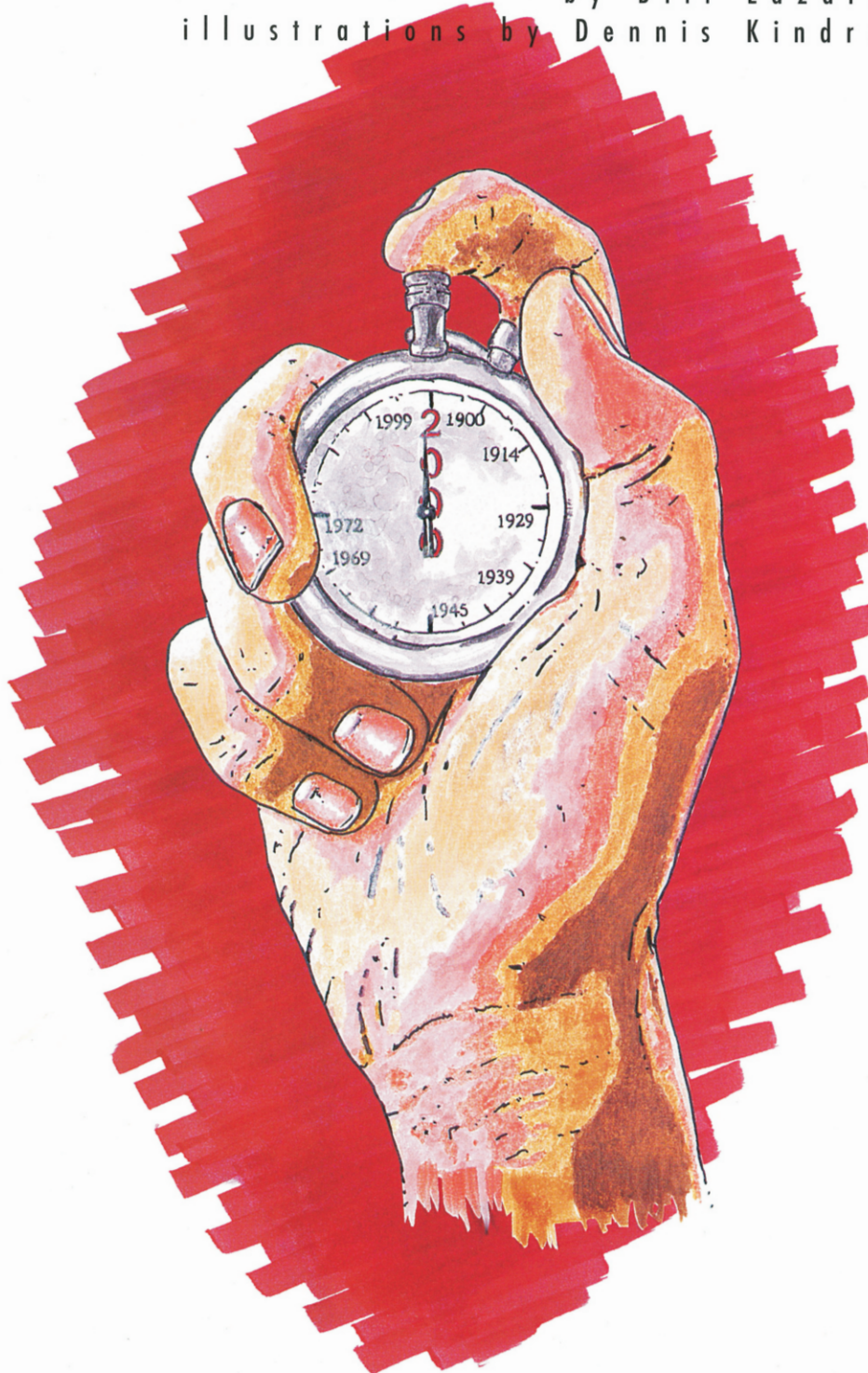


END OF THE WORLD?

by Bill Lazarus

illustrations by Dennis Kindred



Just a few days from now, the clock will strike midnight on December 31, 1999. Based on various published claims, a whole bunch of people are convinced that the last tone of the last chime will herald the end of the world.

Many modern prophets of doom were heartened by the "ingathering" of Jews to Israel in 1948, which they saw as a signal of the end of days. They were also excited when the Israeli Army retook the Temple Mount (former home of the Second Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.) during the 1967 Arab-Israel war.

"The next important development..." according to these interpreters of divine revelation, "will be the destruction of the Moslem mosque now on the (Temple Mount) site, to be followed by the rebuilding of the Third Temple. When it is completed, the Son of Perdition or antichrist will appear, initiating the final seven years of human history. During the last three and a half years of the period, an all-obliterating war will devastate the planet, followed by the return of Jesus and a thousand years of utopian bliss," reported Omar Garrison, who was skeptical, but obligingly recorded many such predictions in his *Encyclopedia of Prophecy*.

If history means anything, however, January 1, 2000 will be just another day. You can almost pick any year and find someone who forecast that it would see the end of the world. Some of the more prominent, usually pious, but occasionally humorous end-of-the-world predictions include:

- The Apostle Paul believed firmly that Jesus presaged the coming end. "Paul expected the age to come, which would be introduced by the Parousia (or return) of Jesus, to arrive in the near future" "...the resurrection of Jesus convinced Paul that the age to come had already begun," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* recorded.



- St. Augustine spent many fruitless years trying to tamp down apocalyptic enthusiasm during his life in the fifth century A.D. as the western Roman empire tottered and finally fell.
- One enterprising thief in Damascus in the 12th century convinced several wealthy residents that the end was coming and that they should wait on their roofs to be whisked to Jerusalem by celestial chariots. While they pondered the night sky, he swept their homes clean and vanished.
- In the 1200s, an earnest rabbi unsuccessfully tried to convince the pope to convert to Judaism, arguing that such a move would initiate the end of the world.
- Joachim of Fiore, a monk in the 13th century, picked 1263 as the dread year, based on research conducted on behest of the pope. He died before then; so did Frederick II, the king he picked as the antichrist.
- In the 1500s, Solomon Molko and David Reuveni teamed up. Reuveni, a dwarf, said he was leading a great army poised behind the Arabs and just waiting for enough money to buy armaments. Then he would launch the war that would initiate the end of the world. He apparently ended up in a Portuguese prison. Molko was burned at the stake after once escaping the flames at the behest of the pope, who initially believed him and his predictions of the coming end.

Christian interest in the end of the world derives principally from *The Revelation of St. John* in the *New Testament*, which attempts to explain why there has been a delay in the return of Jesus and to offer a view of the Kingdom due to arrive shortly.

The text has served as a guide to the coming Kingdom of God since its writing late in the first century A.D. In the book, the Parousia initiates a final battle with the risen Christ and his heavenly hosts against Satan, who would be leading both earthly and supernatural foes.

The continued delay of the Parousia naturally heightened speculation. Since Revelation mentioned a 1,000-year reign (20:5), chiliasts (from the Greek for "one thousand") thought the end of the first millennium would initiate the end. There's a scholarly debate whether anyone actually was frightened when the year 1000 A.D. rolled around. Based on the most recent studies, no one seemed to care very much at all.

In part of the lengthy text, John says the mark of this demonic antichrist is 666. "Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred threescore and six." (Rev. 13:18)

The numbers actually refer to deposed Emperor Nero, whose name numerologically works out to 666. While Nero had committed suicide in 68 A.D., he was rumored to be alive and to return, a non-messianic belief that survived well into the Middle Ages. However, later readers left in the dark about that explanation decided it referred to the year 666 or 1666.

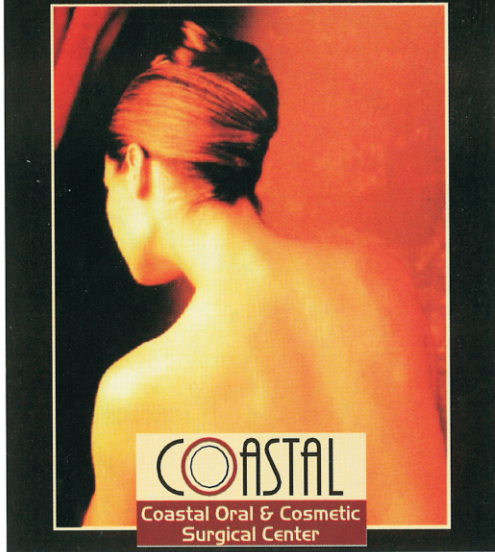
The chiliastic movement, condemned by the Church in 431 A.D., continued to survive despite the official denunciations. By the 1500s, a sect of Christians that decried infant baptism, called Anabaptists, seized control of Munster, Germany and declared the arrival of a new kingdom of Zion. The residents endured a three-year siege by Papal forces before the town was captured and its inhabitants massacred. The debacle, and the accompanying failure of a messiah to appear, led to a dampening of the chiliastic spirit until the 1600s.

In that century, it enjoyed a rebirth of interest beginning in England. Quakerism, for example, owns its beginning to chiliastic thought.

In more modern times, the Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists,

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Church of the Latter Day Saints and several other Christian sects were all founded at least in part on the basis of (obviously inaccurate) predictions of an immediate end of the world.

Actually, forecasts of the end of the world long predate Nostradamus, Jeanne Dixon, Edgar Cayce and many other famed prophets who all "foresaw" an end. They even predate Christianity.

The first known religious documents predicting the end of the world date from around 160 B.C. The book of *Daniel* in the Bible is an example. Scholars have created words to describe writings dealing with this awaited cataclysm: eschatology and apocalypsm. The words are used synonymously, but do have slightly different meanings: eschatology, from the Greek for "end" or "final," is the scientific term of the study of the end of the world; apocalypsm, from the Greek word for "revelation," refers to the religious aspect.

No prophet would have to search hard to locate an end of the world idea; it had long been a popular motif in the culture of many societies. Persians, for example, predicted a battle between the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness," a theme that foreshadows Christianity. The Hindu view of cyclical creations may have been merged with the Persian concept to help generate the basic doomsday theme in Judaism and later Christianity.

Floods provided the main method of destruction: In Greece, Zeus creates the high tide in which only the Titan Prometheus and his son Deucalion survived; in Burmese, Indian and other legends, there's always one survivor who sails to safety in some kind of vessel.

In the *Gilgamesh*, the oldest known epic containing this kind of apocalyptic disaster, a great hero of that name seeks out Utanapishtim, the survivor of the great flood that destroyed humanity. In an account written at least 4,000 years ago, *Gilgamesh* hopes to learn the secret of immortality; instead, he gets a detailed account of a massive flood.

Fortunately for those who support the concept of total destruction, water has never been the only medium for disaster. The Romans and Greeks believed in a succession of ages, each containing men made of gold, then silver, bronze and finally flesh. Greek stoics taught that the end would come with fire and would be reborn in a series of cycles. Famed Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle thought a series of natural events would initiate a destruction-rebirth cycle. Plato said that there were three ages; the third and present one was perfect and eternal.

The Romans, who absorbed a welter of ideas from various cultures, also accepted the concept of a recycled world, with destruction and then the periodic return of the same people and the same world. The poet Virgil, for example, predicted a second voyage of Jason and the Argonauts, a second Trojan War and a second Achilles. Other Romans also imagined a return to the golden age when Saturn supposedly ruled.

Jewish prophets envisioned a time when they would again be a holy people following God's laws and when sinners would be eliminated. The prophet Joel said more than 2,000 years ago that on the Day of Judgement, the unrighteous and the gentiles would be annihilated: "...let all the inhabitants of the Land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is

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nigh at hand." (Joel 2:1)

Ezekiel, whose writings date from the time of Babylonian Exile in the 6th century B.C., said that after the world was destroyed, a prince of the House of David would humble the gentiles and redeem Israel. (Ez. 34:23)

To augment sacred writings, Jewish writers also developed separate predictions. Forged Sibylline oracles (the Sibyl supposedly predicted the history of Rome and was consulted by authorities in times of trouble) claimed that a great man would rise from the East as the world disintegrated: "Near at hand is the end of the world, and the last day, and the judgement of immortal God for such as are both called and chosen... a holy king shall come who shall rule over the whole earth for all ages of the course of time..."

Those predictions, and related prophecies, were widespread. Tacitus (55-c.117) wrote a history of Rome which included a section on the Jewish-Roman war of 66 to 70 A.D. He said, "The majority (of Jews) were convinced that the ancient scriptures of their priests alluded to the present as the very time when the Orient would tri-

umph and from Judea would go forth men destined to rule the world." Tacitus was not impressed, saying that Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus were the actually prophesied individuals, "...but the com-



Illustration taken from a 16th century woodcut depicting Jews and Christians debating.

mon people, true to the selfish ambitions of mankind, thought this exalted destiny was reserved for them, and not even their calamities opened their eyes to the truth."

Jews soon had company on the predic-

tion front. When Augustus died in 14 A.D., after ruling either with companions or alone since 44 B.C., many people felt the world had to end. The long-lived Augustus, after all, was the only emperor many of them had ever known. Moreover, in Roman theology, he was worshipped as a god, both during his lifetime and after his death. To Romans, God had died.

Augustus' death heightened already existing Jewish convictions of the imminent end of the world. When the sun kept shining, the date had to be moved continually forward.

In early Jewish thinking, 1096 was one of the years when the end might come, based on a numerological interpretation of Leviticus 25:24, "Ye shall grant a redemption for the land."

When 1096 came and went, eyes turned to alternatives. Various interpreters suggested the line in *Job* 38:7, "...when the morning stars sang together," pointed to 1492. That year, however, Jews were expelled from Spain.

Also in 1492, Duke Abravanel, the leader of the Spanish Jewish community, predicted the coming of the messiah and the resulting punishment of gentiles. He picked the early 1500s as his target date.

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Author of commentaries on the biblical books of *Joshua*, *Judges* and *Chronicles*, he did his own calculations to arrive at the magical date and hoped his research would encourage disheartened Spanish Jews.

As hopes of an immediate Armageddon faded after the 1492 expulsion, key years for the predicted end of the world grew sharper into focus: 1575, 1648 and 1666.

Jewish speculation was based on numerological and spiritualistic interpretations of the Bible. The *Kabalah*, a collection of mystical ideas that existed in a Jewish undercurrent beginning in the Middle Ages, served as a guide. In the *Kabalah*, the "...messianic king merely puts his seal to the bill of freedom which Israel has written itself by its redemptive labors."

In the 1500s, the basic Kabbalistic system was reformulated by Jewish scholar Isaac Luria, who assumed that the final stage had arrived and that salvation was very close. To achieve speed, the current generation had to be righteous: that matched a Talmudic saying that the son of David would appear only in a generation which was "...wholly sinful or wholly righteous."

Luria aimed for the Day of the Lord in the year 1575. His disciples claimed their master was the messiah from the House of Joseph. Luria's unexpected death in 1572 indicated to them that the world was not "worthy" yet. They settled down to wait for purity to be achieved.

At the same time, the antichrist – who in Jewish and Christian speculation would precede the messiah – was reported on his way. "In the year 1599, a rumor circulated with prodigious rapidity through Europe that the antichrist had been born in Babylon, and that already the Jews of that part were hurrying to receive and recognize him as their messiah," one historian of the era reported.

A year later, people were talking about an antichrist supposedly born near Paris to a woman named Blanchefleure ("white flower") and conceived by Satan. The child was baptized. A "witch" who was tortured to learn the truth, confessed that she had rocked the infant antichrist on her knee and that he had "...claws on his feet, wore no shoes, and spoke all languages."

When the world continued unaffected by such claims, conversation about the antichrist naturally grew muted.

In 1623, the tales started again. This time, brothers of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, residing on Malta, claimed that their spies in Babylon had seen the infant antichrist born there on May 1. The birth was marked by an eclipse of the sun, swarms of flying serpents and a shower of precious stones.

Luria's philosophical ruminations, which were predicated on a coming messiah, were first printed in 1636, some 64 years after his death. Soon, all of the Kabbalistic thoughts had spread through the western world.

That selection process eventually focused specifically on one year – 1648. "The end of days is called 'this,' (a word) whose numerical value is 408." The number 408 in Hebrew corresponds to 1648. That specific year became the focus of the "...most enthusiastic hopes for redemption."

Just one of many.

Like the year 2000.

Bill Lazarus has written four books on religious history and teaches classes on the subject in Stetson University's Department of Continuing Education and at various colleges, universities, churches and synagogues.



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