Doomsday

New Generation of Preachers Carries on in Tradition as Old as Nero

By Jay Merwin
Religious News Service
Staff Writer

If Pat Robertson's calculation of biblical prophecies is "even close," he says, "we must conclude that there is a man alive today, approximately 27 years old, who is now being groomed to be the Satanic Messiah."

And with the addition of Greece to the European Economic Community, or Common Market, the popular Christian Broadcasting Network evangelist believes that a key prophecy in the Old Testament book of Daniel is fulfilled. The Common Market's 10 members are supposed to complete Daniel's vision of a 10-nation alliance led by the deceptively charming anti-Christ.

Robertson and many other students of Doomsday theology are predicting ever more frequently that Jesus Christ will return to earth and defeat the power of the devil, probably during this generation.

Hal Lindsey, author of the best-selling book, "The Late Great Planet Earth," has heralded the "end times" perhaps earlier and more shrilly than anyone. He views the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as the culmination of biblical prophecy. And he has been encouraged by reports that some aged rabbis in Israel have had dreams about the imminent arrival of the Messiah.

Israel, of course, is the hub of all prophetic turnings. The Second Coming of Christ is scheduled for Jerusalem. Armageddon, the battle in which the forces of Christ will defeat the anti-Christ, is to take place at Megiddo in northern Israel.

Israel's capture of East Jerusalem during the 1967 six-day war was thought to complete Jesus's prophecy that the age of the Gentile church would end when the city was no longer "trodden down by the Gentiles." After Israel formally annexed East Jerusalem last July, Lindsey predicted that Jewish possession of the Dome of the Rock — an important Muslim shrine there — would serve as the "trigger of Armageddon."

Last year, while in New York City for a major evangelistic rally, the television preacher Rex Humbard flatly stated: "I feel the very longest we have is 13 years" before the Second Coming. Humbard, 61, expects "to be living when he comes."

Meantime, things are supposed to get much worse. As part of the appeal for financial support, Humbard insists that he needs the money quickly if unreached parts of the world are to hear the gospel message before it is too late. He says that the crippling rates of inflation throughout the world, deepening poverty and wars will close the doors to his evangelistic programs by 1983.

The agenda of this theology, called "pre-millenialism," is already under way, its adherents say; the "end times" have dawned. Soon the anti-Christ will gain power and devastate the earth for a period of three-and-a-half to seven years. Just beforehand, true believers in Christ will meet Him "in the air," according to New Testament prophecy, and will be spared the coming cataclysm. This mid-air meeting is often described as the "rapture."

The tribulation will end at Armageddon when Christ binds Satan and casts him into a "bottomless pit." After a millenium of peace and enlightenment, Satan will rise again to begin another conflagration into which God intervenes with a hail of fire to destroy Satan for good. The earth will cease to exist and the final judgment will commence.

But even for some committed pre-millenialists, the current pace of prophetic claims has gotten out of hand. Recently the American Board of Missions to the Jews admonished its supporters not to follow "rumors of prophecy."

Their letter attempted to disabuse the pre-millenial constituency of three popular rumors; that President John F. Kennedy was the anti-Christ because he received the mortal head wound foretold in the New Testament Book of Revelation; that stones are being shipped to Jerusalem to rebuild the biblical Temple, and that "a record number" of vultures have gathered in Israel in anticipation of great carnage at Armageddon.

Scattered bands of pre-millenialists have taken drastic action on the assumption that the end is nigh.

Fatima International, an unofficial Catholic group in Australia, has planned a community in the outback where its members will await certain nuclear disaster.

In 1979, a fundamentalist group headed by a Melbourne businessman set up housekeeping in the plains district of New South Wales. "Doomsday City" is equipped with underground bunkers and one year's supply of food.

An Assembly of God church in suburban Minneapolis elected a slate of stand-by church leaders who would take over in the event that the present leadership was snatched up in the rapture.

Some members even revised their insurance policies to name as beneficiaries those left behind by this great event.

The present rash of predictions resembles the Protestant pre-millenial movements of the late 19th century from which independent fundamentalist churches eventually developed.

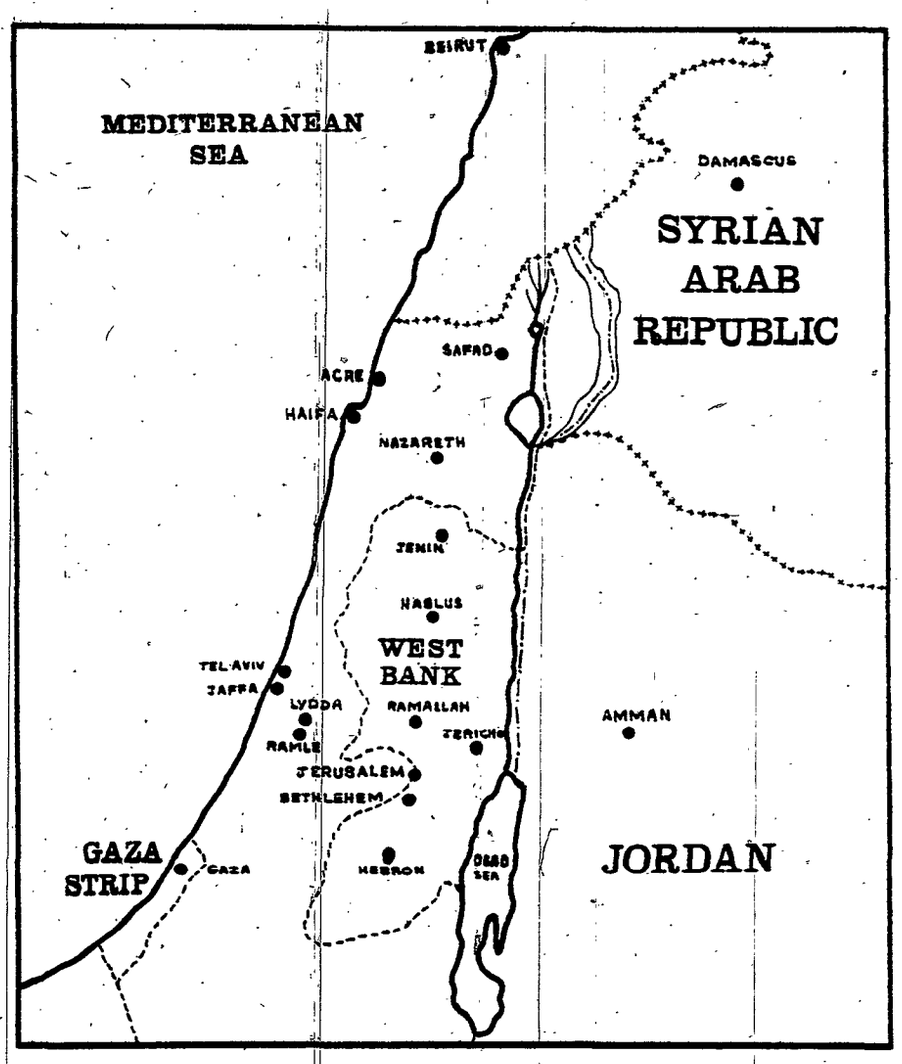
Like the present day, those times were marked by great ideological upheavals in church and society. With Protestant theology then falling under the influence of, among other things, Darwin's theory of evolution, fundamentalists increasingly denounced the shifts as heretical.

A major split occurred over whether the Kingdom of God would be established by the work of the church on earth or by Christ alone following a period of tribulation. At the time of the American Revolution, most churches held the "post-millenialist" view that God's Kingdom advanced through the spread of Christian government. But, gradually, the supernatural assumptions of this theology evolved into faith in the technological and philosophical progress of the late 19th century to bring about the Kingdom.

The fundamentalists went into a different direction. The development of theological liberalism only provided them with more portents of the catastrophic "last days" described in the apocalyptic books of the Bible.

The moving force behind much pre-millenialist teaching was John Nelson Darby, a minister who left the (Anglican) Church of Ireland in 1828 to join the Plymouth Brethren. He traveled throughout Europe and the United States, during most of the 19th century, preaching that true Christians should separate from their allegedly corrupted churches as he had done and live simply until the imminent return of Christ. Believers would be gathered up by Christ, while the apostate churches would suffer with the heathen in the coming devastation.

Later, Cyrus I. Scofield, best known for his annotated Scofield Reference Bible, developed Darby's theories into a system of seven "dispensations," each characterized by a different sort of relationship between God and the human race. The present dispensation of "Grace" began with the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The last dispensation, "The Fullness of Time," would replace it at the Second Coming.



Through widely attended prophecy conferences and Bible meetings at the turn of the century, pre-millenialists derived their basic scheme of "dispensationalist" prophecy through an elaborate calculation of the "seventy weeks of years" described in the ninth chapter of Daniel.

The 70 seven-day weeks, translated into years, were interpreted as 70 "sevens," or 490 years. The countdown began when the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon to reconstruct Jeruselem and its sacred temple in approximately 445 B.C. According to the account in the Book of Nehemiah, it took the Jews seven "weeks," or 49 years, to rebuild the ruined city. Another 62 "weeks" or 434 years passed between the restoration of Jeruselem and the beginning of Christ's ministry at his baptism in the Jordan.

Three and a half years, or halfway into the 70th "week," the crucifixion fulfilled Daniel's prophecy that "the Messiah shall be cut off." The "time of the Gentiles" between then and now is regarded as an historical parenthesis at the middle of the week.

Even before Darby, early strains of pre-millenialism were introduced in this country in the person of Ann Lee Stanley who came over from England in 1774. According to her prophetic visions, she was the "Second Pillar of the Church of God," a female manifestation of Christ returned to earth.

Mother Ann Lee's "Shaker" group established a socialistic community outside Albany, N.Y., from which it reaped a great harvest of believers during the American Revolution and the evangelistic revival that followed it.

At its peak, between 1830 and 1850, the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming had about 6,000 members living in 19 strictly ordered, celibate communities. Procreation was unnecessary with the Second Coming already accomplished and the end so near. But after the Civil War, as their pre-millenial urgency waned, the communes foundered.

Other groups that adapted better to dashed hopes for the millenium were the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Millerites who evolved into what is now the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Jehovah's Witnesses organized under the highly successful preacher, Charles Taze Russell, in about 1872. Attacking the hypocrites of conventional society, they charged that Satan's three great allies were false teachings in the churches, government oppression and the power of big business.

Through a complex system of prophetic interpretation, they held that the Second Coming occurred in 1874 and that time would end in 1914. Afterward, Joseph F. Rutherford, who succeeded Russell in 1916, was less precise about Doomsday and the 1914 projection was retrospectively recast as signaling the beginning of the "last days."

The Seventh-day Adventists got their start under William Miller, an ordained Baptist, who calculated the prophecies of Daniel to pinpoint the apocalypse as coming in 1843. Between 1840 and 1843, he and his promoter, Josiah V. Himes, stirred up millenial fervor at camp meetings across the land. A comet passing close to the earth at the time augmented their claims as thousands prepared for the end.

In what became known as The Great Disappointment, the appointed year, as well as a second date in 1844, passed uneventfully. The misapprehended revelations were later explained as having referred to Christ's "cleansing of the temple" in heaven. Later, the movement was revived under the energetic leadership of Ellen White whose "Spirit of Prophecy" writings are regarded by Adventists today as authoritative revelation.

On its own terms, pre-millenialist theology is difficult to refute. The 70 weeks theory demonstrates the adaptability of apocalyptic literature to almost any set of events. Rather than thwart the theory, those who doubt only hasten its apparent fulfillment. According to Swihart, godless, modern-day scoffers fit into St. Peter's New Testament prophecy that "in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lust."

However, the signs of the end of time are almost as old as the prophecies that introduced them. Nero, and other Roman emperors who persecuted the early Christians, were identified as the "beast" prophesized by St. John in the 13th chapter of the Book of Revelation.

The "mark" of the beast, 666, has been manipulated for centuries in elaborate numbers games. For example, if one assigns values of 100 to 125 to each letter of the alphabet, starting with 100 for "A," the sum of numbers derived from the six letters of the name H-I-T-L-E-R equals 666.

'... there is a man alive today, approximately 27 years old, who is being groomed to be the Satanic 'Messiah.'"