

# The Jewish Roman World of Jesus

— DR . J A M E S D . T A B O R —

Christian Origins and the New Testament

## Why 2K?

The Biblical Roots of Millennialism

by James Tabor

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"January 1, 2000 ... The biggest birthday any of us will ever live through," trumpeted the *New York Times* in announcing the Millennium Series in its Sunday magazine. Newspapers predict that as many as 1.5 million people will crowd Times Square at midnight, December 31, 1999, watched by an estimated television audience of more than 1 billion. A search of the Internet yields more than 460,000 Web sites that mention either "year 2000" or "millennium."

Books are getting in on the action, too. John Updike's recent novel, set in 2020, is appropriately titled *Toward the End of Time*. Last year Robert Stone published *Damascus Gate*, a novel about a self-proclaimed messiah and his followers, who plan to bring on the End by bombing the Muslim Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Stephen Jay Gould's *Questioning the Millennium: A Rationalist's Guide* and Damian Thompson's *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* provide nonfictional analyses of the end-time phenomenon.

The "dawn of the Age of Aquarius" is no longer a pop '60s catchphrase; it is the serious agenda of millions. Witness the phenomenal sales of James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, which heralds an "emerging planetary culture" set to make a "quantum leap" into the new millennium. Book chains have extensive sections devoted to what one might call New Age spirituality, which is more often than not connected to the approaching millennium. The 16th-century writings of the French astrologer Nostradamus, who pinpointed the years 1999 to 2003 as a time of great turmoil and transition, are enjoying a revival. (1)

Technically, the new millennium does not begin until December 31, 2000, with the arrival of the year 2001. For all practical purposes, however, the powerful symbolic value of the round number 2000 has won the day as the beginning of the millennium.

Pope John Paul II has declared 2000 a special Jubilee for celebration and reconciliation: Millions of pilgrims are expected to visit the Holy Land, including the Pope himself. Israel has pulled out all the stops to prepare for an overflow of visitors, but also to guard against doomsday groups that might turn to violence, or even suicide, in anticipation of certain prophecies found in the Book of Revelation. On January 8, 1999, Israel deported 14 members of a Denver-based apocalyptic group called the Concerned Christians based on reports that their leader, Monte Kim Miller, had said he was destined to die in the streets of Jerusalem in the final days of December 1999. On October 11, 1999, a group of 25 Irish Catholic pilgrims were turned away at the port of Haifa for fear that they, too, shared apocalyptic visions of the new year.

Whatever combination of merriment, mayhem, madness and marketing the arrival of the millennium brings, it is surely *the* story of 1999.

Few of us realize, however, that our concept of marking time in thousand-year segments is rooted in six verses in chapter 20 of the Book of Revelation, that mysterious final book of the Christian Bible. In the fearsome imagery that marks the Book of Revelation, the words God gave to Jesus Christ are made known to "his servant John,"\* who testifies "to all that he saw" (Revelation 1:1-2). Five times in chapter 20, John speaks of the final thousand-year period:

\*Since the early days of the church, the author of Revelation has been identified as the apostle John and/or as the evangelist John, but scholars generally remain unconvinced.

Then I saw an angel coming down from Heaven ... He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit ... Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the

thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection ... Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.

## Revelation 20:1-6

Revelation's thousand years is not just any thousand years. It is the *final* one thousand years, culminating in the resurrection of the dead and the last great Judgment. But we must go back to apocalyptic Judaism in the troubled times of the late Second Temple period (200 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.), and even earlier to the Psalms, to find the germ of the idea of dividing time into eras or periods of one thousand years. This notion was picked up and made central by early Christians, who gave it an apocalyptic cast in the New Testament.

Dividing time into thousand-year segments occurs first in Psalm 90:4, where it is said that for God, "a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night." The New Testament epistle Second Peter echoes Psalms yet is even more explicit: "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (2 Peter 3:8). Various ancient Jewish and Christian sources have suggested that the Book of Genesis anticipates later divisions of time into millennia. They see an analogy between the six days of Creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3, which are followed by the final seventh day, the Sabbath, upon which God rested from his work, and the periods of human history that would last precisely six thousand years, followed by a final seventh "day," or millennium—a final thousand years, which like the Sabbath day, would be characterized by peace and rest. In the Christian view, the Sabbath came to mean relief from the toil and domination of Satan's evil grasp upon the planet. Among Christians, millenarianism refers specifically to a "millennial reign of Christ" and more generally to any utopian view of a transformed New Age.

Despite its Christ-centered formulation, Revelation clearly tapped into a concept that had been developing among Jews for centuries.<sup>(2)</sup> A division of 6,000 years of human time is described in the Babylonian Talmud in a conversation between two rabbis.

Rabbi Kattina taught:

\*\*This is a reference to the biblical law regarding the sabbatical year: "Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts: (Deuteronomy 15:1)

Six thousand years shall the world exist, and one thousand, the seventh, it shall be desolate, as it is written, "And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day." ... Just as the seventh year is one year of release in seven,\*\* so is the world: one thousand years out of seven shall be fallow.

To which Rabbi Eliyyahu replies:

The world is to exist six thousand years. In the first two

thousand there was desolation [no Torah]; two thousand years the Torah flourished; and the next two thousand years is the Messianic era, but through our many iniquities all these years have been lost.

Sanhedrin 93b

Many Jewish groups in and around the first century C.E. believed that the appearance of the Messiah was imminent. This Talmudic passage from about the sixth century C.E. looks back on such a hope and considers it postponed as a consequence of the Roman defeat of the Jews: the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., and later, the disastrous Bar-Kokhba Revolt in 135 C.E. which led to a second decisive Roman triumph. These rabbis did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, yet it is their scheme—giving biblical history a chronological logic—that became, in the hands of Christians, a powerful concept culminating in Jesus Christ.

The earliest succinct and systematic Christian exposition of the millennial division leading to God's judgment is found in the Letter of Barnabas, which dates to the late first or early second century C.E. This document was highly treasured by many Christians, and was even included in the Christian Scriptures by some.<sup>(3)</sup> The author writes:

He speaks of the Sabbath at the beginning of the Creation, "And God made in six days the works of his hands and on the seventh day he made an end, and rested in it and sanctified it." Notice, children, what is the meaning of "He made an end in six days"? He means this: that the Lord will make an end of everything in six thousand years, for a day with him means a thousand years ... So then, children, in six days, that is in six thousand years, everything will be completed. "And he rested on the seventh day." This means, when his Son comes he will destroy the time of the wicked one, and will judge the godless, and will change the sun and the moon and the stars, and then he will truly rest on the seventh day.

Letter of Barnabas 15.3-5

This notion that because God created the physical world in six days and rested on the Sabbath, he would create a new world of spiritual perfection over a seven-thousand-year period, becomes commonplace in the early church and is repeated often by the church fathers.

In this world of apocalyptic symbolism, six is the number of humankind operating without God. Seven symbolizes the perfection or completion that the Kingdom of God brings (Sabbath rest). The symbolism of six is significant in the Book of Daniel. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar makes a statue 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide for all to worship (Daniel 3:1). This statue seems to represent the glory of his

\*\*\*The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters plus five variant letters, which appear only at the ends of words. The first nine letters of the Hebrew alphabet are equivalent to one through nine, so that *aleph* (A) = 1, *beth* (B) = 2 ... *teth* (T) = 9. The next nine letters rise by tens, so that *yod* (Y) = 10, *kaph* (K) = 20, *lamed* (L) = 30, *mem* (M) = 40, *nun* (N) = 50 ... *tsade* (TS) = 90. The last four letters and the five variant letters rise by 100s so that *qoph* (Q) = 100, *resh* (R) = 200, etc.

\*\*\*The Greek system is very similar to the Hebrew. The Greek alphabet has 26 letters. But in determining the numerical value of the letters, the symbol *stigma*, which is not a letter, was (for unknown reasons) inserted in the sixth position. In the Greek alphabet the first nine letters (including *stigma*) equal one through nine. The next nine rise by 10s, and the last nine rise by 100s.

kingdom. It may even have been a statue of the king himself (the text is not clear, and no god or deity is specified). In the previous chapter, another monumental statue is described as "huge, its brilliance extraordinary ... The head ... was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay" (Daniel 2:31-33). This statue has been interpreted as symbolizing the kingdoms of Babylon, Persia and Greece, which would be destroyed suddenly and replaced by "a kingdom that shall never be destroyed ... It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44).

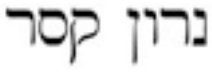
The author of the Book of Revelation seems to be aware of this imagery from Daniel. He describes a false prophet or Antichrist figure, who, in the last days, orders a statue or image to be made of the Beast, which represents a final world kingdom. The number six is the key to his identity:

This calls for Wisdom; let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man—his number is six hundred and sixty-six.

Revelation 13:18

Revelation 13 describes a final evil figure identified by the mysterious number 666, who, at the end of the sixth millennium of human history, causes all the world to worship the image of the Beast, which once symbolized Babylon but for Christians has become the new Babylon—that is, Rome.

Many explanations of the code name 666 have been proposed over the centuries, but one in particular has attracted scholarly support. The author of Revelation, writing sometime between the reigns of the Roman emperors Nero and Domitian (68-96 C.E.), has the emperor Nero in mind as the model for the Beast. The connection is apparent in Nero's name.

In Hebrew, each of the 22 letters of the alphabet has a numerical value. A code called *gematria*, developed in Jewish apocalyptic and mystical circles, draws connections between two otherwise unrelated words based on the total numerical value of the letters in each word.\*\*\* Nero's name or title in Hebrew looks like this:  (*NRON QSR*), meaning Nero Caesar. Taking the value of the Hebrew letters, *N*=50, *R*=200, *O*=6, *N*=50, *Q*=100, *S*=60, *R*=200, one comes up with the sum of 666. To make this identification of the beast with Nero even more convincing, it should be noted that some Greek manuscripts of Revelation give the number 616 rather than 666—probably due to an alternative spelling of Nero as *NRO* rather than *NRON* (666 minus the final N [=50] gives 616).

A similar system of *gematria* was common in Greek.\*\*\* For example, a bit of graffiti at Pompeii reads, "I love her whose number is 545" (letters *phi-mu-epsilon* in Greek, probably someone's initials).

If we write Nero's title in Greek, it looks like this:

Νερων Καεσαρ —*NERO CAESAR*. The value of the Greek letters totals 1,332, which seems to lack significance—until one realizes that 1,332 is in fact 666 times 2. The author of Revelation is apparently signaling to the astute reader that Nero is the model of the Antichrist; since he has come and gone, however, a second "Nero" is to come—in his mind, very possibly the emperor Domitian—who will also persecute Christians. It is probably not coincidental that the Roman numerals—I (1), V (5), X (10), L (50), C (100), D (500)—also add up to 666! Rome and its most wicked emperors seem to be stamped all over these beasts of Revelation 13. In contrast, it was certainly not lost on early Christians that the gematria for the name and title "Jesus Christ" in Greek —*IESOUS*—adds up to 888, which in this system of thought signifies something beyond seven, or completion.

Even though our text of the Book of Revelation only mentions the seventh, or terminal, thousand-year period, its author clearly assumes an audience that is familiar with the idea as a whole and can easily fill in the blanks on its own.

In Jewish and Christian apocalyptic circles, the idea that six thousand years of human history would unfold according to a divine plan and an ordered sequence, orchestrated by the will of God, was compelling. But it also offered a second, far more alluring possibility—that of calculating when the end would occur! After all, if one could determine precisely where one lived in this unfolding sequence of millennia, the idea of the time of the End drawing near would become much more concrete. And that brings us back to the year 1999.

The millennium now ending, the second millennium as dated from the birth of Jesus, is the sixth millennium based on the literal chronology of the Hebrew Bible. Let's do the numbers:[\(4\)](#)

Adam to Noah's Flood	1,656 years
Flood to birth of Abraham	454 years
Abraham to Exodus	430 years
Exodus to Jerusalem's First Temple	480 years
First Temple to Exile	393 years
Exile to rebuilt Temple under Persians	72 years
Total	3,485 years

This takes us to the time of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and the completion of the rebuilt Temple by Jews returning from the Exile in 516/515 B.C.E., the sixth year of the reign of the Persian king Darius (Ezra 6:15). That works out to just about 2,515 years ago. Add the numbers together—2,515 years taking us back to the time of Darius and

another 3,485 years taking us back to Adam. You guessed it: We are sitting on the cusp of the 5,999th year of world history, based on a literal reading of the Hebrew Bible.

If you are familiar with the traditional Jewish calendar, however, you will immediately spot a problem. According to this calendar, 1999 is the year 5760 since Adam and Eve, rather than 5999. How can we account for this 240-year difference? The answer is that the traditional Jewish calendar, based on the rabbinic text called *Seder Olam*,\* is rooted in rabbinic tradition and theology, not on literal numbers taken directly from the Hebrew Bible. The rabbinic chronology results in 163 fewer years and dates the Babylonian Exile to 423 B.C.E.(5) (This is impossible, according to modern scholarship; we know with certainty that the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar, when he destroyed Jerusalem, burned the Temple and exiled the Jews, was 587 or 586 B.C.E.) The rabbis also count Israel's time in Egypt, based on Exodus 12:40, differently from what I have done above, accounting for an additional difference of 77 years between the rabbinic and Christian systems— giving us a discrepancy of 240 years.(6)

\**Seder Olam* is a post-talmudic work that sets forth the details of an official rabbinic chronology and forms the basis for determining the starting "Year of Creation" for the standard Jewish calendar, still used today.

In any case, most people do not believe that the world began only 6,000 years ago. *Homo sapiens* surely existed many hundreds of thousands of years ago. A mere 6,000 years is a blink of an eye against human and planetary evolution.

There are, however, millions of creationists who do take these numbers as absolutes and who believe that the first human beings with a human soul can be traced back to a literal Adam and Eve around 4000 B.C.E. But beyond that, there are many conservative Bible believers who fully accept the evolutionary timetable of millions of years for the development of life on this planet (interpreting the days of Creation in Genesis 1 as ages) but nonetheless see civilization (literate humans in Egypt, Sumer and China) as dating only to approximately 4000 B.C.E. Thus those who see the chronology in the Bible as a metaphor for scientific chronology can still maintain that human history has about run its course.

What is particularly intriguing about the general chronological scheme of 6,000 years (our year 2000 equals 6000 years after Adam) is that it does not have the slightest relationship to the birth of Jesus. All the numbers are taken from the Hebrew Bible. And yet, there is a fascinating correlation between the Hebrew and the Christian calendars.

In and of itself, passing the 2,000th year since the birth of Jesus appears to have no significance in the Bible. There are no passages in the New Testament that specifically state that the "age of the Messiah" is to last 2,000 years. However, such a scheme does seem to lie behind the Book of Revelation; the author expects his readers, who are adept in such mystical matters, to pick up on it. If the millennial reign of Christ described in Revelation 20 is a final seventh millennium following six previous ones and Jesus is born at the close of the fourth millennium

(based on the standard chronology of the Hebrew Bible), then the period of 2,000 years for an "age of the Messiah" is implicit. Rabbi Eliyyahu, in the talmudic passage quoted earlier, clearly knows a similar tradition—that the Messiah was to appear after 4,000 years and the subsequent age of the Messiah was to last another 2,000 years—though he says that the Messiah did not come on schedule due to the failings of Israel.

But there is one problem with linking the birth of Jesus with the appearance of the messiah at the end of the fourth millennium: Most scholars today believe that Jesus was not born exactly 2,000 years ago.

My students are always puzzled when I explain that Jesus was likely born sometime between 7 and 3 B.C.E.—that is, several years before his "birth." It all goes back to an error in calculation by the sixth-century C.E. scholar and monk Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Little). In his time, the years were dated from the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian (284 C.E.), who had persecuted Christians. Dionysius believed that the calendar should be recalculated from the birth of Jesus. He concluded that the Roman year 754 (counting from the founding of Rome) would be the year 1, which he thus called Anno Domini (Year of the Lord)—the first year following Jesus' birth (since there is no year zero). Gradually this system of counting years caught on, and Charlemagne made it nearly universal in the ninth century C.E.\*\*

\*\*One often hears that the turn of the first millennium, that is, the year 999 C.E., caused widespread apocalyptic foreboding that the end of the world was near. Although we can find some isolated examples of such expectations, this new calendar, with its revised way of counting years, was just coming into vogue.

The Gregorian calendar we use today maintains the calculations that Dionysius used to determine the birth of Jesus, adjusted slightly in 1582 by Pope Gregory and his scholars. Unfortunately, it appears that Dionysius made a mistake: He was off a few years on his calculations of the death of Herod, which actually occurred in 4 B.C.E.

Modern calculations of Jesus' birth turn on Matthew's reference to the birth of Jesus preceding the death of Herod the Great. There is also the matter of the Christmas star, which Matthew says the Magi, or astrologers from the East, observed, prompting them to travel to Palestine (Matthew 2). Johannes Kepler, in 1630, proposed that Matthew refers to several extraordinary conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn that took place in 7 B.C.E. More recently, Ernest Martin has argued that even more striking stellar events took place during the years 3/2 B.C.E., involving conjunctions of Jupiter and Venus (the morning star) that were so spectacular they would have appeared in the sky as a single bright light, with Venus rising in the east.<sup>(7)</sup> The author of Revelation does refer to Jesus as "the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16). Martin's Christmas star theory has been accepted by many of the observatories around the world, including the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles, for their annual Christmas programs.

In sum, most scholars are convinced Jesus was actually born several years earlier than the year we designate as 1 A.D. or C.E., with most putting it around 5-7 B.C.E. and some at 3/2 B.C.E.<sup>(8)</sup>



What this means is that if we mark our millennia from the birth of Jesus, as we now more accurately can determine it, we have already entered the new millennium: The transition quietly occurred sometime between 1994 and 1998. It all depends on where we place the birth of Jesus in this range of possibilities from 7 B.C.E. to 3 B.C.E. And yet there is not the slightest chance that anyone is going to pay attention to such technicalities when the year 2000 conveys such symbolic meaning. For all practical purposes, the year 2000 marks the end of the second millennium since the birth of Jesus.

What this means is that conservative interpreters of the Book of Revelation find themselves in a unique position. For the first time in history, there is a chance to view things at the end of a sixth millennium of human civilization—which is the precise scheme that ancient Christians and Jews dreamed and speculated about. For 1,900 years, futurist interpreters have attempted to fit the mysterious prophecies of this book into whatever situation they have found themselves in. For the early Christians, the Beast was clearly Rome, but subsequent candidates have been legion—from the Roman Catholic Church to the Holy Roman Empire, from the Islamic- and Turkish-controlled Middle East and portions of Europe to Nazi Germany.

Over the centuries, there have been four classic ways of reading and interpreting the Book of Revelation, and in principle they apply to that preeminent "apocalypse" of the Hebrew Bible as well—the Book of Daniel.

The preterist view (from the Latin *praeterire*, meaning "to go by," "to pass") explains the book in the historical context of the author's own time—the late-first-century C.E. Roman world, with the Christian persecutions by the Roman emperors Nero and Domitian as a backdrop. This is the approach that is most widely accepted by biblical scholars.

The historicist view holds that Revelation records major events from the time of Jesus until the End in symbolic and cryptic form. In other words, it is the Christian age written in advance. Events such as the rise of the Catholic Church, the Muslim conquest, the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Reformation are all described in symbolic language—especially in chapters 9-16, where one reads of the sequential unfolding of Seven Trumpets and Seven Plagues. One problem, of course, with such a view is that one must continually adjust for future events. For example, the 19th-century commentator Adam Clarke, writing around 1830, understandably ends his interpretation with the Napoleonic Wars.

The idealist view sees Revelation as a timeless symbolic drama representing the struggle of the forces of evil against the forces of Christ—applicable to every age, but without any precise and exhaustive historical fulfillment. Thus the Beast that persecutes the people of God could be any evil force in any age or place that opposes what is good. The message of the book is that Christ will triumph in the end—whenever the Messiah may come.

The futurist view, which has enjoyed such a great revival among evangelical and fundamentalist Christians in the 20th century, understands the Book of Revelation as a precise mapping of the sequence of events in the final days of history, particularly the last seven years.<sup>(9)</sup> The symbols in the book (the Four Horsemen, the Beasts, the Trumpets, the Bowls of Wrath, etc.) are taken to refer to concrete events that are to transpire during a time of great tribulation before the End. Since the major portion of the book has not been fulfilled but awaits the end-time, things have been on hold for 1,900 years. Indeed, one often hears references to God's prophetic clock, which was stopped at the time of Christ, but which at some undisclosed time in the future will begin ticking again—with just a few minutes left before midnight!

Our century in particular has revolutionized the ways the Book of Revelation can be read in this futurist fashion, and as a result millions of Bible-believing Christians have found such views quite compelling—from stump Pentecostal preachers and TV evangelists to Billy Graham.

There are a number of reasons for this. The return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 is understood as the single most important event heralding the approaching End. Not only is this event seen as a direct fulfillment of dozens of prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, but it sets the stage for a literal reading of the Book of Revelation that would be otherwise impossible. The Jewish occupation in 1967 of Jerusalem's Old City, and especially of the Temple Mount, is essential for such literal interpretations of Revelation. Chapter 11, which gives the core sequence of events that will usher in the End, is set in a divided city of Jerusalem (in which "gentiles" occupy certain portions) with a Jewish Temple in existence. The "two Witnesses," two final prophets who appear in the last days, not only carry out their work in Jerusalem but die in its streets. The book climaxes with the "Battle of Armageddon," which involves a worldwide gathering of armies against Jerusalem. Prophetic interpreters merge texts like Zechariah 14, Joel 3 and Daniel 11, which also speak of such a battle, with Jesus' own predictions in Matthew 24 of the time when "nations will rise against nations, and kingdom against kingdom." Even more to the point, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus predicts the Roman devastation of Jerusalem that took place in 70 C.E., but then implies that the gentile control of the city will end before his Second Coming (Luke 21:20-28). None of the resulting sequences makes sense without a revived State of Israel, a Jewish Jerusalem and a rebuilt Temple.

That no such Temple exists has given rise to extraordinary cooperation between some right-wing Orthodox Zionist Jews and fundamentalist Christians. There are plans to raise red heifers for the required ritual lustrations, and Christians are collecting money to fund the Temple's construction.<sup>(10)</sup> The Orthodox Jews are interested in what they see as the next logical step of redemption following the establishment of the State of Israel—the regathering of the Jewish people to the land and Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem. But the fundamentalist Christians have another agenda altogether. In order for

their Antichrist scenarios to be fulfilled, which they believe *must* happen in order for Jesus Christ to return to rule the world, there must be a third Temple. In other words, the Christians want to help construct what they believe will become the Temple of the Antichrist. The Jews, on the other hand, believe the construction of the Third Temple would inaugurate the messianic age. Jeffrey Goldberg puts it well: "There are Jews who want to seize the Temple Mount by any means necessary. And Christians who want to see the Jewish Temple rebuilt and destroyed to bring on Armageddon. And Muslims who will never give up the Dome of the Rock. Will the peace process be stalled by the Apocalypse?"(11)

The worldwide linkup of information technology (television, the Internet, a computer-based global economy) allows one to imagine concretely the kind of global domination that the Book of Revelation posits for the Beast. The text says "all nations" will merge into a single economic and military "world government" led by a charismatic leader whom the entire world will follow (chapters 13, 17-18). When the final events transpire in Jerusalem, Revelation says the "inhabitants of the whole earth" (Revelation 11:9-10) will be able to observe their unfolding. This would be impossible, we are told, without our global satellite television hookup. And yet, these very advances in information technology can also bring the house down in a sudden and total economic collapse: Revelation 18:17 says Babylon falls "in one hour."

Among Christian Evangelicals, there has been an extraordinary focus on the so-called Y2K computer bug. Major television and radio figures such as Pat Robertson and James Dobson are warning Christians to prepare for the worst. Web sites on the Internet offer everything from emergency supplies and survivalist gear to food for a family of four for a year for only \$3,350. There seems to be no general agreement as to whether 2000 will bring a temporary disruption or become a catalyst for some type of beginning of the end ride to the great tribulation and Armageddon. Most of today's futurist interpreters believe that one world government, ultimately facilitated by information technology, will only come about following the devastating collapse of our fragile and interdependent global economy.

The Book of Revelation is also full of descriptions of worldwide famines, epidemics, devastating earthquakes, tidal waves, polluted waters and even an asteroid hitting the earth (Revelation 8:8-10). It does not take much imagination to correlate current conditions on the planet—weather upsets, new and strange diseases, a rash of earthquakes, the recent attention given to the threat of asteroids—with a literal reading of Revelation. In the Gospel of Luke, even Jesus describes upsets in weather and cosmic heavenly signs as the main indicators of his return (Luke 21:25-27). Accordingly, in May 2000, an amazing conjunction of planets is to appear in the sky—similar to the configuration in 3 B.C.E. but much more spectacular.

The late Norman Perrin, my New Testament professor at the University of Chicago, used to tell us that there was one thing certain in

the study of the long history of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism—a 100-percent failure rate. H.H. Rowley, in his masterful book of the early 1940s, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, made an astute observation. At the time, Hitler had taken most of Europe and General Rommel had orders to march to Jerusalem, link up with the Arab allies and crush the Zionists once and for all. One could hardly imagine a better candidate for the Beast than Nazi Germany with its Führer. In both the United States and Britain, the Bible prophecy movement was having a heyday. Rowley wrote:

"Yet where for more than two thousand years a hope has proved illusory, we should beware of embracing it afresh. The writers of these books were mistaken in their hopes of imminent deliverance; their interpreters who believed the consummation was imminent in their day proved mistaken; and they who bring the same principles and the same hopes afresh to the prophecies will prove equally mistaken."[\(12\)](#)

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**1** Nostradamus was born in France in 1503. His major work, *Centuries*, a collection of obscurely phrased, rhymed quatrains written in French, was published in 1555. The most oft-cited passage is quatrain 10:72: "The year 1999, seven months, from the sky will come a great King of Terror, he will bright to life the great king of the Mongols. Before and after Mars [war] reigns with good success" (my translation). [\(back\)](#)

**2** The notion of thousand-year periods can be traced to Zoroastrianism, which was very influential in the development of Jewish apocalypticism. See Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 77-104. [\(back\)](#)

**3** It is included in the oldest complete New Testament manuscript, Codex Sinaiticus, in the British Library in London. It follows the 27 books that now make up the canon. [\(back\)](#)

**4** Although there are a number of ambiguities in the chronological system that runs through the Masoretic text, these numbers are generally quite easy to come up with from a literal reading of Genesis 5, 11 and 25; Exodus 12:40; 1 Kings 6:1; the Exile and Return as described in 2 Kings 25 and Ezra; and passages chronicling the reigns of the kings of Judah. The writings of Josephus and the Septuagint give very different numbers throughout. [\(back\)](#)

**5** There is a theological reason the rabbis collapse their history and lose 163 years during the Persian period. They insist that there were only 490 years between the fall of the First and Second Temples, based on how they interpreted the "70 weeks" prophecy of Daniel 9:25-27, a period they maintain ended with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., and not with the coming of Jesus as Messiah, as Christians were interpreting it. [\(back\)](#)

6 It is worth noting that some mystical Jewish sources still find significance in this 20th century of the Christian era, even though they accept the year of the world as 5760, based on the standard Jewish calendar. The Zohar predicts that "in the year 600 of the sixth millennia [5600 on the Jewish calendar, or the year 1840] the gates of wisdom from above and below will be opened to [begin] to rectify the world to prepare it to enter into the seventh millennium" (1.117A). This analogy, comparing a thousand years to a day, means that 1999—still 240 years from the seventh millennium on the Jewish calendar—is just "hours" before the arrival of the cosmic seventh millennium or Sabbath. Just as pious Jews prepare for the Sabbath each week several hours before sundown, the events of the late 20th century (especially the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the Six-Day War in 1967) are seen as just such a Sabbath preparation—the "footsteps of the Messiah," as it were. By such a cosmic measure, 1999 would be equivalent to the Friday afternoon of human history, about five hours before sunset! Ironically, one mystical rabbi of the 15th century, Abraham Azulai, actually ascribed significance to the precise year 5760 (1999 C.E.). He reasoned that the measure of the world is the same as the measure of the mikveh (ritual bath), 40 *seah*. A *seah* is 144 *eggs* (these are talmudic measurements of volume), and 40 times 144 equals 5760. Writes Azulai: "Thus the length of days of this world shall be 5760 years. Then shall the world be renewed. For as the mikveh purifies the unclean, at this time, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will remove the unclean spirit from the world ... but this is only the beginning of the redemption." ([back](#))

7 For a detailed discussion of all the proposals, including Martin's, see Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp. 306-320. ([back](#))

8 The date of 3/2 B.C.E. was universally held by the early church fathers and has been embraced again by Ernest Martin, W.F. Filmer and others who place the death of Herod in 1 B.C.E. Their position has now been accepted by Jack Finegan in the latest revised edition of his *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, pp. 291-301. ([back](#))

9 Paul Boyer, in *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), chronicles the spectacular rise and popularity of this approach to Bible prophecy. ([back](#))

10 See the extraordinary article by Lawrence Wright, "Forcing the End," *The New Yorker* (July 20, 1998), pp. 42-53. Wright focuses on the breeding of a ritually appropriate red heifer, the ashes of which are required for Temple rites, according to Numbers 19. ([back](#))

11 "Israel's Y2K Problem," *The New York Times Magazine* (October 3, 1999). ([back](#))

12 H.H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944), p. 173. ([back](#))

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The Jewish Roman World of Jesus [Main Page](#)

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[Christian Origins and the New Testament](#) | [Ancient Judaism](#)

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