

1 On the Threshold of the Third Millennium

I

More than a thousand years ago, all Europe was gripped by a heart-chilling fear. Soon, too soon, it would be midnight, 31 December 999. Then, when the new millennium began—as was generally supposed—on the first day of January 1000, the world would end; for Christ and his angels would flash into the sky, to trumpet the judgment day with all its dreadful events.

Well, afterwards people were most relieved to find it had all been a mistake, and so they settled back into their medieval rut. And now another ten centuries have passed, and the world has once again gone through a year like that. Many thought that perhaps, just perhaps, in the course of *anno Domini* 2000, it would happen this time. But, as we know, it did not.

What was the basis for expecting the Second Coming in 2000? It is an old idea according to which the present world will last for seven millennia, or seven thousand-year periods, from creation as described in the Bible. Human history will supposedly fill up six of these. Then Christ will come and set up his kingdom on earth for the final millennium. The whole period of seven thousand years is thought to be typologically related to the six days of creation, plus the seventh or Sabbath day, when the Creator rested from his work (Gen. 1; 2:1-3). The final millennium accordingly constitutes a thousand-year Sabbath for the planet.

In some ways, this is a beautiful conception, and we do not wish to dismiss it altogether. But it has slim support in the Scriptures, apart from 2 Pet. 3:8, according to which “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years.” Unfortunately it ignores the rest of that text, which goes on to say: “. . . and a thousand years as one day,” which refers to a similar thought in Ps. 90:4. Another problem is that Biblical prophecy normally equates a day not with a thousand years but with a year.

Setting dates for the Second Coming is most unwise, since Jesus made it clear that nobody should do so (Matt. 24:36). In any case, thinking of the year 2000 as a possible terminus for the world’s affairs was based on an arithmetical error.

When members of the early church began to interest themselves in the time of Jesus’ birth, a few centuries had already passed, and so they miscalculated the year. He had actually been born somewhat earlier than they thought, anything from 7 to 4 B.C. The most commonly accepted date is 4 B.C., the death year of Herod,¹ who sent soldiers to Bethlehem to have the little boy killed (Matt. 2:16).

Our Lord is already more than two thousand years old, and believers everywhere should have celebrated this momentous birthday in 1996. But there was no such party for him, which brings to mind the night when he was born, neglected and unrecognized by almost everyone, except for a few simple shepherds and—a little later—travelers from afar.

But why, in any case, should human history end precisely twenty centuries after the Lord’s *birth*? Would His crucifixion and ascension not provide a more logical point of departure for such reckoning? But the Bible also does not say that these events are important for calculating the date when the Lord will return, for every such attempt—no matter what its basis—will lead to disappointment.

II

A spectacular example of time setting from the early 1970s was Hal Lindsey's prediction of the world's end, which, however, failed to materialize at the specified date. In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, this Dispensationalist foretold that Christ would come within a generation, about forty years after the founding of the Israeli state on 14 May 1948.²

Well, this did not happen, nor did all the other interesting things he wrote, for instance about the former Soviet Union. In *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon*, Lindsey said that country would conquer the Middle East and Iran; but later China or even the USA, together with their allies, would destroy the Soviet army.³

That, of course, is now impossible. The Soviet Union has broken up and disappeared.

When those two books by Lindsey came off the press, millions of people devoured them avidly. *The Late Great Planet Earth* was an international best seller, with more than thirty million copies sold in thirty-one foreign languages.⁴ A striking movie was also based on it.

This success has now been repeated by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins in their *Left Behind* series, consisting of a dozen narratives or more about events surrounding the Rapture and the Tribulation. A dust-cover advertisement hailed them as "the fastest-selling fiction series ever." Much was expected of blockbuster movie versions, the first of which appeared on 2 February 2001.

The underlying ideas are similar to Lindsey's, which is evident from *Revelation Unveiled* by LaHaye, a non-fiction work. A noteworthy improvement is that it avoids the error of time setting.

LaHaye has, however, retained the idea that Russia will seek to conquer Israel. For this, he thinks it is due to suffer destruction at the hand of God.⁵ He also maintains that Antichrist's kingdom will be fundamentally atheist, with socialism as the "basic philosophy" of its government and economic system.⁶

In Lindsey's time this was still a plausible scenario, for the Soviet Union was both a Marxist and an atheist country. But these ideas are now outdated.

Russia has given up Communist socialism; it has also become a much more Christian country than Western Europe. As the *Observer* in Britain reports, it has to a remarkable extent returned to its old religion. About 55 percent of the Russians now belong to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Fewer than 5 percent are atheists, who are treated with contempt. Instead of Communism, Orthodoxy is taught in the secondary schools as well as in the army, and it is exerting an increasing influence over the state. Russia's new national anthem even declares that it is a "holy country,"⁷ an expression harking back to the days of the czars.

Dispensationalism, as taught in the works of Lindsey, Charles C. Ryrie, LaHaye, and many others is highly popular among Protestants today. Few people realize, however, that events have already discredited it or that it is a variant of Futurism, a Catholic school of prophetic interpretation. Most effectively formulated by Francisco Ribera (1537-91), a Jesuit scholar of the Contra Reformation, it aimed at sabotaging the Historical School to which Luther, Calvin, Knox, and virtually all the original Protestants belonged—and to which we also adhere. Later chapters of this book will deal more fully with this issue.

III

Another example of misguided time setting, in the early 1990s, resulted from Larry Wilson's ingenious calculations, based on Jubilee cycles from the Old Testament. In his *Warning! Revelation is About to be Fulfilled*, he said the autumn of 1994 or perhaps early 1995 would dramatically unleash the last events, culminating in the Second Coming.

Wilson was originally a Seventh-day Adventist minister who had largely given up the year-day principle central to the Historical School of prophetic interpretation and adopted Futurist ideas. He foretold the granddaddy of all earthquakes, with a force beyond the measuring capacity of the Richter scale. This would, he said, be accompanied by signs in the heavens, with rumblings, peals of thunder, and lightning observable everywhere on the planet. Soon after this, a shower of burning meteors would start unquenchable fires all over the world, causing many people to perish.

Wilson dated this calamitous meteor shower as occurring in late 1994. He also predicted that it would shortly be followed by an even more horrific calamity: the earth's collision with two asteroids, one to impact on the sea and the other to strike a land mass.⁸

Well, 1994 passed and almost twenty more years since then. None of these dire events occurred, and so Larry Wilson like Hal Lindsey stands revealed as just another failed prophetic interpreter, who did not heed the warning of his Lord but misled some credulous people. It is, we repeat, unwise to give dates for the Second Coming—or even for the events that immediately precede it.

All the same, there has been an increase in lectures, articles, and even television programs about what may be lying ahead; for though Jesus warned against time-setting, the Bible does provide some clues to indicate that he will be returning soon.

The interest is not confined to Christianity. As Benjamin Creme pointed out at a New Age press conference in Los Angeles during 1982: “The Muslims await the Imam Mahdi. At the same time the Buddhists await the coming of another Buddha. The Hindus await the return of Krishna. And the Jews, as always, await the coming of the Messiah.” He himself was also expecting such a teacher to return on what he called the Day of Declaration.⁹

Some New Agers believed that “before the turn of the century the earth will tilt on its axis, causing major catastrophes, killing the majority of people on Earth and destroying civilization as we know it.” According to this view, there would, however, have been a Great Evacuation through alien spaceships, in an event rather similar to the Second Coming.¹⁰ Well, the century has turned, and nothing of the kind has happened.

A prophetic evergreen that seemingly never fails to excite a certain kind of reader is the *Centuries*, rhymed prophecies of the French-Jewish astrologer Michel de Notredame (1503-66), better known under his Latin name as Nostradamus.¹¹ He had dire predictions for the last few years just before the year 2000. Since those things have not happened, we can now safely also toss his book onto the trash heap of failed predictions.

False and sometimes eccentric interpretations of the prophecies about the Lord's return can disgust a thoughtful person, who may be tempted to turn away from the entire topic as a waste of time, and yet we should be careful. Aesop in ancient Greece used to tell the fable of a man who repeatedly alarmed his neighbors by crying “Wolf, Wolf!” Soon they learned to ignore him, but one day the creature really jumped out of a bush and gobbled him up. As its

fangs were ripping into him, he screamed and screamed, but no one came out to help him.

The Second Coming is likely to take place when almost everybody has ceased being worried about it, for in more than one place the New Testament warns us that it will be unexpected, sudden, and—on a planetary scale—an overwhelming surprise, like a thief in the night.

IV

We suggest that now we open the Bible for ourselves. After all, about 30 percent of it consists of prophetic material.¹² As we turn its pages, we come upon a strangely compelling chapter, Revelation 13. There we read of a fearsome animal, climbing up out of the sea. This is the Beast, with its mysterious signs: a mark that brings damnation to all whose bodies and minds are stained with it, and the riddle of 666, the number which is a name.

We know this is the Antichrist, who like a latter-day Pied Piper of Hamelin will entice the whole world into following it. Most of those who live on the planet will “wonder after it” and be lost forever. We think that for us this is not such a good idea. We would rather not go with this particular crowd, but do our own thing, by not following the Beast. But how? After all, we are not even able to identify the creature.

It looks like a leopard and has bear-like paws and the muzzle of a lion. It also has seven heads and ten horns with crowns on them. Oh, what a puzzlement! We literally cannot make out head or tail of the thing. Perhaps we do know that at different times it has been identified with the pope, Napoleon Bonaparte, Wilhelm II, Adolf Hitler, Henry Kissinger, Mikhail Gorbachev, and even Bill Gates.

Various authors, like Pat Robertson¹³ and Dave Hunt,¹⁴ have interpreted its number, 666, as part of a wicked monitoring device and a computerized credit-card system, run by an international banking consortium. This would be owned by the new world order and controlled by the Antichrist himself. One writer, who has preferred to remain anonymous, is very explicit about how he believes the international banking system will be used to establish an evil empire over the entire planet: “The Antichrist will receive a Certificate of Fictitious ‘Number’ to legally do business as (DBA) 16-666, the world bank computer.”¹⁵

But how can we be sure that this line of thinking is correct? Let us take a closer look at what the Bible says.

In the second part of Rev. 13, we read of another beast: at first it has two horns like a lamb, but soon it begins to roar out words like a speaking dragon! It also performs miracles, like making fire rain down from the sky. It supports the infamous Beast mentioned earlier on, applying economic sanctions against everybody who is not prepared to worship the Antichrist.

All this is mysterious and most disturbing.

Then we happen to page back to Rev. 12, where we discover a big red dragon, which greatly resembles the leopard-like Beast; for it also has seven heads and ten horns. At this point, we wonder whether there are any more animals like it in the book of Revelation.

We decide to read and search beyond chapter 13.

In chapters 14 and 16 we find a fearsome threat of hellfire for those who worship the Beast. We discover that its punishment will begin right here on earth in the time of the terrible last plagues. We also find it in the company of the “false prophet,” presumably the two-horned creature that will assist it.

In chapter 17, we discover what seems to be yet *another* beast, scarlet in color. It, too, has seven heads and ten horns, an apocalyptic theme that we have now come across three times. An added element is a woman called Babylon, clothed lavishly in scarlet and bedecked with jewels.

Finally, in chapter 19, we read that Christ is to come and make war on every one of these creatures.

But what is it all about? It is so puzzling, yet tantalizing. We discuss the mysteries of Revelation with other people. Someone says: “Oh, the Apocalypse! You are not supposed to understand it; it is a sealed book.” We are tempted to turn away in disgust.

But then another person, though perhaps not really able to explain these strange creatures, tells us God wants us to study the book of Revelation and that he has even promised a blessing for those who do so. Indeed, the writer, John, was told explicitly that the Apocalypse was *not* to be sealed up: “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand” (Rev. 1:3). “Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand” (Rev. 22:10).

Startling in their implications for us are the repeated words “the time is at hand.” They are inscribed like a warning at the entrance to the book and we read them again at its exit. We decide to continue our search.

Our Bible happens to have a margin column. In it we notice references to other parts of Scripture. Linked to Rev. 13:1, where we first began to read about the leopard-like Beast, we see Dan. 7:1-6. So we search for the book of Daniel, which is in the second half of the Old Testament.

Its seventh chapter depicts no fewer than four unusual animals. They, too, are puzzling, but there is something a little familiar about them; for they also come up out of the sea, like the Beast of Rev. 13, and resemble it in several ways.

In Dan. 7, the first of the creatures is a lion. Why, the Apocalyptic Beast has the muzzle of a lion. The second is a bear, and the Beast has bear-like paws. The third is a four-headed leopard, and the Beast is spotted like one. The fourth is nightmarish and generally nondescript, but it, too, has ten horns, exactly like the Beast.

But what about the other features, especially the seven heads, referred to in Rev. 12, 13, and 17? This detail has puzzled many students of prophecy, who have interpreted it in different ways; yet an obvious solution is to add up the heads of the four creatures in Dan. 7. Well, let us see. The lion has one head, not surprisingly, and so does the bear. But the leopard has four heads. This gives us six, to which we add the single head of the fourth creature. And . . . we have a total of seven heads!

It appears, then, that the Beast of Rev. 13 is a perfect composite of the four animals described in Dan. 7. The two chapters must have similar topics.

This is progress, and we conclude that if we only knew the identity of the beasts of Dan. 7, it would help a great deal toward understanding the various creatures referred to in Revelation, especially the Beast. It could possibly also help us grasp the meaning of its mark and number.

V

A good beginning is the statement in Dan. 7:17 that the four beasts represent four kings or kingdoms destined to rule in the world. But which ones?

We are again on the point of giving up, when we have a hunch. Perhaps another piece in the Bible will help us understand Dan. 7, just as this chapter is itself a key to Rev. 13. But where?

Well, why not go back to the beginning of Daniel, and keep on reading? The first chapter is fine and even interesting, but it says nothing about beasts, or anything else that can help us in our quest. Then we come to Dan. 2. From that point onward things begin to fall into place. Properly understood, this chapter is a master key to Bible prophecy. We shall therefore be looking at it carefully.

We read of a king's prophetic dream about a great statue, which also refers to four kingdoms, just like Dan. 7. Admittedly, there are differences. Dan. 2 predominantly uses the symbols of various metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron. Bronze and iron? But the terrible fourth creature of Dan. 7 has claws of bronze and iron teeth!

Why, the Bible seems to explain itself, when we compare different Scriptures with one another! This will not be difficult at all, especially if we observe the close relationship between the two books of Daniel and Revelation. We shall therefore have a very good look at Dan. 2, 3, 7-9, and 12.

Each of these chapters is most interesting. At every step, our understanding will grow. We shall also be noting some other fascinating passages of the Old and New Testaments. Finally we will be prepared for a really meaningful study of the dragon and other monsters in Revelation, including the dreadful Beast, which it is death to follow.

VI

The books of Daniel and Revelation contain amazing material. One of the central themes is the Beast and its persecution of God's people, as well as its seductions. But we shall also meet its great and marvelous opponent, the Lamb, who is the Lord Jesus Christ. Other parts of the Bible will greatly aid our understanding of these matters.

But not only understanding. Much more than Nostradamus or any other writings, the Bible will, as C. S. Lewis has put it, surprise us—you, too, reader—with joy.

When we have come to comprehend this wonderful Book, we will no longer need to fear the future. God's Word will not only enlighten our minds, but can bring comfort to our often troubled hearts.