

# Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective

BY THOMAS S. KIDD

**The history of American apocalyptic thought about Islam offers much reason for discouragement. Evangelical Christians have been too eager to gloss biblical prophecy with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam's demise.**

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Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many Christian Americans have expressed new interest in Islam. Often this interest is just a matter of seeking more information about Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an. But many American evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have placed increased focus on Islam and the apocalypse. The horrific collapse of the World Trade Center towers might well turn one's thoughts to the apocalypse, but something more than horror is at work among these conservative Protestants. For many of them, Islam and jihadist terror seems to fit into long-held ideas about the last days before the return of Christ. Although the details have changed over time, American Christians have actually been speculating about connections between Islam and the apocalypse for centuries. The level of apocalyptic interest generated by 9/11 is new. The pattern of thought is not.

For centuries, Protestant Christians have seen Islam as one of the chief religions over which Christ would triumph in the last days. In early America, colonists routinely commented on Islam, its supposedly duplicitous and violent nature, and its coming demise. Colonial Americans lived in a mental world where Islam was perceived as a major threat to Christianity, especially because of the imperial ambitions of the Ottoman Turks, and the aggressions of the Barbary pirates. The Ottomans had pursued expansion into

eastern and central Europe until losing decisively at Vienna in 1683. The Barbary pirates tormented European ships throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They routinely took European and American sailors captive, and sometimes forced them to work as slaves in North Africa. Popular accounts of Barbary captivity often highlighted attempts by the captors to force European Protestants to convert to Islam.

This background of violence and conflict prepared colonial Americans to take a very dim view of Muslims, especially in eschatology, or their theology of the last days. American Protestants often paired Islam and Roman Catholicism as the greatest enemies to Reformed Christianity. Colonial-era Protestants had even more enmity toward Catholicism than Islam because of the wars of the Reformation. Jonathan Edwards, the great evangelical theologian of the eighteenth century, was hardly alone in his opinions about the coming destruction of Roman Catholicism and Islam. "Those mighty kingdoms of Antichrist [Catholicism] and Mohammed that have made such a figure for so many ages together and have trampled the world under foot, when God comes to appear will vanish away like a shadow," he wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Protestant critics of Islam based their ideas on the Bible, where they found prophetic clues to the rise of Islam that may seem surprising today. Most colonial American theologians adhered to a historicist mode of prophetic interpretation, meaning that they believed that many of the prophecies of books such as Daniel and Revelation had already been fulfilled in history. One of the most notable instances of prophecy fulfilled in history was Revelation 9:2-3. This passage speaks of locusts emerging from a smoky abyss. Anglo-American scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries almost universally believed that this passage referred to the rise of Islam in the early seventh century.

Aaron Burr, Sr. — Jonathan Edwards's son-in-law, and the father of the future Vice-President Aaron Burr, Jr. — offered a typical analysis of Revelation 9 and Islam in a 1757 sermon. According to Burr, when the Prophet Muhammad began his rise to power, he and his followers brought such misery and destruction to the Christian church that "it seemed as if the bottomless pit had been opened, and Satan at the head of the powers of darkness, come forth, according to the prophetic description of the rise of the impostor, Revelation 9:2.... The coming up of the locusts, and destruction they make wherever they go, emphatically represents the amazing and destructive progress of the Saracens [Muslims]."<sup>2</sup> Many like Burr referred to Muhammad as an "impostor," following the most popular biography of the Prophet in Anglo-American circles. This book by English theologian Humphrey Prideaux was tellingly titled *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet*.

Many in early America also anticipated that before the return of Christ, the political power of the Ottoman Turks would be ruined. Some believed

that the pouring out of the sixth vial of judgment and the drying up of the Euphrates River (Revelation 16:12) referred to the vanquishing of the Ottomans. Most agreed that prior to Christ's return, the great enemies of Christ's church, including Islam, would be swept aside.

The eras of the American Revolution and early American republic saw a major uptick in prophetic writings generally, and much of it included reflections on the rise and fall of Islam. Yale College President Timothy Dwight, preaching on the fourth of July, 1798, predicted the imminent demise of Islam. He particularly believed that its political power would end soon in Turkey and Persia (Iran), which were among the "chief supports of that imposture." These calamities for Islam added to Dwight's conviction that the "awful advent of the King of Kings" was just around the corner.<sup>3</sup>

The heightened interest in Bible prophecy in America's early republic peaked with the writings of the farmer and Baptist layman William Miller. He became famous for his forecasts that Christ would return in 1843 or 1844. Christ's failure to appear at the appointed hour became known as the Millerites' "Great Disappointment." Miller's date-setting was bold and unusual, but otherwise his views of prophecy were fairly typical for the time. He and his followers accepted the reading of Revelation 9:2-3 and 16:12 as referring to the rise and fall of Islam in prophecy.

Partly because of the embarrassment associated with Miller's failed predictions, the historicist mode of prophecy interpretation became less popular in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. At the same time, dispensational Bible interpretation became more prominent among Anglo-American Christians. Dispensationalists put a strong emphasis on prophecy, but they regarded most prophecies, especially those in Revelation, as yet to be fulfilled. Accordingly, dispensationalists typically regarded passages such as Revelation 9:2-3 as referring to future events, not the rise of Islam. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), the most popular text on dispensational theology, averred that Revelation 9:2-3 represented a surge of demonic activity during the reign of the coming Antichrist.

Dispensational theology also put political developments surrounding the nation of Israel at the center of eschatology. A number of Bible passages suggest a future redemption and restoration of Israel, and dispensationalist Christians (following many earlier Christians such as Jonathan Edwards) interpreted these passages as meaning that prior to the return of Christ, the world's Jews would accept Christ as their Messiah. Dispensationalists added new focus on the literal return of the Jews to the land of Palestine as an essential precursor to key events of the end times: the rebuilding of the Jewish temple, rise of the Antichrist, battle of Armageddon, and physical return of Jesus to Earth. The anticipation of these developments led to an associated focus on the people living in Palestine, particularly Arab Muslims.

Prophetic speculation about the return of the Jews to Palestine took on new life during World War I. In November 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour officially committed Britain to the concept of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Then, the next month saw the British capture Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks. To dispensationalists, the stage seemed to be set for the return of the Jews to their ancestral home. Pastor A. B. Simpson of the Christian and Missionary Alliance cried as he read the Balfour Declaration to his congregation, telling them that these events were “a signal from heaven, and the marking of an epoch of history and prophecy.”<sup>4</sup>

The British seizure of Jerusalem focused many conservative Protestants’ thoughts on the meaning of Luke 21:24, an apocalyptic passage in which Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be trampled underfoot until the “times of the Gentiles” had ended. Many Anglo-American observers have attempted to key Luke 21:24 to news events surrounding British, Arab, or Israeli control of the City of David.

The growing Zionist movement promoted Jewish immigration to Palestine through the 1920s and ‘30s, leading to growing tension and violence between local Arabs and the Jews. The Zionist cause gained unprecedented momentum as the details of the Nazi Holocaust became known, and world sentiment became more favorable toward a Jewish refuge in the Middle East. Finally, in 1948 Jewish settlers declared an independent Israel, resulting in the 1948-1949 Arab-Israeli war and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Arab Palestinians.

Many evangelicals viewed the return of the Jews to Palestine through the lens of Bible prophecy, and came to see the Arab Palestinians as on the wrong side of eschatological history. Increasingly, conservative Protestant observers painted the Arabs’ resistance to their displacement as futile, or even rooted in demonic rage

against God’s chosen people, the Jews. Not only would the Jews flourish in Israel, many evangelicals believed, but they would ultimately destroy the Muslim shrine on Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock. This would set the

stage for the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. Interpreting Jesus’ statement about the “abomination causing desolation” in Matthew 24:15, many believed that the Antichrist would eventually desecrate the Temple and proclaim himself as God. These events were inexorable, and the Arabs only stood in the way of the fulfillment of prophecy, according to observers such as Fuller Seminary’s Wilbur Smith. “No anti-Semitism, no wars, no unbelief,

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no pogroms, not Antichrist himself will be able to prevent the fulfillment of these divinely given promises," Smith wrote in 1956.<sup>5</sup>

Although Arab Muslims would eventually take their place as the chief eschatological opponent of Israel, the atheistic, anti-Semitic Soviet Union played that role in the mid-twentieth century. Many prophecy writers believed that the Soviets' eventual invasion of Israel was foretold in Ezekiel 38 and 39, which depicted the mysterious attack and destruction of "Gog and Magog." Gog and Magog, an army from the north, would assault Israel, but be miraculously ruined in a hail of fire and brimstone. Dispensationalist writers have been divided over the exact identity of Gog and Magog, but they have increasingly given Arab Muslims a key role in the attack. Since 9/11, some writers have even removed the Russians altogether from Gog and Magog, and seen it exclusively as a Muslim force rising against Israel. In any event, dispensationalists have conventionally believed that Gog and Magog's destruction would set the stage for the rise of the Antichrist, who would make, and then break, a seven-year peace treaty with Israel. This would lead to the darkest episode of the end times, the brutal reign of the Antichrist, the destruction of Jewish Christian converts, and the battle of Armageddon. Although these interpretations may seem obscure or even bizarre to outsiders, they have offered an effective means for dispensationalists to explain the disturbing events surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict.

By the time of the Six Day War of 1967, American evangelicals had become accustomed to interpreting news from the Middle East by reference to dispensationalist prophecy interpretation. The Six Day War was a triumph for the Israelis, who decimated the armed forces of Jordan, Egypt, and Syria, and captured East Jerusalem from the Jordanians. This let loose another round of speculation regarding the "times of the Gentiles" and Arab rule over Jerusalem. The most popular dispensationalist interpretation of the Six Day War was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), which stands as one of the most influential books of end-times prophecy ever. Lindsey saw the Six Day War as the end of the times of the Gentiles, and he speculated that the Jews would soon proceed to rebuild the Temple. He noted that the Dome of the Rock stood in the way, and speculated that God might wreck the Dome of the Rock by a providential earthquake. Sensational as it may seem, there is no doubt concerning the popularity of this kind of dispensationalist writing. *The Late Great Planet Earth* went on to become the best-selling non-fiction book of the 1970s in the United States.

Lindsey's wild success in *The Late Great Planet Earth* injected a new dynamic into prophecy writing: commercialism. A host of writers since 1970, including most famously Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the authors of the *Left Behind* series, have shown publishers the mammoth potential of popular books on prophecy. Another popular writer on the Middle East crisis was Dallas Theological Seminary's John Walvoord. His *Armageddon*,

*Oil, and the Middle East Crisis* was originally published as a response to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and also appeared in an updated 1990 edition in reaction to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Another revised edition, co-authored with his student Mark Hitchcock, appeared posthumously in 2007, with new attention to Muslim terrorism. All told, the book sold millions of copies. Walvoord did not depart dramatically from earlier versions of dispensational prophecy, but he gave the question of oil and the Arab-dominated OPEC a new centrality to the events of the end times. Global greed for oil would prepare the way for a European/Middle Eastern alliance that Walvoord called the "Mediterranean Confederacy," the organization of nations the Antichrist would eventually come to rule.

Before 9/11, Islam had played a significant role in American apocalyptic thought. But the terrorist attacks sharpened Protestant conservatives' attention to Islam like no other event. Often, the initial reaction was anger and rage toward Islam itself. Samaritan Purse's Franklin Graham called Islam a "very evil and wicked religion," while Liberty University founder Jerry Falwell opined on *60 Minutes* that the Prophet "Muhammad was a terrorist." Most notoriously, former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines said in 2002 that Muhammad was a "demon-possessed pedophile."

By 2001, conservative American Protestants also had a long, deep tradition of apocalyptic thought to draw upon in order to interpret the horrible events of September 11. Those events generated an explosion of interest in Islam and prophecy, but that interest was channeled into already-existing patterns of Bible interpretation. Popular pastor John Hagee of San Antonio asserted in his book *Attack on America: New York, Jerusalem, and the Role of Terrorism in the Last Days* (2001) that the terrorist violence revealed again the natural hatred of Muslims for the friends of Israel. Hagee believed that in the last days—perhaps quite

soon—the Arab Muslims surrounding Israel would ally with Russia in the Gog and Magog attack, but that it would be miraculously foiled by God.

One substantially new line of thinking in apocalyptic thought since 9/11 is,

ironically, a product of Americans' greater familiarity with the basics of Muslim theology. Some prophecy writers have begun to speculate that the messianic figure that Shi'a Muslims call the Mahdi is actually going to be the Antichrist. This is the view of books like Ralph Stice's *From 9/11 to 666* (2005) and Joel Richardson's *Antichrist: Islam's Awaited Messiah* (2006). In Stice's scenario, the Mahdi would force people to take a laser-burned mark

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of the Muslim creed, with the threat of beheading if they refused. It is difficult to say whether the new role for the Mahdi in conservative Christian apocalyptic thought represents a momentary fad or a lasting trend.

The history of American apocalyptic thought about Islam offers much reason for discouragement, as conservative Christians have seemed all too eager to gloss biblical prophecy with extra-biblical assertions and morbid scenarios of Islam's demise. But we should also note that the purveyors of apocalypse have not cornered the market on conservative Christian opinion in America. To cite only one example, evangelical Baptist theologian Timothy George, the Dean of Beeson Divinity School, wrote a popular book titled *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? Understanding the Differences between Christianity and Islam* (2002) just after 9/11. While George maintained that fundamental theological differences divided Muslims and Christians, he also asked American Christians to emphasize charity and understanding with Muslims as far as they possibly could. He steered readers away from condemnations of all Muslims, or the Prophet Muhammad. George recommended that Christians take Muslim theology seriously, and noted that the Prophet's monotheism was a critical step in the direction of divine truth. However, George reminded readers that Christian and Muslim understandings of God were irreconcilably different, with the Muslims emphasizing the absolute unity of Allah, and Christians seeing God as both one and three in his Trinitarian nature. One could point to a host of conservative Christian commentators (and Christians of other stripes) who have quietly maintained a peaceable witness regarding Muslims despite the din of apocalyptic noise, even in times like those following 9/11.

Christians often seem to indulge extremes when it comes to Islam, either denouncing all Muslims as violent and demonic, or (as is the case with some more liberal Christians) papering over all differences with hopeful assertions that we are all God's children. Perhaps there is a middle way. Christians should refuse to indulge sensational characterizations of Muslims or the Prophet Muhammad, or ghoulish scenarios of Muslims' demise in the last days. But honest understanding and dialogue with Muslims must also acknowledge that there are essential differences between the faiths that cannot be ignored. But these differences give no one, either Muslim or Christian, the right to harm, insult, or demonize the other. Anger over jihadist terror does not license the invention of extra-biblical forecasts of apocalyptic destruction. Unfortunately, those forecasts are often where conservative Christians have turned to make sense of the religious and political challenge of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1 Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, edited by John F. Wilson, volume 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 524.

2 Aaron Burr, *The Watchman's Answer* (Boston, 1757), 17-18.

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3 Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis* (1798), in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, second edition, volume 2 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1392.

4 Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Tyler, TX, 1991, [1977]), 44.

5 Wilbur M. Smith, "Israel in Her Promised Land," *Christianity Today*, 1:6 (December 24, 1956), 11.

6 This article is based on material from Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Used by permission.

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