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Apocalypse Not Yet

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At midnight, in less than a year, we will enter not only a new year, a new decade, and a new century, but also a new millennium. This doesn't happen very often. The last time a new millennium began, feudal lords and bishops ruled Europe. That was centuries before Gutenberg invented printing with movable type or Columbus discovered a new world. The millennium before that began when Jesus was a small boy.

So what is the significance of a new millennium? Since a lot happened in each preceding millennium, we assume that the new one will be packed with more discoveries, inventions, wars, disasters, and many other kinds of change, some good and some bad. On the other hand, can we be sure that this millennium will be a millennium? With exponentially expanding population growth and the problems that go with it, will the human race self-destruct within the next century or so? Will some sadistic Saddam end the world as we know it by vaporizing us in a nuclear holocaust or by bombarding our ecosystems with malicious microbes? Or will Christ come a second time and set up the eternal kingdom which ancient prophets predicted?

For those who believe that Christ will come to right all wrongs, each new millennium brings promise, challenge, hope. Will this new period be the last one to be filled with sorrow, sighing, pain, and death? When we pray for the needs of those around us, afflicted by life-threatening illnesses, accidents, depression, broken relationships, and financial distress, we can be easily prompted to cry out to God: "Enough is enough, Lord! Don't come in the year two thousand and something. Come sooner—come now!" It's time to go home.

Wanting the present era to end can easily lead to speculation. Thus, futurologists have been citing all kinds of evidence that apocalyptic

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events will occur within the next few years. Such prognostication is based on factors as diverse as interpretation of the tunnels in the Great Pyramid to arrive at the year 1998 for the beginning of the millennial age, a prophecy of Nostradamus (1503-1566) in which the seventh millennium arrives in A.D. 2000, and a rare configuration of the planets in our solar system on May 4, 2000.¹

Some people are not content with passive speculation. Their proactive approach to eschatology involves attempts to trigger final events. For example, in the 1970s a Christian minister fire-bombed the El Aqsa mosque on the temple mount in Jerusalem, hoping to pave the way for the building of a third Jewish temple in that location. He believed that such a temple is part of God's eschatological plan, so he wanted to help God make some progress. Fortunately for the fragile peace of Jerusalem, his "Christianity in action" did not succeed. When I went to Jerusalem shortly thereafter, the mosque was undergoing a costly restoration.

More costly was the apocalyptic guruitis of the Branch Davidians. Their leader specialized in eisegeting himself into biblical apocalyptic prophecy and attempting to live out the results in a self-centered, aggressive, and idiosyncratic way. On a trip to Waco in December of 1997, my wife and I saw what is left of the gruesome outcome as we visited the burned out foundations of the facility. A sign marks the underground spot where most of the women and children died. A bulletin board placed by surviving Branch Davidians attacks the leadership of David Koresh by citing lengthy quotations from Ellen White.

For Christians who want the apocalypse now, or at least very soon, there are several kinds of biblically related approaches to calculating the time of Christ's coming. These are based upon factors such as millennial expectations, jubilee calculations, and biblical time prophecies. In this essay, I will investigate the hermeneutical validity of some millennial and jubilee approaches, including the theory of 6,000 years preceding the Millennium. In the following remarks, I will examine some interpretations of biblical time prophecies, including to some extent the traditional SDA approach to the 2300 day prophecy of Daniel 8:14, and I will ponder the question of our proximity to Christ's return.

Millennial Expectations

A *Time* magazine article by Roger Rosenblatt summarized the year 1997 as "The Year Emotions Ruled." Rosenblatt referred to a theory which links the present excitability of society with the end of the twentieth century:

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The “apocalypse now” theory has to do with the odd historical fact that people get exceptionally nervous as they near the end of any era. There were witch-hunts in the 1690’s, episodes of hysteria in the 1890s. In our own time, one has only to reach back a couple of years to recall large-scale group fears induced by mention of the ozone layer, or by pandemics like toxic-shock syndrome, the Gulf War syndrome and the Ebola virus.²

A subsequent issue of *Time* printed an excerpt of a letter from Janet Bollero in Argentina, reacting to the article:

Rosenblatt’s article was good, but I hardly believe that in 1997 people were driven by “apocalyptic, fin-de-siècle anxieties about the approaching millennium.” It is true that people get touchy when encountering the finale of a century, and even more so at the end of a millennium, but violence, insane mass hysteria, suicides, murders and a highly emotional society are not produced by the end of a period of time; they lie in human nature.³

Bollero is right, of course. We should not blame too much on the impending millennium. This does not exclude the fact that events are often shaped or even precipitated by human perceptions, of which millennial hyperventilation can be one among others. But we should keep clearly in mind that although we measure our lives by units of time, transition from one unit to another possesses no intrinsic causality. In fact, as Einstein taught us, time itself has no inherent existence; it exists only in relation to other phenomena. This does not mean that time is unimportant. When God set up the cyclical movements of our cosmos (Gen 1, esp. vs. 3-5,14-19), He created time for Planet Earth, and He expects us to keep the Sabbath during a certain period of time. But time itself does not do anything.

It is true that cyber-damage may be caused when computer clocks set themselves back a century on January 1, 2000. J & H Marsh & McLennan are offering an insurance policy to companies facing such “millennial calendar meltdown.”⁴ But this problem results from the way in which computer clocks work, not from the new time period itself.

When our calendars flip from 1999 to 2000, we will be a little older. That’s all. It’s like the odometer on your car when it turns from 99,999 to 100,000 miles. Your car experiences no renewal just because you are looking at zeros instead of nines. You may make this an opportunity for renewal if you choose to give your car a tune-up, have the engine rebuilt, or trade it in. But going the extra mile has no inherent value in this instance.

We can experience renewal in the year 2000 if we choose to make it an opportunity to become not only a little older, but a little wiser as

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well. If we pause at the dawn of a new era to look over the days and years of our lives and of our heritage, reflecting on the way God has led us, we will be better prepared to sail with confidence into the uncharted waters of the twenty-first century.

Thus far we have been talking about millennial expectations in general. But for centuries people have seen something special about a seventh millennium. For example, in the apocryphal book of 2 Enoch (32:2-33:2), written by an Alexandrian Jew in the first century A.D.,

the world exists for a total of seven days of a thousand years each, and the Lord decrees that the seventh constitutes a penultimate sabbath, to be followed by the endless eighth day of eternal bliss. No Messiah is integrated into this millennial picture, but the implicit use of the canonical theme that “a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday” (Ps. 90:4), with the consequent specification of a future era of explicitly millennial dimensions, is noteworthy.⁵

This view is based upon a combination of two ideas:

1. The sabbatical principle of six working days followed by a Sabbath day (Exod 20:8-11).
2. The concept that for God one day = 1000 years. This comes from Psalm 90:4—“For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.”⁶

The idea of 2 Enoch is weakened by the fact that Ps 90:4, attributed to Moses, is a poetic description of the timelessness of God, not a precise statement of an eschatological formula such as one day = one thousand years. Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible does not connect this idea with the sabbatical cycle.

While the New Testament does not explicitly connect the concepts of millennium and Sabbath, it comes tantalizingly close to that idea. 2 Peter 3:8 refers to Psalm 90:4 in an eschatological context. I quote from verse 7 to the beginning of verse 10:

But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief . . .

Peter’s point in referring to “one day is like a thousand years” is that “The Lord is not slow about his promise.” Notice that he also says: “and a thousand years are like one day.” He is not formulating precise

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eschatological chronology. Nevertheless, the passage is eschatological and therefore closer than Psalm 90:4 to the concept of an eschatological millennium.

Revelation 20 is the real foundation of Christian millennialism. According to Revelation 20:4-6, God's people will enjoy 1,000 years of reigning with Christ in heaven following his Second Coming. For some Christians who have taken this to be a literal period of 1,000 years and who have accepted the eschatological description as authoritative, this passage has encouraged the division of human history according to millennia: a Great Week of 7,000 years, including six millennia of sin, followed by The Millennium, which is a Great Sabbath.

It is true that Revelation 20 does not explicitly connect the millennium with the sabbatical principle. But from the description of the life which God's people will enjoy during the Millennium, it is clear that they will have entered into God's "rest" (cf. Heb 4). Thus, it is easy to see how this millennium could be regarded as constituting one big Sabbath. For the idea that the sabbatical principle should be applicable to a period of time longer than a day, there is biblical precedent in the Sabbatical and Jubilee years prescribed in Leviticus 25.

Belief in a literal Millennium was widespread in early Christianity. Some Christians, such as the author of the early second century Epistle of Barnabas⁷ and Irenaeus (c. 130-200),⁸ believed in 6,000 years preceding the Millennium. Important for them was the historical basis of the sabbatical principle: Just as God made the world in six days, they thought He would bring His purposes in the present era to completion in 6,000 years.

Medieval Christian thinking on the topic of the Millennium was dominated by Augustine, who abandoned earlier Christian millennialism and used instead a spiritualizing/mystical hermeneutic to argue that the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 represented the time period from Christ's first coming to the end of the present era.⁹ In A.D. 999, this view was undoubtedly part of the impetus for extensive preparations in Europe for Christ's return.¹⁰

In Europe generally a sort of mass hysteria progressively took hold as the year end approached . . . Some men forgave each other their debts; husbands and wives rashly confessed their infidelities; convicts were released from prison . . . fields were left fallow, and buildings went unrepaired by their owners . . . The confessionals did a roaring trade as people put their spiritual life in order . . . Many who had lived in sin promptly got married. Huge bands of pilgrims set out for the Holy Land with the hope of arriving in time to meet Christ in Jerusalem . . . mobs called for the execution of suspected sorcerers . . . On the night of 31 December, Gerbert celebrated mass in the Basilica of St

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Peter's in Rome. The packed congregation believed this might be the last mass they would ever attend. When the mass had been said, a deathly silence fell over the congregation—but they waited in vain.¹¹

The great disappointment of A.D. 1000 was hard on Augustine's interpretation. But the older idea that the present age will terminate after six millennia has survived to the present day. But now an additional belief is added, namely, the concept that the six millennia are almost completely in the past. For example, Ellen White wrote:

“The great controversy between Christ and Satan, that has been carried forward for nearly six thousand years, is soon to close.”¹²

That Ellen White appears to endorse the 6,000 year interpretation is significant. While the Bible provides the raw material which raises the possibility of this view, the Bible does not say that six millennia precede the Millennium of Revelation 20, nor does Ellen White explicitly state this. She fixes no terminal dates, but simply warns that humn history is about to run out.¹³

If Christ is to come after 6,000 years, it could appear at first glance that we should prepare to meet him on January 1, 2000. But there are several factors that make this kind of date-setting invalid:

1. When we reach the year 2000, we will reach it according to our calendar, which is an artificial construct. There is nothing intrinsically 2000 about the year 2000. People number years in different ways, even today. For example, the year 2000 will begin in the Jewish year 5760 and the Chinese year 4637. Even if we accept the Christian calendar, in which we count our years as A.D., “the year of our Lord,” we should take into account the fact that the numbering system is faulty because Christ was not born at the beginning of a year numbered as “0.” Because there was no zero year, the year 2000 will actually be only the 1999th year of the so-called Christian era. The 2000th year will begin in the year 2001. Moreover, Christ must have been born earlier than the beginning of the era which bears his name because his birth occurred sometime before Herod died in 4 B.C. So we are already more than 2000 years from Christ's birth.

2. Modern Christians who believe that the 6,000 years are almost finished clearly accept the idea that the world is about 6,000 years old. But we don't have an exact date for Creation. By calculating life spans included in the biblical genealogies and by assuming that there are four millennia before Christ and two millennia after Christ,¹⁴ the Irish Protestant Archbishop Ussher (1581-1656) developed a theory in which he placed Creation at 4004 B.C. But are the genealogies complete, or

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were there some gaps? Moreover, can we accept a date for Creation which is based partly on the 6,000 year theory as support for the same 6,000 year theory? This is called circular reasoning. Another wrinkle to be taken into account is the fact that the Septuagint's chronology is a millennium and a half longer between Creation and Abraham than the chronology of the Hebrew Bible, which was used by Ussher.¹⁵

As we know, the age of the earth is disputed within Adventism. The complexity of the discussion grows by leaps and bounds when extra-biblical evidence is introduced. Historians of the ancient Near East such as Siegfried Horn have wanted a few thousand more years in order to account for Egyptian and Mesopotamian chronology. Geologists have had difficulty reconciling 6,000 years with the geologic column. In any case, it is clear that we don't have a firm date for Creation.

3. According to at least some forms of the 6,000 year theory, there are 6,000 years *of sin* on earth, followed by 1,000 years of heavenly rest as a prelude to a perfect eternity. But when did sin on earth begin? Presumably we are talking about Adam and Eve's fall into sin, but even if we had an exact date for Creation, we don't know exactly when the Fall occurred. We can narrow it down by the fact that Adam was 130 years old when Eve gave birth to Seth (Gen 5:3). Since Genesis 4:25, which reports the birth of Seth, is placed after the description of Cain's murder of Abel, we have the impression that the time during which Cain and Abel grew up together must be fitted into the 130 years before Seth was born. Adam and Eve fell into sin before Cain was conceived, sometime earlier in Adam's first 130 years. But that still leaves some potential leeway between Adam's creation and the time of his first sin.

We cannot set the date of the Second Coming on the basis of millennial theory. There are too many variables.

Although Ellen White accepted 6,000 years as the approximate age of the world since creation, she did not attempt to set a date for Christ's Second Coming on this basis. She vigorously opposed date-setting. For example, in *The Great Controversy* she stated:

The more frequently a definite time is set for the second advent, and the more widely it is taught, the better it suits the purposes of Satan. After the time has passed, he excites ridicule and contempt of its advocates, and thus casts reproach upon the great advent movement of 1843 and 1844. Those who persist in this error will at last fix upon a date too far in the future for the coming of Christ. Thus they will be led to rest in a false security, and many will not be undeceived until it is too late.¹⁶

Adventists usually view Ellen White's statements regarding an approximate 6,000 year age of the earth as primarily relevant to

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questions of Creation and human origin. However, Ed Reid argues, in his book *Even at the Door*,¹⁷ that the importance of the “great week of time” is primarily eschatological, to show that time before Christ’s coming has almost run out. But in fact, Ellen White said that Christ could have come already. For example, in 1883 she reflected thus:

Had Adventists, after the great disappointment in 1844, held fast their faith, and followed on unitedly in the opening providence of God, receiving the message of the third angel and in the power of the Holy Spirit proclaiming it to the world, they would have seen the salvation of God, the Lord would have wrought mightily with their efforts, the work would have been completed, and Christ would have come ere this to receive His people to their reward.¹⁸

The fact that Ellen White believed Christ could have come years before 1883 implies that she understood the 6,000 years as a round number referring to roughly six millennia. If the 6,000 years were a rigidly precise figure, Christ could have only one option for the time of His Second Coming.

Since Ellen White’s references to 6,000 years have to do with eschatology, it is tempting to suggest that the period is simply a figurative way to refer to the duration of the present era. This interpretation would allow for a longer chronology which could harmonize more easily with extra-biblical data. However, Ellen White did choose 6,000 years, when she could easily have referred to 8,000 or 12,000 years. There is no clear warrant for taking her expressions figuratively in this context. While her 6,000 year period appears to be a round number, its flexibility measures in a few centuries, not in millennia. The difficulties with extrabiblical evidence remain.

Jubilee Calculations

In the early 1980s, I received in the mail a rather elaborate exposition which attempted to establish the date of Christ’s Second Coming on the basis of Jubilee cycles. As I recall, Christ was supposed to come very soon after forty Jubilee periods of fifty years each. I forget how the writer established the idea that there should be forty Jubilee periods, but it had something to do with the number forty in the Bible, such as a particular instance of “forty days and forty nights.”

The theory which I have just described took known biblical data—the jubilee cycle and the number forty—and made a connection to which the Bible does not even allude. Why not seventy jubilee cycles or some other number used in the Bible? Because the writer was trying to arrive at a foregone conclusion, namely, that the terminal point must

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be within a few years of the time when he wrote. The writer introduced the number forty even though the number is foreign to the jubilees of the Bible. This is a form of eisegesis. If the writer had chosen the number forty because Ali Baba had forty thieves, the validity of his hermeneutic would have been approximately the same.

Another assumption by the writer was the point of commencement for his forty jubilees. But since the Bible does not give a starting date for counting a fixed time period which terminates at the Second Coming, the assumption had no biblical basis.

One reason why jubilee reckoning has been so popular among eschatological eisegetes is the flexibility of this approach. Like millennia, jubilees are cyclical. But rather than recurring every 1,000 years, they come along every half century. So if one jubilee year turns out to be wrong, we can catch the next one before too long.

Jubilees encourage multiplication, because their cycles consist of multiplied years. According to Leviticus 25:8-10, a jubilee cycle consists of seven sabbatical year cycles lasting a total of 49 years, that is, 7 x 7 years, plus the jubilee year in the 50th year (Lev 25:8-10). Moreover, there is biblical precedent for multiplying jubilees. Ben Zion Wacholder, a Jewish scholar, has pointed out that the "seventy weeks" of Daniel 9:24-27 consist not only of seventy sabbatical year cycles, but also ten jubilee cycles.¹⁹ This may shed some light on an enigma in SDA prophetic interpretation. Daniel 9:25 indicates that the seventy prophetic weeks (490 years) begin with a 49-year period, referred to as "seven weeks." Attempts to identify the event which was to occur at the end of the 49 years have not resulted in a definitive conclusion. Perhaps the point is not so much the event but rather the 49 years itself, which shows that the 490 year period is divisible by 49-year jubilee cycles.

Why 49-year jubilee cycles? It is true that the jubilee year is the fiftieth year of an individual cycle, but when cycles are placed next to each other it appears that the jubilee year must be counted as the first year of the following cycle. This is a minority opinion of Rabbi Judah, recorded in the Babylonian Talmud.²⁰ The advantage of this view is that it allows for continuation of the sabbatical year cycles without necessitating eight years between sabbatical years due to insertion of the jubilee year.

Whereas Leviticus 25 prescribes jubilees for freedom and release of individual Israelites, Daniel 9:24-27 alludes to a larger jubilee-type period which was to culminate in some kind of release for the entire nation. This is jubilee typology. But the Bible does not go the next step by using an even larger jubilee time period to prophesy freedom for the entire world at the Second Coming of Christ. The fact that the Second

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Coming will result in freedom was not missed by Ellen White, who described events connected with Christ's Coming as follows:

Then commenced the jubilee, when the land should rest. I saw the pious slave rise in triumph and victory and shake off the chains that bound him, while his wicked master was in confusion and knew not what to do; for the wicked could not understand the words of the voice of God. Soon appeared the great white cloud...²¹

But no "great jubilee" or "jubilee of jubilees" spans the time until that precise point, like a rainbow with a pot of gold waiting for us at the end.

The idea that there may be large jubilee periods is an ancient idea. But a valid extension of jubilees to the date of Christ's Second Coming has never been established. When the Eschaton failed to materialize in October of 1987, recalculation conveniently pointed to 1991, then 1994, then 1996-1998,²² and the end of this apocalyptic equivocation is not yet in sight. We are reminded of a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, which states that the son of David will come after not less than 85 jubilees. "R. Hanan b. Tahlifa says after 7000 years and R. Abba the son of Raba says after 5000 years. R. Jahocachua says 2000 years; Barakhja and R. Dosa, 600 years; Jose the Galilean 60 years or three generations; R. Akiba 40 years and Rabbi three generations."²³ When speculation like this begins, there is no end to it.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have found that a date for the end of the present era, which we associate with the Second Coming of Christ, cannot be set on the basis of millennial or jubilee approaches.²⁴ When we come up to a particular date such as the year 2000, we cannot say that the apocalypse is "now." We must admit that it is "not yet." Attempts at precise date-setting involve eisegetical assumptions that wipe out their hermeneutical validity. Thus, we must take seriously Jesus' statement: "But about that day and hour²⁵ no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt. 24:36). Jesus encouraged us to follow signs of the imminence of His coming (vss. 32-33), but he warned that "you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (vs. 44).

¹Stephen Skinner, *Millennium Prophecies* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1997), 24-25, 28-29, 94-95.

²*Time* (December 22, 1997), 65.

³*Time* (January 19, 1998), 4.

⁴*Time* (January 12, 1998), 28.

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⁵J. W. Montgomery, "Millennium," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:357. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 451, translates this passage as follows: "And I blessed the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, on which he rested from all his works. God shows Enoch the age of this world, its existence of seven thousand years, and the eighth thousand is the end, neither years, nor months, nor weeks, nor days. And I appointed the eighth day also, that the eighth day should be the first-created after my work, and that *the first seven* revolve in the form of the seventh thousand, and that at the beginning of the eighth thousand there should be a time of not-counting, endless, with neither years nor months nor weeks nor days nor hours."

⁶NRSV here and in subsequent quotations unless otherwise specified.

⁷Section 15 of this work, as translated by J. B. Lightfoot in *Excluded Books of the New Testament* (London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, 1927), 237-238.

⁸*Against Heresies*, book V, 28:3.

⁹Montgomery, 358-359.

¹⁰Skinner, 12.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 69.

¹²*The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 518.

¹³"The figure 6,000 is undoubtedly a rough approximation of the time from creation, as based on the Hebrew patriarchal chronology, to the present century, but the relation of this figure to the 6,000-year theory is purely coincidental." *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, F. D. Nichol, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1953), 1:195.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 1:195.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1:180.

¹⁶*The Great Controversy*, 457.

¹⁷G. Edward Reid, *Even at the Door* (Published by the author, 1994), see especially 11-13, 107-169, 186-187, 227-228, 239-245.

¹⁸*Selected Messages* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:68.

¹⁹Ben Zion Wacholder, "Chronomessianism: The Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975), 202-209.

²⁰Nedarim 61a.

²¹Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1945), 35 (cf. 286).

²²Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1994), 23.

²³Sanhedrin 97b.

²⁴On the folly of trying to predict when Christ will return, see Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).

²⁵That is, precise time.