

Is the end near?

by Rex Morgan

“PANDEMONIUM”, screamed the front page banner headline in the *NZ Herald* of 29 February 2020. The article began: “Panicked shoppers are stocking up for what one labelled ‘the apocalypse’ after news broke that NZ had its first case of coronavirus”.

Since then the COVID-19 pandemic has raged around the globe with the ferocity of a freshly unleashed tiger, causing death and misery on an immense scale. Millions have been infected by the deadly virus, hundreds of thousands have died, businesses have crashed into bankruptcy, unemployment has

surged, and food banks have been unable to keep up with the demand.

In some ways this new global challenge has diverted attention away from the climate change crisis, but global warming remains another looming disaster for humankind. Dire warnings from numerous scientists insist that if urgent action isn’t taken, an increasing number of droughts, intense storms, disastrous floods, extreme heatwaves, and widespread ecosystem collapse will severely impact life on earth.

When I visited my dentist just prior to the lockdown I was stunned to hear him, not a religious man at all, comment that “this could be the end times”—a reference to an expression used several times in the Bible.¹

Are we now living in the biblical “end times”? Reports of armies of locusts in Africa, volcanoes and earthquakes in various places, and other extreme weather events bring to mind apocalyptic biblical writings.

But people have been foretelling the demise of civilisation for centuries. We have all seen the pictures of wild-eyed fanatics holding signs stating THE END IS NEAR, or the more archaic wording, THE END IS NIGH.

A litany of failed predictions

As early as the first and second centuries AD, a number of prophets predicted that Jesus would return imminently, ushering in the end times. In AD365 a bishop named



The challenge of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic has diverted attention away from other global issues such as the climate change crisis, ecosystems collapse, air quality concerns, and the burning of Amazon rainforests (pictured here).

Hilary of Poitiers announced the world would end that year.

As AD 1000 approached, many Christians in Europe predicted the return of Jesus and the end of the world on the first of January. An army of pilgrims sold their belongings and trekked to Jerusalem to await the Messiah. Later, during the great plague of 1348–1352, prophets said the end was at hand and Christ would appear within ten years.

Reformist Hans Hut rounded up 144,000 “elect saints” to prepare for Jesus’ return in 1528. The famous explorer Christopher Columbus wrote *The Book of Prophecies* around AD 1500, including a prediction that the end of the world would occur in 1658.

John Wesley said the end would come in 1836. A New York farmer, William Miller proclaimed Jesus would return on 21 March 1843, based on his study of Old Testament prophecies. When this didn’t

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happen, he predicted a new date of 22 October 1844, and hundreds of followers sold their property and possessions and gathered to meet Jesus. His failure to arrive that evening became known as “The Great Disappointment”.

After 14 years studying Bible prophecy, Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA engineer, announced the return would be on 12 September 1988. He published a book entitled *88 Reasons why the rapture could be in 1988*, which sold 4 million copies.

Later, a Korean prophet encouraged 20,000 Christians to leave school or quit jobs and await the end, which he believed would be at midnight on 20 or 28 October 1992.

More recently, Mark Biltz, Pastor of El Shaddai Ministries, predicted 30 September 2008 as the date of the second coming of Jesus, based on the timing of four lunar eclipses. As recently as last year biblical preacher Greg Sereda published a YouTube video warning the world would end in 2020.²



Belief that the world would come to an end on 21 December 2012 was based on a Mayan prediction recorded on their Long Count calendar more than 2,200 years ago. No natural disaster—giant tidal wave, Earth-wide earthquake or tremendous volcanic eruption—happened.

What a woeful series of false alarms, unfulfilled expectations, and fake news! And the examples listed above are only a small selection of the dates that have been set and failed.

Clearly it is an all too easy and common mistake to conclude that current events portend the end of the world. But does the fact that so many miscalculations have been made mean that the end will never come and Jesus won't return?

It's impossible for any human being to accurately predict the future. Anyone who could do so would make a fortune on the stock market! If the rises and falls of stocks and shares are so notoriously difficult to foretell, how much more so the enigmatic question of when the world will end. No human has the answer, but if there is an all-powerful

God in charge of the universe, that is a different matter. Such a God would have full knowledge of the future in advance.

A book with answers

As it happens, the Christian Bible claims to be inspired by an all-knowing God, and interestingly, it contains prophecies referring to the end of the world. Since no one else can ascertain the answers, it is worth a look at what the Bible says, to weigh up whether it makes sense or not.

So what does the Bible say about this subject? Well, it certainly doesn't support any of the failed dates catalogued above. But it does speak about the "last days" and the "end of the age".

"There will be terrible times in the last days", says one passage describing

conditions at that time. It continues: "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".³

Another passage warns: "In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say: "Where is this 'coming' he [Jesus] promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation".⁴

One day Jesus' disciples asked this very question. "Tell us", they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"⁵



Because King George II rose to his feet during the singing of the "Hallelujah" chorus, it has become customary for all audiences to stand when it is sung.

"And he shall reign..."

Handel's *Messiah* is a majestic work often performed at Christmas time. The completion of the score of this great oratorio in just 24 days is considered to be one of the most incredible achievements in the entire history of music.

One of the most well-known and beloved sections of the work is the "Hallelujah" chorus. Many people recognise the music and can even quote some of the lyrics: "He shall reign for ever and ever..."

The *Messiah's* libretto is taken from Bible passages referring to two separate appearances of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, on the earth. Some of the arias, such as "Behold, a virgin shall conceive", relate to Jesus' first coming. Others, including "The trumpet shall sound", point to events that have not yet happened, but will take place at Jesus' future return.

At the London premiere of *Messiah* in 1743, King George II was reputedly so moved by the magnificence of the masterpiece that he spontaneously rose to his feet during the singing of the "Hallelujah" chorus, capped off by the powerful words "...and he shall reign for ever and ever!" The entire audience, naturally, followed suit. Ever since that day, it has been customary for the audience to stand whenever the "Hallelujah" chorus is sung.

These words certainly don't apply to any human king or government. None of us lives forever! And sadly, humanity's governments have left a woeful trail of mismanagement and corruption down through the centuries. But a government is coming that is foreshadowed by the words and sentiments of the "Hallelujah" chorus. Jesus Christ, at his second coming, is the one who "shall reign for ever and ever".

Peace on earth—when?

At the birth of Jesus Christ, a group of angels sang the immortal words: “Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill towards all men” (Luke 2:14). This message is often quoted as a mantra around the Christmas season. But no matter how hard we try, we don’t seem even to be able to achieve peace in many of our families and neighbourhoods, let alone on a global scale! And this gloomy situation prevails even though Jesus has come and gone. Where is the “peace on earth” the angels announced at his coming?

A study of the Bible as a whole reveals that Jesus didn’t come—the first time—to bring peace. In fact, he promised the very opposite would occur. Although it isn’t as well known as the “peace on earth” quote, in fact Jesus said: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Interesting words indeed to be stated by someone known as “the Prince of Peace”! The Bible shows that the reason for Christ’s first coming was not to set up his world-ruling kingdom. If he had been attempting to establish world peace at that time, he has certainly been a failure!

Peace on earth is already available to Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus, resulting in a transcendent God-given peace in their lives (Philippians 4:7). But for humanity as a whole, the good news is that Christ is going to come again, and this time the mission will be to bring peace on earth. Along with numerous other Bible promises, the angelic refrain “peace on earth and good will among men” is a prophetic pronouncement that won’t be fulfilled on a global basis until his second coming.



A fanciful illustration of the angel choir that sang “Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill towards all men”.

Jesus answered first with a caution to watch out for “fake news”, warning that many people would come up with false predictions. Then he noted there would be wars and rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes. He mentioned that the Christian gospel would be published all around the world.

Again, these are events that have been taking place for a long time. But then he narrowed down the time frame when he stated: “For then 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”.⁶

It is only in recent years that existential risks (events capable of causing human extinction) have arisen. These threats include destructive biotechnology or nanotechnology, nuclear holocaust, bioterrorism using genetically modified organisms, and global warming.⁷

Jesus didn’t specify any precise date for his return; in fact he emphasised that nobody knows that date.⁸ But he told his followers to be prepared at all times,⁹ and it is certainly possible that he could return in our lifetime.

It is important to note that the biblical references to the time of his second coming use the words “end of the age” rather than “end of the world”. The Greek word used in the original manuscript is “aion”, which means “age, epoch, generation, or era”. Jesus’ return to earth will bring an end to a certain age or period—the age in which mankind has been free to rule over the planet—but not an end to the world as a whole.

In the initial setting for these remarks, Jesus was speaking of events that would precede the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the armies of Rome. This occurred in AD70, accurately foretold by Jesus as due to occur in that generation.¹⁰ For his Jewish listeners, this was

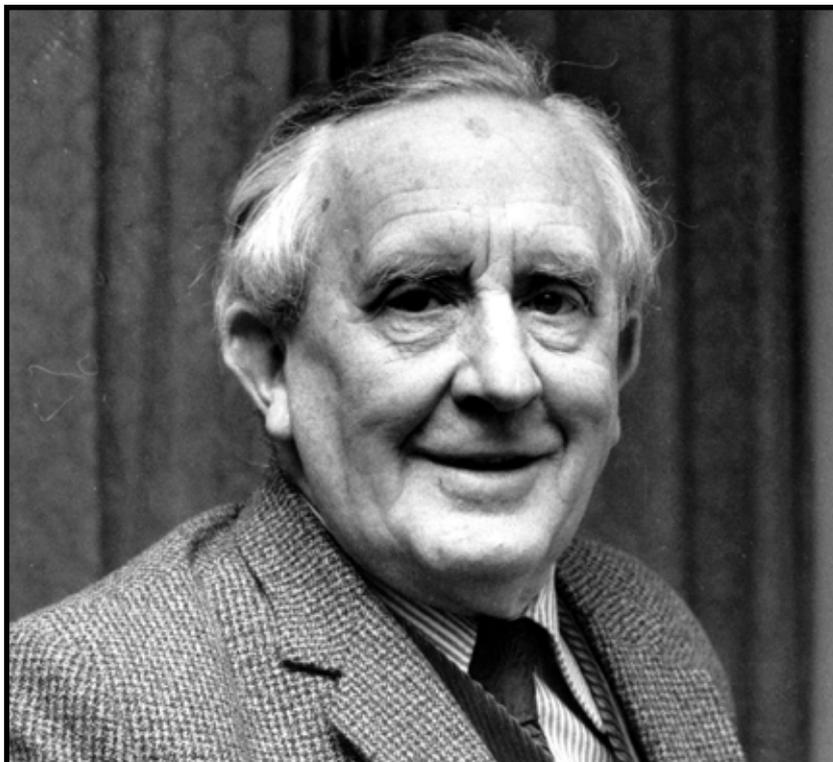
certainly the end of an “age” or era, as the opportunity for free religious practice in Judea was suddenly stripped away from them. But the predictions also point forward to Jesus’ return at the end of the age of mankind’s rule on earth. Many Bible prophecies can be shown to have a dual fulfilment, pertaining to events that are now historical, but also foreshadowing events yet future.

Although it does talk of the end of the age, the Bible nowhere states that the end of the world is near. In fact, it affirms that God is going to ensure the end of the world doesn’t happen at all! Rather, when conditions have deteriorated to the stage where it looks like the end is near, Jesus will return in power and glory to save us from destroying ourselves and to finally bring the solution to the problems caused by self-seeking, deeply flawed human beings.¹¹

A dramatically different return

The first time he came, much to the dismay of his followers, Jesus didn’t make any attempt to overthrow the government of the day. His Jewish compatriots were smarting under the heel of the Roman Empire, but he didn’t seek to redress that. He simply carried out a modest and unpretentious teaching operation, in a localised region of the world. When he was captured by the Roman authorities and falsely accused of sedition, he didn’t speak up strongly in his own defence, or rally his supporters for a rebellion. He meekly allowed himself to be brutally beaten, humiliated, and crucified, without any resistance.

But according to the Bible, the next time Jesus comes will be dramatically different. This time he will make a spectacular entrance, described in symbolic language as shining brilliantly astride a stunning white stallion galloping across the heavens with an entourage of dazzling angels, clearly indicating that no one on earth will miss his arrival.¹² Hundreds of Bible predictions provide



J.R.R. Tolkien, author of The Lord of the Rings. The third book in the trilogy, The Return of the King, contains some parallels to Christian spirituality.

The return of the king

The 2003 fantasy film *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson, was one of the most critically acclaimed films and greatest box-office successes of all time. It won all eleven Academy Awards it was nominated for, putting it in a tie with *Titanic* and *Ben-Hur* for the most Academy Awards ever won. It also won the Academy Award for Best Picture, the only time to date that a fantasy film has done so.

Although the movie didn’t focus at all on this aspect, it is interesting to note that J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the epic book on which the movie was based, was a Christian, and Christian themes often play in the background of his writings about Middle Earth. There are certainly spiritual parallels to be noted in *The Return of the King*. The most significant of these is that Jesus Christ, who came to earth 2000 years ago, has promised to return as a conquering King.

The first time Jesus came as a meek “lamb to be slaughtered”. But his second coming will be in spectacular style, depicted in the Bible as thundering across the heavens on a white horse accompanied by a dazzling army of angels with special effects that will make Peter Jackson’s work seem like a kindergarten play.

It is then that Christ will take up his rightful place of reigning over the world as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”. Christians look forward eagerly to this time when the troubles of the world will be put to rest at last and the world will be at peace.

This won’t just be the return of a fictional king to rule over Middle Earth. It will be the return of the real King to rule the world.

descriptions of this momentous event. They explain it will bring an end to war, using the poetic image of “swords being beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks”.¹³ Then will follow an unprecedented time of global prosperity, with health, education, security, justice, and international harmony achieving heights never attained before.¹⁴

For thousands of years mankind has dreamt of world peace and happiness for all, but this has consistently eluded us. There has hardly been a single decade in all of history when there hasn't been a war going on somewhere. The scourges of drought, crime, drugs, corruption, and poverty have devastated nations and shattered millions of lives. Mankind seems powerless to bring a halt to the unremitting advance of these serious ills.

Thousands of years of human history have demonstrated that if we want to achieve lasting peace and prosperity for everybody on planet Earth, we surely could do with help from beyond ourselves. Thankfully, there is a source of such help. Jesus has promised to return to Earth and deliver a new administration of love, joy, and peace.

So, is it true that “the end is nigh”? It depends on what you mean by “the end”. If you mean the end of the world, thankfully the Bible shows



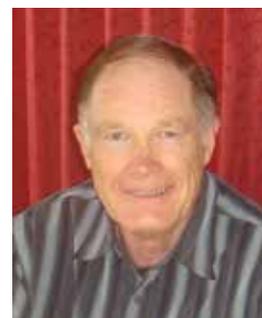
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the answer is no. But the Bible does predict the end of the age, the conclusion of the period of human dominion over planet Earth, and the beginning of a new era when Jesus Christ will return in glory to rule over all nations, to finally show us how things should be done. We don't know precisely when this will take place, but for the sake of humanity and the planet we have so greedily abused and ill-treated, it can't happen soon enough!

NOTES

- ¹ The expressions “the end of the age” (also translated “the end of the world”), and “the last days” occur in several places, e.g. Matthew 24:3; 1 Corinthians 10:11; Acts 2:17; 2 Timothy 3:1.
- ² <https://www.keepthefait.co.uk/2020/01/30/why-preacher-fears-end-of-world-in-2020-after-prophecies-fulfilled/>
- ³ 2 Timothy 3:1–4.
- ⁴ 2 Peter 3:3–4.
- ⁵ Matthew 24:3.

- ⁶ Matthew 24:21–22.
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_catastrophic_risk (accessed 1 May 2020).
- ⁸ Matthew 24:36, 42.
- ⁹ Matthew 24:42–44.
- ¹⁰ Matthew 24:34.
- ¹¹ Matthew 24:30.
- ¹² Revelation 19:11–16.
- ¹³ Isaiah 2:4.
- ¹⁴ Isaiah 9:7.



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