

Apocalyptic Disappointments and the “Appointed Times of the Nations”

A characteristic of some Christian cults¹ indigenous to America is predictive prophecy. The nineteenth century gave rise to a number of groups eagerly anticipating the fulfillment of God’s scheme of redemption in America as the promised land. The confusion and spiritual malaise that seemed to exist among the traditional churches provoked many to search outside the mainstream for the “truth.” Revivals helped to remedy these problems in the traditional churches, to a degree, by unifying some denominations. At the same time,

The revivals left many individuals distraught and torn by anxiety; and, having tried without success to gain a sense of assurance in their own churches, they were in a receptive mood to listen to new prophets who offered definite guarantees of spiritual security.²

Hudson gives three emphases stimulated by revival which created the climate out of which cults, sects, and communities evolved: “immediate confrontation with God...perfect sanctification...millennial expectation.”³ It was primarily the last of these emphases that gave impetus to a mentality which focused on the specific date for Christ’s return. An early expression of this was given by William Miller who calculated that the return of Christ would occur in 1844. Although Miller and his followers experienced a “great disappointment” when Christ failed to return, some remained resolute in their hope. Following his death his followers divided into three groups, one of which was led by Ellen G. White. She concluded that Christ actually did return as Miller predicted, but only in a spiritual sense into the “most holy place” (Dan. 8:14; Heb. 9). His physical presence was not realized because Christians had failed to observe the Sabbath. This doctrine was later called “the investigative judgment” by those who followed White, *viz.*, the Seventh Day Adventists. “The investigative judgment” doctrine has been seriously challenged from

¹“Cult” is difficult to define. Generally, a Christian “cult” is a group which differs significantly on one or more of the basic orthodox beliefs—particularly in reference to Theology, Christology, and Soteriology—of the normative expressions of the Christian faith. The group usually centers around and submits to an individual’s or organization’s authoritative interpretation of the Bible. Consequently, there is frequently some sense of “progressive revelation” espoused. Cults generally view themselves outside of mainstream Christianity, which they perceive as apostate.

²Winthrop S. Hudson and John Corrigan, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 181.

³*Ibid.*

within the Seventh Day Adventist church itself, but the challenge has been countered with firm disciplinary action.⁴

The Seventh Day Adventist story demonstrates a pattern replicated later by the cult that perhaps best expresses the millennial expectation mentality, the Jehovah's Witnesses. This pattern includes specific date setting by the central figure (organization), failure of fulfillment, disappointment and disaffection among followers, reinterpretation of the date's meaning, challenges from within, and unilateral authoritative action. The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Watchtower) is the official organ of the Jehovah's Witnesses tradition and tenaciously promulgates specific eschatological dates that are central to the beliefs of its followers. It is the purpose of this paper, first, to examine some of those dates, and, second, demonstrate how they arrive at the most crucial date in their apocalyptic calendar—A.D. 1914.

A LITANY OF APOCALYPTIC DISAPPOINTMENTS

1874. The earliest prophet in the Jehovah's Witnesses⁵ tradition was Charles Taze Russell (1852 – 1916). Penton chronicles Russell's eschatological background rooted in the Millerite movement through George Storrs and Nelson Barbour.⁶ Barbour modified the calculations of John Aquila Brown, the first expositor to interpret the "seven times" of Daniel 4 as a period of 2,520 years, to arrive at the year A.D. 1914 as the end of the "Gentile times" of Luke 21:24 (see extended discussion below). Russell agreed with Barbour and encouraged him to write *Three Worlds and the Harvest of This World*, published in 1877. This book spells out the 1914 eschatological chronology.

Russell explicates his views in a series of six books called *Studies in the Scriptures*, published by the International Bible Students Association.⁷ Following Barbour, he taught that the second coming of Christ occurred in

⁴See Edward E. Plowman, "The Shaking Up of Adventism?" *Christianity Today* 24 (8 February 1980): 64 – 67; and James C. Hefley, "Adventist Teachers Are Forced Out In a Doctrinal Dispute," *Christianity Today* 27 (18 March 1983): 23 – 25.

⁵ The name "Jehovah's Witnesses" was not taken by the group until 1931 (M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985], 62).

⁶*Ibid.*, 13 – 24. See also Carl Olof Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*, 2nd. ed. (Atlanta, GA: Commentary Press, 1986), 21 – 39.

⁷ *The Plan of the Ages* (1886), *The Time is at Hand* (1889), *Thy Kingdom Come* (1891), *The Day of Vengeance* (1897), *The At-one-ment Between Man and God* (1899), and *The New Creation* (1904). A seventh volume was published posthumously in 1917 entitled *The Finished Mystery* which actually contained some material by Russell as well as others (Penton, *Apocalypse*, 50 – 51). In addition to these are a number of other books, booklets, tracts, and Watchtower magazines that contain his writings. See the bibliography in Penton, *Apocalypse*, 361 – 382.

1874. The disappointment over Christ's failure to appear *physically* was allayed by a reinterpretation of scripture yielding an "invisible presence" of the Lord in 1874.⁸ This was the beginning of the "Jubilee Year" (Lev. 25), "the times of the restitution of all things." It was the beginning of the last of seven one thousand year periods of humanity from Adam, *i.e.*, the millennial reign of Christ from Revelation 20.⁹ In 1878 Christ assumed power as King of kings and the resurrection of the faithful (144,000) began.¹⁰ In 1881 the fall of Babylon the Great—the end of false Christendom's reign over the church—occurred.¹¹ This position on the second advent of Christ was held by the organization through 1929 under its second president, J. F. Rutherford.¹²

1914. Two caveats are in order when discussing this date as understood in the Jehovah's Witnesses tradition. First, the later tradition (following 1929) understands it as the second coming of Christ as opposed to the earlier tradition's focus on 1874 for this event. Second, later editions of *Studies in the Scriptures* have been altered to accommodate various predictive failures by Russell concerning 1914.¹³ Thus, there is confusion as to precisely what the organization teaches concerning this date.

For Russell the significance of the year 1914 is summarized in *The Time Is at Hand*:¹⁴ 1) the Kingdom of God is established "on the ruins of present institutions," 2) proof of Christ's presence and rule is demonstrated, 3) the last member of the body of Christ is glorified with Christ and rules with him, 4) the end of the times of the Gentiles comes, 5) Israel's blindness begins to end, 6) the great "time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation" culminates and the "new heavens and new earth" begin, and 7) "*before that date* God's Kingdom" crushes all civil and ecclesiastical power.

With the outbreak of the First World War Russell's emerging disappointment with the fulfillment of these predictions was alleviated. He died in 1916 confident of his chronology. However, with the end of the

⁸Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience* (Atlanta, GA: Commentary Press, 1983), 142 – 147.

⁹*Time Is at Hand*, 173 – 200; *Thy Kingdom Come*, 121 – 134; and *Finished Mystery*, 301 – 302.

¹⁰*Time Is at Hand*, 239; and *Day of Vengeance*, 604, 621 – 622.

¹¹*Thy Kingdom Come*, 132 cf *Finished Mystery*, 273 – 276.

¹²*The Harp of God* (Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association, 1921), 234 – 238; and *Prophecy* (Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association/Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1929), 65 – 66.

¹³E.g., the 1912 ed. of *Thy Kingdom Come* states the "deliverance" of the bodies of the saints (Rom. 8:22 – 23) "must take place **some time before** 1914." The 1917 ed. states it "must take place **very soon after** 1914" (228) (emphasis mine).

¹⁴76 – 78, 101.

war in 1918, and the failure of all seven predictions, it was up to Rutherford once again to abate the growing disappointment of Russell's followers by reinterpreting the nature of *what* was to occur, leaving the *when* firmly in place. Rutherford (in 1930) spiritualized all the events and translated the sphere of fulfillment to heaven. As early as 1917 he was already modifying and adding to Russell's earlier predictions.¹⁵ He also changed the 1874 date of Christ's invisible presence (and the accompanying events of 1878) to 1914 (and 1918), the chronology followed by Jehovah's Witnesses to this date.¹⁶

A major problem remains for the Jehovah's Witnesses concerning this date. They apply Matt. 24:34—"this generation will not pass away until all these things take place"—to the generation of 1914.¹⁷ Given their definition of a generation (eighty years),¹⁸ this application fit well with their 1975 prediction (see below), but is now (2005) facing difficulty and another great disappointment. The number of those alive today who were alive in 1914 is shrinking rapidly. This fact is intensified by Watchtower statements that the "generation of 1914" was "15 years of age" in 1914,¹⁹ and "**saw** the events of 1914 C.E." (emphasis mine).²⁰ Consider these words from the Watchtower as late as 1982:

*But that generation of 1914 certainly did see what happened here on earth as a "sign" of his presence and as "a beginning of sorrows" for mankind! (Matthew 24:8, Authorized Version) And the remaining ones of that generation of 1914 are still talking about it. Some of them will be talking about it right down to the time when the "great tribulation" wipes Satan's wicked system of things off the face of our globe.*²¹

A number of suggestions have been floated by the governing board of the Watchtower concerning this "generation" problem: it referred only to the 144,000, it applied only to Jesus' generation concerning the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, it referred to the generation that saw the "Celestial Phenomena" in Matt. 24:29 - 44 which began in 1957, marked by the launch of the first Russian Sputnik.²² To date, the Watchtower has clung to the original interpretation, but disappointment is sure to follow the last survivor of that generation.

¹⁵ *Finished Mystery*, 57 - 62, 128 - 129, 484 - 485, 513 - 515, 594 - 595.

¹⁶ Jonsson, *Gentile Times*, 29 - 36.

¹⁷ "What Will the 1970's Bring?" *Awake!* 8 October 1968, 13 - 14.

¹⁸ *Aid to Bible Understanding* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1971), 641.

¹⁹ "What Will the 1970's Bring?" 13 - 14.

²⁰ This statement is on the inside cover of every issue of *Awake!* explaining why the magazine is published.

²¹ *The Watchtower* 1 May 1982, 15.

²² Franz, *Crisis*, 214 - 220.

1925. Undaunted by past prediction failures, the Bible Student organization experienced new growth in the early twenties with the release of Rutherford's little book *Millions Now Living Will Never Die*.²³ It predicted that the millennium would begin in 1925 based on the "jubilee system" of Lev. 25. Specifically, Rutherford predicted the resurrection of some Old Testament faithful:

*The chief thing to be restored is the human race to life; and since other Scriptures definitely fix the fact that there will be a resurrection of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and other faithful ones of old, and that these will have the first favor, we may expect 1925 to witness the return of these faithful men of Israel from the condition of death, being resurrected and fully restored to perfect humanity and made visible, legal representatives of the new order of things on earth.*²⁴

This year marked the beginning of "the earthly phase of the kingdom."²⁵ It was "the beginning of the reconstruction," or "restoration," which included the gradual restoration of "a man of seventy years of age...to the days of his youth and [he will] live on the earth forever and never see death."²⁶

A book by W. E. Amburgh, written for children, also promised the literal physical presence of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac...John the Baptist to whom all the faithful would have direct access: "No doubt many boys and girls who read this book will live to see Abraham,...and those other faithful men of old, come forth in the glory of their 'better resurrection,' perfect in mind and body."²⁷

Another disappointment followed the failure of these predictions. The church experienced a serious loss of membership, members were blamed for viewing the prediction as a "certainty" rather than a "probability." Rutherford admitted his mistake, but continued to assure his followers that the Old Testament faithful would return. A house was built in San Diego, California in 1930 to house them upon their return.²⁸ Nevertheless, Rutherford continued to maintain that the dates 1914, 1918, and 1925 "were definitely fixed in Scriptures; and they [the organization] also learned to quit fixing dates for the future and predicting what would come to pass on a certain date."²⁹ Apparently, Rutherford learned the lesson, but the Watchtower did not.

²³Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association, 1920.

²⁴Ibid., 88.

²⁵Ibid., 89.

²⁶Ibid., 97, 100.

²⁷*The Way to Paradise* (Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association, 1925), 226.

²⁸See Franz, *Crisis*, 190 – 197; and Penton, *Apocalypse*, 57 – 58.

²⁹*Vindication*, Book 1 (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society/International Bible Students Association, 1931), 338 – 339.

1975. In 1966 the Watchtower was again predicting the millennial reign of Christ.³⁰ Fred Franz (president, 1977 – 1992) claimed:

*In this twentieth century an independent study has been carried on that does not blindly follow some traditional chronological calculations of Christendom, and the published timetable resulting from this independent study gives the date of man's creation as 4026 B.C.E. According to this trustworthy Bible chronology six thousand years from man's creation will end in 1975, and the seventh period of human history will begin in the fall of 1975 C.E.*³¹

Of course this conflicted with Russell's calculations that set the date for man's creation at 4128/9 B.C.³² Allowing two years for the period of innocence before the fall, the 6,000 year period began in 4126 B.C. and thus ended in A.D. 1874.³³ Later, the Watchtower was able to "correct" Russell's miscalculations.³⁴

Essentially, Franz revised Russell's 1874 date to 1975. He stopped short of categorically stating that 1975 marked the beginning of the millennium, but the implication was clear, and subsequent publications and public pronouncements perpetuated the idea. For example, the 1968 article in *Awake!* stated that "the corrupt system of things" would be destroyed by God in "a few years, at most."³⁵ It continued:

*How fitting it would be for God, following this pattern, to end man's misery after six thousand years of human rule and follow it with His glorious Kingdom rule for a thousand years! This Kingdom Christians have prayed for during many centuries.—Matt. 6:10.*³⁶

Very clearly the article pointed to autumn 1975 as the beginning of God's rule, but it qualified the date by saying, "Since the Bible does not

³⁰This is the thousand years reign of Christ in Rev. 20 (*Babylon the Great Has Fallen!—God's Kingdom Rules!* [Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1963], 634 – 635, 682).

³¹*Life Everlasting—in Freedom of the Sons of God* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1966), 28 – 29. Gruss traces the history of the "6,000 year tradition" concerning Adam's creation and provides evidence for the near unanimous consensus concerning the impossibility of determining it by biblical genealogies (Edmond C. Gruss, *Jehovah's Witnesses and Prophetic Speculation* [Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972], 59 – 62, 66 – 69, 72 – 76).

³²*Time Is at Hand*, 39 – 43, 51 – 54.

³³*Thy Kingdom Come*, 127 – 128.

³⁴*God's Kingdom of a Thousand Years Has Approached* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1973), 206 – 211. See also *Aid*, 333 – 334.

³⁵"What Will the 1970's Bring?" 13.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 14.

specifically state this, no man can say.”³⁷ But Franz and the Watchtower apparently overlooked one small detail. Both assumed the creation of Adam and Eve in the same year to arrive at 1975. The *Awake!* article specifically states: “According to reliable Bible chronology, Adam **and Eve** were created in 4026 B.C.E.” (emphasis mine).³⁸ Ironically, the article cites a pre-1966 Watchtower publication which states that the time of Eve’s creation could not be determined and, accordingly, “It does no good to use Bible chronology for speculating on dates that are still future in the stream of time.”³⁹

Regardless, both the members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the general public believed the Watchtower was predicting the end of this system of things in 1975. Between the year the prediction was first made (1966) and 1975, witnessing doubled and baptisms increased by a multiple of five.⁴⁰ However, when 1975 came and went without event, witnessing began to decrease, responses followed in kind, and many disaffected members left the organization. Dissenters were cast out, members were faulted by the hierarchy for believing that they (the general membership) *could know* the actual date of Christ’s return when he specifically said no one could know “the day or hour.”⁴¹

An “explanation” was given to allay the widespread disappointment. The problem was not in the calculation for Adam’s creation, that was correct. What is not known is when **Eve** was created, which could be years from Adam’s. The 6,000 years should begin at Eve’s, not Adam’s, creation, and therefore could come at any time.⁴² As mentioned above, this was essentially what the Watchtower had taught prior to arriving at the 1975 date in 1966.⁴³ Presumably this explanation satisfied some. However, the future will soon demand more explanations as the apocalyptic clock runs out for the Watchtower.

THE APPOINTED TIMES OF THE NATIONS

The most crucial date for the Jehovah’s Witnesses is A.D. 1914. Walter Martin claimed, “How they arrive at this arbitrary date no one can

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹*All Scripture is Inspired of God and Beneficial* (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1963), 286.

⁴⁰Franz, *Crisis*, 206 – 207.

⁴¹Penton, *Apocalypse*, 99 – 126.

⁴²Heather and Gary Botting, *The Orwellian World of Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 46 – 47.

⁴³*All Scripture*, 286.

reasonably or chronologically ascertain.”⁴⁴ This is not true. Although the date may not be reasonable or chronologically accurate, *how* they arrived at it can be ascertained. It is my purpose to demonstrate that, as well as *some* of the weaknesses in their methodology.⁴⁵ Critical analysis of this material is rare, either because it is so convoluted it seems to defy analysis (so Martin’s statement seems to imply), or the methodology is so unscholarly it is deemed unworthy of critical attention.⁴⁶ Although both may be true to a degree, the thousands of souls who depend on the Watchtower, which produces all the cult’s doctrines, make the study worthy of attention.

Both Russell and later Watchtower “prophets” arrived at the 1914 date in basically the same manner. Russell’s explanation is given in *The Time Is at Hand* (pp. 73 – 102), but I will use only more recent material that the Jehovah’s Witnesses continue to recognize as authoritative.

Two biblical time periods form the core of the 1914 doctrine: “the desolation of Jerusalem, seventy years” (2 Chron. 36:20 – 21; Jer. 25:11 – 12; 29:10; Dan. 9:1 – 2; Zech. 1:12; 7:5) and the “seven times” of Daniel 4 (vss. 16, 23, 25, and 32), which the Watchtower equates to “the appointed times of the nations” (or “Gentile times”) in Luke 21:24. The first period is used to establish the *beginning* of the latter period. They date the period of desolation from 607 to 537 B.C.⁴⁷ The appointed times of the nations they date from 607 B.C. to A.D. 1914.⁴⁸ It is important to note that these are not “rough” dates; the Watchtower is very precise, marking “the close of the Gentile times, around Tishri 15 (October 4/5) in the year 1914 C.E.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴Walter R. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults: An Analysis of the Major Cult Systems in the Present Christian Era* rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., Publishers, 1965), 97.

⁴⁵It is not my purpose to characterize the process (Martin calls it a “hoax,” *Ibid.*), to analyze the psychology behind the cult itself, or to differentiate between the various strains within the Jehovah’s Witnesses tradition (e.g., modern Jehovah’s Witnesses try to distance themselves from the predictions of Russell and Rutherford, the first two presidents of the organization).

⁴⁶The two most scholarly works addressing the issue of Watchtower dating practices are Gruss, *Prophetic Speculation* and Jonsson, *Gentile Times*. Gruss (a former Jehovah’s Witness), as an anti-Witness polemicist, was the first to critically examine the issue. But Jonsson’s work, as a Jehovah’s Witness, seriously challenged the Watchtower’s dating methods and caused considerable turmoil within the organization.

⁴⁷*Babylon*, 364 – 373.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 174 – 181; and *Our Incoming World Government—God’s Kingdom* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1977), 71 – 89.

⁴⁹*Then Is Finished the Mystery of God* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1969), 30.

The desolation of Jerusalem, seventy years (607 – 537 B.C.).

The Bible does not fix dates according to the modern system of dating. Therefore, *everyone* who attempts to set biblical dates must depend upon secular dating methods. The Watchtower accepts “from secular historians the year 539 B.C. as a fixed date, marking the downfall of Babylon, the third world power.”⁵⁰ They recognize this downfall was executed by Cyrus, and state his first year *may* not have begun until late in 538 extending into 537 B.C. They argue that Darius the Mede (Dan. 5:30 – 31) reigned the year before Cyrus, thereby dating his decree for the Jews to return to their land in 537: “It is very important to fix this date, for by means of it we are able to fix the date for the beginning of the desolation of the land...”⁵¹ However, the Bible simply does not state that Darius was ever king of the Medes, and there is no evidence in the Bible or secular sources to support the Watchtower’s claim. The identity of Darius the Mede continues to be a mystery.⁵² Although the 537 date cannot be fixed with the certainty the Watchtower requires,⁵³ it is far less problematic than the 607 date they derive from it.

Based on the passages given above referring to the desolation of Jerusalem for seventy years, the Watchtower figures backwards from 537 (the beginning of the return of the Jews to the land) to the fall of Jerusalem in 607 B.C.—specifically, the beginning of the Gentile times on Tishri 1 (September 22/23), two months following the destruction of the temple.⁵⁴ The destruction of the temple by Babylon was the beginning of the period of Gentile rule over Jerusalem, which symbolized the Davidic rule or kingdom of God. From this time the Gentiles exercised domination over the whole earth, and would continue to do so “until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (Luke 21:24) (see below).⁵⁵

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine each of the “desolation” passages to determine whether or not the seventy year period (if taken literally) must begin with the destruction of Jerusalem.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ *Babylon*, 366.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁵² R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 192 – 193, 1122 – 1123, 1128.

⁵³ *Gentile Times*, Jonsson, 204.

⁵⁴ *Babylon*, 372.

⁵⁵ *Aid*, 94 – 95.

⁵⁶ Using dates accepted by the consensus of scholars, a careful examination of the passages reveals it is conceivable the seventy year period ran from the first deportation of Jews under Jehoiakim (607/6 B.C.) (contra. *Babylon*, 138) to the first return under Zerubbabel (537/6 B.C.). It is less likely the seventy years ran from the destruction of the temple (587/6 B.C.) to the rebuilding of the temple (516 B.C.). Jonsson (*Gentile Times*, 113 – 117) also suggests 605 B.C. (fall of Carchemish) to 539 B.C. (70 understood as a round number), or 609 B.C. (Babylonian defeat of Assyria) to 539 B.C. See my paper “The Appointed Times Of The Nations” (607 B.C.E. – 1914 C.E.), A Critical Analysis of the

Regardless of one's reading of those passages, and what constitutes "desolation,"⁵⁷ the issue is the Watchtower's arbitrary acceptance of the 539 B.C. date for Babylon's fall, while rejecting the 586 B.C. date for Jerusalem's fall which is equally attested by secular historians. It is at this point that the Watchtower's chronology is most vulnerable. By fixing the date for Jerusalem's fall to Babylon at 607 B.C., the Watchtower "prophets" come into direct conflict with all existing evidence. It is here that the works of Raymond Franz and, particularly, Carl Olof Jonsson are so important.⁵⁸

The Watchtower claims the astronomical Canon of Claudius Ptolemy, to which chronologists in Christendom try to harmonize the Bible records, "has long since been exploded."⁵⁹ However, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, to which the Watchtower frequently appeals for support, states: "Proof of the fundamental correctness of Ptolemy's Canon has come from the ancient cuneiform tablets excavated in Mesopotamia."⁶⁰ The research for his article on "Archaeology" in *Aid to Bible Understanding* led Raymond Franz to discover that there was nothing in these Mesopotamian tablets to support the 607 B.C. date. In fact, they pointed to the 587 B.C. date. Even though he attempted to discredit or weaken confidence in these ancient texts through his article, he believed: "In the end, it became evident that it would have taken a virtual conspiracy on the part of the ancient scribes—with no conceivable motive for doing so—to misrepresent the facts if, indeed, our figure [607 B.C.] was to be the right one."⁶¹

Jonsson delivers the most devastating critique of the Watchtower chronology, and particularly of the 607 B.C. date for Jerusalem's fall. His

Watchtower Bible and Tract Society's Doctrine of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in the Year AD1914 for an extended discussion of all the passages and dates.

⁵⁷The Watchtower insists the land had to lie "completely desolate" (*i.e.*, totally uninhabited) in order for it to enjoy its full number of Sabbaths (*Babylon*, 371 – 373). However, "desolation" does not necessarily demand total depopulation (Lev. 26; Jer. 39:8 – 10; Ezek. 33:21 – 29; Neh. 2:17). Jer. 52:30 speaks of a deportation from Judah four years *following* the fall of Jerusalem (cf Jer. 52:12ff). See Jonsson, *Gentile Times*, 90 – 113.

⁵⁸Jonsson's work is the result of his exhaustive research, as a Jehovah's Witness, which led to the near collapse of the Watchtower's eschatological chronology and a schism in the Brooklyn headquarters in 1980. Jonsson's demonstration that their chronology was built on false assumptions could not be refuted and led only to official gag orders from the Watchtower and Jonsson's eventual excommunication (*Gentile Times*, v). The writer (Raymond Franz) of "the most able and thorough discussion of Watchtower chronology ever published by that organization" has since abandoned the most critical point in it, the 607 B.C. date for the fall of Jerusalem (*Gentile Times*, 10 – 11). That discussion is found in *Aid to Bible Understanding*, 322 – 348. See also Raymond Franz's own account of his findings on the 607 B.C. date in *Crisis*, 25 – 27.

⁵⁹*Babylon*, 138.

⁶⁰*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1990 ed., s.v. "History."

⁶¹*Crisis*, 26.

extensive discussion on “The Chronology of the Neo-Babylonian Period” independently confirms Franz’s observation by using seven lines of evidence (four of which are independent of one another) beyond Ptolemy’s canon. All point to the same conclusion: the destruction of Jerusalem occurred in 587/6 B.C.⁶²

The appointed times of the nations, seven times (607 B.C. – A.D. 1914).

The Watchtower arrives at this time period in the following manner.⁶³ The line of rulers in God’s kingdom was interrupted after Zedekiah until Christ returned to rule (Ezek. 21:25 – 27; Luke 21:24). Daniel 4 is a prophecy of Gentile rule to last “seven times” (4:16 – 17, 2, 25, 32). A “time” is a lunar year (360 days) (*cf.* Rev. 12:6, 14 where 1,260 days = “a time and times and a half time” = 3.5 years = 42 months, Rev. 11:2 – 3). The use of lunar years is supported by Genesis 7:11 – 12, 24; 8:3 – 4. Thus, “seven times” is seven years. Employing the idea that each prophetic day is counted as a year (Num. 14:34; Ezek. 4:6), seven prophetic years (“times”) is actually 2,520 years (7 x 360 days/lunar year). Therefore, 607 B.C. plus 2,520 years ends in A.D. 1914.

However, this approach is extremely suspect. In the first place, the meaning of Jesus’ words in Luke 21:24 are unclear. Fitzmyer argues the trampling under foot took place

*until the triumph of the Romans over Jerusalem is complete. When the “end” of Jerusalem comes, the pagans take over...The fulfillment of the time of the pagans can only mean the period after A.D. 70, when the city of Jerusalem and Judea are again dominated by the Romans (the pagans) after the unsuccessful revolt of the Jews.*⁶⁴

This view does justice to the context (*cf.* Rev. 11:1 – 2) and would probably find acceptance among postmillennialists as well.⁶⁵ It is possible Jesus’ quote of Daniel 7:13 (Luke 21:27 *cf.* Matt. 24:15) might draw the reader into that book linking the Gentile times with the Gentile kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (2:31 – 45) and Daniel’s visions (7:8 – 28). Some premillennialists make such connections. For example, Robert Shank argues from these passages that the Gentile times began with Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and ends with the

⁶²*Gentile Times*, 40 – 86.

⁶³*Make Sure of All Things—Hold Fast To What Is Fine* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc./International Bible Students Association, 1965), 89 – 90; *World Government*, 82 – 89; and *Babylon*, 179 – 181.

⁶⁴Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X – XXIV)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1985), 1347.

⁶⁵Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 175 – 176.

yet future earthly millennial reign of Christ.⁶⁶ However, to the best of my knowledge, neither Shank nor any other premillennialist links the “seven times” of Daniel 4 with this prophetic scheme.

In addition to the Daniel references in Jesus’ discourse, the Watchtower finds a strong link to the “seven times” of Daniel 4 through the “time” element in Luke 21:24 (*i.e.*, “the *times* of the Gentiles”).⁶⁷ However, this method of approaching Scripture could lead anywhere. The term *καῖρός* (“time”) is found 82 times in the New Testament and around 250 times in the LXX.⁶⁸ The meaning of the “seven times” in Daniel 4 must be determined by an exegesis of its context. Beyond that, unless there is further clear evidence in Scripture, the reader should not make application beyond its historical context.⁶⁹

Jonsson dates the prophecy “towards the close of Nebuchadnezzar’s forty-three-year-long reign, and consequently several years *after* the destruction of Jerusalem in his eighteenth regnal year.”⁷⁰ This may or may not be the case, but it is not necessary to establish this to demonstrate that the context militates against a period of world dominion by Gentile powers. The very symbol of king Nebuchadnezzar’s humbling for “seven times” is intended to demonstrate just the opposite (“sovereignty has been removed from you,” 4:31), that God *always* rules the nations (4:25 – 26, 32 – 37). There is no indication in the context that the kingdom (rule) of God abdicates during the “seven times.”

The context provides the fulfillment of the prophecy (4:28 – 37): “all this happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king (28)...Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled (33)...at the end of that period (34).” However, the Watchtower adds to Daniel’s interpretation: “Both the dream and its direct fulfillment upon Nebuchadnezzar were prophetic. That is why his experience is recorded in the Bible.”⁷¹ In reference to 4:26 which states that Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom would be assured to him after he recognized God’s sovereignty, the Watchtower claims, “What was really meant was the world sovereignty or domination exercised by the kingdom of God.”⁷² Thus, the tree in the vision which represented king Nebuchadnezzar, becomes a symbol of the sovereignty

⁶⁶*Until the Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 107 – 117.

⁶⁷*Aid*, 94 – 95.

⁶⁸The phrase “the times of the nations” is unique to Jesus in this context.

⁶⁹An example where such evidence is provided in a similar situation is found in Matt. 1:23 with reference to Isa. 7:14. Were it not for Matthew’s application of that passage, the reader would not have the freedom to go beyond the historical fulfillment of the prophecy.

⁷⁰*Gentile Times*, 126.

⁷¹*Babylon*, 176.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 177.

of God “exercised through King David and his royal successors at Jerusalem.” The chopping down of the tree then symbolized the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 607 B.C.!⁷³

Nothing in the context of Daniel 4 permits the applications the Watchtower makes to the passage. The double fulfillment of this passage is unwarranted and actually inverts the intended meaning of the chapter; the Watchtower has the same symbol performing two diametrically opposed functions. In addition, the so-called “day/year theory” is suspect. Not only can such a “Bible rule”⁷⁴ not be established, there would be no certain way to know when to apply it. Curiously, in the very “time” passages (Rev. 12:6, 14, see above) the Watchtower uses to establish that a “time” is equal to 360 *years* in Dan. 4, they interpret as 360 *days*.⁷⁵ At least Russell was consistent at this point.⁷⁶ Beyond these objections is the devastating fact that the dominion of the world powers, as they define it, **did not** end in A.D. 1914. This is one historical reality that cannot be spiritualized.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

The legacy of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society is a litany of categorical eschatological predictions, apocalyptic disappointments, and disingenuous reinterpretations. Through inaccurate, arbitrary, and inconsistent methods of date setting, wedded to unrestrained exegesis of Scripture, this tradition has led thousands of souls on a spiritual roller coaster of hope, disappointment, despair, and disaffection. The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ tradition embodies the spirit of millennial expectation as well as any tradition in history. Its continued success, notwithstanding its legacy of eschatological failures, is a living testimony to the apocalyptically curious, with an appetite for knowing the unknown, and to those eager to feed it to them.

⁷³Ibid. See also *World Government*, 85 – 86.

⁷⁴*World Government*, 88.

⁷⁵*Babylon*, 179; and *Mystery of God*, 315 – 316.

⁷⁶*Time*, 91.

⁷⁷Another more subtle inconsistency is the conversion of lunar years (by which they arrive at the figure 2,520) to solar years when measuring between 607 B.C. and A.D. 1914. 2,520 lunar years from 607 B.C. would be ca. A.D. 1884 (see my paper “The Appointed Times of the Nations,” 8).

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