

APOCALYPTIC FICTION IN TIMES OF COVID-19

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Times of global upheaval, like the current COVID-19 pandemic, provide a fertile ground for apocalyptic speculation. Before we draw eschatological implications from COVID-19, we should remember that many other epidemics and pandemics have afflicted the human race throughout history. In 430 BC a devastating plague believed to be typhus struck Athens. It began during the Peloponnesian War and lasted three years, killing possibly as many as seventy-five thousand or one hundred thousand people—about a quarter of the city’s population.¹ As the plague ravished the city, many Athenians gave themselves up to the unbridled gratification of their carnal instincts. Seeing that all stripes of people were perishing, “they judged that piety and impiety came to the same thing, and . . . no one expected that he would live to be called to account and pay the penalty of his misdeeds.”²

In AD 541 the Byzantine world was hit by what has been dubbed the world’s first true pandemic. Known as the Plague of Justinian, it was caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* and killed millions of people.³ The plague heightened eschatological expectations as some believed that the six thousandth year from creation would have fallen between AD 492 and 508. Thus, many saw the plague as foreboding Jesus’ coming and the last judgment.⁴

In the 1340s, the Plague of Justinian rose its ugly head again, but this time with a new name: the Black Death. Nothing like it had ever happened before; it struck Europe with merciless fury, killing a third of its population and erasing entire towns from the map.⁵ Some saw the plague as a demonstration of God’s judgment upon sin and “a precursor to the end of the world.”⁶

In 1918 an influenza virus emerged that killed more people than any other outbreak of disease in human history. Although the Black Death of the 1300s killed a much larger proportion of the population, in raw numbers influenza killed more than the plague, and even more than AIDS has today. Epidemiologists estimate that it “caused at least fifty million deaths worldwide, and possibly as many as one hundred mil-

lion.”⁷ Unsurprisingly, influenza also sparked its fair share of religious frenzy, acting as a “powerful midwife to propheticism and eschatological belief.”⁸

Other plagues could be mentioned, but this sketch will suffice to indicate two points: On the one hand we learn that humanity’s struggle with the microbial world is by no means unique to COVID-19. Indeed, humans have been under the sword of microscopic enemies since the entrance of sin. On the other hand, like other major crises—such as war—pandemics can spark eschatological frenzies, and even in the post-Enlightenment world some people remain vulnerable to apocalyptic speculations. Rather than an eschatological trigger of the last events, COVID-19 may be better perceived as an indication of the ravaging effects of sin in the world.

Unfortunately, an adverse side effect of COVID-19 has been the upsurge of sensationalist interpretations of biblical eschatology. One case in point lies in the ideas propagated by Walter Veith, a South African zoologist and Seventh-day Adventist author and speaker who runs the Amazing Discoveries media ministry.⁹ To press home the argument that the end of the world is imminent, Veith builds an eschatological scenario by correlating current events with quotes from Ellen G. White and biblical passages. With the creativity of a fiction writer, Veith puts together conspiracy theories merged with an idiosyncratic understanding of Adventist eschatology to convey the message that the end is near. In principle there should be no problem in proclaiming the imminence of Jesus’ soon coming; this remains a vital component of the gospel message and the blessed hope of the church. The problem lies in the fact that Veith’s exposition consists of 1) concocting conspiracy theories based on the news headlines and 2) postulating a time frame for the end of the world.¹⁰ The critique that follows addresses these two aspects of Veith’s teachings and should not be construed as an evaluation of his person, Christian experience, or motives.

Conspiracy Theories

In his presentation, Veith pays lip service to the historicist position but seems more concerned with ad-

vancing speculations concerning the correlation of current events with biblical prophecy. Although correctly recognizing that Jesus related the “abomination of the desolation” to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Veith reapplies the abomination of the desolation to the future implementation of the Sunday law. In doing so, he overlooks the historicist view that has related the abomination of the desolation to the work of papal Rome and the oppression of God’s people during the 1260 years mentioned in Daniel and Revelation.¹¹ Ironically, Veith’s interpretation comes much closer to a futuristic rather than historicist understanding of apocalyptic prophecy.

To make his prophetic scenario look plausible, Veith argues that the United States president Donald Trump, the vice president Mike Pence, and Anthony Fauci—who serves as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—are part of a Jesuit conspiracy to restore Roman Catholic dominance over the world. That all three men are currently involved in the enforcement of COVID-19 regulations would be a sign that the last events are upon us. But on what grounds does Veith make such an inference? For Veith the evidence seems clear: all three men have studied in Jesuit schools and thus must be part of a Jesuit scheme to restore Roman Catholicism to its former glory. Indeed, Trump and Fauci have studied in Jesuit schools and Mike Pence has a Catholic background.¹² But to argue that these factors make them part of a large Roman Catholic plan to restore its former power cannot be sustained with serious arguments.

In the same vein, Veith also understands the appointment of William Barr (a Roman Catholic) to serve in the position of United States attorney general as another step in this Roman Catholic machination. According to Veith, Barr allegedly reinstated the death penalty; since the second beast of Revelation (the United States) would make use of the death penalty, Veith understands Barr’s appointment to have prophetic implications. Indeed, Barr reinstated the death penalty for the “executions of five death-row inmates convicted of murdering . . . children and the elderly.”¹³ But the idea that Barr’s action has a bearing on the prophecy of Revelation 13 strains credibility. Following the same logic, Veith also sees the Supreme Court appointment of Brett Kavanaugh—who happens to be a Roman Catholic—as another element in this vast network of Jesuit/Catholic stratagem to restore Catholicism.

In the wake of his exposition to show the influence of Catholicism, Veith mentions John Henry Newman (1801–1890), an Anglican priest converted to Catholicism and subsequently made cardinal.¹⁴ Veith argues that Newman’s conversion destroyed Protestantism in England. Such a claim seems to exaggerate the historical significance of Newman’s conversion.¹⁵ In addition, from a theological perspective, Veith’s statement seems to minimize the close similarities between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism.

In the same context, Veith refers to Newman’s canonization by Pope Benedict XVI with information

that cannot be corroborated by any credible source. For example, Veith asserts that the pope had Newman’s remains dug up, held Newman’s moldy bones in his hands, and ordered the bones to be disseminated all over the world to be venerated. An investigation of this claim reveals that Veith’s reconstruction lacks historical credibility. Indeed, the Vatican decided to move Newman’s remains from his burial site in a small cemetery near Rednal to a marble sarcophagus in the Birmingham Oratory, a congregation established by Newman. However, as the tomb was opened,

Newman’s corpse was mystifyingly absent, [and] there remained a paltry cluster of sundry materials—“brass, wooden, and cloth artifacts.” The empty grave was forensically predictable: according to the opinion of medical professionals present for the exhumation, the sodden clay native to the area, coupled with the mold in which Newman insisted his casket be enshrouded, rendered conditions ideal for the quickened and complete decomposition of a corpse.¹⁶

In view of Veith’s fictional account of Newman’s bones, one wonders how much of Veith’s presentation stems from fanciful imagination as opposed to serious research. If Veith’s depiction of the pope holding Newton’s bones can be taken as a measure of his respect for the facts, one wonders how many of Veith’s prophetic predictions abide by the same standards. Unfortunately, many of Veith’s correlations between current events and prophetic fulfillment spring more from a fertile imagination than from serious engagement with the biblical text and historical sources. For Veith, the presence of Catholics in the United States government and Supreme Court indicates a Roman Catholic conspiracy. But what about the presence of Protestants, Evangelicals, Mormons, and secular people who most likely outnumber Roman Catholics in the United States government? Furthermore, does a degree from a Roman Catholic institution turn one into a Jesuit agent? For Veith, the answer is an unequivocal yes.

Veith claims not to be propagating conspiracy theories, but his reasoning indicates otherwise. He sees prophetic fulfillment not only in the United States, as previously noted, but also in movements among Islamic leaders, Orthodox rabbis, the prime minister of Israel, the Turkish president, and the Russian leader Vladimir Putin. He also refers to locust plagues in Africa and a reported arrival of American soldiers in Europe as part of a wide network of events signaling the impending unfolding of eschatological events. With a sleight of hand, Veith’s presentation weaves everything into a checkered tapestry of eschatological fiction. However, an even bigger problem lies behind Veith’s eschatological speculation: his inclination to prophetic time setting, to which we now turn.

Time Setting

Distinguishing between hard time setting (a precise date) and soft time setting (an approximate date), Veith seems inclined to favor a soft time setting. But how can Veith argue such a “soft time setting” in view of biblical passages such as “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matt 24:36)?¹⁷ Veith argues that such a reading would exclude even Jesus, which of course would not make sense since Jesus is one with the Father. Veith apparently ignores the standard explanation, that

as a man on earth Christ voluntarily limited His knowledge and power to the capacities of human beings in order that His own perfect life might be an example of how we should live, and that His ministry might be a pattern we could follow, aided by the same divine guidance and help that were His (see on Luke 2:52).¹⁸

Instead, he appeals to a brochure by James White titled “The Second Advent,” according to which the verb “knows” should be translated as “make known.” From this the implication follows that others may know the time, but only the Father has the authority to “make it known.” Veith appeals to 1 Corinthians 2:2, where the verb “know” arguably can also be read as “make known”: “For I determined not to know [make known] anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). The problem with this kind of interpretation is that it overlooks the context and the actual communicative intention of the sentence in which the verb is embedded. One cannot simply take the meaning of one word in one passage and claim the same word has the same meaning in another passage without paying close attention to the context. Although the signs of the second coming recorded in the Bible may certainly allow the believer to know that the end is approaching, Veith claims a degree of precision that cannot be corroborated by the biblical text.

For example, Veith attempts to ground his “soft time setting” on statements by E. G. White, according to which the earth has been under sin for about six thousand years. To drive home his thesis, Veith takes a statement in which E. G. White says that Jesus’ baptism took place four thousand years after Adam fell into sin:

Christ, in the wilderness of temptation, stood in Adam’s place to bear the test he failed to endure. Here Christ overcame in the sinner’s behalf, *four thousand years after Adam turned his back upon the light of his home*. Separated from the presence of God, the human family had been departing, each successive generation, farther from the original purity, wisdom, and knowledge which Adam possessed in Eden. Christ bore the sins and the infirmities of the race as they existed when He came to the earth to help man. In behalf of the race,

with the weaknesses of fallen man upon Him, He was to stand the temptations of Satan upon all points on which man could be assailed.¹⁹

Consequently, Jesus’ baptism in AD 27 sets the beginning for the last two thousand years of earth’s history. That being the case, 2027 will mark the completion of the six thousand years of earth’s history. But before one concludes that Christ will return in 2027, Veith quickly argues that the “six thousand years” during which “Satan has struggled to maintain possession of the earth”²⁰ must include the short time Satan will have after the millennium to arraign his forces for the final battle against God. Of course, although we do not know how much time Satan will spend in that process, that lapse of time must be discounted from the six thousand years, which implies that Jesus may return some time before 2027.²¹ Veith claims that he is not setting the time for the second coming of Jesus, but at the same time he argues that we are in the final week of earth’s history, which ends in 2027. He claims to draw on what the spirit of prophecy says, but by weaving E. G. White’s quotes with biblical passages without proper regard for context and in a literalistic fashion, he sets the time before which Jesus will come. What is this, if not time setting?

Veith does not reckon with the fact that “four thousand years after Adam turned his back upon the light of his home” may be a round number with no intention to set the precise timespan that transpired between Adam’s fall and Jesus’ baptism. Indeed, E. G. White says that on the occasion that Jesus was tempted by the devil, sin had been ravishing the world for “more than four thousand years.”²² Significantly, in another publication, E. G. White indicates that since Satan overcame our first parents “more than six thousand years” have elapsed.²³ Thus, it seems clear that such chronological statements from the Spirit of Prophecy are approximations and not precise calculations of an exact time span.²⁴

Significantly, neither E. G. White nor the other pioneers interpreted such references to four thousand and six thousand years with the chronological precision Veith ascribes to them. To arrive at such time setting, Veith strings together a litany of quotes from E. G. White and the Bible with no serious regard for their context. In doing so, he overlooks some significant statements from E. G. White herself in which she instructs the church to stay away from time setting. The following statements are a representative sampling of her position on this matter:

No one has a true message fixing the time when Christ is to come or not to come. Be assured that God gives no one authority to say that Christ delays His coming five years, ten years, or twenty years. “Be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh” (Matthew 24:44). This is our message, the very message that the three angels flying in the midst of heaven are proclaiming.

The work to be done now is that of sounding this last message of mercy to a fallen world.²⁵

Many Adventists have felt that unless they could fix their faith upon a definite time for the Lord's coming, they could not be zealous and diligent in the work of preparation. But as their hopes are again and again excited, only to be destroyed, their faith receives such a shock that it becomes well-nigh impossible for them to be impressed by the great truths of prophecy. . . . The repeated efforts to find new dates for the beginning and close of the prophetic periods, and the unsound reasoning necessary to sustain these positions, not only lead minds away from the present truth, but throw contempt upon all efforts to explain the prophecies. The more frequently a definite time is set for the second advent, and the more widely it is taught, the better it suits the purposes of Satan.²⁶

I plainly stated at the Jackson camp meeting to these fanatical parties that they were doing the work of the adversary of souls; they were in darkness. They claimed to have great light that probation would close in October, 1884. *I there stated in public that the Lord had been pleased to show me that there would be no definite time in the message given of God since 1844.*²⁷

Our position has been one of waiting and watching, with no time-proclamation to intervene between the close of the prophetic periods in 1844 and the time of our Lord's coming.²⁸

*The people will not have another message upon definite time. After this period of time [Rev 10:4–6], reaching from 1842 to 1844, there can be no definite tracing of the prophetic time. The longest reckoning reaches to the autumn of 1844.*²⁹

From the quotes above, it seems clear that E. G. White does not endorse speculations regarding the time of Jesus' coming or the end of the world. Indeed, she warns against such suppositions on the grounds that they "lead minds away from the present truth" and better serve "the purposes of Satan."

Conclusions

Many hearts open to the gospel in times of crisis, as people become more aware of their limitations and the fragility of the human and societal condition. Such spiritual longings, however, cannot be met with sensationalist predictions, conspiracy theories, or time setting. The exposition of God's Word must be based on truth, not on misguided expectations generated by apocalyptic fiction. In fact, idiosyncratic interpreta-

tions of end-time prophecies serve only to spark emotional excitement and bring the church's end-time message into disrepute.

Our preaching and proclamation are to be centered on Jesus Christ—His love and care for a suffering world, and His offer of forgiveness and restoration for all. And of course our message certainly includes the proclamation of the soon coming of Jesus. There is nothing inherently wrong with preaching about the signs of the end. Jesus Himself, when asked about the signs of His coming, told the disciples about war, "famines, pestilences, and earthquakes" (Matt 24:7; par. Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11). But the end-time message must be based on the Word of God rather than on news headlines or speculative understandings of current events.

Significantly, when the disciples asked Jesus about the time of His coming, He told them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (Acts 1:7). Then He made a promise: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Whereas the disciples wanted to know the time, Jesus shifted their concern to the gift of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel.

So, as the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps the world, our focus should be on a deeper personal commitment to Jesus so that we can embrace Christlike compassion for a needy and suffering world. By the power of the Spirit we can become effective witnesses of Jesus and thus enjoy the privilege of being part of the most evident sign that Jesus is soon to come: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14).



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¹ Robert J. Littman, "The Plague of Athens: Epidemiology and Paleopathology," *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine* 76 (2009): 456–467. According to Mark Welford, *Geographies of Plague Pandemics: The Spatial-Temporal Behavior of Plague to the Modern Day*, Geographies of Health, ed. Allison Williams and Susan Elliott (London: Routledge, 2018), 14, "The first wave of the Athenian Pandemic occurred in early May 430 BCE, soon after the Spartan army laid siege to Athens. Thereafter, pandemics hit in summer 428 BCE and again in the 427–426 BCE winter (Morens and Littman 1992). The population of Athens might have swollen to as much as 400,000 in early May 430 BCE as refugees entered the city ahead of the Spartan army, although Athens' base population was closer to 155,000 (Rostovcev 1941; Morens and Littman 1992). Thucydides suggests the epidemic lasted 4–5 years with a secondary peak in summer 428 BCE (Morens and Littman 1992)."

² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.53.1–4, trans. Charles Forster Smith, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, vol. 1, *Books I and II*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 353–355.

³ As noted by Dan Carlin, "A Pandemic Prologue?," chap. 6 in *The End Is Always Near: Apocalyptic Moments, From the Bronze Age Collapse to Nuclear Near Misses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), some have estimated the Justinian Plague killed a hundred million people, a number now considered far too high. But whatever the actual numbers may have been, "it was the precursor to the Black Death of

the Middle Ages, and it was caused by the same thing—the plague, which was spread by fleas hosted by rats. It was a horrific way to die.”

⁴ Lester K. Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109.

⁵ Welford, 73; and Carlin.

⁶ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 689.

⁷ John M. Barry, “Prologue,” in *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

⁸ David Killingray, “A New ‘Imperial Disease’: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918–9 and its Impact on the British Empire,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2003): 30–49.

⁹ See Wikipedia, s.v. “Walter Veith,” last modified June 4, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Veith (accessed June 7, 2020).

¹⁰ The points selected for discussion are taken from Walter Veith and Martin Smith, “Amazing Discoveries Africa,” “Is This The End? (2 Hour In Depth Study) — What’s Up Prof? 8,” YouTube, April 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6h4H1DHQzc&t=6080s> (accessed June 7, 2020).

¹¹ As explained by Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 809, “this period of 1260 days is referred to seven times in the books of Daniel and Revelation. As 1260 days it appears in Rev. 11:3; 12:6; as 42 months in Rev. 11:2; 13:5; and as 3 1/2 times in Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 12:14. For the calculation of this period see on Dan. 7:25. Adventists generally date this period as from A.D. 538 to A.D. 1798. During this period God’s hand was over the church, preserving it from extinction.”

¹² A Google search shows that he has indeed a Catholic background, but studied at Hanover College (BA, 1981), an institution affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. Subsequently, Pence earned a law degree at Indiana University in 1986. Interestingly, neither of these institutions are known to have ties to Jesuits. Pence, although coming from a Catholic background, “joined an evangelical megachurch, the Grace Evangelical Church. In 2013, Pence said his family was ‘kind of looking for a church.’ He has described himself as ‘a Christian, a conservative and a Republican, in that order,’ and as ‘a born-again, evangelical.” See Wikipedia, s.v. “Mike Pence,” last modified June 7, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mike_Pence (accessed June 7, 2020).

¹³ United States Department of Justice, “Federal Government to Resume Capital Punishment After Nearly Two Decade Lapse,” July 25, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-government-resume-capital-punishment-after-nearly-two-decade-lapse> (accessed June 7, 2020).

¹⁴ See F. X. Connolly, “Newman, John Henry,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Berard L. Marthaler et al., vol. 5 (Detroit, MI: Thomson and Gale, 2002), 331–340.

¹⁵ What most likely brought Protestantism (or, more broadly, Christianity) to a near collapse in Britain were the two World Wars of the twentieth century.

According to Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God* (London: Continuum, 2000), 56–57, “The churches were full before 1914, half-empty after 1919, and three-quarters empty after 1945. And I would add that, by all but destroying British Christianity, these wars may come to destroy the spirit of the country.”

¹⁶ Justin Coyle, “Newman’s Bones,” *First Things*, September 30, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/09/newmans-bones> (accessed June 11, 2020).

¹⁷ All biblical quotations are from the NKJV.

¹⁸ Nichol, 5:503–504.

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, *Confrontation; Redemption; or the Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1971), 32, emphasis supplied.

²⁰ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1890), 342.

²¹ For an incisive critique of recent speculation about the nearness of Jesus’ return and the date of 2027, see Laurence Turner, “Blessed Hope or Blessed Calculation?,” TED News Network, <https://ted.adventist.org/news/1708-blessed-hope-or-blessed-calculation> (accessed June 7, 2020). For a detailed response (in German with English subtitles) to Veith’s proposal of a Cosmic Week and his reasoning that Jesus might come back in the year 2027, see the video produced by the theology teachers at Bogenhofen Seminary, Austria, “2027 - Ende der Welt? Hat Walter Veith RECHT!?” YouTube, May 29, 2020, <https://youtu.be/zoNpGvMuVXw> (accessed June 7, 2020).

²² Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958–1980), 269.

²³ Ellen G. White, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-Day Adventists* (Basle: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 133.

²⁴ Although the unequivocal testimony of the Bible and the spirit of prophecy points to a recent six-day creation, any attempt to arrive at a precise date for the creation or the fall faces insurmountable challenges given the complexities of the biblical genealogies. For some helpful studies on this matter, see Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11,” *Origins* 7, no. 2 (1980): 53–70; Colin L. House, “The Successive, Corresponding Epochal Arrangement of the ‘Chronogenealogies’ of Genesis 5 and 11B in the Three Textual Traditions LXXA, SP, and MT” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1988); and Warren H. Johns, “Ellen G. White and Biblical Chronology,” *Ministry*, April 1984, 20–23.

²⁵ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:113–114.

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 457.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:73, emphasis supplied.

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 10 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 270.

²⁹ Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 35–36, emphasis supplied.