

SIGNS OF SEVEN THUNDERS

# PREPARE *Ye A* HIGHWAY

A LATTER-DAY PERSPECTIVE  
*on the* SIGNS OF OUR TIMES

DREW BLANDFORD-WILLIAMS

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# CONTENTS



## PREFACE

### PART ONE: They Shall Be Led Captive

Chapter 1: Their Everlasting Confusion  
(Jeremiah 20:11; John 15:18)

Chapter 2: In the Sight of the Beast  
(Revelation 13:13–14)

Chapter 3: Thou Shalt Not Serve Other Gods  
(Deuteronomy 28; Luke 21:20–24)

### PART TWO: Therefore, Endure Hardness

Chapter 4: The World Languisheth  
(Isaiah 24:5; Luke 23–29)

Chapter 5: A Day of Darkness  
(Joel 2; Ezekiel 38–39; Revelation)

Chapter 6: A Great Mourning  
(Zechariah 12–14; Joel 3)

### PART THREE—The Arrogance of the Proud

Chapter 7: Blood and Fire  
(Joel 2:30–31)

Chapter 8: The Day That Cometh  
(Malachi 4)

### PART FOUR—It Will Be Fair Weather

Chapter 9: Distress in the Land  
(Luke 21:26)

Chapter 10: Run to and fro  
(Revelation 9:5–10)

### PART FIVE—Seek and Find Me

Chapter 11: Neither Will I Hide My Face  
(Ezekiel 39:29)

Chapter 12: To Turn Them from Darkness  
(Acts 26:18)

Chapter 13: Superior to Rational Creatures  
(1 Thessalonians 5:5)

Chapter 14: There Shall Be One Measure  
(Magna Carta)

Chapter 15: The Mere Pleasure of God  
(Concerning Human Understanding)

Chapter 16: Many Are Called  
(Isaiah 29)

#### PART SIX—All Things Work Together

Chapter 17: My Standard to the People  
(Isaiah 49:22–23, 54)

Chapter 18: Mountain of the Lord  
(Isaiah 2: 1–5, 5:26; Micah 4:1–7)

Chapter 19: Messenger of the Covenant  
(Malachi 3:1)

Chapter 20: Faith and Fellowship  
(Deuteronomy 29:27; Romans 11)

Chapter 21: Kingdoms of Our Lord  
(Revelation 11:15)

Chapter 22: Signs of Seven Thunders  
(Isaiah 2:4; Zechariah 14:4–9)

#### EPILOGUE

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## CHAPTER ONE

# THEIR EVERLASTING CONFUSION



*“Therefore, my persecutors shall stumble, and they shall not prevail: they shall be greatly ashamed; for they shall not prosper: their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten. . . . If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.”*

—Jeremiah 20; John 15

When attempting to organize an entire book to focus on the fate of mankind, by mapping our inevitable destiny to a smattering of historical and religious references, it’s probably a good idea to fasten such concepts and suppositions on the notion that “God told me so.”

Yeah, that’s not confusing.

Okay, so, here’s the idea: whenever any major monumental or historical event has come to pass, more often than not, there follows some form of divine prophecy<sup>23</sup> or intervention.

Speaking of “their everlasting confusion,” let’s consider our calendar,<sup>24</sup> for example. The way our world organizes and schedules the very timelines of the human race is tied to the birth of Jesus Christ. But that has been a point of contention over the years as well as a generous portion of confusion. Measuring time has been a concept that has migrated from a caprice of religious folklore to the general standard across most of modern civilization. But the idea of organizing our cycles of activities into days, weeks, months, and years (beyond the number of full moons or fall harvests) is a relatively young concept in comparison to the epoch of time. (Only since the 1700s has the current calendar been considered a “standard” measurement for periods of time). And the idea wasn’t consistent from culture to culture (and still isn’t). There were Icelandic calendars, Hindu calendars, Chinese calendars, Zoroastrian calendars, and (even now) Jewish calendars. And none of them agree on days, months, and years.

Since the Bronze Age, tribes, territories, cultures, and countries have been plotting cycles of time to map their respective needs, based on the movement of the moon, sun, stars, and tides. For more than a millennium, from the time Julius Caesar reformed the Roman calendar in 65 BC until the Persians established a new way of measuring time in 1079, people grew “old” a lot faster. The Julian calendar included only ten months, which stood for more than 1,000 years, until the Persians devised that a standard year lasted 365.24 days.

Although they were on to something (but not yet accurately so), the scholars of Julius Caesar's court calculated that the solar year, which was based on the two equinoxes, was drifting ever so slowly.

Following the third century and Emperor Constantine's Council at Nicaea, a debate ensued over when the rising population of Christians under a new Roman emperor would recognize the date of their Lord's resurrection from the tomb (Easter) and to address this so-called "subtle drift in the timeline."

Fast-forward through the Dark Ages, passing twelve popes named Gregory, and we come to 1582 and Gregory XIII, who set out to make revisions to the standard calendar to more accurately determine the sacred Christian holiday.

After much debate, deliberation, and a few fine-tunings to February under the direction of the Church, the Gregorian calendar became the global standard.<sup>25</sup> The Gregorian calendar added a small fraction of time to the 365.24, requiring an added day every fourth year to keep the timelines in sync with the sun. How ironic that the whole thing was based on when the world would be able to schedule a date to recognize the Christian namesake's triumph over death!

The idea of recognizing the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has become something of an accepted condition, which one-third of this world's population accepts: There was a God, He lived 2,000 years ago, and our world was forever changed because of His time as a man upon the earth.

But just as was predicted by those ancient prophets and kings of the Old Testament, He who would ransom Himself for the fate of mankind came into the world, and upon His birth framed the very nature of time immemorial, changing the world and forever, the way we measure time: "For I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:9–10).

With more than 300 references in the Old Testament foretelling the coming of the Messiah, and (just as Isaiah foresaw in chapter 53,<sup>26</sup> more than 700 years earlier), in a small outpost community of the ancient Roman empire, in a land where people were coerced to worship a host of characters, young Yeshua ben Youssef<sup>27</sup> was born into a world of tribal tumult, political unrest, and cultural captivity.

Similar to how the measurement of time itself was modified to be measured by a single, consistent standard across all cultures, the emergence of a global cultural icon would also change forever the way people considered their relationship with God.

I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid. . . . Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay: for shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not?...The meek also shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 29:14)

That a wandering teacher from the deserts of Galilee could sway even the Jews to rethink their religious position was seemed as a passing fad by many Romans, but as their collective voice grew, the rising tide of the Christian undercurrent forced even the Jews to rethink their station. And thus, with the capture and execution of Jesus and His perceived coconspirators ("Apostles"), continuing with Jeremiah's foreshadowing words of "everlasting confusion," the Christian persecution began:

And we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure . . . but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation . . . but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (1 Corinthians 4; 1 Peter 4)

The Roman Empire was not completely without civility, however. The three major cities of Rome, Alexandria (in Egypt), and Antioch (in Syria) were social hot spots during the early centuries of the first millennium. They were also large centers of Jewish culture, which had become highly influential in maintaining self-governing control over their territory and were natural attractions to raise up new Christian congregations.

The rising tide of faithful to follow this Jesus of Nazareth did not sit well with the local governments of the empire or the traditional Jews of the Sanhedrin (the supreme legislative council of the ancient Jews). While the empire was tossing Caesars like a salad (it saw more than a dozen within sixty years), the spreading social and religious ties to the newfound “gospel” began to extend even beyond Rome’s borders, as was foretold by Jesus, Peter, and Paul in his letter to the faithful in Corinth:

For we stretch not ourselves beyond our measure, as though we reached not unto you: for we are come as far as to you also in preaching the gospel of Christ. . . . To preach the gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man’s line of things made ready to our hand. But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. (2 Corinthians 10)

But the Caesars were always looking over their shoulders, which was the case when the Sanhedrin ordered James the Just thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and clubbed to death. Rome’s reaction was swift and firm, resulting in a total occupation of Jerusalem. Roman leadership, it seemed, didn’t like uprisings from anyone, even if it was between heretical religious factions opposed to the state religion.

Like the children of Israel before them, the rising tide of Christianity became the favorite target of the Roman Empire.

Despite the persecution, however, the Church continued under the authority of Peter, who was given the keys of authority by Jesus, prior to Christ’s ascension. Peter held those keys until his death in Rome in AD 66.

The Roman leaders always had spies plugged into the most fashionable regions of their social network—like those associated with James and his rising tide of followers, Rome’s reaction was swift and firm, resulting in a total occupation of Jerusalem and Roman leadership. Religious factions and those who would offer dissenting views of Rome’s divine emperor were put down quickly (or at least attempts to do so were ongoing). For the Roman leaders, the big prize in their pursuits was capturing one or more of the twelve coconspirators of the leader of this new movement, which were referred to as “apostles.”<sup>28</sup> With the exception of John and Judas, all of Jesus’s original Apostles met with terrible demise at the hands of their captors.<sup>29</sup>

While no one is absolutely certain, based on recorded accounts from the time, the following illustrates the fate of the original Twelve Apostles of Jesus. Each of the original twelve men called by Jesus, with the exception of Judas Iscariot and John the Beloved, was summarily hunted down throughout the empire, and either murdered on the spot, or

made part of a public execution.<sup>30</sup>

<b>Apostle</b>	<b>Cause of Death/Approximate Year</b>
Judas Iscariot	Driven by guilt, committed suicide by hanging, 34
Bartholomew	Beaten, crucified, and beheaded, 52
Phillip	Crucified at Heirapole Phryga, 52
Thomas	Impaled by lance while preaching in the East Indies (some accounts say he was in India), 52
Matthew	Killed by sword in Ethiopia, 60
James (son of Alphaeus)	Crucified in Egypt, 60
James (brother of John)	Beheaded by command of Herod, 64
Simon Peter	Crucified head down on a hill outside Rome, 66
Thaddaeus	Shot in Arafat by Roman soldiers, 72
Andrew	Bound and crucified in Greece by order of the Governor, 74
Simon Zelotes	Crucified in Persia, 74
John the Beloved	Banished to the island of Patmos, 96

Although there are many recorded interpretations on the actual method of death, what is important is that these men all died for their holy cause, while John the Beloved was banished to the island of Patmos in AD 96.<sup>31</sup>

By the close of the first century, the holy apostleship, under the divine authority granted to them by Christ, vanished from the earth. With the last apostles rounded up and executed, the Church no longer had direct leadership, and many men became self-appointed leaders. Consequently, religious chapters that were organized by the likes of Stephen, James, Timothy, and Paul were left to their own designs and influences of the local cultures.

Meanwhile, in the capital city, around AD 69, and about a year before the second temple of Jerusalem was destroyed and four years after the Great Fire, Roman emperor Vespasian commissioned a massive colosseum to be constructed in the center of the thriving capital, along the Via Sacra. His son, Titus, later completed the edifice, and its use as an entertainment center has been well documented. On average, during its first year of operation, a man, woman, or child was offered up in sport and killed every five minutes around the clock. Whether part of some organized mock-battle, animal-to-man conflict, or outright public execution, the killings extended for nearly three centuries! From AD 64 until the Edict of Milan<sup>32</sup> in 313, in which an official proclamation ended the persecution of Christians by official decree, blood and anguish flowed from the Colosseum.

Those poor souls who believed in God came under such intense scrutiny by those who didn't that, like the children of Israel, the Christian world was almost bled, beaten, and burned out of existence. Throughout history, the faithful followers of the Man from Galilee have been ridiculed, pursued, chastised, and even rounded up and slaughtered for the entertainment of others:

Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue... they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. (Annals of Tacitus [AD 109])

Rome saw that the religious faction rising out of the Middle East would continue to threaten (and possibly overtake) their own deity. Even Jupiter himself—the supreme god of the ancient Romans—was cast into the shadow of this Christian God.<sup>33</sup> This did not sit well in the high senate and ruling Roman families. It was one thing to debate politics in the Senate, but it was a far different thing to incite sedition. And as with the Jews before, it was now the Christians who found themselves under the captor's lash. Rome was not prepared for mass conversion (yet), and in one account, the first-century bishop of the Christian church in Smyrna, Polycarp, was accused of and condemned for heresy against the empire. His crime: refusing to light a candle to recognize the Roman emperor as being above God in stature.<sup>34</sup>

The condemned bishop documented his last days of captivity by the Romans before being burned and stabbed:

One might almost say that all that had gone before happened in order that the Lord might show to us from above a martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel. For he waited to be betrayed as Jesus had done, that we too might become his imitators, not thinking of ourselves alone, but also of our neighbours. And the governor said: "I have wild beasts. I will send you to them, unless you repent." And he said: "Call for them, for repentance from better to worse is not allowed us; but it is good to change from evil to righteousness." And the governor said again to him: "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, if you not scared by the beasts, unless you repent." But Polycarp said: "You threaten with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will." (Acts of Thecla and Paul [AD 155])<sup>35</sup>

Greek philosophies<sup>36</sup> and other local customs became stronger influences among the Christian factions. By the close of the second century, there were house churches and Christian spin-offs covering almost every major region of the empire. Some efforts were made to keep the foundation of the Church intact, the most notable being that of Ignatius of Antioch<sup>37</sup> in about AD 110, but even his efforts were made while he was on his way to his own execution in Rome:

Let me be food for the wild beasts, for they are my way to God. I am God's wheat and shall be ground by their teeth so that I may become Christ's pure bread. Pray to Christ for me that the animals will be the means of making me a sacrificial victim for God. No earthly pleasures, no kingdoms of this world can benefit me in any way. . . . The prince of this world is determined to lay hold of me and to undermine my will which is intent on God. Let none of you here help him; instead show yourselves on my side, which is also God's side. Do not talk about Jesus Christ as long as you love this world. Do not harbor envious thoughts. And supposing I should see you, if then I should beg you to intervene on my behalf, do not believe what I say. (Ignatius of Antioch [AD 107])

The "Church," as it was organized by Christ and further established by the Apostles throughout the lands, fell deeper into a state of endless confusion and segregation, which some religious scholars would suggest has lasted nearly 2,000 years:

The Christian churches in the absence of revelation had tightened their views protectively defensively either around a holy man the pope and hierarchy or around a holy book the bible which was alleged to be all sufficient and only sufficient religious knowing came only through that word and all other claims were treated as emotional extravagance. . . . There is new recognition that the word mysteries as it appears in the new testament and in its background literature means something more something one can reach through with knowledge or gnosis not simply on the ground of faith which was the protestant claim but with knowledge. It has been terrifying to men in charge of men's souls to be so bereft they now recognize that while damning prophets they themselves have been cast in the role for any man at any time to say if you will do so and so you will be saved is to make prophecy it is either true or false and suddenly the recognition comes that Christ did not say there would be no prophets that would have been a categorical way of enabling Christians to avoid deception instead he gave tests for distinguishing the true from the false. (Truman G. Madsen<sup>38</sup>)

Early writings found in the Old and New Testaments suggest that the intersection between God's favoring the Jews and His turning to the Gentile nations for their redemption set in motion a series of global evolutionary events that have continued to serve as both unifier as well as disrupter for cultures and faiths all around the world for 2,000 years.

"Everlasting confusion," indeed!

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23. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/divine-prophecy/>
  24. <http://www.history.com/news/6-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-gregorian-calendar>
  25. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gregorian-calendar>
  26. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-Chapter-53/>
  27. <http://www.hope-of-israel.org/messiahname.html>
  28. <https://www.christian-history.org/death-of-james.html>
  29. <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/whatever-happened-to-the-twelve-apostles-11629558.html>
  30. <https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/who-were-twelve-disciples>
  31. <http://answersfromthebook.net/was-the-apostle-john-exiled-to-the-isle-of-patmos-if-so-who-exiled-him-and-why/>
  32. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edict-of-Milan>
  33. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution\\_of\\_Christians\\_in\\_the\\_Roman\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_Christians_in_the_Roman_Empire)
  34. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/polycarp.html>

35. <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/spectaclesintheromanworldsourcebook/chapter/executions-of-christians/>
36. <https://www.gospeltruth.net/gkphilo.htm>
37. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/ignatius-of-antioch.html>
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