

Living in the light of the End (which is a new beginning) SUMMARY

by Tony Higton



AN ESCHATOLOGICAL CHURCH

This is Morston Church on the North Coast of Norfolk. It was struck by lightning in 1743 and was not repaired in stone but in simpler cheaper brick 'because the Second Coming was thought to be imminent.' (I commend their awareness of eschatology, but not their way of working it out).

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Introduction

“Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets ... The Sovereign Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?”¹ This is an important biblical principle. It means that God, as a God of revelation, wishes to reveal his purposes to his people. It is quite clear in the New Testament that God wants his people to be aware of what is going to happen in the future (even though not in detail). Speaking of the great Day of the Lord, when Jesus returns, Paul says “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.”²

Importance of eschatological thinking

The New Testament really does teach we should be thinking frequently about the End Times. It is true that Jesus says “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt 6:34). But he is talking about worrying. He is not saying we should not think about the future or live in the light of it. However, it is clear that Jesus intended us to think frequently about eschatology.

He stressed the Kingdom which is ultimately eschatological. He taught us to pray regularly for his eschatological Kingdom to come (in the Lord’s Prayer). One of the prayers of the early church was “Maranatha” “Come, Lord” (see 1 Cor 16:22). I counted 118 passages on eschatology in the NT excluding Revelation. This includes 8 major passages plus a whole book - Revelation.

Jesus emphasized eschatology in Holy Week. In answer to a question from the disciples, he prophesied the destruction of the Temple (which was brought about by the Romans 40 years later in AD70). But he also prophesied the End Times and urged his disciples to look out for both early (recurring) and later signs of his Return (see Matthew 24). urges us to “keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (v 42) and to “be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matt 24:42, 44).

Jesus also told the parable of the Ten Young Women (Virgins) in Holy Week. They were waiting for the bridegroom

to come but he “was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.”³ That’s a good picture of the church and of many Christians today. Because the ‘bridegroom’ (Jesus) is a long time in coming (the Second Coming) they have stopped concentrating and don’t think about his Return. However, Jesus’ message is for those who have not made any preparation for his Return, i.e. have not come to faith in him, shown in obedience. Such people, he says, when he returns, will be shut out from his presence – a solemn warning.

He also described the last judgment.⁴ When he returns he will judge the people of all nations. The criterion of judgment is people’s attitude towards the followers of Jesus (which, of course, shows their attitude towards him). Only those who show love and kindness towards the followers of Jesus (and so to him) will have eternal life.

At the Last Supper, Jesus taught that Communion not only looks back to his death but forward to when he will drink wine with his disciples in his Father’s kingdom.⁵ Paul says Communion proclaims the Lord’s death “until he comes.”⁶ Jesus was referring to a prophecy of Isaiah that God “will prepare a banquet for all the nations of the world—a banquet of the richest food and the finest wine. Here he will suddenly remove the cloud of sorrow that has been hanging over all the nations. ... will destroy death forever will wipe away the tears from everyone’s eyes.”⁷ We should be looking forward to that?

When Jesus was tried by the Sanhedrin (Jewish court) the high priest said: “Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus replied: “‘You have said so ‘But I say to all of you: from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”⁸ Jesus looked beyond the horror of the cross to the time (still future) when he returns “on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”⁹ I strongly recommend that we think of his return daily.

Paul teaches about the Second Coming in 1 Thess 4 and says “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (v 18). He urges us to “be awake and sober” about Jesus’ return (1 Thess 5:6). He teaches more about the second coming etc., in 2 Thess 1 & 2 so obviously he wants Christians to know about it and think about it. He also writes that we are “to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13).

Peter writes: “The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray” (1 Peter 4:7). The Holy Spirit inspired John to write the Book of Revelation to teach us about the End Times, including the difficulties and suffering involved.

So it is also clear that Jesus and the apostles thought about it regularly and taught the church accordingly. But many of us do not do so. Eschatology needs to be reinstated in the church and in the thinking of the individual Christian. It is perhaps helpful to realize that this is in line with the creeds and liturgies of the church, as the Appendix¹⁰ makes clear.

The fear of God

One of the greatest failings of the modern church is to soft-pedal or ignore the fear of God. This is one of the main reasons for a neglect of eschatology (the doctrine of the End Times). If we really thought we are going to stand before God individually to answer for our behaviour we would live accordingly. But, as Paul said in Romans 3:18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” As a result, he says, people don’t seek God, and they fall into sin.

Of course, some people don’t believe in God. The rather pathetic atheist bus advert campaign stated: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” “*Probably*”? What if there *is*, and he holds us accountable? It’s got to be incredibly unwise to take the risk of relying on thinking there “probably” is “no God.”

It’s the same with the popular word “yolo” which means “you only live once” and it is an excuse to live irresponsibly. As someone said, it should stand for “you oughta look out!” Jesus rebuked people whose philosophy was “Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry” (Luke 12:19-20) and called them foolish.

It doesn’t do any good to “roast people over Hell.” But if people are going to face God’s judgement and we don’t warn them about it, as helpfully as possible, we are deeply lacking in love. That is why I think the modern church is lacking in love. We have bought into the relativism of modern society. Anyone can believe anything. Your truth is as valid as my truth even if the two truths contradict one another. Similarly I am free to choose how I shall behave within reason. Modern thinking confuses the equality of all human beings with the equality of all human behaviour. That is a serious fallacy. I believe firmly in the former but not in the latter.

The question is: has God revealed what we should believe and how we should behave? Surely the personal, loving

God of Christianity can be expected to have done so. And does he require us to obey him? If that is the case we are very unwise not to find out what he has said and to put it into practice.

It profoundly concerns me that people don't realise they are accountable to God – and, frankly, that applies to some Christians as well, judging by their behaviour. I believe God is love as much as anybody. But he is also a holy judge before whom we each must stand one day.

Little wonder the Bible states: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

A proper approach to the subject

It is important not to be over-dogmatic about the details of the End Times. Just imagine someone sitting down about 100 years before Jesus was born to write a book on End Times, taking all the relevant OT teaching into account. I'm quite sure he would not have got the Christmas-Good Friday-Easter-Ascension-Pentecost-Second Coming story straight. We can do so (at least up to Pentecost and we know Jesus will return a second time) because we have the benefit of hindsight, reading the NT history and explicit teaching on a *second* coming. Just as this writer wouldn't have got it all sorted out in detail, we won't get the whole story of the Tribulation, Second Coming, Judgment, etc., straight and we need to have the humility to accept that. To some extent – perhaps a large extent - it will turn out differently from what we expect.

God doesn't reveal everything in detail and if we think he does it will lead us into speculation, dogmatism, argument and division. The devil doesn't miss a trick: if he can't stop us thinking seriously about this important subject, he'll get us to fall out over it and so hinder God's work.

We must concentrate on primary matters: the return of Jesus, judgment, heaven and hell. We can make suggestions and offer opinions, but we'll have to live with unanswered questions and things which don't tie up.

Interpreting Scripture

We should also be careful how we interpret Scripture. I work on the following principles:

1. Understand Scripture as literal unless there are very good reasons for thinking it is symbolical.
2. Understand Scripture in a way which harmonizes with the surrounding passages.
3. Understand Scripture in a way which harmonizes with the teaching of the whole Bible, comparing Scripture with Scripture.
4. Understand Scripture in its historical context, rather than imposing modern thinking on it.
5. Understand prophetic Scripture in the light of the fact of multiple fulfilment rather than limiting it to either historical or future fulfilment.

Obviously, it is helpful to read what different scholars have to say about a passage or, if that is not practical, to read a summary of such views, rather than only to read those who agree with our preconceived ideas.

We can take the easy way out and regard everything as symbolical with a general application to whatever you like. Then we could look down on the literalists. (The slight problem is that we probably wouldn't have taken some OT prophecies literally, had we been living in OT times, but now we know many were literal).

On the other hand, we could be hardline literalists holding some fanciful interpretations and being very dogmatic about them. We could then look down on the “liberals who don't take Scripture seriously” (i.e. they don't accept our fanciful interpretations and speculations).

As so often, the truth lies between these two extremes. Of course, there is symbolism (some of it in highly-coloured language). But there is also literal prediction (even if sometimes conveyed in symbolical language).

It is important to note that language can be symbolical but can still be referring to literal things or events. So John describes the guests at the “wedding supper of the Lamb” as wearing white linen then adds “Fine linen stands for the

righteous acts of God's holy people" (Rev 19:8). Similarly, the fact that Wormwood is a symbolical name doesn't in itself mean that no heavenly body (e.g. an asteroid) will ever literally collide with earth. Then there are the numbers in the Book of Revelation which may be symbolical but refer to literal things: There aren't four corners to the earth (20:8) but that doesn't mean there is no earth. The symbol of seven spirits of God doesn't mean there is no Holy Spirit. There is not a literal lamb on the throne in heaven but that doesn't mean that Jesus, the Lamb of God, isn't on the throne. 144,000 may not be literal but that doesn't mean there aren't a lot of people. One third of the earth and sea etc., being destroyed doesn't in itself mean that there won't ever be extensive literal destruction or plague. The symbolical number of 42 months of the Gentiles trampling on Jerusalem doesn't mean they won't (and haven't). The symbolic number 42 months of the beast blaspheming doesn't mean the Antichrist won't literally blaspheme for a limited period of time. The fact that monthly crops of fruit (22:2) sounds symbolical doesn't mean the new earth won't be literally exceptionally fertile.

Another widespread source of disagreement is whether the Book of Revelation and other relevant passages refer only to the NT generation, or only to the (future) End Times or to the whole of history. When I am asked if the Book of Revelation refers to the NT generation, or to the (future) End Times or to the whole of history I answer 'Yes'! It is meant to encourage Christians to persevere in hope throughout the ages. Some of it can be applied to the Roman Empire *and* to godless authorities in other ages *and* to the final revelation of the evils of the Antichrist. So, the NT says there have been, and will be, many antichrists but there will be one future ultimate Antichrist. The important thing is that there is an ultimate (still future) fulfilment for many NT (and a few OT) prophecies.

Now and not yet & dual reference of prophecy

Early in Holy Week Jesus prophesied the destruction of the Temple (which was brought about by the Romans 40 years later in AD70). But he also prophesied the End Times and urged his disciples to look out for both early (recurring) and later signs of his Return (see Matthew 24). His prophecies here are typical of biblical prophecy:

- Prophecy can have an early and a later fulfillment.
- Prophecy can concertina events widely separated in time to appear close together.

So Jesus speaks of the events of AD70 and of his still future return in the same passage.

We should be looking out for the signs of Jesus' return?

The "now and the not yet" is an important factor in understanding the Bible's teaching on the End Times. It teaches that:

- There are two ages – this age and the age to come, but they overlap like two intersecting circles and believers now have a foretaste of the age to come.
- Believers have received eternal life now, but this is only a foretaste of the fullness of eternal life they will experience when Jesus returns.
- Believers live in the kingdom of God now but this is only a foretaste of what it will be like when the kingdom will be fully revealed in glory when Jesus returns.
- We already live in the Last Days and yet there will be a Last Day when Jesus returns.

Understanding this "now and not yet" factor will help us come to terms with our experience of some prayers, e.g. for healing, not being answered. In the age to come and the fullness of the kingdom and eternal life all sickness will be healed. In the present age not all sickness will be healed. Not all other suffering or injustice will be removed either. So there is the 'now and the not yet' of healing and deliverance from suffering and injustice.

Oscar Cullman said that we are living between the two comings of Christ: D-day and VE-day. On D-day (June 6th 1944) the allies invaded Normandy and it was the decisive battle of the 2nd World War. It was clear that the allies would win the war and it was only a matter of time. However the Nazi regime was not destroyed until VE-day (May 8th 1945) and in between those dates there was a lot of fighting, suffering and death. Jesus' death and resurrection was D-day. The final victory and destruction of Satan is assured but we have to wait until the Return of Christ: VE-day when the destruction will finally take place. In the meantime there is a lot of fighting, suffering and death.

This age and the age to come

Jesus speaks of the two ages - this age and the age to come.¹¹ The present age is under the influence of Satan, "the god of this age."¹²

However, the age to come has already begun. The "culmination of the ages" was inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus.¹³ He died to "rescue us from the present evil age"¹⁴ and now he reigns high over all in this age and the age to come.¹⁵ He has promised to be with believers "to the very end of the age" and so God will protect them

until Jesus visibly returns.¹⁶

This age is characterized by a worldly ‘wisdom’ which is foolishness in the eyes of God¹⁷ so we believers must not conform to this age but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.¹⁸ When Jesus returns we shall be made like him, so we should seek to be like him now.¹⁹ In fact, if we are rich in good deeds in this age we are laying up treasure in the coming age.²⁰ God can enable us to live godly lives as we wait for the return of Jesus²¹ and the great thing is that we can taste the powers of the coming age in this age.²² Jesus gives rewards to committed believers in both this age and the coming age.²³

Jesus will visibly return at the end of this age²⁴ and he will carry out judgment, separating the wicked from the righteous.²⁵ We believers will be raised imperishable.²⁶ We “will shine like the sun” in the kingdom of the kingdom of God²⁷ and God will show his kindness to us.²⁸ We shall see God and understand fully.²⁹ Jesus will destroy all ungodly “dominion, authority and power” including death.³⁰

Eternal Life – Now and Then

The New Testament teaches that believers receive and enter into eternal life now, in the present age. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.³¹ It is a gift³² which is in Jesus so when we invite Jesus into our lives he brings us eternal life.³³ In fact, Jesus is eternal life³⁴ and eternal life is knowing God.³⁵ However, if we have the faith in Jesus which brings eternal life we will be prepared to make sacrifices for him³⁶ and to do good.³⁷

Nevertheless the full experience of eternal life will only happen when Jesus returns.³⁸ It will be a reward for believers who have shown their faith in good deeds.³⁹ Jesus promises to keep them safe until they enter the fullness of eternal life.⁴⁰

Kingdom – Now and Then

The kingdom, or Rule, of God, came into the world with Jesus.⁴¹ He told the Pharisees: “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.”⁴² It is an eternal, otherworldly kingdom,⁴³ characterised by righteousness, peace, joy,⁴⁴ justice⁴⁵ and the power of God.⁴⁶ So it cannot be shaken, like earthly kingdoms⁴⁷ and it grows phenomenally.⁴⁸ It is a kingdom of believers, all of whom are priests.⁴⁹ They enter the kingdom by being born again.⁵⁰ Characteristics required in the kingdom include humility,⁵¹ penitence,⁵² forgiveness,⁵³ obedience⁵⁴ and perseverance.⁵⁵

Jesus majored on preaching the kingdom⁵⁶ and he commanded his disciples to do the same⁵⁷ as a matter of urgency,⁵⁸ so this characterised the ministry of the early church.⁵⁹ They urged people to strive to enter the kingdom by faith⁶⁰ as a priority.⁶¹

However, Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom, he demonstrated it in healing and exorcism.⁶² He taught that the kingdom interfaced with the kingdom of Satan⁶³ and he sent his disciples out to heal the sick⁶⁴ and to cast out demons as a sign of the kingdom. We also are called to preach the kingdom.⁶⁵

Jesus said in Matthew 16:28 that some listening to him would not taste death before they saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. He may have been referring to the Transfiguration (which happened shortly afterwards) or to Pentecost. Either way it was not the ultimate revelation of the kingdom. He also said at the Last Supper that he looked forward to eating with his disciples at the messianic “wedding supper” when the kingdom is fully revealed.⁶⁶

After Jesus returns his kingdom will be fully revealed⁶⁷ and will replace the “kingdom of the world”⁶⁸ and the power of Satan.⁶⁹ The saints will share in his rule over the nations.⁷⁰ We should be ready and watching for the kingdom to be revealed⁷¹ and pray regularly for it to be revealed.⁷² One of the signs of that time drawing near is the message of the kingdom being preached throughout the whole world.⁷³ Ultimately Jesus will hand over the kingdom to the Father.⁷⁴

The Last Days and the Last Day

We already live in the Last Days. The coming of Jesus 2000 years ago ushered in the Last Days.⁷⁵ Peter makes it clear that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was a fulfilment of the prophecy by Joel that God would pour out his Spirit “in the last days.”⁷⁶ The fact that the New Testament teaches that we are in the Last Days shows that we are meant to live in the light of the return of Jesus. It warns that there will be terrible times in the Last Days in

terms of sinful human behaviour. “People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power.”⁷⁷

Another characteristic of the Last Days in which we are living will be people scoffing at the idea of the return of Christ. People will say: “Where is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”⁷⁸

However there will be a Last Day when Jesus will raise up all believers.⁷⁹ All will be judged on this Last Day,⁸⁰ and those who reject the gospel will be cast out from God’s presence.

MORE ON THE DUAL FULFILMENT OF PROPHECY

We have noted the “Now and the Not Yet” of biblical prophecy. This speaks of lesser and greater fulfilments of prophecy. We have seen that in Matthew 24 Jesus prophesied both the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and the End Times. Similarly Peter quoted Joel 2:28-3:2 on the Day of Pentecost as applying to the outpouring of the Spirit that day and to the End Times “wonders in the heavens and on earth.”

Sometimes people, events or statements in the OT are seen as symbolizing and prefiguring Jesus, and events in the NT. Traditionally the OT symbol or prefiguring has been called a “type” and the NT equivalent the “antitype”. So, Jesus sees Jonah and his three days and nights in the whale as a “type” of himself and his death and resurrection (Matt 12:39-42).

Scholars also point out that the Jewish people in NT times saw repeating patterns in history. This would apply to Matthew 24 and its predictions of both AD70 and the End Times.

However, some scholars are critical of the idea of the dual reference of biblical prophecy. For example there has been much discussion over Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” He applies it to the virgin birth of Jesus but originally, it referred to events in Isaiah’s day. The word “virgin” could be translated “young woman” and the name Immanuel could be another name for Isaiah’s son, whose birth is recorded in Isaiah 8:3, see 8:8.

Some scholars say the virgin birth is not a second fulfilment but it is Matthew using Isa 7:14 as a parallel, an association of ideas which would have been quite an acceptable thing to do in his day. Similarly they say when Jesus quoted Daniel 7:13 about the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven he knew it referred to events in the OT but simply re-used the passage to apply to a different event – his coming. These scholars are saying that neither Isa 7:14 nor Dan 7:13 have dual fulfilments but rather Matthew and Jesus, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “re-used” the prophecies to apply to much later events.

However, other scholars point out that in ancient Israel prophecy was regarded as not just predicting a future event but as having an important effect on the future. This effect would not necessarily be foreseen by the prophet. It would develop as time progressed. So Isaiah wouldn’t necessarily have foreseen the virgin birth and the child who really was “God with us” but he would have been quite happy with Matthew’s use of his prophecy. Isaiah would have expected that the fulfilment of his prophecy might have developed.

Many scholars do believe in the dual-fulfilment of biblical prophecy whilst accepting that the Old Testament prophets did not necessarily have the second (main) fulfilment in mind, even though they may have been “trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing” as Peter put it in 1 Peter 1:10-12. I believe these scholars are correct.

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24

We have noted that Jesus spoke on the Mt of Olives in Matthew 24 about both the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and about the End of the age and his return. We need therefore to be clear which aspects of his teaching refer to the Second Coming.

Which aspects of the teaching of Jesus on the Mt of Olives refer to the Second Coming?

Some scholars say all the prophecies were fulfilled by AD70 (when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple).

They say:

- “The Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven” refers to Dan 7:13-14 where the Son of man comes to God not to earth, i.e. the Ascension.
- “All the peoples of the earth will mourn” is really “All the tribes of the land will mourn” and refers only to the Jewish people mourning in AD70.
- The angels gathering the elect refers to the worldwide growth of the church after AD70.
- The gospel being preached to the whole world refers to the preaching of the gospel throughout the then known world between AD30 and AD70.

Others say Jesus only referred to the Second Coming and the events associated with it, all still future (not AD70).

A third view is that Jesus refers to both AD70 and to the Second Coming. I hold this view and will explain why in the next post.

I believe Jesus refers to both AD70 and to the Second Coming because:

- a. The disciples asked about both.
- b. Jewish people expected “the End” to be when the Messiah physically came to earth.
- c. The signs of Matt 24:4-13 (false messiahs, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, false prophets) continued to happen both before and after AD70. They are repeated Reminders that Jesus will return.
- d. The language of Matt 24:9-29 does not fit what happened from AD30-AD70:
 - “You will be hated by all nations ... many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other ... Many false prophets will appear and deceive many ... The love of most will grow cold.” This is describing a far worse situation than happened from AD30-70.
 - “This gospel ... will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” This goes beyond what happened in AD30-70. There were many more nations in the whole world than were evangelised in that period. “The End” more likely refers to the return of Christ than AD70.
 - “There will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again. ‘If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive.’ This language goes way beyond the suffering of AD70. What about the Holocaust or the massive persecution of Christians?
 - Matt 24:29 says “immediately” after the great distress there are signs in the heavens and Jesus returns – an event visible to all, not hidden away in heaven. This is not AD70.

What did Jesus mean by “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 (Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32)?

Jesus says: “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”

He says: “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” This seems to say that all that Jesus had foretold would happen in the first generation – between AD30 and AD70.

Some people have translated the word “generation” as “race” meaning this “race” – the Jewish people – will not pass away until all is fulfilled. But the word normally refers to the literal present generation and is often described as an evil generation.

However, Luke probably wrote some 30 years after Jesus died when the ‘present generation’ would have been ‘passing away’ so it is unlikely he would have understood the current generation to be meant by the term ‘this generation.’

Is Jesus therefore referring to the generation that experiences the beginning of the late (non-recurring) signs of the

Return of Christ and saying all the great events including the Return itself will happen within one generation?

One thing is clear, in view of all I have written, I don't believe Jesus was referring to his own (AD30-70) generation. It raises far greater difficulties to say he did.

What is the duration of the Great Distress in Matthew 24:15-22?

Five suggestions have been made:

1. Jesus passes from one period of great distress (AD70) to another (still future).
2. Jesus means the whole period from AD70 until his Return is a time of distress (this does not seem to fit the facts of history).
3. Jesus follows the 'telescoping' or 'foreshortening' which is typical of the prophets. Think of climbing a mountain. What looks like a single slope to the top often turns out to hide valleys which have to be crossed. In fact the mountain is a series of lesser peaks separated by valleys, but from the bottom it looks like a single slope to the highest peak. The prophets often see a series of events as a 'single slope' but they turn out to be events separated by 'valleys' of time. So Jesus may have been viewing the two periods of distress in that way, apparently as one event but actually two, separated by a (very long) 'valley' of time.
4. Jesus means the tribulation starts in AD 66/70 but the main part of it is long postponed – to the still future End Times.
5. Jesus is only talking about AD30-70 and is not referring to his visible return to earth (I have already concluded this is not the case).

In my view, taking everything I have said into account, suggestions 1 and 3 seem most likely.

Some scholarly opinions about Matthew 24

Professors W D Davies and D C Allison in the "International Critical Commentary on Matthew" write that they are "unpersuaded" by another scholar, Dick France, that Matthew 24 is only about the events around AD70. They believe the chapter covers the whole period leading up to the Second Coming.

Professor Leon Morris says the chapter refers to both the destruction of Jerusalem and the lead-up to the Second Coming. Professor Douglas Hare says the same and adds that the "the abomination that causes desolation" refers to a supernatural Antichrist. Professor C E B Cranfield agrees.

Professor F D Bruner writes that the emphasis is on the end of the world, foreshadowed by the destruction of Jerusalem. Professor Robert Mounce says that biblical prophecy is capable of more than one fulfilment and so Matthew moves from one fulfilment (AD70) to another (still future).

Professor C E B Cranfield, (writing on Mark 13) says the passage is about the signs of the End. He comments: "The recognition that the events of history are signs of the End and pointers to the coming Lord rescues eschatology from the realm of merely academic discussion and makes it relevant for faith and obedience. As our faith recognizes the signs as they occur, we are again and again put in remembrance of our Hope, and our gaze, that is so easily distracted from the Lord who is coming to us, is again and again directed back to him. The events of the present become for us reasons for lifting up our heads (Lk. xxi. 28) and so many summonses to renewed penitence, obedience and joy."

Scholars also comment on the difficult verse: "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Matthew 24:34; Mark 13:30). Did he mean all the signs of the End, including the Second Coming, would happen before the generation of people alive when he said this died?

Professor Robert Gundry points out that in the previous chapter Matthew 23:29-36 Jesus accuses "this generation" (the people alive when he spoke) of murdering a prophet who lived hundreds of years before. Clearly this is not literal. He means they share the responsibility for his death because they have the same attitude – of rejecting the prophets. So if "this generation" is clearly not limited to the literal present generation in chapter 23:35-36 surely there is no problem in saying "this generation" in chapter 24:34 is not limited to the literal present generation either.

Professors Robert Mounce and Leon Morris say Matthew 24:34 doesn't mean all these things must end in this generation but only that they must have begun to happen in this generation.

Robert Mounce also says: “One thing we do know is that by the time Matthew wrote, the mission of the Twelve was history and the parousia [Second Coming] had not taken place.” It is not likely therefore that Matthew was referring to the AD30-70 generation.

The signs of the End

Here is an outline of Jesus’ teaching (plus a little from Paul and Revelation):

We might call the preliminary signs “Reminders of the End” because they are repeated and Jesus said when we see them “The End is not yet.” However they can and should remind us that the End is coming. Obviously when they occur, our first concern should be to pray and show compassion for those adversely affected by the occurrences.

I. THE PRELIMINARY (REPEATED) SIGNS (OR REMINDERS OF THE END)

Wars, uprisings (Matt 24:6-18)
Famines (Matt 24:6-18)
Earthquakes (Matt 24:6-18)
Pestilences (Luke 21:11)

II. THE INTERMEDIATE SIGNS

Persecution (Mt 24:9ff)
Turning away from the faith (Mt 24:10)
False prophets and messiahs (Mt 24:11, 24)
Worldwide evangelism (Mt 24:14)

III. THE IMMINENT SIGNS

Cosmic disturbances (Mt 24:29)
The Jewish people regaining control of Jerusalem (Lk 21:24).
The rebellion and deceptive ‘signs and wonders’ of the man of lawlessness (Antichrist) who proclaims himself to be God (2 Thess 2:1-12)
The sudden financial collapse of the world system (‘Babylon’) (Rev 18)

However, from time to time I will comment on current events relating them to the signs of the End, because that is what Jesus encouraged us to do. You will find these at <https://christianteaching.org.uk/bloggng/>

The Reminders of the End

I want to look briefly at the early Signs of the End Times Jesus mentions in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 in answer to the disciples’ question about when the End would be. As we have seen, they are false messiahs, war, uprisings, famines, earthquakes and pestilences. He makes it quite clear they are not to be taken as meaning the End is near. Rather he says: “the end is still to come All these are the beginning of birth-pains.” This is a technical term meaning the birth pains of the Messiah, i.e. the traumas which will herald his return. They are Reminders that the End is coming, but not yet. Jesus wants us to think frequently about the End so we should take note of the daily news, pray about it and respond compassionately to, say, victims of famine and natural disasters, but we should also note certain events as Reminders of the End.

1. War and uprisings (Matthew 24:4-8)

Is war increasing? Some Christians say it is but the idea that war is increasing *overall* seems not *at present* to be borne out by the facts, according to some people. They say that one of the reasons why war may *seem* to have increased is that we now have global media which report each conflict graphically into our living rooms. In the last decade there have been less deaths per annum than in each of the previous hundred years. However there were 200 million war deaths in the 20th century. The Global Peace Index discovered that since 2008, 111 countries have deteriorated in levels of peace. There are only 11 countries in the world free from conflict. Also the number of refugees has exceeded 50 million for the first time since World War II.

There are various negative factors in the situation today:

a. Terrorism: the threat of terrorism has grown in recent years. General Martin Dempsey said the Islamic State “has

an apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision.” British Home Secretary Theresa May said the If ISIS consolidated “we will see the world’s first truly terrorist state. Terrorists will acquire chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons.” It already has advanced artillery, armoured cars, battlefield tanks & anti-aircraft guns man-portable air defence system and three Russian-built MiG jets. It has control of a large chemical weapons facility northwest of Baghdad.

- b. Civil unrest: this has increased as we have seen in the Middle East
- c. Nuclear war: the threat has decreased since the end of the cold war but there is a real danger of terrorists gaining nuclear weapons. There is a danger of catastrophic nuclear accidents. In 1961 a US plane broke apart and dropped two nuclear bombs. In 1980 a worker dropped spanner in a nuclear silo and the missile (but not warhead) exploded. In 1983 Russia mistakenly registered missile strike from US and in 1995 they mistook a Norwegian research rocket for US ballistic missile
- d. Unprecedented population growth, climate change, and resource shortages could lead to war in the future.

2. Famines (Matthew 24:7)

Famine is, of course, still a huge problem. It may be caused by crop failure, overpopulation, war, control of resources and income by military, political and economic elites, land being controlled by absentee landlords and their agents producing meat and butter not for the locals but to ship overseas or government policies (including the policies of rich countries). A good deal of malnutrition is not caused by famine as such, but rather by poverty. The world produces enough food for everyone but it is not shared justly. We should remember that when the fullness of God’s kingdom comes it will be characterised by justice.

Spiralling grain prices, stock market speculation, climate change and corrupt and failing governments have left almost a billion people facing starvation.

Climate change is a major factor which is going to make the earth less efficient for farming. Hurricanes will increase in intensity, and storms, floods and droughts will become more frequent. Changes in temperature and rainfall will affect what crops can be grown and productivity. It will also increase animal and plant pests and diseases. The FAO warned: ‘Slow-onset climate changes are expected to have potentially catastrophic effects on food production in many developing countries, particularly between 2050 and 2100.

There were some 37 famines recorded in the 20th century and there have been 17 already in the 21st century.

3. Earthquakes (Matthew 24:7)

Earthquakes killed an average of 50,184 people per annum between 2000 and 2008. The US Geological Survey (USGS) estimate that there are over a million earthquakes per annum but most go undetected, either because they are in very remote areas or because they are very small. The National Earthquake Information Center (NEIC) records some 50 earthquakes a day – approximately 20,000 per annum. In a recent 30-day period the USGS recorded 609 earthquakes, 12 of them more than magnitude 6.

As with other preliminary, repeated signs mentioned in Matthew and Luke, some people claim that there is a growing number of earthquakes. Again, Jesus did not speak about any increase.

The NEIC records from 1900 onwards show that there are likely to be 16 major earthquakes per year, including 15 over magnitude 7 and one over magnitude 8. The data shows that this was only exceeded in 8 years (1976, 1990, 1995, 1999, 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2011). In 2010 there were 24 earthquakes over magnitude 7. The number of earthquakes over magnitude 6 has stayed relatively constant.

One reason why it seems that earthquakes are increasing is because of a larger number of seismograph stations (from 350 in 1930 to over 8000 today) and an improvement in global communication. Before the 20th century records of earthquakes are much more limited. However, from the records we have since 1700, five of the largest earthquakes (over magnitude 8) have been in the 20th century and three in the 21st century.

4. Pestilences (Luke 21:11) Part 1 Modern diseases

Major advances in medicine, including preventative medicine, have transformed human health, especially in the developed world but ‘pestilences’ are still very much with us.

On the 28th January 2014 the Lancet Infectious Diseases journal published a study on the Black Death. It pointed out that the 6th century Justinian Plague which led to the final collapse of the Roman Empire and the 14th century were both caused by the same bacterium *Yersinia*. The scientists concerned think the bacterium re-emerged in the 19th century “Third Plague” pandemic in China and India, which killed millions. They then warned that their findings suggest another plague pandemic could occur from another strain of the same bacterium. They added that long periods of warm, wet weather preceded both the Justinian Plague and the Black Death, which was thought to have resulted in an explosion in the rat population. This is worrying in view of current weather trends.

Researchers have compiled a database of 335 infectious diseases first acknowledged as a potential threat between 1940 and 2004.

The World Health Organisation lists various disease outbreaks. The most extensive in the 21st century are Avian influenza (in 25 countries 2003-12), Cholera (in 36 countries 2000-11), Dengue fever (in 16 countries), Ebola (in 7 countries 2000-11), Meningitis (in 29 countries 2000-12), Plague (in 8 countries 2001-10), Polio (in 25 countries 2000-11), Rift Valley fever (in 8 countries 2000-10), SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome - in numerous countries 2003-4) and Yellow fever (in 22 countries 2000-11). The WHO lists a further 46 diseases including Anthrax, Botulism, Hepatitis E, Influenza, Lassa fever, Legionellosis, Malaria, and Swine flu.

More recently Ebola has spread alarmingly in various African countries. Ebola is “the most severe, acute health emergency seen in modern times,” said Margaret Chan, director-general of the World Health Organization in October 2014. She added that it is a “crisis for international peace and security” and added “I have never seen a health event threaten the very survival of societies and governments in already very poor countries. I have never seen an infectious disease contribute so strongly to potential state failure.”⁸¹ Some, however, have accused her of alarmism.

Nathan Wolfe is Visiting Professor in Human Biology at Stanford University and director of the Global Viral Forecasting Initiative. He stresses the importance of Ebola, SARS, Bird Flu, HIV, influenza and Malaria as potential pandemics. He added that there is a possibility of viruses such as Bird Flu (which didn’t affect many humans despite concerns) mutating into a form which could seriously affect humans.

AIDS has now surpassed the Black Death and could kill 60 million people by 2015.

5. Pestilences (Luke 21:11) Part 2 Danger of pandemics [This was written before the emergence of Covid]

Health authorities are alert to the continuing danger of pandemics. For example, the World Health Organisation (WHO) Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) states: “Today, there is growing recognition that an outbreak anywhere can potentially represent an emergency of international public health concern. Outbreaks threaten the health of the world’s population. They require regional and global alert and response mechanisms to ensure rapid access to technical advice and resources and to support national public health capacity. No single institution or country has all of the capacities to respond to international public health emergencies caused by epidemics and by new and emerging infectious diseases.”

Sally Osberg, CEO of the Skoll Foundation, which encourages and supports innovators who seek to solve the world’s most pressing problems, said: “Pandemics pose an enormous threat to us all. Often, by the time a new virus is discovered, it’s too late to contain it.”

Writing in the Wall Street Journal in May 2009, Larry Brilliant, an epidemiologist, and chairman of the National Biosurveillance Advisory Subcommittee, stated: “We might be entering an Age of Pandemics. In our lifetimes, or our children’s lifetimes, we will face a broad array of dangerous emerging 21st-century diseases, man-made or natural, brand-new or old, newly resistant to our current vaccines and antiviral drugs Naturally occurring diseases with pandemic potential are much more ubiquitous and more certain to occur. Over the last decades, we have seen more than three dozen new infectious diseases appear, some of which could kill millions of people with one or two unlucky gene mutations or one or two unfavorable environmental changes.” Factors favouring pandemics: Global communication

We now live in a global village and so the possibility of infection being spread around the world is high. One example proves the point. A flight from Buenos Aires to Los Angeles stopped in Lima in 1992, and picked up some seafood infected with the cholera then making the rounds in Peru. As a result, dozens of passengers who arrived in Los Angeles, some of whom then changed planes and flew on to Nevada and even as far as Japan, found that they had contracted cholera. Within days that single airplane spread cholera 10,000 miles around the whole rim of the Pacific

Basin.

a. Factors favouring pandemics: Increased contacts between humans and animals

Scientists are aware that many diseases spread to humans from animals. In April 2009 Scientific American reported the likely sources of various diseases, namely AIDS (from chimpanzees), Hepatitis B (from apes), Influenza A (from wild birds), Plague (from rodents), Dengue fever (from Old World primates), East African and West African sleeping sickness (from wild and domestic ruminants), vivax malaria (from Asian macaques), Yellow fever (from African primates) and Chagas' disease (from many wild and domestic animals). Bird flu, SARS, West Nile, Monkey-pox and Ebola also came from animals.

Scholars such as Mark Woolhouse, Professor of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, have found at least 868 human pathogens that infect both animals and humans, although in the last 40 years, only HIV has become a pandemic, with some 40 million people affected, rising to possibly 60 million in three years time.

b. Factors favouring pandemics: Causes of increased contacts between humans and animals

- i. Global warming affects agriculture and leads to deforestation. Yet forests served as a barrier to viruses which pass from animals to humans. A 2009 Oxfam report on climate change says many diseases are already migrating as temperatures rise.
- ii. World poverty causes poor people to eat more wild animals.
- iii. Factory farming increases risk to human health.

c. Factors favouring pandemics: Drug-resistant microbes and Bioterrorism

- i. The spread of antibiotic resistant bacteria is a major threat to human health. The World Health Organisation calls it "one of the three greatest threats to human health."

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in September 2013 that 23,000 people in the United States die each year as a direct result of drug resistant infections and 14,000 die from related infections. It lists 18 bacteria which are a serious threat to patients and its director, Tom Frieden said this resistance is "one of our most serious health threats" which would undermine life-saving treatments such as chemotherapy, kidney dialysis and organ transplantation.

Dr Margaret Chan, the director general of the World Health Organisation said in 2012 that there was a danger that normal infections such as "strep throat or a child's scratched knee" could kill, because bacteria had evolved to survive treatments.

David Willetts, UK Minister of State for Universities and Science has warned that this problem could be as serious threat as global warming.

The UK's Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies said drug-resistant infections could lead to an "apocalyptic scenario" in the mid-21st century.

In 2014 David Cameron, former UK prime minister, spoke to the press about the emergence of untreatable bacteria. He said: "This is not some distant threat, but something happening right now ... If we fail to act, we are looking at an almost unthinkable scenario where antibiotics no longer work and we are cast back into the dark ages of medicine, where treatable infections and injuries will kill once again. That simply cannot be allowed to happen and I want to see a stronger, more coherent global response."⁸²

Dr Keiji Fukuda, the World Health Organisation's assistant director general for health security said that unless adequate international action is taken, once-beaten diseases will re-emerge as global killers and common infections and minor injuries which have been treatable for decades will once again kill people. It is regarded by experts as a threat equal to climate change and global terrorism.

Antibiotics are not only used unnecessarily in humans but also in food animals. It is estimated that 80% of the antibiotics used in America are used on animals to promote growth.

Jesus said one of the “birth-pains” (sufferings preceding his coming) would be “pestilence” (Luke 21:10). We should take note of relevant current events but we should also pray about these issues and for those adversely affected by them.

- ii. Bioterrorism: a few years ago Martin Rees, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and head of the Royal Society, predicted that bioterror or bioerror would unleash a catastrophic event claiming one million lives in the next two decades.

d. Factors favouring pandemics: experimentation going wrong

Some scientists are exploring how Bird Flu (H5N1) could become more infectious and cause a global pandemic. However 22 other scientists wrote to scientific journals recently criticising these experiments as creating a danger of accidental release of a pandemic strain of the virus. It has killed half the patients infected by it.

Professor Lord May, a former government chief scientist and past president of the Royal Society, called for a moratorium on this research back in January 2013 because “there is the opportunity for evil people to pervert it.”

Dr Robert Webster, a virologist, said: “As long as H5N1 is out there in the world, there is the possibility of disaster... There is the theoretical possibility that it can acquire the ability to transmit human-to-human And then God help us.”

Dr. Thomas Inglesby, a bioterrorism expert and director of the Center for Biosecurity of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center said: “It’s just a bad idea for scientists to turn a lethal virus into a lethal and highly contagious virus. And it’s a second bad idea for them to publish how they did it so others can copy it.”

When asked about the possibility of a future virus wiping out tens of millions of people, disease scientists give a range of answers from maybe to probably.

In September 2014 scientists discovered old vials containing smallpox, ricin, plague and botulism between 60 and 100 years old in a US laboratory. They were not stored in accordance with security regulations. In July 2014 6 vials of smallpox viruses were found in a cardboard box in a Maryland laboratory. The same month anthrax was discovered in unlocked refrigerators (or refrigerators with a key in the lock) some in an unrestricted hallway. Some anthrax containers were missing and had to be found. Some 75 scientists in Atlanta may have been exposed to anthrax because proper procedures were not followed. Samples were transferred to laboratories not equipped to deal with them.

WHAT SCHOLARS SAY ON THE REMINDERS (OR REPEATED SIGNS) OF THE END

Jesus says that they (false messiahs, war, uprisings, famines, earthquakes and pestilences) are “the beginning of birth-pains” (v. 8). This is a technical term. The rabbis used this term of the sufferings which would precede Messiah’s coming. **Professor C E B Cranfield**, comments “Though these things do not mean that the End is come, they do point to it and are a pledge of it. To the eye of faith they are full of promise.” Professor Anthony Hoekema says when we see these events: “We are not to think that the return of Christ is immediately at hand. These signs point toward the end and provide a pledge that it will come.” R T France says ‘birth pains’ refers to the period of suffering which must lead up to the new age)” and adds: “while all such events have an ultimate connection with the final consummation, they are far from being its immediate precursors, and so cannot be used to plot its nearness.” So these events are to be seen as the beginning of the sufferings preceding the End of the Age, and as Reminders that the End is coming. [see “Living in the light of the End (which is a new beginning) FULL VERSION” at <https://christianteaching.org.uk/blogging/> for more details and comments by scholars]

MORE ON THE “BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH-PAINS” [OF THE COMING OF MESSIAH] Matt 24:8

We have noted that Jesus mentions such signs as war, famine and earthquakes. In this area, a report has just come out that alarming quantities of Methane are being released from the Arctic (due to global warming) which, if it continues will cause much more extreme weather, damaging rise in sea level and spreading of deserts. The results would be catastrophic for millions of people. Methane is at least 20 times more potent a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. The report claims the enormous economic effects of this Methane release could be £40 trillion, almost the whole annual global economic output (although that figure is open to debate). The gas is being released because floating sea ice (which reflects the sun’s heat back into space) has melted dramatically, as has permafrost (hitherto permanently-

frozen ice in the Arctic tundra) which traps Methane beneath it. Experts say this has only been detected in the last ten years. As always, our first response should be to pray – for governments to take appropriate action and for the protection of the vulnerable. But, as Jesus said, we should also recognise this as a “birth-pain of the coming of Messiah.” Linked with other factors, such as nuclear weapons being obtained by terrorists or rogue states, it makes the apocalyptic predictions of the Book of Revelation (however symbolical their language) seem very credible.

Inevitably some people have criticised the Report, saying it won’t have catastrophic results. If you’re interested see the article “Arctic methane catastrophe scenario is based on new empirical observations” in The Guardian which states that these criticisms are based on outdated assumptions. Methane levels are at unanticipated record highs. Prof Peter Wadhams, head of Polar ocean physics at Cambridge University said critics were unaware of unique and unprecedented factors.

A 2010 scientific analysis led by the UK's Met Office in Review of Geophysics stated: “Overall, uncertainties are large, and it is difficult to be conclusive about the time scales and magnitudes of methane feedbacks, but significant increases in methane emissions are likely, and catastrophic emissions cannot be ruled out... The risk of a rapid increase in [methane] emissions is real but remains largely unquantified.”

Will there be a sudden, secret “Rapture” of believers to heaven?

Some Christians believe that Jesus will next return suddenly, without any signs or warnings, and will secretly “rapture” (catch up) all believers into heaven whilst there is a time of ‘Great Tribulation’ on earth. They say this could happen at any moment. Nothing needs to happen before it. This return of Jesus is completely imminent. It will only be seen by the church, not by the world. It is not the same as the Second Coming which will happen later and be seen by the whole world.

I was brought up on this view and, throughout my childhood, I was excited by the thought that Jesus could return at any moment. So, I understand only too well how much this view means to Christians who hold it. It is not my intention to cause unnecessary upset to them but I have to say that I have concluded that it is an incorrect understanding of the New Testament.

History of the “Secret Rapture” view

This view sees the following order of events:

1. Secret Rapture
2. Great Tribulation (Matt 24:21)
3. Second Coming
4. Millennium (1000-year reign of Christ on earth Rev 20:1-6)

Here is a potted history of this view:

- a. Early church leaders and their godly descendants for 1800 years didn’t hold this view.
- b. 1830 Margaret Macdonald had an End Times vision and began to teach the Rapture of what we would call Charismatic Christians only.
- c. Edward Irving, Scottish Presbyterian preacher, then taught this view.
- d. John Nelson Darby, Anglican priest, probably heard the view from the above. He formed the Plymouth Brethren. [Part of my background is in the Brethren]
- e. Darby influenced American lawyer Cyrus I Scofield who wrote the notes for the Scofield Bible which teach this view. [I was brought up on the Scofield Bible].
- f. Recently Hal Lindsay, Tim LaHaye (‘Left Behind’ novels) have popularised this view.

“Dispensationalism”

J N Darby believed:

- a. That God’s dealings with humanity are divided into seven ages or “dispensations.”
- b. That God’s dealings with Israel are totally separate from his dealings with the church.
 - Israel and the Church belong to different “Dispensations” (Ages)
 - God has different plans for Israel and the Church
 - Whatever God said to Israel should never be applied to the church and vice versa.
- c. That for the last 2000 years (the “Church Age”) he has only been working with the church, not with Israel. So the

current dispensation is the Church Age.

- d. That God won't start working with Israel again until the church is taken out of the way – in the Secret Rapture, which will bring the present dispensation to an end. So, Darby believed the Rapture is important in God's purposes.
- e. That in the Millennium (the next "Dispensation") God will work with Israel.

To avoid confusion let me say these are Darby's views, not mine. I disagree with him and will say why later.

IF YOU WANT TO IMPRESS YOUR FRIENDS WITH TECHNICAL LANGUAGE

Darby taught "dispensational premillennialism" i.e. that there are various dispensations (different ages) before (pre-) the millennium. It's helpful to understand that terminology.

(Whilst dealing with complex language let me add that there is another form of premillennialism called "historic premillennialism" which has a lot more credibility. It is called 'historic' because many of the earliest Christian leaders believed it. It does not believe in a separate secret Rapture before the Great Tribulation, nor in dispensations).

Be careful not to read into the Bible what you want to find in it

Whenever we hold a special opinion there is a danger that we shall "read into" Scripture what is not actually there in Scripture. I think that is what those who defend this Secret Rapture view are in danger of doing. But we need to stand back and try to understand what the Bible actually does say, rather than what we want it to say.

Those who hold that the Rapture of believers into heaven can happen at any moment tend to argue from silence. *The New Testament nowhere says that there are two returns of Christ – the Rapture and then later the Second Coming. This distinction is actually based upon the fact that references to the Lord's return don't always include all the information. Some, like Matthew 24, speak of the signs which must happen before his return. Others don't. But that does not mean they are speaking of two different returns, one with signs and the other without. The only order of events found in the NT is the appearance of signs leading up to the Antichrist - the Great Tribulation – the Second Coming.*

Passages some say are relevant

The main passage referring to the saints being "raptured" ("caught up") is 1 Thess 4:16-17 **"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever."** These people interpret this as Jesus suddenly catching up all the believers and taking them up into heaven. However, the passage only says we will be with the Lord forever. It doesn't say where, except we meet him in the air/clouds.

When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 Paul he used the Greek word *apantesis*. Although we can't be certain, it seems likely that he had in mind the Greek approach to an official visit to a city by some dignitary. When such an important person visited, the leading people and others would go out to meet him then escort him back into the city. It seems likely therefore that 1 Thess 4:16-17 means that believers are caught up to meet the Lord and *escort him back to earth* (not disappear with him to heaven). Many scholars agree with this view and, as we shall see, the general teaching of the NT seems to support it.

John 14:1-3 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

Some think this clearly indicates that Jesus will return to rapture believers to heaven and the house with many rooms seems to refer to heaven. However:

- a. Two days earlier Jesus had taught his disciples on the Mt of Olives (the Olivet Discourse) that there would be many signs before his return: the "birth-pains" of the coming of the Messiah – wars, famine, earthquakes etc., persecution and false prophets, the gospel being preached to the whole world and the Gentile domination of

Jerusalem ending, the great distress (tribulation) and cosmic signs followed by his return to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth.

- b. This teaching would be fresh in the disciples' minds and we are surely right to assume that, in the absence of any statement to the contrary, they would understand John 14:3 as not a different return of Christ without signs or warning but as the same return he was speaking of on the Mt of Olives.
- c. The great promise of John 14:3 is that when Jesus returns believers will always be with him and that ultimately means in heaven. But that doesn't mean he will take them to heaven immediately

1 Thess 1:9-10 speaks of Jesus returning to rescue us from the coming wrath.

Some think this means Jesus will remove all believers to heaven so they don't experience the "wrath" of the Great Tribulation. But this is an assumption, it is not what the passage says. It could equally well mean God will help believers in difficult times and come and rescue them from the wrath of his ultimate judgment.

1 Thess 5:1-9 "Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety', destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Some people say this destruction is the Great Tribulation and will only suddenly come on unbelievers because the church will have been "raptured" to heaven. However:

- a. This passage about destruction and wrath is continuous with 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 which speaks of the rapture of believers (the chapter division was not in the original).
- b. Paul warns BELIEVERS about the day of the Lord, which brings destruction, and says they must not be taken by surprise when it comes. "But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief" (v. 4). Clearly, believers will not have been raptured away into heaven, they will experience this dark day.
- c. 'Day', as often in Scripture, means a period of time.
- d. This passage indicates that Paul describes that believers are caught up to meet the Lord and then *escort him back to earth* (not disappear with him to heaven).

1 Corinthians 1:7 "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."

- Some say the eager waiting may suggest an imminent rapture. But this is unconvincing.

Titus 2:13 "We wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ"

- Some say the words "blessed hope" may suggest an imminent rapture. But this is unconvincing.

1 John 3:2-3 "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

- Some say that an imminent "Rapture" would be a greater incentive for pure living. But the fact that we are one day going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10) is quite sufficient to encourage us to purify ourselves. In fact, it is a stronger incentive. Also we should remember that death could be imminent for any of us. That too is a strong motive.

In Revelation 3:10 Jesus says to the church of Philadelphia "I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth."

- Some claim this is referring to a Rapture before the Tribulation. Robert Mounce comments: “the thrust of the verse is against this interpretation. It is precisely because the church was faithful to Christ in time of trial that he in turn will be faithful to them in the time of their great trial. The promise is consistent with the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, ‘I do not pray that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one’ (John 17:15). It is their preservation in trial that is taught.”⁸³

In Revelation 22:7, 12, 20 Jesus says “Look, I am coming soon!”

- Some think this points to the rapture as being imminent and ready to occur "at any moment." But the context of judgment. Jesus says “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.” He goes on to refer to people who “wash their robes” so they may enter heaven as opposed to those who are sexually immoral, murderers, idolaters etc., (verses 14-15). Yet the secret rapture is not meant to be related to judgment.
- IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN A SUDDEN SECRET RAPTURE SAY THAT IT IS NOT TO DO WITH JUDGEMENT (WHICH, THEY SAY, COMES LATER. BUT WE SHALL SEE THAT MANY NT PASSAGES THOUGHT TO REFER TO THE RAPTURE ACTUALLY DO REFER TO JUDGMENT.

In Romans 13:11-12 Paul says: “The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.

- This clearly speaks of the approaching return of Christ but it has nothing to say in support of a sudden secret rapture.

Heb 10:23-25 speaks of “Encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

- Again, this is stressing that the return of Christ is approaching. But the context is about judgment. See verses 26-31. Yet, as we have seen, the secret rapture is not meant to be related to judgment. That happens, say the proponents of this view, at the subsequent second coming.

James 4:7-10 says: “The end of all things is near.”

- However it has nothing to say in support of a sudden secret rapture.

In James 5:8-9 James stresses “the Lord’s coming is near.”

- He is even “standing at the door” but he does so as the Judge and the secret rapture is not meant to be related to judgment.

In Matthew 25:1-13 Jesus tells the parable of the ten virgins in which the bridegroom suddenly appears at midnight.

- This cannot be understood as referring to a sudden secret rapture, though, because the foolish virgins (nominal believers) are excluded finally. So judgment takes place but those who teach there is a sudden secret rapture say it is not associated with judgment. (Furthermore, if it referred to the rapture, the foolish virgins would have the opportunity to come to faith in the Great Tribulation and so not to be excluded finally as the parable says they were). The same can be said for the similar parable in Luke 12:35-48 where the Lord’s sudden coming is associated with judgment.

In Luke 17:30-35 Jesus speaks of “The day the Son of Man is revealed” and adds: “I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding corn together; one will be taken and the other left.”

- This is speaking about an unexpected coming of the Lord and a rapture of individuals. But, again, the context shows it is associated with judgment. See verses 26-30. So this cannot be the sudden, secret rapture.

Heb 10:36-37 says: “In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.”

- Yet again the context speaks of judgment. See verses 24-31.

2 Peter 3 says that God’s ideas of imminence are not the same as ours. The scoffers ask: “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” (vv 3-4). The answer is: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (vv. 8-9). However “The day of the Lord will come like a thief” (v 10).

The order of events of the End Times

The only Order of events in the NT is: The signs culminating in the appearance of the Antichrist - the Great Tribulation – the Second Coming. We can see this in the following passages:

Matthew 24 (Mark 13, Luke 21) The Olivet Discourse

We have already looked at these in some depth. The order in Matthew 24 is:

- i. War, famine, earthquakes, etc (vv 6-7)
- ii. Persecution vv 9-10
- iii. Apostasy (people giving up the Faith) v 12
- iv. World evangelism v. 14
- v. False messiahs/prophets vv 23-24
- vi. Great Tribulation v 22
- vii. Return of Christ (seen by the whole world) vv 27, 30
- viii. Gathering of the elect v 31

Book of Revelation

The order is:

- i. Great tribulation - chs. 4-18
- ii. Return of Christ – ch 19
- iii. Millennium – ch 20
- iv. Eternal state – ch 21-22

2 Thess 2:1-12

The order here is:

- i. Rebellion and Antichrist vv 3-7, 9-12 (cf. 1 John 2:18-23)
- ii. Return of Christ (to judge Antichrist and his followers) vv 9, 10-12
- iii. Gathering of believers v 1

2 Thess 2:1, 3 is quite clear that “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ *and our being gathered to him* will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction [the Antichrist].”

Misunderstandings

1. That believers being “saved from the wrath of God” means they won’t go through the Tribulation

Those who believe in a sudden, secret rapture think that the NT passages which speak of believers being delivered from wrath mean deliverance from the Great Tribulation (i.e. that believers are raptured to heaven before the Tribulation begins). But these passages have a much broader meaning than this.

When we come to faith in Christ we are saved from the wrath of God.

John writes: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them” (John 3:18, 36).

The wrath of God is a much bigger subject than the Great Tribulation.

Paul speaks of a day “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed.” (2 Thess 1:7-10). Note that believers will be saved.

The NT promises that believers will experience ‘tribulation.’

Jesus pronounces a blessing on believers who are persecuted “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:10-12). In the Olivet

Discourse about the End Times Jesus makes it clear believers will be persecuted (Matt 24:9-10). “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim 3:12-13).

There is a danger that believing we will be raptured before the Great Tribulation can be for escapist motives for some people. The Lord never promised to keep us safe *from* tribulation. He promised to keep us safe *in* tribulation.

2. That the Church will be raptured to heaven because God never deals with the Church and Israel at the same time

I have already mentioned that part of the reason people believe in a secret rapture of believers to heaven which is quite distinct from the Second Coming, is to do with their making a total separation between Israel and the Church. These people say that before Jesus came it was the Dispensation (Age) of the Law. In this age, which began with Moses, God was only dealing with Israel. Then the church started after Jesus resurrection and this started a new dispensation – the Church Age. So for the last 2000 years God has not been working with Israel. He has been working only with the church. Then, say these people, when the sudden rapture takes the church away to heaven, God will resume his work only with Israel, not with the church.

This “Dispensationalism” is a mistaken idea which is contradicted by the Bible. But it is an important part of the foundation of those who believe in a sudden secret rapture.

In fact, the NT teaches that Israel and the Church are “one tree”

Paul’s teaching in Romans 9-11 is very important. He says:

- 1. Gentile believers have been grafted into God’s one spiritual tree (which has a Jewish root and trunk: believing Israel in the OT as well as numerous Jewish branches: Jewish believers)*

Paul writes: “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: you do not support the root, but the root supports you” (Rom 11:17-18). Paul also writes: “If the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (Rom 15:27).

God has only one spiritual tree (community). He doesn’t have a Jewish tree and a Gentile tree, which is what the dispensationalists are really saying. He hasn’t rejected the Jewish tree and replaced it with a Gentile tree.

Paul writes: “I ask then: did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew” (Rom 11:1-2). He adds: “At the present time there is a remnant [of believing Israel] chosen by grace” (Rom 11:5).

- 2. Gentile believers must have a humble attitude to believing Israel*

Gentile believers are a “wild olive shoot” which has been grafted into the olive tree of believing Israel, which is the natural olive tree. They are nourished by the (Jewish) “olive root.” Paul says; “You were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree” (Rom 11:24).

- 3. Some branches (unbelieving Jews) have been removed from the tree*

Paul is quite clear “Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring” (Rom 9:6-8, cf. Rom 2:17-29). It is only believing Jews who are part of true spiritual Israel. Obviously, this includes the Old Testament saints. It also includes Jewish people who have come to faith in Jesus in the last 2000 years. They are part of the true (spiritual) Israel, the one olive tree, the true church.

- 4. If these unbelieving Jewish branches come to faith, they can be re-grafted into the olive tree.*

This re-grafting is more readily achieved because these Jewish “branches” are natural branches, as opposed to Gentile “branches” which are “wild.”

Paul writes: “if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!” (Rom 11:23-24).

5. *If believing Gentile branches do not persist in faith they will be removed.*

The only criterion for being in the “olive tree” (the community of salvation) is faith in Christ. Some dispensationalists say that, in the Millennium, Jewish people will be saved through Judaism and its animal sacrifices. This is a very serious error. Jesus, and faith in him, is the ONLY way of salvation, for everyone – Jew or Gentile.

“You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.’ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off” (Rom 11:19-23).

Elsewhere in the NT Paul gives similar teaching. In Galatians he calls the church “the Israel of God.” “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule – to the Israel of God” (Gal 6:15-16).

Writing to the Ephesians 2:11-22 he says that Gentiles have now been included in citizenship in Israel and in the covenants of promise (2:12, 19). God has brought Jews and Gentiles together in one group, one new humanity, one body (2:14-16), one building, one temple, one dwelling for God to inhabit (2:21-22).

Paul writes that Gentile believers (as well as Jewish believers) are the true circumcision (Php 3:3; Col 2:11; Rom 2:28-29). They are Abraham’s offspring (Rom 4:16; Gal 3:29).

The writer to the Hebrews refers to the fact that the Lord promised to make a new covenant **with the people of Israel**, which is clearly the covenant that now includes the Gentiles. He covenants to write his law on their hearts, to enable them to know him and to forgive them (Heb 8:8-12).

It is quite obvious from the NT that the dispensational separation between Israel and the Church is profoundly mistaken. This undermines one of their main arguments for the idea of a sudden, secret rapture.

I shall have more to say about Israel on another occasion.

What does the NT mean by the imminence of the return of Christ?

It seems clear that the return of Christ will be heralded by various signs and happenings, so it can’t literally be at any moment as those who teach a sudden, secret rapture would have us believe. But we must not lose the impact of the NT emphasis on expecting Christ’s return.

The NT seems to speak of a time of apostasy, the revelation of the Antichrist and Tribulation as the precursor to the return of Christ. However it seems that this could happen in a fairly short period of time.

Obviously, it is possible to be waiting for and expecting events which we know cannot come literally at any moment. Equally it is possible to be expecting something to happen but for there still to be an element of shock when it does.

Jesus urged the disciples to “keep watch, because because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matt 24:42-44). Clearly what Jesus wants is for his followers to be:

- Regularly thinking about his return (it should always be on our agenda, not filed away)
- Recognising signs pointing to his return
- ‘Hastening’ his return (through prayer and obedience, including evangelism)

As someone put it: “Expectancy – yes; imminency – no.”

Conclusion

It seems clear that the New Testament does not teach that there will be a sudden, secret “rapture” of believers up to heaven before the Great Tribulation (and distinct from the Second Coming). We need to be alert to the signs of Jesus’

return and to “hasten” his coming (by prayer and obedience). However, just as there is tribulation and persecution throughout church history, so the church will go through the Great Tribulation, but will be kept safe until the Second Coming. It will also be kept from the wrath of God.

Further signs of the End

Persecution: a pointer towards the End

(also for prayer for the persecuted)

Speaking of the Signs of the End, Jesus said “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated *by all nations* because of me” (Matthew 24:9). (Our first reaction to it must be to pray for and support our persecuted fellow-Christians).

There has been persecution throughout history but, in view of other passages about the End Times, it is reasonable to think that persecution will increase towards the end. Here are some figures from researchers:

- One Christian dies every 5 minutes due to persecution
- 160,000 Christians died through persecution in 2000
- The figure has reduced to about 100,000 in subsequent years
- “More Christians were persecuted in the 20th century than in all the previous 19 centuries put together.

These figures can be debated because it is very difficult to be precise when much persecution happens in remote areas. But one thing is certain, there is a very great deal of persecution of Christians today.

Researchers say:

- 70 million Christians have been martyred since AD33
- There have been 6000 major martyrdoms over the centuries: 76 with 100,000 martyrs each, 27 with over 500,000 and 15 with over 1 million.
- Sadly, Christians have martyred 5,539,000 other Christians.

Obviously, many more Christians have been persecuted without being martyred.

Researchers also say:

- Some 45 million Christians (of the total of 70 million since AD33) have been martyred in the 20th century (and they claim that this excluded those killed for national, ethnic or political reasons who just happened to be Christian but were not killed because of their being Christian).
- 61% of the major martyrdoms with over 100,000 martyrs each have been in the 20th century (plus 2 in the late 19th century).
- 87.5% of the major martyrdoms with over 500,000 martyrs each have been in the 20th century and
- 66% of the major martyrdoms with over 1 million martyrs each have been in the 20th century.

Again, these figures are controversial, including averages and estimates, and are incomplete but they probably show a reliable indication that persecution has very significantly increased in the last century or so.

John Allen, writing in The Spectator in 2013 said: “The global war on Christians remains the greatest story never told of the early 21st century.” Professor Alan Johnson asked: “Why are we so quiet about Christianophobia?” The International Society for Human Rights is quoted as saying that 80 per cent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians.

The Archbishop of Canterbury said in the House of Lords (Dec 2011) of Middle East Christians: “the position of Christians in the region is more vulnerable than it has been for centuries.” The Pope warned in September 2007: “Churches in the Middle East are threatened in their very existence.” The AI Monitor in Lebanon commented: “Christians in the Middle East “are victims of a slow and masked form of genocide, one that has been ongoing for some time now.”

80% of all acts of religious discrimination are against Christians according to the International Society for Human Rights (a secular group).

Christians are persecuted in 139 nations (about 75% of the world) according to the Pew Research Center (compared with Muslims in 90 countries and Jews in 68 countries).

Lord Sacks, former Chief Rabbi, said in the House of Lords that attempts to wipe out Christianity in parts of the Middle East and the killing of Christians across much of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia amount to the “religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing” and is a crime against humanity.

Pope Francis said “I am convinced that the persecution against Christians today is stronger than in the first centuries of the Church.”

In April 2014 David Cameron said: “It is the case that Christians are now the most persecuted religion around the world. We should stand up against persecution of Christians and other faith groups wherever and whenever we can.”

Is it all down to extreme Islamists?

There is no getting away from the fact that much of the growing persecution of Christians happens in a Muslim context. HOWEVER:

- Islamophobia – a persistently negative and suspicious attitude towards Muslims - is not a Christian attitude.
- Many Muslims disapprove of the persecution of Christians by fellow Muslims.
- Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs said: “Today, the majority of victims of Islamist violence are Muslim, and shall we not shed tears for them, too?” Similarly, the Bishop of Exeter said: “the primary victims of religious extremism in the Muslim world are other Muslims.” [NEVERTHELESS: 75 per cent of all religious persecution in the world is carried out against Christians].
- The western world bears major responsibility for the negative attitude towards Christianity by many Muslims.

Why have violent Islamist attacks on Christians increased

In the House of Lords Lord Parekh gave 5 reasons why violent Islamist attacks against Christians have increased:

1. Countries want unity and so see the country as belonging to the majority faith group.
2. Religious minorities tend to relate to the current regime for safety's sake, so, when the regime changes, they may be scapegoated.
3. Western foreign policy tends to encourage extremism.
4. Some governments encourage religious division for their own purposes
5. There are extremist groups such as Al Qaeda.

We can add another reason:

6. Antagonism towards Muslims converting to Christianity. This can lead to the convert being killed. It also means that Muslims are antagonistic towards ‘proselytising’ i.e. evangelism by Christians.

I will refer to persecution taking place against Christians in 47 countries of the world. Most of them are Muslim but there is also persecution by Buddhists in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and by Hindus in India. Here I will give a very brief summary in the next few posts. Details will eventually be on my blog and I will notify you when that is the case.

Persecution of Christians today

Yes, this is a pointer towards the Return of Christ but we must pray for them

AFGHANISTAN: Violence and threats. The government does not intervene when families murder a family member for converting to Christianity.

ALGERIA: Court cases and intimidation. Churches closed. Churches attacked.

AZERBAIJAN: Worship must be registered and this can take years. Religious literature, including Bibles, censored.

BANGLADESH: Muslim & Buddhist fundamentalists perpetrate killings, rape, torture, attacks on places of worship, destruction of homes, forced evictions and desecration of items of worship.

BELARUS: Christian meetings raided and property seized.

BHUTAN: Harassment and discrimination.

BOSNIA–HERZEGOVINA: Harassment and attacks on churches.

BURMA (MYANMAR): Churches closed, intimidation, registrations for places of worship blocked.

CHINA: Registrations for places of worship blocked and unregistered churches raided. Pastors imprisoned. Harassments, arrests, torture.

CUBA: Some improvement but Christians are not allowed to work in education, health and social services. Confiscated church buildings not returned.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: Violence. Attacks on churches.

EGYPT BEFORE THE OVERTHROW OF MUBARAK: Churches destroyed. Christians killed. However some Muslims support Christians.

EGYPT UNDER MORSI: Churches attacked, Morsi publicly supported prayers for destruction of Jews and Christians. 100,000 Coptic Christians fled.

EGYPT SINCE MORSI REMOVED: The Muslim Brotherhood is still attacking churches and imprisoning Christians in their homes.

ERITREA: Arrests, harassment, indefinite detention, torture (sometimes leading to death)

INDIA: Violence by Hindu extremists. Churches attacked.

INDONESIA: Intimidation. Churches destroyed. Militia groups trying to stop reconciliation between Christians and Muslims

IRAN: Arrests. Churches attacked. Conversion dealt with severely.

IRAQ: Continuing attacks against Christians. Half of Iraq's indigenous Christians have left. In August 2014 Christians fled from Mosul, the largest Christian town in Iraq, when Isis conquered it. It had a population of 60,000 Christians. Open Doors says: "Christians in Iraq are on the verge of extinction.

ISRAEL AND PALESTINE: Palestinian Christians oppressed in Gaza. Warned against public witness. Manager of Christian bookshop murdered. Messianic Believers (Jewish Christians) are persecuted in Israel (by threat to property rather than life) as traitors to Judaism.

KAZAKHSTAN: Attacks on churches. Church registration very difficult to obtain. Evangelism forbidden

KYRGYZSTAN: Worship has to be registered and cannot be in a home. But only 3 Russian Orthodox churches have gained registration. Christian literature incl. Bibles may not be distributed.

LAOS: Arrests. Detention without trial. All religious activities must be registered.

LEBANON: In 1926 84% of the population of Lebanon were Christians. Less than 50% of the population is now Christian (one estimate is 39%).

LYBIA: Converts to Christianity can be imprisoned. Evangelism is illegal.

MALDIVES: All non-Muslim religious activity and places of worship banned.

MAURITANIA: Conversion to Christianity can lead to the death penalty. Evangelism and distributing Christian literature illegal.

MOROCCO: Christians may practise their faith openly but evangelism is illegal.

NEPAL: Evangelism is illegal.

NIGERIA: Sharia law is applied in 12 of Nigeria's 36 states. Discrimination, false charges of blasphemy; Christian students and teachers being forced to leave schools; permits to build churches refused. Churches destroyed. Teenagers abducted and forced to convert to Islam.

NORTH KOREA: People caught praying likely to be executed. Prisoners subjected to torture, murder, rape, medical experimentation, forced labour and forced abortion. Possessing a Bible is a crime that can carry the death penalty.

PAKISTAN: False accusations of blasphemy against Islam and offences against the Quran have led to killings by mobs.

PHILIPPINES: Bomb attacks on churches.

RUSSIA: Many improvements but legal regulations for non-Orthodox Christians increasingly stringent, using charges of extremism in order to ban religious materials and restrict the right of assembly.

SAUDI ARABIA: Public Christian worship banned. Christians arrested.

SOMALIA: Christians beheaded.

SRI LANKA: Violence and discrimination. Churches attacked.

SUDAN: Christians had suffered terrible atrocities before the country was divided in July 2011 with a Christian state in the South. 700,000 Christians of southern origin still remaining in Sudan fear retribution.

SYRIA: Unprecedented persecution

TAJIKISTAN: Converts suffer harassment, beatings and arrest. Religious activity must be registered and churches find it difficult to gain registration.

TUNISIA: Discrimination, evangelism illegal, attacks on churches.

TURKEY: Rise of extremism. Bishop murdered. Evangelism banned. Registration of religious groups difficult to obtain.

TURKMENISTAN: Harassment and restrictions. Even registered churches have been restricted. Registration difficult to obtain. Religious literature censored.

UGANDA: "A new wave of persecution against Christians in Uganda."

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: Conversion, evangelism and circulation of non-Islamic literature illegal.

UZBEKISTAN: Imprisonment. Raids on both unregistered and registered religious gatherings

VENEZUELA: Plans to confiscate churches, schools and other religious buildings. Attacks on Christians.

VIETNAM: Some improvement but still government harassment and excessive use of force.

YEMEN: Sharia law is the foundation of the legal system. Growing influence of Al Qaeda. Expatriate Christians murdered because of missionary activities.

I have only given you a brief outline of persecution throughout many countries. Full details are now on my blog <https://christianteaching.org.uk/blogging/>

Are Christians in Britain being persecuted?

I have written a paper on this which may be found at <https://christianteaching.org.uk/blogging/>

In that paper I concluded:

- That recent high-profile cases of Christians being penalised for wearing Christian symbols, for sensitively praying

with or sharing their faith with patients, for refusing certain involvement with homosexuals should not have happened.

- That the new legislation on equality needs to be reassessed so that religious freedom is not undermined.
- That some in the pro-gay lobby are using the gay issue not just to seek respect and equality for homosexuals but as a Trojan horse to marginalize Christians and churches which follow traditional teaching on gay sex.
- That Christianity is being marginalised in judicial proceedings, employment, as well as in parts of the media.

I don't believe British Christians are being persecuted yet. Some are being discriminated against and oppressed, and the future is likely to be even more difficult for them." I find it rather difficult when Christians use the word 'persecution' of the relatively slight difficulties we Christians face in this country.

Conclusion on persecution

Researchers claim that:

- 200 million Christians face discrimination or persecution.
- Persecution of Christians increased worldwide in 2012.
- Over 75% of the world's population live in countries which are closed to the gospel and where evangelistic missionary activity is prohibited.
- Christians were harassed by government officials or organisations in 95 countries in the year ending in mid-2010 and by social groups or individuals in 77 countries.⁸⁴

In conclusion, it seems clear to me that persecution of Christians has grown very significantly over the last century. One could argue that it could subside again but I do not find that convincing. So, although we none of us know how much more extensive persecution could become this 'sign' seems well on the way towards fulfilment.

Worldwide evangelism – a pointer towards the End

Jesus made it clear that one of the signs pointing towards his return was worldwide evangelism. He said: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14).

What did Jesus mean?

- Preaching to every individual? Such a task could hardly ever be completed, even with modern communications.
- Preaching to every people group? Researchers say there are between 11,294 and 16,791 people groups.
- Preaching to every nation? Yet nations come and go over the centuries, or their boundaries change. Prof C E B Cranfield says it means "that before the End all nations shall have an opportunity to accept the gospel." Dr Dick France agrees.

It is probably wise not to be too precise geographically in terms of people groups, let alone individuals, in our understanding of Jesus' words. The gospel certainly has been spread far and wide and we shall look at statistics about the present situation to see how far the world has been evangelised.

Here are some statistics:

- The US Census Bureau says there are 7.108 billion people on the planet
- Researchers say there are some 2.3 billion Christians (about 32% of the world population) including 748 million Evangelicals and over 524 million Charismatic/Pentecostal (these two figures overlap to some extent)
- Estimates of the number of unevangelised people in the world vary from 1.6 billion to 1.75 billion, i.e. 22-25% of the world population.
- Researchers say between 32.7% and 56.6% of people groups unevangelised

- 94% of the world's population has the New Testament in language they can understand (not necessarily their own local language - Wycliffe Bible Translators say that 2000 of the over 6,800 living languages do not have any Scripture translated).
- Over 800 million adults are illiterate so they would need to have the message conveyed to them orally.
- However, Christian radio is available to 99% of the world's population, assuming good reception and the availability of a radio. Then there are Christian programmes on TV, DVDs etc.
- In 2009 alone Campus Crusade for Christ reported that over 10 million internet users came to faith in Christ through their websites. They also received close to 4 million emails. However only about 34% of the world's population (still a huge number) has internet access and the situation is worse in least evangelised areas.

Conclusion on worldwide evangelism

It is impossible to be dogmatic about what in detail Jesus meant about the gospel being “preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.”

It is also impossible to be dogmatic about statistics. However

- The gospel has gone out to all the nations
- The NT is available to some 94% of the population in a language they understand.
- Christian radio is potentially available to some 99% of the world's population.

But there could be 1.6 to 1.75 billion or more (some say over 2 billion) unevangelised people in the world.

So, the gospel has certainly gone a long way to being “preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.”

Jesus clearly taught that this was a pointer towards the End, and his return.

Turning away from the faith: a pointer towards the End

Jesus said: “‘...you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.’”

Jesus had in mind people who had faith but who have now turned away from it, either because of persecution or because of the “increase of wickedness.” There are, of course, many in ‘Christian countries,’ some of whom had a Christian background, who have turned away from it, although some may never have had a personal faith. As we shall see, the current “turning away from the faith” is in countries where there is little or no persecution. It is a matter of debate as to whether there is an increase of wickedness in these countries (compared with countries where Christianity is strong and growing) as there is evidence on both sides.

Church decline

To listen to some people, including Christians, there is currently a massive decline in Christianity with people turning away from the faith. Some take this as an indication that this prediction by Jesus is taking place. But it is important to see the whole picture.

Church Decline in the US:

- Americans believing in God in 1940s: 92-98%; in 2010: 80%
- Americans calling themselves Christians in 1948: 92%; in 2008: 78%
- Americans claiming religion very important to them in 1958: 75%; in 2008: around 50%
- Majority of Americans do not attend church weekly

Christianity is still a major influence, though.

Church Decline in developed nations:

- Only 38% of people in developed nations say religion is important to them.

- In 2007/8 eight of the 11 least religious countries in the world were in Europe
- In the UK belief in God was 79% in 1960s and 68% in 1990s.
- About a third of French people don't believe in God.

Causes of Church Decline include:

- Cultural factors – secularisation in sexual matters, abortion, gay relationships and gay marriage and divorce; a subjective consumer approach to religion.
- Political secularisation.
- Scientific and intellectual factors (but these comments are only relevant to more conservative Christians).

Church decline in the Middle East (some of this is through emigration):

- In 1948 Jerusalem 20% Christian, now 2%.
- Until recently Bethlehem was 80% Christian, now 33%
- Until recently Lebanon had a Christian majority, now 33%
- In 1946 Syria was about 50% Christian, now 4%.
- In 1950 Jordan was 18% Christian, now 2%
- In 1953 Palestinian areas 10% Christian, now 2%
- Before the 2003 war Iraq had between 800,000 and 1.4 million Christians (5%), now 500,000-600,000.

Church decline in Britain:

- In 2005 5.8 million churchmembers (12.3%), in 2010 5.5% (11.2%).
- In 2001 71.7% claimed to be Christian, in 2010 59.3%.
- Less than 50% of young people claim to be Christians.
- In 1983 clergy were the most trusted professionals – by 85% of the population, in 2011 they were the 6th most trusted professionals – trusted by 66%. In 2014 a survey discovered that 69% of the UK population do not trust religious institutions. The church came in 7th position after the NHS, police, social services, local authorities, judiciary and government/parliament.
- British Christians turning away from biblical teaching on sexuality, etc:
 - In 1983 31% of Anglicans thought pre-marital sex 'always' or 'mostly' wrong, in 2012 10%.
 - In 1987 78% of Anglicans thought people should marry before having children, now 54%.
 - In 1983 63% of Anglicans thought "sexual relations between adults of the same sex" were "always wrong," now 40%.

In 1983 34% of Anglicans thought a woman should be allowed to have an abortion if she didn't wish to have a child and her health was not endangered by the pregnancy, now 56%.

(There are similar figures for Roman Catholics for all the above points).

The majority of UK citizens now believe that religion does more harm than good. The Huffington Post discovered that only 25% of British people think religion is a force for good. Professor Linda Woodhead (Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University) commented "This confirms something I've found in my own surveys and which leads me to conclude that religion has become a 'toxic brand' in the UK."

There is growing ignorance of the Christian Faith in the UK. The Bible Society discovered that:

- 25% of children have never read, seen or heard the story of the Nativity.
- 43% of children have yet to hear, see or read about the Crucifixion.
- 29% of children don't know that the Nativity story is part of the Bible.

30% of secondary school children (aged 12-15) did not know the Nativity story appears in the Bible.

Church decline in Europe:

- Europeans calling themselves Christians in 1910 94.5%, in 2010 80.2%.
- However only 52% of Europeans believe in God and 27% believe in a spirit or life force.

However, in the world as a whole, Christianity is growing:

Church growth

- The number of Christians worldwide was 600 million in 1910 and over 2 billion in 2010, but still about the same proportion of the whole population: 35% in 1910; 32% in 2010.
- 63% of Christians live in Europe and the Americas in 2010 compared with 93% in 1910.
- 26% of Christians live in Europe in 2010 compared with 66% in 1910.
- 24% of Christians live in Sub-Saharan Africa, 13% in Asia and the Pacific.
- Christians are a majority in 158 countries (some two thirds of the world).

So, the statistics do not support the idea that we are currently seeing many turning away from the faith and betraying and hating each other, although there is certainly a massive turning away from the faith in Western countries, particularly Europe. That does illustrate that such decline can happen quite quickly and dramatically though, and could do so again in the future, including in places where Christianity is currently strong and growing. So this sign of the End Times could come about quite quickly. One of the main causes seems to be materialism.

However, it has to be said that one of the reasons people are leaving the church is the failure of the church itself. It is not only the failure of very many churches to evangelize and to provide ministry and fellowship up to biblical standards but it is the failure of sections of the church to live up to biblical standards of behaviour. There is all too much nominal faith, hypocrisy and ungodly behaviour. Failings amongst clergy, some of it very serious, have done enormous damage.

There is some growth in the British church:

- There are now 500,000 Christians in black majority churches in Britain. Black churches are growing rapidly.
- Church attendance in London grew by 16% between 2005 and 2012 from 620,000 to 720,000. Membership of the Anglican diocese of London, the largest Anglican diocese in the country, has grown by over 70% since 1990. (But overall London Anglican numbers are declining)
- There are 140 churches in London with more than 800 members and these attract younger people.
- One new congregation has been started in York every year since 1980
- There is substantial church growth in Edinburgh.
- Cathedral mid-week attendance has mushroomed.
- Tens of thousands of people attend “fresh expressions” of churches, e.g. Café Churches started in the last 20-30 years.
- Peter Brierley calculates that 2,950 new churches started between 1989 and 2005. There is some evidence that over 5000 new churches have begun in the UK between 1980 and 2010. He also says that 1248 more churches have opened than closed between 2005 and 2010.
- 60% of Anglican parishes are declining but 40% are growing. Seven diocese grew between 2001 and 2010: Canterbury, Ely, Hereford, London, Newcastle, Southwark and York.

The historian Simon Schama (himself Jewish) believes Britain is becoming more religious. He said recently: “My generation grew up thinking that religion was completely marginal to British life, which, as for the rest of the world, has been proved more and more wrong. We were arrogantly isolated from that, thinking religion was just an ornamental part of Britishness. Now look at the success of the Alpha Evangelicals, how important Christianity has been to the community of West Indians, the huge place of Islam. Britain is becoming a more religious place, not less.”⁸⁵ A poll conducted by OnePoll in April 2014 found that 35% of *non-religious* people in Britain believe in God and 43% of them pray at times. Also 32% want a religious funeral.

A 2013 Theos survey reported that:

- 61% of non-religious people believe that “there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means.”
- 59% of non-religious people believe in the existence of some kind of spiritual being.
- 52% – think spiritual forces have some influence either in the human world or the natural world.
- 51% believe “prayer works, in the sense that it makes you feel more at peace”.
- 30% believe in God “as a universal life force.”
- 30% believe in spirits.
- 25% believe in angels
- 39% believe in the existence of a soul

- 38% think prayer could heal
- 32% believe in life after death
- 26% believe in heaven
- 16% believe in reincarnation
- 13% believe in hell
- Only 25% of the non-religious – agree with the statement “humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element”.
- 17% of people said that prayer works “in the sense that it can bring about change for the people or situation you are praying for.”
- 13% of people say they prayed “daily or more often”, 8% say they prayed a few times a week and 34% said they prayed occasionally.

The Report went on to comment: “For all that formalised religious belief and institutionalised religious belonging has declined over recent decades, the British have not become a nation of atheists or materialists. On the contrary, a spiritual current runs as, if not more, powerfully through the nation than it once did.”

Linda Woodhead said recently: “In culture and institutions Britain is more Christian than not. What is happening is that people are leaving the churches, not faith.”

The Attorney General, Dominic Grieve, commented: “The evidence is overwhelming that most people in this country by a very substantial margin have religious belief in the supernatural or a deity. To that extent atheism doesn't appear to have made much progress in this country at all ... Our state, its ethics and our society are underpinned by Christian values.” He added: “As I go around and look at the way we make laws, and indeed many of the underlying ethics of society are Christian based and the result of 1,500 years of Christian input into our national life. It is not going to disappear overnight. They (the atheists) are deluding themselves.” He also said that he believed people were hesitant to express their religious beliefs because of the “deep intolerance” of religious extremist in British society.

Taking all the evidence into account, the overall picture about the church is positive. The church is growing, despite areas of serious decline especially in the West. This does not support the idea that we are seeing a huge End Time turning away from the faith.

Apostasy (turning away from the Faith)

There is a significant amount of apostasy (turning away from the Faith). Here are some examples:

The Sea of Faith Network, founded by Don Cupitt, an Anglican priest, says: “God has no ‘real’, objective or empirical existence, independent of human language and culture; God is ‘real’ in the sense that he is a potent symbol, metaphor or projection, but He has no objective existence outside and beyond the practice of religion. Non-realism therefore entails a rejection of all supernaturalism - miracles, afterlife and the agency of spirits.”

The Rev Anthony Freeman, another Anglican priest, published a book called *God in Us* in which he said he had experienced a “reverse conversion experience”, after which he stopped believing in a literal, objective, personal God. He would claim he does believe in God as “the sum of our values and of our spiritual experiences: the ideal.” In other words, God is merely an idea or ideal in the minds of human beings. He (or rather it) has no objective existence. When his book was published, he was sacked from his job as vicar and as Diocesan Director of Post Ordination Training. Immediately 65 clergy wrote to *The Independent* condemning the sacking.

In the 1991 World Council of Churches Assembly delegates on their way to the opening worship passed through the smoke of burning leaves - a pagan cleansing ritual. On the second day, with two painted Aborigines dancing in the background, a South Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung invoked the spirits of the dead. One delegate, Vijay Menon, a convert from Hinduism, was amongst those who protested. “Pagan culture has infiltrated the WCC. I left that behind to become a Christian.”

We have seen some evidence of apostasy but not on scale to be seen as a sign of the End Times.

False prophets and messiahs

Jesus warns against false prophets and messiahs in the End Times (Mt 24:11, 24). It would appear therefore that Jesus says false messiahs will happen from time to time throughout history and they are reminders that he, the true Messiah, is coming back, but the matter will become more serious in the end times. False messiahs will have more influence and be more deceptive.

There have certainly been false messiahs over the centuries. So far, I have discovered 81 people who in one way or another have made significant messianic claims. There does seem to be some evidence of a growth in the number of false messiahs.

1 st Century	2 “messiahs”
2 nd Century	2 “messiahs”
5 th Century	1 “messiah”
7 th Century	1 “messiah”
8 th Century	2 “messiahs”
12 th Century	2 “messiahs”
13 th Century	1 “messiah”
15 th Century	2 “messiahs”
16 th Century	3 “messiahs”
17 th Century	5 “messiahs”
18 th Century	4 “messiahs”
19 th Century	10 “messiahs”
20 th Century	39 “messiahs”
21 st Century (up to 2012)	7 “messiahs”
TOTAL:	81 “MESSIAHS”

Conclusion on turning away from the Faith

We have seen that the church is growing, despite areas of serious decline, especially in the West. We have also looked at some evidence of apostasy and false messiahs. But overall the present situation does not support the idea that we are seeing a huge End Time turning away from the faith. However the massive turning away from the faith in Western countries, particularly Europe, does illustrate that such decline can happen quite quickly and dramatically, and could do so again in the future, including in places where Christianity is currently strong and growing. So this sign of the End Times could come about quite quickly.

The return of the Jewish people to Israel – a sign of the end times?

In his predictions about the End Times Jesus said of the Jewish people: “They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). Some people try to relate this only to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. The first part clearly does refer to AD70: Many Jewish people did “fall by the sword” and the vast majority were “taken as prisoners to all the nations.” It is also true that after that Jerusalem was trampled on by the Gentiles” i.e. subject to Gentile rule for 2000 years. All of this is literal. But then Jesus predicts that the Jewish people will regain control of Jerusalem (the unavoidable implication of “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled”). Are we therefore to see the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem after 2000 years of exile and the re-establishment of the State of Israel (whatever else needs to happen) as a sign of the End Times? I believe we are (even though much more needs to happen), although I am aware of all the questions that raises.

It is not helpful that some Christians are so supportive of Israel that they show a lack of care, or even negativism towards the Palestinians and Arabs. I believe strongly God is a God of justice, yes for Israel, but also for the Palestinians. (See <http://www.prayerforpeace.org.uk/calltojustice.html>).

I have already explained that I do not accept the view known as Dispensationalism (on which I was brought up), namely:

- That God’s dealings with Israel are totally separate from his dealings with the church.
- That for the last 2000 years (the “Church Age”) he has only been working with the church, not with Israel. So the current dispensation is the Church Age.
- That God won’t start working with Israel again until the church is taken out of the way – in the Secret Rapture, which will bring the present dispensation to an end.

Given the amount of prediction of an End Time return to the land in the Bible (not just from Babylon etc.) the most remarkable re-establishment of the State of Israel is, to say the least, a huge coincidence if it is not the beginning (only the beginning) of the fulfilment of those prophecies.

It is important to note that many Christians accept what is called “Replacement Theology,” namely the idea that the

church has totally and finally replaced Israel in the purposes of God. This view holds that all the OT prophecies concerning Israel which have not already been literally fulfilled are now to be applied exclusively to the Christian Church.

Just as we must avoid anti-Arab or anti-Palestinian attitudes, we must also avoid anti-Semitism (anti-Jewishness) which, sadly, is alive and well in the world today.

I also want to make it clear that it is legitimate to apply many O.T. prophecies, originally made concerning the Jewish people, to the Church, Jewish and Gentile. But, as we shall see, this is not to deny the continuing relevance of these prophecies to the Jewish people and Israel.

It is true that:

- Many OT prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus
 - He is the servant of Isaiah, the sacrificial Lamb of God, his body is a temple (John 2:19).
 - He speaks of a universal kingdom.
- Jesus reinterprets important OT concepts
 - For example he declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19)

Some people say:

- The land “was unimportant to Jesus and the NT writers
 - Jesus told the Samaritan woman that worship should be in spirit and in truth rather than in a particular geographical location, even Jerusalem. (John 4:19-26).
 - Paul includes no reference to land in his list of Israel’s privileges in Rom 9:4.
- The land “was replaced by the world in the NT”
- The return to the land “is re-interpreted by the NT as worldwide success of the gospel”

BUT, as we have seen, Jesus does foretell the eventual return of Jewish control to Jerusalem (Luke 21:24 – this is only a brief reference but it is the tip of an iceberg of prophecies in the OT as we shall see).

Also, when the disciples ask him in Acts 1:6 if he will restore the kingdom to Israel he doesn’t say they are mistaken to expect that to happen. He only seems to imply only that it is inappropriate to speculate on the timing of that event.

The NT teaches that God has a continuing purpose for the Jewish people.

He has not finally rejected the Jewish people (Rom 11:1, 2). They did not “stumble so as to fall beyond recovery” (Rom 11:11). Paul looks forward to their “fullness” which, says Professor F F Bruce means: “The large scale conversion of the Gentile world is to be followed by the large scale conversion of Israel”⁸⁶ The “rejection” of the Jewish people is temporary and partial (since many Jewish people have come to faith in Christ). Paul says: “For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!” (Rom 11:15).

Paul goes on to say: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved...” (Rom 11:25-26).

Some people have tried to make out that “Israel” in verse 26 really means the church (the new Israel) and not the nation of Israel but scholars disagree. For example:

- Professors Sanday and Headlam say: “The whole context shows clearly that it is the actual Israel of history that is referred to.”⁸⁷
- Professor Bruce agrees “It is impossible to entertain an exegesis [explanation] which takes ‘Israel’ (in v26) in a different sense from ‘Israel’ in verse 25.”⁸⁸
- Prof. C E B Cranfield says the most likely meaning of “all Israel” is “the nation Israel as a whole, but not necessarily including every individual member.”⁸⁹
- Prof. John Zeisler comments: “When Paul says ‘all Israel’ we therefore take it that he means ‘all Jews.’”⁹⁰
- Prof. James Dunn states: “There is now a strong consensus that ‘*pas Israel*’ [all Israel] must mean Israel as a whole...”⁹¹

(There are more details and quotations from scholars in the longer version of this message which is now at <https://christianteaching.org.uk/blogging/>. It has a hyperlink index).

God clearly has an important future purpose for the Jewish people and it will be fulfilled when they massively turn to Jesus as their Messiah (and ours).

The biblical teaching on the future significance of the Jewish people and their land

Jesus clearly predicted an end of Gentile rule over Jerusalem (Luke 21:24), which necessarily means the Jewish people regaining control of Jerusalem. This has now happened (I'm not ignoring the claims of the Palestinians to East Jerusalem which must be dealt with justly). He also did not disagree with the idea the disciples had that he would "restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6). But these verses are the tip of an iceberg of OT predictions of an End Time return to Israel.

1. The O.T. teaches that Israel remains the promised land

- (a) I counted that on 109 occasions the O.T. refers to the land as given or promised to the Jewish People.
- (b) In addition on a further 36 occasions it states that God swore a solemn oath to give them the land.⁹²
- (c) And on a further 15 occasions the land is promised 'for ever.'⁹³
- (d) So strong is the emphasis on this in the O.T. that it is clear that the people and the land are very deeply and closely associated. If the two are separated something is seriously wrong.
- (e) The Lord states that Israel does not deserve the land (Dt.9:4-6) and each generation of Israel will only keep and enjoy the land if they are obedient to God. This is made clear on 22 occasions.⁹⁴
- (f) However, although the Lord threatens judgement and eventually the people are exiled for their disobedience, yet he constantly assures them that, even then, he is willing to forgive and restore them. He says this on 24 occasions.⁹⁵
- (g) The Lord is so merciful that although he lays down repentance as the condition of restoration yet he doesn't seem to keep strictly to this. The Israelites had already returned to the land before Ezra led them in repentance in Nehemiah 9.

Would it not be strange if God decided against fulfilling his strong and numerous promises to Israel about the land? If God breaks such promises, how reliable is he in other promises?

Also the O.T. stresses that the people and the land are so deeply and closely associated that only persistent disobedience will separate the two. Is it not therefore reasonable to expect that when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25) they will be restored to the land. We have seen that such restoration could precede such turning to Christ. (point g. above).

2. The O.T. foretells the return of the Jewish people to Israel in the last days:

It is important to distinguish prophecies referring to a return from exile in the Last Days from the prophecies (now fulfilled) of a return from the exile in Babylon which took place in O.T. times.

Isaiah prophesies about the coming messianic rule over the whole earth and states: "In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from lower Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. He will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth." (Isa 11:11-12). Scholars agree that this is not the return from Babylon but a wider future return. He gives a similar prophecy in 60:4, 9, 21, 22, 61:4.5.

Jeremiah gives similar prophecies in Jeremiah 3:12-18 and 23:7-8 and scholars again see this as an End Time wider return. In 32:37-41 God says: "I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banished them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety." (cf. 31:8).

Jeremiah also writes: "This is what the Lord says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord Almighty is his name: 'Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,' declares the Lord, 'will Israel ever cease being a nation before me.' This is what the Lord says: 'Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 31:35-37). It seems clear to me that this can only be interpreted as God having a future purpose for Israel as a nation.

In a prophecy generally accepted and describing the Messianic Age, Ezekiel describes an attack by 'Gog' on a restored Israel under the reign of the house of David. This amounts to a massive coalition of world powers to destroy God's kingdom. The children of Israel are gathered from among the nations and resettled in their own land (Ezekiel 38:8, 16, 39:25-29). In Chapter 39:25-29 God says: "I will now bring Jacob back from captivity ... when I have

brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations. They will know that I am the Lord their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind.” Scholars relate this to the End Times.

Joel prophesies “The Day of the Lord”, i.e. the End Times (2:28-32 quoted in Acts 2:17-21). He then proceeds to describe the End Time judgements. The Lord says, “In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgement against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land. Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her. Judah will be inhabited for ever and Jerusalem throughout all generations.” (Joel 3:1-2, 17, 20). These words fit only a description of the restoration of Israel in the End Times, and, as we have seen, Joel puts them in the context of the Day of the Lord.

Amos prophesies that Israel will finally be settled back in their own land “never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them” (Amos 9:14-15). These words only fit the restoration of Israel in the End Times.

Zechariah foretells a time when “all the nations of the earth are gathered against [Jerusalem]” (Zech 12:3 cf. 14:2). This has not happened in history but, even at the present time, Israel’s ability to create widespread disapproval in the world makes such a possibility hardly seem farfetched. One can imagine a situation where Israel has turned to her Messiah (“all Israel will be saved”) and in the time of the Antichrist (a subject to which we shall return) there is great antagonism towards her (Zechariah 12:2-3, 10-11; 14). Scholars see this as an End Time prophecy.

But what about the way in which the State of Israel was re-established?

How can we be sure that what has happened in the last few decades is a fulfilment of prophecy? Even some Jewish people do not accept the setting up of the modern secular State of Israel as being a divine action because they believe only the Messiah can lead the people back to the land. The recent return was a secular not a Messianic action.

After all, the Jewish people have gone back in unbelief, as far as faith in Jesus as Messiah is concerned and they are largely secular nation with all the failings of a modern secular Western democracy. What is more, look at the injustices meted out on the Palestinians?

My response is as follows: The return of the Jewish people is either:

- a. a most remarkable coincidence, or
- b. an unacceptable human attempt to fulfil biblical prophecy by political manipulation and aggression,
- c. or it is the beginnings (no more) of a genuine fulfilment of biblical prophecy.

I find a. incredible and b. doesn’t explain the most remarkable process, with many people praying for a return to the land, especially after the Holocaust, which led to the UN vote to partition Palestine. God does overrule the changes, chances and wrong actions of human life so that they fulfil his purposes.

It does not seem impossible therefore that, for all the deplorable human failure involved, the return of the Jewish people to the land is the beginnings of a fulfilment of biblical prophecy. To believe such a thing does not imply wholehearted support for all the actions of the secular state of Israel.

Current Anti-Semitism

The NT is quite clear that God has a continuing purpose for the Jewish people in Christ. Paul predicts that “All Israel will be saved.” Scripture also foretells attacks on Israel in the End Times. The continuation and even growth of anti-Semitism is a clear pointer to all this. The idea that anti-Semitism is growing, including in Europe, is controversial. Some surveys have been criticised as unreliable. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi, is a man of great integrity and intellectual ability. In 2014 of Jewish people having “a degree of apprehension I have not known in my lifetime ... Anti-Semitism has returned to Europe within living memory of the Holocaust. Never again has become ever again.” He added that a French synagogue congregation was surrounded by “a howling mob claiming to protest Israeli policy” and that four people were murdered in a Jewish museum and a synagogue was firebombed in Brussels.

He quotes “well-established British Jews saying ‘For the first time in my life, I feel afraid.’ A survey 2013 survey showed almost a third of Europe’s Jews have considered emigrating because of anti-Semitism (France 46%, Hungary 48%). He continued that in the Middle Ages Jews were hated for their religion, in the 19th and 20th century for their

race and today for their nation state. "Israel is the only country among the 193 in the UN whose right to exist is routinely challenged and in many quarters denied." In 102 nations Christians predominate and there are 56 Islamic states "but a single Jewish state is deemed one too many."

Rabbi Sacks believes the new anti-Semitism started at the U.N. Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001. "Israel was accused of ... racism, apartheid, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and attempted genocide." He said that human rights matter but added that "the sheer disproportion of the accusations against Israel" show mixed motives. Over half the U.N. Human Rights Council resolutions since 2006 criticising a particular country have been directed at Israel. In 2013, the U.N. General Assembly passed 21 resolutions against Israel and only 4 criticisms of the rest of the world. In 2004, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) gave examples of anti-Semitic comments on Israel:

- Denying the Jewish people the right to self-determination e.g. claiming the existence of Israel is a racist endeavour
- Applying double standards by requiring of Israel a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation
- Historical libels e.g. claims of Jews killing Jesus or using Christian blood in the Passover to characterize Israelis
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the State of Israel.

In 2013 the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that:

- 76% of Jews thought anti-Semitism had increased over the last 5 years,
- 46% of Jews were worried about being verbally assaulted or harassed in public because they were Jewish.
- A third of Jews were worried about being physically attacked
- 57% of Jews said they had heard or seen someone claim over the last year that the Holocaust was a myth or had been exaggerated.

Danny Cohen director of TV at the BBC said he has "never felt so uncomfortable as a Jew in the UK"

Anti-Semitism is deceptive: concerns for justice for the Palestinians and legitimate criticisms of Israel can mask unwitting anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism ("the world's longest hatred") is an underlying racist attitude and spiritual problem - a pernicious and widespread form of racism. The only explanation for anti-Semitism's prevalence is that it's a demonic influence opposing God's continuing purpose for the Jewish people. When Israel recognises her Messiah & proclaims him the world will be affected. Satan plans to prevent this by destroying the Jewish people. Those of us who, like me, are deeply concerned about justice for the Palestinians must be very careful not to fall into anti-Semitic attitudes. Those of us who do have legitimate criticisms of some of Israel's actions must be very careful not to fall into anti-Semitic attitudes.

We need to try to enter into the mind-set of Jewish people in general and Israelis in particular. For them the Holocaust happened recently. Centuries of persecution preceded the Holocaust. The 'closeness' of history causes insecurity. Israelis feel insecure because of the history of persecution and because countries and political groups today are determined to destroy Israel

Conclusion

So I believe that:

- God has a (corporate) purpose for the Jewish people (Rom 11). This purpose is to be fulfilled only in Christ. It is only as they are saved through turning to him.
- Jesus foretold Jewish control of Jerusalem in the End Times (Lk. 21:24).
- The people and the land are inseparable except in a time of persistent disobedience. (It is therefore reasonable to expect that when "*all Israel will be saved*" - Rom. 11:25 - they will be restored to the land).

I also note the following very significant facts:

- The remarkable, unique of the survival of the Jews for 2,000 years
- The remarkable, unique re-establishment and preservation of Israel
- The hatred of the world against the Jews and Israel. What is the reason for the world's longest hatred? There are secondary causes but it seems inexplicable except from a supernatural point of view. God's remarkable past salvation purpose, leading to the Incarnation and his future purpose (Rom 9-11) seem to be the real target.
- The deep intercessory concern which millions of mature Christians have for Israel.

The 'Great Tribulation' and the Antichrist

Until now I have been writing mainly about signs of the End Times. Now I move on to the Great Tribulation and the Antichrist, a subject where numerous paranoid and even crazy 'interpretations' have been published. We need to avoid them but not to avoid the subject. It is important biblical teaching and we need to face up to it and understand it as best we can.

Many Christians are facing serious persecution ("tribulation") in the world today. It's reasonable to expect this will get worse in the time approaching the Return of Christ. We could think of it as Satan having his final fling. Such an End Time tribulation is taught in Scripture.

St John says there are many antichrists - people who deny that Jesus is the Christ and incarnate Son of God (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). But the NT also predicts a major Antichrist figure in the End Times, another aspect of Satan's final fling. (I will use the term "Antichrist" in my writings although John is the only one who actually uses it).

Unfortunately some fundamentalists have become paranoid and jump to bizarre conclusions about who the Antichrist is. Candidates have included Barack Obama, Bill Gates, Ronald Reagan or Mikhail Gorbachev (the details will be added to my blog soon). We must avoid both paranoia and naivety. On the other hand, we need to recognise factors and trends in modern society which could facilitate the fulfilment of the prophecies about the Antichrist. Joyce Baldwin in her commentary on Daniel says that the church has lost its nerve about saying prophecy foretells the future.

Outline of the relevant Biblical Teaching

Daniel predicts a period of 70 'weeks' of years (i.e. seven-year periods) with the Anointed One (Messiah) dying after 69 'weeks' and the distinct 70 'week' being associated with the person who will set up the "abomination that causes desolation" (Dan 9:26-27). This 70th 'week' is seen by many as the period of the Great Tribulation. We shall return to this.

Daniel, (c 530BC) predicts the arising of four 'beasts' or empires (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome), after which he sees a "little horn" (a symbol of power and authority, e.g. a powerful leader) which "had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully" (Dan 7:8). He goes on to prophesy about a king "in the time of the end" who "will do as he pleases" and "will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods" (Dan. 11:35-37). Commentators say that from verse 36 onwards there is a reference to the Antichrist (although that term is not used). On the other hand, some claim that it refers to Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Greek king who entered Jerusalem in 167BC and desecrated the temple with an image of Zeus. But Joyce Baldwin in her commentary writes that the details do not fit Antiochus. She believes there is a double reference both to history and to the End Times. Daniel foretells that Antichrist will invade Israel (the 'Beautiful Land'), "Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him." The Antichrist is the ultimate example of the deification of secular authority (cf. the Roman emperors who were proclaimed gods).

Zechariah 12-14 is also seen as a description of the End Times. Joyce Baldwin relates these chapters to "the end of time" and "the day when the Lord will reign over the earth, and so to the end of time." p. 70-71. She also draws parallels between Zechariah and the Book of Revelation. These chapters describe the following:

1. All the nations will besiege Jerusalem/Judah (12:3; 13:8-14:1). This relates to the Antichrist who turns against the Jewish people. It is part of the Great Tribulation.
2. The nations will be defeated (12:6-9; 14:2-3, 11-15). This would seem to be the Battle of Armageddon.
3. The Lord will return to the Mt of Olives (14:4). He defeats the Antichrist.
4. The Jewish people look on the one they have pierced (12:10) and are cleansed from sin (13:1). Baldwin considers various interpretations but relates this to Jesus. It seems that this is referring to the Jewish people recognising Jesus as Messiah, fulfilling Paul's prophecy: "All Israel will be saved." (Rom 11:26).
5. People from the nations who survive the defeat will go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord (14:16-19).

As always, some interpreters will want to conclude the passage is totally symbolical and others that it refers to events long ago in history. But it seems to me that both of those views have serious difficulties. At the very least the

interpretation I have suggested does seem feasible. See the fuller version at <https://christianteaching.org.uk/bloggng/>

Jesus predicts “the abomination that causes desolation” and associates it with “great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again” (traditionally called the Great Tribulation) Matt 24:15-22. He is quoting Dan 9:27.

Paul predicts “the man of lawlessness” who “will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess. 2:3-4). Many believe this is the same as the ‘abomination that causes desolation’ set up in the temple.

Paul continues: “the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing” (2 Thess. 2:8-10). This is the ultimate rebellion against God.

John uses the term Antichrist and many believe this is the same person as the “man of lawlessness” who sets up the “abomination that causes desolation,” namely “sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.” John writes: “The antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. Who is the liar?” (1 John 2:18, 22f. cf. 2 John 7).

In the very symbolical Book of **Revelation**, many think that the “beast coming out of the sea” which is followed and worshipped by the whole world (Rev 13:1-8, 11-18) is the Antichrist. Then there is the “beast coming out of the earth” – the False Prophet – who manipulates humanity to worship the Antichrist using economic boycotts and death threats. It forces people to receive the “mark of the Beast” without which they could not buy or sell. The Antichrist (Rev 17:16) brings destruction on the world’s corrupt and unjust economic and religious system (“Babylon” falls, Rev 18) and upon all who worship the Antichrist. The Antichrist survives until, with nearly absolute power, he wages war on Christians and is finally consigned to hell (Rev 19:19-20).

Interpreting the biblical teaching

Remember that prophecy can be fulfilled more than once – an initial fulfilment or fulfilments and then a final major fulfilment. So one “tribulation” is the terrible treatment of the Jews by the Romans in AD 70 but Jesus speaks of “great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matt 24:21-22). This surely can’t be limited to AD70, terrible though it was. Surely the Holocaust was worse. As for Christians, there have been terrible persecutions. But, it seems clear there will be an End Time great tribulation.

Similar comments may be made about the Antichrist. One fulfilment of the “abomination that causes desolation” could be the Roman desecration of the temple in AD70. But 2 Thess. 2:1-12 describes a future “man of lawlessness” associated with the return of Christ, who is generally recognised as the End Time Antichrist. Then there are the references to the Beast in Revelation 13 which most scholars say was written well after AD70. Scholars agree with this idea of an End Time great tribulation and Antichrist (see <https://christianteaching.org.uk/bloggng/>).

What about the 70 ‘weeks’ of Daniel?

Again, one fulfilment of Daniel’s prophecy that a prince would come and destroy the temple may be Titus the Roman general in AD70. But the NT sees an End Time fulfilment.

There has been much debate about Daniel’s prophecy of 70 ‘weeks’ of years (7-year periods). He split them into 69 ‘weeks’ (483 years) plus one ‘week’ (7 years). Some take these figures as symbolical, others as literal. There is disagreement over the starting date of the 483 years (485BC or 445BC) but either way the figure of 483 years comes remarkably close to the time of Christ, although the figures are not absolutely precise.

Daniel predicts the coming prince will make a covenant with the Jewish people for the 70th ‘week’ (7-year period) but will break it and put an end to sacrifice and offering.” (Dan 9:27). Some see the prince as Jesus ending the OT sacrificial system and establishing the New Covenant. But the prince then sets up “the abomination that causes desolation” so he can’t be Jesus.

We’ll come back to all this but it seems to me that the 70th ‘week’ of Daniel’s prophecy is quite separate from the other 69 ‘weeks’ and belongs in the End Times. I am hesitant about taking numbers literally in the Book of Revelation

because they are frequently used symbolically. However, if it is credible to take the 69 sevens as literal seven year periods then it is not wild speculation to regard the coming great tribulation as lasting seven years. On the other hand, it may be that the figures seven and three and a half are not to be taken strictly literally but rather as referring to a firm limitation on the freedom of the Antichrist. So I don't have a problem with the idea of the great tribulation lasting seven years and being divided in two, but it is not something about which I would be dogmatic.

The order of events associated with the End Time Great Tribulation

There are four main views of the order of events associated with the Great Tribulation, mainly to do with when the 'Rapture' of the church (to meet the Lord in the air 1 Thess. 4:17) takes place.

1. **The Pre-tribulation view:** This holds that the church is raptured before the Great Tribulation begins, so the church is safely out of the way in heaven when the 7-year wrath of God breaks out on earth.
2. **The Mid-tribulation view:** This holds that the church is raptured half way through the 7-year Great Tribulation when the Antichrist turns against the Jewish people, so the church is safely out of the way in heaven when the (3.5 year) wrath of God breaks out on earth.
3. **The Pre-wrath view:** This holds that half way through the 7-year Great Tribulation when the Antichrist turns against the Jewish people, the wrath of Satan is revealed on earth (with the church still on earth). Then shortly afterwards the wrath of God is revealed on earth, but the church is raptured to heaven before the wrath of God breaks out some time after the middle of the 7-year Great Tribulation.
4. **The Post-tribulation Rapture view:** This view holds that the church goes through the Great Tribulation foretold by Jesus (whether it lasts 7 years or not) and is raptured after that when Jesus returns to earth. Some say the church is raptured to heaven, safely out of the way. Others say the church is caught up to meet the Lord and then escorts him to earth (after the historical tradition of the leaders and people of a city going out to meet a visiting king and to escort him into the city).

I have explained before why I believe that the Rapture is the church being caught up to meet the Lord and then escorting him to earth. I have also pointed out that there is no evidence in Scripture for two returns of Jesus. I therefore believe that the Rapture occurs after the Great Tribulation when Jesus returns to earth, accompanied by the church. God will keep us IN the tribulation rather than keeping us FROM the tribulation.

In my understanding, we seem to have the following aspects mentioned in Scripture:

1. The Antichrist makes a covenant "with many for one 'seven'".
2. He breaks that covenant in the middle of the 'seven' putting an end to sacrifice and offering.
3. He sets himself up in the temple as the "abomination that causes desolation" claiming to be God.
4. He attacks the believing community.
5. He destroys the world's political, economic and religious system.
6. He is ultimately destroyed by Jesus at his second coming.

Much of this creates little difficulty, in my opinion, but there are some questions about the idea that the Antichrist makes a (7-year) covenant with the Jewish people who have rebuilt the temple and resumed the sacrificial system, then he breaks that covenant after 3.5 years abolishing the sacrifices.

- a. Are the references to the temple and "sacrifice and offering" literal?
- b. With whom does the Antichrist make a covenant?

Are the references to the End Time temple and "sacrifice and offering" literal?

It seems Paul refers to a literal temple in 2 Thess. 2: "He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God."

Ezekiel prophecies about a new temple and resumption of the sacrifices in great detail (Ezek. 40-46). However:

- He also prophecies that David will be king at that time (37:24) which is not literal.
- He prophecies that a river will flow from under the south side of the temple and into the Dead Sea making the salt water fresh (cf Zech. 14:8). Many would not see this as literal.
- He also predicts specific areas for the 12 tribes to settle in the End Times which, in view of the loss of the ten tribes, seems non-literal (Ezek. 48)

- He also prophesies God will dwell in the Temple forever but the ‘temple’ is now the church 1 Pet 2:4ff

Could the prophecies refer to AD70 when the Romans worshiped their pagan standards in the temple? Not really:

- Jesus refers to the ‘abomination that causes desolation’ as a person (using the masculine) in Mark 13:14.
- Paul goes on to say that Jesus will overthrow him “with the breath of his mouth and destroy [him] by the splendour of his coming” (2 Thess. 2:8-9). This cannot be fulfilled by the AD70 events but is clearly referring to the End Times.

Would God want the Jewish people to re-build the temple and resume the sacrifices in the End Times?

I do not believe he would because the death and high priesthood of Jesus have replaced the old sacrificial system. He is the “great high priest” (Heb 4:14) who “provided purification for sins” (Heb 1:3). “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (Heb 7:27 cf 9:28; 10:14). He “did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence” (Heb 9:24). The earthly sanctuary (temple) “is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Heb 8:5, cf. 9:24). The old covenant (with its animal sacrifices) “is obsolete and outdated” (Heb 8:13). “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:1-4).

But the question remains: will the temple be rebuilt in the End Times? It is not beyond the bounds of credibility. The Temple Institute in Jerusalem states that its “ultimate goal is to see Israel rebuild the Holy Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, in accord with the Biblical commandments” (see <http://www.templeinstitute.org/>). They have created all the gold and silver vessels, furniture and instruments used in the sacrificial services together with the robes, breastplate, ephod and golden crown of the high priest. So there is certainly an organised group campaigning for the rebuilding of the temple. However, given the great sensitivities on Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque, any attempt to rebuild the temple there would create a very strong reaction from the Muslim community.

With whom does the Antichrist make a covenant?

It would not be the messianic Jewish people (who accept Jesus as Messiah) because they would not want to renew the animal sacrifices.

The references with respect to the Antichrist’s covenant, about the temple and “sacrifice and offering” could only be literal if:

- the prophecy “All Israel will be saved” has not been fulfilled by then
- a large non-messianic Jewish community remains (who do not accept Jesus as Messiah)
- the temple has been rebuilt and the sacrificial system resumed by that community (despite that not being God’s will).

The prophecies seem to require this to be the case.

One additional factor is that it would hardly be surprising if the Antichrist was motivated to some extent by anti-Semitism, the world’s longest hatred, which can only be explained in terms of demonic reaction to God’s continuing purpose for the Jewish people. So it is not inconceivable that he could pretend to make a covenant with the Jews and then break it. Daniel sees the ending of the sacrificial system as preparing the way for the setting up of the “abomination which causes desolation” – the worship of the Antichrist (Dan 9:27).

What is the mark of the Beast?

There have been many ideas about this, some of them weird and ridiculous. More recently people have thought it is the bar code used on the packaging of many goods today. Others refer to the micro-chips which some people have implanted under their skin today. The chip is a radio frequency identification device (RFID) and is the size of a grain of rice or the tip of a ballpoint pen. It is a tiny transmitter-computer which never runs down and has a life expectancy of 20 years. It is injected by a special ‘intravenous needle.’

More recently a patent has been applied for an electronic skin tattoo that incorporates a microphone and power supply which could be applied to the skin for long-time use, monitoring the wearer’s heart and brain and relaying the information to medical professionals. But it could also be used as a lie-detector.

John predicts that the Beast will force “all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on

their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name” (Rev 13:16-17). Although I don’t like the paranoid speculation about these matters, I have to admit that what John is referring to could, in theory, be something like the devices mentioned above especially as it is about permission to buy or sell, i.e. a sort of PIN number or password. Certainly modern technology encourages a literal interpretation of the mark of the Beast.

Then there is the NUMBER OF THE BEAST 666 which has provoked much speculation. Perhaps the most convincing is that it is a number which falls short of the perfect number 7. So the real Trinity would be 777 but the evil trinity (the ‘dragon’ and two ‘beasts’ of Rev 12-13) is 666 and always falls short and fails. This seems more credible but we really cannot be sure what 666 means.

Are there events today which could facilitate the rise of Antichrist?

This is an area in which there has been much paranoid and bizarre speculation. God has not called us to be paranoid. But neither has he called us to be naïve. We must not jump to hasty conclusions. On the other, without being dogmatic, we need to recognise factors and trends in modern society which could facilitate the fulfilment of the prophecies about the Antichrist. Whilst being properly critical, we must also avoid cynicism.

We need to face up to the current and future failings and evils in society, in particular injustice, declining moral standards, church decline and apostasy, oppression and persecution, false prophets and messiahs, as well as natural disasters: war, famine, earthquakes, disease. And, of course, the media constantly emphasise such things.

But we need also to remember what theologians call the general work of the Holy Spirit or common grace, i.e. God’s beneficial influence in society, and not to sink into doom and gloom. There is an immense amount of good in the world and I want to make this point as strongly as I can. Just read through this list of words and thank God for the great deal of good there is in human society: affection, altruism, bravery, caring, charity, compassion, conscientiousness, consideration, co-operation, courage, courtesy, devotion, empathy, fairness, forgiveness, friendship, generosity, gentleness, goodness, helpfulness, humility, humour, honesty, idealism, integrity, justice, kindness, love, loyalty, patience, perseverance, reliability, self-discipline, self-sacrifice, sympathy, tact, tenderness, thoughtfulness, tolerance, trust, unselfishness.

So, seeking to avoid paranoia, hasty conclusions and undue negativism, we nevertheless need to face up to the dangers in modern society. One complication is that not infrequently good things with beneficial effects and actions taken with positive motives can lead on to unintentional bad results. We have to be realistic about that. So, for example, the abortion law was liberalized to allow abortion where the mother’s life was at risk, but it has led to abortion on demand. Homosexuality was decriminalised, but it has led on to the undermining of marriage (and more problems to come). Thinking towards the future, supporting a Palestinian state is in accordance with principles of justice and equity but it could lead to Israel’s existence being threatened. Globalisation can benefit the poor and vulnerable, prevent war, injustice, oppression. But could it lead to an oppressive world government?

How do we respond to good moves which could ultimately lead to evils?

We cannot just take a negative approach, for example, opposing the EU because it might go wrong and become oppressive. We have to support the good intentions and beneficial actions which people take, whilst looking critically for any negative threats, and taking whatever action we can to prevent those threats becoming reality.

We need to bear in mind the important moral principle of sometimes having to choose the lesser of two evils. Will the benefits of a certain action significantly outweigh any negative risks involved? We cannot function ethically on the basis of what might go wrong:

- Cars are an advantage but lead to accidents
- Planes are an advantage but lead to aerial wars and bombing
- Armies are necessary but lead to atrocities
- Nuclear power is beneficial but leads to nuclear weapons

Maybe Murphy’s Law is relevant: “Anything which can go wrong will go wrong!” After all, we are dealing with human nature and, whereas the good qualities mentioned above are very widespread, unfortunately bad qualities are common too: selfishness, greed, injustice, pride, corruption, divisiveness, hatred, etc.

How are we sensibly and realistically to assess what, if any, indications there are today which are relevant to this very late sign of the end times? Two main such indications are the modern movement towards globalisation and the rise of

modern dictators which we shall now examine. But I would also add the decline and rejection of Christianity especially in the West whilst general non-religious ‘spirituality’ thrives. It seems to me that such a vague spirituality renders people open to spiritual deceit and ultimately to the deceit of the Antichrist.

Modern movement towards globalization

It seems clear that the Antichrist is a worldwide ruler. We are to expect a charismatic leader who has authority over the whole world and unites it in worship of himself. In the last few decades especially, we have seen the world become a global village with jet travel, global media, the internet, an increasing number of global organisations and a gradually growing opinion that we need world government.

There are, of course, great benefits in globalization and there would be great benefits in world government. I am not one of those who subscribes to a narrow nationalism, as do some of our right of centre politicians. But I do believe that there are also great dangers in world government. There will be many people who believe that, basically, all would go well given world government but they need to realize that this belief is in the realm of prophecy. They have no proof. For myself, I prefer to rely on biblical prophecy which says that ultimately world government will basically go wrong, very seriously wrong. The fact that we are moving steadily and inevitably towards it is therefore a matter of concern.

Trends towards world government

We need to see both the benefits and the dangers of world government. Globalisation is more than economic co-operation and international business. It includes shared transport, communication, technology, culture, sport, etc.

Here are some of the steps towards world government (much more detail is at <https://christianteaching.org.uk/blogging/>):

- Globalisation on a large scale began in the 19th century. Britain was the first global economic superpower and others followed. Steamships and rail travel facilitated international trade. Various international organisations were established
- The World Wars encouraged globalisation. After the First World War the League of Nations was set up.
- Globalisation grew much more rapidly after the Second World War. The United Nations replaced the League of Nations. Then there was the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (1944), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1947) removing trade restrictions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The World Federalist Movement was set up in 1947 to facilitate World Federal Government.
- The Internet (2.3 billion users in 2012) and air travel have helped create our global village. Multinational corporations employ some 3 billion people. National economies are becoming more interdependent leading to the single world market. National functions are to some degree replaced by international agreements and institutions such as the International Criminal Court, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, or the European Union and the European Central Bank.
- During the Cold War the European Community was developed with 27 members and half a billion people. Ten other such unions with a combined membership of 195 nations were also formed around the world.

Many say globalisation is the end of the nation state

Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Union made a controversial speech in 2010 in which he said that “the time of the homogenous nation state is over ... In every member state, there are people who believe their country can survive alone in the globalised world. It is more than an illusion – it is a lie

Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, believed that through economic and similar co-operation members of the EU would ‘sleepwalk’ into political union.

The December 2012 US National Intelligence Council predicted possible world scenarios in 2030. Firstly, it includes the possibility of large-scale conflicts leading to a “complete breakdown and reversal of globalisation.” Secondly, it includes the possibility of the US, Europe and China co-operating to stop a large-scale conflict “broadly leading to worldwide cooperation to deal with global challenges.” Thirdly, it includes the possibility of a world where

inequalities dominate leading to political and social tensions. Finally, it describes the possibility of “a Nonstate World.”

Immanuel Wallerstein who was Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, believes that the nation-state system no longer works and that it will break down in the next 25 to 50 years and there will be a time of great conflicts and disorder.

Others say globalisation won't eradicate the nation state

Martin Wolf, associate editor and chief economics commentator at the Financial Times, writes: “Contrary to one common assumption, the modern form of globalisation will not spell the end of the modern nation-state.” He adds: “Globalisation does not make states unnecessary. On the contrary, for people to be successful in exploiting the opportunities afforded by international integration, they need states at both ends of their transactions. Failed states, disorderly states, weak states, and corrupt states are shunned as the black holes of the global economic system.”

What, then, is the effect of globalisation?

Jayantha Dhanapala, who was Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs at the United Nations, writes: “Globalisation is an ongoing process, not a completed condition. Against the grand tapestry of history, it has arguably just started. It has grown from a purely economic or technological concept and now implies evolutionary change on a cultural dimension as well. Information communicated through modern print and electronic media is not just affecting commerce, but shaping world-views, relations inside families, and attitudes of citizens to the state. The process, however, has still not significantly touched an extraordinary proportion of humanity and hence has not yet truly earned its title, globalisation Nor has globalisation ushered in a golden age of world peace. In the decade since the end of the Cold War, over five million people have been killed in armed conflicts around the world.

Professor Richard Brinkman wrote: “It appears arguable that while the nation-state is far from finished, there is good reason to doubt that states hold the monopoly power within the politics of globalisation.”

Surveillance: a tool of World Government

Modern states can quickly target our home phone, mobile, email, passport number, credit card numbers, address, or any of our log-ins to a web service. They can access the content of our communications via any of those means, gather information about anyone with whom we communicate, get a full picture of all our internet use, and track our location online and offline. They can even, by looking at our internet searches, know what's on our minds. In May 2012 the UK Home Secretary proposed a law giving police and security services the power to monitor emails and internet use of everyone in Britain. It was severely criticised by human rights organisations and a former Director of Public Prosecutions.

The Snowden revelations

John Naughton, Professor of the public understanding of technology, Open University: “We have constructed an architecture of state surveillance that would make Orwell gasp ... What we're witnessing is the metamorphosis of our democracies into national security states in which the prerogatives of security authorities trump every other consideration and in which critical or sceptical appraisal of them is ruled out of court.”

George Monbiot commented in the Guardian: “We should not fear some Orwellian future state where we're subjected to total electronic scrutiny – it's our present reality

In 2006 Richard Thomas, when he was the UK Information Commissioner, said: “Two years ago I warned that we were in danger of sleepwalking into a surveillance society. Today I fear that we are in fact waking up to a surveillance society that is already all around us.”

In September 2014 the UN received a report from Ben Emmerson QC the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. It stated that the fact that intelligence and law enforcement agencies could have access to the communications of every internet user “amounts to a systematic interference with the right to respect for the privacy of communications, and requires a correspondingly compelling justification.”

UK Home Secretary, Theresa May, addressed the Tory Party Conference about the danger of Islamic State militants

even seizing nuclear weapons. She said she wanted to revive the Communications Data Bill requiring companies to keep records of people's internet, email and mobile phone activity, but not their contents, which was abandoned by the government in 2013. Commenting on that Bill, Dominic Grieve, ex-Attorney General, said: "Any restriction on freedom of expression of individuals outside the criminal law is something that has to be approached with very great caution." Also David Davis, the former shadow Home Secretary said: "These are quite incredible powers to limit democratic rights, rights that people have had for 200 years in this country. It will have real trouble both getting through the House of Commons and indeed real difficulty standing up in front of the court." It is disturbing, therefore, that the government is persisting in trying to pass such a bill into law.

In July 2014 the House of Commons approved The Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Bill which 15 academic experts in technology law, in a letter to MPs, described as "a serious expansion of the British surveillance state."

Andrew Caplen, President of the Law Society, commented: "We are concerned that introducing emergency legislation does nothing to enhance the rule of law or address the fact that we are increasingly becoming a 'surveillance society'."

Arguments for World Government

Geoffrey Blainey, an eminent Australian historian, wrote: "For the first time in human history, world government of some sort is now possible." He sees it happening within the next century or so.

The idea of world government was popular immediately after the atom bombs were dropped on Japan at the end of the Second World War. Then the Cold War effectively prevented any serious consideration of it because the world was firmly divided in two. Since the end of the Cold War, the idea of global political integration rather than a central government authority with powers of coercion is more popular. Criticisms of world government include:

- It is unrealistic given the jealousies, divisions and self-seeking attitudes prevalent in the world. Nations tend to hunker down into national concerns when times are difficult.
- International co-operation would be sufficient.
- It could become tyrannical

BUT listen to these scholars:

1. Thomas G. Weiss, Presidential Professor of Political Science at City University of New York and co-director of the UN Intellectual History Project is very critical of the inadequacies of the UN and "global governance" to cope with the major threats faced by modern states: climate change, migration, and pandemics to terrorism, financial instability, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which, he says require global action. He laments the fact that interest in world government, which was common in the 1940s amidst fear of atomic warfare, has declined remarkably. (Weiss, T.G., 2009, "What Happened to the Idea of World Government," *International Studies Quarterly* 53, 253–271).
2. Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery wrote: "The multinational economy, the social media, the fight against deadly diseases, the civil wars and genocides, the environmental dangers threatening the entire planet – all these make world governance imperative and urgent – yet this is an idea whose realization is still very, very far away."
3. Alexander Wendt, Professor of International Security at the University of Chicago: "I have argued that a world state will emerge whether or not anyone intends to bring it about." "My own guess is that a world state will emerge within 100–200(?) years." "Were a 'completed' EU to be globalized it would be a world state." (<http://www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/WendtWhyaWorldStateisInevitable.pdf>)

So these scholars believe that nations are facing various global problems and it is argued they can only be effectively tackled on a global basis:

War and terrorism: It is only a matter of time before terrorists obtain nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Modern weapons, especially nuclear weapons require international control.

Economic considerations: The global market requires harmonising the policies of the major economies around the world.

Global warming: Gary Stix, senior editor of *Scientific American* in an article *Effective World Government will be needed to stave off climate catastrophe*, wrote: In it he said: "To be effective, a new set of institutions would have to be imbued with heavy-handed, transnational enforcement powers. How do we create new institutions with

enforcement powers way beyond the current mandate of the U.N.? Could we ensure against a malevolent dictator who might abuse the power of such organizations?"

World Poverty & Inequality: The Trades Union Congress stated: "Globalisation as we know it is increasing the gap between rich and poor. This is because the policies that drive the globalisation process are largely focussed on the needs of business ... One aspect of globalisation is the increasing power of multinationals to disrupt collective bargaining agreements or bargaining structures." One argument for world government is to control multinationals.

In 1963 Pope John XXIII expressed the hope that one day "a true world political authority" would be created. In 2011 Pope Benedict XVI agreed. "In a world on its way to rapid globalization, the reference to a world Authority becomes the only horizon compatible with the new realities of our time and the needs of humankind."

However, Dr Seth Baum, Executive Director of the Global Catastrophic Risk Institute, says: "A global government might begin benevolent, but it could turn sour, even becoming the oppressive disaster that the conspiracy theorists fear. And if it does, there would be no other government out there to keep it in check ... if we do end up with an oppressive global government, it would probably follow from an initial, benevolent global government."

Threats to Democracy: Changes in world politics

In September 2014 Amol Rajan, editor of the *The Independent*, wrote an editorial in which he said "We have entered a post-American age. Two of the biggest and best ideas that the United States has stood for – liberalism and democracy – are in retreat around the world." He continued that since the late 20th century "Democracy has taken a pounding. Illiberal powers such as China and Russia are in the ascendant; the Arab Spring was a crushing disappointment; Turkey's increasingly despotic leader has left Indonesia as essentially the last big Islamic democracy; and a deep antipathy towards political elites has taken hold in Britain, France and America, making governing them very difficult."

Threats to democracy: Political use of the threat of terrorism

There is, of course, a serious threat of terrorism but there is also a danger of such a threat being used, deliberately or unintentionally, to undermine the rights and freedoms of law-abiding citizens. In 2010, the all-party parliamentary committee on human rights concluded the following: "Since 9/11, the government has continuously justified many of its counter terrorism measures on the basis that there is a public emergency threatening the life of the nation...we are concerned that the government's approach means, that in effect, there is a permanent state of emergency and that this inevitably has a deleterious effect on the public debate about the justification for counter terrorism."

Lessons from the rise of Hitler

The idea of the Antichrist, a charismatic world leader who succeeds in causing people to worship him might seem the stuff of fiction. But the example of Nazi Germany is instructive. How is it that within a few years a proud civilised nation became committed worshippers of a little lance corporal?

Professor Bruce Loebs, quotes historians:

- Professor Robert Waite, "Hitler was Nazidom. Seldom in the history of western civilization has so much depended on one man's personality."
- Friedrich Meinecke, Hitler "is one of the great examples of the singular and incalculable power of personality in historical life."
- William Shirer, who heard Hitler often, declares, "Hitler has a magic power to sway millions with his voice."
- Professor Trevor Roper explains, "Hitler, at the beginning, had only his voice...that was his only instrument of power. His only asset was his demagogic power over the masses, his voice."

Listen to what those who had direct experience of him have said in interviews:

- An officer who fought on the Eastern front said: "This man emanated an almost indescribable demonic effect on individuals which only a few were able to escape and which one can't really understand if one has not experienced it oneself."
- Ulrich de Maiziere, General Staff Officer: Hitler had "demonic charisma."
- Winrich Behr, Officer at Stalingrad, "He's an unbelievably impressive man. Whether you take it as a kind of hypnotism or just an impression he made on many people, you can't deny its existence."
- One woman said: "A certain something he had can't be grasped rationally. He had an awe which somehow spread over us."

Others said:

- “It was something like a religious delusion”
- “It was an extremely deep inner love.”
- “It was a form of mass hypnosis which had me under its spell”
- “We had the unswerving belief that the Fuehrer would do everything right. He was made out to be God – as God-like. And we saw him as God too.”
- “God didn’t exist but the Fuehrer was sent to us by providence.”
- “Just like God. He was just like God to me.”
- “Hitler was beyond our reach. I would go so far as to say he was God.”

Ian Kershaw comments: “Unquestionably, the adulation of Hitler by millions of Germans who may otherwise have been only marginally committed to the Nazi ideology, or party, was a crucial element of political integration in the Third Reich.”

Hitler managed to deceive Christians. Ian Kershaw writes: “Grotesque as it seems, Hitler himself continued to be widely regarded as a God-fearing and deeply religious man. Even church leaders with a reputation for hostility to Nazism were persuaded of his sincerity, belief in God, and acceptance of the role of Christianity and the churches. Their public avowals of obedience to the Fuehrer and recognition of his leadership and achievements played no small part in helping to give legitimation to the ‘Hitler Myth’.”

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Christian support for Hitler

Professor Robert P. Erickson describes how three distinguished Protestant theologians, Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch, “supported Hitler openly, enthusiastically, and with little restraint.” In fact, they tended “to see God’s hand in the elevation of Hitler to power.” Althaus described Hitler’s rise to power as “a gift and miracle of God.” He added: “we Christians know ourselves bound by God’s will to the promotion of National Socialism.” All three were anti-Semitic.

Catholic Bishop Kaller wrote: “In this staunchly Christian spirit we also now participate wholeheartedly in the great struggle of our people for the protection of their life and importance in the world. With admiration we look upon our army, which in courageous fighting under extraordinary leadership has achieved and continues to achieve unparalleled success. We thank God for his support. Especially as Christians we are determined to rally all our strength so that the final victory will be secured for our fatherland. Especially as believing Christians, inspired by God’s love, we faithfully stand behind our Fuehrer who with firm hands guides the fortunes of our people.”

Bishop Wilhelm Berning frequently signed his letters to the authorities, ‘Heil Hitler’ and on a visit to a concentration camp, called out a threefold “Sieg Heil to Fuehrer and Fatherland”

The Augsburg diocesan newspaper declared in April 1941 that “the person of the Fuehrer contains the strength, greatness and future of the German people.”

Karl Jaspers, philosopher persecuted by the Nazis, “That which has happened is a warning. To forget it is guilt. It was possible for this to happen and it remains possible for it to happen again at any minute.”

The rise of Hitler, and other modern dictators, is instructive because it shows how an antichrist figure can arise. Hitler’s amazing rise to power and the hugely devastating effect of his leadership shows the power of a demagogue. It illustrates the power of manipulative propaganda which is, in recent decades, very much more powerful in modern media. It shows the strong tendency of human beings to worship the demagogue, given a charismatic personality and gifted rhetoric. Other factors also were important, such as economic disaster and treatment of “opposition groups” as scapegoats.

We none of us know the details about the Antichrist but we can at least see here that the world is more ready for him than it was a century or so ago. It doesn’t take much imagination now to think of a demonically-inspired, charismatic orator who rises to world power in combatting huge challenges (perhaps economic) in our global village, gaining extra support through anti-Semitism and antagonism towards Israel, and then becomes a world dictator, using all the facilities of modern technology to control the population. To think this could not happen is surely naïve.

How do we respond to all this?

We should avoid paranoia or jumping to simplistic interpretations of prophecy. Rather we should take the following

steps:

1. Recognise that suffering, oppression and persecution are not alien to the Christian experience. Rather they are predicted by Jesus and others as part of every age. Those of us in the West should remember that many of our fellow Christians are experiencing such things far more than we are.
2. Trust in God's promises to keep us *in* suffering (rather than *from* suffering) cf. John 17:14-15.
3. Pray without ceasing.
4. Support one another.
5. Rejoice with an inexpressible and glorious joy that we are receiving the end result of our faith, the salvation of our souls (1 Pet. 1:8-9).

Secular eschatology: What secular scholars are predicting about the future of the world

I seek to encourage Christians to take eschatology (teaching on the End Times) seriously, which many don't – they don't even think about it. Ironically, there are secular scholars who take what is sometimes called (secular) "Eschatology" very seriously. Is this a case of the people of this world being wiser than the people of light? Both Oxford and Cambridge Universities have an organisation dedicated to such concerns: The Cambridge Centre for the Study of Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford.

The Cambridge Centre for the Study of Existential Risk

This was founded by Professor Huw Price, a philosopher, and Professor Martin Rees, a cosmologist and astrophysicist and others. Their advisers include seven other professors, one of whom is Stephen Hawking. Their publicity states: "Many scientists are concerned that developments in human technology may soon pose new, extinction-level risks to our species as a whole." They list Artificial Intelligence (intelligent computers/machines), biotechnology (including genetic engineering), nanotechnology (engineering at molecular level), and man-made climate change.

Professor Huw Price wrote: "By 'existential risks' (E.R.) we mean, roughly, catastrophic risks to our species that are 'our fault,' in the sense that they arise from human technologies. These are not the only catastrophic risks we humans face, of course: asteroid impacts and extreme volcanic events could wipe us out, for example. But in comparison with possible technological risks, these natural risks are comparatively well studied So the greatest need, in our view, is to pay a lot more attention to these technological risks. That's why we chose to make them the explicit focus of our center."

Professor Martin Rees wrote: "Those of us fortunate enough to live in the developed world fret too much about minor hazards of everyday life: improbable air crashes, carcinogens in food, low radiation doses, and so forth. But we are less secure than we think. But the wide public is in denial about two kinds of threats: those that we're causing collectively to the biosphere, and those that stem from the greater vulnerability of our interconnected world to error or terror induced by individuals or small groups."

The Future of Humanity Institute, Oxford

This was founded by Nick Bostrom, Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University, and is supported by nine academic research fellows. He makes the following comment which is very relevant to Christians: "The future of humanity is often viewed as a topic for idle speculation. Yet our beliefs and assumptions on this subject matter shape decisions in both our personal lives and public policy – decisions that have very real and sometimes unfortunate consequences. It is therefore practically important to try to develop a realistic mode of futuristic thought about big picture questions for humanity."

He goes on to warn: "Predictions about future technical and social developments are notoriously unreliable – to an extent that have led some to propose that we do away with prediction altogether in our planning and preparation for the future. Yet while the methodological problems of such forecasting are certainly very significant, the extreme view that we can or should do away with prediction altogether is misguided."

The institute's publicity states: "Global catastrophic risks are those that pose serious threats to human well-being on a global scale. An immensely diverse collection of events could constitute global catastrophes: they range from volcanic eruptions to pandemic infections, nuclear accidents to worldwide tyrannies, out-of-control scientific experiments to climatic changes, and cosmic hazards to economic collapse..."

The Institute studies human enhancement (human genetic engineering), artificial intelligence (or superintelligence), transhumanism (attempts to transform human abilities technologically), bioterrorism (germ warfare), etc.

Secular "Eschatology": Threats to humanity

Professor Nick Bostrom points out various scholarly predictions of human extinction:

- Professor Martin Rees says the odds of humanity surviving the 21st century are not more than 50%
- Professor John Leslie, a philosopher, who says the probability in the next 500 years is 30%.

Bostrom adds that "there seems to be a consensus among those researchers who have seriously looked into the matter that there is a serious risk that humanity's journey will come to a premature end."

He writes that the greatest risks arise not from natural disasters but from technological developments:

- Biotechnology creating disastrous new viruses.
- Molecular nanotechnology (engineering at molecular level) creating terrible new weapons.
- Superintelligent machines which will determine the future (or demise) of humanity.
- Scholars are anticipating the development of superior, genetically-altered human beings which is very controversial and is criticised as having various inherent dangers.

Dangers of Bioterrorism (Germ Warfare) and Nuclear Terrorism

There have been examples over the last century of extremists releasing bacteria, viruses or toxins in order to cause sickness or death. Such biological agents are not too difficult to obtain and are cheap. They are also easy to spread and difficult to detect.

Professor Martin Rees wrote: "Malign or foolhardy individuals or small groups have far more power and leverage than in the past. Concern about cyber-attack, by criminals or by hostile nations, is rising sharply. Advances in synthetic biology, likewise, offer huge potential for medicine and agriculture – but they amplify the risk of bioerror or bioterror "We're kidding ourselves if we think that all those with the technical expertise to pursue such work will be balanced and rational: expertise can be allied with fanaticism. And there will be individual weirdos with the mindset of those who now unleash computer viruses. The global village will have its village idiots – and their idiocies can have global range."

Dr William Potter, Director of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute for International Studies, wrote a paper on preventing nuclear terrorism and, according to the Future of Humanity Institute, "found it implausible in the near term for non-state actors [terrorists] to use nuclear means to threaten the extinction of mankind, but stressed the very real risks that they could design and build crude but functional nuclear explosives (i.e., improvised nuclear devices), as well as acquire intact nuclear weapons (especially relatively small tactical nuclear weapons)."

Dangers resulting from Globalism

Professor Martin Rees speaks of the possibility of catastrophic breakdowns in global technology. "There are indeed grounds for anxiety the advances in technology – hugely beneficial though they are – render us vulnerable in new ways. For instance, our interconnected world depends on elaborate networks: electric power grids, air traffic control, international finance, just-in-time delivery and so forth. Unless these are highly resilient, their manifest benefits could be outweighed by catastrophic (albeit rare) breakdowns cascading through the system."

In December 2012 Kharunya Paramaguru, wrote in Time magazine about “the still little-understood flash crash of May 6 2010. In just six minutes, automated trades executed by computers caused one of the biggest single-day declines in the history of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, causing the stock index to plummet almost 1,000 points, only to recover again within minutes. The dip caused alarm among regulators who realized that this technology — lightning-fast trades set to execute based on computerized analysis of market conditions — is already in many ways beyond our control.”

Martin Rees also wrote about the danger of pandemics in our global village. “Pandemics could spread at the speed of jet aircraft, causing maximal havoc in the shambolic but burgeoning megacities of the developing world. Social media could spread psychic contagion – rumours and panic – literally at the speed of light.”

Dangers from Artificial Intelligence (Ai)

This can seem like the stuff of science fiction but there is real danger from the development of supercomputers. We already have very advanced AI machines. They can exceed human performance in chess, flying, driving, financial trading, face, speech and handwriting recognition. They can compose music, understand continuous speech, pick stocks, guide missiles, diagnose health problems, drive cars etc.

Professor Huw Price wrote: “I do think that there are strong reasons to think that we humans are nearing one of the most significant moments in our entire history: the point at which intelligence escapes the constraints of biology. And I see no compelling grounds for confidence that if that does happen, we will survive the transition in reasonable shape.”

Professor Hans Moravec, chief scientist of the Seegrid Corporation which makes vision-guided industrial mobile robots, believes that the robots will eventually replace humans as the dominant form of life on earth.

Huw Price and Jaan Tallinn comment: “The greatest concerns stem from the possibility that computers might take over domains that are critical to controlling the speed and direction of technological progress itself. If intelligent machines were able to develop even more intelligent machines this would lead to an intelligence explosion leaving humans far behind.

Price and Tallin continued: “We seem to have no reason to think that intelligent machines would share our values. The good news is that we probably have no reason to think they would be hostile, as such: hostility, too, is an animal emotion. The bad news is that they might simply be indifferent to us – they might care about us as much as we care about the bugs on the windscreen A suspicious attitude would seem more than sensible, then, even if we had good reason to think the risks are very small.”

Computers have been developed which can recognise emotion. In 2012 an Israeli firm *Beyond Verbal* claimed its software can “understand a speaker's transient mood and emotional decision-making characteristics in real time, by analysing the modulations of the voice.” A US company, *Affectiva*, is releasing software to mobile developers that can sense human emotion by analysing the expression on our faces.

Professor Gary Marcus, (professor of psychology at New York University) estimates that human level AI will be available in the mid-21st century. He comments: “If machines will eventually overtake us, as virtually everyone in the A.I. field believes, the real question is about values: how we instill them in machines, and how we then negotiate with those machines if and when their values are likely to differ greatly from our own.”

He concludes: “Before we get complacent and decide there is nothing to worry about after all, it is important to realize that the goals of machines could change as they get smarter. Once computers can effectively reprogram themselves, and successively improve themselves, leading to a so-called ‘technological singularity’ or ‘intelligence explosion,’ the risks of machines outwitting humans in battles for resources and self-preservation cannot simply be dismissed.”

Professor Nick Bostrom writes that Artificial Intelligence could develop very powerful computers, advanced weaponry, space travel, elimination of aging and disease, fine-grained control of human mood, emotion, and motivation, reanimation of cryonics patients (humans preserved in deep freeze) and fully realistic virtual reality. “General superintelligence would be capable of independent initiative and of making its own plans, and may therefore be more appropriately thought of as an autonomous agent.”

Bostrom goes on to point out that superintelligence could thwart any attempt to hinder its goals and neutralise any agents that sought to do so. He believes that “the best way to ensure that a superintelligence will have a beneficial impact on the world is to endow it with philanthropic values. Its top goal should be friendliness.” However he is not sure how this should be implemented.

Professor Robert Pepperell says that computers must be developed so they can constantly react to random stimulation from the environment. This means they would be unpredictable. To create very powerful, superhuman computers which are unpredictable in their responses to their environment seems to involve significant dangers.

Verner Vinge, Professor of Mathematics at San Diego State University, wrote in 1993 “Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly thereafter, the human era will be ended.”

Human Rights Watch are very concerned about killer robots selecting and attacking targets without human intervention. They write: “Distinguishing between a fearful civilian and a threatening enemy combatant requires a soldier to understand the intentions behind a human’s actions, something a robot could not do.”

Some scientists have argued that strong AI could be developed in the twenty-first century. So it is still unattainable. However some experts argue that there is a substantial possibility of it happening.

Dangers from Genetically-Enhanced Humans

Other terms used for genetically-enhanced human beings are “posthuman” or “transhuman.” Basically these are human beings with unprecedented physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual abilities which are not subject to biological aging or deterioration. They could have indefinite health-spans, much greater intellectual faculties than any current human being as well as the ability to control their own emotions. It is anticipated that this will be achieved by nanotechnology (engineering at molecular level), genetic engineering (altering genetic makeup and inserting new DNA), the use of psychiatric drugs (including memory enhancing drugs), the interfacing of mind and computers (including wearable computers), anti-aging techniques, etc.

Professor Nick Bostrom writes: “Drugs and other neurotechnologies could make it increasingly feasible for users to shape themselves into the kind of people they want to be by adjusting their personality, emotional character, mental energy, romantic attachments, and moral character. Cognitive enhancements might deepen our intellectual lives.”

Transhumanists anticipate that genetically-altered human beings would no longer be unambiguously human by present standards. They could be a combination of human and artificial intelligence. In fact some people anticipate that posthuman beings will become so superior in intelligence and other qualities as to appear God-like: “posthuman gods.”

Some scientists are cautious but nevertheless acknowledge that future developments are likely to be unimaginable today. In 2006 nine scientists specialising in research into aging, wrote: “For now, and for the foreseeable future, all explicit and implicit claims of cures for human aging are pseudoscience..... Nevertheless, we believe the future will bring biomedical advances that are today almost unimaginable Recent scientific advances have taken gerontological research to challenging and exciting new frontiers, and have given many scientists increased confidence that human aging is to some degree controllable.”

We should note that there is research into creating intimate links between humans and computers. One development is wearable computers and personal digital assistants (PDAs). For example, the Google Glass is a tiny wearable computer attached to a pair of glasses. It can take photos and video. On its tiny screen it can display current events, including weather forecasts, give directions, send messages, etc. It can do searches for information and report back audibly (though being close to the wearer’s ear it is quite enough not to be heard by others). It can be operated by voice command as well as touch. Concerns have been expressed about the device being able to record people without permission.

However there is also research into direct control of computers through brain activity, which might involve implanting electrodes in the brain and computers learning to interpret signals and commands. So paralysed people can control a computer cursor with just a single electrode. Also electrodes implanted deep in patient's brains have stabilised the symptoms of Parkinson's disease.

‘Creativity caps’ that deliver magnetic pulses to the head are in use to boost memory and mathematical ability. It can also relieve symptoms of depression. The implantation of a device in a human nervous system has enabled a patient to

control a robotic arm simply by thinking about it. Scientists have demonstrated how a person in New York with a device implanted in their nervous system can control a robotic arm in the UK, moving it around and sensing the position of objects just by thinking about it.

However, there are safety concerns involved in this research. It could change people's personalities, create bionic supermen for military applications or be used to control minds with disturbing implications for society. Some Parkinsons patients with electrodes planted in their brains have developed personality changes, deterioration in relationships, increased sexual urges and criminal behaviour.

Francis Fukuyama, professor of international political economy at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and member of the US President's Council on Bioethics, believes Transhumanism is a most dangerous idea. He believes it undermines basic human rights because it would mean there were superior and inferior human beings. Professor Nick Bostrom disagrees and says humans already vary greatly in ability but this doesn't undermine human rights.

However Bostrom does consider "the hypothetical case in which someone intends to create, or turn themselves into, a being of so radically enhanced capacities that a single one or a small group of such individuals would be capable of taking over the planet." He comments that this could be an issue in a few decades' time but his response is, in my view weak: "The would-be creator of a new life form with such surpassing capabilities would have an obligation to ensure that the proposed being is free from psychopathic tendencies and, more generally, that it has humane inclinations." Sadly, however, there is no guarantee that every "creator of a new life form" would be responsible or competent enough to avoid this danger. Then there is the danger of well-intentioned science going seriously wrong. Also, if such new life forms are as competent as they are predicted to be, how can it be certain that this life form would not decide to act wrongly? Bostrom himself goes on to say about posthumans: "If, for some inscrutable reason, they decided that they would prefer to be less intelligent, less healthy, and lead shorter lives, they would not lack the means to achieve these objectives and frustrate our designs." What if they decided to be inhumane or psychopathic?

It is disturbing to read the 'Posthuman Manifesto' by Professor Robert Pepperell. Here are some extracts:

"It is now clear that Humans are no longer the most important things in the Universe. All technological progress of Human society is geared towards the redundancy of the Human species as we currently know it In the Posthuman era machines will be Gods. Intelligent Agents will be the religious authorities of the Information Age. We will ask them to interpret the Chaos of the God machines for us Logic is an illusion of Human imagination. Truth and Falsity do not exist in Nature - other than in Human thought The Post-Human realises that the ultimate questions about existence and being do not require an answer. The answer to the question 'Why are we here?' is that there is no answer."

These quotations do not inspire confidence that all will be well with the development of posthumans.

Professor Nick Bostrom also warns: "Transhumanism does not entail technological optimism. While future technological capabilities carry immense potential for beneficial deployments, they also could be misused to cause enormous harm, ranging all the way to the extreme possibility of intelligent life becoming extinct. Other potential negative outcomes include widening social inequalities or a gradual erosion of the hard-to-quantify assets that we care deeply about but tend to neglect in our daily struggle for material gain, such as meaningful human relationships and ecological diversity. Such risks must be taken very seriously, as thoughtful transhumanists fully acknowledge While disasters and setbacks are inevitable in the implementation of the transhumanist project (just as they are if the transhumanist project is not pursued), there is one kind of catastrophe that must be avoided at any cost: Existential risk – one where an adverse outcome would either annihilate Earth-originating intelligent life or permanently and drastically curtail its potential."

The area of genetic engineering also includes controversial issue such as the manipulation of human embryos, which could, of course lead to 'designer babies,' and human cloning. Scientists have developed a technique called Crispr (pronounced 'crisper') which stands for "clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats." This enables them to engineer any part of the human genome with extreme precision. Scientists believe it will be used in gene therapy to treat incurable viruses such as HIV and perhaps to correct gene defects in human embryos. In 2013 the UK government approved a technique which would replace damaged mitochondrial DNA in one embryo with healthy mitochondrial DNA from another embryo.

Also scientists have managed to turn skin cells into early-stage embryos, which can be used to create tissue cells for transplant operations. They have also grown miniature human brains from skin cells. These mini-brains are the

equivalent of the brain development of a nine week old human foetus. They stress that they are still far from being described as true human brains with a potential for self-awareness or consciousness. They regard crossing that threshold as unethical (at present).

Speaking of experts in human genetic enhancement, Professor Sherwin Nuland warned: “The world will be destroyed by well-meaning geniuses.” He went into further detail: “If we are to be destroyed, I am now convinced that it will not be a neutral or malevolent force that will do us in, but one that is benevolent in the extreme, one whose only motivation is to improve us and better our civilization. If we are ever immolated, it will be by the efforts of well-meaning scientists who are convinced that they have our best interests at heart.”

Dangers of oppressive world government

I have already written on this subject but it is interesting to read what secular scholars say about it:

One of the concerns connected with human enhancement is described by Professor Nick Bostrom: “that powerful new mindcontrol technologies would be deployed globally to change people’s motivation, or that an intensive global surveillance system would be put in place and used to manipulate the direction of human development along a predetermined path.” He doesn’t anticipate that happening but he helpfully describes one of the widespread fears about genetic engineering and other human enhancement techniques. I think such a prospect is not impossible and it could be related fairly easily to aspects of biblical apocalyptic.

Professor Martin Rees speaks of the need of greater surveillance: “In a future era of vast individual empowerment where even one malign or careless act could be too many, we’ll need more intrusion and less privacy. Indeed the rash abandon with which people put their intimate details on Facebook and our acquiescence in ubiquitous CCTV suggest that such a shift would meet surprisingly little resistance.”

Dangers from Nanotechnology

Before looking at the dangers we need to understand what nanotechnology is.

Nanotechnology is about constructing incredibly tiny functional machines (nanomachines) – motors, robots (nanobots) arms, drug delivery systems, even whole computers – just a few molecules wide, or even smaller than one molecule. It is measured in ‘nanometers’ and a nanometer is a billionth of a meter (about the size of six carbon atoms in a row). A sheet of newspaper is about 100,000 nanometers thick and nanotechnology functions on a scale of less than 100 nanometers (i.e. one thousandth the thickness of a sheet of newspaper).

Nanotechnology includes building electronic circuits from single atoms and molecules in order to create computer chips etc. It is already used in chemistry, electronics, engineering, medicine etc. Scientists expect it to create new medical treatments, e.g. inserting nanobots (tiny robots) into human bodies to repair cells and cure cancers. The many other uses include providing clean water from polluted water sources (including arsenic pollution), contributing to building and maintaining lighter, smarter, more efficient, and “greener” vehicles, aircraft, and ships, improving the performance, resiliency, and longevity of highway and transportation infrastructure components while reducing their cost. There are currently over 800 everyday commercial products that rely on nanoscale materials and processes. They include anti-bacterial wound dressings which use nanoscale silver, more effective sunscreens with nanoscale titanium oxide or zinc oxide, scratch- and glare-resistant coatings (nanofilms) for spectacles, windows and car mirrors, very strong but light carbon nanotubes in tennis racquets and car parts and a powder which can neutralize gas and liquid toxins in chemical spills.

Many nations are now spending millions on nanotechnology. The Royal Society estimated global expenditure on it in 2004 as 5 billion euros.

The Center for Responsible Nanotechnology (CRN) is not negative towards nanotechnology. It includes the aims of raising awareness about the benefits of nanotechnology and assisting in “the creation and implementation of wise, comprehensive, and balanced plans for responsible worldwide use of this transformative technology.” However it states: “The next Industrial Revolution is right around the corner. Fourth generation nanotechnology — molecular manufacturing — will radically transform the world, and the people, of the early 21st century. Whether that transformation will be peaceful and beneficial or horrendously destructive is unknown. Although nanotechnology carries great promise, unwise or malicious use could seriously threaten the survival of the human race. The vision of CRN is a world in molecular manufacturing is widely used for productive and beneficial purposes, and where dangerous uses are limited.”

The Royal Society in its 2004 report “Nanoscience and nanotechnologies: opportunities and uncertainties” expresses concern about possible dangers to health by people of “deliberately manufactured nanoparticles and nanotubes that are free rather than fixed to or within a material.” However it comments: “It is very unlikely that new manufactured nanoparticles could be introduced into humans in doses sufficient to cause the health effects that have been associated with the nanoparticles in polluted air. However, some may be inhaled in certain workplaces in significant amounts and steps should be taken to minimise exposure.” (They are referring to academic research laboratories and they also refer to use of certain cosmetics). Another danger they describe is that combustible nanoparticles could increase the risk of explosion.

The Royal Society is also concerned about the implications of a possible future convergence of nanotechnologies with biotechnology, information and cognitive sciences which could be used for radical human enhancement. It comments: “If these possibilities were ever realised, they would raise profound ethical questions.”

The Center for Responsible Nanotechnology (CRN) says the technology could produce small, cheap, powerful, and very numerous weapons and surveillance devices. “Criminals and terrorists with stronger, more powerful, and much more compact devices could do serious damage to society. Defenses against these devices may not be installed immediately or comprehensively. Chemical and biological weapons could become much more deadly and easier to conceal. Many other types of terrifying devices are possible, including several varieties of remote assassination weapons that would be difficult to detect or avoid.”

It will be possible to make weapons the size of an insect which could seek and inject toxins into a human being. CRN calculates that “as many as 50 billion toxin-carrying devices—theoretically enough to kill every human on earth—could be packed into a single suitcase.” Bullets could be self-guided. Weapons could be remotely activated.

The Royal Society report notes that “Manipulation of biological and chemical agents using nanotechnologies could result in entirely new threats that might be hard to detect and counter.”

It also quotes Bill Joy, Chief Scientist of Sun Microsystems, who wrote: “The 21st-century technologies – genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics (GNR) – are so powerful that they can spawn whole new classes of accidents and abuses. Most dangerously, for the first time, these accidents and abuses are widely within the reach of individuals or small groups. They will not require large facilities or rare raw materials. Knowledge alone will enable the use of them.’

Those who think this is unnecessarily alarmist should remember that it really is only a matter of time before terrorists get hold of nuclear weapons. The same is likely to happen with nanotechnology.

Nanotechnology would facilitate the creation of very small, inexpensive supercomputers that conceivably could be used for 24/7 surveillance of every individual. (There are already full-size computers which can analyse a video feed, learn familiar patterns, and notice unfamiliar patterns). This sounds like science fiction but the danger of oppressive political regimes is always with us. We should remember that, despite overstatements and the discovery that there are almost one million fewer CCTV cameras in the UK than previously thought, Britain still appears to have far more cameras trained on its population than other countries.

The Royal Society states: “The perceived opportunities and threats of nanotechnologies often stem from the same characteristics. For example, the convergence of nanotechnologies with information technology, linking complex networks of remote sensing devices with significant computational power, could be used to achieve greater personal safety, security and individualised healthcare and to allow businesses to track and monitor their products. It could equally be used for covert surveillance, or for the collection and distribution of information without adequate consent.”

Some people are dismissive of the dangers inherent in Artificial Intelligence, Genetically-enhanced humans, nanotechnology, etc., but we are in uncharted waters, so dogmatism is unwise. Also we noted above that the Future of Humanity Institute said: “Because of the extreme severity of existential risks, they deserve extremely careful attention even if their probability could confidently be assessed to be very small.”

Dangers from man-made climate change

PERSONAL PREFACE: I am aware that there is still controversy in some quarters over global warming. This section is not an attempt to prove that human-induced global warming is happening (even if I had the ability to do that) but is

part of my paper on secular eschatology, outlining what scholars see as the future threats to life on earth. Having said that, I do think we must take seriously (though not uncritically) what 97% of climate scientists, 196 scientific organisations worldwide plus NASA and the Met Office affirm. We are told that, unless radical action is taken, global warming will lead to extreme weather: droughts, floods and more severe storms, displacement of millions of people because of flooding or spreading deserts, many human deaths, extensive reduction in agricultural productivity and economic difficulties. If these predictions are correct, they fit well into the subject of secular eschatology. It is worth noting that some global warming sceptics have changed their minds. For example in the UK, the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail, which have cast doubt on global warming in the past, have now changed their tune and accept that it is happening and human beings play a role in it.

Professor Robert Jensen, wrote an article in February 2013 entitled “Rationally Speaking, We Are All Apocalyptic Now.” This was not written from a Christian point of view. He said we see “groundwater depletion, topsoil loss, chemical contamination, increased toxicity in our own bodies, the number and size of ‘dead zones’ in the oceans, accelerating extinction of species and reduction of bio-diversity, and the ultimate game-changer of climate disruption.” He added: “We are in end times of sorts—not the end of the physical world, but the end of the First-World way of living and the end of the systems on which that life is based We are all apocalyptic now, whether we like it or not.”

But is such an apocalyptic approach sensible? For example, is man-made global warming really happening and really as serious as people say? We need to examine the evidence.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said in 2013 “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased. Each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth’s surface than any preceding decade since 1850.”

It is true that there has been variation in temperature over the last thousand years, with a medieval warm period and a ‘little ice age’ but the rise in average global temperature in the 20th century is well above the range of such variability. There was a cooler period between 1950 and 1970 but scientists believe that was caused by an increase in particles from industrial sources which reflected sunlight back into space and so cooled the surface of the earth. Global temperatures have risen more slowly in the last decade but all of the top ten warmest years have happened since 1998. So this decade was warmer than the last which was warmer than the previous one.

It is difficult to prove that any particular extreme weather event in recent years is due to global warming, but it is likely to be an important factor. However it is true that if temperatures are increasing, as the scientists tell us is the case, there will be more temperature extremes, more evaporation leading to higher rainfall, and more hurricanes from a warmer sea. The 19 hottest, wettest or stormiest events have happened in the last decade, often with disastrous results. Sea levels are rising which leads to storm surges. It is clear that the climate is changing.

Dangers from climate change: Melting of the ice caps

There is some natural variation. Less ice was lost from the Arctic in 2013 than in 2012 but 2013 still had the sixth greatest ice loss since observations began in 1979. Some newspapers pointed out that there was more Arctic ice in August 2013 than a year earlier and argued that this showed the earth was not warming. However this increase of ice was not a surprise to scientists. The loss of ice in 2012 was extreme so it could be expected that the loss in 2013 might be less. The fact remains that, despite annual variations, *overall* the Arctic has lost 75% of its summer ice volume over the last 30 years. The rapid loss of ice is clear from the records kept by military submarines, from land measurements taken over many decades and from satellite observations from space. Also Arctic temperatures have risen twice as fast as the global average in the last 50 years.

Over recent decades the surface of the Larsen B Ice Shelf in Antarctica has gradually melted, forming nearly 3,000 lakes. But in 2002, all the lakes drained away in the space of a week and the 2,700-square-kilometre ice shelf, about 220 metres thick which might have existed for 12,000 years, rapidly disintegrated into small icebergs.

The European Space Agency’s CryoSat-2 satellite was launched in April 2010 to measure the thickness of Arctic and Antarctic ice with unprecedented accuracy and to tell scientists how melting polar ice affects ocean circulation patterns, sea level and global climate. By December 2013 it had shown that the West Antarctic Ice Sheet is losing over 150 cubic kilometres of ice each year – considerably more than when last surveyed. Preliminary results also showed that 900 cubic kilometres of summer ice had disappeared from the Arctic between 2011 and 2012.

The diminishing of the ice caps will in itself cause global warming. The white caps' brilliance reflects heat back into space so any significant reduction in the caps will reduce that reflection and cause the region to heat up. Professor Chris Rapley of University College London said: "With the temperature gradient between the Arctic and equator dropping, as is happening now, it is also possible that the jet stream in the upper atmosphere could become more unstable. That could mean increasing volatility in weather in lower latitudes."

Another concern is that melting of the ice releases methane which is a powerful greenhouse gas (23 times more powerful than carbon dioxide). Some people have disputed that the methane would make it from the sea floor to the atmosphere but research shows that it can. In 2008 scientists discovered intense concentrations of methane – sometimes at up to 100 times background levels – over an area of thousands of square miles of the Siberian continental shelf. They saw the sea foaming with gas bubbling up through "methane chimneys" rising from the sea floor. They were able to document these "chimneys" on echo sounder and with seismic instruments.

These conclusions are disputed but Professor Peter Wadhams, head of Polar ocean physics at Cambridge University, said the scientists who rejected his scenario as implausible were simply unacquainted with the unique dynamics of the East Siberian Arctic Shelf, the nature of permafrost melting there, and its relationship to ongoing releases of methane in recent years: "Those who understand Arctic seabed geology and the oceanography of water column warming from ice retreat do not say that this is a low probability event. I think one should trust those who know about a subject rather than those who don't. As far as I'm concerned, the experts in this area are the people who have been actively working on the seabed conditions in the East Siberian Sea in summer during the past few summers where the ice cover has disappeared and the water has warmed. The rapid disappearance of offshore permafrost through water heating is a unique phenomenon, so clearly no 'expert' would have found a mechanism elsewhere to compare with this... I think that most Arctic specialists would agree that this scenario is plausible." Atmospheric methane levels in the Arctic are currently at new record highs, 70 parts per billion higher than the global average. Methane plumes up to 150 kilometres across have been observed. Methane has the potential to cause catastrophic effects on crops, rising sea levels, coastal flooding and extreme weather.

Dangers from climate change: Rising sea levels

The IPCC reports that "The rate of sea level rise since the mid-19th century has been larger than the mean rate during the previous two millennia Global mean sea level will continue to rise during the 21st the rate of sea level rise will very likely exceed that observed during 1971–2010 due to increased ocean warming and increased loss of mass from glaciers and ice sheets."

In the 20th century sea levels rose by an average of around 1.7mm a year, but more recently they have been rising at around 3mm per year i.e. about 30cm (12inches) over the century, but it could increase. The IPCC has recently put it at between 26 and 59cm (10-23 inches).

Dangers from climate change: Coastal flooding

634 million people live within 30 feet of sea level, according to the April 2007 edition of Environment and Urbanisation. Some two thirds of the world's largest cities (with over 5 million people) are in low-lying coastal areas. Cities threatened by rising sea levels include Alexandria, Amsterdam, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Hong Kong, Miami, Mumbai, New Orleans, New York-Newark, Rotterdam, Shanghai, and Tokyo. The World Bank listed various countries at risk from serious coastal flooding: China, Egypt, Indonesia, Mauritania, Tunisia, Vietnam and all low-lying island states.

Dangers from climate change: Growth in acidity of seawater

The danger of flooding is obvious but another effect is the growth in ocean acidity. A report in the science journal 'Nature' in August 2013 said: "The slow and inexorable increase in the oceans' acidity as they soak up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere could itself have an effect on climate and amplify global warming, according to a new study. Acidification would lead certain marine organisms to emit less of the sulphur compounds that help to seed the formation of clouds and so keep the planet cool."

Marine life is adversely affected by growing acidity and by the fact that warmer water holds less oxygen.

Dangers from climate change: Disruption of ocean currents

The thermohaline circulation, otherwise known as the ocean conveyor belt, is a circulation in the deep oceans. The wind drives surface water from the equator towards the poles, which cools it, also causing evaporation which makes it more salty and so more dense. It therefore sinks near the poles and flows back towards the equator at depth. So water from the tropics is carried by the Gulf Stream to the region between Greenland and Scandinavia. Global warming will increase rain and fresh water from the polar caps and this will reduce the salt content of the sea water, making it less likely to sink. This will hinder the circulation and is likely to create large regional climate changes

We have noted the effects on the weather of disruption of the ocean currents but there is more.

Dangers from climate change: Disruption of the jet stream

The jet streams are narrow band of strong west winds blowing at the height of jet aircraft. There are two main ones in the Northern hemisphere and two in the Southern hemisphere (the polar and subtropical streams). The jet stream we talk about in the Northern hemisphere has changed dramatically in the last few years, causing extreme weather. It has meandered and slowed down, trapping areas of high or low pressure. An increasing number of meteorologists (but not all) blame the warming of the Arctic. Normally the warm air of the tropics has meant the atmosphere is higher and there has been an atmospheric gradient to the lower atmosphere over the poles so that the air flows down that gradient. It is clear that global warming disrupts this gradient and the jet stream, slowing it down.

Dangers from climate change: Increasing rain and flooding

As the planet warms there will be more evaporation of water, more water vapour in the atmosphere and so more precipitation. The increased heat also intensifies the water (hydrological) cycle and produces heavier rain. However it is difficult to be dogmatic over the cause of particular weather events. Bob Ward is policy and communications director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at London School of Economics and Political Science. In January 2013 he wrote: “It is not possible to attribute unambiguously any single extreme weather event, or indeed any set of weather events from a single year, to climate change. Statistical trends in extreme weather can only be detected over several decades. But much of the unprecedented weather we are seeing is consistent with what climate scientists warn will happen in a warming world.”

The UK government Department of the Environment is more convinced. In their “Adapting to climate change” of 1st July 2013 they say “The world’s climate and weather patterns are changing. Global temperatures are rising, causing more extreme weather events, like flooding and heatwaves.” “Climate risks affect all aspects of society. Rising temperatures, rising sea levels, and increasing frequency of extreme events have direct effects on people’s lives, as well as disrupting commodity prices, supply chains, markets, and economies.”

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change adds: “There is strong scientific evidence that climate change will disrupt the global economy, environment and society due to projected warming, sea level rise and changes in global rainfall/snowfall patterns and extreme events. They point out that in England and Wales, currently around 50,000 hectares are at risk of flooding frequently (i.e. at least once every three years) and this is projected to increase to around 200,000 ha by the 2080s (or 1% of total agricultural land).”

The World Meteorological Organisation is clear the global warming is causing extreme weather, the melting of ice sheets and glaciers and the rising of sea levels.

Dangers from climate change: Earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis

This is a controversial area. Bill McGuire, professor of geophysical and climate hazards at University College London, writes: “The idea that a changing climate can persuade the ground to shake, volcanoes to rumble and tsunamis to crash on to unsuspecting coastlines seems, at first, to be bordering on the insane.” However, he goes on to point out that glaciers are melting at a staggering rate in Alaska and the reduction in the weight of ice is allowing faults in the earth’s crust to slide more easily causing increased earthquake activity. Similar effects in Greenland could cause tsunamis and increase volcanic activity. Permafrost which holds mountain peaks together is thawing increasing rock and ice avalanches.” McGuire has written a book “Waking the Giant: How a Changing Climate Triggers Earthquakes, Tsunamis and Volcanoes”, published by Oxford University Press.

Dangers from climate change: Environmental refugees

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has stated: “For UNHCR, the consequences of climate change are enormous. Scarce natural resources such as drinking water are likely to become even more limited. Many crops and some livestock are unlikely to survive in certain locations if conditions become too hot and dry, or too cold and wet. Food security is an immediate concern in many parts of the world. People will have to try and adapt to this situation, but for many this will mean a conscious move to another place if they are to survive. This has the potential to spark conflicts with other communities, as an increasing number of people compete for a decreasing amount of resources.”

The most common claims are that there will be 150-200 million climate change refugees by 2050. The UNHCR comments: ““While there are no scientifically verified estimates of climate change-related displacement or of overall population flows triggered by the effects of climate change, it is evident that gradual and sudden environmental changes are already resulting in substantial human migration and displacement. This trend is expected to continue, with anywhere between 50 and 200 million people moving as a result by the middle of the century, either within their countries or across borders, on a permanent or temporary basis. There is a possibility of even higher numbers if the IPCC’s worst-case scenarios materialize.”

What is the evidence for human-induced global warming?

The increase in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere

The IPCC said in 2013: “The atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane, and nitrous oxide have increased to levels unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. CO₂ concentrations have increased by 40% since pre-industrial times, primarily from fossil fuel emissions and secondarily from net land use change emissions. The ocean has absorbed about 30% of the emitted anthropogenic [human-induced] carbon dioxide, causing ocean acidification.”

The IPCC goes on to say that there is an “increase in the atmospheric concentration of CO₂ since 1750. Human influence on the climate system is clear. This is evident from the increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere, positive radiative forcing, observed warming, and understanding of the climate system.”

Tom Bawden, Environment Editor of the Independent, wrote in May 2013: “The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has breached the symbolically important level of 400 parts per million (ppm) for the first time in 5 million years after rising at its fastest rate since records began in 1958 The elevated carbon emission reading harks back to the Pliocene period, between 3m and 5m years ago, when global average temperatures were 3 or 4C hotter than today, the Arctic was ice-free, sea levels were about 40m higher and jungles covered northern Canada.”

So the scientists are saying that since the industrial revolution we have been responsible for increasing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere by 40%.

The IPCC is, according to Professor Martin Rees, president of the Royal Society, “the world's leading authority on climate change.” It is approved by 120 governments and by 196 scientific organisations worldwide plus NASA and the Met Office. Thousands of scientists contribute to its reports. Its conviction that recent global warming is attributable to human activity is shared by most scientists. A US poll of 1,380 climate scientists found that 97% backed the belief that carbon emissions are raising global temperatures. It would be very unwise not to take the IPCC’s conclusions seriously.

Scientists are not claiming to be infallible and they can make mistakes but the IPCC says that it is 95% probable that most global warming is caused by human activities such as the increased production of greenhouse gases, burning fossil fuels, deforestation and release of aerosols. This seems convincing.

It may be politically correct in some circles to deny human-induced global warming (in fact there has been an increase of people in the UK who do not believe the climate is changing) but if this is on the part of people who do not carefully weigh up the considerable scientific evidence and opinion it is hardly reliable. After all, 95% of scientific papers on the subject say that the planet is warming.

Whereas some people who deny human-induced global warming are sincere, it must be borne in mind that there are vested interests in denying it. For example in 2007 the Guardian reported that a think tank funded by ExxonMobil (the world’s largest oil and gas company) offered scientists and economists over \$10,000 each to undermine an IPCC report. There have been similar reports about other fossil fuel organisations in the media.

One also has to be careful about some media reports. Two newspapers reported that Professor Tsonis of the University of Wisconsin, claimed his research showed global warming was only temporary. However, Tsonis' co-author Kyle Swanson wrote: "What do our results have to do with Global Warming, i.e., the century-scale response to greenhouse gas emissions? VERY LITTLE, contrary to claims that others have made on our behalf." The papers also claimed that global warming had 'paused' since 1997. In fact, it has risen, but more slowly than the previous 15 years, which research suggests is due to the heat being transferred to the deep ocean more efficiently due to recurring ocean cycles.

Scientists point out that, whereas global warming has slowed down, there has still been a rise of 0.2°C over the last 15 years. They also point out that a reason for the slowdown is that excess heat is being stored in the Atlantic and Southern Oceans and that a natural ocean cycle will cause the temperature to rise in around 15 years' time. The Pacific may also have a similar role. Trade winds help the oceans to absorb heat into an area 100 -300 metres below the surface. These trade winds are likely to drop in some years' time (probably soon after 2020) which will facilitate the heat being released. Scientists also point out that volcanic eruptions spread particles into the atmosphere which reflect the sun's heat back into space, thus acting against global warming.

The fact is that the World Meteorological Organisation has reported that 13 of the 14 warmest years have occurred since 2000 and each of the last three decades has been warmer than the previous one, with 2001-2010 the warmest on record.

The WMO also reported that concentrations of Carbon Dioxide in the atmosphere increased faster in 2012-13 than at any time since 1984. They were 142% of pre-Industrial Revolution levels. Methane was 253% and Nitrous Oxide 121% of pre-industrial levels, both of them greenhouse gases. The seas are becoming more acidic at a greater rate than for 300 years.

Professor Stephen Belcher, head of the Met Office Hadley Centre, said the pause in the rate of increase of global temperatures, is unusual but not exceptional, with similar pauses of about 10 years expected on average twice every century.

Similarly, the Department of Meteorology at Reading University commented: "The recent slowdown or hiatus in the rate of global warming at the Earth's surface is continuing to receive media attention. However, surface temperature is only one measure of climate change examined by scientists and it is useful for measuring long term trends but less informative over short timescales. Trends in other variables, such as sea level change, Arctic sea ice cover, glacier volume, and ocean temperatures, are consistent with a planet continuing to warm. It is extremely likely that various factors including natural fluctuations in the ocean have played a role in the slowdown, with discussion continuing about the weight given to specific factors."

Michel Jarraud, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organisation said in November 2013:

"The observations from WMO's extensive Global Atmosphere Watch network highlight yet again how heat-trapping gases from human activities have upset the natural balance of our atmosphere and are a major contribution to climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its recent 5th Assessment Report stressed that atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide have increased to levels unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years.

"As a result of this, our climate is changing, our weather is more extreme, ice sheets and glaciers are melting and sea levels are rising.

"According to the IPCC, if we continue with 'business as usual,' global average temperatures may be 4.6 degrees higher by the end of the century than pre-industrial levels – and even higher in some parts of the world. This would have devastating consequences.

"Limiting climate change will require large and sustained reductions of greenhouse gas emissions. We need to act now, otherwise we will jeopardize the future of our children, grandchildren and many future generations. Time is not on our side."

The Independent Editorial for the 2nd January 2014 stated: "For all the protestations from the political fringes, controversy is waning. The UN's most recent judgment is that global warming is all but certain to result from human activity. Even in Washington, where sceptics were once in the ascendant, the reality of climate change is no longer in doubt."

The case of Richard Muller, professor of physics at the University of California, Berkeley, is instructive. He calls himself a converted climate-change sceptic. He wrote in the New York Times in July 2012: "Call me a converted

skeptic. Three years ago I identified problems in previous climate studies that, in my mind, threw doubt on the very existence of global warming. Last year, following an intensive research effort involving a dozen scientists, I concluded that global warming was real and that the prior estimates of the rate of warming were correct. I'm now going a step further: Humans are almost entirely the cause.

"My total turnaround, in such a short time, is the result of careful and objective analysis by the Berkley Earth Surface Temperature project, which I founded with my daughter Elizabeth. Our results show that the average temperature of the earth's land has risen by two and a half degrees Fahrenheit over the past 250 years, including an increase of one and a half degrees over the most recent 50 years. Moreover, it appears likely that essentially all of this increase results from the human emission of greenhouse gases."

He is still sceptical about unsubstantiated or more extreme claims about global warming. He writes: "Hurricane Katrina cannot be attributed to global warming. The number of hurricanes hitting the United States has been going down, not up; likewise for intense tornadoes. Polar bears aren't dying from receding ice, and the Himalayan glaciers aren't going to melt by 2035."

However, he concludes: "What about the future? As carbon dioxide emissions increase, the temperature should continue to rise. I expect the rate of warming to proceed at a steady pace, about one and a half degrees over land in the next 50 years, less if the oceans are included. But if China continues its rapid economic growth (it has averaged 10 percent per year over the last 20 years) and its vast use of coal (it typically adds one new gigawatt per month), then that same warming could take place in less than 20 years."

Attempts to combat global warming

Various methods have been suggested, for example:

- **Reflecting sunlight back into space:** This could be done by spraying sulphate particles high in the atmosphere, whitening low clouds by spraying salt water above the oceans, thinning high cirrus clouds to allow more heat to escape from the earth, whitening the ocean surface to reflect more sunlight by generating microbubbles or covering deserts with shiny material. However a study in November 2014 showed that these methods would cause worse floods and droughts for billions of people.
- **Extracting Carbon Dioxide from the atmosphere:** This would require burning many plants and trees in power plants and capturing the Carbon Dioxide from them. It would require the planting of huge numbers of trees. This would be very expensive.

Consequences of global warming

So, we have noted the predicted results of global warming, which will have serious effects on the world's population:

1. Extreme weather: droughts, floods and more severe storms
2. Displacement of millions of people because of flooding or spreading deserts. Oxfam says: "Scientific estimates indicate that by 2050 there will be a billion climate displaced people with one in every 45 people in the world a victim." Lord Stern warned in the Guardian: "That would lead to conflict and war, not peace and prosperity."
3. Many human deaths. Oxfam reports: "By 2030, climate change will indirectly cause nearly one million deaths a year and inflict 157 billion dollars in damage, according to estimates presented at UN talks."
4. Extensive reduction in agricultural productivity.
5. Economic difficulties (see 3. above).

If, as seems convincing, these predictions are accurate, they do fit into the same category as some of the apocalyptic predictions in the Book of Revelation.

General conclusion on secular eschatology

We have noted that some secular scholars take eschatological risks to the future of humanity more seriously than many Christians.

They stress dangers from bioterrorism (germ warfare) and nuclear terrorism, globalism, AI (Artificial Intelligence), genetically-enhanced humans, oppressive world government, nanotechnology and global warming.

Putting all these risks together shows that the idea that the world has an apocalyptic future is not just the teaching of the highly symbolical Book of Revelation but is held by secular scholars who have researched the subject seriously. We should all take note.

The Battle of Armageddon

We now return to biblical eschatology. We have looked at the Great Tribulation and the rise and nature of the Antichrist. Now we must tackle the Battle of Armageddon. Some regard this not as a literal battle but as the on-going attack by the powers of evil on the church. I'm sure that Revelation is meant to encourage Christians in any age to persevere against the attacks of the devil but I do not believe the prophecy about Armageddon is limited to such a symbolic interpretation.

The only specific reference to the name Armageddon is in Revelation 16:16 "Then they [demonic spirits] gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon." John describes how impure spirits looking like frogs came from the mouths of the dragon (Satan), the beast (the Antichrist) and the false prophet (who, as we have already noted, manipulates humanity to worship the Antichrist using economic boycotts and death threats).

Scholars interpret the symbolism of the frogs emerging from the mouths of the evil trinity deceptive propaganda leading people to commit themselves to the cause of evil. John writes that the evil spirits gather "the kings of the whole world for the battle on the great day of God Almighty" (Rev 16:14).

Professor William Hendricksen writes that Armageddon is "When the world under the leadership of Satan, antichristian government and antichristian religion – the dragon, the beast and the false prophet – is gathered against the church for the final battle"

So all the kings of the whole world, i.e. all the leaders of the nations and their forces, gather at Armageddon, seized by a passion for war inspired by Satan and his associates, especially the Antichrist. The word 'Armageddon' is really 'Har-Mageddon' i.e. Mt Megiddo but there is no such mountain. Some think it refers to the hills around Megiddo in Northern Israel, about 18 miles SE of Haifa. The mound or tell on which Megiddo was built was only some 70 feet high. Others think the name comes from the end time battle on the mountains of Israel as predicted by Ezekiel 38-39 where Gog and his allies attack. Megiddo is the scene of some great victories by Israel.

But why would all the nations attack one city? One scholar says "The only explanation is that this is an ideological conflict to remove a non-co-operative element that blocked the way to an international world order." Others believe Armageddon is not a single battle but a campaign which lasts throughout the second half of the Great Tribulation, and takes place in different places.

However the geography is not crucially important. The significance of the battle of Armageddon is that it is the End Times battle between the forces of evil and the power of God.

Armageddon is a battle against God and his people. Some think that the church has been 'raptured' safely to heaven before this and the battle will only be against Israel, but, as I have already stated, I do not think Scripture supports that view. Certainly Antichrist will persecute and seek to destroy the (largely Gentile) church but there does not seem to be any reference to anyone other than Israel being attacked in the relevant passages (Ezk 38-39; Joel 3; Zech 12-14; Matt 24:29-31; 2 Thess 1:6-10; 2:1-12; Rev 16, 19, 20). It is difficult to imagine the armies of "the kings of the whole world" literally gathering on the plain of Megiddo (although I suppose it could be a smaller international force) and, of course, there is symbolism in the immediate context.

However an international invasion of Israel is hardly incredible, given that:

- "The world's longest hatred" is anti-Semitism and can only be explained as demonic, based upon God's choice of and future purpose for the Jewish people.
- Even today Israel is incurring growing international disapproval and opposition, including from nations which oppose its existence.
- Because of its strong messianic faith, it is not incredible that Israel could resist acceptance of the Antichrist.

- God's future purpose for the Jewish people is that they will turn to Christ in large numbers (Rom 11:25-26), the prospect of which engenders demonic opposition.

I have studied the passages which seem to relate to the Battle of Armageddon (Ezk 38-39; Joel 3; Zech 12-14; Matt 24:29-31; 2 Thess 1:6-10; 2:1-12; Rev 16, 19, 20) and I don't want to be dogmatic. Biblical prophecy does not necessarily follow modern logic and consistency. Also particular aspects are sometimes open to different interpretations and chronological assessment. Terminology and similar descriptions can sometimes apply to different events. Nevertheless, a certain pattern does seem to emerge, even if it is not entirely clear in every aspect, namely:

1. The nations, deceived by the Antichrist, gather to invade Israel
2. Israel will turn to Christ, "the one they pierced" and be spiritually purified. However, tragically, many in Israel will be killed or exiled.
3. Jesus will return to gather the elect and to judge the Antichrist and his followers defeating their military might "with the breath of his mouth" and with various signs and catastrophes. (The judgment of believers will take place at some stage).
4. The Lord will rule over the earth in peace and justice and the nations will gather to worship the Lord. There is some difficulty in understanding all the nations going up to Jerusalem annually for the Feast of Tabernacles literally in view of the numbers involved (unless it is a representative group of international leaders).
5. If, as seems likely, the Millennium is literal (even if not exactly a thousand years) then after it Satan will attempt a repeat invasion of Israel and the people of God before being finally destroyed in Hell.

The fall of 'Babylon'

Revelation 17-18 described the fall of Babylon or the Great Prostitute. These symbols refer to the godless world economic and cultural system organised without reference to God and seducing people away from God. It concentrates on the luxury, vice and glamour of this world and speaks of the self-deification of human power. It also persecutes the church. The early church saw this fulfilled in pagan Rome. The Roman emperors became gods in the eyes of the people and this was a foretaste of the Antichrist.

John goes on to write that the beast, "once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction ... it once was, now is not, and yet will come." This is referring to the fact that evil keeps recurring in the world. This is true especially with respect to the final manifestation of the power of the antichrist just before the second coming of Christ." This repeated manifestation of the spirit of Antichrist, of course, fits in with the concept of the multiple fulfilment of prophecy.

This godless world system will form a world alliance "will wage war against the Lamb" in the Battle of Armageddon (Rev 17:14). However, division arises between the Beast, Antichrist, and the great prostitute/Babylon, the godless world system (Rev 17:15-18). There is no cohesion in evil. Wicked men give way to jealousy and hatred.

Revelation 18 then describes the fall of Babylon (the collapse of godless civilisation) in graphic detail with devastating economic effects.

Revelation 19 then describes the return of Christ in judgment but we will return to that.

Cosmic signs

Could some of the cosmic signs in biblical prophecy be literal?

Speaking of the signs of his coming and the End of the Age, Jesus predicts "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken" (Matt 24:29 cf. Isaiah 13:10; 34:4). Ezekiel, Joel, Zephaniah and Revelation predict similar events.

Many take these as symbolical language, and some of it seems to be, e.g. the heavens rolling up like a scroll or blood falling on the earth. But could such prophecies include some literal predictions as well as poetic language about cataclysmic events? For example, the sun, moon and stars could be darkened by the "smoke" of a supervolcano and falling stars could refer to Near Earth Asteroids which might collide with the planet.

Professor F. F. Bruce, commenting on Acts 2:19-20 says the sun was darkened on the afternoon of the Day of the crucifixion and the paschal moon might have appeared blood-red because of this. These were to be understood as signs of the End.

NEAR EARTH ASTEROIDS. Astronomers are very concerned about Near Earth Asteroids. One, big enough to destroy London, passed Earth by just 17,200 miles in February 2013. On the same day a small asteroid hit Earth. This was only a week after the 10 ton meteor hit Earth with a blast 30 times more powerful than the Hiroshima atom bomb, injuring 1200 people and damaging 3000 buildings. Astronomers say such objects enter our atmosphere between once a year and once a decade.

Comments in the press can be summed up by Professor Qing-Zhu Yin of the University of California, who commented: "If humanity does not want to go the way of the dinosaurs, we need to study an event like this in detail." There are many more Near Earth Asteroids up there.

In February 2014, Paul Cox, technical and research director of the Slooh Space Telescope, said: "We continue to discover these potentially hazardous asteroids - sometimes only days before they make their close approaches to Earth "We need to find them before they find us!"

Slooh astronomer Dr Bob Berman said: "On a practical level, a previously unknown, undiscovered asteroid seems to hit our planet and cause damage or injury once a century or so, as we witnessed on 20 June 1908 and 15 February 2013 Every few centuries, an even more massive asteroid strikes us – fortunately usually impacting in an ocean or wasteland such as Antarctica. But the ongoing threat, and the fact that biosphere-altering events remain a real if small annual possibility, suggests that discovering and tracking all NEOs [Near Earth Objects], as well as setting up contingency plans for deflecting them on short notice should the need arise, would be a wise use of resources."

SUPERVOLCANOES are thousands of times more powerful than normal volcanoes. In the past they have caused mass extinctions, long-term climate change and volcanic winters when ash blots out sunlight. If a supervolcano erupted the sound would be heard around the world, black rain would fall and the sky would darken. Only a few supervolcanoes exist including Yellowstone Park in Wyoming

A supervolcanic eruption 70,000 years ago in Sumatra blocked out the sun for six to eight years and caused a period of global cooling lasting a thousand years. Experts say it would take about ten years for pressure to build up enough to cause an eruption.

Conclusion on cosmic signs

One cannot be dogmatic that such events as asteroid impacts and supervolcanoes will fulfil the prophecies of cosmic signs pointing to the return of Christ and the End of the Age. But it is at least conceivable. It is also interesting that astronomers currently are deeply concerned about the possibility of such events. At the very least they can be a "reminder" of the End, like earthquakes, war, pestilences and famines. After all, Jesus did predict: "There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:11). If the earthquakes, famines and pestilences are literal, is it surely possible the "fearful events and great signs from heaven" are literal too?

Old Testament Eschatology

What is the role of Israel in the End Times?

There is a great deal of teaching on the End Times in the Old Testament and its influence on New Testament eschatology is very clear.

One important question is: What, if any, is the role of Israel in the events of the End Times? Some see Israel as totally and finally replaced by the church. Others see Israel as quite distinct from the church (the church age being a side issue). These people see the main player in the End Times as Israel, with the church safely removed from the scene in heaven. I don't think Scripture supports those views.

We need to remember that:

1. There is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ

Jesus speaks of Jews and Gentiles being one flock (John 10:16). Paul says they are both baptised by the Spirit into one body (1 Cor 12:13). He adds that God has made the Jews and Gentiles one, removing the division and making one new humanity, building and temple out of the two (Eph 2:14-16, 19-21).

Paul writes “there is no difference between Jews and Gentile” (Rom 10:11) and “there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised” (Col 3:11). Both are children of Abraham (Rom 4:11, 16-17; Gal 3:29).

2. The old covenant has been fulfilled and so superseded by the new covenant

The old covenant made with Moses at Sinai is definitely and completely fulfilled and superseded according to the NT. God has finished with the sacrificial system, ceremonial foods and ritual washings. So God does not want the Jewish people to renew the sacrificial system (although they might actually do so, as some groups in Israel currently intend).

The NT states that the old covenant with its animal sacrifices, ceremonial foods and ritual washings is “obsolete and outdated” (Heb 8:13). It has been set aside (Heb 10:9 cf 7:18). Paul says “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value” (Gal 5:6).

We now have a new “better covenant” (Heb 7:22) which is “superior to the old one” (Heb 8:6).

3. The church is the flowering of God's eternal purpose through Israel

The church is not a digression from God's main purpose (which some say is his purpose for Israel). It was God's eternal plan to create the church (consisting of both Jewish and Gentile believers) in order to show his “manifold wisdom ... to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Eph 3:10-11). It is part of his purpose to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph 1:9-10 cf. Col 2:24-27).

It is important therefore that our eschatology does not divide up Jew and Gentile, Israel and the Church.

4. Any continuing purpose God has for Israel is dependent on her obedience to God

The OT teaches that Israel's possession of the land depends on her obedience to God (Ex 19:5-6). God warned them that if they were disobedient, he would scatter them among the nations (Lev 26:33-34; Deut 4:25-27; 32; Jer 9:13-16; 13:20-27).

I am strongly against all anti-Semitism and unfair negativism towards Israel. But we must remember that Israel is in very serious disobedience today. She has rejected God's Son and her Messiah. That is why she was exiled for so long from the land. Israel is certainly in no state to be used by God as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The New Covenant changed the emphasis from a corporate (national) to an individual relationship with God. Now the law has to be written on individuals' hearts and minds (Jer 31:29-34 cf. Ezek 18; 36:25-27). It is about individuals, from the least to the greatest, knowing the Lord personally. (This is not to deny the importance of the corporate aspect which is also stressed in the NT teaching on the church).

For Israel to have a future purpose it must be Israel which has turned to Christ. It cannot be fulfilled until the time when “all Israel will be saved” as Paul puts it in Rom 11:26, at which point, Israel would be part of the Body of Christ, the church.

5. God has not finished with Israel

Romans 11 teaches that God has not rejected Israel (vv1-2). They have not fallen beyond recovery (v 11). They will be fully included in the future (v 12). Gentile believers must not feel superior to Israel because Israel is the spiritual root which supports them (vv 17-18). God has removed the Jewish branches but “if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again” vv 19-24). Paul then writes: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved” (vv 25-26).

6. Biblical prophecy about the return of the Jews to Israel is being fulfilled

I have also written at length about why I believe the predictions of the OT prophets about the return of Israel to its ancient homeland are basically literal. See <http://www.prayerforpeace.org.uk/christianzionismbibblebias.html>. I believe the recent re-establishment of the State of Israel to be part of that process (despite the current widespread lack of faith in Christ and the secular nature of the state).

An outline of Old Testament eschatology

I shall now outline the OT teaching on eschatology, putting it in chronological order as I understand it, relating it to NT chronology. However, I am not being dogmatic about this chronology because it is not always clear from the OT text.

Prophecies about a return to Israel by the Jewish people have begun to be literally fulfilled and this suggests other prophecies about Israel could be literal too. Also the world's longest continuing hatred: anti-Semitism, shows that Satan is aware that God has a purpose for the Jewish people even if some Christians are not.

There is OT-inspired symbolism, including in titles such as the Lamb of God, but I do not think it is credible to treat all this prophecy as symbolical of, for example, the church. One principle of interpretation of Scripture is that the text is literal unless there is very good reason that it cannot be. However, we also need to avoid speculative literalism.

1. Israel will return from exile throughout the world

See <http://www.prayerforpeace.org.uk/christianzionismbibblebias.html>. Various passages say that the nations will bring back Israelites and support them - including with their riches Isa 60-62 (Isa 14:2; 43:6; 49:22-23; 60:9). Jesus himself predicts that the Jewish people would regain control of Jerusalem in the End Times (Luke 21:24).

2. Israel will turn to Christ

Zechariah prophesies that Israel will look on "the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son." God will "cleanse them from sin and impurity" (Zech 12:10-13:1). Scholars see this as referring to Christ.

Some people believe that after the terrible international attack on Jerusalem which Zechariah prophesies will lead to the death of two thirds of the population of Israel, it is the remaining one third who turn to Christ (Zech 12-13). The main thing is that Israel turns to Christ. Paul confirms this in Rom 11:25-27.

The impact on the world of so many hundreds of thousands of Jewish people turning to their Messiah would obviously be huge.

3. The Antichrist will arise and eventually be defeated in Israel

Daniel prophesies about a "little horn" (symbol of political power) which "spoke boastfully" (Dan 7:8). This is associated with "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" to receive eternal "authority, glory and sovereign power" so that all nations and peoples worship him. (Dan 7:13-14). The NIV is surely right to see the horn as "The antichrist, or a world power sharing in the characteristics of the antichrist." The son of man is Christ.

Daniel also predicts that a ruler will "set up an abomination that causes desolation" which Jesus relates to the End Times in Matthew 24:15. Similarly he speaks of a king who "will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods" (Dan 11:36).

Paul predicts the "man of lawlessness" who "will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:4). This is the Antichrist.

4. There will be an unprecedented time of "great distress"

The common term for this is "The Great Tribulation." Jeremiah calls it "a time of trouble for Jacob" (30:7). This teaching is paralleled in the NT (e.g. Matt 24:21-22).

5. *There will be an international attack on Jerusalem*

I have written before in some depth about the battle of Armageddon but briefly refer here to the relevant Old Testament teaching. Ezekiel predicts the invasion of Israel by Gog (ch. 38). Zechariah predicts that all the nations will attack Jerusalem (12:1-3; 14:1-2) and two thirds of the people will be struck down (13:8-9).

6. *The Lord will return to the Mt of Olives*

In his vision Daniel sees “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Dan 7:13-14). There are various interpretations of this passage and some say it has nothing to do with the Second Coming. However it seems to me that Jesus’s words: “Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30) refer to Daniel’s prophecy and relate them to the Second Coming.

Zechariah foretells that after the international attack on Jerusalem: “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem...” (Zech 14:4). It seems clear that this refers to the Second Coming.

7. *The Lord will bring judgment for the wicked and blessing for the obedient*

The Second Coming is the Day of the Lord foretold by various prophets (Isa 11:4 cf. 24:1-12, 17-23; 26:20f; 27:1; 34:1-4; 63:1-6; Obad.15-16; Zech. 14:3, 12-15). Joel prophesies that when the Lord restores the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, he will “gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat” (Jerusalem) to judge them for their maltreatment of Israel (Joel 3:1-16). Ezekiel says something similar (Ezk 38:18-23; 39). Zephaniah says that the Day of the Lord will be “a day of wrath – a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness” (Zeph. 1:15). Haggai writes that the Lord will “shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land” (Hag 2:6). The theme is taken up in 2 Thess 1:5-10; 2:1-5; Rev 19:11-21.

However, Amos foretells that the Day of the Lord will also be a day of judgment on those who are disobedient in Israel. He gives a warning to those in Israel who long for the Day of the Lord as a judgment on the nations but who are religious hypocrites (Amos 5:21-24).

On the other hand, the Day of the Lord will bring freedom, blessing and security for Jerusalem, justice for the poor (Isa 11:3-5 cf. Joel 3:17-21; Zech. 12:4-5, 7-8 cf.14:10-11; Obad. 17-21).

8. *The temple will be rebuilt?*

Ezekiel has a very detailed vision of a new temple which is to be built (Ezekiel 40-48) and I have written above in some detail about the various interpretations of this. Paul talks about Antichrist setting himself up in God’s temple (2 Thess 2), which sounds literal.

However, Ezekiel also says David will be king, a river will flow out from under the temple to the Dead Sea, the land will be divided amongst the 12 tribes (yet 10 have been lost) and that God will dwell in the temple for ever (whereas the ‘temple’ is now the church 1 Peter 2:4ff). Many people would not see these predictions as literal.

More important, as we have noted, God would not want the sacrificial system to be re-established because it has been replaced by Jesus. However the Temple Institute in Jerusalem is working hard to achieve it and it is not beyond the bounds of credibility that the Jewish people will rebuild the temple (though it would involve many difficulties and dangers), and although not blessed by God, this would be used in his purposes.

9. *The nations will come to Jerusalem to worship?*

Isaiah’s prophecies that “many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isa 2:2-3 cf. Mic. 4:1-2). More than that, Zechariah warns that those nations who do not go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles will be punished (Zech 14:16-19).

However, the idea of the whole world literally coming to Jerusalem to worship is totally impractical. I suppose it could be representative leaders from all the nations. Some Christians would see this as symbolical of the nations coming to

embrace the Gospel which came from Jerusalem.

10. Christ will reign on earth?

This is another controversial subject. Some people believe in a literal Millennium (a literal rule of Christ on earth). Others see it as symbolical of his ultimate victory over evil and his spiritual rule on earth. The prophets predict such a Millennium. Isaiah prophecies that the Messiah “will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever” (Isa 9:6-7 cf. Ezk 37:24-28; Mic 5:2-4; Zech 14:9). The Lord will reign on Mt Zion (Isa 24:23).

John writes about a millennium rule of Christ in Rev 20:1-6. Satan is bound for a thousand years, so could no longer deceive the nations. Saints and martyrs reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

The prophets say that the Lord will establish peace on earth (Isa 2:4 cf. Mic 5:2-4). He will bring about harmony in nature (Isa 11:6-9). There will also be supernatural fertility in nature (Isa 35:1-2 cf 32:15-20; Ezk 34:25-31; Ezk 36:29-30, 34-36; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-14).

Will this idyllic scene be literally worked out in a millennial reign by Christ on earth? There is symbolism in the prophecies and a possibility that it is referring to the new heavens and new earth. I shall return to this subject.

11. There will be a new heavens and a new earth

The Lord says: “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain” (Isa 65:17-19, 25).

This is similar to the passages which I have related to the Millennium and relates to Jerusalem and Mt Zion. But it also relates strongly to Revelation 21 where John described the new heaven and earth in terms of the New Jerusalem descending from heaven. He describes it in similar terms to Isaiah (he is quoting Isaiah 25): “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4).

Conclusion

We must bear in mind the NT teaching that there is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ, the Old Covenant has been superseded by the New Covenant, the church is the flowering of God’s eternal purpose through Israel and any continuing purpose God has for Israel as a nation is dependent on her obedience to God and turning to Messiah.

However it is also clear that God has not finished with Israel. Biblical prophecy about the return of the Jews to Israel is being fulfilled. The OT teaches (in harmony with the NT) that Israel will return from exile throughout the world and will turn to Christ. The Antichrist will arise and be defeated in Israel and there will be an unprecedented time of “great distress” culminating in an international attack on Jerusalem. The Lord will return to the Mt of Olives and will bring judgment for the wicked and blessing for the obedient.

It is possible that the Temple will be rebuilt and that representatives of all the nations will come to Jerusalem to worship. Ultimately there will be a new heavens and a new earth.

The return of Christ

I do not believe Scripture teaches a pre-tribulational appearance of Christ meeting the church “in the air” and rapturing it to heaven, ensuring it does not experience the Great Tribulation. Instead I believe it teaches that Jesus will return once only at the end of the Great Tribulation. See <https://christianteaching.org.uk/bloggng/>.

The return of Christ: a coming in glory

Jesus will appear “on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30). His coming “will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other” (Luke 17:24). He will be accompanied by a host of angels (Matt 24:31) and everyone on earth will see him (Matt 24:30).

We shall see the glory of the Lord which the Old Testament describes as looking “like a consuming fire” (Ex 24:17). Ezekiel said in his vision the Lord looked “like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and ... brilliant light surrounded him” (Ezk 1:27-28). Similarly, John says of Jesus: “His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Rev 1:13-16). At the Transfiguration “his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning” (Lk 9:29).

When the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle or the temple Moses and the priests could not enter it (Ex. 40:35; 1 Kings 8:11). When the glory of the Lord shone around them, the shepherds were terrified (Lk. 2:9). God said to Moses “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Ex 33:18-20).

It is this awesome, radiant, glorious Lord who will appear on that day. His voice will shake the earth. “His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives” (Zech 14:4).

The return of Christ: a coming in salvation

Jesus says “he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Matt 24:31). Paul adds: “the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. (1 Thess 4:16-17). This is the Rapture. What a prospect!

The saints will then escort the Lord back to earth where he will take up his rule. They do not disappear with him to heaven. Many scholars agree with this view and the general teaching of the NT seems to support it.

We need to prepare for that day “so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2:28). John means that we must live in union with Christ, loving and obeying him.

Jesus also says that those who endure suffering and persecution will receive praise honour and glory from him at his return. They will hear him say the words: “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt 25:21). What a prospect: to hear the Lord honouring us for endurance! What a day that will be!

The return of Christ: a coming in judgment

Jesus says “all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. (Matt 24:30). “People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken” (Lk 21:26).

Paul writes that on that day “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you” (2 Thess 1:7-10). (It should be noted that, as is sometimes the case with the prophets, this is a summary statement. Not all the judgment will take place on the day Jesus returns. We shall come back to this issue later).

Jesus will return at the high point of the rule of the Antichrist (“the lawless one”) whom he will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming” (2 Thess 2:8). The Greek word Paul uses for “destroy” does not mean annihilate but to make completely powerless.

The return of Christ: conclusion

So we await and prepare for the great day when Jesus returns to earth. We shall see our awesome, radiant, glorious Lord whose voice will shake the earth. We shall be caught up to meet him in the air and return with him in glory to earth, never to be separated from him. He will give praise, honour and glory to those who have endured. He will descend to the Mt of Olives, showing his intention to fulfil his promises to Israel (which meanwhile has turned to him and been saved) within the wider Body of Christ. He will defeat the Antichrist and begin to bring judgment to humanity as he establishes his rule of peace and justice throughout the world.

Will there be a literal millennium?

The teaching about a thousand year rule of Christ on earth is found in Revelation 20:1-6 but there are different interpretations of this passage. Some take it literally (whether or not as exactly 1000 years) and say it takes place between the Second Coming of Christ and the last judgment. Others say it precedes the Return of Christ and refers to the eventually conquest of the world by the Gospel. Others take it symbolically of the period between the first and second comings of Christ. We need to examine the arguments for and against these different views but first we look back at opinions held in the history of the church.

The millennium in church history

Scholars point out that belief in a literal Millennium (rule of Jesus on earth) was the dominant view in the early church. Christian leaders in the 2nd and 3rd centuries such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus and Cyprian taught this view. So did Papias who is described as “a hearer of [the Apostle] John.” However it was not universally held.

Origen of Alexandria, who was a strong advocate of allegorical or symbolical interpretation of Scripture rejected a literal Millennium. So did Augustine of Hippo who had great influence in the church. By his day the Emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity and Christianity became the dominant religion in the whole empire. So the old need to believe that Jesus would soon come and overthrow the persecuting power and set up the Millennium faded. In fact, people came to believe the Roman Empire would defeat the Antichrist and that the Last Emperor would be a superhuman figure who would unite the whole of Christendom and rule in peace and justice before the brief rule of the Antichrist.

Arguments for a literal millennium

1. God promises that Jesus will be vindicated by ruling on earth

Paul predicts that: “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed” (2 Thess 1:7-10).

Isaiah prophesies that “He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples” (Isa 2:2-4). Zechariah says that on the day when Jesus descends on the Mt of Olives “The LORD will be king over the whole earth. (Zech 14:9).

Given the humiliation of Jesus on earth and his rejection by many over the centuries it seems likely that God will vindicate him in a millennial kingdom, as Rev 20 foretells.

2. God will fulfil his promises to Israel

God has made important promises to Israel over the centuries and he keeps his promises. Some think these promises are all fulfilled in a spiritual sense in the church but it seems clear that God still has a purpose for the Jewish people and Israel as a nation but it is dependent on her obedience to God and turning to Messiah. It is therefore to be expected that there will be a fulfilment of those prophecies in an earthly kingdom. He is already fulfilling biblical prophecy about the return of the Jews to Israel. (It should be noted that, at that point, Israel would be part of the Body of Christ, the church. I have made it clear, though, that I do not believe that God has purpose for Israel which is totally separate from his purpose for the church and includes the renewal of the sacrificial system).

Antichrist will arise and be defeated in Israel and there will be an unprecedented time of “great distress” culminating in an international attack on Jerusalem. The Lord will return to the Mt of Olives and will bring judgment for the wicked and blessing for the obedient. It is possible that the Temple will be rebuilt and that representatives of all the nations will come to Jerusalem to worship (but this could not mean a resumption of the sacrificial system, as that has been fulfilled in the Cross. However it is not impossible that these could have been resumed earlier before the majority of Jewish people turned to their Messiah).

Another aspect is that it would be a final correction of anti-Semitism, vindicating and fulfilling God’s choice of the

Jewish people by displaying his rule over believing Israel within the wider Body of Christ.

3. God has promised the church that it will rule on earth

Paul writes: “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12). Jesus says: “To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations –that one “will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery” (Rev 2:26-27). The heavenly host worship Jesus with the words: “With your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Rev 5:9-10).

(It should be noted that it is not, as some say, just the martyrs who will enter the Millennium. All the saints, whether or not they have experienced death, will have been raised from the dead or received transformed bodies before the Millennium – 1 Thess 4:16; 1 Cor 15:21-23, 51-53, cf Matt 24:31. We shall return to this later).

This all supports the idea of an earthly millennium.

4. God has promised worldwide peace

Isaiah prophesies: “In the last days He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more” (Isa 2:2, 4).

Paul writes: “The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. ...” (Rom 8:20-23).

There will be harmony in nature: “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa 11:6-9). There will also be supernatural fertility in nature (Isa 35:1-2 cf 32:15-20; Ezk 34:25-31; Ezk 36:29-30, 34-36; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-14).

Some say that all this is referring to the ultimate new heavens and new earth but it includes references to settling disputes and judging between nations which seems more appropriate to an earthly millennium. We have noted how prophecy can have lesser fulfilments before an ultimate total fulfilment and this could be the case here, namely a lesser fulfilment in the millennium and an ultimate fulfilment in the new heavens and new earth.

Arguments against a literal millennium

1. An earthly millennium is only mentioned in Rev 20:1-6

This argument presupposes that the references elsewhere to great blessing, peace and fruitfulness all refer to the (ultimate) new heavens and new earth. Also the concept of progressive revelation (that God reveals more details of his purposes as time goes on) is important. For example, the OT prophets did not know that the Messiah would come twice. They saw the whole series of events from the cross to the second coming as one. The NT revealed much more detail. Hence there is no reason why Rev 20:1-6 should not reveal more detail than what earlier prophets ‘saw’ i.e. that there is a millennium as well as a new heavens and new earth.

2. Jesus came to proclaim a spiritual kingdom unlike his Jewish contemporaries

“Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place’” (John 18:36). He also said “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is in your midst.” (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus also resisted the attempt of people to make him an earthly king (John 6:14-15).

However, when the disciples asked him “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

he didn't say he wasn't going to do so. Rather "He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority'" (Acts 1:7).

Also Paul predicts: "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:24-25). This could refer to a millennial kingdom on earth.

"When Jesus said 'My kingdom is not of this world' he did not mean that his kingdom takes no physical form, but that it differs from the world's kingdoms in its origin (from God), its goals (true worship free from idolatry, true harmony in diversity) and its methods (no violence, but victory through suffering)."

3. The OT prophets prophesied an eternal, not thousand year, kingdom

Daniel prophesied: "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever" (Dan 2:44). This does not seem to be a kingdom in three phases: the first almost destroyed by the Great Tribulation, the second lasting only for 1000 years and the final eternal phase.

However, it is clear that biblical prophecy can initially seem to be predicting a single event and then later prophecy reveals that apparent single event is, in fact, more than one event.

4. There is no hint of a millennium in Jesus' prophecies on Olivet

"Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel'" (Matt 19:28). The "renewal of all things" sounds like the new heavens and new earth, rather than the millennium.

However, the word Paul uses for "renewal" is also used in Titus 3:5 of our (current) renewal by the Spirit. So there it is used of a pre-final state: the ultimate renewal by the Spirit has not yet happened. It could therefore be used of a pre-final state in Matt 19:28, rather than of the ultimate renewal of the new heavens and new earth. Similarly, Paul speaks of our already being seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). Again, that is not the ultimate experience of being seated with Christ.

John writes: "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge" (Rev 20:4) and this is in the context of Satan not yet having been finally removed from the scene (Rev 20:3, 7). Yet he will have been finally removed by the time of the new heavens and new earth. Similarly, in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus predicts he will sit on his throne judging the nations. Are the saints involved in this judgment (they are said to judge the world in 1 Cor 6:2)? Again, this judgment clearly precedes the creation of the new heavens and new earth.

It does not seem convincing to say that Matthew 19:28 cannot apply to the millennium.

5. The NT seems to focus on anticipating the new heavens and new earth

Peter says of Jesus: "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). Yet the millennium does not restore everything because sin is still around and leads ultimately to a huge crisis.

Peter also predicts: "the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:10-13). Again the day of the Lord brings destruction of the present earth and we look forward to the new heavens and new earth. There is no reference to a millennium.

However, we have noted that biblical prophecy can initially seem to be predicting a single event and then later prophecy reveals that apparent single event is, in fact, more than one event. Thus Peter's prophecy of God restoring everything cannot exclude the possibility that it is referring to a process rather than a single event.

6. The NT teaches that Satan is already bound

The NT says that the prince of this world was driven out by the death and resurrection of Christ (John 12:31). Jesus broke the power of the devil (Heb 2:14); he came to destroy the devil's work (1 John 3:8). Yet the devil is clearly still a very strong influence in the world. He is not utterly destroyed. He is not already totally bound and helpless. In fact, Peter writes that "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

John, however, writes that the angel "threw [Satan] into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended" (Rev 20:3). This is surely speaking of a total removal of Satan's influence in the world and so cannot refer to the present situation. It refers to a time in the future.

We should mention here Postmillennialism. This is the view that the return of Christ follows, not precedes, the millennium. Some postmillennialists believe we are already in the millennium (which I find difficult to believe). Others believe that there will be a future golden age of worldwide godliness, i.e. a millennium. I have to say that I find it difficult to believe in the arrival of a millennium without very special divine intervention, such as the premillennial view teaches. Also the parable of Parable of the Weeds is that the wheat (believers) and weeds (unbelievers) will grow together until the day of the Lord (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43).

7. The NT teaches there is only one resurrection (not two separated by the Millennium)

Jesus said: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:28-29). Some say this proves that believers and unbelievers will be raised together but the text does not in fact prove that. It could be referring to an extended period of time or two different occasions. Rev 20:4-6 requires this interpretation. Paul makes it clear in 1 Thess 4:16-17 that all believers are raised at the second coming.

Some say that Rev 20:4 is referring only to Christian martyrs being raised and that the rest of the believers are raised after the millennium. However the text is not clear and the first sentence could refer to other believers who are not martyrs.

8. The NT teaches that the second coming is followed immediately by the judgment

Jesus says: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matt 25:31-33). He also said: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:28-29).

Paul wrote that on that day "the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed" (2 Thess 1:7-10).

Some claim these passages do not allow for there to be a millennium between the second coming and the judgment.

However, none of these passages rule out the interpretation that they are summary statements and don't mean the judgment all happens as soon as Jesus returns. As we have already noted, it is well-known that the prophets often compressed together events which actually take place at widely different times.

9. How can perfect saints in glorified bodies live alongside sinful humanity in the millennium?

This is an interesting point but we cannot say this is impossible.

10. It seems strange that Christ should come back to rule over an earth which is not glorified and which still contains those who oppose him.

Some say it is more logical that he returns to final perfection. Again, this is an interesting point but we cannot say this is impossible.

11. How is it that such rebellion as that described in 2 Thess. 2 could take place after the millennium?

Again, we cannot say that this is impossible. It shows the persistent tendency of human nature towards rebellion against God and the implacable opposition of Satan to God's purposes. But the millennium provides a wonderful opportunity for unbelievers to repent, in particular because the conversion to Christ of huge numbers of Jewish people is bound to make a massive impact. See Paul's comments: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob'" (Rom 11:25-26).

12. The key, the chain, the dragon, the snake and the binding in Rev.20:1-2 are symbolical, why not the whole passage?

It is important to remember that the use of some symbolism in a prophecy does not mean everything in it is symbolical. The angel, Satan, the martyrs, ruling with Christ and the resurrection in this passage are not symbolical. We should follow the principle of taking a passage literally unless there is very good reason not to do so.

Will there be a literal millennium? - Conclusion

We have noted that belief in a literal millennium dominated the early church, including some who were contemporaries of the apostles. We have also argued that a literal millennium is to be expected to vindicate Jesus on earth, to fulfil God's promises to Israel and his promise to the church that it will rule on earth, and because he has promised worldwide peace.

We have examined twelve arguments against a literal millennium and found them all unconvincing. We therefore conclude that there is good reason to believe that the biblical promise of a millennium is literal, although there is no requirement, as with all numbers in biblical prophecy, to believe it means exactly a thousand years.

I therefore believe there is one coming of Christ in glory, resulting in believers being clothed in risen bodies and returning with Christ for the earthly millennium. This is followed by a very brief rebellion leading to the last judgment, the final destruction of sin and death, and the new heavens and earth.

End times judgment

We believe in a God of love. In fact, he *is* love. But, as we shall see, like any good father, God's love is both kind and stern.

We are not called to "roast people over hell" in fiery sermons. We are called to proclaim the message of God's love. However, if we don't (lovingly) include the aspect of what Paul calls the sternness of God we are failing to love the people we are addressing. How can we love people who are heading into danger if we don't warn them? How can we love them if we lull them into a false sense of security that they can safely ignore God and still be confident of going to heaven? How can we love people if we allow them to die not realising that after death there is judgment?

This subject is an important one. We need to understand it so we can help others to do so, but, above all, to prepare for that judgment ourselves.

What is the foundation of end times judgment?

1. God is a holy God

As the old saying puts it: "We have become matey with the Almighty." We have lost much of a sense of God's holiness. We live in an easy-going, pluralistic society where my truth is as good as your truth, even though it may

contradict it and where all truth is relative: we've all won and we'll all get prizes. So the idea of accountability is much reduced and any idea that we are accountable to God is largely absent.

The important thing is that although society and attitudes have changed, God hasn't. He is still the God of the Bible, including of the Old Testament. Of course, we are not under law but under grace. But God hasn't changed. He is still as holy as the Old Testament teaches.

2. *God's holiness in the OT*

When God revealed himself on Mt Sinai there was thunder and lightning, and the mountain shook. People were warned not to approach the mountain lest they die. The people trembled with fear. God's presence was awesome. Just imagine the crashing thunder, the dazzling lightning, the violent shaking of the ground, the thick black smoke concealing glory and majesty beyond their imagination. And, again, God has not changed. This is not the Santa Claus god of much modern thinking. This is the awesome Lord of the universe, utterly holy, radiantly majestic, totally magnificent, enthroned in splendour.

God's awesome, fearful holiness was present in the Tabernacle and Temple. Only the High Priest was allowed, on one day a year – the Day of Atonement - to enter the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary to offer sacrificial blood. He did so in great fear and trepidation. There were also many other regulations to do with respecting the holiness of God and of the special objects used in worship in the Tabernacle and Temple.

Lest it be thought that this is only an Old Testament concept of God, we should note the complementary description of God. The Lord "passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' (Exodus 34:6-7). This is equal to any New Testament concept of God. However it continues: "Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

3. *God's holiness in the NT*

God's holiness is taught throughout the New Testament. In heaven they "never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come'" (Rev 4:8).

Jesus himself is "the Holy One of God" (Luke 4:34, 6:69 cf. Acts 2:27; 13:35).

Then, of course, the third person of the Trinity is frequently called the Holy Spirit. He is so holy that Jesus says: "Blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. When Ananias 'lied to the Holy Spirit' over his giving 'he fell down and died' as did his wife (Acts 5:1-11).

The church, like Israel, is called a holy people on many occasions (Acts 9:13; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1, 18; 2:21; 3:18; 5:3; Php 1:1; Col 1:2, 12; 3:12; 2 Thess 1:10; 1 Tim 2:8-9; 2 Tim 2:21; Philem 1:5; Heb 3:1)

In view of all this, Paul urges Christians to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1) and to control our bodies "in a way that is holy and honourable For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thess 4:4-7).

When Jesus died "At that moment the curtain of the temple [concealing the Most Holy Place] was torn in two from top to bottom" and, reminiscent of Sinai, "The earth shook, the rocks split" (Matt 27:51). We must not forget that God is still the same utterly holy God as he was in Old Testament times, but by his death Jesus gave penitent sinners access to his Father's presence.

4. *We are called to fear God*

The concept of fearing God is alien to much modern thinking, even in the church. The words "God-fearing" or "God-fearer" have dropped out of use. And yet fear of God is at the heart of true Christianity.

- a. It is our duty to fear God: Moses told Israel they were required to fear, obey and love God. The Psalmist writes: "God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him" (Psa 89:6-8)
- b. It is our motive for holy living: Fear of God is a motive for holy living and governs the way we should treat other people (Lev 19:14; 25:17; 2 Chron 19:7; Neh 5:9-11). In fact: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10).

- c. Jesus feared the Lord: Isaiah foretells that the Messiah will exemplify fear of the Lord: “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD – and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. (Isa 11:2-3).
- d. The early church feared the Lord: “Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers” (Acts 9:31). Fear of the Lord was Paul’s motive for evangelism (2 Cor 5:11) and early evangelism was successful amongst the “God-fearing” (Acts 13:26; 17:34).
- e. What does it mean to fear God? It means to be in awe of his otherness, his greatness, his majesty and his power; to recognise our humanity, our frailty and our sin; to repent and to seek to order our lives in line with his standards – or else to be judged by the Lord.

5. *God is a God of justice*

Judgment is based upon the fundamental truth that God is a God of justice who is gracious and compassionate (Isa 30:18). There is so much injustice in this world and often it is the innocent who suffer. But God loves justice (Psa 11:7) and judges justly particularly for those who suffer innocently.

At the heart of the Gospel is God’s justification of believers. He declares them righteous because of the cross of Christ where his justice and compassion were fulfilled by Jesus bearing our sins. This is the language of the law court.

So God desires this world to reflect his justice and compassion. The kingdom of God, established ultimately through Christ, is a kingdom of love, faithfulness, justice and righteousness. He defends, sustains and secures justice for the fatherless, widows, alien, oppressed, weak, needy and poor.

God hates injustice, oppression, extortion, dispossession, dishonest business, bribery and commands us to avoid them. God watches over foreigners (or people from another tribe, race, social or religious background) and condemns those who ill-treat or withhold justice from them.

Perfect justice is the basis of the Judgment of God. He will one day put right all those wrongs which have not been corrected in this life, as a precursor to the fulfilment of his kingdom, over which he will reign with perfect justice.

6. *God is a merciful God*

In dealing with the End Time Judgment, we must remember the love and kindness of God who offers salvation to everyone. Judgment will be severe, but it will not be unloving or without mercy. However, despite the love, kindness and mercy of God, there will be plenty of impenitent, rebellious people who will experience his judgment. No-one, including believers, deserves his mercy but the fact is that believers in Christ have come to repentance and, despite their unworthiness, will be declared righteous by God and acceptable in his eternal kingdom.

God is “rich in mercy” (Eph 2:4, James 5:11), “full of compassion and mercy” (James 5:11) and “delights to show mercy” (Mic 7:18). His “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

The New Testament teaches that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) and he is love even in judgment. It is very important, whilst considering End Time Judgment to remember that “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17). The fact that many will not believe and be saved is their own responsibility. God has made every effort to provide salvation “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10).

Who carries out the end times judgment?

Jesus is quite clear that: “the Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him” (John 5:22-23 cf Acts 17:31). Jesus, who was so despised, humiliated and rejected, will be finally vindicated and honoured by being the judge of all.

However, in his love he mentions the offer of salvation in the same breath as judgment. This shows the love of God “who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). But they have to come to faith in Christ. Jesus says: “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life ... For as the Father has life in himself, so he has

granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:24-27).

On the one hand Jesus says: “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved ... I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:9-10). On the other, he said: “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind” (John 9:39).

The *purpose* of his coming is that all should be saved but, because of human unbelief, the *result* of his coming will sometimes be judgment. See John 3:17-19, 36; 12:47-49).

So the judge is our loving saviour who wants all men to be saved. He is also “one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15). What better judge could we have? Nevertheless, as we shall see, the ultimate punishment for those who reject the gospel is severe. It is important to add that Jesus judges in line with the Father’s will (John 5:19, 30).

Who is to be judged in the end times judgment?

The answer is all human beings, dead or alive, believers or unbelievers.

No-one will escape the judgment of God. Jesus said: “the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done” (Matt 16:27). He also described the judging of the nations – the separation of the ‘sheep’ from the ‘goats’ according to how they have behaved (Matt 25:31-46).

Paul says God will judge people’s secrets through Jesus Christ (Rom 2:16). He adds: “We will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: “‘As surely as I live,” says the Lord, “Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.” So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Rom 14:10-12). Paul then refers to: “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels” and says: “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess 1:7-8). John describes the final judgment before the great white throne (Rev 20:11-13).

The New Testament clearly teaches that we believers will be judged too as well as unbelievers. We need to understand that to be judged means to be subject to the justice of God and does not necessarily mean condemnation. We shall return to this important subject later.

The New Testament also teaches that the corrupt, oppressive politico-economic system (“Babylon” – the rule of man in opposition to God) will be judged (Revelation 18 cf. 14:8; 16:19). Satan (Rev 20:10), his angels (2 Peter 2:4) and the Antichrist (Rev 19:20) will also be judged.

On what basis will humanity be judged in the end times judgment?

1. Judgment is according to knowledge

God judges people according to the spiritual light they have, so he doesn’t condemn them for not obeying a law of which they are unaware. Paul writes: “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law ... (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)” (Rom 2:12, 14-15). He adds that people who do not have the law can suppress the truth that creation shows God’s eternal power and divine nature (Rom 1:18-20).

2. Judgment is according to deeds

Jesus makes it clear that he will “reward each person according to what he has done” (Matt 16:27). Jesus says: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 7:21). He also warns: “I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matt 12:36).

How will believers be judged in the end times?

John 5:24 can give the mistaken impression that believers will not be judged at all. But Paul writes (clearly to believers): “We will all stand before God’s judgment seat ... each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Rom 14:10-12). John 5:24 means that believers will not be *condemned*, but they will stand before God (the Son) as judge (John 3:18).

The “quality of each [believer’s] work” will be tested and if it is not worthy that believer “will suffer loss” (1 Cor 3:10-15). “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:9-10). “The Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do” (Eph 6:7-8).

It is clear, then, that:

- Each believer will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.
- Each believer’s character, behaviour and deeds will be judged.
- If the believer’s character, behaviour and deeds are worthy s/he will be rewarded.
- If the believer’s character, behaviour and deeds are unworthy and go unrepented s/he will suffer loss.
- BUT all believers will be saved and will go on to enjoy eternal life, even though some by the skin of their teeth (“even though only as one escaping through the flames” - 1 Cor 3:15).

We need to be clear: anyone who trusts in Christ is saved, has eternal life and will not come into condemnation. But that believer’s character and behaviour will be judged and this will lead to reward or loss. But that believer will not lose his/her salvation. It is a solemn prospect that we shall each stand alone before our Lord as judge and he will judge how we have lived our lives.

When does end times judgment take place?

Three main judgments are mentioned in the New Testament: judgment of believers (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:9-10; Eph 6:7-8), judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31-46), the Great White Throne judgment (Rev 20:11-15). Some believe they are on three very separate occasions: judgment of believers at the pre-tribulational Rapture of the church to heaven; judgment of the nations just before the Millennium to decide which people are allowed into the Millennial Kingdom and the Great White Throne judgment after the Millennium. Other think there will only be one combined judgment which is described in three different aspects. After all, Jesus speaks of believers being raised (and therefore judged?) on the “last day” (John 6:39-40, 44, 54).

However, John writes about the martyrs being raised before the Millennium and the rest of the dead being raised after the Millennium (Rev 20:4-6). Also Paul writes that all the believing dead are raised at the Second Coming “the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thess 4:16) and believers alive when Jesus returns will be transformed bodily without experiencing death (1 Cor 15:51-53). Many scholars agree that this will all happen at the return of Christ (1 Cor 15:21-23) at the last trumpet (1 Cor 15:52 cf. Matt 24:31). There is no reason therefore to limit the believers who enter the Millennium, as some do, to the martyrs because all the saints, whether or not they have experienced death, will be ready to enter it.

So it appears that at least there are different resurrections, whether or not there are judgments at different times. Also, as is sometimes the case with Scripture, some of these statements may be summaries which imply that events which are actually separate happen at the same time.

We shall examine nine arguments which are claimed to prove that the Sheep/Goat Judgment (Matt 25:31-46) and Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11-15) are not the same event.

1. Matt 25 is linked with the Second Coming - Rev 20 is after the Second Coming and Millennium.

But Jesus does not make it clear that the Matt 25 judgment will happen immediately or soon after his second coming. He refers to the ‘sheep’ entering the kingdom but this is an eternal kingdom rather than a 1000 year millennium (See Luke 1:32-33; 2 Peter 1:11; Rev 11:15 cf 1 Cor 15:24).

2. Matt 25 is to see who will inherit the kingdom - Rev 20 who will be thrown into the lake of fire.

However we have noted this is an eternal, not millennial kingdom. Also in Matt 25:41, 46 Jesus says the ‘goats’ will go “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

3. *Matt 25 includes both believers and unbelievers - Rev 20 appears to be only of unbelievers*

However, Rev 20:11-15 does not exclude the presence of believers at the Great White Throne judgment.

4. *Matt 25 is about how the nations treated brothers of Christ – Rev 20 is about “what they had done.”*

Some say Matt 25 is about how the nations treat Israel but Jesus refers to how they have treated his “brothers” i.e. disciples. The Great White Throne judgment on the basis of works would include attitudes towards disciples of Christ so it is not conclusive that this is a different judgment.

5. *Matt 25 is of those alive at the second coming – Rev 20 is of the dead.*

It seems likely that in Matthew 25 Jesus is speaking about the judgment of all individuals, not of nations as such. It doesn't seem possible that nations, as opposed to individuals, will be judged for their attitude to believers and receive eternal life if they were positive towards believers or to hell if they were not. So, when Jesus says “All the nations will be gathered before him” this can easily be understood as meaning all the people on earth stood before him. Matt 25 does not say that only the living are judged but simply all people.

However if the sheep/goats judgment is after the Millennium it implies that believers were hungry, thirsty, naked or in prison during the Millennium which does not fit with it being a period of the ideal rule of Christ. Others argue that the judgment may refer to conditions before or after the Millennium, especially if it includes judgment of the dead who may have lived before the Millennium.

6. *Matt 25 doesn't mention a great white throne*

This does not seem a very strong point. A “glorious throne” is mentioned in Matthew 25:31.

7. *Matt 25 doesn't mention the “book of life”*

This does not seem a strong point. It is possible to have two incomplete descriptions of the same event.

8. *Matt 25 does not describe death and hades being thrown into the lake of fire.*

The comment made under point 7 is relevant here.

9. *The fact of two resurrections (rev 20:4b-5) suggests there are two judgments*

This inference is by no means certain.

Conclusion:

Whilst not being dogmatic, it does seem likely that the sheep/goats judgement and the great White Throne judgment are two different descriptions of the same final judgment which takes place after the Millennium. It seems reasonable that there should be only one final judgment, although the idea of their being an earlier judgment of believers (before the Millennium) does not seem unreasonable.

In the light of the end times judgment how should we live?

The subject of judgment is not theoretical, e.g. about timing. It is a challenge to live in the light of the fact of judgment. As we have noted above, we believers will stand individually before the judgment seat of Christ so we need to live our lives as those who are accountable to God. Peter warns: “Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear” (1 Peter 1:17). Jesus makes it clear that “men will have to give account on the day of judgment for *every careless word* they have spoken” (Matt 12:36). Similarly James writes: “Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” (James 5:9). Paul says: “if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment” (1 Cor 11:31-32). Those of us who are teachers and leaders in the church should take note of James: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

So, if judgment includes even careless words and grumbling against one another, which are often accepted in human relationships, we should pay serious attention to the sure prospect of standing before the Lord Jesus as our judge.

Having majored on End Times Judgment I now need to deal with the subject of Approaching Death so you may feel I'm not exactly spreading light and joy! However we Christians should be able to think of death without being gloomy. Also there are interesting questions e.g. what happens to us immediately after death? So, here goes:

Approaching death

The second date on your gravestone (and mine) is already fixed and known to God. And the world, including our own little world, will go on without us. Death is the one certain thing about our future. We Christians should take the lead in facing up to our own death and sensitively encouraging others to do the same. This study of the End Times is not meant to be theoretically. We need to ask how we should live in the light of the Bible's teaching about the End Times, and that includes the subject of death.

Many of us have a fear of death. That is natural and we should face up to the fact that we have that fear without feeling ashamed, seeking help and advice if necessary.

An organisation called the Dying Matters Coalition (<http://dyingmatters.org/>) was set up in the UK in 2009 and has produced a wide range of resources to help people start conversations about dying, death and bereavement. These conversations can cover funeral arrangements, where people want to die, but also emotional and spiritual considerations. Families commonly report that it comes as a relief to everyone once the subject is brought out into the open.

“Promotion to glory!”

This wonderful phrase comes from the Salvation Army: “Promotion to Glory.” What a prospect! The believer can be certain that whenever and however death comes glorious eternal life will follow. In fact, eternal life has already begun. Jesus said: “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (John 5:24-25).

“Death ... will [not] be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39); it has been “swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54). Jesus “has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:10). There is a death sentence on death and ultimately even physical death will be totally destroyed (1 Cor 15:26).

So the believer can be absolutely confident that death will be a transition from an incomplete to a complete experience of eternal life. We “die in the Lord” (Rev 14:13) and our “life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). “Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom 14:8) and in death we are “together with him” (1 Thess 5:10). Death is a partnership with Christ. He, and he alone, goes through death with us.

What about the “intermediate state”?

We know that ultimately we shall experience the resurrection of our bodies, but what happens between death and resurrection, i.e. in what is called the Intermediate State?

Here we enter another area of controversy. There are different ways of understanding what the Bible teaches about the Intermediate State. The majority view is that immediately after death we consciously live in paradise. Another view is that of “soul sleep” which believes we lose consciousness between death and resurrection, so the Intermediate State is an unconscious state. Some people go further than that and hold that we (body and soul) pass completely out of existence between death and resurrection so the resurrection is a complete re-creation. Still others believe there is no Intermediate State.

We will briefly examine these views.

View 1 - The intermediate state is conscious

People who hold this view use the following arguments:

- a) *Believers who die are “with the Lord.”* See 2 Cor 5:6-8; Php 1:23. Prof. N T Wright asks: “Had the post-mortem state been unconscious, would Paul have thought of it as ‘far better’ than what he had in the present?”

Other scholars agree

- b) *Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus.* (Matt 17:3). There is no reason not to take this as a literal event.
- c) *Jesus speaks of the rich man and Lazarus being conscious* (Luke 16:19-31). This is not a literal story but would Jesus have made such a clear statement about the consciousness of the departed if it were not true in principle?
- d) *Jesus told the thief on the cross he would be with him in paradise that day* (Luke 23:43). It doesn't seem very convincing to say that what Jesus really was saying is: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise ... but you won't know anything about it because you'll be unconscious!"

View 2 - The intermediate state is unconscious

People who hold this view point out that the word "sleep" is used of death in the New Testament. Jesus spoke of Lazarus having "fallen asleep" (John 11:11-13). Acts describes Stephen the martyr and David falling asleep (Acts 7:60; 13:36) and Paul describes some of the witnesses of the resurrection as having fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:6). Paul frequently uses "sleep" to describe dead believers. They have "fallen asleep" (1 Thess 4:14-15) and "sleep in death" (1 Thess 4:13 cf. 1 Cor 15:51; 1 Thess 5:10). However, this can be just a figure of speech. When someone dies it appears that they have fallen asleep.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia comments: "Because the dead are asleep to our earthly life, which is mediated through the body, it does not follow that they are asleep in every other relation, asleep to the life of the other world, that their spirits are unconscious."

View 3 - The intermediate state is complete annihilation

Some Christians believe that when a believer dies, the whole person – body and soul – ceases to exist. So our deceased loved ones no longer exist. But at the resurrection they will be re-created. Various scholars hold this view.

They point out that Lazarus did not report any wonderful after-death experiences. They also say that in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul does not refer to a reunification of body and soul but simply that "the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Cor 15:53). They claim this means there is no natural immortality of the soul.

However, again, if deceased believers have simply passed out of existence, I cannot see how Paul would have written that he "would prefer to be away from the body and AT HOME WITH THE LORD" (2 Cor 5:8) or "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Php 1:23). And how could Moses and Elijah have met with Jesus (Matt 17:3) at the Transfiguration if they no longer existed? Nor can I see how Jesus would have said to the dying thief "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" if the man was just going to pass out of existence.

View 4 - There is no intermediate state

Those who hold this view refer to 2 Cor 5:1-5 and say it teaches that the believer will never be 'naked' (without a body) but will either be in the present body ('earthly tent') or the resurrection body ('a building from God ... and eternal house ... a heavenly dwelling'). They also refer to the martyrs seen under the altar in Rev 6:9-11 who are not presented as without bodies because "they are clothed and speak."

More important, those holding this view ask whether those who have died live in the same historical time frame as we who are alive. If they do then this would imply some form of disembodied intermediate state. However, if the dead are outside time, as we experience it, an intermediate state would not be necessary.

So, from our perspective, we can say believers who have died are 'sleeping' but from their point of view they have already experienced the resurrection. From our point of view their resurrection is future but, because they have passed out of time, from their point of view they have already risen. So when Jesus says to the thief on the cross "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" he is talking from the point of view of dead believers about an immediate resurrection.

However doesn't this view contradict the NT teaching on a general resurrection at the Return of Christ? The answer is only if eternity includes the continuation of time as we know it. If dead believers pass out of time into eternity then, from our point of view there is gap between their death and final resurrection. But this is not the case in the eternal sphere beyond death which is not governed by time.

Conclusion on the intermediate state

As I have pointed out, this is one of those areas where Christians differ and Scripture is not completely clear on the matter (because its main interest is resurrection not an Intermediate State). I find the idea that believers cease to exist for a lengthy period when they die very difficult to accept and it doesn't seem to square with the biblical material. I also find it difficult to square the soul sleep view with the biblical material. The idea of a conscious Intermediate State has much more going for it but I think, on balance, that I am most convinced by the last view above, that there is no Intermediate State but that believers experience resurrection immediately because they pass out of the historical time of this world into eternity. However, I think we should avoid dogmatism, not least because, in the end, what matters is that all the views agree that when a believer dies the next thing s/he experiences is joy in the glorious presence of Christ.

How can I have a positive attitude to death?

Many people fear death. There is:

1. fear of the unknown,
2. fear of the actual dying process,
3. fear of going through a huge transition alone,
4. fear for loved ones who will be left behind
5. fear of being rejected by God.

1. Overcoming fear of the unknown

It is true that we don't know a lot about life after death. But we do know where we're going and we know who is waiting to greet us and care for us. If Jesus said to the thief on the cross "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43) he surely will say that to US on the day of OUR death. We can meditate on that now – and as we approach the time of our death. A sudden, unexpected death or death after unconsciousness makes no difference to this sure hope. Whether we're able to think about it at the time or not the Lord will be saying it to us. So we "die in the Lord" (Rev 14:13) and "whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rom 14:8)

2. Overcoming fear of the dying process

Obviously, there can be a natural fear of sickness, pain or injury becoming the cause of death. That is part of normal living which is subject to "the changes and chances of this mortal life." We can trust God for peace and pain relief, even in fatal illness. The latter normally comes through medical skill. But we can also claim by faith the wonderful promise in Philippians: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7). So we can reject anxiety by:

- turning to our ever-present Lord
- turning our fears into prayer topics
- thanking God for his goodness and love
- claiming by faith God's promise of the peace which transcends all understanding.

On a different level I have at times, half seriously, said: "So many people have died - it can't be that difficult." There is a serious side to this which I find helpful. When we die, we're not experiencing anything which millions of others (including friends and relatives) haven't gone through. I find that encouraging.

3. Overcoming fear of going through this huge transition alone

There is a gulp factor in going into the uncertainty of death and eternity alone. No-one will be there to support us – except one – the only one who can accompany us through death: Jesus. The Lord has said: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb 13:5). Death will not be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38-39). In the helplessness of death we can bask in the love of Christ, knowing that "underneath are

the everlasting arms.”

4. *Overcoming fear for loved ones left behind*

This is a very natural concern – linked with the sadness of separation. There is no way of avoiding that separation and the grief of those who will be left behind. But God will be good to them and bring them healing through the trauma of grief. There is no way of avoiding the pain but, again, it is some comfort to know that millions have gone through it and come out the other end. But, more significant, is the long-term perspective. If our loved ones are believers we can look forward to an eternity together even if we are separated for years.

(Obviously, it is also good to discuss matters with loved ones. You need to make a will and you may wish to let them know your wishes about how and where you should be cared for if you become incapacitated or about aspects of your funeral. It is also important to sort out practical matters to do with dependents, business, paperwork, etc.).

5. *Overcoming fear of being rejected by God*

I am writing all this for believers – those who trust in Jesus. If you are not yet a believer it is very important to put your trust in him, asking for whatever help you need from a local Minister or mature Christian. You might find my booklet “What is a Christian anyway?” helpful. You can download it from my website at <https://christianteaching.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/WhatIsAChristianAnyway.pdf>

If you are a believer then remember that Paul wrote “each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Rom 14:12). He also wrote about the judgment of believers and says that the “quality of each [believer’s] work” will be tested and if it is not worthy that believer “will suffer loss” (1 Cor 3:10-15).

However the wonderful, and very important, truth is that believers will not be condemned, rejected or lose their salvation. They will be saved and enjoy eternal life in heaven. The Bible teaches that this is certain. Anyone who trusts in Christ is saved, has eternal life and will not come into condemnation. But that believer’s character and behaviour will be judged and this will lead to reward or loss. However that believer will not lose his/her salvation. Salvation (justification) is by faith. Nevertheless it is a solemn prospect that we shall each stand alone before our Lord as judge and he will judge how we have lived our lives.

Resurrection

Resurrection is central to Christianity. The resurrection of Christ is a vital foundation for the faith. Paul says that if Jesus was not raised the Christian faith is useless and, of course, no-one else will be raised (1 Cor 15:14-19).

However, Paul affirms: “In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet ... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Cor 15:51-52).

In the Apostles Creed we confidently affirm: “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” But what do we mean? Does it mean our present body is raised or is it a totally new body? Is it a physical body? We shall examine these questions.

What does Paul mean by the resurrection body being a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44)?

Does he mean it is no longer a physical body?

Physical objects and people in this life can be described as “spiritual.”

Paul refers to the manna eaten by Israel in the wilderness and the water Moses brought forth from the rock as “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink” (1 Cor 10:3-4). Yet it was, of course, physical.

Professor Andrew Lincoln writes; “By the term spiritual we must not understand this to mean non-material or non-physical, but that it is a way of describing a bodily existence that is fully energised by the Spirit.”

Our resurrection body will be like Jesus’ resurrection body which was physical (Philippians 3:21).

- The risen Jesus could be touched (Matt 28:9; John 20:27; Luke 24:39).

- The risen Jesus ate with the disciples (Luke 24:42-43).
- The risen Jesus broke bread and gave it to his disciples (Luke 24:30).
- The risen Jesus made a fire and cooked fish for breakfast for the disciples (John 21:9, 12-13).

Our resurrection body will be a glorified body

Our bodies will be imperishable and powerful (1 Cor 15:42-43). They will not experience tiredness, weakness, sickness, injury, ageing or death.

Our bodies will be glorious. Professor Wayne Grudem says: “The word ‘glory’ ... suggests that there will also be a kind of brightness or radiance surrounding our bodies that will be an appropriate outward evidence of the position of exaltation and rule over all creation that God has given us” cf. Matthew 13:43).

The risen Jesus was able to appear and disappear and to move through solid objects (John 20:19-20, 26). There is some debate over whether this will be true of our resurrection bodies. Some say it was something unique Jesus did but I see no reason why it should not be an ability of our risen bodies.

What about Paul’s statement that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 15:50)?

Professor N T Wright says that Paul’s use of “‘flesh and blood’ is a way of referring to ordinary, corruptible, decaying human existence. It does not simply mean, as it has so often been taken to mean, ‘physical humanity’ in the normal modern sense, but ‘the present physical humanity (as opposed to the future), which is subject to decay and death.’” Other scholars agree.

In other words, our present body in its ageing and decaying state, cannot, as it is, inherit the kingdom of God, it has to be glorified by resurrection. But it remains a physical body in its glorified state.

Is our resurrection body continuous with our present body?

1. Rom 8:23: Paul says that we “wait eagerly for ... the redemption of our bodies.” Something can’t be redeemed if it is destroyed.
2. 1 Cor 6:15: Paul says: “Your bodies are members of Christ himself?” i.e. closely united with Christ, suggesting our present bodies will be raised.
3. The term “resurrection” surely implies the resurrection of the present body. One cannot resurrect a body by replacing it.
4. We know that Jesus was raised in the same body – that is the reason for the empty tomb.

But how can God raise the bodies of those whose physical remains have long since disintegrated. Professor Wayne Grudem makes an interesting comment: “We must simply say that God can keep track of enough of the elements from each body to form a ‘seed’ from which to form a new body.” As a result of the discovery of DNA unique to each created being, we now know that is all that is needed, given the intervention of the Creator God, for a body to be able to be resurrected.

The importance of God overcoming death

We need to understand that death is an enemy of God not just of us (1 Cor 15:25-26). Death is alien to the living God. Hence dead bodies were ceremonially unclean in the OT (e.g. Num 19:11-16). Professor Jay McDaniel says: “The significance of physical death is that it finalizes the degree of death that the soul has experienced.” So it is crucial that God totally overcomes his enemy death and that includes the resurrection of what Wayne Grudem calls “the elements” from a person’s physical remains. Only then is the victory total. Death at every level – spiritual, relational, physical - must be overcome. God will achieve a *total* redemption, including “the elements” of the old body.

Paul exults in the victory of our resurrection: “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54-57).

Hebrews says Jesus shared in our humanity “so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb 2:14-15). John says that ultimately death will be “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14).

When will the resurrection take place?

There are different views. Some say there are two or even three resurrections.

Paul speaks of a resurrection of believers at “the last trumpet” (1 Cor 15:51-52) when the Lord himself comes down from heaven, i.e. the second coming (1 Thess 4:16).

John speaks of a second resurrection (Rev 20:4-6). He appears to be saying that only the martyrs are raised before the millennium, i.e. at the second coming. But others think the first resurrection includes all the believers who had previously died and the second is of unbelievers. This seems to be in harmony with Paul’s teaching in Corinthians and Thessalonians.

Others take the first resurrection as meaning the spiritual experience of receiving eternal life and the second resurrection as the bodily resurrection but various scholars disagree with this interpretation (e.g. R H Charles, Robert Mounce).

The resurrection of Old Testament saints

We should, in passing, note that the resurrection will include Old Testament saints. The hope of resurrection is not prominent in the OT but some spoke of it: Job (Job 19:25-26), Isaiah (Isa 26:19), Daniel (Dan 12:1-2).

Hebrews says “they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one” (Heb 11:13-16, 39-40).

Then there is that account by Matthew of Old Testament saints rising from the dead at the time of Jesus’ death and resurrection and appearing to many people (Matt 27:51-52). Some take this account as symbolical but, whether literal or symbolical, it is clearly teaching the resurrection of OT saints.

The resurrection and justice

Psalms 73 raises the whole issue of underserved suffering in this life very eloquently. This life can seem very unfair. The psalmist says he was envious when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. They were healthy and free from common human burdens. They are “always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.” (Psa 73:3-12).

He then describes how he struggled with the unfairness of it all. He has tried to live a righteous life but seems to have been punished. He was deeply troubled (Psa 73:13-16).

We too must struggle with it whether because of our own suffering or in sympathy with others. There is no room for glib comments or even accurate comments made insensitively. Suffering is real. The unfairness of this life is real. However the Psalmist continued: “It troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.” (Psa 73:17-20).

There is, of course, no room for rejoicing over the ultimate end of the impenitent but the Psalmist began to see his suffering (and that of other righteous people) in the light of eternity, in the light of the resurrection.

Whilst avoiding insensitivity towards those who suffer we need to see the suffering, meaninglessness and unfairness of this life in the light of eternity. God forbid that we should not be compassionate and do all we can to alleviate the suffering of others. But the remaining unfairness and injustices of this life will be more than rectified for us believers after the resurrection.

The resurrection of unbelievers

The New Testament is clear that unbelievers will be judged before God but there is controversy over whether

unbelievers actually experience bodily resurrection. After all, it is possible for God to judge disembodied spirits. The New Testament says little on the subject. Jesus says those who have done evil will come out of their graves to be condemned (John 5:28-29). He also says that God “can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). Paul says: “I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (Acts 24:15).

So there seem to be hints in the New Testament that unbelievers will experience the resurrection of the body in order to stand before the Judge of all, but not, of course, the glorification of the body which believers will experience.

Conclusion on the resurrection

We believers shall rise after death with a glorified physical body, like Jesus. Our glorified bodies will be imperishable and powerful. They will not experience tiredness, weakness, sickness, injury, ageing or death. Our present body will provide the ‘seed’ from which God will form our glorified body. So, all the results of sin will be conquered and we shall live for ever in the new heavens and new earth. God will finally triumph over death itself.

The destruction of world

The New Testament says: “The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly ... The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare ... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat” (2 Peter 3:7, 10, 12).

Is this literal? Does it mean the total destruction of the Earth? When will it happen? We shall examine these questions.

Secular interest in the end of the world

Apocalyptic End of the World movies are popular and there have been hundreds of predictions of the date of the end of the world over the centuries – currently 2028, 2037, 2129, 2240 and 2280!

However, we have already noted that secular scholars anticipate the world ending. Professor Stephen Hawking said in April 2013 “We must continue to go into space for humanity. We won’t survive another 1,000 years without escaping our fragile planet.”

The Cambridge Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, founded by Professors Huw Price, and Martin Rees, states: “Many scientists are concerned that developments in human technology may soon pose new, extinction-level risks to our species as a whole.”

The Future of Humanity Institute, Oxford, founded by Professor Nick Bostrom, speaks of “global catastrophic risks, in which an adverse outcome would either cause the extinction of Earth-originating intelligent life or permanently and drastically destroy its future potential. It would spell an end to the human story.”

Those who dismiss giving serious thought to the end of the world are therefore being rather naïve. If serious secular scholars are taking it very seriously, surely Christians should.

Is prophecy of the destruction of the earth literal?

Clearly the secular scholars I mentioned are taking the possibility of the earth being destroyed literally. I see no reason why the description in 2 Peter 3:3-13 should not be taken as literal. I maintain the position of taking Scripture literally unless there is very good reason to take it as symbolical. It is interesting that the author is, by implication, rebuking those who scoff at a literal return of Christ and goes on to point out what will happen in association with that literal return. I hardly think he would respond to their scoffing by conveying highly symbolical information.

Professor Bo Reicke on this passage says: “The solar system and the great galaxies, even space-time relationships, will be abolished ... All elements which make up the physical world will be dissolved by heat and utterly melt away. It is a picture which in an astonishing degree corresponds to what might actually happen according to modern theories of the physical universe.” Michael Green allows for the possibility of a symbolical interpretation but he writes: “Does Peter teach that the whole world will be destroyed by fire? There is no *a priori* reason why he should not” and he add that it

is “by no means incredible to a generation which lives after Hiroshima.”

Will the earth be totally destroyed or renewed?

This is a very important question and there are different views amongst Christian interpreters.

Some say the earth will be totally annihilated and point to various biblical passages which seem to support this. 2 Peter 3:7, 10-12 speaks of the destruction of the “elements” and the “heavens.” Jesus says: “Heaven and earth will pass away” (Matt 24:35). Hebrews 1:10-12 says the foundations of the earth, and the heavens will perish. Rev 20:11 says: “The earth and the heavens fled from [God’s] presence, and there was no place for them.”

However there are various passages which seem to support the idea of the earth being radically cleansed and renewed. Jesus speaks of “the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne” (Matt 19:28). Peter speaks of when “the time comes for God to restore everything” (Acts 3:21).

Paul predicts that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:20-22). John speaks of God saying “I am making everything new!” (Rev 21:5).

There are various considerations which support the idea of radical renewal, not total destruction:

1. The earth will no more be destroyed by the fire than it was by the flood

2 Peter 3:6-7 draws a parallel between the Flood and the destruction of the earth by fire. “By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” However the earth was not totally destroyed by the Flood. It was radically cleansed and survived. The parallel suggests the same will happen by fire in the End Times.

2. Destruction of the earth would be total victory for Satan

God is deeply concerned for the whole of creation. He pronounced it “very good” (Gen 1:31). He gave humans the responsibility to care for creation (Gen 1:28). He provides for all creatures (Psa 104:27-28).

Creation is there to bring glory to God. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psa 19:1).

God also made a covenant with “every living creature on earth” (Gen 9:9-10).

In the light of all this the total destruction (as opposed to “resurrection”) of the earth would be a victory for Satan.

3. God is redeemer of all creation, not just human beings

God aims to redeem the whole of creation, not just human beings. He “was pleased ... through [Christ] to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col 1:15-20).

Paul describes creation as groaning whilst it waits “to be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-22).

So God’s purpose for the earth is not destruction but redemption. One cannot redeem something which has been destroyed.

4. Comparison with the resurrection of the body

We have already concluded that the resurrection body is not completely new but is continuous with our old (existing) body. If this is how God redeems human beings then it seems convincing that he will do the same with the redemption of creation.

When does the ‘destruction’ of the world take place?

Some think the ‘destruction’ of the world is at the beginning of the Millennium but it seems clear from Revelation that

it takes place in association with the Great White Throne judgment which is after the Millennium (Rev 20:11; 21: 1, 5). It seems appropriate that it is part of the final judgment. Even the earth does not escape this judgment.

But what about Jesus' words in Matthew 24:29-31 that immediately after the great tribulation (before his return) "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken"?

Some say Matthew 24 is symbolical and refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. Others say it shows there is no literal millennium. I have already explained why I don't agree with these views.

Some argue that Matthew 24:29-31 is an example of 'prophetic foreshortening' i.e. the prophets seeing two future events as closely related in time, whereas in reality they are separated by a long period of time.

Finally, some say Matthew 24:29-31 is not describing the 'destruction' of the world but lesser cosmic events (whether literal or symbolical) associated with the second coming. If literal, it could be describing an eclipse and an asteroid or asteroids hitting the earth. I find this view, namely, that Jesus was describing a lesser cosmic event than the 'destruction' of the world, most convincing.

If the earth is to be destroyed does conservation matter?

If we take eschatology seriously, we shall not simply try to sort out the order and nature of events in the end times, we shall seek to live in the light of them. That will involve being true disciples of Christ. One aspect of such discipleship is care for God's earth. Some people have concluded that, since the earth is to be destroyed anyway, we don't need to trouble ourselves with being conservationists. However, they are mistaken.

We have noted that God is not going to destroy the earth totally but to redeem it and radically renew it. God is not giving up on planet earth and neither should we.

We have also noted that God gave humans the responsibility to care for creation: "fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Gen 1:28). The words 'subdue' and 'rule' have been misunderstood as approving the selfish domination and abuse of creation which has, in fact, taken place. But it is clear from the Genesis account that humans are meant to be God's viceroys and to rule in the same way as he does. God does not exploit creation and neither should we.

God cares for creation so, if we want to be godly, we have to do the same. "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives" (2 Peter 3:11).

Now we come to the most difficult subject in End Times teaching – Hell. We have to take this important issue very seriously and not avoid it as an unpleasant subject.

The truth about Hell

A true story told by a London bus driver was reported recently by the BBC. In the interview he said: "A bloke got on the bus and started screaming and shouting: "We're going to 'ell. We're going to 'ell." I told 'im: "No, we're not goin' to 'ell. We're goin' to Ilford." This is certainly not the way to deal with the subject of Hell but at least the man was not avoiding the issue, unlike many Christians today.

It was also reported that a Norfolk church had put up a notice with the slogan "If you think there is no God, you'd better be right" - with flames underneath the message. Someone reported it to the police who said: "National guidance required us to investigate the circumstances and the matter has been recorded as a hate incident. Having spoken to the pastor of the church, it has been agreed the poster will be taken down." The person who complained said: "It is my basic understanding that Christianity is inclusive and loving in nature. The message being displayed outside of the church could not be further from the often-uttered phrase 'love thy neighbour'."

Again, this is not a helpful way of communicating about Hell. But, far from being a hate crime, if Hell is a reality, it is profoundly unloving not to warn people but in more sensitive and compassionate ways. So Pope Francis was exemplary when he warned the Mafia about Hell in March 2014.

But is Hell a reality? Is there a place of everlasting conscious suffering for those who reject the Gospel?

The “wrath of God”

The idea of the wrath of God is alien to our modern, easy-going, pluralistic age where human rights and individual freedom dominate. So the church often preaches a grandfatherly god who likes to indulge his “grandchildren” (human beings). This god has given us written instructions as to how we should and shouldn’t live. But he doesn’t take any action (in this life or the next) if we don’t follow them. In fact, we Christians often order our lives on a secular pattern, especially influenced by our powerful media.

Some scholars tone down the Bible’s references to the “wrath of God”, saying it means “an impersonal process of cause and effect, the inevitable result of sin.”

Other scholars disagree and explain that the wrath of God is not bad temper or an emotional or vindictive outburst but rather a settled, holy reaction against sin. It is, of course, ascribing human characteristics to God or, more specifically, attributing human emotions to God, but so is saying that God is loving.

Martin Luther called God’s wrath his ‘alien work’ and his love as his ‘proper work.’ It is appropriate to say ‘God is love’ but not ‘God is wrath.’

It is not just the Old Testament which speaks about the wrath of God, the New Testament teaches about it too.

The teaching of Jesus

Jesus teaches more about Hell than all the other NT writers. He spoke twice as much about God’s wrath as his love.

In summary Jesus taught that:

- People with wrong attitudes towards a brother/sister are in danger of Hell (Matt 5:22).
- People who persist in sin are in danger of Hell (Matt 5:29-30, cf. 18:9).
- Hypocritical religious leaders who harm their followers are in danger of Hell (Matt 23:33).
- Hell for the unrighteous is conscious agony (The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:23-28. There is, of course, symbolism in this passage but it is very unlikely that Jesus would have told such a story which is based upon the terrible concept of conscious agony in Hell, had he not believed in the reality of Hell).
- The wicked will finish up in the “blazing furnace” of Hell (Matt 13:40-42).
- The unrighteous will go away to eternal punishment (Matt 25:41-46).

It is very difficult indeed to believe that Jesus would have taught all that if Hell is unreal and there is no conscious punishment.

The teaching of the rest of the New Testament

The wrath of God is a theme recurring throughout the rest of the New Testament. Paul taught that people who persistently reject the truth will incur God’s wrath (Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8; 9:22). So will persistently immoral, impure or greedy people (Eph 5:6 cf 2:3; Col 3:5-6).

He writes that when Jesus returns “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess 1:8-9).

Hebrews warns that “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb 10:26-27).

Jude says that seriously ungodly people who had slipped into the church face “the punishment of eternal fire” and “blackest darkness has been reserved for ever” Jude 7, 13).

On the other hand, Paul speaks of Jesus saving believers from God’s coming wrath (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:10), rescuing us from the wrath which the law brings (Rom 4:15).

Will everyone will be saved in the end?

Some people believe that everyone will be saved and get into heaven in the end. This is called universalism (universal salvation). They say the Bible teaches the cross leads to “justification and life for ALL people” (Rom 5:18). God will “have mercy on them ALL” (Rom 11:32).

But elsewhere Paul clearly contradicts such an interpretation. He says “God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’ (Rom 2:6-16) and adds “for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Rom 6:6-12). He predicts that Jesus will “punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess 1:7-10).

It seems clear, therefore, that Rom 5:18 means that justification and life is *available* for all people (but, of course, some do not accept it). Similarly, Rom 11:32 teaches God *wants* to have mercy on all, but some will not accept the gospel.

Similarly when Paul says “in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22), he is referring to believers. When he writes to Timothy that God “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:3-4) but that does not mean that all will do so.

Critics of universalism say that it undermines the importance of faith, the seriousness of sin, the significance of divine judgment and the urgency of evangelism.

Will there be a second chance to turn to Christ after death?

Peter writes that after his resurrection Jesus preached the gospel to those who had died (1 Peter 3:19-20; 4:6). In the second passage it refers to those who had lived in the time of Noah. There are numerous interpretations of these difficult passages. It doesn't seem likely that Jesus preached only to Noah's generation or that he was proclaiming judgment to fallen angels (which is how some people interpret them). The main question is whether Jesus preached to all the dead, giving those who had been disobedient a second chance after death to accept the gospel.

Another passage sometimes said to speak of a second chance after death is John 5:28-29 “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.” However this is a misunderstanding. It is simply referring to the Lord ‘commanding’ the resurrection of the dead – both of believers and unbelievers. It says nothing about Jesus preaching the gospel to the dead.

The idea of there being a second chance after death to turn to Christ contradicts Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus. In it Abraham says to the rich man: “between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (Luke 16:26). True, this is a story but I do not think Jesus would have conveyed such a solemn idea that there was no chance of repentance after death had it not been in fact true.

In my view the most likely interpretation of the passages in 1 Peter is that Jesus descended to Hades (deemed to be the place of all the dead in OT times) and announced the gospel to the OT saints – those who were already believers but hadn't heard the gospel.

Is Hell everlasting conscious punishment?

This is the traditional view and is held by many conservative Christians today. It was held by many leading Christians in history and some Evangelical scholars teach it today. They point out that Jesus spoke of “eternal fire” (Matt 18:8) and he parallels eternal punishment and eternal life (Matt 25:46). Paul speaks of “everlasting destruction” (2 Thess 1:9). Hebrews speaks of “eternal judgment” (6:2). John says the smoke of the torment of those who worship the Beast (Antichrist) “will rise for ever and ever” (Rev 14:11). He adds that “Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” together with the devil, “beast and false prophet,” death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev 20:10-15). Although the passage only specifies that the devil, “beast and false prophet” “will be tormented day and night for ever and ever”, the implication seems to be that those whose name is not in the book of life will suffer the same fate.

Whereas we can take the fire and lake as symbolical, it seems that the NT predicts Hell as eternal conscious physical

and mental torment. It is understandable that to many this seems a clear conclusion.

However there are a significant number of scholars, including evangelical scholars, who believe that, whereas Hell is real and is the destination of those who persistently reject the gospel, it is not everlasting.

Is Hell temporary conscious punishment?

Those who believe Hell is temporary include prominent evangelical scholars like John Stott, John Wenham, Tom Wright, Anthony Thistleton and Philip Hughes. Michael Green refers to the “savage doctrine” of eternal suffering. The Evangelical Alliance’s Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE) published a report entitled “The Nature of Hell” in 2000 which accepts that evangelicals are divided in their opinion. Most accept that Hell is eternal but a large minority believe it isn’t, so it isn’t a fringe opinion. The report pleads for unity in diversity and mutual respect. It is well worth reading.

You could be forgiven for thinking that those saying that Hell is temporary are simply ignoring the plain teaching of Scripture quoted in the previous section. But why do these evangelical scholars, who respect the authority of Scripture as God’s Word, think otherwise? The fact is that the issue and the interpretation of Scripture is not quite as straightforward as it may seem. We need to examine the arguments.

In passing, we should note that some people think that unbelievers are simply annihilated at death – they pass out of existence. However annihilationism, as it is called, seems obviously contrary to Scripture. Jesus speaks of the rich man being in conscious torment in Hades (Luke 16:19-31). This is not a literal story but I cannot believe Jesus would have made such a clear statement about the consciousness of departed unbelievers if it were not true in principle.

Then passages we looked at in the previous section clearly teach the reality of Hell as conscious suffering. The query as to whether Hell is eternal does not undermine that truth.

Problems with Hell being everlasting

A. *Biblical language*

“Eternal”: The Greek word translated “eternal” in our English NT basically means “of the age” or “age-long.” So it relates to the age to come and refers to the new *quality* of life in the age to come. It can be used not meaning ‘everlasting’. The meaning has to be determined from the context (surrounding passage). Dr Dick France, commenting on Matthew 25:41 about the ungodly going “into the eternal fire” says the word could be used meaning ‘belonging to the age to come’. Or it could mean ‘going on for ever’ i.e. the fire goes on for ever but the “fuel” (ungodly people) don’t last forever: they are destroyed. So this passage doesn’t settle the question is Hell everlasting conscious punishment? Other scholars agree. What they are saying is that eternal punishment could be destruction which lasts for ever. So it is eternal in its effect not in the consciousness of the person so condemned.

“For ever and ever”: But what about passages which use the term “for ever and for ever.” Scholars point out that even this doesn’t always mean “everlasting.” For example it is used of the destruction of “Babylon” (meaning the godless world system) in Rev 19. Verse 3 says “The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever” but the destruction of the godless world system would hardly seem to go on for ever, despite the term “for ever and ever”. What it means is that it is destroyed for ever.

“**Destruction**”: Jesus speaks of the ungodly being destroyed (Matt 7:13; 10:28). So does Paul (Rom 9:22; Php 3:19). He says “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess 1:9). John Stott comments: “It would seem strange ... if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and ... it is difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.” However, as we noted in the section about the Destruction of the Earth, destruction does not always mean total annihilation.

“**Fire**”: Some that it would be perfectly possible for God to limit the ‘physical’ effect of fire to intense heat and discomfort...” This sounds like special pleading. The idea of fire speaks of annihilation.

“**Immortal**”: Are human beings essentially immortal, i.e. do they exist for ever, whether ultimately in heaven or Hell? Or is immortality a gift given to believers? This latter view is called Conditional Immortality. If it is true, then we must allow for the ungodly surviving death and experiencing judgment and Hell, even if only for a short time. The NT says that God alone is immortal (1 Tim 6:15-16) and suggests immortality is a gift for obedient human beings (Rom

2:7; 1 Cor 15:53-54; 2 Tim 1:10). It seems the NT doesn't exclude the idea that humans are not essentially immortal.

“The second death”: This is when the ungodly are “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14 cf. 21:8).

Some scholars, including evangelicals see this as a reference to annihilation. Others point out that a few verses earlier “the lake of burning sulphur” was where the devil, the beast and the false prophet “will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev 20:7).

In conclusion, it seems that the language the NT uses about the duration of Hell is not clearly conclusive.

B. Divine justice

The doctrine of Hell (and of Heaven) is important with respect to divine justice. So often in this life the innocent and godly suffer unjustly and the wicked thrive. Believing in Heaven and Hell puts this in perspective. Life after death corrects injustices and belief in it helps to cope with the injustices of this life.

However, the idea of an everlasting, conscious torment in Hell raises serious questions of justice. It's not just that the ungodly vary considerably in how they have sinned. The big question is: how can EVERLASTING conscious torment be deserved by any human being however ungodly?

People have attempted to answer this in various ways. Some say it's not the nature of the sinful lifestyle that matters so much as the fact that it is against God and that to sin against the everlasting, infinite God warrants an everlasting punishment. The greatest sin is to reject Christ. Far be it from me not to take sin seriously. We all deserve Hell. But I do not find these explanations convincing.

I believe firmly in Hell as conscious torment. But how can God, who is love, who is merciful and compassionate, who teaches us to forgive our enemies possibly condemn anyone to EVERLASTING, conscious torment (unless that person continued to rebel for all eternity)? That seems to me to be a very strong argument to believe in EVENTUAL annihilation of the ungodly.

C. Divine victory

Another serious question is that if the devil and his angels, plus the ungodly exist for ever, does this not mean that God's victory is incomplete? God's aim is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph 1:10). Christ is the one who “fills everything in every way” (Eph 1:22-23). There is “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6). Christ ascended “higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe” (Eph 4:10). How is this consistent with the everlasting existence of the devil, his angels and millions of ungodly people endlessly suffering torment in Hell? Surely eventual annihilation would be a greater victory.

D. The perfect joy of Heaven

A third serious question is, if believers are aware that the ungodly suffer for ever in Hell, how could heaven be a place of complete joy where God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more ... mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”? (Rev 21:4). Some argue that God could blot out awareness of the suffering of people, including loved ones, in Hell. Others have said that the saints will rejoice in God and his justice, including in the reality of an everlasting Hell. I do not find these arguments convincing.

What is the “fire” of Hell?

Some believe it is literal but it seems clear to me that it is symbolic. We don't have the details in Scripture but I see Hell as a God-forsaken place (effectively chosen by those who reject God) which means it is “burning” with intense dread, total self-loathing, utter loneliness, complete hopelessness, bitter regret, endless frustration, simmering rage, unceasing hatred and impenetrable darkness. It is too horrible to think about. It should cause us to re-double our prayers and witness to those who have not yet received eternal life through faith in Christ.

Are there degrees of suffering in Hell?

Justice surely requires that very evil people (the Adolph Hitlers of this world) will be punished more severely than those who are far less evil. The NT seems to say that there are degrees of punishment in Hell. Jesus said it would be more bearable for the predominantly Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon than the Jewish villages of Chorazin and

Bethsaida who had refused to repent (Matt 11:22) and even for the wicked city of Sodom than for Capernaum” (Matt 11:24). He said the more a person knows the more he will be punished for disobedience (Luke 12:47-48). Heb 10:26-29 and James 3:1 say the same.

It is possible that people will experience different lengths of time of God-forsakenness (before their annihilation) according to how sinful they have been. But this is speculation.

What happens to those who have never heard the gospel?

It is one thing to believe in Hell as conscious torment for the ungodly who die. It is quite another to think that we know who has gone to Hell. I personally have known someone who committed his life to Christ in what could have been the final seconds of his life.

Paul teaches that judgment will be according to the spiritual light a person has received (Rom 1:18-20; 2:12-16). It would appear that if people have genuinely not heard the gospel in a way which “got through” to them, they will be judged according to how they have responded to the spiritual insight they have received. God will not judge people for unavoidable ignorance (although there is the issue of culpable ignorance, when a person deliberately chooses not to find out about the gospel). Those who, through no fault of their own, do not understand the gospel (including the mentally disabled or educationally handicapped as well as those too young to understand) are in the same category of being judged according to how they have responded to the spiritual insight they have received. We should remember that the OT saints did not know the NT gospel but those who obeyed what they did understand will be saved as Hebrews 11 makes clear.

There is only one way of salvation, through faith in Jesus, but God alone knows the hearts of individual human beings and he judges with mercy and compassion. People who don’t know the gospel but who in God’s sight obey the spiritual light they have received will be saved. But it is only through Jesus – his death and resurrection - that they will be saved.

Conclusion on the duration of Hell

I have tried to explain the pros and cons of the views on this issue. I have no doubt that Hell is a possibly extended time of conscious punishment. I have carefully considered the biblical passages used by those who believe Hell is everlasting and have noted that that interpretation is not as clear as it might seem. With my high view of Scripture as the Word of God I don’t want to ignore anything it says. However it is crucial to look at passages in not only the immediate context, but also in the context of the whole of Scripture. After all, it is quite possible to prove from NT passages that slavery is acceptable.

The slavery issue is helpful because we all know it is not acceptable on the basis of general theological and moral principles. Yet it is not condemned by the NT. I see a parallel with the idea that Hell is not everlasting. It is not only the issue of biblical interpretation. I find it extremely difficult to believe that EVERLASTING conscious torment can be deserved by any ungodly human being. It would seem to conflict with the perfect justice of God who is also perfectly loving and merciful. I am not being dogmatic but I am very strongly inclined to the view that Hell is a possibly extended, but not everlasting, conscious punishment. I am aware that this can weaken the strong incentive to turn to God which everlasting punishment is in theory. But that consideration cannot remove the theological problem I have with it. I might add that, in practice, Hell doesn’t prove to be a strong incentive today anyway. Nor was it used as such in NT evangelism.

How should we Christians respond to the truth about Hell?

We should apply ourselves urgently to prayer for and witnessing to those who are not yet believers. The Evangelical Alliance report states: “Although the gospel is fundamentally ‘good news’ about the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, it is appropriate that Christian witness should also include the message of divine judgment and hell.”

Clearly this has to be done with great care, compassion, balance and sensitivity. It has been pointed out that Jesus made most of his references to Hell in addressing the disciples, rather than the general public. However he did tell the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30) with its picture of the weeds being burnt, to the crowds (although interpreted it only to his disciples). Peter mentioned God as judge in preaching to Cornelius and his friends (Acts 10:42). Paul did the same preaching to the Athenians (Acts 17:29-31).

I think therefore that the Evangelical Alliance report has got it right to say that the message of divine judgment and

hell should be included alongside an emphasis on the love of God in our evangelism.

The hope of Heaven

The New Testament speaks of two main aspects of the final state enjoyed by believers: the new heavens and the new earth and the New Jerusalem. We look first at the broader context of the final state:

The new heavens and the new earth

The hope set before us is not of some spooky, ethereal heaven floating amongst the clouds but of a totally new creation. Isaiah, 2 Peter and John prophesied this (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:12-13; Rev 21:1).

Prof E M B Green says sin has spoilt God's world but it will not have the last word. "Paradise Lost will become Paradise Regained."

Creation is 'groaning and longing' for its renewal/restoration which will coincide with the bodily resurrection of the saints (Rom 8:19-23). Redemption applies to the cosmos as well as humanity.

The new heavens and the new earth and everything in them will be united under the Lordship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20).

The incarnation of the son of God brought about a new unity between heaven and earth. Jesus is the God-man. Divinity and humanity were brought together in a new way. His resurrection developed this. Jesus is in heaven in his resurrection body. He is the heavenly man. He is fulfilling God's purpose to reconcile and bring together all things in heaven and on earth.

The Genesis creation accounts show God intended peace, harmony and order in creation. Humans were to be his viceroys, not ruling in a harsh, exploitative way but maintaining God's order in diversity. He intended that human beings should enjoy paradise and an intimate relationship with him as well as harmony with one another. But, of course, the fall of man spoilt all this. The new creation will fulfil God's original intention.

"No more sea"?

John makes the rather strange statement that in his vision of the new heaven and the new earth "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea" (Rev 21:1). Considering the beauty of the sea and the immense amount of sea life it seems unlikely that this is a literal prophecy – God's purpose is radical renewal of the whole earth. The prophets sometimes refer to the sea as a symbol of unrest amongst the nations and the ungodly (Isa 57:20; Jer 49:23).

More significant is John's vision of the "beast" (Antichrist) "coming out of the sea" (Rev 13:1). The ancient world commonly associated the sea with evil. It seems therefore that the absence of the sea is symbolical for the absence of the chaos and rebellion of godless society. The old order has been done away with.

"The New Jerusalem"

At the centre of the new earth John sees the New Jerusalem "prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev 21:10). This symbolic Jerusalem is "the city of the living God." Its descent speaks of the control of heaven in the renewed universe. In this age there is tension between heaven and an earth under divine judgment. In the new age the rule of heaven will bring unity and harmony.

The city is enormous, approximately 1500 miles square and 1500 miles high, reaching "from heaven to earth." The city of God and the Lamb will extend far over the territories of men and unite earth and heaven in one."

As a perfect cube, 1500 miles x 1500 miles x 1500 miles it is a reminder of the inner sanctuary of the temple (a perfect cube, each dimension being 20 cubits; 1 Kings 6:20), the place of divine presence."

⁹⁷ (There are some, though, who think it might have been pyramid-shaped).

In the original creation God gave man a garden. In the new creation it is a huge city (within the wider context of the new heaven and new earth) which symbolises security and contrasts with "Babylon" [the godless world system]. God intends to bring his people back to Jerusalem. Originally this meant bringing the Jewish people back to the literal

Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is home to all believers – Jewish and Gentile. This is the ultimate homecoming for God’s people. The contrast between the two cities – Babylon and the New Jerusalem is clear in the detailed descriptions in Revelation (Babylon Rev 16-18; New Jerusalem Rev 21).

“The New Jerusalem”: the heavenly vision

We shall see the majestic, awe-inspiring presence of God. The holy or pure in heart will see God face to face, as he is. Since God is spirit, what does this mean? Calvin said that this would be through seeing Christ, for to see him is to see God. Others speak of our ‘seeing’ God intuitively with our whole being. We cannot imagine the blissful joy and exalted rapture we shall experience when we see God in this way.

Earlier John sought to describe God enthroned in heaven “the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders ... From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder” (Rev 4:3-5).

He also had a vision of the glorified Jesus and wrote he saw: “someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ... His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Rev 1:13-16).

What a privilege it will be to have personal access to God in this way in view of the awesome holiness of God.

Ezekiel struggled to find words to describe his vision of God: “High above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezk 1:26-28). Notice how he does not say he saw God directly but “the *appearance of the likeness* of the glory of the Lord.”

The writer to the Hebrews describes the presence of Jesus also enthroned in heaven “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:3). He “is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Peter 3:22).

Professor Richard Bauckham writes: “Since the whole of the New Jerusalem is a holy of holies, God’s immediate presence fills it. In place of a temple, it has the unrestricted presence of God and the Lamb (21:22). Like his presence in the temple (e.g. Ezek.43), this eschatological presence of God entails holiness and glory. As his eschatological presence, it is also the source of the new life of the new creation.”

“The New Jerusalem”: the worshipping community

The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are worshipped by the heavenly hosts “many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand.” “Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,’ who was, and is, and is to come.’ They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’ ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!’ ... ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!’ ... ‘Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever.” (Rev 5:11; 4:8-11; 5:12-13; 7:12).

We believers will join in that awesome worship “lost in wonder, love and praise.”

“The New Jerusalem”: the beautiful environment

John describes the New Jerusalem: It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal ... The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth

beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass” (Rev 21:11, 18-21).

So the city was made of pure gold surrounded by a wall of translucent green. It was built on a foundation of precious stones: in ascending order - translucent green, deep blue, green, red, white, red, yellow, greenish-gold, bluish purple and purple. It had 12 gates (3 on each side) each made of a single pearl and a street of pure gold. The whole city therefore is conceived of as glowing with the glory of God, reflecting the divine nature in its every part.”

It seems that the precious stones in the city were related in the ancient world to the 12 signs of the zodiac but John lists them in the reverse order. This probably means that the reality after which the pagans aspire is found in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.” (G R Beasley-Murray).

The symbolism of the New Jerusalem speaks of the unending beauty of the environment we shall experience in Heaven. It is paradise. John also describes how “the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it” (Rev.21:26). It seems likely that this would include the (redeemed) art, culture and creativity of humanity.

“The New Jerusalem”: the loving fellowship

The writer to the Hebrews says the heavenly Jerusalem is the location “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” (Heb 12:22-23). Similarly, John “saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Rev 21:2). He also writes: “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” (Rev 19:9).

The church is the Bride of Christ and the wedding of the Lamb speaks of the intimate relationship between Jesus and the believing community.

Also, since God is love and calls us to love, the final state of believers will involve a perfectly loving fellowship. This will include acts of self-giving and service.

John describes how the names of the 12 tribes of Israel are written on the gates and the names of the 12 apostles on the foundations. This speaks of the ultimate fulfilment of God’s purpose that “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). Paul affirms: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:28-29)

“The New Jerusalem”: the question of the nations

John writes about there still being nations living outside the New Jerusalem, which seems strange. Are they part of the loving fellowship in heaven? Reference to the nations clearly relates to the OT prophecies of the eschatological glory of the earthly Jerusalem (Isa 60; 61:5, 7; 62:4-5).

There are different views of the references to the nations:

1. That it is referring only to those who have come to faith in Christ from the nations and so form the covenant people. But why are they living OUTSIDE the New Jerusalem?
2. That, the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem have special privileges compared with the nations outside. I don’t find this convincing.
3. That all the nations will become God’s people. But Jesus says that not everyone will come to eternal life (Matt 7:14; Luke 13:23-25).
4. That John has simply used OT figures of speech about the nations living around the New Jerusalem but they are not to be taken literally. This seems to be supported by the fact that John goes on to say that godless people are outside the city (Rev 22:14-15). This surely is not literal – godless and evil people in the new heaven and new earth. I am therefore inclined to accept this fourth view.

“The New Jerusalem”: the transformed body

We noted earlier in these studies that our resurrection bodies, as believers, will be like the resurrection body of Jesus - imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual (1 Cor.15:42-44). They will be controlled by the spirit which will be in harmony with the Spirit of God.

Jesus' post-resurrection body had flesh and bones (Luke 24:39) and could be touched (the implication of Luke 24:39 and John 20:27); he could break bread (Luke 24:30) and make breakfast for the disciples (John 21:9, 12-13); he could eat food (Luke 24:42f). Yet he could appear and disappear at will (Luke 24:31,36; John 20:19,26; 21:1); he could pass through solid objects (John 20:19, 26).

In John's vision a “river of the water of life” flows from God's throne and down the middle of the great street of the New Jerusalem. It has trees beside it which are “for the healing of the nations”? What does this symbolism mean? It is important to remember that only God is eternal. Eternal life comes from him and needs to be continually received from him. The idea of the tree of life (also referred to in the Garden of Eden) continually providing ‘healing’ might be a reference to this.

Will we know one another in heaven?

Will we know one another in heaven? It seems clear to me that we shall. Admittedly, the disciples on the Emmaus road didn't immediately recognise the risen Jesus but since we shall know who we are it doesn't seem likely that we wouldn't be able to tell everyone, including our loved ones, who we are, even if we are transformed!

What about marriage in heaven?

What did Jesus mean by saying: “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (Matt 22:30)? Procreation is important in a world where death is an important aspect. But the resurrection world will not be subject to death and this removes the need for procreation. There will be loving relationships in heaven but not the exclusive relationship in which procreation takes place. R T France comments: “Jealousy and exclusion will have no place there.”⁹⁸

We can be confident that the resurrection life will be without sickness, pain, sadness, strained or broken relationships or death. We can also be confident that it will be a purposeful existence, characterised by vitality and creativity. There will be challenges to overcome and achievements to reach.

“The New Jerusalem”: the governmental authority of the saints

Daniel prophesied that in the End Times the “holy people of the Most High” would share his sovereignty (Dan 7:27). Jesus foretells that the apostles will judge (i.e. govern, rule) “the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matt 19:28).

Paul broadens this out to include all the saints sharing in the Lord's authority: “Do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we will judge angels?” (1 Cor 6:2-3). He also wrote: “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12). This sharing in divine rule seems to be implied by what Paul writes to the Ephesians “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6).

It is true that some of the references to the saints ruling might refer to the Millennium (Rev 20:4-6). However this passage does not exclude the more general reference to the saints sharing the Lord's rule (in the resurrection life) in the other passages. John himself makes this clear when he says that whereas the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem will serve God they will also “reign for ever and ever” (Rev 22:3, 5).

N T Wright says: “Both Paul and Revelation stress that in God's new world those who belong to the Messiah will be placed in charge. The first creation was put into the care of God's image-bearing creatures. The new creation will be put into the care of, the wise, healing stewardship of those who have been ‘renewed according to the image of the creator’, as Paul puts it.”

“The New Jerusalem”: the absence of evil

Sin and its consequences (suffering, curse and fear) will be totally absent from the new Jerusalem: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27).

Different rewards in heaven?

Heaven will be so wonderful that being there will be sufficient reward. However it does appear from the New Testament that there are degrees of additional rewards in heaven. Jesus promises a reward to those who love people who don’t love them (Matt 5:46) to those who don’t parade their spirituality in front of others (Matt 6:1-6, 16, 18), to those who welcome a prophet (Matt 10:41) or give a cup of cold water to the needy (Matt 10:42).

In terms of being accepted by God, including into heaven, (justification) that is by grace through faith, not because of works. However true, saving faith will show itself in obedience to God and Christians are judged by works and rewarded according to what they have done. Jesus said: “I will give to everyone according to what they have done” (Rev 22:12 cf. Matt 16:27; Eph 6:8).

Perhaps the most important passage is 1 Cor. 3:10-15. Paul says we can build on the foundation of Christ using “wood, hay or straw” i.e. we fail to live a really good life or using “gold, silver, costly stones” i.e. many good works. He adds that “the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.”

We can only speculate on the nature of rewards. Perhaps they are various levels of responsibility.

The assurance of eternal life

The New Testament makes it quite clear that eternal life is a gift and it is given to those who put their trust in Christ and believe “he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

Jesus spoke of his authority to *give* eternal life to all the Father has given him (John 17:2). He also said that those who believe in him already have eternal life (in this world) and will not perish (see John 3:14-16, 36; 5:24). In his first epistle John writes: “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11-12).

Paul makes it quite clear that no-one can gain eternal life by doing good works or keeping the Law (Rom 3:28; 4:6; Gal 2:16). The reason for this is that no-one could be good enough to ‘earn’ eternal life by doing good works and keeping the Law. To be good enough to ‘earn’ eternal life would mean being perfect – doing everything written in the law.

So we are not saved (accepted by God) because of our good deeds. However saving faith which leads to eternal life is not mere intellectual belief. It involves real commitment. Saving faith will show itself in acts of love and obedience to God. After all, if we really believe we are saved and receive eternal life only because Jesus died for us then we will want to show our immense gratitude.

Jesus makes it clear that saving faith will lead us to make sacrifices. He challenged the rich man, who asked him how he could get eternal life, to give away all his riches (Matt 19:16-24). He says: “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:28-30, cf. John 12:25; Rom 2:6-7; Gal 6:8; 2 Peter 2:11). Similarly he says that those who serve him by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner, clothing the naked, looking after the sick will go to eternal life (Matt 25:34-46 cf. Heb 5:8-9). He told the parable of the Good Samaritan to someone who asked “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25-37).

Let me summarise to remove any confusion:

1. Eternal life is a gift which God gives to all who sincerely trust in Christ.
2. Our good deeds would never be good enough to ‘earn’ eternal life (we’d have to be perfect!).
3. But true faith will show itself in commitment and good works. It will express IN PRACTICE gratitude for the fact that Jesus died so he could offer us eternal life as a gift.
4. We show commitment and do good works not in order to gain eternal life (which is impossible) but because we

are grateful to have received eternal life as a gift through faith in Jesus.

With that understanding of faith in Christ (showing itself in good works) we can be secure in the knowledge that we have eternal life and that, as we persist in this faith, we shall certainly be in heaven. Jesus says about his followers “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. (John 10:28-29). He also said: “This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” (John 6:39-40).

John assures us: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:11-13). So we can rest assured that our names are written in the book of life in heaven (Luke 10:20; Heb 12:22-23 cp Rev 20:15; 21:27).

Conclusion

There is much we don’t know about Heaven. But we can be confident that we shall be for all eternity in:

- A place of unending beauty
- A place of undying love
- A place of continuous joy
- A place of unfathomable peace
- A place of universal kindness
- A place of endless divine order
- A place of never-ending fulfilment
- A place of constant opportunity
- A place of awesome worship

Understanding the Book of Revelation

Most Christians avoid the Book of Revelation because they can’t cope with it: all those seals, trumpets, bowls and beasts! However the book is in the NT for a reason and has a very important message.

There are different approaches to and interpretations of the book, and some people are very dogmatic. We need to take a humble approach, and even to be tentative about some aspects. But we can grasp the gist and general outline of the book which will help us to understand it.

In this paper we shall look at the following:

- A. Different interpretations of Revelation
- B. A brief order of events in NT eschatology (doctrine of the end times) showing how Revelation fits into it.
- C. A brief outline of Revelation chapters 4-22 giving a sense of perspective.
- D. A more detailed plan of Revelation.

Different interpretations of Revelation

The four main views

There are various different approaches to the Book of Revelation. The main ones are:

The Preterist/Contemporary-Historical View: that all the prophecies were fulfilled in the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 or the Fall of the Roman Empire. Some would see “the Beast” as the emperor Nero. But the book speaks of the final overthrow of evil, which clearly has not yet happened.

The Historicist View: that the prophecies refer to the whole of history up to present. It developed in the 11th century

amongst those troubled at the corruption of the Roman church. Some see specific reference to Popes, the Reformation, the French revolution, Charlemagne (the Holy Roman Emperor), Mussolini etc. But interpreters cannot agree on who or what the prophecies refer to.

The Futurist/Eschatological View: that the prophecies only refer to the (still future) End Times. But this means the book was largely irrelevant to the generation alive at the time it was written and to many subsequent generations, except as something about the distant future.

The Idealist/Timeless View: that the book is only symbolical and should not be taken as referring to any specific events. Obviously the book uses much symbolism but it doesn't seem likely that such a lengthy and complex book, full of detailed symbols is *only* symbolic and does not refer to any literal events.

My conclusion is that all of these views contain truth but none of them totally explains the purpose of Revelation. It seems clear to me that Revelation must be relevant to the whole history of the church – the first century, the 2nd- 21st centuries and future centuries, particularly the final generation when Jesus returns etc. Revelation clearly includes a great deal of symbolism but, as I said, I can't believe such a lengthy and complex book is solely symbolism.

We have noted previously that prophecies can be fulfilled more than once, with initial fulfilment(s) and then a major final fulfilment. I am convinced that this applies to the Book of Revelation. So it could have a fulfilment in the generation in which it was written (e.g. the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple) and in various centuries since then, but we still await the final End Times fulfilment. Thus it becomes directly relevant to every generation. The basic message is that evil will be with us and recur in each generation but it can be overcome in each generation and will finally be totally overcome and destroyed in the End Times when Jesus returns.

So I am quite happy that people have related Revelation to the 1st century during the Roman Empire, including the Fall of Jerusalem and interpret various passages as applying to this. I am also happy that people have sought to relate its teaching to the events and traumas of the last 2000 years (even though some specific interpretations might be fanciful or prejudiced). The book is meant to encourage Christians to persevere in every generation.

I firmly believe, however, that the book also refers to the future and to the last generation(s) in the End Times. It is this (Futurist/Eschatological) view that I major on because I am writing about the End Times. But I am not denying the other interpretations.

Symbolism in Revelation

We must take symbolism seriously and not jump to naïve literalistic interpretations of Revelation. Nor should we rush to adopt a symbolic interpretation of prophetic passages. It is important to have a clear indication that a passage cannot be literal before concluding it is symbolic. Even when it is symbolic it can still refer to literal events. So references to "Babylon" are clearly symbolical but they refer to the world's corrupt and unjust economic and religious system – which, sadly, is literal.

G B Caird gives a helpful illustration of John's writings:

"Imagine a room lined with maps, in which someone has placed clusters of little flags. A man in uniform is busy moving some of the flags from one position to another. It is war-time, and the flags represent units of a military command. The movement of flags may mean one of two things: either that changes have taken place on the battlefield, with which the map must be made to agree, or that an order is being issued for troop movements, and the flags are being moved to the new positions the units are expected to occupy. In the first case the movement of the flags is descriptive symbolism, in the second case determinative symbolism. The strange and complex symbols of John's vision are, like the flags in this parable, the pictorial counterpart of earthly realities; and these symbols too may be either determinative' [what is to happen] 'or descriptive' [what has happened]. John sees some things happen in heaven because God has determined that equivalent events should shortly happen on earth, but other heavenly events take place ... because earthly events have made them possible John himself frequently uses military imagery, but mixes it freely with other types of image, and makes no attempt at sustained metaphor or allegory."

Interpretation is made more complicated because symbols are used very flexibly. Prof Richard Bauckham says: "Revelation's images are flexible, theologically significant and not intended to be pieced together into a single literal picture of what will happen at the End. Besides the great earthquake, there are many other images of the End: the harvest, the vintage, the last great battle, the Lamb's wedding banquet. Only the insensitively literalistic will be puzzled that John can describe the fall of Babylon first in the great earthquake, and then at the hands of the armies of the beast, or that in the last of the seven plagues we find an earthquake instead of the Battle of Armageddon which the

penultimate plague had led us to expect.”¹⁰⁰

Chronology (order of events) in Revelation

I believe there is an overall chronological development in Revelation but it is also clear that there is repetition, overlapping and there are flashbacks and flashforwards. John sometimes goes back and restates something with greater detail or intensity and this increases as the book continues. There are also parentheses or intervals when the scene changes dramatically, perhaps from earth to heaven, etc.

Prof Robert Mounce writes “that the visions of John neither follow in a strict chronological sequence nor do they systematically recapitulate one another. While there is a rather clearly discernible literary development, it is not intended to represent a corresponding historical development. Obviously, there is progression, but not without considerable restatement and development of detail. The further one moves toward the consummation the greater is this enlargement. All attempts to press the material into well-defined patterns leave the impression that John was more interested in producing a work of literary subtlety than sharing with his fellow believers the awe-inspiring visions that God had dramatically revealed to him. E. F. Scott wisely remarks that a perfectly logical apocalypse would be a contradiction in terms (p. 26).”¹⁰¹

We should note in passing that some people believe that Revelation 4-20 is only about the Jewish people but it seems clear that this is not the case.¹⁰²

A brief order of events in NT eschatology (doctrine of the end times)

There are different views on various aspects but this is how I have come to understand the order of events in the end times according to the NT. You will see that many events have parallels between Revelation and other parts of the NT. [It is important to remember that Revelation sometimes repeats itself - using different language].

1. **War, famine, earthquakes, etc.** (Matt 24:6-7; Rev 6:1-8). These are repeating events and like long-distance signs pointing towards a destination on a motorway.
2. **The Jewish people regaining control of Jerusalem** (Luke 21:24).
3. **Worldwide Persecution** (Matt 24:9-10; Rev 6:9-11; 7, 12). Persecution is worse than ever now but will get even worse.
4. **Worldwide Apostasy - people giving up the Faith** (Matt 24:12). Again, this will get worse later on.
5. **Worldwide evangelism** (Matt 24:14). Much of this has been achieved but more needs to happen.
6. **An increase in false messiahs/prophets** (Matt 24:23-24). Again, they have increased but this will get much worse.
7. **Great Tribulation** (Matt 24:22) including:
 - *More severe pre-final judgments* (Rev 8-9).
 - *The ‘Two Witnesses’* (Rev 11), if they are a literal pair it seems appropriate to put them here.
 - *The Rebellion and Antichrist* (2 Thess. 2:3-7, 9-12; Rev 13:1-5 cf. 1 John 2:18-23).
 - *The False Prophet and deification of Antichrist* - “*the abomination which causes desolation*” (Matt 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4-12; Rev 13:6, 11-15), the *mark of the Beast* (Rev 13:16-18), persecution of God’s people (Rev 13:7).
 - *Judgment on the Antichrist and his followers* (Rev 16:1-15 cf 2 Thess. 2:8). Described in more detail in Rev 19:11-21.
 - *Armageddon* (Rev 16:16)
 - *The fall of ‘Babylon’* (the world’s corrupt and unjust economic and religious system) at the hands of Antichrist (Rev 17-18). Obviously, this precedes the judgment on Antichrist of Rev 16, evidence that John does not stick to a definite chronology but has ‘flashbacks’ and ‘flashforwards.’
8. **Cosmic signs** – perhaps literal (Matt 24:29; Rev 6:12-17).
9. **Return of Christ** (seen by the whole world) (Matt 24:27, 30) including:
 - *Gathering of the elect* (Matt 24:31)

- *The Wedding supper of the Lamb* (Rev 19:1-10). Some would not see this as literal.
- *Destruction of Antichrist and the False Prophet* (Rev 19:11-21). Mentioned previously in Rev 16:1-15 cf 2 Thess 2:8.

10. **The Millennium**, if literal (Rev 20). The rule of Christ on earth.

11. **The Eternal state** (Rev 21-22). The *New Heaven and the New Earth and the New Jerusalem* (God present in glory with his people).

A brief outline of Revelation chapters 4-22

1. **Vision of God's throne and worship in heaven** (Rev 4).

SEALS (*bringing problems and destruction, emphasising suffering of church. Seals 1-4 emphasise the inevitable results of human sin. Seal 6 is more like divine intervention*)

2. **The Lamb [Jesus] alone is worthy to open the 7 seals of the scroll in God's hand** (Rev 5).
3. **6 SEALS opened by the Lamb**: 'releasing' the **4 horsemen** – bringing war, inflation, famine, plague (Seals 1-4 cf Matt 24:6-8); assuring the martyrs their prayers would be answered (Seal 5 cf Matt 24:9); fearful cosmic signs (Seal 6 cf Matt 24:29) (Rev 6).
4. **Interval & scene change: Vision of the "144,000" believers** (perhaps martyrs) being 'sealed' as belonging to God and **the countless number of all believers** gathered before God's throne cf Matt 24:14 gospel going to whole world. These had come out of great tribulation cf Matt 24:21f. (Rev 7).
5. **7th Seal opened**: followed by silence then the "incense smoke" of the prayers of God's people lead to thunder, lightning and earthquake (Rev 8:1-5).

TRUMPETS (*overlapping with the Seals but bringing more intense problems and destruction, emphasising what the world will suffer. 1-4 emphasise limited – 'one third' - divine judgment encouraging repentance*)

6. **6 TRUMPETS sounded**: leading to destruction of third of earth, sea, water sources, heavenly bodies (Trumpets 1-4 sound like asteroid strike cf Matt 24:29) and demonically-inspired great tribulation but no repentance (Rev 8:6-13; 9:1-21).
7. **Interval & scene change**: Angel tells **John to eat the open scroll**, to **prophesy** and to **measure the Temple**. **Gentiles control city 42 months** (Rev 10:1-11:2).
8. **Interval & scene change: 2 witnesses** prophesy for 42 months, prevent rains and cause plague. **Beast from Abyss (Antichrist)** kills them but 3.5 days later resurrected (Rev 11:3-7).
9. **7th Trumpet (3rd Woe): The world becomes the Kingdom of God and the Messiah**. The elders praise God and **foretell final judgment** and rewards for the faithful (Rev 11:8-19)

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SATAN & THE CHURCH SETS SCENE FOR FINAL CONFRONTATION

10. **The pregnant woman (The true Israel) bears a child (Christ)**. **Red dragon (Satan)** – with 7 heads, 10 horns - seeks to devour child but child caught up to heaven (Ascension). **Woman flees to desert 1260 days** (3.5 years first half of Great **Tribulation**). **Michael defeats dragon** (devil) and **casts him down to earth** in fury and the **woman flies away to safety for the rest of the Tribulation** (Rev 12).
11. **Beast from the sea (Antichrist)**, (7 heads, 10 horns), One head fatally wounded but healed. All those not in Book of Life worship the Beast who attacks God's people (Rev 13:1-10).

12. **Beast from the Earth (False Prophet/Religion)**, (2 horns), made people worship the 1st Beast, set up image and enforced Mark of Beast 666 (Rev 13:11-18).
13. **Interval & scene change:** Vision of the **Lamb on Mt Zion with 144,000**. **Angel** proclaims gospel and **warns of judgment on 'Beast-worshippers' (followers of Antichrist)**. Fall of 'Babylon' (the world's corrupt and unjust economic and religious system) announced. **Son of man reaps harvest of judgment** (Rev 14)

BOWLS (bringing the final judgments on earth. The judgments are universal, not a call to repentance - no time for repentance).

14. **Those triumphant over the Beast (Antichrist) sing** (Rev 15:1-4)
15. **7 angels with 7 Bowls (containing plagues) appear** (Rev 15:5-8): Sores and total destruction of sea, water sources. People scorched by sun but no repentance. Darkness. Euphrates dried up and **Beast and false prophet gather nations for Armageddon**. Earthquake splits Babylon and destroys cities. Huge hailstones but no repentance (Rev 16).
16. **The great prostitute** (i.e. Babylon - the world's corrupt and unjust economic and religious system) with 7 heads/hills/kings (i.e. great power) and 10 horns/kings (i.e. all the nations following the Antichrist who attack the Lamb). The Antichrist and the nations will bring the great prostitute to ruin (Rev 17).
17. **Angel announces fall of Babylon** in "one hour," i.e. swift economic collapse (Rev 18).

THE VICTORY OF JESUS (over the Antichrist; the 'binding' of Satan for the Millennium, his release and total defeat; the final judgment, the new heaven and new earth).

18. **Wedding Supper of the Lamb**. The church rejoices in the downfall of Babylon/the great prostitute and gathers for the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:1-10).
19. **Rider called Faithful and True, Word of God** (i.e. Jesus) judges nations, defeats the Beast and false prophet. They are thrown into lake of fire (Rev 19:10-21).
20. **Satan bound for 1000 years (The Millennium)**, the saints reign with Christ. Then Satan is released to summon Gog and Magog (godless nations) to attack God's people. Heaven defeats them and **Satan cast into lake of fire** (Rev 20:1-10).
21. **Great white throne judgment**. All whose names are in the Lamb's book of life are saved. Death, Hades and others are thrown into lake of fire (Rev 20:11-15).
22. **New heaven and a new earth**. The New Jerusalem, crystal-clear river, trees of life (Rev 21-22).

A more detailed plan of Revelation 4-22

I find it helps to get a clearer impression of Revelation to have the context portrayed in a simple chart format with brief explanations and comments. This is what I have sought to do here.

As I have noted above, **it is helpful to remember that Revelation majors on the Great Tribulation in chapters 8-18**. It includes the repeating, 'long-distance' signs (war, famine, earthquakes, etc – Seals - 6:1-8) and worldwide persecution (6:9-11; 7, 12). Then it moves onto the Great Tribulation: more severe pre-final judgments (Trumpets 8-9), the 'Two Witnesses' (11), the Rebellion and Antichrist (Beast 13:1-5), the False Prophet and deification of Antichrist - "the abomination which causes desolation" (13:6, 11-15), the mark of the Beast (13:16-18) and persecution of God's people (13:7). Then there is a summary description of the judgment on the Antichrist and his followers (Bowls 16:1-15) described in more detail in Rev 19. John also describes Armageddon (16:16) and the fall of 'Babylon' (the world's corrupt and unjust economic and religious system) at the hands of Antichrist (17-18).

A detailed plan of the Book of Revelation 4-22

			<div>HEAVENLY PERSPECTIVE: THE SLAIN LAMB TRIUMPHS <i>Throne in heaven (Rev 4):</i> With the rainbow, 24 elders, 7-fold (Holy) Spirit, Sea of glass and 4 living creatures</div> <div>Lamb as if slain, on throne Praised by innumerable multitude because worthy to open scroll (Rev 5, Parallel to Chapter 7)</div>			
<div>EARTHLY PERSPECTIVE: REPEATED SIGNS Only the Lamb/Lion of Judah can open SEALS (Rev 6)</div> <div>THE SEALS ARE A REPEAT OF JESUS PROPHECY IN MATTHEW 24 ETC: RECURRING SIGNS</div>	<div>1st Seal: White horse – conquest (Rev 6:1-2)</div> <div>Cf. Matt 24:6 “wars and rumours of wars”</div>	<div>2nd Seal: Red horse – removal of peace, bloodshed (Rev 6:3-4)</div> <div>Cf Matt 24:7 “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.”</div>	<div>3rd Seal: Black horse – scales, high inflation, shortages, famine (Rev 6:5-6)</div> <div>Matt 24:7 “There will be famines.”</div>	<div>4th Seal: Pale horse – Death & Hades quarter of earth killed sword, famine, plague (Rev 6:7-8)</div> <div>Luke 21:11 “pestilences in various places”</div>	<div>5th Seal: Martyrs under altar: “How long?” Given white robe (purity), soon full number will be martyred (Rev 6:9-11)</div> <div>Matt 24:9 “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.”</div>	<div>6th Seal: Earthquake, Sun dark, Moon blood red, stars fall, people hide. Wrath of God has come (Rev 6:12-17)</div> <div>Matt 24:29: “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies ... shaken.”</div>
			<div>HEAVENLY PERSPECTIVE: THE MARTYRS TRIUMPH (Rev 7): Angels ready to judge land and sea but the 144,000 of Israel must be sealed first with the name of God on foreheads. Countless number: God’s people – delivered out of the great tribulation, white robes, palm branches, worship God</div>			

			and the Lamb (Parallel to Chap. 5)			
			7th Seal (Rev 8): (The judgment scroll is now open). Half an hour silence. Angel with censer offered incense with prayers of saints. Then threw censer onto earth			
EARTHLY PERSPECTIVE: GROWING JUDGMENT 7 angels with TRUMPETS (Rev 8:1-7): 1st Trumpet: Hail, fire, blood. One third of earth burned THE TRUMPETS ARE MORE SEVERE PRE-FINAL JUDGMENT ON A HOSTILE WORLD AIMING TO BRING REPENTANCE	2nd Trumpet: Blazing 'mountain' falls into sea. One third of sea and living creatures destroyed (Rev 8:8-9) A natural disaster? Like an asteroid. Only a third killed: the judgment is not yet total and complete	3rd Trumpet: Asteroid? destroys one third of water supplies, many die. (Rev 8:10-11) A natural disaster? Like an asteroid	4th Trumpet: One third of sun, moon and stars darkened and one third of each day Eagle cries "Woe" about final 3 Trumpets (Rev 8:12-13) Akin to eclipses "Each numbered series moves us closer to the end; not so much because it follows the preceding series in sequence but because it heightens and intensifies the final and climactic confrontation of God and the forces of evil." ¹⁰³	5th Trumpet (1st Woe): Locusts with scorpion-like sting torture those without seal of God on foreheads. From the Abyss ruled over by Abaddon/Apollyon (Rev 9:1-12) Appears to be more of a demonic attack on humans. The torture is for "5 months" the life-cycle of the locust	6th Trumpet (2nd Woe): Voice from altar calls for release of 4 angels bound near Euphrates to kill 1/3 of humanity, using mounted troops (Rev 9:13-19) Appears to be more of a demonic attack on humans. The Euphrates is the boundary between Israel and her enemies (Assyria and Babylon)	Those not killed by these plagues did not repent of their sins: idolatry, murder, thieving, sexual immorality, magic (Rev 9:20-21)
		INTERLUDE: THE PROPHETIC ROLE (Rev 10:1-8) Angel with open scroll stands with one foot on land and the other on the sea and the 7 thunders cry out. But John forbidden to record their words. Angel then says: "No more delay." Probably the 7 thunders were more warning plagues but men determined	John told to eat the scroll: sweet taste but bitter in the stomach. He is commanded to prophesy to many peoples. (Rev 10:9-11) "From this point on the Apocalypse becomes a multi-	John is told to measure the Temple , excluding the outer Court of the Gentiles. They will control the city for 42 months. (Rev 11:1-2) Some say the "temple" represents the church but it could relate to		

not to repent so they were 'cancelled.'	dimensional presentation of the final triumph of God over evil. Any attempt to arrange the material in a strictly sequential pattern is doomed to failure." ¹⁰⁴	the literal temple the non-messianic Jews may restore
<p>The 2 witnesses will prophesy for 1260 days (42 months) and have supernatural power to punish enemies, prevent rain (for 1260 days), and strike the Earth with plague – 1st half of Tribulation (Rev 11:3-6)</p> <p>There could be literal witnesses modelled after Moses and Elijah, or leading representatives of believing Jews and Gentiles</p>	<p>Prophecy proves more effective in the End Times, drawing the nations to worship God</p>	<p>Then the Beast from the Abyss kills them, exposing their bodies for 3.5 days, after which they are resurrected to heaven. Earthquake destroys 1/10 of city (Rev 11:7-14)</p> <p>First mention of the Beast from the Abyss i.e. demonic</p>
<p>DECLARATION OF VICTORY (Foretaste of Parousia) 7th Trumpet (3rd Woe): (Rev 11:15-19) The world becomes the Kingdom of God and the Messiah. The elders praise God and foretell final judgment and rewards for the faithful</p> <p>The DECLARATION is seen as a 'woe' for the wicked</p>		
<p>Chapters 12-14 set the scene for the final conflict between the church and evil, and</p>		

		introduce various key characters		
<p>The pregnant woman (Rev 12:1) clothed in the sun with the moon beneath her feet and a crown of 12 stars appears.</p> <p>The woman is the true Israel, i.e. the church, not just the messianic community. The stars of 12 tribes of Israel</p>	<p>The red dragon (Rev 12:2-5) with 7 heads (great knowledge) and 10 horns (great power) seeks to devour her child (who will rule the world) but he is caught up to heaven.</p> <p>Satan (cf v 9) 7 heads: great knowledge 10 horns: great power seeks to destroy the Messiah</p>	<p>The woman flees to the desert for 1260 days – 2nd half of Tribulation (Rev 12:6)</p> <p>The desert: a place of refuge. 1260 days: symbol of limited period of unrestrained evil/persecution</p>	<p>Michael defeats the dragon. (Rev 12:7-12) The dragon (devil, accuser of the faithful) is cast down to earth, filled with fury.</p> <p>Defeat is ultimately the cross & resurrection but now is the final End Time battle and defeat</p>	<p>Satan pursues the woman (Rev 12:13-17) she is transported into the desert for 3.5 years (1260 days) and protected from attack. Satan attacks the rest of her offspring</p> <p>Seems a repeat of 12:6. Her offspring are believers. The river spewed by Satan may be river of lies.</p>
		John keeps repeating and underlining events in the constant battle against evil, but, overall, moves forward in time towards the End		
<p>FALSE PROPHET Beast from the Earth (Rev 13:11) 2 horns like a lamb spoke like a dragon.</p> <p>Probably an individual seeking to appear gentle and harmless (like a lamb) but actually demonic</p>	<p>It made people worship the 1st Beast. (Rev 13:12)</p> <p>Fulfills the role of false religion/ideology manipulating humanity (via economic boycott and death threats) to worship secular power. The “universal victory of humanism.”</p>	<p>It exercised miraculous power. (Rev 13:12-13)</p> <p>The evil trinity: the beast from the earth under authority of the beast from the sea which is under the authority of the dragon, i.e. religious compromise, secular power, Satan (i.e. the false prophet, Antichrist, Satan)</p>	<p>It set up an image of the 1st Beast which it brought to life. (Rev 13:14-15)</p> <p>Cf 2 Thess 2:4 “sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”</p>	<p>It forced people to receive the Mark of the Beast 666. (Rev 13:16-18)</p> <p>People were often tattooed with the mark of their god. Of the many interpretations of 666 the best may be the beast and evil trinity was constantly falling short of divine perfection: 777</p>
		<p>HEAVENLY PERSPECTIVE: VICTORY ASSURED (Rev 14:1-5) The Lamb on Mt Zion with the 144,000 sang a new song. (the New Jerusalem)</p>		

<p>One angel announces judgment, another the fall of Babylon, which had seduced the nations. (Rev 14:6-8)</p> <p>Originally Rome but now the world's corrupt and unjust political, economic and religious system</p>	<p>A 3rd angel announces the judgment of hell on all who worshipped the Beast. (Rev 14:9-13)</p>	<p>The Son of man and angels reap the harvest of judgment. (Rev 14:14-20)</p>
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Those triumphant over the Beast sang songs of victory next to what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire
(Rev 15:1-4)

One of the 4 living creatures gave the 7 angels 7 golden bowls of the final plagues
(Rev 15:5-8)

<p>JUDGMENT ON ALL WHO WORSHIP ANTICHRIST: NO MORE TIME FOR REPENTANCE (Rev 16)</p> <p>1st Bowl: Ugly festering sores on those with the mark of the Beast</p> <p>Some trumpet judgments only affected one third of population. Bowls affect all who worship Antichrist</p>	<p>2nd Bowl: (Rev 16:3) Sea turned to blood and everything in it died</p> <p>Unlike the trumpet judgments these are universal and final, happening in quick succession, with no pause between numbers 6 and 7</p>	<p>3rd Bowl: (Rev 16:4-7) All water-sources turned to blood</p>	<p>4th Bowl: (Rev 16:8-9) Sun scorches people. They curse God but don't repent</p> <p>Bowl judgments: similarities to the plagues of Egypt: Water turning to blood, gnats, flies, boils, hail, locust, darkness (Ex 8-10)</p>	<p>5th Bowl: (Rev 16:10-11) Poured on throne of Beast. Its kingdom plunged into darkness. People in agony, cursed God and didn't repent</p>	<p>6th Bowl: (Rev 16:12-16) Poured on the Euphrates, which dried up allowing 3 kings to cross. 3 spirits like frogs came from mouth of Beast and false prophet who gather the nations for Armageddon.</p>	<p>7th Bowl: (Rev 16:17-21) Cry from heaven: "It is done!" Great earthquake splits great city in 3. Other cities collapse. Babylon judged. Huge hailstones. People curse God but don't repent.</p> <p>The visions are not strictly chronological. Babylon had already fallen according to Rev 14:8 and it is repeated in Rev 18</p>
<p>FALL OF THE WORLD'S CORRUPT AND UNJUST POLITICAL, ECONOMIC & RELIGIOUS SYSTEM <i>The great prostitute,</i> (Rev 17:1-2)</p>	<p>Prostitute dressed in purple and scarlet, glittering with jewels. (Rev 17:3-5)</p>	<p>She had drunk the blood of the martyrs. (Rev 17:6)</p>	<p>The Beast 'once was, now is not, and yet will come.' The 7 heads are 7 hills on which city built. (Rev 17:7-9)</p>	<p>They are also 7 kings, (5 have fallen, 1 is and 1 will come briefly). The beast who was and is no longer is an 8th king. (Rev 17:10-11)</p>	<p>The 10 horns are 10 kings who will have authority with the Beast for 1 hour. They will unsuccessfully attack the Lamb. The waters are many nations.</p>	<p>The Beast and 10 kings hate and attack the prostitute. (Rev 17:15-18)</p>

Babylon the great, sitting by many waters on a scarlet beast which had 7 heads and 10 horns, and was covered in blasphemous names.	"Babylon": originally Rome but now the world's corrupt and unjust political, economic and religious system		The beast appeared once, is not evident now but will appear in the future. The wording is similar to that used of Jesus in 1:4, 8.	The symbolism of Revelation is fluid: the 7 heads are 7 hills and 7 kings	(Rev 17:12-14) The figures 7 and 10 are probably symbols of completeness: complete power	
			<p>The fall of Babylon announced. God's people are called to separate from her. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her. The merchants grew rich from her. They lament her demise and their financial loss which happened in 1 hour.</p> <p>(Rev 18)</p> <p>Sudden universal financial collapse, cf 2008 etc.</p>			
			<p>WEDDING SUPPER OF THE LAMB (PAROUSIA)</p> <p>There is huge rejoicing and worship in heaven (including over the Fall of Babylon). The church (the Bride of Christ) is prepared for the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.</p> <p>(Rev 19:1-10)</p> <p>Shows the intimate relationship between God and his people</p>			
			Heaven opened and a rider called Faithful and True , with blazing eyes, many crowns, a robe dipped in blood sat on a white horse. He is the Word of	Armies follow him. A sharp sword comes from his mouth. He judges the nations. On his robe and thigh is written "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF	The Beast and false prophet were thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulphur. The rest were killed with the sword.	(Rev 19:17-21)

God. (Rev 19:11-13)	LORDS. (Rev 19:14-16)	
	<p>MILLENNIUM (Rev 20:1-6) <i>Satan was bound for 1000 years.</i> The martyrs rule with Christ. The rest of the dead came to life after the 1000 years. Satan is released after the 1000 years and summons Gog and Magog to fight against God's people. Fire from heaven defeats them and Satan is cast into the Lake of burning sulphur</p>	
	<p>JUDGMENT (Rev 20:7-15) The dead are judged before the <i>great white throne.</i> All whose names are in the Lamb's book of life are saved. Death, Hades and all the others are thrown into the lake of burning sulphur.</p>	
	<p>NEW HEAVENS & NEW EARTH (Rev 21-22) There is a <i>new heaven and a new earth.</i> All sadness and death disappears. The New Jerusalem (God's dwelling place with the saints), brilliant like jewels, with 12 gates, descends from heaven, "prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." It is illuminated by the glory of God and those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life enjoy it</p>	

and see God.
A crystal-clear
river flows from
the throne of
God and the
Lamb through
the city,
watering the
tree of life and
providing fruit
and healing for
the nations.

Jesus says:
"Yes, I am
coming soon."

Islam in the End Times

Preface

I am going to quote the Quran at some length which some Christians might question. My reasons are:

1. Many Christians have not read the Quran and are not informed about its teaching (which is fair enough: I'm not encouraging them to read it).
2. However the principle of justice requires that a person (or in this case a religious group) must be heard before any judgment can be made on their faults. Sadly, there is much ignorant, judgmental and even racist comment on Islam and this is not a godly attitude. I am therefore seeking to allow Islam to speak for itself and then to go on to criticise it in a fair and informed way. God after all is a God of justice.

I am (and will be) critical of Islam. I have lived amongst Muslims in East Jerusalem. I have dialogued with them in this country and I regularly study in some depth what is going on in Muslim circles and the Muslim world. However I am trying to speak in Christian love about the many decent Muslims, and I am seeking to be particularly sensitive and careful how I make legitimate criticisms of Islam and some Muslims. We have to be careful how our words come over. If we keep being critical and negative towards Muslims we confirm the feelings of rejection they already have and we put them off the Gospel. This is serious and I want to dissociate myself completely from it.

The evil of Islamophobia

I strongly disapprove of Islamophobia (prejudice against, dislike or fear of Muslims). It should be strongly rejected, especially by Christians. To be negative towards a person because they belong to a particular group – religious, racial, etc., - is a hangover from primitive tribal exclusiveness. More important, it is a contradiction of the fundamental duty for Christians of loving our neighbours. We are to love our Muslim neighbour as much as any other neighbour.

To regard all Muslims with suspicion as a potential danger because of the existence of Islamic extremists is both ridiculous and judgmental (another attitude Christians are called to avoid). After all, there have been many violent 'Christian' extremists in the past, even the fairly recent past e.g. in Northern Ireland. But we don't therefore regard all Christians with suspicion as a potential danger.

I have met numerous very decent people who are Muslims. They disapprove of violent Islamic extremism as much as we do. For example, British Muslim leaders issued a fatwa (edict) saying that British Muslims allied to the Islamic State are heretics. It was also moving to see a Muslim colleague of the (non-Muslim) kidnapped aid worker, Alan Henning, in tears on TV news over his murder by Islamic State which shows the compassion of ordinary Muslims. I have been involved in dialogue sessions with Muslims in a university context. Their friendly welcome and generous hospitality has been exemplary. I have had contact with Muslims involved in reconciliation and, of course, in caring professions. I have come across Muslims who show remarkable forgiveness after terrible traumas.

I have been impressed with the reverence and commitment of Muslims in their worship. Their chanting can be evocative. I remember seeing an Islamic epilogue on Jordan TV. It was in Arabic which I could not understand but there was a sense of awe at the transcendence of God. On another occasion I spent some hours debating theology with

a Nigerian imam on a train journey after we had done a TV interview together. He knew the NT well and gave me a run for my money!

Many Muslims say Islam is a religion of peace. For example, the *Forever Muslim* blog states that Islam is a religion of peace, justice and tolerance. It says Muslims should practise religious tolerance, respect promises and agreements with non-Muslims, protecting their lives and property. It adds: "Only enemies who harbor hatred and contempt against Islam are addressed by those Quranic verses that warn Muslims against taking them as intimates and allies ... They are always to behave kindly toward any non-Muslim who are not hostile ... it is not permissible under any circumstance for Muslims to mistreat a non-Muslim who has not committed any aggression against them; they are not allowed to harm, threaten or terrorize him, steal his wealth, cheat him or deprive him of his rights."

Some evils of the Islamic world

However, it has to be remembered that, whereas there have been some tolerant Islamic regimes in the past and today, there are a significant number which are oppressive towards minorities such as Christians. Islam is a missionary religion which seeks to win the world to its faith, as does Christianity. They are the only two major religions claiming to be universal truth which their adherents are obliged to spread to the rest of mankind. Both religions have used violence and repression in the past but Christianity has now discarded such an ungodly approach, whereas significant numbers of Muslims have not.

There is no getting away from the fact that much of the growing persecution of Christians happens in a Muslim context. Persecution is taking place against Christians in 47 countries of the world, most of which are Muslim.

Bernard Lewis, Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University and an expert on Islam says that there are two myths about Islam. "The negative one sees Muslims as a collection of bloodthirsty barbarians offering people the choice of the Koran or the sword, and generally bringing tyranny and oppression wherever they go. And the other one is the exact opposite, what you might call the sanitized version, which presents Islam as a religion of love and peace, rather like the Quakers ... The truth is in its usual place, somewhere between the extremes."

He writes elsewhere about Islam's duty to subjugate non-Muslims: "It is the duty of those who have accepted them [Allah's word and message] to strive unceasingly to convert or at least to subjugate those who have not. This obligation is without limit of time or space. It must continue until the whole world has either accepted the Islamic faith or submitted to the power of the Islamic state."

More recently we have seen the emergence of Al Qaeda and then IS, the so-called Islamic State, which is already notorious for its barbaric violence.

Does the Quran advocate violence?

The following are the main passages in the Quran which advocate violence. As we have noted, many people claim that these passages are in the context of self-defence, when Muslims are attacked (which I find difficult to accept with some passages). Others disagree, but that debate doesn't seem so relevant when we remember that many Muslims do feel under attack today in one way or another, including militarily by the west. They feel they are the victims of injustice and humiliation. So even if these verses are in the context of self-defence they would be seen by significant numbers of Muslims as justifying violence. However we should note that polls show many Muslims condemn terrorism and the killing of non-combatants. Bernard Lewis is quite clear that Muslim jurists do not approve of terrorism and Muslims are commanded not to kill women, children or elderly people. They are not to practise indiscriminate slaughter or to harm non-combatants. Nevertheless some Muslims justify terrorism. Here are the passages I referred to:

"Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the Religion of Truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low" (9:29).

"Choose not friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back [to enmity] then take them and kill them wherever ye find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them ... Ye will find others who desire that they should have security from you, and security from their own folk. So often as they are returned to hostility they are plunged therein. If they keep not aloof from you nor offer you peace nor hold their hands, then take them and kill them wherever ye find them. Against such We have given you clear warrant ... Relent not in pursuit of the enemy" (4:89, 91, 104)

“We shall cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve because they ascribe unto Allah partners, for which no warrant hath been revealed” (3:151).

“How should ye not fight for the cause of Allah and of the feeble among men and of the women and the children who are crying: Our Lord! Bring us forth from out this town of which the people are oppressors! Oh, give us from thy presence some protecting friend! Oh, give us from Thy presence some defender! Those who believe do battle for the cause of Allah; and those who disbelieve do battle for the cause of idols. So fight the minions of the devil. Lo! The devil's strategy is ever weak. Hast thou not seen those unto whom it was said: Withhold your hands, establish worship and pay the poor due, but when fighting was prescribed for them behold! a party of them fear mankind even as their fear of Allah or with greater fear, and say: Our Lord! Why hast Thou ordained fighting for us? If only Thou wouldst give us respite yet a while! Say [unto them, O Muhammad]: The comfort of this world is scant; the Hereafter will be better for him who wardeth off [evil]; and ye will not be wronged ...” (4:75-77)

“O Prophet! Exhort the believers to fight. If there be of you twenty steadfast they shall overcome two hundred, and if there be of you a hundred [steadfast] they shall overcome a thousand of those who disbelieve, because they [the disbelievers] are a folk without intelligence. ... It is not for any prophet to have captives until he hath made slaughter in the land” (8:65, 67).

“Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them [captive], and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful ... Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the Religion of Truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low ... O ye who believe! Fight those of the disbelievers who are near to you, and let them find harshness in you, and know that Allah is with those who keep their duty [unto Him]” (9:5, 29, 123).

“Lo! Allah loveth them who battle for His cause in ranks, as if they were a solid structure” (61:4).

“And with how many a prophet have there been a number of devoted men who fought [beside him]. They quailed not for aught that befell them in the way of Allah, nor did they weaken, nor were they brought low. Allah loveth the steadfast. Their cry was only that they said: Our Lord! forgive us for our sins and wasted efforts, make our foothold sure, and give us victory over the disbelieving folk” (3:146-147).

“That which befell you, on the day when the two armies met, was by permission of Allah; that He might know the true believers; And that He might know the hypocrites, unto whom it was said: Come, fight in the way of Allah, or defend yourselves. They answered: If we knew aught of fighting we would follow you. On that day they were nearer disbelief than faith. They utter with their mouths a thing which is not in their hearts. Allah is best aware of what they hide. Those who, while they sat at home, said of their brethren [who were fighting for the cause of Allah]: If they had been guided by us they would not have been slain. Say [unto them, O Muhammad]: Then avert death from yourselves if ye are truthful” (3:166-168).

Allah also promises pardon and heaven to those who are “slain in Allah’s way” (3:156-158, 195; 4:74. cf. 2:216; 3:121-127; 4:84; 8:15-17; 33:26; 48:19-20).

I searched the Quran for references to believers needing to show love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness but they are very few and far between. I found only 14 out of some 6236 verses referring to these qualities.

There are numerous references to God’s forgiveness (incl Sura 40. Al-Ghafir - The Forgiver [God]) but I found only eight references to human beings needing to forgive. Muslims are urged to “forgive and be indulgent” towards “the people of Scripture (primarily Christians) who “long to make you disbelievers” - convert you to Christianity (2:109). Muhammad is told to forgive (3:159; 7:199; 15:85). Patience and forgiveness is commended (42:43 cf 24:22) including for “those who hope not for the days of Allah” (45:43 cf 64:14).

I found only three references to the need for human beings to show mercy. The Quran says that God “ordained between you love and mercy” (30:21). It also describes that those with Muhammad were “hard against the disbelievers and merciful among themselves” (48:29). The most significant verse is where Allah says: We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow, and gave him the Gospel, and placed compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him” (57:27). This is the only time where the Quran mentions humans showing compassion.

I found only three references to Muslims being called to love others. Two refer to them loving opponents (3:119; 60:7) and one to loving Muslim fugitives (59:9).

However there are the following statements: “Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loveth not aggressors” (2:190) and “There is no compulsion in religion” (2:256). This does

not alter the fact that most relevant passages in the Quran seem to be open to the interpretation that they favour violence.

Theological differences

Opposing Islamophobia does not mean that we can and should ignore the important theological and spiritual differences between Christians and Muslims. After all, Islam makes strong criticism of Christianity, e.g. that belief in the divinity of Christ is blasphemous. It says there is no hope for us Christians since we do not accept Islam. Allah says: “Lo! Those who disbelieve Our revelations, We shall expose them to the Fire. As often as their skins are consumed We shall exchange them for fresh skins that they may taste the torment. (Quran 4:56). If we believe in the divinity of Christ and the Trinity Allah will forbid us paradise and our abode will be fire of hell (Quran 3:12; 5:75, 76; 66:9; 98:6).

Muslims are exhorted not to make friends of Christians or Jews: “O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends is [one] of them. (Quran 5:54).

Although there are important areas of agreement between Christianity and Islam there are very serious fundamental contradictions as well. One area of agreement is over the Creator God. I am aware of the controversy over whether Allah is the same as the God of the Bible, Yahweh. Christians disagree. Some Christians believe that Allah is the moon-god but Christian scholars contradict this. Certainly, Islam has a view of God which to some extent is contradictory to the teaching of the Bible. That is because they do not accept the revelation of God in Christ. However it must be remembered that the Hebrew Bible names for God – “El” and “Elohim” – come from a polytheist (many gods) background, e.g. the Canaanites. In fact Elohim is plural and can mean “gods.” Abraham and the patriarchs came from a polytheist background out of which came belief in one God. Similarly, Islam was born in a polytheist context but it strongly teaches there is only one God. The Quran says: “Do not prostrate to the sun or the moon; but prostrate to Allah Who created them, if it is in truth Him Whom ye worship.” (41:37). Statements such as that do indicate agreement over the Creator God.

The main contradiction between Islam and Christianity is over the person and work of Jesus.

Islam affirms Jesus (Isa) as:

- Born of a virgin (Quran 3:47)
- A great prophet
- Messiah (Quran 3:45)
- A miracle worker
- Returning to earth in the future.

But Islam denies:

- The divinity of Jesus.
- The atoning death of Jesus (*there is some debate in Islam as to whether Jesus did die or only appeared to die but the fundamental truth of his atoning death is denied*).
- The resurrection of Jesus (*the Islamic view of his being raised to heaven is often not resurrection from the dead but more like ascension – Quran 3:55*).
- Salvation through faith in Jesus.

Jesus ‘was not the divine Son of God’

The Quran teaches that Jesus is the Messiah (3:45) but he “was no other than a messenger, messengers [the like of whom] had passed away before him” (5:78). He was not the divine Son of God: “O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not “Three” - Cease! [it is] better for you! - Allah is only One Allah. Far is it removed from His Transcendent Majesty that He should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender” (Quran 4:171). “The Originator of the heavens and the earth! How can He have a child, when there is for Him no consort, when He created all things and is Aware of all things?” (6:101). “And say: Praise be to Allah, Who hath not taken unto Himself a son, and Who hath no partner in the Sovereignty, nor hath He any protecting friend through dependence. ...” (17:111). “It befitteth not [the Majesty of] Allah that He should take unto Himself a son” (19:35 cf 19:88-92; 5:119).

Jesus 'did not die on the cross'

The Quran teaches that Jesus didn't die, saying of the Jews: "And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise" (4:157-158).

There are various Muslim interpretations of this verse. The majority interpretation is that God made someone look like Jesus and that person, not Jesus, died on the cross. The second view is that Jesus was crucified but was not on the cross long enough to die. The third view is that Jesus was crucified but his body was immortal so it only appeared that he died. The fourth view is simply that the crucifixion did not happen. The fifth view is that Jesus didn't die on the cross (which would have dishonoured him) but that God 'gave him death' before he ascended.

The crucial thing is that Muslims deny that Jesus died an atoning, saving death on the cross which, of course, is absolutely fundamental to Christianity.

Jesus will return as a Muslim

Muslims believe that Jesus will return to help the Mahdi ("rightly guided one") to fight against the Dajjal (Antichrist). Sunnis believe Jesus will kill the Antichrist. Shia believe the Mahdi will do so. When the Mahdi dies Jesus will rule over a period of peace and justice for about 40 years. Then he will die and be buried in Medina. Jesus will be a committed Muslim. Christians and Jews will join him in the Islamic faith. All religion other than Islam will be wiped out.

However much we oppose Islamophobia and seek to love our Muslim neighbour, and whatever truth we see in Islam, we have to conclude that our Muslim friends are seriously deceived spiritually. Their creed denies the gospel. There is no salvation in a faith which denies the incarnation (divinity) of Christ, his atoning death and his resurrection - understood as triumph over human sin. Their concept of Jesus' return in the end times is seriously inconsistent with biblical teaching, not least because he is seen as a committed Muslim. We can only see such a returning messiah as a false messiah.

What, then, inspired the Islamic faith proclaimed by Mohamed? I have to conclude that "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). The word 'unbeliever' there means someone who does not trust in Christ as saviour.

The growth of Islam

We must note the huge growth and influence of Islam over the centuries. It is truly remarkable that an illiterate merchant from Mecca could have launched such a powerful religion which 1500 years later could have 1.6 billion followers, 23.4% of the world's population (compared with some 2.1 billion Christians).

Out of 196 countries in the world 49 countries (25%) have a Muslim majority (32 with over 90%; 7 with 80-90%; 4 with 70-80%; 6 with 50-69%). There are also 8 countries with 25-49% Muslims.

In Europe, including Britain, the Muslim community is the fastest growing community. Professor Bernard Lewis told the Jerusalem Post in 2007 that he believed the Muslims "seem to be about to take over Europe." He added that the only pertinent question regarding Europe's future would be, "Will it be an Islamized Europe or Europeanized Islam?" Some Muslim leaders have spoken of Islam taking over Europe through immigration and high birthrates. For example Muammar Gadhafi told Al-Jazeera in 2006: "We have 50 million Muslims in Europe. There are signs that Allah will grant Islam victory in Europe — without swords, without guns, without conquests ... [they will] turn it into a Muslim continent within a few decades."

How has this massive growth come about? It cannot be put down merely to human factors: birth-rate and family loyalties, although there is the effect of the wealth of Islamic regimes in oil-rich countries. It seems clear to me that there is a powerful supernatural factor.

The significance of Islam

As I see the situation, briefly:

- Islam has some beautiful and uplifting aspects, including a sense of awe at the transcendence of God.
- Many Muslims are honourable, peace-loving people.
- There can be no doubt that aspects of Islamic culture, such as their architecture, are beautiful.
- Islam believes in and honours Jesus as a great prophet, born of a virgin, messiah and miracle worker who will return to bring peace on earth.
- BUT Islam denies the incarnation (divinity) of Christ, his atoning death and his resurrection understood as triumph over human sin. The Jesus (Isa) of Islam is not the real Jesus but a false messiah.
- Islam makes strong criticism of Christianity, e.g. that belief in the divinity of Christ is blasphemous. It says there is no hope for us Christians since we do not accept Islam. We are duty bound to respond that Jesus said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). There is no salvation (eternal life) other than through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God crucified and risen. As John puts it: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:11). All of this is denied by Islam.
- The growth of Islam over the centuries really can only be fully explained by supernatural considerations.

Islam is a very powerful and, to many, attractive supernaturally-inspired religion which proclaims a false messiah and expects him to return to rule on earth. It has growing influence throughout the world. It dominates the religious scene and, in many places, the political scene too. It has more than its fair share of extremists, so that, according to the recent US government National Counterterrorism Center report published in 2012 Sunni Muslim terrorists committed more than 70% (8,886) of the 12,533 terrorist murders. (It should be noted however, that the great majority of people killed by terrorists were Muslims). Security expert Amir Lechner founder of ThreatRate, a leading global risk management firm, wrote in 2007 that more than 95 percent of all suicide bombing attacks conducted worldwide are carried out by Muslim extremists.

What are we to make of all this?

Islam in Christian eschatology

There have been various attempts to see a major role for Islam in Christian eschatology.

Daniel had visions of and prophesied about four kingdoms. It seems clear that the four kingdom were Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome (although some have said they were: Babylon, Medea, Persia and Greece. But Daniel seems clear that the Medes and the Persians were united in one empire Dan 5:28).

However, some people see the fourth kingdom prophesied by Daniel as Islam rather than Rome. They claim that the fourth kingdom was not Rome because Rome did not crush the previous three empires - Babylon, Medo-Persia and Greece - as Daniel prophesies. It conquered Greece but the area that had been Babylonia and Medo-Persia was under Parthian control during the time of the Roman Empire. It is true, though, that Rome conquered Greece which had conquered Medo-Persia, which had conquered Babylon, so in a sense Rome had conquered the three empires.

Other interpreters have tried to include Islam in the 7 heads and 10 horns of the Beast in Revelation 13:1. We have already noted that one interpretation is that the seven heads which John says are both seven hills and seven kings i.e. seven Roman emperors, five in the past, one in John's time and one to come. Another interpretation says the kings are ancient pagan empires including Rome. There is also an eighth king which Leon Morris thinks is the Roman Emperor Domitian who is another Nero. All of this is disputed.

However, another interpretation is that the 7 heads are the seven main empires which have ruled or dominated Jerusalem: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece (all of which had fallen by John's time), Rome, and later the (Muslim) Ottoman Empire which ruled over the Holy Land from 1516 to 1917. Some think that nations controlled or significantly influenced by Islam may unite under one leader (perhaps the Antichrist), thinking that he is the Mahdi ('The rightly guided one,' a messianic spiritual and political world leader who will establish righteousness in the End Times). They think there will be a revived caliphate (which has a modern ring to it because the Islamic State – ex-ISIS – are seeking to do just that). The caliphate – an Islamic empire ruled over by a caliph - a supreme religious and political leader - existed from the 7th century until it was abolished by Ataturk in 1924. The caliphate covered the territory which was controlled in the past by the Babylonian, Persian, and Greek empires.

Seeing a role for Islam in the end times is not a new idea. Luther and Calvin, the 16th century reformers, thought that

the “little horn” of Daniel 7 might be Islam. Islam was a threat to Christianity in the 16th century because of its attacks in eastern and central Europe leading to the unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1529 and eventually the Battle of Vienna in 1683. In 1518 Luther said that Islam was the “scourge of God” a punishment on the sins of Christendom. Calvin called Mohammad and the Pope “the two horns of the Antichrist.” John Wesley had a similar view.

There are problems with the idea that Islam is the “little horn” of Daniel 7. For example, the little horn arose out of the fourth kingdom (Rome) but Islam did not emerge from the Roman Empire. It originated in what is now Saudi Arabia.

Joyce Baldwin makes an interesting comment. She notes that the little horn of Dan 8:9, which grew out of one of the four horns of the he-goat, should not be identified with the little horn of Dan 7:8, which came up among the ten horns of the indescribable beast. “Though they have a superficial similarity, there are many differences between them and they do not belong to the same era. This fact is an indication that we are being introduced to a recurring historical phenomenon: the clever and ruthless world dictator, who stops at nothing to achieve his ambitions. The book proclaims that such rulers cannot ultimately succeed. Though they talk and act big, and though they cause great suffering to many, their end is sure.”

This shows that there is a flexibility in the apocalyptic language of the prophets which is different from modern western thinking. The ‘little horn’ is “a recurring historical phenomenon.” On this basis Islam could be seen as a fulfilment of “little horn” prophecy but not necessarily the ultimate fulfilment of it.

Conclusion

Islam is certainly a sign of the End Times:

- A false prophet speaking of a returning false messiah.
- A very powerful and growing worldwide religious force not under the Lordship of Christ.
- Often persecuting the saints

That has to be a significant factor in end times thinking. Unlike Communism (which at the height of its power was seen by some as very significant in end times terms) it seems unlikely that Islam will fade in its power and influence in the world. But quite how it figures in the end times is not clear except that it will contribute to the final crisis prior to the return of Christ in his omnipotence and love.

Meanwhile, our priority is to love our Muslim neighbour and to seek to win him/her to Christ.

¹ Amos 3:7-8.

² 1 Thess 5:4-6

³ Matthew 25:5

⁴ Matthew 25:31-46

⁵ Matthew 26:29

⁶ 1 Cor 11:26

⁷ Isa 25:6-8

⁸ Matthew 26:63-64

⁹ Matthew 24:30

¹⁰ **1. The creeds show church tradition regards eschatology as important**

The creeds contain important sections on eschatology:

“he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

2. The Anglican Church (for example) includes eschatology in its liturgy

Following on from the previous point it is helpful to note the incidence of references to eschatology in one mainstream church. The various eucharistic prayers in the Communion service include the following words:

- Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord (*which is an eschatological statement*)
- we look for the coming of your kingdom,
- looking for his coming in glory
- he instituted, and in his holy gospel commanded us to continue, a perpetual memory of his precious death until he comes again.
- May we and all who share this food offer ourselves to live for you and be welcomed at your feast in heaven where all creation worships you

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- we proclaim his death and resurrection until he comes in glory.
 - help us to work together for that day when your kingdom comes and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth. Look with favour on your people, gather us in your loving arms and bring us with ... all the saints to feast at your table in heaven.
 - we long for his coming in glory.
 - Gather your people from the ends of the earth to feast with all your saints at the table in your kingdom, where the new creation is brought to perfection in Jesus Christ our Lord;
 - Bring us at the last with [*N and*] all the saints to the vision of that eternal splendour for which you have created us;

The various Acclamations in the Communion service include the words:

- Christ will come again.
- Lord Jesus, come in glory.
- When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory.
- Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.
- Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This is good as it indicates that eschatology is not a fringe issue *officially*. However the issue is that in very many churches these liturgical references are not associated with the clergy teaching with any regularity (or at all) about eschatology or the congregations thinking about it.

¹¹ Matt 12:32; 13:22

¹² 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:1-2

¹³ 1 Cor 10:11; Heb 9:26

¹⁴ Gal 1:4

¹⁵ Eph 1:20-21

¹⁶ Matt 28:18-20; 1 Thess 5:23-24

¹⁷ 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6; 3:18-20

¹⁸ Rom 12:2

¹⁹ 1 John 3:1-3

²⁰ 1 Tim 6:17-19

²¹ Titus 2:11-13

²² Heb 6:4-6

²³ Luke 18:29-30

²⁴ Matt 24:2-3

²⁵ Matt 13:38-42, 49-50; John 5:24-29

²⁶ 1 Cor 15: 50-54

²⁷ Matt 13:43

²⁸ Eph 2:6-7

²⁹ 1 Cor 13:12

³⁰ 1 Cor 15:22-26

³¹ John 3:36, compare John 3:14-16; 4:14; 5:24; 6:47, 54; 1 Tim 1:16; 6:12

³² Rom 6:23

³³ 1 John 5:11-13

³⁴ 1 John 5:20; compare 1: 2

³⁵ John 17:3

³⁶ Matt 19:28-29; Rom 6:22

³⁷ Rom 2:6-7; Gal 6:8-9

³⁸ John 6:40; Titus 3:5-7; Jude 21

³⁹ Matt 25:46; Mark 10:29-30

⁴⁰ John 10:27-28

⁴¹ Matt 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15

⁴² Luke 17:20-21

⁴³ Luke 1:30-33; John 18:36-37

⁴⁴ Rom 14:17-18

⁴⁵ Heb 1:8

⁴⁶ 1 Cor 4:19-20

⁴⁷ Heb 12:28-29

⁴⁸ Matt 13:31; 33; Mark 4:30; Luke 13:18-21

⁴⁹ Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10

⁵⁰ John 3:3, 5; 1 Cor 15:50

⁵¹ Matt 5:3 "poor in spirit"; 18:1-4; 19:12-14; 22:2-3; Mark 10:14-15; Luke 18:15-17

⁵² Matt 21:31

⁵³ Matt 18:23-25

⁵⁴ Matt 5:19-20; 7:21; 8:11-12; 16:19; 21:43; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:5; Col 1:9-13; 1 Thess 2:11; 2 Peter 1:10-11

⁵⁵ Matt 5:10; Acts 14:21-22; 2 Thess 1:4-5

⁵⁶ Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:43; 8:1

⁵⁷ Luke 9:2

⁵⁸ Luke 9:59-62
⁵⁹ Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23-32; Col 4:11
⁶⁰ Matt 9:47-48
⁶¹ Matt 6:33; 13:44-50; Mark 10:24-25; Luke 14:15-18
⁶² Matt 12:28
⁶³ Matt 13:24, 38-39, 41; Mark 4:26-29
⁶⁴ Luke 10:9-11
⁶⁵ Matt 10:7
⁶⁶ Rev 19:7
⁶⁷ Luke 21:27-31
⁶⁸ Rev 11:15
⁶⁹ Rev 12:10
⁷⁰ Mt 19:28; 1 Cor 6:2-3; Rev 3:21
⁷¹ Matt 25:1
⁷² Matt 6:10; Luke 11:2
⁷³ Matt 24:14
⁷⁴ 1 Cor 15:22-28
⁷⁵ Heb 1:1-2
⁷⁶ Acts 2:16-18
⁷⁷ 2 Tim 3:1-3; James 5:3
⁷⁸ 2 Peter 3:3-4
⁷⁹ John 6:39-40, 44, 54
⁸⁰ John 12:48

Categories: Biblical, Eschatology

TAGS: eschatology, End Times, prophecy, war, famine, earthquake, pestilence, disease, pandemics, Second Coming, Return of Christ, Parousia, signs of the End, bioterrorism, Rapture, Dispensationalism, Last Days, eternal life, global warming

<https://christianteaching.org.uk/bloggng/>

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⁹⁵ Lev 26:40-45, Dt. 30:1-10, 1 Kings 8:46-53, Jer. 12:14, 24:6-7, 27:22, 29:14, 30:3,10,11, 31:4-5,10, 16,17,23, 33:7, 42:12, Ezk. 11:17-18, 28:25, 34:12-16, 36:21, 37:21-28, Zech. 8:7-8, 10:9
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⁹⁹ G B Caird, The Revelation of St John the Divine, Blacks NT Commentaries, A & C Black, London 1984, p. 60f
¹⁰⁰ R Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation, T&T Clark Edinburgh 1993, p. 209.
¹⁰¹ Robert Mounce, The Book of Revelation, New International Commentary on the NT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1977, p. 178.
¹⁰² Some people say that Rev 4-20 is only about the Jewish people but there is little material which could be understood in this way. Of course, John uses OT terminology and links his eschatology with Jewish eschatology but that doesn't mean he is only writing about Jews. He is clearly writing about both Jews and Gentiles:
 - In chapter 5 Jesus is called the "Lion of tribe of Judah ... Root of David." But then he is the Lamb who has redeemed "people from every tribe and language and people and nation" (vv 6-10).

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- In chapter 7:1-4 he writes about the tribes of Israel but in vv 9-17 he writes about all nations
 - In chapter 10:11 John was told to prophesy “about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.”
 - In chapter 11:1-2 the angel asked John to measure the Temple etc (v. 1-2) but later voices said “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah.” (v. 15).
 - In chapter 21 the New Jerusalem bears the names of the 12 tribes of Israel but also of the 12 apostles.

¹⁰³ Robert Mounce, The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on the NT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1977, p. 205.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.213.