

## REVELATION

by James Reston, Jr.

The inside source for the Last Apocalypse at the end of the first millennium of Christ is a quirky French monk named Raoul Glaber. Glaber was a Cluniac when the Abby of Cluny in central France was at the height of its power in the eleventh century and represented the most powerful force for church reform in Europe. From Glaber's Histories we have our reports of meteors, famines, and plagues around the year 1000 A.D., events that were interpreted as heavenly signs that the Biblical prophecy of the End Time was near to fulfillment. But Glaber was writing in the 1030s, a thousand years after the death rather than the birth of Christ. And for the year 1033 A.D. itself, a thousand years after the Passion of Christ, he also reported dire happenings, especially a terrible famine which swept Europe.

"Men believed," the monk wrote, "that the orderly procession of the seasons and the laws of nature which until then had ruled the world, had relapsed into eternal chaos. They feared that mankind would end." As a consequence, in that thousand-year anniversary of Christ's death, Glaber reported a huge pilgrimage to Jerusalem (which in 1015 A.D. had been captured by Muslims.). The fear of the Antichrist drove the throngs to the Holy City where the Holy Sepulchre was held hostage by the infidel.

But hold on! In another passage about the dawning of 1033 A.D., Glaber portrays a relieved populace, giving thanks for its deliverance, building churches like mad, joyful and optimistic about the future. Bishops raised their staffs to heaven, opening their arms gleefully, and shouting Peace! Peace! "At the millennial anniversary of the passion of our Lord the clouds cleared in obedience to divine mercy and goodness; and the smiling sky began to shine and blow gentle breezes."

It is as if the historian can not make up his mind. Which will it be? disaster or deliverance? Suffering or joy? Do we mark the apocalypse at the birth or death of Christ? in celebration or in guilt? This could be important. If somehow we've slipped a digit and the apocalypse is to come two thousand years after Christ's death, we could have another 35 years until the year 2033 A.D. By human logic, it would seem to make sense that the Second Coming should happen in anger at the murder of Christ. But when that millennial year rolls around, look out!

Is it any wonder then that we are seeing a bewildering cacaphony from the various Christian faiths about the coming millennium? Like Glaber, they too seem to be torn between gloom and joy. The easiest path seems to be to ignore the Book of Revelation altogether.

Seventeen years ago, not long after the Rev. Jim Jones took 1000 followers to their graves in the rotten jungle of Guyana, and just before Ronald Reagan was about to move into the White House and confront the Evil Empire, I remember interviewing the Rev. Billy Graham. In somber, mellifluous tones the evangelist proclaimed that, at that very moment, he perceived 22 signs of the End Time. He invoked the standard citation from Revelation 13:5 about wars and rumors of war (the Middle East), nation pitted against nation (our pious Democracy vs. the Evil Empire), earthquakes and famines, cultural wickedness such as the movie "The Exorcist" and mysterious happenings such as the sighting of UFOs. The troubles in the Middle East proved that Palestine was the modern Gog and Magog. All these signs were converging "for the first time in history," he said soberly. "We're to live pure lives as though Christ were not coming for ten thousand years. And yet we're to watch for Him and have this hope in our hearts: If man does reach Armageddon, God has a plan for the human race."

But since that time very good things have happened. This has caused fundamentalist Christian sects a very big problem. The Evil Empire has collapsed, and just like that, the grotesque vessel for all the Devil's handiwork has vanished. God-less Communism has all but disappeared, so what is a God-fearing Christian to hate? The villains have been vanquished.

Their wicked ways have been discredited. Gone too is the perpetual terror of imminent nuclear incineration, that perfect modern incarnation of the biblical holocaust, prophecied in the last book of the Bible.

Who will replace the old demons? How might world-wide conflagration take place without nuclear weapons? What to do about the more than 20 references in the Book of Revelation to white robes in the field of blood? The timing of all this good news is very awkward indeed.

It has fallen to the Religious Right in America to fill in the blanks created by the end of the Cold War. Early in 1991, the Reverend Jerry Falwell cast the new threat as a conspiracy from within: Western society was being dragged down by the Devil's trinity of communies, feminists, and homos. But in 1994 Pat Robertson seized the torch with his book called *The New World Order*, and followed in 1995 with his novel on the Antichrist. "In the year 2000 California is being ravaged by the worst heat wave in its history," reads Robertson's thriller, "and is on a crash course with a menacing meteor." The protagonist is a pastor who is also an expert on the Book of Revelation, and the secretary of energy is a Shiite Muslim who is a member of Hezbollah. "God's wrath is horrible beyond imagination," the reader is warned.

To Robertson, the ways of Lucifer are simply more devious now that the Communists and their nukes are history. But the evil framework has been in place in this country long before Lenin or even Marx. For over 200 years, Robertson proclaims, there has been a "tightly knit cabal whose goal is nothing less than a new order for the human race under the domination of Lucifer and his followers." The conspiracy began, we are told, with the Order of the Illuminati, with its twisted roots in the Spanish Inquisition, mixing alchemy with free thought. This sinister, secret society took over the freemasons and now consists largely of Jews, freemasons, and international bankers. In his "premillennialism," (the belief that Christ will come before the millennium; not to be confused with "post-millennialism" whose adherents will have to wait a few more years), Robertson must see the final clash as between

God and this tightly knit cabal. A very unfair fight indeed.

The Roman Catholic Church has taken a very different tack. It has decided to go with the good tidings of the past decade and embrace them totally. The millennium must be a happy time of celebration and intensified faith. Representing nearly a billion faithful around the world, the church has adopted a clever position on the millennialist forebodings of the last book of the Bible: it will ignore the Book of Revelation altogether. "Christ is the Lord of time," reads the papal letter known as Tertio Millennio Adveniente. "All time belongs to him." A year and a half ago when I was in Rome, I was unable to get anyone in the Vatican's large office, solely devoted to the planning for the year 2000 A.D., even to talk about Revelation.

"You don't need a priest. You need a theologian!" an officious Irish priest told me. Apparently I needed a church historian as well, because the Irish cleric had never heard of the great Sylvester II, the magnificent pope who presided over the first millennium in the year 1000 A.D.

Instead the Vatican emphasizes "the Great Jubilee" when two years from now Rome will brace itself for 30 million pilgrims. For the Vatican, the preparation for the millennium seems to have more to do with hotel rooms and rock concerts than with End-Time anxieties. The historical reference point for the Catholic Church is not 1000 A.D., the last apocalypse, but rather 1300 A.D. when Pope Boniface VIII first established the concept for a "jubilee" year every fifty years. Pilgrimage to Rome was encouraged. The reward for the effort was the remission of sins. But, to be validated, the pilgrimage had to be accompanied by a substantial monetary contribution to the Church. So the 700 year tradition of the "Jubilee Year" began as a slick fund-raising scheme!

Pope John Paul II himself seems passionately determined to survive through the Jubilee Year, no matter what physical ailment may beset him. He has declared the preparation for the millennium to be the very key to his pontificate. Though it is never stated, the Holy Father

knows that his reputation will last forever if he does live into the third millennium. John Paul's name will glow along with the extraordinary and brilliant Sylvester II, the towering figure of the first millennium who was able to sanctify the Christianization of Europe after two centuries of Viking, Moor, and Magyar depredations. The glory of Sylvester II, rather than the embarrassment of Boniface VIII, would be a fitting parallel for John Paul II. The Polish Pontiff unquestionably played an active, important role in the collapse of pagan Communism in Eastern Europe.

In choosing to ignore the concept of apocalypse and the Book of Revelation, the Catholic Church ignores a lot of good stuff. Some of the most startling imagery in the Bible is found in apocalyptic imaginings, and it's no wonder that it has fascinated writers and scholars over the centuries from St. Augustine to Dante to John Milton to Isaac Newton.

Nor are these imaginings only in the Book of Revelation. They are also in the Book of Daniel, in Paul's Epistles, in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. At the Second Coming the Lord may descend with a shout or he may come stealthily as a thief in the night. In the Great Tribulation we are to look out for false Christs and false prophets and the Anti Christ himself, spouting blasphemy and frogs from his filthy mouth. We may know that the Kingdom of God is nigh when we see the horrible number 666 and then the Beast appears....with seven heads and ten horns and upon each horn a crown, and upon each head the name of blasphemy.

No alien from the Hollywood wonderworks can top these creatures of old. If you escape the first fiend, perhaps the second will get you: with his feet of a grizzly bear, mouth of a lion, face of a leopard. And if not him...or it...perhaps the Great Whore of Babylon, the mother of all harlots, dressed in purple and scarlet, decked out in gold and jewelry, holding her drink as if it were a martini at Elaine's, a gold cup filled with the filthiness of her fornications, especially her fornications with kings and potentates.

Then there are the Seven Seals and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Had it not been for the mystery of the Seven Seals in Revelation 6, America might not have suffered

through one of the great tragedies of the 1990s. David Koresh, that tin-horn Antichrist from Waco had asked the authorities for a little more time, 'a little season' more to complete his 'opening' of the Seven Seals. He had worked his way through the first four from which the white, the red, the black, and the pale horses emerge. In the midst of the ATF siege, he had arrived at the Fifth Seal. It depicts the 'souls of those who have been slain for the word of God.' These martyrs, dressed in white robes, cried out for vengeance. And they needed to wait only a 'little season' longer before they would be avenged.

Here was a messianic crazy with a vision of his own End Time, focussed on a biblical mystery about vengeance, who had already been attacked and who was now surrounded, harrassed, and threatened. And the 'sinful Messiah' was asking for a little more time. One can almost hear him crying out to his following behind those board and batten walls from Revelation 6:10: 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?'"

But Janet Reno could not wait. She could not see the incendiary mix before her, because she looked in the wrong places and listened to the wrong voices. Her agents were tired; reinforcements were scarce. Instead of consulting her own archives to see how another two bit messiah with an apocalyptic obsession had given America its worst tragedy of the 1970s, she handed Koresh the perfect excuse for his own fiery martyrdom, just as surely as Congressman Leo Ryan had handed the Rev. Jim Jones his provocation in 1978.

At least, Janet Reno can not be blamed for Hale Bopp. In the next two years as the anxiety level rises, however, there is no telling what shape the trigger may take for another premillennialist cult, bent on fulfilling biblical prophecy as it sees it, trying to repeat history a third or fourth time. Just as Glaber saw the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in 997 A.D. as a sign, we have Mt. Pinatubo and Mt. St. Helen's. Just as Glaber had a meteor in 1000 A.D. which glowed as the brightest star in the sky for three months and then disappeared, we have Shoemaker Levy 9 and Hale Bopp. Just as the monk had a plague called St. Anthony's fire

(which spread from rotten host-bread), we have AIDs. Maybe the alignment of the planets in 2000 A.D. really does mean something.

All the dire signs are converging for the first time in history, Billy Graham said in 1981, just before the signs all changed. Maybe December 31, 1999 is just another New Year's Eve.

The dawn of the third millennium is what you want to make of it.

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