



A RABBI LOOKS
AT THE
LAST
DAYS

*Surprising Insights on Israel,
the End Times and Popular Misconceptions*

JONATHAN BERNIS



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Over thirty years ago, when I was a university student studying business, a friend named Suzie made it her project to lead me to the Lord. She brought me to a Bible study where I was confronted with the Gospel and eventually prayed a prayer. I don't even remember the exact words of that prayer, but my life has never been the same since. Thank you, Suzie, for your faithfulness and perseverance. And thank you, Ernie and Maria Beck, for leading that wonderful Bible study for so many years!

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Preface

A great event is taking place in the world, and almost nobody seems to notice.

It amazes me that many Christian authors who are focused on the last days do not seem to be aware of what is happening in the Jewish community around the world.

Just as the Bible predicted, the Jewish people are being restored to their land and to their Messiah. Not in some far distant end times—but right now!

Although Jewish people who accept *Yeshua HaMashiach* (Jesus the Messiah) are often ostracized by their families, friends and business associates, Jews all over the world are turning to Him and becoming Messianic Jews in numbers not seen since the first century.

I am weary of reading the dogmatic positions expressed in much apocalyptic literature. Some authors will tell you with absolute confidence that they know exactly when and where the significant events of eschatology are to take place. Yet in most instances they ignore some of the clearest prophetic promises concerning the last days.

Perhaps the saddest reality of all is that predominant eschatological positions today frequently impede efforts by evangelical believers to reach Jewish people with the Gospel—and discount the relevance of doing so.

I have written this book in juxtaposition with what is out there on the subject of the last days. Like the little mirror on the right side of your car suggests, “Objects in your mirror are closer than you think.”

I hope you enjoy reading this book. And if you have any Jewish friends in your life who may be open to reading it, pass it along to them.

Acknowledgments

I am so thankful to the Lord for the incredible people He has, by His grace, brought into my life. They have been my inspiration and a source of great joy.

First, to my beautiful wife, Elisangela, and my two precious daughters, Liel and Hannah. From the moment I leave on one of my many missions trips, I miss you and can't wait to return home. Every day I am gone I dream of that moment when I return and am met at our door with your excited screams, "Papai is home!" I love you more than you can ever imagine!

To the amazing team at Jewish Voice Ministries International, the ministry the Lord has given me the privilege to lead. Your dedication, commitment to excellence and hard work is a source of inspiration daily, and I am so grateful to each and every one of you. Together, we have done great things and will continue to do great things "exceedingly, abundantly, beyond all we can ask or think."

To Mary Ellen Breitwiser, Grace Sarber and Jane Campbell for driving this project and me to the finish line. I could not have done it without you!

Acknowledgments

To the tens of thousands of Jewish Voice supporters and friends. Your partnership in the Gospel has enabled us to go to some of the most remote places on earth to help Jewish communities in need and provide them with free medical care and the Gospel. We could not do what we do without you.

And finally (and most importantly), to my beloved Yeshua HaMashiach. *Thank You for redeeming my life.*



PART ONE

“... AND THEN
THE END
WILL COME”

1

What If Everything You Have Been Told about the Last Days Is Wrong?

The mark of the beast . . . Gog and Magog . . . 666 . . . a confederation of ten nations . . . the Antichrist's ascendancy to power . . . the abomination of desolation . . . Bible teachers point to these as signs that the end of the world as we know it is near.

Many Christians have become obsessed with trying to unravel the Bible's mysterious and veiled prophecies about such things. They analyze every word in the daily newspapers and television news shows to see if they can identify a connection to the last days. This is especially true when there is news of Israel or the Middle East. While they focus on such esoteric matters, they do not seem to notice other and far more obvious signs that the last days are upon us.

What if much of what you have been told about the end times is wrong, or at the very least off target? What if you have looked for the signs of Messiah's return in all the wrong places?

Before we go any further, let me explain that there is nothing wrong with seeking to understand Bible prophecy and live in the

light of that understanding. This is precisely what God expects us to do. I am not saying, “Stop trying to understand the book of Revelation.” But if we focus too much on red heifers or who the Antichrist is, then we will miss out on the marvelous things God is doing right now to prepare the world for the Messiah’s return.

About Me

With the title *A Rabbi Looks at the Last Days*, I am sure you expected a book written by a traditional rabbi. That is not the case. I am, in fact, a “Messianic” rabbi. Please allow me to explain.

A Messianic Jew is a Jew by birth who has come to believe that Jesus—we call Him by His Hebrew name, *Yeshua*—is the promised Messiah of Israel. As Jews, we also believe that we, like the first-century believers, who all happened to be Jewish, have a responsibility to retain our Jewish identity.

I was born a Jew and raised by my Jewish parents in a traditional Jewish home in Rochester, New York. I was a “holiday Jew.” We went to synagogue for the High Holidays and celebrated the other significant Jewish feasts such as Passover, Sukkot and Chanakkuh.

Throughout my childhood I attended religious classes at the synagogue on Sundays and Hebrew school on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons in preparation for my bar mitzvah (Jewish rite of passage for males) at age thirteen.

I was well versed about God’s divine intervention in our ancient past, including the call of Abraham, the ten plagues and the deliverance of the children of Israel out of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the conquest of Joshua, Daniel in the lions’ den, Samson and his supernatural strength tied to his long hair and other stories of renown. I always believed in God but felt my spiritual “duty” had been fulfilled by making it through my bar mitzvah. Still, I knew that my Jewish identity was somehow important.

As a high school athlete (of marginal ability), my first real exposure to the Gospel came through one of my wrestling coaches. This All-American athlete who was also a “born-again Christian” impressed me. It intrigued me to hear him talk about his faith in such a personal way. Until this experience, I thought of Jesus simply as the “son of Mr. and Mrs. Christ,” the one who had somehow become the God of another religion called Christianity. At my coach’s invitation, I went on a youth trip to Florida with a group called Young Life and attended their meetings for about a year. I enjoyed the fun and even the messages I heard from the New Testament but kept at arm’s length the well-meaning believers who shared with me. Jesus was simply not an option for me. I was Jewish, and it was made clear to me as a child that Jews do not believe in Jesus. I was born a Jew and would die a Jew.

A Holy Change in Plans

I knew I had a head for business (which I had inherited from my grandfather on my mother’s side), and I had one goal: to be a rich and successful businessman by age thirty. After graduating from high school in my hometown of Rochester, New York, I went off to university in the neighboring city of Buffalo to earn a degree in business and start making as much money as possible as quickly as possible. God, however, had other ideas.

At college I began experimenting with drugs, Eastern meditation and the occult. “Mind-expanding” drugs and the supernatural realm became major pursuits and occupied my free time. But all this changed radically when a friend with whom I used to do drugs got saved.

She had become consumed with drugs. She quit going to class. She stopped eating. I could not watch her continue to destroy herself, so eventually I lost contact with her.

You can imagine how shocked I was when I ran into her one day and she looked completely well and healthy. Light sparkled in her eyes. When she saw me, the happy grin on her face grew even bigger. Everything about her was different.

“I Have Been Born Again!”

Before I could think better of it, I blurted out, “What in the world happened to you?” I realize now how rude that sounds, but I really could not help myself. It was as if she had come back from the walking dead.

“I’ve been born again!” she said.

“You’ve been what?” I asked.

“Born again,” she laughed. “I’ve made Jesus Christ the Lord of my life.”

Oh no, I thought. *What have I gotten myself into?* But before I could get away, she proceeded with great enthusiasm to tell me that she had turned to Jesus, and that He had set her free from her addiction. The desire had just gone away. One instant, she was a hopeless addict. The next, the craving had vanished.

I could not deny the evidence standing right in front of me, but I did not want to accept what she was telling me. I thought, *If it worked for you, fine, but I have other plans for my life.* I just wanted to get away from her, and that took at least ten minutes.

Even then, I could not get away. For the next few weeks she called me every day, asking questions such as, “Do you know why you’re here on earth?” and “If you died right now, where would you go?”

At first I politely tried to brush her off, but I was beginning to sense a certain pressure. Her questions haunted me. Why *was* I here? Where *would* I go if I died? Her words had impact because there was no denying that something amazing and real had happened to her. She was not the same person I had known before.

No Place for a Jewish Boy

After numerous invitations, I finally agreed to go with her to a home Bible study she had been attending. From the moment I walked into the room, I wanted to turn around and run. Clearly this was no place for a good Jewish boy to be—especially one who was still using drugs.

But I could not leave. My only mode of transportation was a motorcycle, and it was a terribly stormy night. I was soaked to the skin by the time I arrived. The wife of the Bible study leader gave me some dry clothes to wear while my clothes tumbled around in her dryer throughout the evening. I could not leave without my clothes!

The study seemed to go on for hours, although it was probably only ninety minutes or so. I was miserable. Everyone seemed to be staring at me. I felt completely out of place and knew everyone sensed my extreme discomfort.

In addition, the leader of the study was originally from Germany and still had a decidedly German accent. This made me uncomfortable as well. After all, I had been brought up believing that the world was divided into two groups: Jews and Christians/Gentiles. And I believed that Christians, especially German ones, hated us. Because of the horrors of the Holocaust, I had a subconscious fear of all Germans, and this encounter triggered this discomfort.

After the study, he invited me to meet with him privately upstairs. Although I was uncomfortable, upstairs meant closer to the front door and my escape, so I followed him to the living room and sat down on the couch, where we were joined by an older gentleman. He placed a Bible on my lap and began to lead me through various Bible verses. He began with Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” *Interesting.* I knew I was a sinner, because of my wild college lifestyle, but it was the first time in my life that I was aware of

my physical separation from God. Then he took me to Romans 6:23, which said, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ [Messiah] Jesus our Lord.”

At that moment I had what I can only describe as a supernatural experience. Although I did not have a vision or hear a heavenly voice, I do not know what else to call it. The room became abnormally bright and warm. I began to sweat profusely, and I can honestly say that I felt as though that couch had arms that reached out and grabbed me—holding me in place. My experience was so significant that I wondered if perhaps the room had been rigged in such a way as to produce this amazing response! I even went back later to inspect that couch and the lighting in the room but found nothing irregular about either one.

That night I began to deal with a sense of my own separation from a God who loved me, Jonathan Bernis, a twenty-year-old college student. At the same time, I struggled with an innate understanding that this direction meant abandoning my own goals and ambitions. Looking back, I am convinced that the presence of God came into the room that evening and apprehended me. God had a plan for my life that was different from my own, and He meant to make sure I would lay aside my plans and follow Him.

Over the next few days, I developed a tremendous hunger to read the Bible, but I did not have one and did not know where to get one. I now wanted to read the New Testament in particular, but where does a good Jewish boy go to shop for a New Testament? I could not go to my friends—they were all drug users. I could not go to the rabbi—he surely would not have one. I had no idea that the Bible was the bestselling book of all time, and I could have bought one at any grocery store or even pharmacy!

Finally I remembered that the high school wrestling coach I mentioned earlier had given me a Bible and said I would need

it someday. I had thrown it into a box in my closet at home and forgotten about it.

I jumped on my motorcycle, drove more than sixty miles to my parents' house, ran up to my room and dug through the box in the closet until I found the Bible. I ran back out of the house without ever saying hello or good-bye to my parents and drove back to my dorm room, where I devoured the Scriptures. I could not get enough.

I do not know what I expected to find in the New Testament. I had been taught it was a book for Christians and that it had no connection whatsoever to me as a Jew or to anything I learned in synagogue growing up.

You can imagine my shock when I first opened the book of Matthew and immediately found references to Abraham, Isaac, David and the other Jewish heroes I had learned about as a child. I could not understand, however, what these great figures of Judaism were doing in the Christian Bible. *Was there a parallel universe? Were there two Abrahams—a Christian Abraham and a Jewish Abraham, the father of the Jewish people? Was there a Christian David and a Jewish David? What about the other Jewish heroes? Was there a Jewish Isaac and a Christian parallel? Had they converted to Christianity and no one had ever told me?*

My mind was reeling! As I continued to read over the next few days and weeks, I discovered that Jesus was not the God of the Gentiles, as I had been told, but was in fact Yeshua, the Messiah of Israel. I was stunned as I learned that Yeshua was born to Jewish parents in the Jewish homeland of Israel, and that all His first followers were Jews.

Then I searched through the Hebrew Scriptures, my own Torah, prophets and writings (the Tanakh or Old Testament), and was even more shocked to find literally hundreds of prophecies about the Messiah. It was clear that many of these were

fulfilled in the New Testament. This process of discovery literally transformed my life.

Life Takes a New Direction

As the Scriptures took root in my life and I drew closer to God, my goal of becoming a millionaire by the time I turned thirty suddenly seemed insignificant. The treasures of this world became trivial as I understood the realities of His eternal plan and His call on my life. I knew God was calling me into full-time ministry, so after three years of pursuing my ambitions in business, I switched my major to the department of classics with a focus on religious studies and theology. After an additional three years of study, I was graduated with degrees in Jewish studies and early Christianity. Upon completion of my undergraduate studies, I started taking graduate courses and seeking the Lord about the next phase of my life.

Although God’s calling on my life was certain, I still had no desire to go into full-time ministry. As a Jew, my only concept of “Christian” ministry was a Catholic priest, and to me this spelled commitment that included a vow of celibacy and perhaps even poverty. These were not options I could live with. But after much struggling—perhaps like Jacob’s wrestling experience with God—and several more months of studying and prayer, I finally gave in to God’s ultimate purpose for my life. I have walked with Yeshua ever since, and He has been beside me every step of the way.

Back in Rochester during a visit to my family in 1984, I attended a small Messianic fellowship of only five people. During the service, I had what can be described only as a vision where I saw the circular youth chapel of the church where our tiny group was meeting. It was packed with people worshiping in a Messianic service. When I went home that night, I could not sleep.

The stirring in my heart and mind was building to a conclusion, and by morning I knew that God was calling me to move back to Rochester and turn this little fellowship into a full-fledged Messianic Jewish congregation. I was to become a Messianic Jewish rabbi and reach out to my Jewish people with the message that Yeshua (Jesus) was our promised Messiah.

We called it Congregation Shema Yisrael. The Assembly of God graciously opened up its facility to us. What a great blessing to our small congregation! We remained there until 1988, when by the grace of God we were able to purchase our own building. The congregation grew into a healthy community of around two hundred Messianic believers and has continued to prosper to this day.

Distorted Teaching about the End Times

One Sunday during this time, the pastor invited a guest speaker to teach a seminar on the last days. The place was packed, which indicated to me there was great interest in this topic. I sat on the platform and listened as this teacher dressed in a fancy silk suit reported that the Third Temple had already been rebuilt in Jerusalem and that sacrifices would begin shortly.

Because I was already traveling to Israel regularly and had even lived there for a semester during my undergraduate studies to work on an archaeological excavation, I knew this was not true. I struggled to keep my composure as he continued to wow the audience with this fabricated and erroneous report. I watched the fervor of the audience build as they digested his false teaching.

As soon as the guest speaker finished, I spoke privately with the senior pastor. Together we confronted the man.

“The things you said today just aren’t true,” I said.

“Yes they are. I have pictures,” he replied.

I asked him to show me the pictures, but he refused. When the senior pastor and I continued to press him, he relented, opened his briefcase and pulled out some photos that he said were of the rebuilt Temple. I recognized the photographs immediately. They were pictures of a conservative synagogue that had been constructed far away from the Temple Mount in the modern section of Jerusalem.

Since then I have listened and read many inaccurate and fabricated reports about a rebuilt or nearly rebuilt Temple. Most have been utter nonsense.

Why do I tell you this story? Because it is an example of distortions and misinformation that have been perpetrated upon God’s people. Jesus told us to live in constant expectation of His return. This is a good thing. But He also said, “So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:26–27).

Do Not Throw Out the Baby. . . .

For many years believers have viewed almost anything that happens on the international stage as a sure sign that the Second Coming is imminent. During the first Gulf War, some were declaring that Saddam Hussein fit the profile of the Antichrist. Prior to World War II, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini were considered prime suspects. So was Josef Stalin. When Napoleon’s armies swept through Europe, many were sure that he was the Antichrist.

Many men also have erroneously predicted the date of the world’s end:

- In 960 Bernard of Thuringia, a German theologian, calculated that the end would come in 992.¹

- Pope Innocent III (1161–1216), considered an intellectual and one of the greatest canon lawyers of his time, expected the Second Coming to take place in 1284, 666 years after the rise of Islam.²
- Augustinian monk and mathematician Michael Stifel (1486–1567), who discovered logarithms, calculated that the Day of Judgment would begin at 8:00 a.m. on October 19, 1533.³
- John Napier (1550–1617), Scottish mathematician, physicist, astronomer and astrologer who made common the use of the decimal point in arithmetic and mathematics, predicted that the world would end in 1688 or 1700.⁴
- Harvard University graduate, prominent New England Puritan minister, prolific author and pamphleteer Cotton Mather (1663–1728) chose 1697 as the year of Jesus’ Second Coming.⁵
- A Baptist preacher named William Miller found an audience of thousands for his prediction that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844. When it did not happen, that day became known as *The Great Disappointment*.⁶
- More recently, Edgar C. Whisenant, a former NASA engineer and Bible student, predicted the “Rapture” would occur sometime between September 11–13, 1988. He published two books, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* and *On Borrowed Time*. *88 Reasons* was extremely popular, with 4.5 million copies sold. The author gave away 300,000 copies to ministers throughout America. Some in the evangelical Christian community took the books seriously. When the prediction failed to occur, however, Whisenant wrote more datebooks, forecasting the world’s end would come in 1989, 1993 and 1994. The rapture of the saints still had not occurred when he died in 2001.⁷

- Harold Camping spent untold millions on billboards that declared “Judgment Day” was May 21, 2011. Well, May 21 came and went, and here we still are. . . .

There have been countless others, of course, no one has been right so far. Jesus was very clear when he told us, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). Still, that does not mean we stop looking and expecting. He also said, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (Matthew 24:42).

Erroneous predictions have caused many to become disillusioned and throw out the baby with the bathwater. In other words, they have stopped looking for any signs of the Messiah’s return.

And yet, He is coming, and I believe it will be very soon. In the pages ahead, I will tell you how I know.