THE END OF THE WORLD. AGAIN

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. It did not take long for some present-day prophets to see in the invasion a sign of the end of the world.

Pat Rob­ertson returned to *The 700 Club* to announce that “Vladimir Putin was “compelled by God” to invade Ukraine as a prelude to an eventual climactic battle in Israel.” (Crary) He said Putin’s ultimate goal is not a confrontation with Ukraine but with Israel. It’s all there in the Book of Ezekiel, Rob­ertson explained.

Greg Laurie, pastor of the megachurch Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California, announced on YouTube that the pandemic plus the invasion show that “we’re living in the last days. I believe Christ could come back at any moment.” (Qtd. in Crary)

Such predictions are hardly new. Let me highlight two out of many such occurrences.

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In the second half of the 1100s, Joachim of Fiore (c. 1132-1202), a Cistercian monk, divided his­tory into three ages: the age of the Father (Old Testament times), the age of the Son (dominated by the Church), and the age of the Holy Spirit, which ­­a new religious order had in­au­gurated. The age of the Spirit would be a “dispensation of universal love . . . in which there will be no need for disciplinary institutions.” (Gardner)

By calculating generations as given in the Bible, Joachim determined that Saint Benedict began the third age when he founded the Benedictines in 529. But the full flowering of the third age would be 22 generations after Benedict. Since Joachim probably thought he was twenty generations after Benedict (Braid), Joachim guessed the third age would start around 1260.

The prediction caused quite a stir. A sect (the Joachimists) arose within the Franciscans; it declared itself to be the new religious order that would bring about the new age. Its members went so far as to declare that Joachim’s three books predicting the new age were now a replacement for the Bible. The Joachimists identified the Antichrist[[1]](#footnote-1) as Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1220-50). Their faith was not shaken even when Frederick died in 1250: in ten years or so, they assured themselves, the end would arrive.

In 1256, Pope Alexander IV (1254-61) condemned the Joachimists. But the real blow came in 1260: nothing happened. Within a decade, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) refuted the Joachimists in his *Summa theologiae* (1-2.106.4).

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In the mid-1800s, another example of “end-times fever” occurred.

William Miller (1782-1849) was a farmer on the Vermont-New York border. A diligent examiner of biblical prophecies, by 1818 he had determined when Jesus would return: “between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844” (qtd. in “William Miller”).

How did he deduce the date? In Dan 8:14, Daniel overheard one angel say to another that the temple would be trampled by gentiles for “two thousand three hundred evenings and mornings.” Miller assumed that the 2300 days referred to years. (This “day-year principle” was well-established: most of the Protestant Reformers had used it in the 1500s.) By using other references in Daniel to 490 days, 1290 days, and 1335 days, plus data from the Book of Revelation, Miller discovered the time of Jesus’ return.

In 1822 he published a slightly more precise prediction: the end would come “within twenty-one years,—on or before 1843.” (Qtd. in “William Miller”) Throughout the 1830s and early 1840s, interest in Miller’s prediction spread across the country, as far as Washington, DC, and the Ohio frontier.

1843, the crucial year, came and went: but nothing happened.

But wait: Miller had originally said, “between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844.” So his followers now fixed on the second of those dates. But March 21, 1844, came and went: but nothing happened.

Further discussion revealed the problem: Miller had used a rabbinic calendar rather than a Karaite calendar. (The Karaites were a Jewish fundamentalist sect.) A new date was adopted: April 18, 1844. This had to be it!

April 18 came and went: but nothing happened.

Miller, nevertheless, remained optimistic: “I confess my error, and acknowledge my disappointment; yet I still believe that the day of the Lord is near, even at the door.” (Qtd. in Melton)

Further discussion now revealed another problem: Daniel’s 2300 years did not begin in 458 BCE (when Emperor Artaxerxes ordered Ezra to rebuild the temple); the sequence of years began when the Jews actually started rebuilding (in 457). That meant the second coming would be October 22, 1844!

In the frenzied summer of 1844, many adventists ignored their harvests or sold their businesses.

October 22 came and went: but nothing happened.

Adventists have referred to October 22, ever since, as “the Great Disappointment.” (Conkin 122)

Despite the setbacks, the movement did not die. Those who had left their denominations (about 50,000—largely Methodists, but also Baptists and Disciples of Christ) had been ridiculed, so they could not return. A year later (1845), Miller and others held a conference in Albany and began constructing an “adventist” denomina­tion. (“Advent” means arrival.) They “endorsed a ten-point doctrinal platform, ordained five ministers, and planned additional conferences.” (Conkin 123)

The new denomination was fissiparous: “New cults and sects multiplied (twenty-five by one count in 1855).” (Conkin 123) But one, in particular, survived: it became the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They are now about 20 million strong. (About 10 smaller sects also survive.)

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In every age, some use adverse events to warn that the end has come. Every age has enough dire events to make the predictions seem plausible. (Matt 6:34 kjv, “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”) But, as Jesus also said, in a prediction whose fulfillment keeps recurring (Matt 24:6 nrsv, see Mark 13:7; Luke 21:9), “you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but *the end is not yet*.”

1. The New Testament says the Antichrist, who will oppose Christ, will appear at the end times: 2 Thess 2:3-4, 8-12; 1 John 2:18-22; 4:3-4; 2 John 7; Rev 13:1-10 (the beast from the sea, empowered by the dragon/Satan); 13:11-18 (the beast from the land, also 16:13-14); 19:11-21 (defeat by Christ). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)