

“Prophecy in the News”: Cautionary Tales from Christian Antiquity

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In the Cold War world in which many of us grew up, the newspaper and the newscast often delivered far more than a simple report of the happenings of the day. News from around the world fell into patterns—stories of us vs. them locked in cosmic struggle, tales of heroism and betrayal, speculations about wars and rumors of wars. For many evangelical Christians in those days, the stakes were, quite literally, sky high, for this struggle was far more than a mere human super-power contest. At any moment, Christ—as likely if not more so than atomic bombs—could be coming through the clouds to usher in the end, the Eschaton, the Apocalypse. For many of us that meant first the Rapture, signaled by a universal Trumpet Sound.

Eloquent prophetic preachers could gain immense evangelical followings in those days. Christian news shows with titles like “Today in Bible Prophecy” essentially encouraged the faithful to hold a Bible opened to a hoary and mysterious Old Testament prophecy in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. As passionate and seemingly sincere silver-tongued prognosticators revealed the long-hidden connections between the very different texts in each of our hands, we were literally (and very literally) seeing ancient prophecy fulfilled before our eyes. Soviet tanks could move a few hundred miles to the west and, overnight we became the first of God’s people anywhere and anytime to truly understand the details of Daniel’s prophecies about The Great Bear from the North. While pastors and theologians debated the identity of the other three of the four beasts of the prophet Daniel, a U.S. President and many others carefully watched Soviet actions in light of a passage in the prophet Ezekiel, clearly convinced that the Soviet Union was actually Gog of the famous Gog and Magog prophetic pair. Other speculators had their own identification of Gog and Magog, and the debates could be lively. The key,

though, was that the news could and should be read in light of biblical prophecy if we were to ever truly understand the meaning of either.

Of course, as we all likely know, the end of the Cold War did not bring with it the end of this newspaper/prophecy approach for a fair number of Christians. The *Left Behind* series did sell over 75 million books, after all, and after the end of the Cold War. One long-running, Cold War era Christian-prophecy news show continues to broadcast with its unforgettable husband and wife team, now octogenarians. As I was putting the final touches on this study, I stumbled across a flashy web site whose home page features, literally, a Bible opened to an Old Testament passage laid over the top of a newspaper describing a recent disaster in Haiti.¹ With the closing of the Cold War, Gorbachev, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and any given *mullah* in Iran have each taken their turn fulfilling very specific Old Testament (and, sometimes New Testament) prophecies. There is no end in sight to this habit in some quarters. A quick Google search will reveal that Christian prophetic speculation about virtually every current international news story can be as passionate as ever in some circles, even if, anecdotally, it would appear that those circles are smaller and more fringe than they were during the Cold War. It is unlikely that we will see another U.S. President any time soon weighing in on where the Soviet Union is predicted in the Old Testament, even if an evangelical Christian should make it to the White House. I do note, though, that the same Christian newscaster who taught me as a child how to understand Russia's daily actions in light of the Old Testament is now doing the same for ISIS.

A brief look back to Christian antiquity shows us immediately that our (or our parents' or our grandparents') generation did not invent this type of prophetic speculation vis à vis news and

¹ <http://www.endtime.com/prophecy-news/>. As I was studying this particular home page, a pop-up teased me with a method for finding prophecies about ISIS in the Bible.

media reports. Many early Christians often worked in pretty much the same way as Cold War evangelicals, and in ways that might surprise you. Looking back at their experience can give us much insight into how our early Christian forebears dealt with news of disaster as well as provide important cautionary tales against the type of bizarre excesses we have seen among Christians at all eras, and, importantly, even in our own lifetimes.²

When we encounter the past, even when we are noting stark similarities to our own era, we are still entering “a foreign country.” The terms we use must be defined and explained carefully and appropriately in context if we are to avoid the twin dangers of anachronism, on the one hand, and exoticism, on the other. In the former, we illegitimately conflate their world and ours; and in the latter we draw an impenetrable glass barrier between “us” and “them.” Neither one of these is helpful or appropriate if we are to understand the dynamic at play with news and prophecy. Two questions form the core of this paper, both of which must be answered as we attempt to enter the “foreign country” of the past. First, what passed for “news” in antiquity; can antiquity be said to have had media any sense we can recognize? Second, how did prophecy function in antiquity?

To the first question, recent scholarship in fields of media, information, and communication theory across many disciplines, has not only helped us understand more about what we mean by “news,” but has also helped us understand its role in different societies across time and space. In his influential and path-breaking study, *A History of News from the Drum to the Satellite*, M. Stephens defines news simply as “new information about a subject of some public interest that is shared with some portion of the public.”³ While this basic definition can fit any context, we must still see fundamental differences between ancient and modern attitudes

² Many of the specific examples here are drawn from M. Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

³ M. Stephens, *A History of News from the Drum to the Satellite* (New York: Viking, 1988), 9.

toward news. To us, in a modern world, news holds “a privileged and prestigious position in our culture’s hierarchy of values.” But to the ancients, “the very ordinariness of news means that its transmission is often present in our sources in inexplicit form, because it required no explanation.”⁴ The actual passage of news is one of the most taken-for-granted aspects of the ancient world. The Romans—and it is them that I will be exploring here—were generally reticent about their media; but the ancients’ essential silence in describing what we would call media does not, of course, deny media a present and active role in their world.

Nothing quite like newspapers, and certainly not newscasters, could be found in the ancient world, but news and media were alive and well, even if implicit in our sources. The modern world has until recently been so rooted in print culture that we can hardly explore ancient news-sharing without hinting, consciously or not, at “inadequate media,” or the like.⁵ Yet we can catch fleeting glimpses of the spread of news in such phrases as “news reached,” “news circulated,” and “news spread and burst upon . . .”⁶ In our world, yesterday’s news is indeed old news—forgotten and largely irrelevant, consigned to the dust bin or the history book (both, of course, equally irrelevant). In the Roman Empire, however, where, depending on the season, it could take a piece of news three or more months to reach its destination, and any response an equal amount of time to return, it almost goes without saying that timeframes differ from ours. According to one commentator on the ancient world, “contemporary” for the sake of news, can even be defined as “within living memory.”⁷ St. Augustine of Hippo, of whom we will hear more in a bit, once described the disastrous surrender of a Roman border city as “almost within living

⁴ S. Lewis, *News and Society in the Greek Polis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2, 5.

⁵ See Lewis, *News and Society*, 5, for further challenges.

⁶ *Life of St. Daniel the Stylite*, 56; Julian, *Misopogon*, 360; Libanius, *Oratio* 13.32; See Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness*, 80.

⁷ C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 22.

memory.”⁸ That city, Nisibis (whose loss elicited more response from contemporary writers than almost any other single event in Rome’s history), along Rome’s eastern frontier with the Sassanid Persian Empire, had been handed over decades before he made this statement. The point is that “news” as such had a longer life in antiquity than now, and, as we will see, this fact is vital.

Without anything like media figures, per se, news nonetheless travelled through official and unofficial channels. Orations, pamphlets, letters, couriers, inscriptions, personal travel-accounts, treatises, even coins were the media of the day. The famous Roman roads, the imperial post, markets and fairs, urban centers, and, in time, ecclesiastical networks, provided the context for sharing of information as news. The Roman Empire itself remained together, in a certain sense, through these channels of communication. The Greeks before them had nothing close to Roman networks of communication and news-sharing.

The Christians we will be discussing below were Romans, and so generalizations about Roman news-sharing apply to early Christians as well. Several crucial distinctions, however, should be drawn. Christian patterns of news circulation and interaction could differ from their pagan counterparts. Sermons, letters, and various types of theological treatises, all of which survive in surprising numbers, made aspects of Christian news-sharing distinct. Every week, the faithful gathered to hear sermons and homilies, surviving examples of which show that bishops and priests often reported on current events to their gathered congregations. Thus, the sermon itself was a form of media in a day when there were few, if any, public alternatives. The material in these sermons often was gleaned from letters from near and far. The surviving corpus of letters to and from St. Augustine of Hippo, for example, contain clear references to current events, i.e., news. Roman Christians, like their modern counterparts, were often particularly

⁸ St. Augustine, *City of God* 4.29.

attuned to disaster news, a fact which explains the tendency to connect news and prophecy, as we will see. As Christians gathered for worship, homilies kept them up-to-date on events near and far from home.

Thanks to its very structure, furthermore, the Christian church was able to make news-sharing and communication remarkably efficient. This was due in no small part to the importance that early Christian bishops and other clerics gave to collegiality and unity in defending against heresy and clarifying doctrine. Bishops were necessarily in contact with each other on a regular basis, as no one imagined the church as simply a local body. These letters contain references to current events. An interesting upshot of their networks of communication and news-sharing was that at times Christians actually had better access to the news of the day than did the pagan Romans surrounding them, especially at times of political crisis. For example, in the middle of the third century, the bishop St. Cyprian of Carthage reported that he had managed to gather news about the defeat of the Roman emperor up on the Danube frontier, far to his north, as well as some secret order for persecution by the current emperor Valerian. What is clear from Cyprian's letters is that he knew about such information even before the local governor who had the formidable imperial post at his personal disposal—a remarkable accomplishment indeed for ecclesiastical networks of communication.⁹ This was far from an isolated incident. As Roman political solvency decreased, it appears that the efficiency of ecclesiastical media increased.

In order to answer our second core question, about the function of prophecy, it is necessary to look at the various prophetic media of the time. Romans of all stripes and at all times were entranced by prophecy and related forms of divination such as oracles and portents, particularly at times of intense threat and social and political instability. Conversion to

⁹ *Epistula 80.1*; see Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness*, 119, 144.

Christianity did not make one immune from this fascination; in many cases, it simply provided more and different prophetic material to explore. More reliable than news as we might understand it, per se, prophecy allowed Romans to interpret their present moment or period of crisis immediately, often reading the will or mind of God (or the gods) in history. In the early centuries A.D., making sense of the present and the past by means of the future became increasingly prevalent for Christian and non-Christian alike. “Prophecies could describe and validate current conditions—the current state of affairs as part of a divine plan.”¹⁰ Christians relied on prophecy as they sought to understand their place in this world and in the world to come as well as process news of disaster or impending disaster. Interpretations of prophecy, then, can make explicit how Christians were responding to news of disaster at a time when the actual dynamics of news, as such, often otherwise escape us.

Many Christian writers used current news and information, especially from Rome’s troubled frontiers, to make sense of biblical prophecies and vice versa. Threats to the Roman Empire, from the third century onward, provided just the type of current problem to inspire prophetic speculation about contemporary events, imbued with deep eschatological significance. Barbarian invasions from the north and northeast as well as the long-term superpower struggle—sometimes hot, sometimes cold—with the Sassanid Persian Empire to the east were grist for the prophetic mill. One perennial prophetic favorite (which should come as no surprise to us) was the reference to Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38:15. Ezekiel had prophesied that “Gog” would come out of the north “riding on horses, a great host, a might army” (ESV). The Third-Century Crisis—as the period is known by historians—and barbarian invasions (coupled with a little bit of folk etymology) clearly convinced some Romans that the Goths, who consistently challenged

¹⁰ D. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.

frontier zones in the north and northeast were, in fact, Ezekiel’s “Gog.” Connecting Gog—as the invading Goth—with other prophecies in Ezekiel and Daniel, the third-century Christian writer Commodianus predicted the complete annihilation of the Roman Empire within just a few years of his writing. Roman imperialism was waning, and with its passing was coming what Christ himself had predicted as the “abomination of desolations spoken of by Daniel the Prophet.”¹¹

Many, although not all, fourth-century writers continued to make this same type of connection. The picture becomes more complicated after the early fourth-century conversion of the emperor Constantine, since many Christians tended to see him as bringing in a blessed millennium, and concluded that perhaps the end was not nigh, nor did they wish it to be. It is important to see, however, that some of the most important Church figures at this time understood current events in light of prophecy; we are not talking about fringe figures here. St. Ambrose, the spiritual father of St. Augustine, responded to news of the Battle of Adrianople (378)—one of Rome’s worst military disasters ever—by quoting Ezekiel 38 in one of his sermon delivered during the winter of 378-79, shortly after the battle. “For Ezechiel already prophesied in that time both our future destruction and the wars of the Goths That wretched Gog is the Goth whom we now see to have come forth.”¹² That this connection was made by many—a perfect example of the news/prophecy connection we are exploring here—can be surmised by St. Augustine’s own later explicit denunciation of such connections. In his *City of God*, he writes, “For these nations which he names Gog and Magog are not to be understood of some barbarous nations in some part of the world, whether the Goths or the Messagetæ, as some conclude from the initial letters, or some foreign nations not under the Roman government.”¹³ St. Jerome,

¹¹ *Carmen Apologeticum* ll. 803-814, cited in A.R. Anderson, *Alexander’s Gate, Gog and Magog, and the Inclosed Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1932), 9.

¹² *De Fide* 1.137-38; see Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness*, 141.

¹³ St. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.11.

likewise, denounced such associations clearly, further suggesting that it was a popular viewpoint at the time.¹⁴ That neither St. Augustine nor St. Jerome was successful in their attempts to discourage their fellow Christians from such prophetic designation of current events can be divined from a text written about two centuries later. In his “History of the Goths,” Isidore of Seville simply passes on the Gog/Goth connection without comment. In subsequent centuries, Huns, Alans, Khazars, Magyars, Turks, and Mongols each took their turn playing the prophesied part. All of these, *nota bene*, were well before Russia even existed, let alone came along and stole the Gog connection and the prophecy show.

In the early Christian centuries, as now, the explicitly apocalyptic passages of the Scripture were favorites for interpreting and processing disaster news. Apocalyptic literature, which had its high-water mark in the several centuries on either side of Christ’s birth, tends to thrive at times of crisis because it offers a decided resolution to surrounding woes. While frequently recurring in, first, Jewish and, then, Christian history through time, it is not necessarily consistent in intensity, but ebbs and flows with disaster news or perceived disaster. “Apocalyptic,” writes theologian D.S. Russell, “is literature of despair . . . [W]ith equal appropriateness it can be described as a literature of hope. God would vindicate his people once and for all and bring to its consummation his purpose and plan for all the ages.”¹⁵ It was during the Third Century Crisis that we first see Christians turning to apocalyptic writing to make sense of the frequently-arriving disaster news.¹⁶ They would continue to do the same in subsequent centuries as political, military, economic, and social crises befell the Roman Empire. They

¹⁴ See Jerome, *Commentaria in Ezechielium XI*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1844-64), 25.15-490.

¹⁵ D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 B.C.-A.D.100* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 18.

¹⁶ Many through time have interpreted Revelation 18 as a coded reference to the destruction of the Roman Empire, personified as the Whore of Babylon. Since the descriptions in this chapter are generalized, and not likely based on specific news events, I do not consider it relevant to the analysis here.

borrowed images freely from Ezekiel and Daniel as well as the Revelation of St. John, the Gospel of St. Matthew, and intertestamental apocalyptic literature. Apocalypticism played well in this setting because it helped interpret rapid and otherwise inexplicable change. The primary concern of apocalyptic literature is the end of history and of the world itself, when the righteous will be vindicated and the wicked judged. This future, but imminent, moment imparts meaning to the events it describes or explains—current events, of course, provide the tangible substance of apocalypse. Meaning in history, then, ultimately comes from an understanding of the eschaton (telos, apocalypse) and the human’s relationship to it. Although apocalypticism often reacts at some level to political or military disaster, it points out that the military/political world and the divine cosmos past, present, and future, are part of an inseparable continuum. Then, as now, it is important to note, though, that it brought Christians great hope. In the midst of this critical and historical analysis, it should not be forgotten that the Apostle Paul himself, describing the coming “Day of the Lord,” concludes simply with, “Therefore, comfort one another with these words.”¹⁷

Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170-236), writing at the early stages of the Third Century Crisis was one of the first known Christian writers to directly interpret current news in light of apocalyptic visions. He ties the Roman Empire into one of the visions recorded in the book of Daniel (always a favorite, then as well as now), attempting to explain the apparent decline of the Empire in his own day.¹⁸ More famously, St. Cyprian, one of the greatest and most influential of North African Christian Fathers, responded to disaster news in his own day by invoking the apocalypse. Much of his apocalyptic speculation is inspired by news coming from Rome’s northern and eastern frontiers. His surviving letters provide fascinating insight into the Christian

¹⁷ I Thessalonians 4:18 (ESV).

¹⁸ In *Danielem*, cited in Potter, *Prophets*, 106-107.

church's news-gathering efficiency, as noted above. To Cyprian, the moment of Gothic invasions in the north was a sure sign of apocalyptic catastrophe and cataclysm (much as news about Soviet movements or terrorist actions has been in our own recent memory). News connected to apocalyptic indicators and apocalypse signaled the suspension of the cosmos. Current news reports demonstrated all too clearly to Cyprian that the world "had begun to fail"; in fact, it was "already in decline and at its end."¹⁹ In one treatise, Cyprian reflects that one does not even need to point to the "oft-repeated vengeance on behalf of the worshippers of God," since recent news reports indicated the impending end of the world. Reports of the "decrease of forts" on the Roman frontier and other setbacks were enough to show that the end was indeed nigh.²⁰

The subsequent disasters of the fourth century continued to stoke the apocalyptic fires. St. Ambrose, mentioned above with his Goth / Gog connection, elsewhere interpreted the disastrous Battle of Adrianople in 378 as a sign of the end of the world. Several years after the battle, in an exposition on Luke (21:9 – "And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place," ESV), he suggests that not only do current events (news) point to the end of the Roman Empire, but also the end of the world itself. His exposition likewise echoes apocalyptic passages in Matthew (24:6) and Mark (13:7). Ambrose writes,

None are witnesses to the heavenly words more than we, whom the end of the world has found. Indeed, how great the battles and what rumors of battles have we heard! The Huns rose against the Alans, the Alans against the Goths, the Goths against the Taifals and Sarmatians, and the exile of the Goths made us even in Illyricum exiles from our fatherland and there is not yet an end . . . Therefore, since we are at the end of the age, certain sicknesses of the world must go before us.²¹

¹⁹ *Ad Demetrianum* 4; see Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness*, 144.

²⁰ *Ad Demetrianum* 17; see Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness*, 144.

²¹ *Expositio Evangelii Lucae* 10.10; see Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness*, 144-45.

Elsewhere, Ambrose writes that “the whole world having fallen, it is the end of the universe.”²²

The fourth-century barbarian invasions across the Roman Empire were sure signs of the coming end.

The major barbarian invasions of the early fifth century kept the apocalyptic imagination working overtime. One of many apocalyptic accounts from the time is the *Chronicle* of Hydatius, a Christian bishop from northwestern Spain. The attacks on Rome’s frontiers, the “frontiers of the narrowly-confined Roman Empire that are doomed to collapse,” not only signals the end of the Roman Empire, but also the consummation of the present age.²³ Like Christians before him, Hydatius mined the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Revelation of St. John for up-to-the-minute interpretation of news. He points, for example, to several plagues in his own day as the direct fulfillment of Ezekiel 5:17, 14:21, and 33:27-29 as well as the first four seals in Revelation. At one point, he connects news of a recent marriage of two prominent barbarian nobles with the prophecy of the marriage of the king of the North and a daughter of the South, mentioned in Daniel 11. Pointing to churches which recently had fallen to barbarian Arian heretics, he finds the fulfillment of Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and 12:11, all of which refer to the profaning of holy places and the “abomination of desolation.”²⁴

During the sixth and early seventh centuries, the issue for the Eastern Roman Empire (often now called the Byzantine, following the collapse of Roman power in the western Mediterranean) was less the invading barbarians and now more the powerful Sassanid Persian Empire on their eastern frontier. A new dynasty had come to the Persian throne in the early third century, and a much more powerful, centralized empire and formidable threat to Rome had been emerging in subsequent centuries. A strong attachment to Zoroastrianism (a dualist religion and

²² *De Excessu Fratris* 1.30; see Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness*, 145.

²³ *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana*, ed. R. Burgess (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 6.

²⁴ Burgess, *Chronicle*, 6.

philosophical system) provoked apocalypticism on both sides of the Rome/Persian frontier. While Christians could, and did, interpret moments of the struggle as tangible signs of the end, the Zoroastrians likewise interpreted the conflicts in terms of their own belief about the ultimate showdown of light and darkness, truth and evil. They likewise imagined an end of the conflict as the ultimate setting of all things to right and bringing in a kingdom of light and truth. The Sassanids had long been a superpower checking Rome's power, but by late sixth and then seventh century, Rome and the Sassanid Persians were almost constantly at war. A variety of peripheral peoples were pulled into this conflict, Turks, Avars, Khazars, Armenians, and Arabic-speaking peoples. In fact, the bulk of the soldiers in this conflict were just such peripheral peoples pulled in as mercenaries or regular soldiers (often, of course, as shock troops). The major religions which have left us writings interpret the growing conflagration and superpower struggle in, at the very least, explicitly religious terms. Many Jews interpreted the conflict as the moment for the coming of the Davidic Messiah; Zoroastrian Persians interpreted it as the ultimate showdown between good and evil; Byzantine / Roman Christians interpreted the conflict as signaling the triumphal return of Christ.

An important flashpoint in the conflict occurred in 614-15 when the Sassanid Persians violently seized Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria from the Byzantines. The horrors associated particularly with the fall of Jerusalem connected well with apocalyptic sensibilities and the worst fears of the day. Losing Jerusalem, which Christians of the time conceived as the center of the map, indeed the center of God's very plan for humanity (and the place to which Jesus Christ himself would soon return), made the struggle particularly momentous. In addition, the Christian world's most prominent relic—the True Cross—was seized from its holding site in Jerusalem and taken back to the Persian capitol at Ctesiphon. This relic represented, for many Christians,

the very cross upon which Jesus had died. Various legends also connected its wood to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. The ambitious Christian Byzantine emperor Heraclius, after some initial setbacks and near loss of nerve, was persuaded to launch an all-out campaign against the Sassanids to reclaim the True Cross and with it the Holy Land and its important pilgrimage sites. For a time he was very successful, scoring a series of important victories in the years leading up to 630. His coinage began to declare him as a new Constantine, and church writers of his time presented him as a Christian Alexander the Great, going against another Persian Empire, and, importantly, an apocalyptic crusading king. Note that the original meaning of Crusade has the crux, the cross, at its center. The imagery on his coins and writings from the time describe him parading the True Cross and returning it to Jerusalem, which he had recovered.

In his important, albeit short-lived, victories against the Sassanid Persians, Heraclius declared the first-known Holy War in an attempt to inspire his own troops, but also to encourage peripheral peoples to fight on his side—the true side of right in the midst of this ultimate showdown in history. The end was nigh. One of the major peoples his recruitment campaign targeted were the fierce Arabic-speaking peoples of the Arabian peninsula. Many of these Arabic-speaking peoples, especially to the north of the Arabian peninsula, were themselves Christians, albeit of a heterodox variety (Monophysite). Heraclius’ message inspired many of them to fight for his apocalyptic “righteous” cause, but it also gave at least some of the Arabic-speaking peoples the idea of calling people to action by declaration of Holy War. Yes, many historians ultimately connect the Muslim idea of *jihad* to Heraclius’ call for a Holy War against his Zoroastrian Persian foes.²⁵ At the time that Heraclius was recruiting Arabs to his own apocalyptic cause, Muhammad was a forty-something year old man, just beginning to have

²⁵ See Peter Sarris, “The Eastern Roman Empire (306-641)” in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. C. Mango, 55-56 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

visions. It would not be long before the armies that Muhammad summoned were ending the Sassanid Persian Empire altogether and dealing further serious setbacks to the Byzantine Empire. Their message was likewise an apocalyptic one—indeed a full one-third of the Qur’an consists of apocalyptic commentary and prophecy on the impending Last Day, the Last Trump, the Overwhelming Event, etc. Their means to prepare for That Day was *jihad*, a Holy War. Ideas have consequences—and the results are not always benign.

Along with apocalyptic prophecy, Christians also engaged in a range of more traditional Roman prophetic practice. While it might seem antithetical to Christianity itself, many early Christians accepted the proclamations of pagan oracles as giving news and a legitimate interpretation of it. Church Fathers often embraced the use of oracles, so long as they established the truth of Christianity. Lactantius, a fourth-century Christian Roman polemicist, proclaimed the following about oracles:

Since all these things are true and certain, foretold by the harmonious prediction of the prophets, since Trismegistus, Hystaspes and the Sibyl [all oracles] all uttered the same things, it is impossible to doubt that hope of all life and salvation resides in the one religion of God.²⁶

St. Augustine spoke very highly of oracles as well, particularly the Sibylline oracles, since they “wrote some things concerning Christ which are quite manifest”; of one Sibyl (or pagan prophetess) he claims, “We might even think she ought to be reckoned among those who belong to the city of God.”²⁷

There was a long history of copying out, modifying, and inventing oracles in the Roman Empire, and before. Christian writers revised some of these in order to take account of history as it unfolded, that is, in relation to current news. As with our Cold War evangelicals mentioned at

²⁶ *Epitome Institutionum*, 68, quoted in J.J. Collins, “The Development of the Sibylline Tradition,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* ii, 20.1 (1987), 421-59. Theophilus, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Eusebius, and Tertullian likewise praise pagan oracles for revealing Christian truth.

²⁷ St. Augustine, *City of God* 18.23.

the outset, news was interpreted in relation to prophecy—current events were read into biblical and other prophetic texts now presented as hoary oracles.

Two particular examples, with striking parallels to our own day, are the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle and the Oracle of Baalbek. These connect very explicitly here because they were circulated widely at a popular level in something closer to modern-day media, and were written (or, at times, rewritten) from the perspective of the person on the street.²⁸ In other words, these were not high-brow theological treatises, but rather vernacular media. The Sibylline oracles were a collection of utterances which were ascribed to various pagan Sibyls. Like apocalyptic literature, they were composed and circulated at times of distress. Most of Sibylline oracles—as opposed, incidentally, to Rome’s centuries-old Sibylline books—were written between the second and sixth centuries A.D. Anonymous Jewish and Christian revisers had added to the Sibylline oracles over time, starting with existing pagan material and adding direct references to Scripture and other religious texts. The Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle painted the Roman Empire of the third century in grim terms, noting current crises (which it then “predicted” as though still to come), and then followed up with apocalyptic language of impending disaster.

When another king of Rome will rule, then ruinous Ares with his bastard son will bring the disorderly races against the Romans, against the wall of Rome. And then suddenly there will be famines, plagues, dreadful lightning bolts, horrible wars, and destruction of cities.²⁹

Note particularly the combination of reference to Roman mythology (Ares) with language of the Revelation of St. John. The Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle is full of such references.

The Oracle of Baalbek was written near Rome’s eastern frontier, about 15 miles west of the Euphrates River. The site was a crucial frontier city during Rome’s wars with Sassanid Persia

²⁸ D. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), vi.

²⁹ l. 103, cited from *Rome and its Empire, A.D. 193-284*, ed. Oliver Hekster (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 110-12.

in the fourth century and beyond. This popular oracle cites several non-canonical early Christian apocalyptic texts such as the Apocalypse of Elijah, the Apocalypse of John, and the Seventh Vision of Daniel. Making sense of recent battles, the prophecies declared that “there will be much shedding of blood, so that the blood will reach the chest of horses . . . and they will capture and set on fire the cities and despoil the east.”³⁰ The wording here is echoing Revelation 14:19-20, which likewise measures the depth of flowing human blood by height measured on a horse. Commenting on military disasters along Rome’s eastern frontier, the Oracle of Baalbek warns, “Woe to women with child and to those who suckle [their babes] in those days,” echoing, obviously, the wording of the Gospel of Matthew 24:19.³¹ “The Persians will arise . . . and will overturn with the sword the cities of the East together with the multitude of the soldiers of the Roman Empire.”³²

Not all Christians, though, were caught up in apocalyptic fervor, and it is important, in closing, to note variety in the early Church, as might be apparent already from parts of this study. One of the most devastating moments to ever befall Rome, in fact, elicited some decidedly non-apocalyptic and very influential responses. In A.D. 410, the city of Rome was sacked by the Visigoths under the command of Alaric, a disgruntled Roman army officer. The material devastation was significant, but much more so was the “psychological” blow to the Roman spirit: it had been nearly 800 years since the “eternal city” had fallen to an external invading force. To the pagans remaining in the Roman Empire, most of them intellectuals, this calamity was the natural result of the country embracing the exclusive and monotheistic Christian religion, and turning its back on the gods which had made Rome the undeniable master of the “civilized”

³⁰ P.J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967), ll. 183-85.

³¹ Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, ll. 183-85.

³² Alexander, *Oracle of Baalbek*, ll. 170-172.

world. For the Christians, the fall of The City posed some serious problems. Beginning with the conversion of Constantine I to Christianity in 312, and culminating with the official enforcement of Christianity upon everyone in the Roman Empire by Theodosius in 392, many Christians had seen in the Roman Empire the consummation of history and the direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Christian historiography had experienced a drastic reversal in the fourth century, going from condemnation of the “pagan and hostile empire” to acceptance and then thankfulness for it. The writings of such churchmen as Lactantius, Jerome, Ambrose, Eusebius, and Orosius abound with praise of the “Christianized Empire” and with attempts to posit Rome directly into God’s eternal plan for history. Why then would God let The City fall (and to Arian Christians at that!)?

St. Augustine of Hippo, though, had grown increasingly suspicious of the Christian attempt to read God and His plan so directly into human history, for better or for worse. Probably even before 410, he had been laying mentally the groundwork for a radical conception of history which distinguished Christianity from historical and secular power structures such as the Roman Empire.³³ Such a model of history could defend Christianity against its detractors, and at the same time, could help distance Christians from the politico-religious tangle the Church was becoming. To the pagans, St. Augustine presented his formidable *City of God*, answering their accusations against Christianity in excruciating historical and rhetorical detail; to the Christians, he suggested a philosophy of history, implied in many of his works, which did much more than just allow them to understand why God would allow such a “Christian city” as Rome to be desecrated. His model of history would have a profound impact on the thinkers of Late Antiquity

³³ Most scholars now agree that the underlying theme of *City of God* had been in Augustine’s mind for some time; the crisis of 410 only inspired him to organize his thoughts and write them down. On this, see Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 158; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mystery of Continuity Time and History, Memory and Eternity in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986), 35; and John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 217.

and the Early Middle Ages, especially as the western empire became more Christian and less politically solvent in the years following 410. In a word, his answer was a resounding cautionary statement. Kingdoms of this earth—Cities of Man, he called them—rise and fall, and we should not necessarily presume to understand God’s ultimate plan for them with reference to current and fleeting events or with recourse to obscure biblical prophecies. It is the eternal City of God, made up of all Christians past, present, and future, which will abide forever. That city deserves our highest love, honor, and praise. “Glorious things of you are spoken, O City of God” was his answer, drawing directly from Psalm 87:3 (ESV).

My point in this study is not to parade the oddities of Christian believers through time. Even if some here were often badly mistaken, it is important to note that they were right in many, many other matters. St. Cyprian, for example, when he was not connecting Gog and Goth, was composing beautiful treatises on Christian unity which can inspire all branches of Christianity to this day. Every age of crisis has produced its share of prognosticators, and many of them were some of the leading Christian minds of their times. No less a light than the Puritan polymath Jonathan Edwards was once convinced that the French and Indian Wars heralded the end of the world. A list of the number of prominent Protestant pastors and theologians who have identified the pope as the Antichrist who is to come at the end of time would be longer than my entire paper. At the end of the day, though, Christians are commanded to be vigilant and to look expectantly for the blessed hope of Christ’s return, the Parousia. As we do so, it is important that we remember that we are not the first generation to face difficult times, and we will likely not be the last. History helps us do that, for often we find rather quickly that our own troubles pale in comparison to those of Christians across space and time. Yet we also should be concerned about understanding the Scriptures correctly, and history, likewise, presents us with innumerable

cautionary tales. We are not the first ones to speculate wildly, and absolutely wrongly, as we look for the blessed hope. We can learn much from the saints through the ages, and the lessons are both positive and negative. Our Christian brothers and sisters through time provide tremendous guidance and encouragement. I suspect that most of us would affirm that we would do well to learn from them and to not simply repeat their mistakes.