the literal children of Israel.

In addition to failing to believe this plain declaration on the matter in Romans, supporters of Replacement Theology end up having to teach that all the Old Testament promises made specifically to Israel now have to be re-interpreted as "spiritual" promises towards the church. This means that portions of the Old Testament that once had a clear literal meaning to the Israelites, and formed much of the basis of their national identity and hope, are assigned a completely different meaning. John Calvin sells this approach to "spiritualizing" the book of Isaiah this way:

Now the Prophets hold out those things which relate to the present life, and borrow metaphors from them; but it is in order that they may teach us to rise higher and to embrace eternal and blessed life.

We must not fix our whole attention on these transitory blessings, but must make use of them as ladders, that, being raised to heaven, we may enjoy eternal and immortal blessings.

(John Calvin¹)

This sounds great, but in essence what he is saying is that we can't take the prophets words literally. But if we can't take their words to mean what even the prophets themselves appear to have believed them to mean, what value are their words to us at all? Doesn't it just leave the field wide open to interpret them in whatever way suits us? The early reformers may have done a great thing in breaking away from the darkness of Catholicism, but we have to realize that they could only see so far. They were so embedded in a Roman Catholic mindset that there were limits to how far they could shift their thinking in that first big step of the reformation.

The key point in covering this issue is to clarify that promises to Israel will never in this study be redefined as now being towards the church. God made both unconditional and conditional promises to Israel at different times in the past. The unconditional promises must be fulfilled, for God cannot lie. The conditional promises have been, and are being, fulfilled or not fulfilled according to Israel's keeping or breaking of their conditions. But even when it comes to the conditional promises, whether fulfilled or unfulfilled towards Israel, they are still not transferable to the church via clever twists of theology.

WHY STUDY PROPHECY?

Even in just introducing this study of prophecy we have already touched on controversy and the abuse of the subject itself, therefore it's no wonder some people just want to avoid the topic like the plague. And yet it is probably more relevant and timely today than at any time since Christ's ascension, for truly one of the remarkable things about the time we are living in is the growing social consciousness of our nearness to end times. And although this consciousness is expressed via some rather diverse perspectives, it still seems poignant that the sum total of many voices is that some kind of end times is near. In amongst the diverse mix are those who refer to the Mayan prophetic calendar, Nostradamus followers, Christians, Muslims, New Age teachers and even total atheists who worry about horrific world scenarios. Speaking from just about every shade in the spectrum of beliefs, it seems that the voices of multitudes are combining to warn that mankind stands on the brink. Plenty of world issues could be highlighted to suggest this, but there's something more to it

than that. It appears that somewhere in the collective total of the facts and information swirling around us many have simply developed a gut feeling that we really are on the verge of a great time of testing.

So given all the opinions and superstition that abound in the world, it's important that Christians really know how to rightly divide the word of truth, how to give a clear account of Gods plan amongst all the confusion, and how to discern true prophetic fulfillments from false. Will there be false fulfillments? It would seem so. For example, II Thessalonians 2:9 tells us that the Antichrist will come with "all signs and lying wonders". This is not conclusive on its own but we'll see as we go on that there are strong indicators that Antichrist will probably be hailed by many as the Christ and touted as fulfilling (incorrectly interpreted) biblical prophecies² concerning Christ and his kingdom. This abominable deception cannot arise out of nowhere. Rather the foundations of deception have to be laid first, and indeed they are already being laid. It's easy to keep on just living life without lifting our heads to see the great deception that's developing in the world around us, or the darkness starting to overshadow the land. But if ever there was a day for Christians to be alert, students of prophecy and of God's word as a whole, it is surely today. That's the motivation behind preparing this study; to help those who desire understanding to get a clear grasp of the most immediately relevant and essential themes of bible prophecy.

While reasonably straight forward, the material that follows is quite condensed so in many places it is best read slowly, with reflection, and ideally in combination with reading the bible chapters and verses being referenced. All bible quotations are from the NKJV³ (due to the richness and power of that translations wording), however some readers may well prefer following them in an NIV⁴ or other simplified version in order to assist understanding.

EMPIRES IN PROPHECY

Daniel chapters 2 & 7

One of the key themes of prophecy is the progression of human government and its eventual replacement with the government of Jesus Christ over the whole earth. While this theme is woven into many parts of the Old Testament, nowhere is it so clearly revealed as in the book of Daniel. Daniel received a series of visions from God that are perhaps the greatest treasure chest on the subject of any book in the bible except Revelation itself. Primarily the book of Daniel deals with four great empires that each had power over the Holy Land, and that also collectively form the spiritual, cultural and governmental foundations of modern western civilization.

EMPIRES RISING

Over six hundred years before Christ, an ancient power was rousing itself in the Middle East. Babylon, the fountain head of idolatrous worship and occult “mystery religions”, with its eyes on Egypt, started pushing west from its base in an area within what we now call Iraq towards the areas now known as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. It was rising up to become a powerful empire that ultimately would encompass all the lands from Israel to the eastern parts of Persia (Iran)¹. Pushing first into Assyria and then down into Israel, it was set to fulfill the prophecies of Jeremiah concerning a power that God would raise up against Israel.

Then the LORD said to me:

“Out of the north calamity shall break forth on all the inhabitants of the land. For behold I am calling all the families of the kingdoms of the north,” says the LORD;

“They shall come and each one set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah.

(Jeremiah 1:14-15)

By about 606BC the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, had brought Jerusalem into submission by way of a military siege and taken captive back to Babylon a number of the finest Hebrew teenagers to be trained for service in his royal court. Amongst these was Daniel who became the author of the book of Daniel.

Daniel and three of his friends were notable for maintaining their Hebrew faith even in the very tempting environment of elite Babylonian society. Because they kept themselves pure and followed God with their whole heart God used these men as chosen vessels of gold to serve him. To Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego God gave miraculous deliverance from the fiery furnace, which became a testimony to the whole empire (Ch.3). To Daniel God gave wisdom, understanding and visions concerning many events that would take place in his time and into the future. Some of his visions extend even beyond the first coming of Jesus to the last days on earth before the greatest day in biblical prophecy, “the day of the Lord”, often referred to by Christians as “the second coming of Christ”.

Yet the first prophecies in the book of Daniel were not given to Daniel directly, but through the great king, Nebuchadnezzar. King Nebuchadnezzar received the prophecy in a dream, but when he awoke, although he perceived that it had been a prophetic dream it slipped out of his mind and he couldn't remember it². This was how it came about that he gave the astounding command that the wise men of Babylon had to tell him the dream, and explain it to him, or else be put to death. Of course they all complained loudly that no king had ever asked such a thing and that no magician or wise man could know what another person had dreamt. Daniel and his friends also knew that this was outside the power of man, so they set to praying earnestly that God would reveal it to them. God answered their prayers by appearing to Daniel in a night vision, showing him both the king's dream and the interpretation of it.

The dream was of a great statue, exceedingly bright but also terrifying. It's head was of gold, it's chest and arms of silver, it's belly and thighs of brass, it's legs were made of iron and its feet of a mix of iron and clay (perhaps like pottery). In the vision a stone was cut out without hands and struck the great statue on the feet smashing them. Then the whole statue disintegrated into tiny pieces that the wind blew away, and the rock carved out without hands became a great mountain that filled the whole earth. Daniel explained to the king that the statue represented four world empires, of which his empire was the first, the head of gold. He then told the king that after his empire would come another empire, inferior in some way to Nebuchadnezzar's. This next empire was represented by the chest and arms of silver and actually came into being later in the book of Daniel during the time

when Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar is on the throne. Later in chapter 5 of the book of Daniel, we read that Belshazzar threw a great party and decided to use the holy vessels stolen from God's temple in Jerusalem to drink wine out of. But then suddenly, during his party, Belshazzar saw a ghostly hand write on the wall and with his face pale and his knees knocking he called for someone to interpret it. None of his magicians or wise men could, however the queen suggested he call Daniel for she said that in the time of Belshazzar's father the wisdom of the gods was found in him. Daniel was then called and interpreted the writing as saying that God had numbered Belshazzar's kingdom and finished it, and that Belshazzar himself had been judged and found lacking. The writing also said that his kingdom had been given to the Medes and the Persians. Indeed shortly after this the armies of the Medes and Persians conquered both the city of Babylon and the whole Babylonian empire. The first king of the new (Persian) empire³ was Darius the Mede, and the second was Cyrus the Persian. Although Daniel said that the empire that came after Babylon would be inferior, it was actually larger in size. The inferiority may therefore have referred to the power of the king. For whereas Nebuchadnezzar had total power, we find out in the story of Daniel and the lion's den (Ch. 6) that king Darius could not change his commandment once he had signed it. If you know the story, you may remember that once he realized that his decree meant throwing Daniel to the lions he was very sorry about having made it and wanted to change his mind, yet was unable to do so. We see then that in the Persian Empire, even the emperor had some restrictions on what he could do due to a form of constitutional law called 'the law of the Medes and Persians'. So it's probably in this respect that the power of the latter empire was inferior to the absolute power Nebuchadnezzar wielded in Babylon.

The third empire described by Daniel in response to Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2 is the one of brass, which from history we know was geographically even bigger again, ruling over the Middle East, most of Europe, North Africa and the areas we now call Afghanistan and Pakistan. This was the Grecian empire established by Alexander the Great⁴. Alexander became king of Macedonia when he was only 20 years old and during the following thirteen years conquered the whole Persian Empire and some territories beyond. Shortly after, at only 33 years of age, Alexander died and his kingdom was divided amongst his top four generals. Thus for most of its history the Grecian empire existed as four separate regions which often warred one with another.

The next kingdom to arise and conquer the territories belonging first to Babylonia, then Persia then Greece was the Roman Empire which was still quite new in its existence when Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of the first Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus⁵. Of this fourth kingdom Daniel says that it would be as strong as iron but that its feet and toes would be iron mixed with clay,

suggesting perhaps something hard yet weak or brittle in some way. The latter form of the fourth kingdom, represented by the toes made of iron mixed with clay, appear to be yet future because it is at the time of this last kingdom that according to the prophetic dream of the king, “the stone carved out without hands” strikes the statue on the feet and destroys it. Daniel again provided the interpretation, which was that God will destroy the last kingdom of man and establish his own kingdom that will rule over all the earth. One thing that is quite clear is that God has not yet destroyed the corrupt and violent governments of man, nor has he yet established his own government of righteousness and equity over the earth.

Collectively these prophecies, based on the king's vision of the great statue, span from about 600BC to the time of Christ and also to a future time represented by the kingdom of iron mixed with clay. It is worth remembering that the Roman Empire was never really defeated. It broke up due to a combination of external attacks and internal rebellions and successions. Although the religious authority of popery became known as "The Holy Roman Empire", this was not really an empire in the true sense as it did not actually govern the lands over which it wielded influence. Today the countries that came out of the Roman empire include the UK to the far west, France, Germany, Italy and most of the other countries of Europe as well as Turkey, most of the middle eastern nations and parts of North African nations such as Libya and Egypt. Since the disintegration of the Roman Empire there has been no overarching empire covering all of these parts of the world. However the cultural and spiritual influences of the Babylonian, Persian, Grecian and Roman empires live on, especially in western society.

THE EXCEEDINGLY DREADFUL BEAST

So, as we've seen, the prophecy of the great image (idol) spans prophetically significant kingdoms from the time of Daniel right through to the end of the kingdoms of man. Another passage of similar scope is found in Daniel chapter seven, which picks up the same theme, but deals with it from a slightly different angle.

I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the Great Sea.

“And four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other.”

(Daniel 7:2-3)

'Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth.

(Daniel 7:17)

This vision, like Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the Great Image in Daniel chapter 2, covers the four prophetically significant world empires that would arise out of "the great sea" of mankind. Of particular importance is that it provides the vital connection between these prophecies in Daniel, and the prophecies of the final beast in Revelation. It also focuses in on the "different" and "exceedingly dreadful" beast that has teeth of iron and nails of bronze (v19).

The first three empires in the prophecy are in this passage given the characteristics of animals. Babylon is like a lion with eagle's wings, but its wings are plucked off and it is made to stand on its feet and a man's heart is given to it. (Commentators believe the reference to being "given a man's heart" relates to Daniel chapter four which is the testimony of king Nebuchadnezzar who clearly came to be a believer in the Most High God.) The passage goes on to characterize the Persian Empire as being like a bear, and the Grecian Empire like a Leopard with four wings on its back and four heads. The Leopard with four wings may speak of the remarkable speed of its conquest, while the four heads almost undoubtedly predict it being split into four regions, each with its own king, which occurred after Alexander's death.

Lastly a fourth beast arises:

"After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth; it was devouring, breaking in pieces, and trampling the residue with its feet. It was different from all the other beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns.

(Daniel 7:7)

...I watched until the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given to the burning flame.

(Daniel 7:11)

Daniel is greatly troubled by this vision and seeks to know the truth about the fourth beast that was different from all the others (7:19). The beginning of the answer is:

'The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the other kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, trample it and break it in pieces.'

(Daniel 7:23)

Drawing on what we know of the four kingdoms laid out in Daniel chapter 2, the fourth beast is clearly the Roman Empire and would appear to have two phases, the second of which is yet to come into being. While the Roman Empire of Jesus' day may fulfill aspects of the prophecy of the fourth beast in Daniel chapter 7, a number of the verses appear to be primarily about the second phase, the latter (end times) form of the Roman Empire. For instance, the fact that it is destroyed and its dominion taken away (7:26) and that it is replaced by God's everlasting kingdom (7:27), suggest application to the second phase (the final world empire) since the Roman Empire was never judged and replaced in this manner.

Mysteriously, in Daniel's vision the final empire is different from all the others. What makes it different? Unlike the other kingdoms, which have natural animal characteristics, this beast is to have "teeth of iron and nails of bronze" and will devour the whole earth. It is not of the natural order of beasts created by God. Not a bear nor a lion but something strange and possibly machine-like. While nowhere does the bible clearly predict the technological age, this passage may strongly hint at it. Daniel was greatly disturbed by the fourth beast as though he didn't understand what he was seeing. Its metallic form could have other explanations, but given where we find ourselves today it seems very likely that it does speak of a key characteristic of the final kingdom; that it comes to pass during a mechanized hi-tech age.

The important link between Daniel 7 and the beast spoken of in Revelation is that in both cases the term is used to describe an empire rising up. Also, in both cases the beasts have ten horns. Both are ultimately judged and destroyed by God who then establishes his own government over the earth. In all respects they must surely be seen as one and the same kingdom. Taking this as the case, let's now look more at the horns. Twice in chapter seven we read of ten horns, three of which are uprooted and replaced by a little horn that speaks great and blasphemous things. In both instances the rise of this little horn brings final judgment. Now, in the final part of chapter 7 these things are dealt with a third time, this time with greater clarity and plainness than before.

The ten horns are ten kings who shall arise from this kingdom. And another shall rise after them; he shall be different from the first ones, and shall subdue three kings. He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, shall persecute the saints of the Most High, and shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand for a time and times and half a time.

But the court shall be seated, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and destroy it forever. Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.

(Daniel 7:24-27)

It seems this final kingdom has a multiplicity of leaders. Ten kings appear to reign at the same time since the little horn displaces three (whereas a normal leadership succession would make it impossible to displace more than one). There appears to be a phase change even within this last form of the kingdom since the power of the ten shifts to the one leader who displaces three in verse 24 (seen in more detail in the two beasts of Revelation 13). We also see here that the one who arises will speak against God and persecute the saints for time, times and a half of time⁶. And again this passage repeats that at this time his dominion will be taken away and God's kingdom established.

So you can see from what we've covered that Daniel chapters 2 and 7 together really form the hub of prophecy in terms of the progression of the kingdoms of man. They outline a series of kingdoms culminating in a final world kingdom and the Antichrist, but clearly also show us that this final kingdom will be divinely overthrown and replaced with the kingdom of God. In presenting this significant mega-theme Daniel chapters 2 and 7 set much of the context into which other prophetic revelations fit.

And as we read it, and see the fulfillments in past empires, it also invites us to reflect on the present. We are living in an age of increasing "Globalization". Will this globalization ultimately give rise to a new world empire? If so, what world conditions would be needed to bring a new Empire into existence?

SHADOWS OF ANTICHRIST

Daniel chapter 8

Earlier in our study mention was made of king Belshazzar of Babylon who, in chapter 5 of Daniel, is recorded as having seen a ghostly hand writing on the wall; words that when translated by Daniel turned out to be announcing the judgment about to fall on both him and his kingdom. It was during the reign of this same Belshazzar that Daniel received, as recorded in chapter 8, new visions of kingdoms that would come after Babylon. These visions focus on the first two of the three kingdoms which were to come after Babylon, the first being represented by a ram with two horns and the second by a male goat with a “notable horn between his eyes”.

Like many of the core prophecies in Daniel we are not left to guess at their meaning, for in 8:20-21 we are told that the ram with two horns represents the kings of Media and Persia, while the male goat is the kingdom of Greece. In the prophecy the larger horn of the ram comes up last, signifying that the Persian kings would rise to power later than the Median kings within the Medo-Persian Empire. Yet, despite the great power of this kingdom represented by the ram, Daniel’s prophecy predicted that a king would come from the west (Greece) and attack the ram with furious power, casting it down to the ground and trampling on it. In Daniel chapter 7 this beast is seen as a leopard with four wings, and here we see it described as coming “across the surface of the whole earth, without touching the ground”. Indeed Alexander the Great’s conquests were of unparalleled speed, his whole empire being built in only 13 years.

After defeating Persia in verse 7, the notable horn in the vision is broken and in its place four horns come up. In verse 22 it says:

As for the broken horn and the four that stood up in its place, four kingdoms shall arise out of that nation, but not with its power.

(Daniel 8:22)

After Alexander the Great’s death, in an amazingly accurate fulfillment of this prophecy, his kingdom ended up divided amongst four of his top generals. As the prophecy predicted though, none of the resulting kingdoms had the same degree of power as the complete Grecian kingdom out of which

they came.

THE FEIRCE KING

In many ways what's been mentioned so far is just a backdrop to the main focus of chapter 8 which is the little horn that comes out of one of these four regions and grows exceedingly great towards the south, the east and the "Glorious Land" (Israel). This little horn is also described as the "king of fierce countenance" in verse 23. Ultimately the verses appear to have a dual fulfillment. From history we can see that Antiochus IV¹, ruler of the Seleucid kingdom to the north and east of Israel from 175-164 BC appears to have fulfilled many elements of the prophecy. On the other hand the prophecy itself states that "the vision refers to the time of the end" (v 17). Not only this but the prophecy has connections with Daniel 9:27 which Jesus refers to in Matthew 24:15 as yet future to his time. Thus, while it is of interest to look at Antiochus IV as a pre-fulfillment, the primary meaning of the verses should probably be ascribed to events occurring at the times of the end.

ANTIOCHUS AND ANTICHRIST

Let's look at some of the key verses of the chapter and relate them to both early fulfillments in the person of Antiochus IV and latter fulfillments in the Antichrist himself:

He even exalted himself as high as the Prince of the host; and by him the daily sacrifices were taken away, and the place of His sanctuary was cast down. (v11)

Antiochus IV assumed the title "Epiphanes" meaning "manifest" (i.e. God Manifest). Antichrist is likely to take to himself the office of "Christ", along perhaps with titles from other religions.

...he cast truth down to the ground. He did all this and prospered. (v12)

Antiochus sought to destroy the Jewish religion and convert the people to a Hellenistic (Grecian) way of thinking. Antichrist will also seek to destroy both Judaism and true Christianity and replace it with something basically occultic or New Age in nature, though perhaps allowing for variations that wear "Christian" labels in order to satisfy the apostate followers of Christian traditions.

"How long will the vision be, concerning the daily sacrifices and the transgression of desolation...?" (v13)

"For two thousand three hundred days; then the sanctuary shall be cleansed." (v14)

Antiochus caused the temple worship to cease and erected a statue of Jupiter in the temple (with his own facial features on it). Antichrist we are told in II Thessalonians 2 will “sit in the temple of God, showing that he is God”. The 2300 days mentioned here has proved a little hard to pin down but most likely predicted a time between interferences with the temple sacrifice by Antiochus and the cleansing and rededication of the temple by the followers of Judas Maccabeus (when Jerusalem was recaptured from Antiochus about three years into the guerilla war they waged against him). It could also potentially predict the gap in time between Antichrist’s desolation of the temple in the end times and a later “cleansing of the sanctuary” (v14); possibly a rededication of the temple in the Messianic kingdom at some point after the return of Jesus the Messiah. It’s worth commenting that because the phrase for days in the original manuscripts is literally “evening mornings”, it’s not 100% clear whether the period is 2300 days or 1150, though 2300 seems more likely. What the literal meaning does tell us is that it is almost certainly erroneous to take the 2300 “evening mornings” to mean 2300 years, since “evening mornings” are so specifically connected to the biblical definition of days in Genesis 1:3, (“So the evening and the morning were the first day”).

“And in the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors have come to their fullness, a king shall arise who understands sinister schemes. His power shall be mighty, but not by his own power; he shall destroy fearfully, and shall prosper and thrive; he shall destroy the mighty and also the holy people. (v23-24)

Like Antiochus, Antichrist is likely to be full of dark and hidden schemes, and to an extent greater than any man before him will be empowered by the devil (or perhaps even be the devil incarnate). Like Antiochus IV the Antichrist is likely to make great wars (“destroy fearfully”), and for a time shall seem to prosper and thrive. Both are enemies of the Jews who crush, and to a large extent conquer them, for a season. Also, just as Antiochus was plagued by the dedicated followers of Judas Maccabeus, so dedicated Jews may hold out in parts of Israel against Antichrist and ultimately eject him from the land, this perhaps being what brings about the great convergence of nations against Jerusalem in the final days of the tribulation (Zechariah 12).

He shall even rise against the prince of princes; but shall be broken without human means. (v25)

Anyone who rises up against God’s people is rising up against God himself. Antiochus died suddenly of illness in 164BC, while the Antichrist appears to be divinely overthrown in Revelation 19:19-20.

All up chapter eight builds on chapters two and seven, in particular focusing on the “king of fierce countenance” and his exploits against the people of God, the temple of God and God himself at the “time of the end”. This theme, and understanding the nature of this person, seems to be highly

important in the prophecies given to Daniel. Antichrist is arguably the main focus of Daniel chapters seven, eight, the last verse of chapter 9 and from about v36 onwards in chapter 11. The prophecies of Daniel certainly speak of kingdoms, but with even more emphasis they speak again and again of a king who will come and do much harm to God's people.

THE COMING ANTICHRIST

Within the church's treatment of prophecy the speculative, and often ridiculous, naming of Antichrist suspects only serves to potentially immunize many people against the very concept of identifying the Antichrist when he does appear on the world scene. However, despite the many inaccurate portrayals of world leaders as the Antichrist, there will come a time when Antichrist really will appear and fulfill the visions shown to Daniel concerning him. When this happens the signs of who he is should be crystal clear to those who listen to God's word, though he will be a master deceiver who may actually be honored by many who call themselves Christians but do not genuinely know the Lord.

GOD'S TIMETABLE

Daniel 9

Because no clear length of time is allotted to the present church age, when we study prophecy it's much easier to know a fair amount about what will happen in the future than it is to know when it will happen. Yet isn't it human nature for us to itch to get some idea of when these things will come to pass. We can only speculate that like us Daniel may also have desired to understand the timeframe of the prophetic revelations given to him. If so then such a desire was largely gratified, for in Daniel chapter 9 he tells us how God revealed to him the timetable for key prophetic events related to Israel's future. At the time of it being given it wasn't the distant future of the nation that Daniel specifically had in mind, but an expectation of the very imminent fulfillment of a prophecy given by Jeremiah. In the first part of the chapter Daniel recounts how he understood by the book of Jeremiah that the captivity of the Israelite nation in Babylon would last 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10). Realizing that the time of their deliverance was drawing near, Daniel set himself to pray, to confess sin on behalf of his nation, and to ask for God's mercy. But while Daniel was focused on the immediate deliverance of the nation, the vision he received was of a much greater deliverance to come at a later time when Israel would again be under the foot of the gentiles and would again be delivered. The time in which "all things" would be fulfilled. While the duration of the Babylonian captivity was to be seventy years, this new prophecy concerned seventy times seven years. These 490 years are God's prophetic timetable. These important prophecies are contained in just four long verses, 9:24-27, and they are among some of the plainest prophetic verses in the bible. Let's see what they say:

Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy.

(Daniel 9:24)

This first verse sets the big picture that seventy sevens¹ were appointed for all things to be fulfilled. That this includes events beyond the works of Christ's first coming is clear from the phrase "to bring in everlasting righteousness".

Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again and the wall, even in troublesome times.

(Daniel 9:25)

This part speaks clearly of the time covered by the books of Nehemiah, Ezra, etc. While previous allowances had been made by the Persian kings for the rebuilding of the temple and for people to return to the land, the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem itself was given by Artaxerxes² in 444BC. From this time until Messiah the Prince was to be sixty-nine sevens (483 years). It is perhaps significant that Christ is referred to here as “Messiah the prince”, not “Messiah the king”. In his first coming he was heir to the throne but did not receive the kingdom at that time. It is widely believed that this period of sixty-nine sevens was fulfilled to the day when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey (Matthew 21). Certainly the approximate timing seems about right to coincide with the end of Jesus’ ministry. One might ask why the sixty-nine sevens is divided into seven sevens, followed by sixty-two sevens? The former period seems to coincide with the rebuilding of the city, in which case the latter part would be the interval from the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the coming of Messiah.

And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined.

(Daniel 9:26)

One thing that can be potentially confusing here is the reference to the sixty-two weeks, without mention of the first seven. But it is not sixty-two from the start of the prophetic timetable, but as made clear by the preceding verse the sixty-two comes after the seven, so this verse is also predicting events that would occur after sixty-nine sevens (483 years from the command to rebuild and restore Jerusalem). These verses contain two amazing things, the exact timing for the Messiah’s (first) coming and also a clear prophecy concerning the death of Messiah and that it would in some way be for others, not for himself (his death for our sins). After this we are told that the prince who would come would destroy the city and the temple. This clearly predicted the Wars of the Jews³ which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70AD by the armies of Titus. (Titus was indeed a prince, for his father Vespasian had just been made emperor in Rome at this time⁴.) From this point onwards desolations are predicted upon the nation, the one hint in the passage that there would be an intervening time between Messiah being cut off and the reconfirming of the covenant for the last week (7 years).

Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate.

(Daniel 9:27)

“He” shall confirm a covenant with many. Who is “he” and what is the covenant? Well, it would seem to relate to the covenant given in verse 25 as the starting point of the whole seventy week prophetic period. In some manner the covenant of support between Artaxerxes (in 444BC) and Israel is renewed in a future time and context. This could be in the form of some agreement between the dominant gentile power of the day and Israel. “He”, in this scenario, would therefore presumably be that powers’ dominant leader. Now, remember that Jesus said:

I am come in my father's name, and you receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him you will receive".

(John 5:43)

Does Israel make some kind of covenant with the Antichrist? Maybe. Either with the Antichrist or a preceding figure with the power to support and protect Israel in the way that Artaxerxes did in the days of Nehemiah. This will be the one who the Daniel 9:27 verse described as coming in on the wing of abominations and making (the nation) desolate. Not surprisingly some Christians are “on watch” for such an event. While it would make sense to take an event that fit this criteria seriously, it’s also worth considering that the covenant does not necessarily have to be public to be effective. It may well be public, but it’s also possible that the covenant could be entered into behind closed doors.

Now, there is one more fascinating thing that should not be overlooked about this prophecy. It says in verse 27 that in the middle of the week “he” shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering”. This would fit very well with the abomination that makes desolate spoken of in Matthew 24 and with the Antichrist in II Thessalonians 2:4 who “sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God”. It seems that at some point the Jews will have a temple again, and even resume some form of the Old Testament sacrifices, but that the Antichrist will take control of the temple three and a half years into the covenant making it in some way a place of glorification to himself.

At the very end of the chapter we see the outpouring of God’s wrath on the world. At the point where the Antichrist assumes the place of God he will be at war with God. His side of this war will be to attack every aspect of the knowledge of the true God in the world, especially God’s people, Jew

and Gentile⁵, who are in the world at that time. God's part of the war will be to pour out terrible judgments on the kingdom of the Antichrist. In this respect there is general similarity with the conflict between Pharaoh and God back in Egypt where Pharaoh increased the afflictions of the Israelites while God judged the kingdom of Pharaoh with plague after plague.

WARS OF THE END

Daniel 11

Daniel chapter eleven records the prophetic message he received concerning the rise of the Grecian empire, its breakup into four smaller kingdoms after the death of its leader and the wars that would follow between the two most powerful of the four resulting kingdoms. While this was yet future for Daniel, for us it is now history thus we know that the leader who established the Grecian empire was Alexander the Great, while the two kingdoms focused on in the Daniel 11 prophecies were the Seleucid kingdom centered in Syria and the kingdom of the Ptolemaic kings in Egypt. Daniel's prophecies concerning the conflicts between these two kingdoms were fulfilled immaculately between about 320BC – 168BC. In the visions he received the Syrian kings are described as 'the kings of the North' and the Egyptian kings as 'the kings of the South'. It is clear from these descriptions that the reference point is Daniel's home land, Israel, which sits between the two. Indeed Israel is sometimes said to sit "between the Anvil and the Hammer"; in other words between the Blacksmiths anvil of Egypt and the Hammer of Syria. The picture this gives is of a nation pounded between two great forces, and certainly during the period prophesied by much of Daniel 11 Israel was in the unfortunate position of being on the warpath between them. So it was that Judea (southern Israel) came under the control first of Syria, then Egypt, then towards the end of that period back under Syria again.

For us however the greatest significance of this is how the theme is picked up on by prophecy in relation to events that are still in our future. In particular there are parallels between the person and acts of the Seleucid (Syrian) king who comes into focus passage from v21 and the person and acts of Antichrist; in particular in terms of their dealings with Israel and the temple.

Below is an excerpt from Schofield's bible commentary regarding this Syrian king, Antiochus IV:

In 198BC Judea was conquered by Antiochus the Great, and annexed to Syria...About 180BC the land became the dowry of Cleopatra, a Syrian princess who married Ptolemy Philometor, king of Egypt, but on the death of Cleopatra was reclaimed by Antiochus Epiphanes after a bloody battle. In 170BC Antiochus, after repeated interferences with the temple and the priesthood, plundered Jerusalem, profaned the temple and enslaved a great number of the inhabitants. On December the 25th, 168BC,

Antiochus offered a sow on the great altar in the temple and erected an altar to Jupiter...The temple worship was forbidden and the people were required to eat swine's flesh (pork).

Consider the similarities between this history and II Thessalonians 2:4 which predicts that the coming Antichrist will “sit in the temple of God showing himself that he is God” and Matthew 24:15 which describes him as “the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet who stands in the holy place” (the temple). From these New Testament verses it seems quite certain that the coming Antichrist will in some way repeat Antiochus the Great's act of hijacking of the temple. Therefore there may be dual applications to the verses from about Daniel 11:31-39 concerning the king who defiles the sanctuary, worships a god of forces and exalts himself above even the God of gods. It's also worth noting the obvious here, that since this section of Daniels prophecy still appears to have a literal future fulfillment then Jerusalem must once again have a temple. The reestablishing of the nation of Israel was probably an early sign of approaching end times and in a similar way the commencement of this project will be of great significance, being the last thing that needs to be in place for a literal fulfillment of these prophecies.

WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Having traced the line of kings down to Antiochus IV, Daniel eleven clearly shifts its focus from the more immediate future to something more distant by verse 40. This is obvious in two ways. First because the verse starts with the phrase “At the time of the end”, and second because what follows is quite different to what followed at the time of Antiochus IV. What the prophecy appears to do is to continue on with the themes of conflict involving countries to the north and south of Israel, and of a gentile king who takes control of the holy land, yet all picked up on in a future context. To demonstrate this change of time and context in the verses let's compare what happened historically with what is prophesied from verse 40 to the end of the chapter. Historically Antiochus's actions in the temple triggered the revolt of the Maccabees where a band of determined Jews rose up against the authority of Antiochus and in a three year guerilla war managed to free Jerusalem from his control and restore proper temple worship. From verse 40 however we see a very different series of events unfolding. Instead of anything resembling the revolt of the Maccabees the passage picks up on a person of political power who will be attacked by both the kings of the North and the kings of the South “at the time of the end”. So in the time of the end it seems that both Syria and Egypt will apparently fight against whoever this power is but according to the passage they will both be defeated and the power they are to attack will go on to overthrow many countries in the region. We

are also told that this unnamed power will establish some kind of presence in Israel, perhaps peaceably since it only says that he shall “enter the glorious land”, which does not necessarily imply an attack or invasion. It is no doubt this presence of a gentile power in the holy land, along with the Antichrist's ultimate activities with regards to Israel and the temple, that connects the prophetic theme of this future ruler (from v40) with the preceding verses of chapter 11 concerning Antiochus IV. In other words the historical figure of Antiochus and the future figure of the Antichrist will be of a similar spirit and their deeds towards Israel of a similar nature.

To clarify what we’re suggesting the different parts of Daniel 11 refer to, here’s a summary:

V1 – 20. The Grecian kingdom, its breakup and the wars between its ensuing parts.

V21-35. The wars and actions of the Syrian king Antiochus IV.

V36-39. Possibly dual application to Antiochus IV but particularly fitting the Antichrist.

V40-45. Wars of the end times, Antichrist and his demise.

Another geopolitical point of interest in the passage that follows Daniel 11:40 is that, in describing the whole scenario of middle east wars the prophecy also tells us that Moab and Edom shall not be conquered by the one referred to only as “him”. On today's map these two areas equate to the country of Jordan. Also verse 43 tells us that Libya and Ethiopia will be subject to this great power, voluntarily it seems appears from the wording which says, “also the Libyans and Ethiopians shall follow at his heels”.

THE WAR SPREADS

Following his rapid and victorious Middle East campaign, in verse 44 “he” is troubled by news from the east and the north. Following the pattern of the chapter the reference point for direction is Israel, so east could be anywhere in the Middle East or possibly further afield towards China. In a similar way the North could refer to the region of Syria or further afield up towards Turkey or even Russia. However far these extend it seems that the same power involved in a large middle-east war will then end up at war with these areas attacking them “with great fury and destruction”. Verse 44 goes on to suggest that “he” will be victorious, saying that he will destroy and annihilate many. This

may well be what gives rise to the saying in Revelation 13:4 where the world asks, “Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?”

TIMING, GEOGRAPHY AND PROTAGANISTS OF THESE WARS

In terms of timing there are two ways we could look at this passage. On the one hand it may shed significant light on the wars that bring the beast (the final world empire) into a position of power over the whole Earth early in (or even before) the tribulation. This would fit with Revelation 6:2 where a war of conquest appears to occur right at the start of the series of end time events. Matthew 24 also speaks of “nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom” as part of “the beginning of sorrows”, though in the Matthew 24 passage it’s a little less clear how tightly connected the timeframe of these events is with the seven year tribulation (Daniel’s seventieth week of prophecy). On the other hand these wars may relate to the Antichrist’s rise to the fullness of his power part way into the tribulation. This may sound rather similar, but bear in mind that there are two reasons to believe that Antichrist’s full ascension to power occurs at a later stage than the coming into being of the world government itself. The first reason is that in Revelation 13 two phases of the beast are given; the first with ten rulers and the latter with two. (One of these latter two is definitely the Antichrist, the other may be the false prophet). The second reason is that in Daniel 7:24 it says that the little horn (Antichrist) displaces three of the ten kings of “the beast”:

The ten horns are ten kings who shall arise from this kingdom. And another shall rise after them; he shall be different from the first ones, and shall subdue three kings.

(Daniel 7:24)

There is no real mention of what happens to the other seven, however one thing we can pick out from this verse is that his subduing of three kings suggests that all ten are reigning at the same time (not a succession of rulers). A common interpretation of prophecy concerning the ten kings is that they represent a “ten nation confederacy”. While this is possible it is worth considering that should “the beast” be a world empire (even in its first phase) then another possible fulfillment of the ten kings could be something more like a world council of regional presidents that collectively form the executive of a world government. If things do develop in this way then the existing European Union (and EU president) may be looked back on as the forerunner of a larger process of regionalization.

Although it's hard to be certain of exact timing and circumstances, what the passage does make clear about these wars is that they will start in the Middle East, result in the subjection of most of that region, (with Jordan remaining free and North Africa giving allegiance), and spread North and East towards Russia and Asia respectively. This may even give a clue as to the power that is in conflict with all these regions. If we subtract the Middle Eastern nations, Russia, Asia and northern Africa from the power blocks of today's world, the most significant remaining power block is what one might call the 'Anglo-American led western empire'. This is of significant interest when you consider that many of what we loosely call the 'western' nations are those that arose out of the western arm of the Roman Empire, either directly in the case of the European nations, or via colonization from Europe in the case of the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. (Remember that the Roman Empire is seen in Daniels's prophecy as being somehow intrinsically connected with the final empire.) At least being aware of this possibility balances the increasingly prevalent idea that the Antichrist arises out of the Muslim world and the east (based largely on the Middle Eastern location of these wars and the prophetic connections we saw earlier with the Syrian king Antiochus IV). Either is certainly possible; that the East rises to ascendancy over the West or that the nucleus of the final world empire could be some kind of 'western alliance' that ultimately succeeds in subduing the world through a period of terrible wars. Those of us living in the west need to be especially aware of this latter possibility because it's always easier to see the enemy outside the gates than the enemy within. In the movie Star Wars Episode III the "good" empire which was constantly fighting all the "evildoers" turned out to be secretly evil at its core and because of this actually became the "evil empire", even as it finally succeeded in overcoming the evil it was fighting. This is analogous to one possibility of how the future of the world could shape up in end times. Of course it's equally possible that the balance of power in the world could move to the east and that the existing ascendancy of the west could crumble, so at this stage the important thing is just to be aware of all realistic possibilities.

ANTICHRIST IN ISRAEL

From the last verse of chapter 11 it seems that the Antichrist will ultimately base himself somewhere in or around Israel. It says:

"And he shall plant the tents of his palace between the seas and the glorious holy mountain..."

(Daniel 11:45)

This presumably depicts a location between one or more seas in the region and Mount Zion in Israel. Because the names of the seas are not given it is impossible to pinpoint the location in advance, however the reference to Mount Zion clearly indicates Israel (or at the very least nearby).

There are however two additional reasons to deduct that Antichrist will base himself inside Israel itself. First, he will be masquerading as the Christ and thus may attempt to be seen to fulfill prophecies concerning the millennial kingdom where Christ is to reign over the whole world from Jerusalem. The second reason is the prophecy contained in II Thessalonians which says that:

...he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

(II Thessalonians 2:4)

ULTIMATE SUCCESS, ULTIMATE FAILURE

One thing we do know for sure from Daniel 11 is that eventually a Caesar-like figure will arise on the earth who will be worshipped by the world and will bring a great persecution against the saints.

Nevertheless, in the end we also see that having been successful beyond any previous world ruler, and having taken to himself every kind of temporal and dark spiritual power, nothing will be able to save him from the judgment of God which his actions bring against both him and his kingdom. Daniel ends by saying:

...yet he shall come to his end, and no one will help him.

(Daniel 11:45)

THE END OF THE AGE

Matthew 24:1-40

Matthew 24 opens with a stunning prophecy that was fulfilled only a few decades after the crucifixion. The disciples wanted to show Jesus around the marvelous buildings of the temple in Jerusalem, but instead Jesus tells them that not one stone of it would be left on top of another. To any Jew, for whom the temple was the heart of their nation's religious life, this would be a shocking thought. It seems it was contemplating this that prompted the disciples to ask Jesus about "the end of the age".

"Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?"

(Matthew 24: 2)

The beauty of Matthew 24 is that Jesus does answer this very question, laying out in a simple way the general course of end times events, which are also the signs given by which we should know that his coming draws near. Starting with the warning that there will be false Christ's he then speaks of the wars that will precede the end of the age:

"And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet." (v. 6)

(i.e. These events proceed the end, but are not the end as such)

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows". (v. 7-8)

In effect, what Jesus seems to be saying is that these events are not the very end of the age, but they are the beginning of those times immediately prior to the end of the age. One could not be certain based only on this account, however these verses closely parallel what we see in Revelation 6:2,4,6. That the tribulation appears to begin with a war of conquest (6:2, "conquering and to conquer") that ultimately spreads to a wider war (6:4, "to take peace from the earth"). According to both passages

this is followed, or accompanied by, famines and pestilences in various places. Alternatively it's also possible that both Revelation 6:2,4,6 and Matthew 24:6-8 refer to a series of "lead up" events occurring over an undeclared time span prior to the tribulation proper.

Verse 9 in Matthew 24 continues to parallel Revelation chapter 6, teaching us that following the wars of those days great persecution will arise against the saints who will "be hated by all nations" for Jesus name's sake. At this dark time the forces of Satan will act largely unrestrained upon the earth and through the mechanisms of the kingdom that Satan has brought into being Antichrist will wage war against the saints (Rev 13:7). This is a war that God's people will not fight with guns but with faith and the Holy Spirit. Ultimately these saints are viewed in heaven arrayed in white robes of righteousness, and in Revelation 20 we are told that they will reign with Christ a thousand years. (On Earth during the millennial age).

And this reminds us that end times are not the end as such, not even of things upon the earth. The term "the end of the age", which is the term used in Matthew is really much clearer. The great tribulation occurs at the end of the current age, but afterwards a new era is ushered in where Christ himself rules over the earth. He is the "rock carved out without hands" that smashes the feet of the great image in Daniel's prophecy and becomes a great mountain that fills the whole earth. It will be the fulfillment of this prophecy when in the latter days God destroys corrupt human government and establish his own divine government over the whole earth.

Keeping in mind the coming wonderful age will surely help maintain the courage of those saints facing persecution by the final empire. But this persecution will also test the true state of believers, for unless someone has the Holy Spirit they will be more likely to be offended by true Christianity than to allow them self to be hated by the world. This may be what verse ten refers to when it says that:

...many shall be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.

(Matthew 24:10)

Those who are offended may practice a form of Christianity, since betrayal suggests someone who should by nature be an ally, however the Christianity of the betrayers will probably be of the type predicted by Timothy when he said that in the end times people "would have a form of godliness but denying the power thereof". If history is anything to go by this false "harlot" church of end times

may even turn out to be the spearhead of persecution against those who hold to a true New Testament faith.

From verse 15-20 of Matthew we have a specific prophecy and warning to those in Israel during the end of the age. They are told that when they see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, that they should flee to the mountains. In II Thessalonians 2:4 it says that the Antichrist will sit in the temple of God showing himself that he is God. This will be a latter day desecration similar in spiritual character to what happened on December 25, 168 BC when the occupying king, Antiochus the Great, offered a sow on the great altar in the Jewish temple and erected an altar to Jupiter¹. This was the more immediate fulfillment of Daniel 11:31, however the theme of the 'abomination of desolation' in the temple is picked up on by Jesus to speak of a yet future event that will take place during the end times.

Up until this point in the narrative the tribulation has been in what we might call 'human' terms. The difficulties that have come upon the earth have been of the normal kind – war, famines, disease and pestilences, earthquakes and persecutions. However, the Antichrist “sitting in the temple of God showing himself that he is God” will it seems be the point at which divine judgment is released against his kingdom. In verse 21-22 it says:

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be”

“And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened”.

Then, at the end of these days, verse 23 gives us a renewed warning about false Christ's, that we should pay no heed to reports that Christ has come and is in this place or that. Verse 24 tells us that false Christ's and false prophets will come and show great signs and wonders (by the working of Satan according to II Thessalonians 2:9), in order to deceive, if it were possible, even the elect.

But Christ's return will not be as his first, in the body of a man², but as verse 27 describes:

“For as the lightening comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be”.

Then going back a bit and re-iterating in more detail, in verse 29 Jesus gives us a prophecy that was also given by the prophet Joel in the Old Testament, and by the apostle John in Revelation. It is that

at the end of the tribulation, just preceding the Lords coming, the sun and moon will go dark and stars will fall from heaven (possibly what we call 'falling stars' or 'meteorites'²). Then in verse 30 Jesus tell us that prior to his coming the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and that all the tribes of the earth will mourn as they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Presumably they will mourn because they realize that he is returning in ultimate judgment. The sign mentioned in verse 30 may refer to the flashing like lightening from the east to west at his coming (v27), or it could be something like the star that the Magi saw when Jesus was born. (In Revelation 22:16 Jesus says he is “the bright and morning star”.) Whatever the sign is these verses speak of the same point in time as Revelation 6:15-17 when those who are still unrepentant will hide in caves and call on the mountains to fall on them and hide them from his wrath.³

Then in verse 31 we see an awesome thing, that at the time of his coming he will send out his angels with a sound of a great trumpet and they will gather his elect from the four winds of heaven.

This has similarities in imagery with I Thessalonians 4:16,17:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God, And the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...

Note the mention in both passages of the involvement of angels, the sounding of a trumpet and the coming in the clouds.

In the following verses Jesus goes on to say that we should recognize when these times are near (v33) and that “this generation”, the generation who see the preceding signs, will not pass away before all things are fulfilled (which makes it clear that the whole last days timetable will take place within a relatively short timeframe). However, while we are expected to recognize when the times are near, Jesus warns against date setting by telling us that we will not know the exact day or hour of the Lord's coming (v36). People often confuse these two thoughts as though not knowing the day or the hour means that we cannot know the season, but this is not the case at all. That we should recognize the season is further affirmed in I Thessalonians 5:2-4, for having just said that the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night it goes on to say in verse 4:

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.

In other words, the coming of the Lord will overcome the unbeliever as a thief in the night, but the believer should understand events as they unfold and know that it means that the return of Jesus is near.

So all up these passages in Matthew 24 form the simplest overview of future events anywhere in the bible. While much depth is added by studying other prophetic passages, we should pay a lot of attention to this straight forward teaching that not only lays out the whole end time scenario, but does so very much in consecutive order too.

TRIBULATION OVERVIEW

Revelation 6

Revelation chapter six provides us with a summary of what appears to be much of the tribulation period; from the rise of the last empire, going forth “conquering and to conquer”, through to events immediately prior to the outpouring of divine wrath upon the earth and the subsequent return of Messiah.

But before we delve into the chapter’s contents it seems relevant to look into the meaning of the seals that we’ll be reading about in it, and to gain some clue as to the identity of the horsemen that we’ll see going forth. To do this let’s start by looking at the mysterious scroll in Revelation 5:1 (sometimes translated as 'book'). It is a scroll with writing on the front and back and “sealed with seven seals”. To protect the privacy of a scroll’s content they were typically sealed with hot wax into which was pressed the authors unique signet ring, leaving the distinct markings of the ring on the wax. This imprinted wax was the seal, which in effect had a three-fold function. First, to keep the scroll from unraveling. Second, to provide assurance to the recipient that it hadn't been opened in transit and third, to provide assurance of the authenticity of the writer. In Revelation 5 John sees a scroll that obviously contains an important message. This scroll doesn’t just have one seal on it but seven. It’s a high-security document. Who is the author? In Revelation 5 we’re told that only the lamb, who is described as having the seven spirits of God, can open it. Did the lamb write it? Are these seven spirits part of his person, or that of the Holy Spirit? It’s hard to tell. In Revelation 5 they are said to be the seven horns and seven eyes of the lamb (Messiah), sent forth into all the earth. Horns on an animal are used for fighting and in prophecy usually refer to a warlike or destructive aspect of something. The eyes going into all the earth intuitively speak of God’s ability to see and know all that goes on in the world. Together we have a picture of Messiah, his agents, or perhaps aspects of the Holy Spirit, ready to see all that goes on in the earth and bring forth acts of judgment. The seven spirits are relatively mysterious but, given the context in which they’re spoken of from Revelation chapters 1 – 5, it seems likely that they’re somehow integral to one of the persons of the Godhead and that the signet seals on the scroll are therefore those of the seven spirits; the author being God.

The contents of the scroll itself have also been the source of much speculation. For instance, some have said that it is the book of life and others that it is the title deed of the earth. Later in Revelation we find that when the final seal is removed, and it is thus opened, seven great judgments come forth and then another seven out of these. A question we could ask is, do all these judgments have something to do with the contents of the scroll? Are they not perhaps the very content of it? To help answer that let’s have a look at a similar vision in Zechariah chapter 5. It is perhaps debatable whether the flying scroll in Zechariah is the same scroll or something different, however looking at the context of surrounding visions in Zechariah there seems a good likelihood that it is either the same or of the same nature. Here is an adaptation of a short summary given in G. Coleman Luck's excellent commentary entitled "Zechariah".

(Zec 1:7-17) Judgment upon the nations that had persecuted Israel.

(Zec 1:18-19) The four world powers that have scattered Israel.

(Zec 1:20-21) God's agents that bring judgment on these nations.

(Zec 2:1-13) Jerusalem's future deliverance and restoration.

(Zec 3:1-10) Israel's future cleansing when they "look to him whom they have pierced".

(Zec 4:1-14) The two spirit filled witnesses of the tribulation period.

(Zec 5:1-4) The flying scroll – The judgment of the wicked on the whole earth preceding the blessings to follow.

(Zec 5:5-11) Spiritual wickedness in Israel traced to Babylon and the judgment of Babylon (or "spiritual Babylon") foretold – elaborated on in Revelation 17, 18.

(Zec 6:1-8) God's judgment on the nations, possibly parallel to Revelation 6 or referring to the final judgment when Christ himself makes war on the nations.

In Zechariah the scroll is described like this:

This is the curse that goes forth over the face of the whole earth...

(Zechariah 5:3)

Thus, when you review the Zechariah context above it seems likely that the scroll in Revelation 5 is the same scroll, or at the very least sets a precedent for interpreting the scroll in Revelation as being related to judgment.

Now let's look at the four living creatures. The tribulation upon the earth begins in Revelation 6:1 as the first of the seals is opened and John hears one of the four living creatures saying "Come and see". Immediately after that we see a white horse, and a rider on that horse with a crown and a bow.

The opening of each of the first four seals is introduced in turn by each of the four living creatures, and immediately following each introduction we see a horse of a different colour, and a rider on the horse. What are the horses? Who are the riders? Like most of the symbols in prophecy it's good to look at whether they've been used anywhere else in the bible; and if so what significance they had there. Although there are differences, in Zechariah we see an account that has definite parallels.

Then I turned and raised my eyes and looked, and behold, four chariots were coming from between two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of bronze. With the first chariot were red horses, with the second chariot black horses, with the third chariot white horses, and with the fourth chariot dappled horses—strong steeds. Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?" And the angel answered and said to me, "These are four spirits of heaven, who go out from their station before the Lord of all the earth. The one with the black horses is going to

the north country, the white are going after them, and the dappled are going toward the south country.”

(Zechariah 6:1-6)

In this case the horses are stated in the plural, as multiple horses pulling each chariot (rather than single horses with riders on their back). Either way, they each carry a single occupant (which is clear in that the passage says that “the **one** with the black horses is going to the north country”, and so forth for each of the other chariots and their horses).

Who are the four occupants? The passage clearly states that they are “four spirits of heaven, who go out from their station before the Lord of all the earth”. Let’s compare this to Revelation 4 where we are introduced to the four living creatures as follows.

...and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within...

(Revelation 4:6-8)

The four living creatures are “before the throne of God”; they are clearly cherubim, seraphim or the like – presumably angels of particular significance. The similarity of concept between the “four spirits of heaven” who go out from before the Lord in Zechariah and the four living creatures who are before the Lord in Revelation suggests a strong likelihood that both passages speak of the same four spirits, though not necessarily in the same circumstances since there are variations in the two situations.

But, since the four spirits of heaven are the occupants of the four horse drawn chariots of Zechariah, an important insight we can gain is that they may also be the four horsemen of Revelation 6.

Not just tour guides, but the horsemen themselves. And therefore not just representing things that happen on the earth, but being the very spiritual powers sent forth to bring them to pass. This is why, despite the troubles around the opening of the first six seals as being of man’s making, there also appears to be an element by which God brings them forth in their time.

Now let’s look at the opening of each of the seals in turn:

THE FIRST SEAL – THE WHITE HORSE

Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, “Come and see.” And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

(Revelation 6:1-2)

The picture here is of a king riding his white horse, holding a weapon of war in his hand and setting forth on a war of conquest. Given the scope of Revelation itself this is probably figurative of the wars that bring the empire of AntiChrist to fullness of power.

In Jesus' summary of End Times events, in Matthew 24, he starts with a statement that parallels the four horsemen that go forth in Revelation 6. He says:

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.

(Matthew 24:7)

...and, in terms of showing how parallel this is to the four horsemen, Jesus carries on in the passage to speak of the persecution of the saints, just as the Revelation 6 passage does.

So, like Revelation 6:2 we see that Jesus starts his account of end times with nation warring against nation. But which nations, and where? Does the bible say? Probably.

In Daniel 11 from verse 40 there is a broad summary of the wars and conquests of The Antichrist during what it calls "the time of the end".

You can read more about it later but, understanding from historical fulfillments of the passage up to about verse 30 something that "the king of the North" represents a northern neighbor of Israel (probably Syria or a wider region including Syria), and that "the king of the South" definitely refers to Egypt (these powers being to the north and south of Israel), you'll discover that the verse speaks reasonably clearly of the countries and areas involved in a large war around the time of the end. It clearly speaks of:

- War in the Middle East and parts of North Africa
- Large wider spreading wars to the north and east of the region which, if extensive in reach, may be as far afield as Russia and China respectively.

This is about as much detail as we can clearly dig out of it, but the key point to take from the opening of the first seal is that the white horse in Revelation 6, when read in combination with other prophetic passages, seems to clearly portray great wars of conquest at the beginning of the tribulation.

Perhaps the two most comparable pieces of history to what can be expected are:

- The Napoleonic wars of the early 1800's, through which Napoleon rapidly established French hegemony over most of mainland Europe (with himself as the Emperor).
- Hitler's attempt to establish a thousand year Reich of Aryan ascendancy over the world. This was clearly an Anti-Christ perversion of the promised millennial kingdom of Messiah.

THE SECOND SEAL – THE RED HORSE

When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see." Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.

(Revelation 6:3-4)

In Revelation 6:4 the horseman on the fiery red horse is given power to remove peace from the earth, perhaps suggesting the spreading of this conflict to a wider war (perhaps again parallel to parts of Daniel 11), though alternatively it could refer to anarchy, violence, civil wars and unrest within nations.

THE THIRD SEAL – THE BLACK HORSE

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine."

(Revelation 6:5-6)

Here we see the wheat for a day's bread, or the barley for a days horsefeed, costing a day's wages, and yet the oil and wine are not harmed.

With the way the price of food has been going up in recent years many of us find it increasingly easy to imagine a day's supply of food costing a day's wages. Aspects of the black horse have actually been building up for some time. We've all grown up with an awareness of the horror of famines and starvation in the world; especially within Africa, usually as a result of either droughts or war. So, just as with the red horse, it's really not hard to see how in a time of conflict and other stresses on the world, the black horse of famine might come forth at a global scale.

One mystery in this passage is why it says "do not harm the oil and the wine". In scripture oil often refers to the Holy Spirit, whilst God's kingdom is often referred to in the metaphor of a vineyard, in which case the wine would be the ultimate output of that vineyard – the redeemed. If this is what it's alluding to it might speak of God protecting his people from starvation. Or, if the reference is to luxury items (represented by oil and wine), it could be more figurative of the rich still dining well and drinking wine, even whilst the poor are struggling to survive. It certainly wouldn't be the first time in history that such a pattern has played out. Well, that's happening now, it might just get worse.

THE FOURTH SEAL – THE BAY HORSE

When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.

(Revelation 6:7-8)

This appears to be the culmination and coming together of the previous calamities, but with the additional elements of death by the beasts of the earth. This last aspect suggests quite a state of disorder since, in his current state, mankind is in a good position to ward off wild animals.

THE FIFTH SEAL – THE PERSECUTION OF THE SAINTS

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

(Revelation 6:9-11)

The persecution of the saints is brought into focus as we view, now in heaven, those saints who have been killed upon the earth.

Daniel 7:25 and Revelation 13:7 both make it clear that this final great persecution of God’s people is orchestrated by the Antichrist. The timing is not absolutely clear but it seems from the flow of Daniel 7, Revelation 6, Matthew 24 and Revelation 13 that this persecution will probably arise at some point after the great wars that bring the beast and / or Antichrist himself to power.

THE SIXTH SEAL – THE HEAVENS AND EARTH SHAKEN

In Revelation 6:12-14 God shakes the heavens and the earth and John sees that “every mountain and island was moved out of its place”. This appears to be a very serious and late stage of things deep into the tribulation, especially given that parallel events are seen in Revelation 16:18,20. Further indications of this timing come from the fact that the preceding verse of Revelation 6:12 parallels the prophecy of Joel which says:

The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come.

(Joel 2:31)

Nevertheless the timing of events towards the end of chapter 6 are hard to pin down with complete certainty. One seal remains unopened at the end of Revelation 6, and out of this seal comes the trumpet and vial judgments. How long is the time assigned to the last seal? Classic evangelical teaching has been that the first six represent the first half of the tribulation and that the last seal represents the second half of the tribulation. This division largely stems from the 1260 days mentioned in Revelation 11:3 as the period of God’s two witnesses. It’s highly possible though that various tribulation events don’t neatly fit into segments, and that events may have overlapping

timelines. Also, the outpouring of God's wrath may well occur over a much shorter timeframe than the 1260 days (nearly 3.5 years), and thus closer to the end of Daniels seventieth prophetic week than often suggested. The most difficult thing to reconcile about the timing of Revelation 6 is that it appears to run almost right to the end of the tribulation, and yet chapters 7-11 appear to follow consecutively on from it (due to the pattern of seals and trumpets), and between them contain events that must span at least several months or more. (The locust plague alone is recorded as being five months.) It is not unlike Prophecy to show something and then go back over in more detail, yet in this case such an explanation doesn't seem entirely sufficient. Although it gives the impression that the Lord's return is about to occur in verses 16-17, it is perhaps not immediately imminent. It seems that just prior to the outpouring of God's wrath the events of verses 12-14 cause great fear to come upon mankind along with an awareness that the time of God's wrath has come (v 17). And so it is perhaps just with this awareness that they try to hide from his face, not necessarily because he is about to appear at that moment.

These latter verses of Revelation 6 also seem to tie in with the following in Luke:

"And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

(Luke 21:25-26)

This doesn't help us a lot though on the matter of timing, for in Luke these verses are immediately followed by the return of the Lord which doesn't occur in Revelation until the last trumpet (of the seven that came out of the seventh seal) is sounded in chapter 11. This may however just be because the Luke account is a highly summarized version of events.

Perhaps the key point here is that we need to remain a little flexible in our thinking in terms of how the timing of the latter verses of chapter 6 pans out. Wherever exactly those final verses fit in, the great significance of Revelation 6 is that it provides a general overview of the tribulation period prior to (or even including) the judgment of God up to the point of where the appearing of Jesus seems reasonably imminent. As such it establishes the order of a number of key events, and when combined with related threads of scripture forms a key part of our insight into the tribulation period.

THE 144,000

Revelation 7

Many evangelicals claim that during the tribulation 144,000 Jews will be marching through the world proclaiming the gospel, resulting in the conversion of the “great multitude which no man can number” (Rev 7:9) who are martyred for their faith during that time (Rev 7:14 & Rev 6:9). But do they really know that? Does the bible actually teach this anywhere? The truth is that this concept is a case of if we believe A and we believe B then C must surely be the case. What if A is incorrect in the first place, or if A + B does not equal C?

What I think we should start by affirming though is that the 144,000 are Jews. (Yes, really, not elite Jehovah’s Witnesses after all.)

Revelation chapter 7, verse 4 reads:

And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed.

(Revelation 7:4)

...and it goes on to specifically name each of the tribes.

If we understand the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic covenant, and the clear statement that all Israel will eventually be saved (in Romans 11:25-27), then there is absolutely no justification for not taking the specific mention of the tribes at face value.

The scene we have in Revelation 7 is really not too difficult to understand. In Revelation 6 we see the opening of the first six seals during the time of the tribulation prior to the final outpouring of divine wrath. At the start of Revelation 8 we see the opening of the seventh seal and the time of wrath beginning. Revelation 7 is a pause in between while God places a seal on 144,000 Jews who he wants to protect from the wrath to come. Christians are said to be “sealed with the Holy Spirit”, so this may refer to a moment when they supernaturally receive the Holy Spirit and become born again as well, though it may also just be God marking them out to be spared (without them necessarily even knowing it).

Also in chapter 7 we see again the Martyr’s of the tribulation that we saw in Revelation 6:9-11:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

(Revelation 7:9)

These are mostly gentiles (though could include Jews), since they come out of all the nations. They are also a great multitude and it's clear from the Revelation 6 context that they are those killed during the intense persecution of believers that arises during the tribulation.

The assumption that is made by pre-tribulation rapture advocates is that, since there are obviously great multitudes of gentile believers present during the tribulation, and since 144,000 Jews are sealed in the same chapter that mentions them (now martyred), then the 144,000 Jews must be the evangelists that proclaim the gospel to them during the tribulation and bring them to saving faith. But here's the problem. In the flow of the first seven seals in Revelation chapters 6-8 the 144,000 are only sealed at the end of the tribulation (after the sixth seal), after the persecution and martyrdom of most of the believers (during the fifth seal). The order is all wrong for them to be the evangelists who bring the great multitude to faith. On the other hand pre-wrath or post-trib theories on the rapture don't suffer from this problem since they simply conclude that the great multitude are the genuine Christians in the world who entered the tribulation, or were saved during it, and that the Jews spared during the final cataclysms are just that, not necessarily anything more. If anything (in terms of evangelists) they may be the group that brings Israel as a whole to saving faith in Messiah right at the end of the time of Jacobs Trouble, precipitating the return of Messiah.

So, a relatively straight forward chapter but one often clouded by a great deal of potentially mythological speculations.

RISE OF THE BEAST

Revelation 13

Revelation thirteen is such a clear narrative that it lends itself to a form of paraphrasing; substituting the best understanding we have of the various imagery into the text and elaborating further based on other texts.

John stood on the sand next to the sea and he saw an empire rising up out of the sea of peoples and nations. It resembled a beast with seven heads and ten horns, and on each horn a crown, for the horns represent ten kings (or rulers) who shall rule for a short time¹.

Now this kingdom (or empire) that he saw was like a leopard in the speed of its conquest, its feet strong like a bear as it trampled the nations and it had a mouth that was as bold and as proud as that of a lion. Satan gave the kingdom its power and great authority to rule. One of the parts of the kingdom (or one of the kings) seemed vanquished (or killed), yet suddenly achieved great victory, so that the entire world marveled and worshipping the beast saying, "Who is like the beast and who can make war with him"?

Then the beast opened its mouth and its leaders began to speak against God and against God's people, and throughout the kingdom there was much persecution of the saints. But all the rest of the world worshiped the empire and its leaders.

Then two great figures arose, overshadowing or displacing the power of the ten kings before them. One was the ultimate Antichrist, the complete embodiment of Satan upon the earth². The other was the false prophet³ who proclaims the Antichrist as messiah. The Antichrist performs great deceiving wonders; even making fire come down from the sky so that people think he is a god. His ability to do miracles comes from his command over the satanic part of the supernatural world (just as Pharaoh's magicians could repeat some of the miracles of Moses⁴).

The Antichrist then set up an idol (much as Nebuchadnezzar did), however this idol is able to speak.⁵ Then he commands that all the people of the earth receive a mark on their hand or forehead and if

they don't receive this mark they will not be allowed to buy or sell, thus being completely cut off from the economic system.

Addition from Rev15:2: But many shall reject the beast and reject the idol and reject the mark, and these are ultimately seen standing on a sea of glass playing heavenly music and singing the song of Moses that starts "Great and marvelous are your works, Lord God almighty...".

JUDGMENT OF THE GREAT HARLOT

Revelation 17 & 18

Wedged between the seven bowls of God's wrath being poured out on the earth in Revelation 16 and the return of Christ in Revelation 19, chapters 17 & 18 focus on the destruction of "Mystery, Babylon the great". In terms of the flow of tribulation events, the timing of these chapters seems to be established in the chapter before, chapter 16, where the judgment of Babylon is mentioned along with other judgments poured out in the seventh bowl.

... And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath.

(Revelation 16:19)

Thus chapters 18 & 19 are a detailed expansion of this chapter 16 event and their timing needs to be viewed in the context of this rather than as events that directly follow on from the end of chapter 16.

IDENTITY OF THE HARLOT

Although there are further layers to deal with, we'll start by looking at the reasonably plain and well established interpretation of chapter 17; an interpretation that really does seem compelling from the biblical text and it's relation to history.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication."

(Revelation 17:1-3)

In verse 15 of the same chapter “the harlot sitting on many waters” is interpreted as “peoples, multitudes, nations and languages”, thus the harlot obviously has some kind of influence or dominion over people from many parts of the globe. That the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her clearly speaks of some kind of unholy union between the great harlot and political powers. This suggests straight away that the great harlot is not primarily a political power; otherwise she would simply be one of them rather than described as entering into fornication with them. The most common interpretation is that these verses refer to Catholicism, or to the apostate church as a whole. (Ultimately there may be little difference between these two versions of the interpretation since the direction of the apostate Protestant church appears to be back towards union with Roman Catholicism anyway.) As a system Catholicism has its roots in the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the empire by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century AD. Apart from being a hybrid of the former pagan religions of the Roman Empire and the thoughts and terminology of Christianity, another of its defining characteristics has always been the extremely close relationship it’s maintained with the world powers. Though undergoing many changes in form over time, this characteristic is most clearly visible during the period of “The Holy Roman Empire¹”; a period of over 1000 years during which the kings of Europe were more or less subject to the pope.

So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

(Revelation 17:3)

Here the harlot is pictured as being the rider of “the beast”, a term which from Revelation 13 and the prophecies of Daniel we clearly understand to refer to empire; thus she is shown as somehow riding (or controlling) the empire. There is an interesting tension between a rider and the beast being ridden. Who is really in control? Theoretically the rider, but ultimately the beast is actually the one in control (as anyone who has been thrown off a horse will probably agree). In verse 16 of this chapter the beast turns against the woman to make her desolate and burn her with fire. Why? Well apart from the fact that God puts it in the heart of the beast to fulfill his purpose (v17), we could also speculate that while the harlot may serve the purposes of the empire in its rise to power, on gaining absolute ascendancy the powers of empire may come to resent the meddling of the harlot. It may also be that the Antichrist, while happy to use apostate Christendom to bring multitudes to worship him, may ultimately seek to bring in a form of pure Satanism that is incompatible even with highly apostate Christendom.

The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written:

MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.

(Revelation 17: 4-6)

Here the great harlot is shown as being outwardly glorious but inwardly full of abomination. She is also connected in a mysterious way to Babylon, which is described as “the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth”. Alexander Hislop’s book, *The Two Babylons*², is the classic work tracing the clear spiritual connection between Roman Catholicism and the “Mystery Religions” of Babylon (which are also the root of sun cults, occult practice, the New Age and many other false religions). Therefore, given the Babylonish roots of Roman Catholicism, the common interpretation of “Mystery, Babylon the great” in Revelation as speaking spiritually of Catholicism is a compelling one.

Yet another clue to the identity of the harlot is given in verse six where we see her as the great persecutor of the true followers of Jesus. To the reformers, fresh out of the bloodbath of Catholic persecution, this clearly spoke of Roman Catholicism. However, since some reformed movements later wedded themselves to the secular powers and as a result also ended up persecuting and killing more radically bible based Christians (such as the Anna Baptists), it is questionable whether this mark of identification could be pinned on Roman Catholicism alone.

EMPIRES AND KINGS

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition.

(Revelation 17: 8)

In attempting to interpret this we are now heading into slightly more speculative territory, however if we continue with the understanding of prophecies concerning empires that we’ve gained so far then this may refer to the Roman Empire that previously was, that is not (during an interlude

between its stages), will rise again to become the end times empire, but will ultimately be judged and destroyed. There may be variations on this that are feasible, however given the intrinsic connection set out in the book of Daniel between the Roman Empire and the empire of end times this seems the most straight forward and reasonable interpretation.

“Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time. The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition.

(Revelation 17: 9-11)

Here we are given the interpretation of the seven heads of the beast. Given that it is the interpretation it makes sense to take it literally (as seven mountains) rather than look for further symbolic meaning. Thus it seems fair that people have often connected “the seven mountains” of this passage with the city of Rome, referred to at times in the past as “The City Of Seven Hills” (dating from when the smaller size of the city only encompassed that number of hills). Obviously the significance of any possible connection with Rome is that Rome is where the Vatican is located and thus it is the seat of Roman Catholicism. As for the kings in the vision, does the fact that there are seven (for even the eighth is one of the seven) bear any relationship to the seven heads of the beast? We’ll expand on the possibilities here later, however if Catholicism is the main focus of the passage then it could perhaps refer to kings (or kingdoms) which over time have been, or are yet to be, under the direct or indirect control of Catholicism. What we can tell for sure is that these kings are a succession of kings (unlike the 10 kings we see afterwards who reign concurrently with one another). That they are a series of kings is clear because of the seven only one is present at the time the vision relates to, while five are past and another is yet future. There is also an eighth, presumably the final Antichrist (who is also said to be one of the seven). This sounds confusing but we’ll come back to it soon and hopefully find that it’s not too hard to understand.

Now, turning our attention to another group of kings:

“The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast. These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.”

(Revelation 17: 12-14)

The ten kings represented by the ten horns receive no kingdom of their own, yet each has authority one hour with the beast. These are not a succession of kings but reign at the same time as each other, presumably over different geographical areas. As such they are also not historical to the time of the vision but relate very much to end times since they give their authority and power to the beast. Most likely these ten are world leaders in the final world empire who align themselves to the service of the Antichrist; perhaps as regional presidents or something of that nature.

Now skipping over verses 16 & 17, which we discussed earlier, one final clue is given to the identity of the woman.

And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth."

(Revelation 17: 18)

Here again relating the great harlot of Chapter 17 to Roman Catholicism seems to fit, since through the Roman Caesars, then later through the popes, the city of Rome could be said to have ruled over the kings of the earth for at least 1600 years. Relating it only to the physical city though would make it hard to apply all the other clues of this chapter, therefore since Roman Catholicism is so intrinsically connected to the city of Rome, defining "The Church of Rome" as "that great city" (Rome) seems fitting, especially when viewed from the religious and political circumstances of the middle ages.

A SPANNER IN THE WORKS

If we only had to deal with chapter 17 in terms of Babylon and the judgment of the harlot we would be on easier ground. However chapter 18 introduces perspectives that call into question the simplicity of the interpretation we focused on for chapter 17. While the interpretation offered for 17 still seems very compelling, and is almost sure to be at the very least an earlier fulfillment of a pattern, in chapter 18 the focus is more clearly on "a literal city", and there are statements that suggest very different ways of looking at things. For instance, let's look at the reaction the world has to the destruction of the city:

The merchants of these things, who became rich by her, will stand at a distance for fear of her torment, weeping and wailing, and saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls! For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.' Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, 'What is like this great city?' 'They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth! For in one hour she is made desolate.'

(Revelation 18: 15-19)

Does this really seem fitting for modern Rome? Terms like “what is like this great city?” imply something of much greater magnitude and importance than the city of Rome (at least in its present form).

Some people suggest that the term “Mystery, Babylon the great” may actually relate to Washington, a city whose very architecture is firmly rooted in the occult. Although relating well to a period of American ascendancy in the world, this interpretation would be hard to link to attributes such as “being drunk with the blood of the martyrs”, unless this kind of persecution one day emanated from Washington. Another suggestion given is that the city of Babylon (in Iraq) will ultimately be rebuilt into a fabulous world city which will be the epicenter of the Antichrist’s kingdom in the end times (at least until the Antichrist destroys it). This could be the case, which would presumably imply that end times are not immediately imminent since Babylon is far from being of much significance at the time of writing this. Further supporting the idea that literal Babylon is rebuilt in end times is the fact that prophecies concerning its total and permanent destruction have never been fulfilled.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans’ pride, will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It will never be inhabited, nor will it be settled from generation to generation; nor will the Arabian pitch tents there, nor will the shepherds make their sheepfolds there.

(Isaiah 13: 19-20)

The simple truth is that, while Babylon is not of much significance today, it is inhabited. That it is totally destroyed at some point does not automatically imply that it must first become a great city again, but the possibility is there. If this is the correct interpretation of Revelation 18 then it may also suggest a movement of power from the “Christian West” to the “Islamic East” (unless the West

ultimately takes control of the Middle East, a scenario that is not entirely unlikely given its actions so far in Iraq and Afghanistan, Libya, etc).

RELIGIOUS BABYLON VERSES POLITICAL BABYLON

One way commentators have dealt with the discrepancies between chapters 17 and 18 has often been to divide them into “Religious Babylon” (17) and “Political Babylon” (18). There is no clear justification from the chapters themselves for doing this since they pretty much run together as one narrative; however the apparent differences in their focus do make it a reasonable possibility. If this is the case then chapter 17 may well be largely fulfilled historically by Roman Catholicism, while chapter 18 remains yet to be fulfilled in terms of a pre-eminent center of the final world empire. The connection that would tie the two together would be their “Babylonian spirit”. In other words similarities in their religious and philosophical systems, in particular perhaps in the way they merge the worlds of religion and monetary with political power.

THE SPIRIT OF BABYLON

Although very compelling, and no doubt accurate at a certain level, it may be that interpreting chapter 17 as being all about Roman Catholicism (or even the apostate church as a whole) is simplistic. Perhaps a more complete way of looking at it would be to see chapter 17 as being about “the spirit of Babylon” present in the world from the Babylonian Kingdom itself down to end times. The characteristics of this spirit being the same wherever it manifests in the kingdoms of man. A religious spirit that:

- Seeks to be the guiding force behind political power
- Loves money and power and intoxicates its citizens with the same love
- Seeks to glorify itself upon the earth
- Persecutes the true followers of God

In seeing things this way it becomes much easier to understand 17:10 concerning the seven kings (out of which the Antichrist becomes the eighth). Rather than being related specifically to Rome, or Roman Catholicism, these may represent seven past kingdoms on the earth that have embodied the spirit of Babylon (the terms “king” and “kingdom” often proving synonymous in prophecy). This also

would explain how Antichrist can be the eighth and yet also one of the seven. If the Roman Empire was one of the seven Babylonish kingdoms then the final world empire of Antichrist, being intrinsically connected with the Empire of Rome in prophecy, could both be the eight and (by its connection to the original Roman Empire) be seen as one of the seven. Note that it does not say that the eighth is the seventh; rather that it is one of the seven. In between the Roman Empire and the final world empire (that is intrinsically related to it) sits at least one other empire that embodies the spirit of Babylon, the “Holy Roman Empire” of Roman Catholic ascendancy during the dark ages. Thus Revelation chapter 17 can be very much about Catholicism, and yet also be about the Babylonish systems both before and after it. Looking at things in this wider context not only makes sense of the how in chapter 17 there can be eight kings (in a succession over time / kingdoms) and also ten kings (concurrent with the Antichrist in the last kingdom), but it also makes it much easier to understand the transition from Revelation chapter 17 to chapter 18. Whereas chapter 17 describes a spirit, or a pattern, running right through time to its final incarnation, chapter 18 seems to describe the judgment of the city at the power centre of the final world empire; the last empire to embody the false religious Spirit of Babylon.

THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

Zechariah 11,12

Zechariah tells us that in the dark days immediately prior to the return of the Lord, all the surrounding nations will lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem. He goes on to reveal that at this time of terrible national peril God will pour out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem “the spirit of supplication and of Grace”, bringing about national repentance and with it national restoration.

In looking at these chapters of Zechariah it is necessary to start by dispelling a common misapplication that is often applied to some of their verses. To highlight the nature of the confusion let's look as an example at the following verse and how it is sometimes misinterpreted:

In that day I will make the governors of Judah like a fire pan in the woodpile, and like a fiery torch in the sheaves; they shall devour all the surrounding peoples on the right hand and on the left, but Jerusalem shall be inhabited again in her own place – Jerusalem.

(Zechariah 12:6)

Many have claimed these verses as relating to modern Israel's success in the six day war and other conflicts, but this is clearly taking the prophecy out of context when we consider the narrative of chapters 11 & 12 as a whole. In order to establish the correct context let's start from chapter 11, verse 3 and make a quick pass through these chapters gaining an overview of their meaning.

There is the sound of roaring lions! For the pride of the Jordan is in ruins. Thus says the LORD my God, "Feed the flock for slaughter, whose owners slaughter them and feel no guilt; those who sell them say, 'Blessed be the LORD, for I am rich'; and their shepherds do not pity them. For I will no longer pity the inhabitants of the land," says the LORD. "But indeed I will give everyone into his neighbor's hand and into the hand of his king. They shall attack the land, and I will not deliver them from their hand."

(Zechariah 11:1-6)

We see here that the Lord completely turns the nation over to devastation. Given that aspects of the verses following clearly relate to the time of Jesus first coming (verses 12 & 13, the religious leaders

paying 30 pieces of silver for Judas's betrayal of Jesus and that money ultimately being used to buy the potter's field), then it probably makes sense to understand the verse above as belonging to the same general era, and therefore to see them as having been fulfilled in the destruction of the Jewish nation by the Romans (which culminated in the final taking of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in 70AD).

So I fed the flock for slaughter, in particular the poor of the flock. I took for myself two staves: the one I called Beauty, and the other I called Bonds; and I fed the flock. I dismissed the three shepherds in one month. My soul loathed them, and their soul also abhorred me. Then I said, "I will not feed you. Let what is dying die, and what is perishing perish. Let those that are left eat each other's flesh." And I took my staff, Beauty, and cut it in two, that I might break the covenant which I had made with all the peoples. So it was broken on that day. Thus the poor of the flock, who were watching me, knew that it was the word of the LORD. Then I said to them, "If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not, refrain." So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter.

(Zechariah 11:7-13)

Beauty (also translated "Grace") is cut off. God cuts off his covenant of protection with the nation because of their rejection of Messiah. This is surely why they have experienced 2000 years of suffering, because God has for a time cut off his protection. Israel may be likened in this situation to a backslidden Christian. The promises to them are still to be fulfilled, but for a time they are turned over to the devil that through suffering and loss repentance may come.

In verse 8 God also dismisses the three Sheppard's of the nation that abhorred him. Some interpret this as prophet, priest and king and Israel really hasn't had a true prophet, priest or king since the wars between the Jews and the Romans that led to the scattering of the nation not long after the time of Christ.

Then, straight away, a contrast is drawn between the Sheppard rejected, and a foolish Sheppard that will follow.

For indeed I will raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for those who are cut off, nor seek the young, nor heal those that are broken, nor feed those that still stand. But he will eat the flesh of the fat and tear their hooves in pieces. "Woe to the worthless shepherd, Who leaves the flock! A sword shall be against his arm And against his right eye; His arm shall completely wither, And his right eye shall be totally blinded."

(Zechariah 11:16-17)

This foolish Sheppard is believed by many to be the Antichrist. If so it suggests that having rejected the true Messiah they will for a time follow a false Messiah. It is no doubt significant that some religious Jews today say that they will know Messiah because he will help them rebuild their temple. Yet concerning the temple, II Thessalonians speaks of the Antichrist as one who:

...opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

(II Thessalonians 2:4)

So if he does help them to build the temple, his hidden intent will be that he may ultimately sit as God in it.

Now, carrying on into Zechariah chapter 12:

The burden of the word of the LORD against Israel. Thus says the LORD, who stretches out the heavens, lays the foundation of the earth, and forms the spirit of man within him: "Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples, when they lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it.

(Zechariah 12:1-3)

Here we see Jerusalem besieged by a multi-national force of great size. The context of this certainly seems to be the modern restored nation of Israel in the last days since it is at this time, at the point of the nation's greatest calamity, that the LORD himself intercedes.

In that day," says the LORD, "I will strike every horse with confusion, and its rider with madness; I will open My eyes on the house of Judah, and will strike every horse of the peoples with blindness. And the governors of Judah shall say in their heart, 'The inhabitants of Jerusalem are my strength in the LORD of hosts, their God.' In that day I will make the governors of Judah like a firepan in the woodpile, and like a fiery torch in the sheaves; they shall devour all the surrounding peoples on the right hand and on the left, but Jerusalem shall be inhabited again in her own place—Jerusalem. "The LORD will save the tents of Judah first, so that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall not become greater than that of Judah. In that day the LORD will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; the one who is feeble among them in that day shall be like

David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the Angel of the LORD before them. It shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.

(Zechariah 12:4-9)

Despite some possible foreshadowing similarities, this passage is NOT about any of Israel's wars of the last 60 years, which is made clear by what follows:

"And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.

(Zechariah 12:10)

You see, at the time of this prophecy's fulfillment Israel turns in repentance to their Messiah. This did not happen after the six day war.

This is elaborated on as follows:

... And the land shall mourn, every family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of Shimei by itself, and their wives by themselves; all the families that remain, every family by itself, and their wives by themselves.

(Zechariah 12:11-14)

There is deep national mourning for their rejection of Messiah, and so with this national repentance comes national restoration and their Messiah returns to save them, just as Hosea also writes when the Lord says through him:

I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early.

(Hosea 5:15)

So it really is quite clear what Zechariah chapters 11 & 12 are about and the context within which their verses should be interpreted. In the case of all the world's armies gathering against Israel, and their miraculous victory over them, the timing is undoubtedly the last days of the tribulation.

THE MYSTERY OF AN INDEPENDENT ISRAEL

If we stop and consider the Zechariah passages it shouldn't take us too long to notice that it is hard to reconcile the situation of Israel as an independent nation at the end of the tribulation in Zechariah with the prophecy in Revelation 11:2 which tells us that the Gentiles "will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months", seemingly in the latter half of the tribulation. If we add up the accounts of Revelation 11 and Zechariah 12 the most logical conclusion is that a significant event must happen in between the gentile occupation of Jerusalem and the later siege by the gentile armies surrounding Jerusalem. Consider:

Revelation 11 - Gentiles occupy Jerusalem for 42 months, presumably making it part of the kingdom of the beast.

Zechariah 12 - Gentiles surround an independent Jerusalem preparing to attack her.

From this there seems to be one inescapable conclusion. Somehow Jerusalem (and perhaps the wider areas of Judah) break free from the kingdom of Antichrist.

We don't really know how this happens, but here is a fairly plausible theory. In the latter part of the tribulation we know that the Antichrist's kingdom comes under plague after plague and many terrible devastations. What better time would there be for Israel to throw off the occupying power than during this time of trouble. In many ways the Jews fight for independence in the end times could be seen to pick up where the wars of the Jews against the Romans left off (when the Jews were crushed, defeated and scattered among the nations shortly after the time of Christ). Thus the wars of the Jews and end times may be intimately connected in prophecy. For instance Zechariah 11 appears to start with the wars of the Jews, and Zechariah 12 with the siege against Jerusalem in the last days. In chapter 11 they are defeated, but in chapter 12 they are victorious even as they mourn for the one they pierced. These two parts of the same old war flow consecutively in the passages, yet are vastly different in outcome and therefore clearly quite separate events.

If the general thrust of this speculation concerning Israel and the beast is accurate, then it gives a clue as to why the nations are gathered against Jerusalem in chapter 12. Perhaps in the world scene, picked up on at this point in Zechariah, the Jews will have only just thrown off the occupation of "the beast". Thus the gathering of surrounding armies against her may in fact be the counter attack of the beast against a rebellious Israel. Presumably they come to destroy this stubborn and fiercely independent Jewish nation; the nation that continually rebelled against a whole succession of gentile empires. They resisted Babylon, were destroyed but came back into the land during the time of the Persians. They rebelled against the Seleucid rule of Antiochus and freed themselves of external rule

for a time. They rebelled against Roman rule and were scattered and destroyed, yet were reestablished as a nation nearly 2000 years later. From the combined word of prophecy we know that yet once more they are to be occupied, trampled down and nearly destroyed. But, that in this last instance, when they fight back they will after coming to the brink of annihilation ultimately be victorious as Christ empowers them and returns to fight for them. Then finally at this time the nation will be free from all influence of gentile powers, and free to serve its God as Messiah establishes his kingdom over all the earth.

THE RAPTURE

Pre-millennialists believe that there will be a literal 1000yr millennial reign starting from the time of Christ's return and preceded by a time of tribulation. Within pre-millennial circles there is however considerable debate about the timing of what is typically referred to as "the rapture". The rapture is the time most clearly spoken about by II Thessalonians 4 and I Corinthians 15:51-53 where believers still alive on the earth will be caught up to the Lord at his return. The three main views on the timing of this are called pre-trib, mid-trib and post-trib. In other words, they denote whether this catching up to be with the Lord occurs before the tribulation, during it or near the end of it at Christ's second coming to the Earth. Is it all just too confusing, or is one answer clearly correct?

Proponents of pre-tribulation rapture have a complete and well thought out theological argument behind their position; however the main strength of the theory may lie in the following piece of logic:

Surely God will not pour out his divine wrath on his own children. This, presented in one wording or another, is the ultimate trump card of most pre-trib advocates. It appears further backed up by scriptures such as:

For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(I Thessalonians 5:9)

But is this line of argument as convincing as it first appears? The first and most major hole is that, even according to pre-trib theory, there are a group of saved children of God who do go through the tribulation – those who are saved in it. Thus, pre-tribulation rapture in itself does not solve the problem of how God judges the world without pouring out divine wrath on those who are his own. To play this issue down pre-trib advocates tend to call those saved in the tribulation "tribulation saints" rather than "Christians", and usually say that they are more akin to the saints of the Old Testament in their position before God. This latter point is based on the idea that after the pre-trib rapture the "church age" is over and Israel is back in prophetic view. There are problems here though. First, it's quite clear from scripture that Christ comes only when Israel as a nation repents (Zechariah 12:10-11, Hosea 5:15). Thus Israel at a national level is still in unbelief during most of the

tribulation, so while Israel is mentioned a few of times in Revelation it's questionable whether the church age is immediately over. Second, aligning those saved with the Old Testament saints is in a sense undoing the New Covenant. It makes no sense to think that anyone saved both after the establishing of the New Covenant and after Christ's sacrificial death are somehow in the category of Old Testament saints – it's a completely artificial idea.

Now, going back to the verse about Christians not being appointed to wrath. The first thing to say here is that Christians definitely are spared the outpouring of God's wrath, the only question being whether they are spared it while still on the earth, or whether they are completely removed from this world before it is poured out. If we take the former view then it's actually perhaps most natural to end up in the mid-trib camp. The mid-trib rapture teaching correctly points out that the tribulation has two phases. Much of it is simply major troubles on the Earth such as wars, violence, famines, pestilence, etc. Only the latter part of the tribulation (half or less) is actually the supernatural outpouring of God's divine wrath. Thus Christians could be present up until just prior to God's wrath being poured out. Is there an event part way through the tribulation that suggests this view? Some say the latter parts of Revelation 11 are just that.

In the same hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. In the earthquake seven thousand people were killed, and the rest were afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second woe is past. Behold, the third woe is coming quickly. Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: "We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, Because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, And the time of the dead, that they should be judged, And that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, And those who fear Your name, small and great, And should destroy those who destroy the earth." Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail.

(Revelation 11:13-19)

Convincing? Indeed, yet the idea of applying these verses to a mid-trib rapture is completely flawed. These verses occur in the middle of the book, but not in the middle of the tribulation. It's quite clear if you study the book of Revelation thoroughly that these verses belong to the very end of the tribulation period. A number of events in them line up with events spoken of at the end of the

tribulation, most notably the verse about it being the time to judge the dead and reward the saints. This is picked up on again in Revelation 20. And, just to further affirm that Revelation is not entirely consecutive time-wise, note that the first verses in Revelation 12 (immediately following the passage we just looked at) clearly start from a time even before the birth of Christ. The timelines of Revelation are another whole topic, however in a general sense they are similar to the book of Daniel which lays down the big picture, then makes another pass over it in more detail and finally opens up even more detail about particularly important events near the end. Revelation chapter six broadly covers events right through to the time just before Christ's coming, and Revelation 11 also takes the reader right through to this time. The full details of his coming are not however given until chapters 19 & 20. So the book is laid down in layers, much as an artist paints a portrait by first painting the outline then going over it adding detail, and then again with still more detail. Thus getting back to the mid-trib view, the problem with it is that a clear understanding of the timing of events in Revelation leaves it with no obvious verses to hang on.

So, is there an answer or only endless speculation? At this point it wouldn't hurt to look at what Christians believed up until around 1830. It seems that in all of the two thousand year history of the church there are only a tiny number of examples of pre-trib rapture being taught before 1830, and none in the early church (before the Constantinian change and the birth of that Christian-Pagan hybrid we call Catholicism). For instance, the most recent identifiable teaching on pre-trib rapture prior to 1830 comes from a Catholic Jesuit priest, Emmanuel Lacunza who outlined this theory in his 1812 book, *The Coming Of Messiah In Glory And Majesty*. Oddly the rebirth of this idea around 1830 may also have had Catholic origins as you'll see from what follows.

There is an interesting book first published in 1983 entitled "The Great Rapture Hoax¹". In it the author, Dave MacPherson, quotes writings expressing the views of well known and respected early church writers, church fathers, reformers, radicals, revival preachers and some modern teachers too. This list is virtually a who's who of church writers from the beginning until now. They may collectively have many differences in viewpoint, but on the matter of the "catching up" into the air of believers left on the earth and the second coming of Jesus they all expressed the same thought; that these events are one. In addition to this Dave MacPherson presents his research into the roots of the pre-trib idea, arguing that it started with the vision of an 18 year old Catholic girl called Mary Macdonald in Scotland in 1830. Now history is often somewhat debatable, nevertheless it's worth reading his account of things. Apparently a secretive sect, the Catholic Apostolic church, picked up on Mary Macdonald's vision and it became their accepted doctrine. John Darby of the Plymouth brethren also visited Mary Macdonald during the summer of 1830, and though he commented

afterwards that she quoted the scriptures out of context he became more and more interested in pre-trib rapture, ultimately making it his own and forming a complete theology around it, though it's possible he had come to this conclusion prior to meeting Mary Macdonald; it's hard to say for sure. Either way Darby went on to travel all over the western world preaching and promoting this new doctrine. As his own notes actually record he often did this subtly at first, recognizing that it was a new thought and that most people were not ready to accept it straight away.

But if the rapture actually occurs at the coming of Christ (towards the very end of the tribulation), how do we answer the question posed earlier regarding God pouring out his wrath on his own children? Well first, let's remind ourselves that because there are people who are saved during the tribulation (thus becoming God's children), the idea of the rapture occurring prior to the tribulation does not solve this question anyway. Nevertheless answering this question is still important to our understanding. Perhaps the first part of the answer to it is to understand that there may be very few Christians left on Earth at the time of Christ's coming. Daniel and Revelation both teach that the Antichrist makes "war against the saints" and prevails against them. It seems as though an epic struggle occurs in that the Antichrist makes war against God's people and God makes war against the kingdom of the Antichrist. You will recall that in Joshua chapter 10 God rained down hailstones on the armies of the five kings as they fled before the pursuing Israelites. Note that there were no Israelite casualties. God can be very accurate and is quite able to pour out judgment on the kingdom of the beast without hurting his own people. This appears to be a pretty good picture in light of the following words of Jesus on what would happen at the end of the world:

"So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth and sever the wicked from among the just".

(Matthew 13:49)

Notice he says that the angels sever the wicked "from amongst the just". He does not say that God takes away the just first then pours out his wrath on the wicked.

For many, questioning pre-tribulation rapture is unthinkable. When people have read the scripture through a certain lens for many years their framework of thought becomes embedded, and it is often both difficult and discomfoting to rethink things from a different angle. Also, as the majority evangelical belief concerning the timing of the rapture, pre-trib ideas are constantly re-enforced by church culture (almost incessantly in some circles). And it does have its own apparent logic,

however post-tribulation rapture really is the plainest, most straight forward and natural reading of the bible. Here are a few more notes supporting this perspective:

The First Resurrection

Chapter 20 of Revelation speaks of “the first resurrection”, and in the context of the surrounding chapters there is absolutely no mistaking that it is at the end of the tribulation. However these verses are used with regard to pre-tribulation rapture in some pretty scholarly circles, even though they don’t fit at all. You see, if there was a pre-tribulation rapture as a separate event to the first resurrection, then the first resurrection would not actually be the first resurrection but the second (since the rapture would have preceded it). This would then make the second resurrection (of the unbelieving dead) the third resurrection, not the second. Now perhaps you are thinking, ‘but wait – the rapture is of living people off the earth, not dead people from the grave’. Popular culture has emphasized this but the bible actually emphasizes that it is a resurrection of dead people, yet that those Christians who still remain on the earth at the time are also caught up in it. (“The dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain”. End of II Thessalonians 3: 16.)

The resurrection at the last day

Martha says of Lazarus:

I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day

(John 11:24)

Jesus says in the verse afterwards, “I am the resurrection and the life”. Do you see it yet? When Jesus returns the graves are opened because he is the resurrection and the life. This is the rapture, albeit our focus has been on the Christians remaining alive that are also caught up in it. It’s important to understand that the rapture is from an earthly perspective. It’s certainly not from a heavenly one since Jesus said to the thief on the cross:

...today you will be with Me in paradise.

(Luke 23:43)

Saints who have died are already alive with Christ in heaven and it is their return to the earth with him that is seen from an earthly perspective as the resurrection.

Corinthians and the resurrection

The less often quoted verses that totally parallel the II Thessalonians 4 account are I Corinthians 15:51-53. If you read the passage you will see it's all about the resurrection of the dead and what kind of body they are resurrected in.

Common speculations

Pre-tribulation rapture is based on some considerable speculations. One of these relates to II Thessalonians 2:6 where the verse indicates that some power, probably the Holy Spirit, is restraining evil from running its full course until the appointed time. Pre-tribulation theorists extend this to meaning that when this restraint is removed this somehow automatically means that the Holy Spirit is completely removed from the earth and thus the believers with it. But then, where do the great multitude of saved which no man can number (who are killed in the tribulation) come from? (Revelation 7:9,14). Surely you can't say that a great work of God occurs on the earth without the Holy Spirit? It makes a lot more sense to see that these are the saints that enter into the tribulation period, not a whole new breed saved during it. (Though of course many people may be saved during it as well.)

Besides, the II Thessalonians 2 passage is actually evidence that the rapture is not pre-tribulation. Paul is speaking against those who were saying that the day of Christ was imminent at that time or had already passed; pointing out that the day of Christ won't come until after the Antichrist is revealed. So he actually gives Christians the sign of the Antichrist as preceding their expectation of Christ's return.

The Christian expectation

Peter, in his second epistle sets the Christian expectation.

Looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat

(II Peter 3:12)

Anyone studying the Old Testament knows that 'the day of God', 'the day of the Lord', 'That great day of God Almighty', and so on, is the whole focus of prophecy and clearly understood as being the

day(s) when the Lord shall destroy the kingdoms of man and establish his own kingdom over all the earth.

At the last trumpet

In I Corinthians 15:52 (which is clearly parallel to the I Thessalonians 4 verses), the verse says that the resurrection will occur at the last trumpet. In a non pre-trib view there is no reason not to accept that this is at the last trumpet sounded in Revelation 11:15. I Thessalonians 4:16 also mentions “the trumpet of God” in relation to the rapture, thus the exact prophetic timing of the rapture is clearly given, though it will not be possible for those on the earth to know beforehand the exact day or hour that the trumpet will sound.

The prophetic picture as a whole

The whole prophetic picture requires great struggles of intellectual argument to fit together under a pre-tribulation model. When you recognize that the classic rapture passages tie together with the return of the Lord in Revelation 19 and the corresponding first resurrection of Revelation 20, as well as with accounts in Matthew 24, it all starts to fit together and make a lot more sense.

The grafting back on of Israel

It’s somewhat illogical to say that the church age will end before the tribulation and that Israel will come back into focus and be the instrument of preaching the gospel during the tribulation. The response of Israel to the Antichrist is initially that of acceptance. The unbelieving nation of Israel will actually make some kind of covenant with the Antichrist (Daniel 9:27) and will only start to be concerned when he sets himself up as God in the rebuilt temple (II Thessalonians 2:4); probably well into the tribulation period. From about that point the Holy Land will be trodden under foot of the gentiles for three and a half years according to Revelation 11:2, while God preserves a remnant in the wilderness in Revelation 12:14.

Far from Israel coming back to the Lord at the start of the tribulation, it seems that Israel’s eventual repentance is what finally precipitates the return of the Lord.

I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early

(Hosea 5:15).

A plain reading of the most classic of all rapture passages

When do the classic rapture verses in I Thessalonians actually say the rapture takes place?

*For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so **God will bring with Him** those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain **until the coming of the Lord** will by no means precede those who are asleep.*

(I Thessalonians 4:14-15)

This clearly says that God will bring those who died in Christ with Jesus **at the time of his coming**. Then it goes on to describe his coming and how the dead will be raised (meaning that on the earth they will be seen alive again, for since their earthly death they were always present with the Lord in heaven). The part that is new here is the revelation that when this resurrection occurs those saints who remain alive on the earth at the time of his coming will also be caught up in this resurrection of the dead and receive their new resurrection bodies. Since the rapture is clearly tied to the resurrection of the dead saints, what meaning would it have to take it as being a secret event occurring before the tribulation? Since the dead are definitely not raised on the earth before the tribulation (and were already alive in heaven anyway), what would it mean to interpret the passage in this way? You could perhaps say that the dead were raised when they died, yet this wouldn't make sense since the whole passage is about a specific event that happens when the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. On the other hand, if you try and separate the event out so that the living are raptured at the start of the tribulation and the dead in Christ are raised at the first resurrection at the end of the tribulation, then what do you do with the verse that clearly says that the living will not precede the dead in Christ with regards to this event? If we dig down and think through the implications then pre-trib rapture really does produce quite a pile up of conundrums when applied to the very verses the theory has placed so much stock in. On the other hand, accepting that the rapture is just when it says it is (at the coming of the Lord) makes clear and simple sense at all levels, as well as tying in quite naturally with Jesus' own account of the Tribulation. For in Matthew 24:30-31 Jesus speaks of his coming and gathering of the elect in very similar terms, but in that case the event is absolutely and unmistakably tied to his visible second coming to the earth with power and great glory (in the context of 24:26-31).

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

(Matthew 24:30-31)

THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB

Revelation 19

While the church as the betrothed bride of Christ is a widely understood concept, the events surrounding the eventual marriage (the union between Jesus and his church) are often less clearly taught, and in some respects have developed their own mythology. However the marriage of the lamb does, as we'll see, occupy a very clear place in prophecy.

Despite the book of Revelation not being entirely consecutive¹, the last eight chapters do flow fairly chronologically and are all focused on a series of latter events leading up to, inclusive of and following, the return of Jesus Christ.

Let's look at the verse which proclaims that the time of the marriage is come:

"Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready".

(Revelation 19:7)

Here we have this amazing statement, the time that Christ and the church have waited so long for, and it occurs right on the eve of Christ's return to the earth in power and judgment over the wicked governments of man. If we are in any doubt of the connection we only need to see that the few verses in between the two events are linked in that they each start with 'And', 'Then' or 'Now', so that the flow is unmistakable. And if we are at all unsure about the person of the one who comes on a white horse in the passage, it becomes crystal clear later when we read:

He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God.

(Revelation 19:13)

And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

(Revelation 19:16)

So we know this is the return of Jesus, but we probably need to think for a moment to determine who the armies of heaven are that follow him. Look at the parallel between the description of the Lamb's wife in heaven and the armies that follow him at his coming. Of the Lamb's wife it says:

And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

(Revelation 19:8)

And of the armies that follow the Lamb it says:

And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed him on white horses.

(Revelation 19:14)

That it is indeed the saints who follow him at his coming is confirmed in I Thessalonians where it says:

...at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints

(I Thessalonians 3:13)

So where is the marriage in all this? Revelation 19:8 says that it has come, but by verse 17 it has happened since by then we get to the marriage supper of the Lamb. While it is not stated, the coming itself would appear to actually be the marriage. At first this may sound strange, but it's very easy to support.

Before going any further though, let's look at a small dilemma. How is it that of Lazarus it was said "he would rise again in the resurrection at the last day", whereas to the thief on the cross Jesus said "today you shall be with me in paradise"? To understand this we simply need to understand the difference between going to heaven when we die and the first resurrection. The first resurrection is from an earthly perspective. In other words, when those who have died in Christ return with Christ, then from an earthly perspective, those who had died will have risen again. But it has greater significance than this alone. In I Corinthians 15 Paul goes to great lengths to explain the difference between the natural body and the resurrected body:

As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.

(I Corinthians 15:49)

Then he tells us that we shall not all die (physically), but we shall all be changed into the resurrection body:

Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed...

(I Corinthians 15:51)

Earlier in the chapter he explained that the resurrection has a certain order. Speaking of being made alive again he says:

But each one in his own order: Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming.

(I Corinthians 15:23)

Again, how do we reconcile the resurrection at Christ's coming with what Jesus said to the thief on the cross, and the connection Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 5:8 between being absent from the body and present with the Lord? The truth is that the state of believers who have died and gone to heaven is not their final state. Wherever believers are seen in heaven in revelation they are simply described as being clothed in white robes (of righteousness). As we know, in this state they do not seem to be able to enter our physical world, whereas Christ in his resurrected state was able to traverse freely between the heavens and earth. The key thing to understand is that believers in heaven will, at the resurrection, be clothed in their eventual resurrection bodies; bodies like those of the risen Christ. At this point they become of the same type of body as Christ, becoming like him and one with him. The I Corinthians passage flows on from the verses we have been looking at into verses that are completely parallel to the classic Thessalonians rapture verses:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

(I Corinthians 15:52)

Note the duality of the event; the dead are raised and we are changed. This is separated out more in I Thessalonians where it says:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then, we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

(1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17)

Here we have the very same description that Paul associated with the resurrection of the dead in I Corinthians, only here we can see more clearly the emphasis on it being a resurrection of the dead. It simply explains that those Christians remaining on the earth at this time will also be caught up in it. This is the wonderful point at which we shall all finally be brought together with the Lord. This is the marriage of the Lamb to his bride, occurring in a moment at the last day – at his coming. This is the great promise given four times in John chapter six, that all who came to him he would “raise up at the last day”. Do you see this clear link between the resurrection and the marriage? The marriage can’t possibly occur beforehand or there would be a great number of believers still on the earth who would be absent from it, for whatever you think of the tribulation saints it would be ludicrous to say that they are not Christians and are not part of the body of Christ (or bride of Christ).

To summarize, “the day of the Lord” is the focal point of prophecy, both in the Old Testament and the New. It is the day where the saints are rewarded and the kingdoms of man are judged. It is the bringing together of all those who are in Christ at the resurrection to be “ever more with the Lord”. He appears with those who were dead and those Christians who remain are caught up too. He descends on the Earth with this army of the redeemed following him and destroys the armies of the beast. At that time the Antichrist is destroyed and the true Son of God reigns over all the earth, and all his saints with him.

GOG AND MAGOG

Revelation 20, Ezekiel 38,39

Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them.

(Revelation 20:7-9)

Sitting between verses about the millennial reign of Christ (v. 4-6) and the final judgment of the dead (v. 11-14), and followed by chapter 21 which is about the new heavens, the new earth, the new Jerusalem and the eternal state where God makes his home amongst men, the placement of Gog and Magog in the timeline of prophecy is unmistakable. Nevertheless, there are prophecies in scripture that have more than one fulfillment, so the real puzzle when looking at the chapters on Gog and Magog in the book of Ezekiel is to determine whether or not they correlate only to Revelation 20. Furthermore we need to ask whether Ezekiel chapters 38 & 39 speak of the same event, or of two separate fulfillments of a prophetic pattern.

It would be impossible to count how many prophecy teachers have used the account of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel to predict that the Russians will attack Israel, usually in the context of it being at any moment, and that the Russians will then be nuked off the face of the planet. While we should allow a shred of possibility that they may be right, there are a few things about this interpretation that really don't seem right. First, the judgment against Gog and Magog is in all cases described as being personally poured out by God as a divine judgment. Note that it is "I will, I will, I will, I will":

And I will bring him to judgment with pestilence and bloodshed. I will rain down on him, on his troops, and on the many peoples who are with him, flooding rain, great hailstones, fire and brimstone. Thus I will magnify Myself, and I will be known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord.

(Ezekiel 38:22-23)

While God has at times used the agencies of man to execute judgment on a nation, usually unwittingly such as Israel going into captivity in Babylon, God is also able to pour out his own divine wrath as He did on Sodom and Gomorrah. In the case of Gog and Magog, there is a strong indication that this is God executing his judgment himself. He didn't need nuclear weapons to judge Sodom, and he won't need them to judge Gog and Magog. One might also ask how the use of mans weapons would magnify God and make him "known in the eyes of many nations". There is a real danger that some Christian interpretations could actually help fuel despotic thinking in governments and fool Christians into going along with it. It is probably a corrupt vision of Christianity when men start to think that they, and their technology, are instruments for metering out divine judgment on this earth.

The second thing that is bothering about the "nuke the Russians" interpretation is that it never seems to mention the verse we started with from Revelation. This is because it is always preached on as being something that occurs at the start of, or during, the tribulation, whereas the verses in Revelation suggest that these events occur at the end of the millennial reign. Even if we come to the conclusion that the Ezekiel prophecy has more than one fulfillment, wouldn't it be honest to at least talk about what would seem to be the primary interpretation of the chapter 38 prophecy.

Thirdly, the connection to Russia is not proven at all. In Ezekiel 38:3 it says that Gog is the prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal. However despite a wide range of speculative views on where in the modern world these ancient names refer to, no one actually knows for sure. The Revelation account actually says that they will be gathered from "the four corners of the earth", indicating that Gog and Magog may just be a type based on some historic enemy, but expanded to describe something much greater.

So, putting aside the common "cold war" view of the prophecy, let's go back to the question of whether Ezekiel 38 appears to fit with the account in Revelation 20. The key points of the Revelation account are that:

1. It is referred to as "Gog and Magog"
2. The army is huge, like "the sand of the sea"
3. It surrounds the beloved city (Jerusalem)
4. Fire comes down FROM GOD out of heaven
5. The placement in the timeline of events is at the end of the millennial reign, just before final judgment and the new heavens and new earth.

The Ezekiel 38 passage does align with point one:

“Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog...

(Ezekiel 38:2)

It also aligns with point two:

*You will ascend, coming like a storm, **covering the land like a cloud**, you and all your troops and many peoples with you.”*

(Ezekiel 38:9)

And point three:

*You will come up against my people **Israel** like a cloud, to cover the land...*

(Ezekiel 38:16)

And point four (bear in mind the Revelation account is highly summarized):

*...I will rain down on him, flooding rain, great hailstones, **fire**, and brimstone.*

(Ezekiel 38:23)

Only point five is unclear, and yet the character of the land they come up against seems far more relevant to the millennium kingdom than today's world:

“You will say, ‘I will go up against a land of unwalled villages; I will go to a peaceful people, who dwell safely, all of them dwelling without walls and having neither bars nor gates’...against a people gathered from the nations...

(Ezekiel 38:11-12)

Does this sound like the modern, heavily fortified, state of Israel? Clearly not.

Thus there is a reasonable case for saying that the primary application of the Ezekiel 38 prophecy correlates to the passage in Revelation 20; at the end of the millennial kingdom immediately prior to the new heavens and the new Earth.

On the other hand, there are several things about Ezekiel 39 indicating that the chapter may relate to an earlier fulfillment of the prophecy, perhaps taking place right at the end of the tribulation period prior to the millennial kingdom.

First of all, verses 17-20 correlate very closely with Revelation 19:17-21, which describes Christ and his army going to battle against the armies of the beast at his coming. In Revelation 19 all the birds are invited to “the supper of the great God” and in Ezekiel the birds and beasts are invited to “My sacrificial meal”. The events and imagery in both passages are nearly identical. (Especially compare Ezekiel 39:20 with Revelation 19:18.)

Also, after this scene of judgment Israel is gathered from all the nations, and even more importantly, they are from this point forward a believing nation and one on whom God’s spirit is poured out.

“So the house of Israel shall know that I am the Lord from that day forward.

(Ezekiel 39:22)

...Now I will bring back that captives of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel...

(Ezekiel 39:25)

And I will not hide My face from them anymore; for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel, says the Lord God.

(Ezekiel 39:29)

Ezekiel prophesied during the Babylonian captivity, however while this prophecy was no doubt given partly as an encouragement to the captives, the circumstances of Israel’s restoration from captivity in Babylon were quite different from those in this prophecy of restoration following the judgment of Gog and Magog. So while their more immediate restoration as a nation is no doubt part of the prophetic pattern, there is also little doubt that the passage speaks primarily about a future, and much greater, restoration.

Another reason for believing that the Ezekiel 39 account relates to the point of judgment just prior to entering into the millennium is that the nature of the burial of the dead (in chapter 39) seems more in keeping with this than with entering the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth. Verses 11-16 describe the seven months of burying the dead of Gog and Magog in order to cleanse the land. This would seem unnecessary if entering into the new earth of Revelation 21. When the eternal state is ushered in it would seem out of line with the new order of things to still be burying dead bodies, whereas in the millennium there will still be death since it is Christ’s reign over this earth in its current post fall order.

Furthermore this interpretation of where Ezekiel 39 sits would seem to line up with events in Zechariah 14, where all the nations gather together to battle against Jerusalem, and at which time it

says that the Lord himself will go forth and fight those nations. That Zechariah is speaking of the end of the tribulation, rather than the end of the millennium, seems clear from Ezekiel 39:16-17 which record that from this point on the nations will come up each year to Jerusalem to worship the Lord and that if they don't they shall have no rain. This disciplinary action demonstrates clearly that the time following the battle is not that of the eternal state where all will be perfect.

Back to the question of whether Ezekiel 38 & 39 speak of the same events. Were we to decide that they do speak of exactly the same fulfillment of the prophecy it would be hard not to conclude from chapter 39 that Christ's war against the armies of the beast at the end of the tribulation, and the subsequent bringing in of the millennial kingdom, were the primary meaning of the chapters. However taking such a view would negate the passage on Gog and Magog in Revelation 20, and would also mean ignoring the character of the nation of Israel in Ezekiel 38:11-12 where it is seen as at peace and totally undefended. It's hard to be too dogmatic about such complex passages however the best fit overall would seem to be to consider 38 & 39 as separate fulfillments of the same prophetic pattern. Chapter 38 as the most significant in its scale and ultimate finality, and 39 as an earlier fulfillment at the end of the tribulation.

Of all instances where prophecy may have recurring pattern, few passages are more compelling for this view of things than these. Time after time Israel is destroyed and gathered again. Taken captive by Babylon and later restored as a nation under the Persian Empire. Destroyed as a nation by Rome and reestablished in 1948. Trodden under foot by the Gentiles for 42 months in the tribulation, but restored by God and established in the millennium. Under final attack at the end of the millennium, but saved from destruction and brought into an eternal kingdom.

THE NEW EARTH

We all know Christian's go to heaven when they die, but is floating around in heaven our final destination? Definitely not! It is abundantly clear from Revelation chapters 21 & 22 that our final destination is a renewed Earth, and yet this thought is remarkably absent from many Christian's awareness. At the end of Revelation we see that the final state is literally "heaven on earth".

Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

(Revelation 21:3)

God makes his home amongst mankind. Heaven and earth are brought into one. The physical becomes eternal. This is the ultimate fruit of all that God set out to do. Having raised up a family for himself of his own kind, he then brings into existence a suitable world for them to inhabit with him. This new Earth is in many ways parallel to the body of the risen Christ in that Christ's risen body was both spiritual and physical. He could eat fish on the beach and ascend to heaven, all in the same body. His risen body was ultimately fitted for an Earth that is also a merger of the physical and the eternal. Our new bodies will be of this type also, for they will be the same type of body as that of the risen Christ, "the firstborn from the dead". Thus we also will possess bodies fitted for the new Earth, the physical yet also eternal Earth.

When this comes to pass the saying will be fulfilled:

...the meek shall inherit the earth...

(Psalm 37:11, and in Matthew 5:5 reworded)

As we consider the nature of the new Earth it's interesting to observe that it has some differences from this Earth. For example Revelation says:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

(Revelation 21:1)

This clearly refers to a physical characteristic however from about this point on it starts to get quite hard to discern between the physical and the spiritual in applying the descriptions in the passage. We are told that a great city descends out of heaven from God, and that this is “the bride of Christ”. Paradoxically this is given dimensions and appears to be physical, yet we know that “the bride of Christ” speaks of all the saved in Christ. Perhaps, like the body of the risen Lord and the new Earth itself this city is in some way both spiritual and physical. While some relate this city only to the church, it should be noted that the city not only has the twelve names of the apostles in its foundations, but that the 12 gates of the city are named after each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus the two parts of the bride (or the two brides if you like) are seen here brought together into one. And really, were they ever as separate as some bible teacher’s suggest? Wasn’t the church grafted onto the stock of Israel and the prophets? In that metaphor at least they are seen as all part of the same tree.

STREETS OF GOLD AND PEARLY GATES

Now we come to a point where the narrative contains symbols well known in popular culture concerning heavenly things. Therefore we need to ask whether the common understanding of these things is correct, or not, in terms of the true heavenly city shown to us in the bible. In particular, are the streets really paved with gold and does heaven (or at least the heavenly city) have pearly gates? Concerning the streets of gold, John in his vision appears simply to be grasping for a likenesses, since what he actually says is:

...the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass.

(Revelation 21:18)

...the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.

(Revelation 21:21)

Taking these together you can see it may not be entirely literal since gold does not look like transparent glass.

What about the pearly gates? Well, it does say that each gate of the city is made of a single pearl, so this is accurate (though may still just be metaphorical of its beauty – i.e. that they look like pearls, rather than actually coming out of an oyster as such). However the idea of Peter meeting people as they turn up at the pearly gates is nonsense. Believers go straight to heaven as Jesus told the thief on the cross when he said “today you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). In two places in Revelation we see believers “clothed in white raiment”. They have died and are in heaven awaiting the marriage of the lamb. At the time of the marriage they return with Christ at his coming (Revelation 19) at which point they are clothed in their new bodies like those of the risen Christ¹. (Bodies able to enter the physical realm once again.) Believers then reign with Christ for 1000 years during the millennial kingdom (Revelation 20:6). All of this occurs before the time of the new heavens and new earth and the descent of the heavenly city. Unbelievers on the other hand never turn up at the pearly gates to be rejected. When they die they go to Hades to await the second resurrection, the resurrection of the unbelieving dead to the judgment of the great white throne from where they are cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

When it comes to the glorious promise of the new earth and the heavenly city it’s sad to say that myth abounds far more than biblical truth. What is true is that God’s children will dwell with God on a new Earth. This is wonderful for the Earth we live on now, where unspoilt, is a place of such fantastic beauty and really is a very good dwelling place. This understanding also carries with it the likelihood of animals and other aspects of creation being present on the new earth, though the whole state of man and creation is to be fundamentally different since:

...there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain...

(Revelation 21:4)

Even during the millennial kingdom this state does not exist in as much as Christ still rules with a “rod of iron” (Revelation 12:5) and there is still mention of men dying.

So it’s only in the final state, in the new heavens and the new Earth, that the ultimate fulfillment is brought to the saying, “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54). Thus in the closing passage of Revelation we have a prayer of the bride and the spirit for the hastening of these things, along with an invitation for all who would to come and partake of them:

And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

(Revelation 22:17)

- Supplemental -

CHRISTENDOM IN THE LAST DAYS

A defining aspect of apostate Christianity in the last days seems almost certain to be the rejection of biblical teaching concerning the last days.

...knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

(II Peter 3:3-7)

It's not hard to appreciate that the excess hype surrounding prophecy in past decades has created a certain degree of "last days fatigue", and there is certainly no reason to criticize those who simply do not have a particular interest in the subject. However it would be completely against the teachings of Peter, John, Timothy, Paul and Jesus himself to tell other Christians either that there will be no time of judgment or to tell them they shouldn't give any thought to such matters. Unfortunately there are very prominent leaders today who are teaching one or other of these very things. Consider the following:

When the disciples wanted to talk about prophecy, Jesus quickly switched the conversation to evangelism. He wanted them to concentrate on their mission in the world. He said in essence, "The details of my return are none of your business. What is your business is the mission I have given you. Focus on that!"

(Rick Warren¹)

Warren's account is completely at odds with the two-chapter answer Jesus gave to the apostles when they asked him about the end of the age in Matthew 24. Nor does it align with the special blessing promised in the book of Revelation for those who read the book (Rev 1:3).

And here's the other form of misleading teaching concerning end times:

Christians in the power centres of modernity (England in the 1800's, and the United States in the 1900's) saw nothing ahead in the secular story of industrial modernity... nothing but spiritual decline and global destruction. Their only hope? A skyhook Second Coming, wrapping up the whole of creation like an empty candy wrapper and throwing it in the cosmic dumpster so God can finally bring our souls to heaven.

(Brian McLaren²)

The suggestion here is that end times teaching was purely the product of man's circumstances and thinking. Such a suggestion is ludicrous to anyone who really knows the bible since the bible is jam packed with chapters and passages concerning "the last days", "the time of Jacob's Trouble", "The Day Of The Lord", "the return of Christ" and so forth.

These kind of unscriptural rejections of prophetic teaching are becoming increasingly common and increasingly mimicked by everyday church goers. It begs the question, why will biblical teaching concerning prophecy and end times be unpopular in most churches leading up to (and even during) the end times? In all likelihood this condition reflects the fact that many churches are increasingly embracing the world's goals for a humanistic and man-made utopian society, rather than continuing to wait for Christ to overthrow the kingdoms of man and replace them with his perfect kingdom (the clear biblical narrative we've seen in this study). In the eyes of these kinds of churches Christians who still expect divine judgment and the overthrow of man's kingdoms will more and more be seen as fatalistic, negative and anti-environmental; a blight on the brave new spirit of global cooperation that the apostate church believes will 'save the world'.

You see the bible does not predict the disappearance of Christendom in the last days; rather it predicts that people will have a religion that resembles true Christianity but lacks the power of it.

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, ...having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

(II Timothy 3:1,2 & 5)

This isn't to say that people won't believe in signs and wonders for II Thessalonians 2:9 tells us that Antichrist himself comes "after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders".

The power they deny is more likely to relate to a watering down of the miracles and divine person of Christ, and by consequence will also be a denial (and loss) of true Christian power in their own lives.

The state of the church in the last days may be further explained by the last church Jesus gives a message to at the start of Revelation.

Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked – I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

(Revelation 3:17-20)

If this church is representative of the End Times church then this is the era of the “saved individual”. We see from the passage that the church as a whole is apostate but that there are individuals within it who have a relationship with the Lord.

There is a distinct contrast between the apostate state of the church described by a number of New Testament writers in the last days and the true Christians of these times spoken of by Jesus, and by John in Revelation. Whereas the apostate church goes the way of the world, the true church is ultimately cast off from the economic system (Rev 13:17) and persecuted by the Antichrist and his followers. How can two such disparate entities both exist within that which is called Christendom? The truth no doubt is that they cannot co-exist, thus at some point a great tearing apart must occur. Forget denominations, from God’s perspective there are really only two types of Christians; those with oil in their lamps and those without (Matthew 25:1-12). These are also described as the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30). In other words true and false; those who genuinely know God and those who don’t. Right now these are mixed into pretty much all denominations but as pressures come to bear, and people’s true colours are pressed into exposure beyond the current “politeness”, these two groups are likely to be torn painfully apart. In the middle will be many who for a time will probably find themselves terribly confused, not quite knowing which way to jump. This is likely to be a very traumatic time for many Christians, churches and Christian families and we may see again the outworking of this statements Jesus made about the effects of his ministry:

Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

(Luke 12:51-53)

This is the opposite of what any of us really want, nevertheless if truth is under attack it is worse to compromise and fall into apostasy than it is to be reviled by many who by nature we love as family or friends. The opposite of standing for truth, and accepting persecution or ridicule, is the huge ecumenical push for togetherness (at all cost) that we've seen within visible institutional Christendom in recent decades. This primarily political movement only seems to have created a dumbed down oneness that looks like it will eventually hold hands with the Pope, moderate Islam and the New Age and proclaim that we 'all worship the same God'. True spiritual oneness would be a great thing, but this coming together has been more of an unreformation that has only accelerated spiritual decline and birthed the infant one-world apostate church of end times.

A word of warning though; it's easy for biblical believers to overreact against all this and become more isolationist and protective than ever, but in the end that only results in the true testimony being weakened while the tares are left to take over. In understanding the apostasy of the church in the last days genuine Christians not only need to know what to separate from, but what to bring together. Rather than being put off "togetherness" by worldly ecumenicalism, Christians need to respond with their own spiritual ecumenicalism; bringing together and strengthening that which remains in order that a clear and contrasting testimony of the truth can go out to the world. They also need to be large hearted; not proclaiming narrow isolationism but reaching out to those in apostate Christianity with love in the hope that many will "come out of her" (Come out of the harlot church - Revelation 18:4). Ultimately it is important that the true church seize the opportunity in the latter days to work together in proclaiming biblical truth and an unadulterated gospel message to a hurting, confused and often searching world. Indeed this good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, despite being a 2000 year old message, should have a very real and renewed poignancy as we see the return of Jesus drawing near.

- Supplemental -

WILL ISLAM PRODUCE ANTICHRIST?

Since the beginning of "the war on terror" we have become increasingly aware of Christian voices crying out to warn us that Islam bears all the hallmarks of Antichrist in its origins, its practices, and perhaps most decisively in its plans for the world. This has led to much revisiting of how we perceive prophecy being fulfilled. The parallels between Islam's own prophesied future accomplishments and biblical descriptions of the beast and Antichrist are indeed striking, but on the other hand previous insights of Christians into other sources of beast and Antichrist are still poignant and it would seem rash to discard them without further reflection.

As we weigh up the various contenders it can all become quite confusing. Can we even know what part of today's socio-political scene the beast (the final world empire) and the Antichrist (its eventual and ultimate leader) will arise out of? Well, with some allowance for variance in the specifics, we probably do have enough clues to make at least a pretty strong bet. To get there though we need to start by reviewing the three main contenders, and briefly some of the key points that make them so.

ISLAM

Islam is a relatively pure form of Antichrist in that it flatly denies that God has a son, flatly denies that the person of Jesus (who it gives the alternative name Isa) died on the cross, and through the Qur'an also teaches that Islam is to ultimately destroy all Jews and Christians. Indeed, rather chilling is the fact that it calls for their beheading, the very form of execution spoken of in Revelation 20:4. Shia and Sunni Islam's expectation is for the return of Isa who will lead a great army to destroy the enemies of Islam and establish an Islamic world empire to be governed by the Mahdi ("guided one") until Yawm al-Qiyamah¹ ("the day of resurrection"). It has been quite rightly pointed out that this bears strong potential parallels to the role of the false prophet and Antichrist in establishing a world empire that makes war against the saints. Walid Shoebat, a former PLO terrorist turned Christian Evangelist even points out the similarity between the Greek symbols translated in the Bible as 666 and the Arabic character for Allah. Also, in terms of the flow of Daniel's prophecy concerning the line of kingdoms out of which the beast would come, like western culture Islam arises out of regions that were once part of the Roman Empire; the Eastern arm rather than the Western. Even just from this quick overview you can probably start to perceive the compelling arguments for Islam being the

source of Antichrist.

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Just as today Islam is biblical Christianity's most obvious and immediately dangerous enemy, so Roman Catholicism held a similar position during the dark ages and the Reformation. Catholicism was the relentless and vicious persecutor of a great number of men and woman who refused to follow its dogmas. We tend to remember the Catholic practice of burning "heretics" at the stake, but a reading of the history reveals plenty of beheadings² too (aligning to the vision of the saints beheaded for the word of God in Revelation). Like Islam, Catholicism also has its eyes set on world empire, but with the Pope rather than the Mahdi as the head over it. In terms of connection to the Roman Empire (which from Daniel's prophecy we know is somehow intrinsically connected to the final world empire), Catholicism is arguably the most closely connected entity of all. It is in effect a hybrid religion in that through the Constantinian change, and the outworking of the forces that set in motion, Christian ideas and terminology were ultimately fused with the pagan religious ideas that had previously formed the spiritual basis of the Roman Empire. Catholicism came right out of this "Christianizing" of the Empire and its very power was largely inherited from the disintegration of Rome. Many of the reformers saw Roman Catholicism as the iron mixed with clay, the "Holy Roman Empire" (as it was often called) being that second, politically weaker, form of the Roman Empire prophesied in Daniel chapters 2 & 7. While Roman Catholicism seems less significant today it's notable that ecumenical efforts, the emerging church and other forces appear to be bringing the whole Protestant Christian world slowly back towards Rome and the Papacy. Rome may therefore once again become the ascendant power that it was in times past.

NEW AGE / ILLUMINATI

This is a truly complex one to deal with in that it spans a wide range of occultic, New Age and Satanic beliefs, as well as touching on areas of conspiracy theory and elite power within world politics and the monetary system. In essence it would appear that in the west there has existed for many centuries satanic secret societies, operating primarily amongst many of the most powerful and influential people throughout the ages. In one of this spirituality's earliest forms, the Knights Templar, the Catholic papacy actually attempted to wipe it out because even that hybrid and corrupted form of Christendom was able to recognize pure Satanism when it saw it. Absorbed into Freemasonry, which was originally just a tradesman's Guild, the Knight Templar's occultic mystery religion came down through the ages embedded within the very core of an outwardly Christian

society. With its members often masquerading as Christians it nevertheless possesses its own definite ambitions for a new world order. Unlike Islam and Roman Catholicism it would seem that its absolute upper echelon are knowingly Satanists, worshipping a god whose name they conceal, but who amongst themselves they know as Lucifer. It would appear that from this occultic core the new-age movement received its birth, albeit stripped of the obvious Satanism. New Age is in many ways no longer a movement in that it has simply become the lens through which most people in secular society see the world. It seems likely that the New Age with its intrinsic acceptance of the occult is, out of the three great forces of Antichrist, the one that could be most easily be guided into direct Satan worship. Now with regards to the connection to the Roman Empire, the Western world as the direct descendants of the western arm of the Roman Empire connects every bit as clearly back to that empire as Islam and Roman Catholicism do. And in terms of ambitions for a new empire, the new-age movement clearly seeks a "New Age". This new age is to be the age of Aquarius, a perfect new world order that will, they believe, replace the current age of Pisces (understood to be the age of many religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc). This is to occur after a time of much trouble and upheaval during which the forces of the old age will destroy themselves and ultimately be completely eradicated. They also expect their (New Age) Christ to come, the Messianic figure who will reign over the earth and draw all things temporal and spiritual together. Much biblical terminology is misused to support New Age ideas, and it's notable that, just as the protestant denominations are being lead back to Roman Catholicism, so all forms of Christianity in the west are being heavily influence by New Age thinking, even to the extent that some parts of Christianity are now effectively just Christianized New Age movements. (e.g. The Word of Faith movement, The Emergent Church.)

SUMMARY

So, there we have it, the big three. The three biggest contenders for bringing forth the beast and Antichrist. Who will it be? Will one of these vanquish the others and rise to the fullness of its ambition for power over this world? Probably not. While they may well be pitched together in battle at some point one would have to question whether Satan has invested so heavily over many centuries in creating these three forces of Antichrist only to annihilate two of them. Surely Satan's ultimate plan is to bring all of these forces together, to join them and unite them as one against the true God. The purists of Islam may fight the purists of Christianity / Catholicism, and the world and the New Ager may be caught up in that. But once all the fighting is over and all people long for is peace and tolerance, it seems almost certain that the current cries for togetherness and the increasingly expressed sentiments that "we all worship the same God" will come to the fore and all

forms of fundamentalism will be seen as the enemy of this new enlightened way. After all, these three forces of Antichrist that we've focused on all share spiritual connections back to Rome and paganism, they all desire world empire, they all bear the stamp of their maker and are despite outward differences ultimately of the same spirit. A good look at how things are shaping up in the world suggests that it is highly likely that a moderate form of Islam, an apostate Christendom and the New Age spirituality of the 'secular' world will join together in hailing a new oneness of spirit that accepts within it a great diversity of expression and terminology but shares common goals and accepts a common Christ, Mahdi, Buddha or Messiah to lead them to the fulfillment of all their ambitions. This is akin to the polytheism of the Roman Empire, acceptance of diversity yet acknowledging a common unifying spirituality. So surely the answer is not to see just Islam, just the New Age or just Catholicism as "beast and Antichrist", but to recognize that they are all anti-Christ systems that will ultimately play a part in fulfilling prophecy. The relative strengths and degree of influence of each force is hard to predict, but this great coming together is happening right now and is no doubt laying the foundation for things to come.

What could be seen as a little worrying about the current Christian obsession with Islam being THE source of anti-Christ, rather than just a source of anti-Christ, is that it plays right into the hands of those who would like to portray religion (including Christianity) as the source of violence and hatred in the world and thus in its fundamental forms something to be eradicated. Mistaking the spiritual war for a temporal war it's likely that many Christians will ultimately be drawn into wars against Islam, believing somehow that they are in a holy war against the forces of evil. While they may well be fighting against the forces of evil, there is significant doubt as to whether they will be fighting for the forces of good, or whether they will simply be playing into the hands of Satan as he sets up the final great cataclysms out of which his kingdom is to be formed. If there was ever a time for Christians to grasp again the new covenant situation regarding Christians and war³, it is now.

NOTES & REFERENCES

FOUNDATIONS

- (1) Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, vol. 4, Eerdmans, 1956, p. 401
- (2) As well perhaps as Muslim prophecies and New Age expectations
- (3) New King James Version
- (4) New International Version

EMPIRES IN PROPHECY

- (1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Babylonian_Empire
- (2) The wording of some bible versions conveys an alternative meaning; being that Nebuchadnezzar did remember the dream but deliberately withheld it in order to test the authenticity of the interpretation. In other words, that he believed only the person who was empowered by the gods to know his dream could be trusted to accurately interpret it.
- (3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achaemenid_Empire
- (4) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great
- (5) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesar_Augustus
- (6) From Daniel 4:16 we understand that the Aramaic word “iddan”, translated in both places it occurs as “times”, seems to refer to years.

SHADOWS OF ANTICHRIST

- (1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiochus_IV_Epiphanes

GOD'S TIMETABLE

- (1) The word translated weeks literally just means “sevens”
- (2) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artaxerxes_I_of_Persia
- (3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wars_of_the_Jews
- (4) It's well worth reading Josephus's account of the wars of the Jews to understand the history of this time.
- (5) That gentiles come out of the tribulation we know from Revelation 7, verses 9, 13,14 collectively.

THE END OF THE AGE

- (1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abomination_of_Desolation

(2) This is important to keep firmly in mind because in many Christian circles people are now being taught to wait for a man who will come and live among us (in the naturalistic sense).

(3) We tend to think of stars as being suns and planets, however from a prophetic perspective stars may refer to any similar looking lights in the sky. Just as we talk about 'shooting stars' or 'falling stars', stars in this context may be speaking of meteors plummeting to the earth.

TRIBULATION OVERVIEW

(1) In Revelation 5:6 the lamb is described as having seven eyes, which are 'the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth'. Revelation 3:1 and 4:5 also refer to the seven spirits of God.

(2) See Isaiah 63:1-6 & Revelation 19:11-21.

RISE OF THE BEAST

(1) In Rev 17:12 it says they receive power as kings one hour with the beast.

(2) Either a man completely indwelt by Satan or even Satan himself in a bodily form.

(3) The false prophet may be someone with great, perceived, spiritual authority on the earth such as the Pope?

(4) Speculatively, the Antichrist may also use high technology "miracles" as part of his deception.

(5) It seems likely from other passages that this idol will be placed in the Jewish temple.

JUDGEMENT OF THE GREAT HARLOT

(1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_roman_empire

(2) <http://www.biblebelievers.com/babylon/00index.htm>

THE RAPTURE

(1) Dave MacPherson, The Great Rapture Hoax (New Puritan Library; 1st edition - September 1, 1983)

THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB

(1) E.g. Revelation chapter 6 appears to be an overview right up to immediately before the return of the Lord, Rev 11 goes right through to about the same point and Rev 12 starts before the birth of Christ.

THE NEW EARTH

(1) They are seen as resurrected at that time from an early perspective in that those who had died appear and are alive again on the earth.

SUPPLEMENTAL – CHRISTENDOM IN THE LAST DAYS

(1) Rick Warren, Purpose Driven Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p. 285

(2) Brian McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy, op. cit., p. 268

SUPPLEMENTAL – WILL ISLAM PRODUCE ANTICHRIST?

(1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_view_of_the_Last_Judgment

(2) As just one example see Fox's Book Of Martyrs, Ch 11, 4th paragraph
(<http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe/martyrs/fox111.htm>)

(3) 123 What Are Christians Fighting For (<http://www.free-ebooks.net/ebook/123-What-Are-Christians-Fighting-For->)