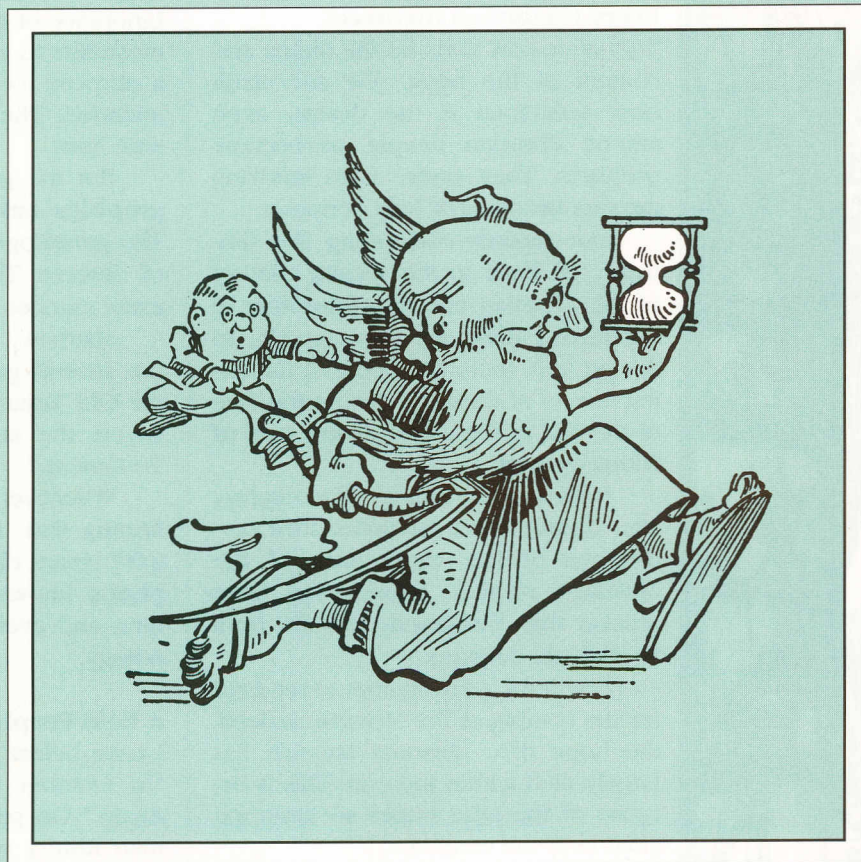


# *The Slippery Dip of Date-Setting:*

A BOOK REVIEW OF  
HAROLD CAMPING'S *1994?*  
—PART ONE



*by Desmond Ford*

Harold Camping, *1994?* Vantage Press, New York, 1992. 552 pages. \$14.95.

*A new book sets the date for Christ's return in 1994.  
We know from Bible chronology that such  
date-setting is incorrect and uninformed.*





I review Harold Camping's book *1994?* with great respect for the author and with considerable regret. The publication of this book will only do great damage to the reputation and ministry of the president of Family Radio. Thousands who have been blessed by Family Radio will, ultimately, if not immediately, join me in deep concern.

What is there about *1994?* which causes such regret in a reviewer? In reply, I quote from the back cover: "Whether we like it or not, the end of history is almost upon us. Abundant Biblical information focuses on 1994 as the likely end of the world."

### Every Prediction Incorrect

That quotation sums up the theme and content of the book. We see again how tenacious is the desire, even among Christian people, to become prophets. They prefer it to studying the true prophets of holy Scripture.

Our records concerning this tendency go back to the second century of the Christian era. From the time of Hippolytus [died around A.D. 236] to the present, there has been an unending stream of those predicting the date of the end of the world. **Every one of them wrong!**

Jews and Christians alike, century after century, have multiplied their predictions of the exact date of the Messiah's coming. Judaism has been quicker than Christianity to learn from its multiple mistakes.

Few Jews today attempt to set dates for the coming of the Messiah. Indeed, the hope of a personal Messiah has largely died within Judaism. This is because of the false hopes so often excited over the centuries.

But Christians never seem to learn. This especially applies (and perhaps only) to fundamentalist Christians. We respect such Christians for their piety, but tremble when we think of their scholarship.

### Use of Begat

When I speak of fundamentalists it is in contrast to conservative evangelicals. It is fundamentalists who are almost the sole proprietors of this morass of date-setting. The vast majority of them are not learned in the Scriptures or history, and therefore rush in where

angels themselves will not tread (Mk 13:32).

Only fundamentalists believe that the world is a mere 6,000 years old. They do not know that the word "begat" in Scripture does not always refer to the father of the child mentioned—it can mean ancestor. They do not know that the terms "father" and "son" in semitic writings have much wider latitude than what we in the modern West give them.

For example, Christ is the Son of David though born a thousand years later than David.

### Chronographies

Ignorance of these basics leads fundamentalists to use Bible genealogies for a purpose for which they were never intended. They use them to calculate time lines.

But the genealogies are **chronographies** rather than **chronologies**. The genealogies indicate the direction of descent. They do not indicate the exact number of years covered.

Matthew, in his genealogy, leaves out several generations mentioned in the Old Testament. This is even as he covers the same ground as the Old Testament.

Whenever you hear someone affirming that the world is only about 6,000 years old, you can be sure that person knows very little about Scripture, and even less about Bible chronology.

### A Bold Prophecy

I have before me a pamphlet entitled, "In October 1992, Jesus Is Coming Again." On page three I read, "... human history will end in six thousand years."

The fact is, our world is already much older than six thousand years. The Bible itself makes that plain, as well as the testimony of archeology and anthropology.

It is worth insisting on this point. For the next seven years, until A.D. 2000, we will witness thousands of people asserting the world is due to end, "...because the six millenniums of history are nearly over."

Let me be so bold as to make a prophecy. Mark my prediction: it will surely be fulfilled in our day. I predict



that multitudes will calculate the end of the world on the assumption that the earth is now not quite six thousand years old. Thus will the ignorant bring the Bible and the gospel into disrepute.

### Dates Throughout History

It is no strange thing that a sixteen-year-old lad in Korea should have come up with such a theory about the end of the world. The marvel is that multitudes are willing to entertain such folly. Isn't there a proverb somewhere about a certain type of person being born every minute? They should rephrase it to read "every second."

At the Library of Congress, I worked through row after row, stack after stack, of books on Bible prophecy. Books written in the sixteenth century set a date for the return of Christ in their day. It was the same in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and, of course, the twentieth also.

At the time of the Napoleonic Wars, Napoleon was the Antichrist for many. At the beginning of WWI, it was the Kaiser. Later, Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin were Antichrist.

Who is next? Some of us have even been "honored" by being stamped with the sobriquet. If labeling someone "Jesusuit" won't work, try "antichrist."

### Truth and Error Close

Truth and error are often close to one another. There is no question that Scripture commands us to watch for Christ's return (Mk 13:37). This implies that wise Christians will not be altogether ignorant of the signs of the coming kingdom (Lk 21:29-31).

However, there is a tremendous gap between immediacy and imminence. The four Gospels plainly give signs of the imminence of Christ's return while simultaneously forbidding date-setting. (Compare Mt 12:39; 24:36; Mk 13:32; Lk 12: 35-48; 17:20-37.)

The date-setting that we see so often manifested among Christian fundamentalists mirrors that found in the ancient Jewish writings, known as the Pseudepigrapha. These writings from thousands of years ago abound in graphic signs of the end of the world. However, they contrast with what we find in Christ's Olivet discourse (Mt

24; Mk 13; Lk 21).

Despite the parallels existing between Mark 13 and the Pseudepigrapha, the contrasts are boundless. Mark 13 is chaste and restrained when compared with much of Jewish apocalyptic material. The latter, in terms of imagination, draws no punches. The Synoptic presentation of eschatological events is tantalizing in what it leaves unsaid. In Mark 13 we are not told what will happen to Antichrist and his hosts, neither is the reward of the righteous pictured in other than general terms.

The chief distinction, however, between Mark 13 and typical apocalyptic literature is the presence of parenthesis [admonition]. This is now an old story, that it is rare for parenthesis to be embedded in apocalyptic material outside of Scripture. Even the use of the second person plural as the constant form of address is unusual.

The first word of Christ's discourse is *blepete* [watch]. It is also the last, and rings like a refrain throughout the chapter. See vv. 7, 9, 11, 23, 33, 35, 37. Thus the motivation of this apocalypse, when compared with the non-canonical variety, is distinctive. It does not appeal to hope's cupidity, nor to the desire for vengeance. It calls instead for ethical alertness. Here is no precise time-table of events. In fact, the presentation seems exactly contrary to the main tenor that human nature would have prescribed. This cannot be said for Jewish apocalyptic in general.<sup>1</sup>

### Date for Creation

Mr. Harold Camping, in his book *1994?*, works like a typical fundamentalist. Yet he knows much more than most fundamentalists. He knows, for example, that the human race has been around for more than six millennia.

He comes up with the date 11,013 B.C. for the creation of Adam and Eve. He thus allots approximately 13,000 years for the existence of humans on this earth.

I, personally, would not feel compelled to argue with that period, provided it is held as a generalization.

But Mr. Camping goes further than that, and is very precise—even to the year.

He explains how he arrives at his date for creation. In brief, he does it by using the genealogy of Genesis 5 in a strange way. His way contrasts with the conclusions of almost all scholars on the chapter. While most scholars do read Genesis 5 as covering millennia, I know of none who would dogmatize as to an exact year. Neither would they assign a period as long as his.

This is characteristic of the book throughout. Mr. Camping is always rushing in where far more learned students of the word have refused to be specific.

### OT Dates Unsure

Old Testament chronology is a very difficult field of study. It is impossible to be dogmatic about any date before the call of Abraham. We may be confident about many dates as far back as the beginning of the second millennium B.C., but not dates before that time.

The well-known archeologist, Dr. Siegfried Horn, has affirmed this repeatedly, and most of his peers agree. This includes the late F. F. Bruce, who wrote an article on Old Testament chronology for the recent *International Bible Commentary*. We quote:

It is impossible to make any confident statement about the chronology of the period before Abraham...."

Professor Bruce would differ from Mr. Camping in many other places also—particularly his chronological computations. Mr. Camping is firm about his date for the Exodus. He gives 1447 B.C. While a fifteenth century B.C. date for the Exodus was popular in the 1930s, such has not been the case for decades. Today most scholars place the Exodus in the thirteenth century B.C.

The scholars may be wrong, but the likelihood is that Mr. Camping is also wrong. (The 480 years given in 1 Kings 6:1 is widely regarded as the equivalent of 12 generations rather than a precise figure.)

The conservative scholar, E. J. Young, in his commentary on Daniel, offers us a wise admonition. After dis-





cussing the minutia of Daniel 9:24-47, he writes:

The question naturally arises, What marks the termination of the 70 sevens? In answer it should be noted that the text does not say a word about the termination. The *terminus ad quem* of the 69 sevens is clearly stated, namely, an anointed one, a prince. No such *terminus ad quem*, however, is given for the 70 sevens themselves. It would seem, therefore, that the *terminus ad quem* was not regarded as possessing particular importance or significance....

For that matter, the text is somewhat vague about the *terminus a quo* of the 70 sevens. It speaks merely of the going forth of a word. It appears that the principal emphasis is not upon the beginning and ending of this remarkable period but upon the mighty events which were to transpire therein, events which have wrought our peace with God. The passage is Messianic through and through. Well will it be for us, if we too, in our study of this supremely important prophecy, place our emphasis, not upon dates and mathematical calculations, but upon that central Figure who was both anointed and a prince, who by being cut off has made reconciliation for iniquity and brought in the only righteousness that is acceptable with God, even His own eternal righteousness.<sup>3</sup>

### SDA Bible Commentary

Not all have been prepared to take such excellent counsel seriously. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* contains many splendid articles, but the commentaries on the Bible books themselves are often not of such quality.

The commentary on Daniel suggests specific dates for the Danielic prophecy of the seventy weeks. These dates include 457 B.C. for the commencement, A.D. 31 for Christ's crucifixion, and A.D. 34 for the end of the seventieth week. Yet in an article in the next volume of the commentary series we find doubts about such precise dates.

The only New Testament mention of a specific year (the 15th of Tiberius) has been subject to varying interpretations. The epistles carry no date lines, and the writers of the Gospels were more interested in the meaning of events than in their dating....

...it is now known that Ussher's dates, compiled 300 years ago, are far from accurate. Many of them are approximately correct, but many more are entirely misleading. Newer discoveries in archeology have made it possible to know many ancient dates with a certainty that was beyond the reach of scholars of Ussher's day. Now 5 B.C. can be regarded as approximately correct for the birth of Christ. However, the evidence is not complete enough to furnish proof of the exact year, as will become evident....

All attempts to arrive at a date for the star of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2) by astronomical calculations are worthless....

The same chapter that contains the phrase "about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23), contains the only definite regnal-year date in the New Testament: John the Baptist came from the wilderness "into all the country about Jordan, preaching," just preceding the baptism of Jesus, in "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:3, 1)....

What calendar year did Luke use? Did he count as Tiberius' year 1 the year in which the king came to the throne, or the first full calendar year beginning at the next New Year's day? Did he count the beginning of the reign from Augustus' death or from a coregency beginning earlier? We must know all this in order to answer the question: What did Luke mean when he said "fifteenth year"? Unfortunately we do not know all this. From the source evidence available the answer can have, at best, only a high probability of accuracy....

Since the writers of the four Gospels were not concerned with uniformity or with strict chronological order, there have always



been differences of interpretation in reconstructing the sequence and duration of the events of Christ's ministry. No one of the various harmonies of the Gospels can claim complete proof for its chronology. Some assign one year, others two and over, others three and a half, some even seven years to the period.

This commentary provides a tentative chronological outline of the Bible narratives built on John's three Passovers (John 2:13; 6:4; 12:1) and one other feast unnamed (John 5:1) but interpreted to be likewise a Passover,...

To summarize: At present there is no *conclusive* historical and chronological proof, neither is there disproof, that Jesus began his ministry in the autumn of A.D. 27, at the end of 69 weeks of years after 457 B.C.; and that He ended the symbolism of the sacrifices and offerings at the cross 3½ years later, in the spring of A.D. 31, with the lat-

ter half of the 70th week extending 3½ years longer to the end of the 490 years from the starting point.<sup>4</sup>

### Year-Day Principle

As we can see from these scholarly quotations, attempts at dogmatism on disputed Biblical historical dates are unwise. A thousand times more unwise are attempts to calculate events yet future when the canon of Scripture closed.

One major approach to such attempts as these is the use of the year-day principle for the symbolic time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. [Elsewhere in this issue we have an article on the year-day principle. This method of interpretation is seen to have no scriptural support.]

### Skeptical About Dates

It can be said with certainty that all attempts to allocate prophetic dates in the New Testament are without foundation. Among those proposed are A.D.

508, 538, 1798, 1840, and 1844. It is impossible to prove any of them. Each of these dates is open to question and non-biblical.

It is not strange, therefore, that we approach Mr. Camping's claim for 1994 with considerable skepticism. ❖

### Footnotes

1. Desmond Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology*. University Press of America, Washington, D. C., 1979, pages 26-27.
2. F. F. Bruce, General Editor, *The International Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986, p. 89.
3. Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1949, pp. 220-221.
4. Article "A Basis for New Testament Chronology," *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Volume 5. Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D. C., 1956, pp. 235, 241, 242, 243, 244, 247, 248.