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STAGE-SETTING FOR THE LAST DAYS: AN APPROACH TO CONSISTENT FUTURISM

Pre-Trib Study Group

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by Thomas Ice

Is there any relationship between the events of which we read, hear, and see in the daily news and biblical prophecy? You better believe there is a relationship! Just as when we are traveling and see signs beside the highway to tell us what to expect on the road ahead; so also, does the Bible speak about signs of the times to point to events of the future. But, just how do these signs appear to us today and how do we at the apparent end of the church age relate prophetically to them? These and other questions are issues I hope to deal with in this paper.

As we integrate God's Word into every area of life, we need to include the relationship between biblical prophecy and world events. God's prophetic plan for humanity is on track and on schedule. History and current events are moving toward a final end in which God's program will be fully realized. With the return of a significant portion of world Jewry to the Promised Land and the subsequent establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948, God's plan is moving closer and closer to fruition. Hardly a day goes by without the media reporting on news from that tiny country in the Middle East—Israel. Such focus is as God's Word said it would be. Israel is God's super-sign of the times that makes significant many other developments and world events.

The Gulf War that ushered in the 90s caused many Americans to wonder how current events relate to Bible prophecy. Dr. John Walvoord noted that "these events were not precisely the fulfillment of what the Bible predicts for the future. Instead they could be a setting of the stage for the final drama leading to the Second Coming."¹ Even though not a specific fulfillment of prophecy, this does not mean that current events are not significant in relation to God's fixed plan for history. "Although the events sparked some premature conclusions that the world is already in the end time, they had a beneficial effect on the study of prophecy," contends Dr. Walvoord. "Many people searched the Scripture, some perhaps for the first time, to learn what the Bible says about the end of the age."²

The next event on the prophetic timetable is the rapture of the church, which will give rise to the seven-year tribulation or countdown to the return of Jesus Christ to planet earth. The signs of the times are passing by—do you see them and recognize them? Are you equipped to interpret

them in terms of God’s prophetic template for history? As we see the direct hand of God at work in history we know that our day is a great and opportune time to be alive!

FOUR APPROACHES TO PROPHECY

There are four possible views relating to the timing of when an interpreter sees prophecy being fulfilled in history. These views are simple because they reflect the only possibilities in relation to time—past, present, future, and timeless.

The *preterist* (past) believes that most, if not all, prophecy has already been fulfilled, usually in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The *historicist* (present) sees much of the current church age as equal to the tribulation period. Thus, prophecy has been and will be fulfilled during the current church age. *Futurists* (future) believe that virtually all prophetic events will not occur in the current church age, but will be fulfilled through events that will occur in the future seven-year tribulation, Second Coming, or millennium. The *idealist* (timeless) does not believe either that the Bible indicates the timing of events or that we can know before they mysteriously happen. Therefore, idealists think that prophetic passages mainly teach great ideas or principles about God’s general dealings with mankind and are to be applied to anyone, in any era regardless of timing.

Advocates of two of these approaches, in principle, do not think that current events can ever apply to Bible prophecy since they believe either, that the prophecies have already been fulfilled (*preterist*), or that the time of fulfillment is unknowable (*idealist*). Of the remaining two views, the *historicist* certainly believes that current events relate to prophecy. Since they do not distinguish between God’s plan for Israel and for the church, many have taught that the last 1600-1700 years have seen a fulfillment of most of the events of the tribulation, which *futurists* believe will be a literal, seven-year event in the future. *Historicists* believe that virtually all of the events of the tribulation (Rev. 6–19) have been fulfilled through events in Europe and they are primarily awaiting Armageddon and the Second Advent. *Futurism*, the view that I share with the majority of Evangelicals, believes that most of the prophetic events lie before us and will begin to be fulfilled after the current church age ends with the rapture. Every prophetic viewpoint produces speculation that flows from its theology. The real task is to understand a viewpoint and to consistently apply its teachings and principles. How then should a *consistent* futurist understand current events?

A CONSISTENT APPROACH

How does the interpreter of biblical prophecy insure that he properly understands the timing of prophetic events? A good interpreter keeps the future in the future. If an event in a passage is to occur during the tribulation, then it cannot happen during the current church age. It is wrong to say that something is being fulfilled in our day when in fact, the biblical context sets it within the future time of tribulation.

In the early 1970's, during my college days, I recall reading Isaiah 24:4-5, which speaks of the earth as "polluted by its inhabitants." I had the thought pop into my mind that this was a prediction of the pollution of our day, because I had been hearing so much about pollution in the news. Therefore, I approached a number of my friends with the notion that Isaiah 24:5 was being fulfilled in our day. Needless to say, they were not as excited about my interpretive find as was I. Later I found out that I was wrong because the context of the passage refers to the judgments that will take place during the future tribulation period. Thus, whatever was happening in 1970 with regard to pollution was not related to Isaiah 24:5. I had used a historicist approach to the passage by relating a future event to the present church age.

Having emphasized the point that we are not to commingle the future with the present, it does not mean that current events have no future meaning in the present. The issue is how they relate and have meaning. After all as a futurist, I do expect that God will one day fulfill His plan for the last days. But what is a consistent approach to this matter?

I believe that it is valid to realize that God is *setting the stage* for His great end-time program. What does that mean? The rapture and the end of the current church age are related to a signless event, thus making it impossible to identify any signs that indicate the nearness of the rapture. This is why all attempts to date the rapture have had to wrongly resort to an application of passages relating to God's plan for Israel to the church. However, since the Bible outlines a clear scenario of players, events and nations involved in the end-time tribulation, we can see God's preparation for the final seven-years of Daniel's seventy weeks for Israel.

STAGE SETTING FOR THE TRIBULATION

I think it is consistent with futurism to develop a scenario of players and events, which will be in place when God's plan for Israel resumes in the tribulation, after the rapture. This scenario views current events as increasingly setting the stage for end-time events, even though they will not commence during the current church age. Such a model allows a

pretribulation futurist to see the rapture as imminent (could happen at any moment with no intervening events required to occur), but at the same time believe that we could be the last generation of the church age. John Walvoord has noted:

In the present world scene there are many indications pointing to the conclusion that the end of the age may soon be upon us. These prophecies relating to Israel's coming day of suffering and ultimate restoration may be destined for fulfillment in the present generation. Never before in the history of the world has there been a confluence of major evidences of preparation for the end.³

The present church age is generally not a time in which Bible prophecy is being fulfilled. Most Bible prophecy relates to a time after the rapture (the seven-year tribulation period). However, this does not mean that God is not preparing the world for that future time during the present church age—in fact, He is. But stage-setting is not the “fulfillment” of Bible prophecy. So while prophecy is not being fulfilled in our day, it does not follow that we cannot track “general trends” in current preparation for the coming tribulation, especially since it immediately follows the rapture. We call this approach “stage-setting.” Just as many people set their clothes out the night before they wear them the following day, so in the same sense is God preparing the world for the certain fulfillment of prophecy in a future time.

Dr. Walvoord explains:

But if there are no signs for the Rapture itself, what are the legitimate grounds for believing that the Rapture could be especially near of this generation?

The answer is not found in any prophetic events predicted before the Rapture but in understanding the events that will follow the Rapture. Just as history was prepared for Christ's first coming, in a similar way history is preparing for the events leading up to His Second Coming. . . . If this is the case, it leads to the inevitable conclusion that the Rapture may be excitingly near.⁴

The Bible provides detailed prophecy about the seven-year tribulation. In fact, Revelation 4—19 gives a detailed, sequential outline of the major players and events. Using Revelation as a framework, a Bible student is able to harmonize the hundreds of other biblical passages that speak of the

seven-year tribulation into a clear model of the next time period for planet earth. With such a template to guide us, we can see that already God is preparing or setting the stage of the world in which the great drama of the tribulation will unfold. In this way this future time casts shadows of expectation in our own day so that current events provide discernible signs of the times.

A point to remember is that just as there was a transition in the early church away from God dealing with Israel as a nation, so it appears that there will be a transition at the end of the church age as God sets the stage to resume His unfinished plan with Israel after the rapture.

The church age clearly began on the Day of Pentecost, but about 40 years later in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 a specific prophecy relating to God's plan for Israel was historically fulfilled. This was the final fulfillment relating to the transition from Israel to the church. During the last 100 years we have seen events occur which are setting the stage for the players to be in place when the rapture brings to an end the church age and God resumes His plan for Israel during the tribulation.

In addition, there are general predictions about the course of the church age such as a trend toward apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1-16; 2 Tim. 3:1-17). These do not relate to the timing of the rapture, but are instead general trends about the church age. It is important to realize that when speaking of a general characteristic like apostasy, no matter how bad something may be it can always get a little worse or progress a little further. Thus, it is tenuous to cite general characteristics, apart from clear historical indicators, as signs of the last days. Regardless of how much our own time may look like it fits that trend, we can never be certain that there is not more development yet to come.

FUTURIST APPROACHES TO PROPHECY

First, I must point out that all forms of pretribulational futurism should oppose any attempt at the exact date-setting of the timing of the Rapture. The Bible teaches that the Rapture is an event that has no signs preceding it. Anyone suggesting that the Rapture will occur on a specific date can only make such a prediction based upon speculative elements derived from outside the Bible or upon a misinterpretation of Scripture.

Among those who are pretribulational futurists, I observe three basic approaches taken in interpreting current events. The three classifications are in terms of how one relates prophecy for Israel to the church age. I am suggesting a spectrum of 1) loose, 2) moderate, and 3) strict.

Loose

The loose view is characterized by those who claim to be pretribulational futurists but often take prophecy written for Israel and suggest that it is being fulfilled today—during the church age. This viewpoint holds that sometimes prophecy relating to the tribulation is being or has already been fulfilled in the current church age. This is a weak, inconsistent application of futurism, since it commingles God’s plan for Israel with His plan for the church at specific points of prophetic fulfillment. This view is not in keeping with the dispensational tradition of separating Israel and the church.

An example of this kind of interpretation would be any pretribulational futurists who date-set or see a current event from today fulfilling prophecy related to the yet future tribulation or millennium. I recall a prophecy teacher saying in the early 1980s that Isaiah 19 predicted the assassination of Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat. This is impossible since Isaiah 19 refers to events that will take place in the tribulation and millennium. This is an improper mixing of God’s prophecy for Israel with the church age, and is really indicative of historicism and not pretribulational futurism. Some within this group have also tried to set a date for the Rapture. When a futurist follows such an approach, he is inconsistent with the pretribulational futurism that he claims to follow.

Strict

I will take the third viewpoint next, so that the second view can be compared to the first and third. Strict pretribulational futurists are airtight in maintaining a distinction between God’s prophetic plan for Israel and His plan for the church. They tend to say that current events have virtually no significance to today, since the only event a true church age believer is looking for is the Rapture of the church.

The strict view holds that the Jewish return to the land of Israel may or may not be the beginning of that which was prophesied for the last days. They tend to reason that we really cannot know about the significance of these things until after the Rapture. Thus, current events do not really indicate “signs of the times” in any significant way. Often this view says that Israel could be kicked out of the land and it would not impact prophecy, since we cannot really confirm whether contemporary events are leading up to biblical fulfillment.

This view is very non-speculative about how current events relate to prophecy, and often speaks strongly against those who try to make a correlation between the Bible and current events. Strict interpreters have a

significant following within the academic circles of dispensationalism, likely over a concern that improper speculation be avoided.

Moderate

A third classification of how prophecy relates to Israel and the church is the moderate view. I place myself within this group. Moderates clearly maintain a distinction between God's plan for Israel and God's plan for the church. The current church age is prophetically pictured only by general trends and characteristics, not by specific fulfillment of events, as will be true of prophecy relating to Israel after the Rapture. Therefore, there are no signs or current events that indicate the nearness of the Rapture, which is an imminent, any-moment possibility at any time during the church age.

Moderates do not date-set or think that a current event fulfills prophecy relating to the tribulation or millennium. However, they do tend to think that it is valid to lay out a model or scenario of how things will be after the Rapture, since Scripture gives a clear and detailed picture of the tribulation period. Based upon such a model, we can see preparation and stage-setting for those events increasingly fitting together through current events. Since these are not signs for the Rapture, but rather stage-setting for events leading up to the Second Coming, our anticipation of the Rapture is quickened. The positioning of players and events related to God's plan for the world during the future tribulation is increasingly casting shadows upon the current church age, thus intensifying anticipation of the any-moment Rapture that must take place before events of the tribulation can unfold.

THE MODERATE MODEL

Moderates are consistent with pretribulational futurism by maintaining a proper distinction between God's plan for Israel from that of the church. This maintains the basis for the any-moment possibility of the Rapture as an event that is not related to signs and current events. On the other hand, a moderate can also see significance in current events that may be setting the stage for end-time events. This approach is consistent with pretribulational futurism because it does not see current events relating to the church but to Israel. Most of the things happening today are not fulfillments, per se, but are either the beginning of fulfillment which will be completed after the Rapture or stage-setting for events yet to be fulfilled in the future.

Another point to keep in mind is that just as there was a transition in the early church away from God dealing with Israel as a nation, so it appears

that there will be a transition at the end of the church age as God sets the stage to resume His unfinished plan with Israel after the Rapture. The church age clearly began on the Day of Pentecost, but about 40 years later in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 a specific prophecy relating to God's plan for Israel was historically fulfilled. This was the final fulfillment relating to the transition from Israel to the church. During the last 100 years we have seen events occur which are setting the stage for the players to be in place when the Rapture brings to an end the church age and God resumes His plan for Israel during the tribulation.

In addition, there are general predictions about the course of the church age such as a trend toward apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1-16; 2 Tim. 3:1-17). But these do not relate to the timing of the Rapture, instead they are general trends about the church age. It is important to realize that when speaking of a general characteristic like apostasy, no matter how bad something may be it can always get a little worse or progress a little further. Thus, it is tenuous to cite general characteristics, apart from clear historical indicators, as signs of the last days because no matter how much our own time may look like it fits that trend, we can never be certain that there is not more development yet to come.

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE AND THE TRIBULATION

Some pretribulational futurists understand Matthew 24:3-8 as referring to the end of the church age leading up to the tribulation (Matt. 14:9-28). They see contemporary significance to recent world wars, famines, and earthquakes (Matt. 24:7-8). Other pretribulational futurists interpret Matthew 24:3-8 as descriptive of events that will take place during the first half of the tribulation and thus do not see contemporary significance to wars, famines, and earthquakes. However, this is a legitimate difference in interpretation, not application.

There are two major views that futurists, like myself, tend to hold. First, some believe that verses 4–14 refer to the inter-advent age—that is the time between Christ's first coming and the beginning of the tribulation. Second, some hold that verses 4–14, especially verses 4–8, refer to the first part of the tribulation and correspond with the first four seal judgments of Revelation 6:1–8. I agree with the second view.

INTER-ADVENT AGE VIEW

Many futurist interpreters of the Olivet Discourse believe that verses 4–14 describe the general signs of the inter-advent age. Dr. John F. Walvoord, an advocate of this view says that verses 4–14 are:

describing the general characteristics of the age leading up to the end, while at the same time recognizing that the prediction of difficulties, which will characterized the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, are fulfilled in an intensified form as the age moves on to its conclusion.”⁵

Dr. Walvoord believes that verses 15–26 are specific signs that describe the tribulation, while verses 27–31 relate to the second coming.⁶

Within the inter-advent age view is a variation of this perspective. Some think that verses 4–8 are general signs of the inter-advent age leading up to the tribulation. While verses 9–14 reference the first half of the tribulation. “The events concerning the first half of the tribulation are recorded in Matthew 24:9–14,” says Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum. This “passage begins with the word *then*, pointing out that what Christ is describing now will come *after* the event of nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom.”⁷

If the inter-advent age view is the correct interpretation, then it would mean that wars, earthquakes, famines, and the appearance of false Christs would be constantly on the increase as we approach the tribulation period. However, if these items are references to the first half of the tribulation, then wars, earthquakes, famines, and false Christs during any part of the church age would not constitute prophetic signs. This explains why some futurists believe that increasing wars, earthquakes, famines, etc. are prophetically significant, while others, like myself, do not think that they are prophetically significant, since these verses refer to global events during the seven-year tribulation.

THE TRIBULATION VIEW

I believe that Matthew 24:4–41 refers to the seven-year period (Dan. 9:24–27) that many commonly call the tribulation. The tribulation is divided in half by the abomination of desolation, mentioned by Jesus in verse 15. Thus, verses 4–14 refer to the first half of the tribulation and are parallel to the first five seal judgments found in Revelation 6.

“If our interpretation is the right one there must be perfect harmony between these three: Old Testament Prophecy: Matthew xxiv:4-44, and Revelation vi-xix.” insists Arno Gaebelein.⁸ I believe just such a harmony exists, especially between the Olivet Discourse and Revelation. This is what convinces me that verses 4–14 refer to the first half of the tribulation. Gaebelein continues:

If this is the correct interpretation, if Matthew xxiv:4-14 refers to the beginning of that coming end of the age and if Revelation vi refers to the same beginning of the end and that which follows the sixth chapter leads us on into the great tribulation, then there must be a perfect harmony between that part of the Olivet discourse contained in Matthew xxiv and the part of Revelation beginning with the sixth chapter. *And such is indeed the case.*⁹

“The acceptance of this view, in part,” observes John McLean, “is dependent on how much weight is given to the parallels between the synoptics and Revelation.”¹⁰ Since all futurists see the Olivet Discourse as parallel to Revelation to some degree, it makes sense that these two portions of Scripture would be focused on the same basic time period—the tribulation.

BIRTH PANGS

Matthew 24:8 characterizes the events of verses 4–7 as “the beginning of birth-pangs.” The Greek word *ôdionon* means “the pain of childbirth, travail-pain, birth-pang.” It is said to be “intolerable anguish, in reference to the dire calamities which the Jews supposed would precede the advent of the Messiah.”¹¹ Another authority agrees and says, “of the ‘Messianic woes’, the terrors and torments that precede the coming of the Messianic Age.”¹²

Most likely our Lord had in mind the Old Testament reference to birth pangs in Jeremiah 30:6–7, which says, “‘Ask now, and see, if a male can give birth. Why do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth? And why have all faces turned pale? ‘Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s distress, but he will be saved from it.’” Dr. Randall Price explains the birth pangs of Messiah as follows:

The birth pangs are significant in the timing of the Tribulation, as revealed by Jesus in the Olivet discourse (Matt. 24:8). Jesus’ statement of the “birth pangs” is specifically that the events of the first half of the Tribulation (vv. 4-7) are merely the “beginning,” with the expectation of greater birth pangs in the second half (the “Great Tribulation”). Based on this analogy, the entire period of the seventieth week is like birth pangs. As a woman must endure the entire period of labor before giving birth, so Israel must endure the entire seven-year Tribulation. The time divisions of

Tribulation are also illustrated by the figure, for just as the natural process intensifies toward delivery after labor ends, so here the Tribulation moves progressively toward the second advent (vv. 30-31), which takes place “immediately after” the Tribulation ends (v. 29). As there are two phases of the birth pangs (beginning labor and full labor), so the seven years of Tribulation are divided between the less severe and more severe experiences of terrestrial and cosmic wrath, as revealed progressively in the Olivet discourse and the judgment section of Revelation 6—19.¹³

Paul also uses the motif of birth pangs in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 where he says, “While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.” The context of this passage relates to the tribulation period, which fits the other uses of birth pangs.

Raphael Patai in his helpful book (*The Messiah Texts*) has dozens of references to extra-biblical commentary from Jewish writings in a chapter entitled “The Pangs of Times.”¹⁴ Patai tells us that “the pangs of the Messianic times are imagined as having heavenly as well as earthly sources and expressions. . . . Things will come to such a head that people will despair of Redemption. This will last seven years. And then, unexpectedly, the Messiah will come.”¹⁵ This widespread Jewish idea fits exactly into the framework that Jesus expresses in the Olivet Discourse. The birth pangs of Messiah, also known as “the footprints of the Messiah,”¹⁶ support the notion that Matthew 24:4–14 relate to the tribulation period leading up to the second advent of the Messiah since it is known as a time of great tribulation that results in Messiah’s earthly arrival.

GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Just because there may be legitimate signs in our day pointing to the return of Christ, does not mean that every thought and speculation being brought forth is legitimate. In fact, there is entirely too much wild speculation that some current event is related to Bible prophecy. For some, virtually every thing that happens is an indication that the Lord’s return is near. Wild speculations are all too common today and too often they not grounded in a proper biblical approach to the issues. This is why we need to spell out some guidelines to discipline our thoughts so that we can guard against extreme and unfounded speculation.

There are at least three key steps that must be processed before developing a proper approach to understanding the signs of the times. Prophecy expert, Dr. Ed Hindson calls these three items facts, assumptions, and speculations.¹⁷ Dr. Hindson says,

In our effort to make sense of all this, let me suggest a simple paradigm:

Facts. There are the clearly stated facts of prophetic revelation: Christ will return for His own; He will judge the world; there will be a time of great trouble on the earth at the end of the age; the final conflict will be won by Christ; and so on. These basic facts are clearly stated in Scripture.

Assumptions. Factual prophecy only tells us so much and no more. Beyond that we must make certain assumptions. If these are correct, they will lead to valid conclusions, but if not, they may lead to ridiculous speculations. For example, it is an assumption that Russia will invade Israel in the last days. Whether or not that is factual depends on the legitimacy of one's interpretation of Ezekiel's Magog prophecy (Ezekiel 38—39. . . .

Speculations. These are purely calculated guesses based on assumptions. In many cases they have no basis in prophetic fact at all. For example, the Bible says the number of the Antichrist is "666" (Revelation 13:18). We must try to assume what this means. It is an assumption that it is a literal number that will appear on things in the last days. When one prominent evangelist saw the number 666 prefixed on automobile license plates in Israel a few years ago, he speculated the "mark of the Beast" had already arrived in the Holy Land.

The greatest danger of all in trying to interpret biblical prophecy is to assume that our speculations are true and preach them as facts. This has often caused great embarrassment and confusion. For example, when Benito Mussolini rose to power in Rome in the 1920s, many Christians assumed he might be the Antichrist, who would rule the world from the city of seven hills in the last days. Some even speculated that Adolph Hitler, who rose to power later in Germany, was the False Prophet. Others were sure the False Prophet was the pope, who was also in Rome.

The time has come when serious students of biblical prophecy must be clear about what is fact, what is assumption, and what is speculation.¹⁸

Thus when we are approaching the study of biblical prophecy and attempting to relate it to events in our own day we must first make sure that we start with a proper interpretation of the biblical text before we can draw conclusions upon which to speculate. It stands to reason that if we have an incorrect interpretation of a passage then the conclusion or assumptions we draw will of necessity be wrong (unless we are illogical and inconsistently stumble onto a right conclusion).

For example, if we are studying what area of the world the antichrist will come from, we must start with a correct interpretation of biblical passages that bear on the subject. Having properly gathered the biblical data, we then draw conclusions, or as Dr. Hindson called it: assumptions. Thus, we might conclude that the antichrist will arise out of the Revived Roman Empire. Since 2 Thessalonians 2:6-9 indicates that he will not be revealed until after the rapture, we would not be able to legitimately speculate as to who he might be within the community of present day possibilities. We could use such an interpretation and assumption to exclude a suggested candidate from somewhere like Japan, if one were to bring forth such a speculation.

Legitimate views about the signs of the times must start with 1) sound biblical interpretation, 2) proper assumptions or conclusions drawn from the interpretation, and 3) speculation consistent with the previous two factors. Only after following such an approach can we conclude that any contemporary development is a sign of Christ's return.

I have often been asked on radio and television talk shows if I believe that events like earthquakes, famines, wars, etc. meant that the end is near. Of course I always say no. This usually surprises the host, since they so often hear from other prophecy teachers that these things have current prophetic significance. As you can see, if they do not refer to the church age, then they must have reference to the tribulation. While it is likely that we stand on the verge of tribulation events, we are not yet in that time period. Since Matthew 24:4-14 cannot happen until after the rapture and the start of the tribulation, it is wrong to say that such events are prophetically significant in our own day. The birth pangs do not start until Israel faces her time of trouble.

ISRAEL: GOD'S SUPER SIGN OF THE END TIMES

The study of Bible prophecy is divided into three major areas: the nations (Gentiles), Israel, and the church. More detail is given prophetically concerning God's future plans for His nation—Israel. When

the church takes these prophecies that relate to Israel literally, as we do, then we see a great prophetic agenda that lies ahead for Israel as a people and nation. When the church spiritualizes these promises, as she has done too often in history, then Israel's prophetic uniqueness is subsumed and merged unrealistically in the church. God has an amazing and blessed future for elect individual Jews and national Israel. Israel is God's super sign of the end times.

God's promises to Abraham and Israel are unconditional and guaranteed through the various covenants. A definite pattern for Israel's future history was prophesied in Deuteronomy before the Jews set even one foot into the land (Deut. 4; 28-31). The predicted pattern for God's program with Israel was to be as follows: They would enter the land under Joshua, they would eventually turn away from the Lord and be expelled from the land and scattered among the Gentile nations. From there the Lord would regather them during the latter days and they would pass through the tribulation. Toward the end of the tribulation they would be regenerated and recognize their Messiah. Christ then returns to earth and rescues the Israel from the Nations who have gathered at Armageddon in order to exterminate the Jews. A second regathering of the nation occurs in preparation for their millennial reign with Christ during which time all of Israel's unfulfilled promises will be realized. This pattern is developed by the Prophets and reinforced by the New Testament.

As with the church and the nations, God is moving His chosen people—Israel—into place for the future fulfillment of His program involving them after the rapture in the direct fulfillment of prophecy relating to the nation. He has already brought them back to their ancient land (1948) and has given them Jerusalem (1967). However, the current situation in Israel is one of constant turmoil and crisis, especially surrounding the old city of Jerusalem. But this is preparation by God for Israel's signing of the covenant with the European Antichrist that will kick off the seven-year tribulation.

That ethnic Israel has been reestablished as a nation and now controls Jerusalem is a strong indicator that we are near the end of the church age. This can only be a general indication, since no timetable is specifically given for current preparation. Therefore, we cannot know for certain that we are the last generation before the rapture since God may choose to "stage set" for another 100 years or longer. Dr. John F. Walvoord correctly says, "There is no scriptural ground for setting dates for the Lord's return or the end of the world. . . . As students of the Bible observe proper interpretation principles, they are becoming increasingly aware of a

remarkable correspondence between the obvious trend of world events and what the Bible predicted centuries ago.”¹⁹ While probably all of the Old Testament passages that predict the restoration and return of Israel to the land in the last days relate to future tribulation or millennial events and thus, in a precise, technical sense are not fulfilling Bible prophecy (Ezek. 37 is the exception), this does not mean that today's events are unrelated to the fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

The many reasons that constitute specific signs indicating that God’s end-time program is on the verge of springing into full gear, but, the fact that all three streams of prophecy (Nations, Israel, and the church) are converging for the first time in history at the same time constitute a sign itself. This is why many students of prophecy believe that we are on the edge of history. If you want to know where history is headed, keep your eye on what God is doing with Israel.

Israel’s Dispersion

The Latin word *Diaspora* has been coined to refer to Israel’s dispersion throughout the Gentile nations. Christ speaks of the current 2,000 year dispersion of Israel in His prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 when He said, “and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). As usual within biblical prophecy, the pronouncement of judgment also contains an ultimate hope of restoration. In this passage Christ said, “until,” which means the dispersion will not last forever, it will soon come to an end.

As early as the Mosaic Law, the threat of dispersion throughout the nations was spoken of (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 4:27; 28:64; 29:28). Nehemiah said, “Remember the word which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses saying, ‘If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples’” (Neh. 1:8). This cycle is repeated many times throughout the prophets.

Israel’s capture of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C. and the trip to Babylon in the sixth century B.C. did not constitute a worldwide scattering as prophesied. This did not occur until the nation’s rejection of Christ and God’s subsequent judgment in A.D. 70.

We rejoice that God is currently in the process of ending the Diaspora. May it happen soon!

The Regathering and Conversion of Israel

There are dozens of biblical passages that predict an end-time regathering of Israel back to her land. However, it is a common mistake to lump all of these passages into one fulfillment time frame, especially in relation to the modern state of Israel. Modern Israel is prophetically significant and is fulfilling Bible prophecy. But readers of God's Word need to be careful to distinguish which verses are being fulfilled in our day and which references await future fulfillment. In short there will be two end-time regatherings: One before the tribulation and one after the tribulation.

Hebrew Christian scholar Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum explains:

The re-establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 has not only thrown a wrench in amillennial thinking, but it has also thrown a chink in much of premillennial thinking. Amazingly, some premillennialists have concluded that the present state of Israel has nothing to do with the fulfillment of prophecy. For some reason the present state somehow does not fit their scheme of things, and so the present state becomes merely an accident of history. On what grounds is the present state of Israel so dismissed? The issue that bothers so many premillennialists is the fact that not only have the Jews returned in unbelief with regard to the person of Jesus, but the majority of the ones who have returned are not even Orthodox Jews. In fact the majority are atheists or agnostics. Certainly, then, Israel does not fit in with all those biblical passages dealing with the return. For it is a regenerated nation that the Bible speaks of, and the present state of Israel hardly fits that picture. So on these grounds, the present state is dismissed as not being a fulfillment of prophecy.

However, the real problem is the failure to see that the prophets spoke of two international returns. First, there was to be a regathering in unbelief in preparation for judgment, namely the judgment of the tribulation. This was to be followed by a second world-wide regathering in faith in preparation for blessing, namely the blessings of the messianic age. Once it is recognized that the Bible speaks of two such regatherings, it is easy to see how the present state of Israel fits into prophecy.²⁰

First World-Wide Gathering in Unbelief

In 1948 when the modern state of Israel was born, it not only became an important stage setting development but began an actual fulfillment of specific Bible prophecies about an international regathering of the Jews in unbelief before the judgment of the tribulation. Such a prediction is found in the following Old Testament passages: Ezek. 20:33-38; 22:17-22; 36:22-24; Isa. 11:11-12; Zeph. 2:1-2 and Ezek. 38–39 presupposes such a setting.

Zephaniah 1:14-18 is one of the most colorful descriptions of “The Day of the LORD,” which we commonly call the tribulation period. Zephaniah 2:1-2 says that there will be a worldwide regathering of Israel before the day of the LORD. “Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, O nation without shame, before the decree takes effect—the day passes like the chaff—before the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD’s anger comes upon you.”

Ezekiel 37 teaches that Israel will be restored to the land in phases. These stages are the reverse of what happens in the decaying process of a dead body—in this instance, a collection of dead bodies. Thus, Ezekiel 37:6-8 pictures a valley of dry bones in which the sinews connect the bones; the flesh grows back on the bones; skin recovers the flesh and bones; and then the last stage occurs when breath is restored to the body and life will have been restored to national Israel. Even though the completed, end product, will be finished at some point in the future tribulation, it is clear that Israel is currently being regathered in unbelief in preparation for that future point in time when she will be spiritually reconstituted.

Futurist prophecy scholars have long taught that on the basis of Ezekiel 37 Israel will be regathered to the land in unbelief and will then be converted to Jesus her Messiah. For example, in 1918, the Philadelphia Prophetic Conference adopted a statement of prophetic faith. The fifth article read: “We believe that there will be a gathering of Israel to her land in unbelief, and she will be afterward converted by the appearing of Christ on her behalf.”²¹ The modern state of Israel is in the process of fulfilling Bible prophecy because of her current existence and regathering, and because the context of Ezekiel 37 allows for the fulfillment of part of that passage before the tribulation, in the current church age. Thus, the fact that national Israel exists and is being regathered does give meaning to other current “stage-setting” events.

Second World-Wide Gathering in Belief

Many passages in the Bible speak of Israel’s regathering, in belief, at the end of the tribulation, in conjunction with Christ’s second coming, in

preparation for commencement of the millennium. These references are not being fulfilled by the modern state of Israel. Some of the citations include: Deut. 4:29-31; 30:1-10; Isa. 27:12-13; 43:5-7; Jer. 16:14-15; 31:7-10; Ezek. 11:14-18; Amos 9:14-15; Zech. 10:8-12; Matt. 24:31 and many more.

The fact that the last fifty years has seen a world-wide regathering and reestablishment of the nation of Israel, which is now poised in just the setting required for the revealing of the Antichrist and the start of the tribulation, is God's grand indicator that all of the other areas of world development are prophetically significant. Dr. Walvoord says,

Of the many peculiar phenomena which characterize the present generation, few events can claim equal significance as far as Biblical prophecy is concerned with that of the return of Israel to their land. It constitutes a preparation for the end of the age, the setting for the coming of the Lord for His church, and the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic destiny.²²

Israel, God's "super sign" of the end times is a clear indicator that time is growing shorter with each passing hour. God is preparing the world for the final events leading up to Israel's national regeneration.

SOME OTHER AREAS OF STAGE SETTING IN OUR DAY

The Revived Roman Empire and The European Union

Scripture teaches that the Antichrist will rise to power out of a federation of nations that correlate in some way with the Roman Empire of two thousand years ago. Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost explains:

Now, when we turn to the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 and to Revelation 13 and 17 and other parallel passages, we find that at the end time, during the Tribulation period, the final form of Gentile world power is a federation of ten separate nations, the ten toes or ten horns. It seems as though Europe's leaders are advocating that which Daniel prophesied hundreds of years before Christ, when he said that the final form of Roman world power would be a federation of independent states who elect one man to take authority over them while maintaining their own sovereign authority. The more movement we see in Europe for a common market and a federation of nations, the closer the coming of our Lord must be.²³

One would have to be totally ignorant of developments within the world of our day to not admit that through the efforts of the European Union Humpty Dumpty is finally being put back together again. This is occurring, like all of the other needed developments of prophecy, at just the right time to be in place for the coming tribulation period. Prophecy popularizer, Hal Lindsey tells us:

A generation ago, no one could have dreamed that an empire formed of the nations that were part of old Rome could possibly be revived. But today, as Europe is on the advent of real unity, we see the potential fulfillment of another vital prophecy leading to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁴

Russia

In conjunction with tribulation events, Ezekiel 38—39 teaches that there will be an invasion into Israel by a coalition lead by “Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal” (Ezekiel 38:2). Gog appears to be modern Russia. Coalition partners in the invasion are Persia (modern Iran), Cush (Ethiopia), Put (Libya), and Gomer and Beth-togarmah (likely modern Turkey) (Ezekiel 38:5-6). Chuck Missler concludes, “All the allies of Magog (Russia) are reasonably well identified and all of them are Muslim.”²⁵

The twentieth century rise of Russia as a military power and her alignment with those nations who will invade Israel under Gog’s leadership, once again, in concert with other all of the other prophetically significant factors, are a sign that the stage is set indicating the nearness of our Lord’s return. The modern Russian bear is a player in end-time prophecy and thus should be watched as a sign of the times. Mark Hitchcock, a specialist on the Gog invasion agrees:

Russia is a wounded, starving bear and is more dangerous than ever before. Vladimir Zhirinovsky is gaining power in Russia, and the entire focus of his political plan is a massive military campaign into the Middle East.

The stage is being set. The events of Ezekiel 38—39 are more imminent than ever before. The consummation of history could begin at any time. All that remains is for the curtain to be raised.²⁶

Political, Economic, and Religious Globalism

As never before current events are working in concert with one another, preparing the way for the rise of Globalism and the infamous character historically known as the Antichrist. The Bible indicates (Revelation 13:12-17) that the Beast (another name for the Antichrist) will expand his rule from his European base to the world during the last three and a half years of the tribulation. Today preparation is well under way for the coming Globalism and the rule of Antichrist.

Only in the last fifty years has Globalism become a realistic option for mankind at the practical level. Revelation 17—18 indicates that Antichrist's global empire will revolve around political, economic, and religious issues. For many who reject the Bible and God's plan for history believe that the ultimate solution to this world's political, economic, and religious problems have only global answers. They are right, . . . if the Bible is not true. But of course Scripture is true so that ultimately they are wrong. Dr. Ed Hindson comments on the motives behind the rise of the modern global thrust:

All previous attempts at structuring a world order have, without fail, fallen on the harsh realities of man's pride, arrogance, greed, avarice, and self-destruction. Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations failed to stop World War II, and the present United Nations has struggled since its very inception. Yet there seems to be something within the international community propelling us toward a unified world system. Many fear that driving force is Satan himself.²⁷

The thrust toward global religious unity has never been stronger than in our day. The flames have been fanned the last few decades by the rising popularity of New Age thought that has invaded every aspect of North American society, including the Evangelical Church. Dr. Charles Ryrie speaks

The Superchurch of World Religions is on its way: powerful, worldwide, and invincible—for three and one-half years.

The progress toward organizational unity waxes and wanes, but the movement is steadily going forward. Whatever happens to ecumenical organizations, however, do not overlook what is happening on the theological scene. Universalism and revolution in the name of the church are sweeping the theological world.

Organizational unity and theological heresy may be compared to two runners. One may pass the other temporarily, causing the lead to seesaw back and forth between them. But as they approach the finish line they will join hands, and from their combined forces will emerge Superchurch.

The stage is set. The script has been written. The props are in place. The actors are in the wings. Soon we shall hear, "Curtain!"
"28

The world is clearly being prepared for the rise of the Antichrist out of Europe, as the Bible demands. While many items could be cited as evidence of such preparation, none is more striking than the rise of an electronic, cashless society, which will facilitate fulfillment of the "mark of the beast" during the tribulation (Rev. 13:16–18).

At what other time in history, other than our own, could such a prophecy be successfully implemented?

It is becoming increasingly apparent that today's developing cashless system will become the instrument through which the Antichrist will seek to control all who buy or sell, based upon whether they are a follower of Jesus Christ or a follower of the European ruler, and thus, Satan. It is obvious that any leader wanting to control the world's economy would avail themselves of the power that an electronic cashless system holds as a tool for implementing total control. . . .

. . . But surely the coming cashless society is one of the signs that prophecy is being fulfilled.²⁹

The European Union is likely preparation for the Revived Roman Empire. It is not a fulfillment of the Revived Roman Empire since we are not in the tribulation. When one combines the globalism of the United Nations and the European Union there appears to be much occurring now that is preparation for the Antichrist's kingdom during the tribulation.

Babylon

Babylon is depicted throughout the Bible as the focus of the kingdom of man that is set in opposition to God, Israel, and His plan for history. It is not surprising to realize that many biblical passages speak of an end-time role for Babylon as God's enemy (Revelation 14:8; 17—18). "What are the specific signposts that can serve as indicators of God's end-time program

for the world,” asks Dr. Charles Dyer? “The third sure signpost is the rebuilding of Babylon.”³⁰ Is Babylon being rebuilt in our day? Yes it is!

Dr. Joseph Chambers traveled to Iraq, shortly before the Gulf War, and witnessed firsthand Saddam Hussein’s rebuilding of Babylon. “I have walked through those ruins and have seen repeatedly the ancient bricks of Nebuchadnezzar with the bricks of Saddam Hussein laid on top and workers proceeding to erect wall after wall and building after building,” declares Dr. Chambers. “Every nuance of God’s infallible Word is being fulfilled.”³¹

God’s prophetic plan includes His restoration of many of Israel’s ancient enemies who will once again, but for the last time, plague God’s people. Dr. Chambers says,

The only biblical fulfillment in our generation that surpassed the rebuilding of ancient Babylon is the regathering of Israel to their God-given homeland. Babylon represents to the world system what Israel represents to biblical ideas and Christianity. The climax of all the ages is at hand.³²

The resurrection of ancient Babylon in our day constitutes another sign of the times, which sets the stage. Once again, this development, after thousands of years, just happens to be happening in conjunction with all the other developments necessary for the fulfillment of the prophecies of the coming tribulation.

Conclusion

There are signs of the time, which indicates that we are likely near the time of the start of the tribulation. Some stage-setting developments casting a shadow in our day include religious apostasy, preparation for a revived Roman Empire in Europe, Israel’s return to the land, revival of Israel’s ancient enemies such as Iraq as Babylon, and the rise of Russia as a military power (Gog and Magog invasion), all preparing the way for tribulation events. But before the curtain rises, the church will rise into the air at the rapture. In the mean time, let’s get back to the future, by keeping the future in the future. Maranatha!

¹John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy: 14 Essential Keys to Understanding the Final Drama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), p. 1.

²Walvoord, *Prophecy*, p. 1.

³John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 129.

⁴John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, revised (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 217.

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- ⁵ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 183.
- ⁶ Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 183.
- ⁷ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (San Antonio: Ariel Press, 1982), pp. 439-40. For the most exhaustive presentation of this view that I have found so far, see David L. Cooper, *Future Events Revealed: According to Matthew 24 and 25* (Los Angeles: David L. Cooper, 1935).
- ⁸ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, [1910] 1961), p. 476.
- ⁹ Gaebelein, *Matthew*, p. 481.
- ¹⁰ John McLean, "Chronology and Sequential Structure of John's Revelation," in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), p. 323.
- ¹¹ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 679.
- ¹² William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 904.
- ¹³ J. Randall Price, "Old Testament Tribulation Terms," in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), p. 72.
- ¹⁴ Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts: Jewish Legends of Three Thousand Years* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), pp. 95-103.
- ¹⁵ Patai, *Messiah Texts*, pp. 95-96.
- ¹⁶ Price, "Tribulation Terms," p. 450, f.n. 56.
- ¹⁷ Ed Hindson, *Final Signs: Amazing Prophecies of the End Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), pp. 36-37.
- ¹⁸ Hindson, *Final Signs*, pp. 36-37.
- ¹⁹ John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, 1976, 1990), 21-22.
- ²⁰ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Press, 1982), p. 65.
- ²¹ Cited in David A. Rausch, *Zionism within Early American Fundamentalism, 1878-1918: A Convergence of Two Traditions*, (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 117.
- ²² John Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), p. 26.
- ²³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Prophecy For Today: The Middle East Crisis and the Future of the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p. 226.
- ²⁴ Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth-2000 A.D. Will Mankind Survive?* (Palos Verdes, CA: Western Front, 1994), p. 221.
- ²⁵ Chuck Missler, *The Magog Invasion* (Palos Verdes, CA: Western Front, 1995), p. 121.
- ²⁶ Mark Hitchcock, *After the Empire: Biblical Prophecy in Light of the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994), p. 156.
- ²⁷ Hindson, *Final Signs*, p. 151.
- ²⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Best Is Yet to Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), pp. 124-25.
- ²⁹ Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *The Coming Cashless Society* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), pp. 85-87.
- ³⁰ Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991), pp. 208-09.
- ³¹ Joseph Chambers, *A Palace for the Antichrist: Saddam Hussein's Drive to Rebuild Babylon and Its Place in Bible Prophecy* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 1996), p. 66.
- ³² Chambers, *Palace*, p. 19.