

Preparing for the Return of Messiah

✖ Journeying to the isolated state of Mizoram in northeastern India, Rabbi Jonathan Bernis and his team offer food and medical care to 5,000 Bnei Menashe—a starving community believed to be descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel, the Manasseh. Taken into captivity when Assyria conquered Israel 2,700 years ago, the tribe’s oral histories suggest that a remnant migrated to India, where they continued Jewish traditions.

The Bnei Menashe is just one of the lost tribes of Israel scattered throughout the world. Anthropologists and rabbis—relying on DNA tests and oral histories—are discovering what they believe are other lost tribes in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, China, Burma, Bangladesh and other places. But even more intriguing—and in fulfillment of biblical prophecies that say God would gather His lost sheep in the last days—Bernis says many are returning to the land of their forefathers and embracing the Messiah of prophecy, Yeshua HaMashiach.

These tribes are among a multitude of Jews embracing Jesus Christ as their Messiah in numbers not seen since the first century. Since the late 1960s, the number of Jews professing faith in Jesus has exploded from several thousand to anywhere from 250,000 to 500,000 worldwide.

From the day Israel recaptured Jerusalem in 1967 during the Six-Day War, fulfilling a prophecy that Jerusalem would be trampled by the gentiles until their time was fulfilled, the number of Messianic Jewish congregations worldwide has grown geometrically from 10 to more than 500, Bernis says. And in what prophecy experts see as a fulfillment of a “super prophecy,” hundreds of thousands of Jews are returning to

Israel from exile. The nation's Jewish population recently surpassed that of the United States.

"I see this as a direct fulfillment of end-times Bible prophecy," says Bernis, author of *A Rabbi Looks at the Last Days* and president of Jewish Voice Ministries International in Phoenix. "We are talking about a culmination of Bible prophecy here in the end of the age that is being directly fulfilled by the restoration of Israel, by the blindness coming off the eyes of the Jewish people and the regathering of the lost tribes."

Now, only a few years after the release of the last of the 16 books in the apocalyptic *Left Behind* series, Bible prophecy experts say "last-days fever" is spreading virally around the planet as a confluence of world events is igniting widespread debate about the end times.

"It's exploding all around the world," says Mike Bickle, director of the International House of Prayer, a ministry based in Kansas City, Missouri, that features 24/7 live worship and prayer and end-times teaching. "The economic crisis, talk of globalization and the threats against Israel have just increased the hunger for knowledge about prophecy."

Prophetic Events Point to End Times

Although most mainline and secular Bible scholars reject the so-called "Left Behind theology," dispensational, premillennial Bible scholars and prophecy writers argue that little is left on God's "prophetic calendar" before the second coming of Christ.

"Jesus told us no one knows the day or hour, but we can know the season," says Tim LaHaye, co-author of the *Left Behind* series, which sold more than 65 million copies. "And I would say that world events are ... shaping up so that we could be in the season when all these eschatological events take place."

Described as a "prophetic perfect storm," the fascination with

ancient predictions has reignited among not only Christians and Jews but also Muslim and New Age movement believers as well.

LaHaye, John Hagee, Hal Lindsey, David Hocking, Paul McGuire and other prophecy teachers say the formation of Israel as a nation in 1948, the ingathering of Jews to Jesus, the rise of global anti-Christ political structures, the military alliance between Russia and Iran, and Iran's threats to annihilate Israel are prophecy fulfillments or conditions that could allow for the fulfillment of prophecies regarding the rapture, Great Tribulation and Second Coming.

No other generation in history, they say, has witnessed the unparalleled acceleration of prophetic events that began when Israel became a nation in 1948. They contend that geopolitical events-the possibility of war between Iran and Israel; calls for a global government, economic system and currency; increasing immorality and lawlessness; devastating natural disasters; global warming; the pending biometric national identification system; the rebuilding of Babylon and the drying up of the Euphrates River-foreshadow events prophesied in the Bible. They argue that the global recession, the United States' soaring debt-now totaling \$53 trillion-and its dependence on foreign oil are setting the stage for the rise of a global leader and government.

"With the proposal for a North American Union-a replica of the European Union-the idea is to have 10 regional global governments across the planet, which will eventually merge into a global government," says McGuire, who wrote *The Day the Dollar Died* and was recently featured on The History Channel special *7 Signs of the Apocalypse*. "The current economic global crisis ... is being used to bring in a one-world economic system."

Left Behind series co-author Jerry B. Jenkins says Daniel 2:40-44 7:23-27 and Rev. 13:11-18 predict the emergence of this global government, religion and currency. In July, Pope

Benedict called for a “world political authority” to manage the global economy. A few days later at the Group of Eight summit, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev-holding a golden coin engraved with “united future world currency”-told reporters national mints are excited about a post-dollar world.

Since the recession began, evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal churches have seen significant surges in attendance by people curious about whether economic and Middle East turmoil are “warning signs” that the Second Coming could occur much sooner than people think. Nationwide, packed-out prophecy conferences are drawing thousands of people.

In Sync With God’s Plan

But it’s not just Christians who are curious about signs of the last days of history. Throughout the world, people are increasingly anxious, believing something cataclysmic is coming, says New York Times best-selling author Joel Rosenberg, a former communications adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In Israel-the centerpiece of God’s prophetic plan-Orthodox Jews are debating how soon the Messiah will come, the Sanhedrin has reconvened and the movement to rebuild the Temple is gaining momentum.

In Iran and other Islamic nations, Muslim religious leaders are predicting the coming of the Islamic Messiah, the 12th Imam. They believe the way to hasten his coming is to “annihilate Israel and the U.S.,” Rosenberg says.

At the same time-in a development prophecy experts connect to Jesus’ warnings about false prophets and doctrines in the last days-New Age believers are intrigued by a Mayan prophecy predicting a global cataclysm on December 21, 2012. Tapping into the zeitgeist of cultural fascination with the end of days, Hollywood is releasing a blockbuster movie about the prophecy-2012-featuring John Cusack on November 13.

Rosenberg, who wrote the nonfiction books *Inside the Revolution* and *Epicenter*, says the world is in a “post-Left Behind moment” in which interest in the end times is being driven not by books but by specific world events.

“The first are actual geopolitical events and trends,” Rosenberg says. “The second is the president of Iran. Specifically, you’ve got the leader of arguably the most dangerous country on the planet talking about his belief that the end of the world is at hand, the Islamic messiah will soon return to Earth ... and he is feverishly trying to acquire weaponry capable of bringing about the end of Judeo-Christian civilization as we know it.”

In his new book *The Late Great State of Israel*, World Net Daily Jerusalem bureau chief and Jewish Press columnist Aaron Klein warns that Israel faces unprecedented danger. As President Obama pressures Israel to accept a two-state peace plan, Iran is quickly developing nuclear capability.

“I think a big war is coming to the Middle East, and all sides seem to be preparing for it,” Klein says.

Rosenberg says the prophet Ezekiel foresaw the end-times war of “Gog and Magog,” a reference interpreted as an alliance between Russia, Iran and other nations to attack Israel (see Ezek. 38-39).

“In the 2,500 years since he wrote that prophecy, Russia and Iran have never had the type of alliance he describes,” Rosenberg says. “But in the last few years, these two countries, along with the others Ezekiel mentioned, are steadily developing a military alliance and a deep and outspoken hatred for the people of Israel. Russia is selling billions of dollars of weapons to Iran. Russia is helping Iran build its nuclear facilities, and Russia is training thousands of Iranian scientists and technicians.”

Demonstrating the importance God places on prophecy,

eschatological experts say 28 percent of the Bible-including more than 150 chapters with most of the text focused on end-times themes-involves predictions about the future. The Bible contains nearly twice as many chapters describing Jesus' second coming as it does His first coming.

Of these predictions, 87 percent have been fulfilled, Calvary Chapel Chino Hills pastor Jack Hibbs told 7,000 people gathered at the recent Southern California Prophecy Conference. Of the remaining 13 percent, 98 percent will be fulfilled during the Great Tribulation (a seven-year period of worldwide disaster), Hibbs says.

More Signs of the Last Days

A key unfulfilled sign involves a Matthew 24 prophecy that the gospel would be preached to the whole world "and then the end will come," Bickle says. "The top mission agencies are predicting that within 10 years all of the earth's 6,000 people groups will have the gospel preached to them."

However, many Bible scholars at secular universities and mainline seminaries reject the premillennial interpretation of prophecy. Known as preterists, they say the visions described in the book of Revelation pertain to people and events in the first century.

"The bottom line is that critical scholars of Revelation read the book as anti-imperial resistance literature," says Stephen D. Moore, a New Testament scholar and expert on the book of Revelation and professor of New Testament at The Theological School at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. "It's sort of a vitriolic tirade against the Roman Empire of John's day." But David Criswell, former editor of the Evangelical Standard at Tyndale Theological Seminary and Biblical Institute in Fort Worth, Texas, says writings from early church fathers show they believed prophecies in the book of Revelation referred to future events. Criswell says it wasn't until the Middle Ages

that preterist theology gained momentum as Catholic scholars attempted to discredit the Reformation.

"The Bible says there will be scoffers in the last days, which will cause the hearts of many sincere people to disregard the reality of the last days," says Jim Tolle, pastor of the 25,000-member Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California.

"But there is a convergence of far more things than ever in the history of the world that point to the fact we are in the last days. There is more deception today than ever before. We are seeing a geometric increase in the amount of earthquakes, natural disasters and diseases. And there has been a multiplication of military conflicts."

A recent poll by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found 79 percent of American Christians believe in the Second Coming. But on the timing and circumstances of Christ's return, Christians are divided. About a third-34 percent-say it will occur after the world situation reaches a low point, 37 percent say it's impossible to know the circumstances preceding Christ's return, and 4 percent say Christ will return when the world situation improves.

Peter Wagner, president of Global Harvest Ministries, is an adherent of partial preterism, believing most end-times prophecies were fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. However, unlike full preterists, Wagner believes Christ will return after Christians transform the culture and people move into "God's prosperity."

Richard J. Mouw, president and professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, says he was raised to believe that the pope was the Antichrist; later it was Stalin; and today Islam "seems to be the likely target"-making him nervous about these sorts of identifications. However, Mouw says he believes the world "could very well be in the last days."

“Humankind seems more and more lawless, and life is getting increasingly fragmented and chaotic. This is how the devil works, causing fragmentation and confusion,” Mouw says. “We need to preach more about the possible return of Christ in our own lifetimes-but without the highly speculative interpretations that [were] so prevalent in the past.”

Is Jesus Coming Back?

Some Christians are convinced that Jesus’ return is imminent. Doyle W. Flowers Jr. of Atlanta, author of *Jesus Really Is Coming Back ... Soon!* says the Second Coming is less than two decades away. “God confirmed to me about two years ago that the return of Christ was at the steps,” he told *Charisma*.

In his book, Flowers describes a vivid dream in which he was picked up by a tornado. He says God revealed to him that he would be taken to heaven in the Rapture at some point in his lifetime.

Yet critics of premillennialism are quick to remind us that preachers have unsuccessfully predicted Jesus’ return many times during the last 2,000 years, including farmer William Miller, who unsuccessfully calculated the end of the world in the early 1840s, and Edgar C. Whisenant, who wrote the controversial best-seller *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*.

Hal Lindsey’s 1970 mega-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth* popularized prophetic beliefs about the last days. Lindsey has since been criticized for a portion of the book in which he quotes Jesus in Matthew 24:34 saying the generation that witnessed the signs given in the Olivet Discourse would not die before their fulfillment.

“What generation?” Lindsey wrote in what became the world’s best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s. “Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs-chief among them the rebirth of the State of Israel. A generation in the

Bible is something like 40 years. If this is a correct deduction, then within 40 years or so of 1948, all these things could take place.”

Lindsey, whose book was read by Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion shortly before his death, says critics have misconstrued what he wrote, claiming he stated Christ would return 40 years after Israel’s rebirth. When 1988 came and went, many pastors shied away from teaching about prophecy, believing it had become too controversial.

“It’s almost like the body of Christ went into embarrassment mode about the end times,” Bickle says. “But then in the last four or five years ... the signs of the times are beginning to make more sense.”

Lindsey says he never set a precise date for Christ’s return. But he claims this is “the generation that will live to see the fulfillment of the ‘birth pangs’ that Jesus predicted would all come together in one time frame shortly before the tribulation’s events that bring about His return.”

Experts say one of the key signs of the last days is the growing interest by Jews in the question of whether Jesus is the Messiah. David Brickner, executive director of the San Francisco-based Jews for Jesus, says a growing number of the world’s nearly 14 million Jews are discovering Jesus as their Messiah and revival is beginning in Israel.

“What we are seeing now in the beginning of the 21st century is openness and a surge of Israeli believers in Jesus,” Brickner says.

For Bernis, Yeshua’s return centers on the “divine timing that God has ordained.”

“I’ve been in 50 countries ministering to Jewish communities,” Bernis says. “There are Jews in just about every country in the world. These are clear signs of the last days that are often overlooked when we talk about end-times prophecies.

Israel is restored, Jerusalem is restored, the Jews are coming back from the four corners of the earth and they are being restored to Jesus, their Messiah."