

The book cover features a background of intense, bright orange and yellow flames against a black backdrop. In the center, there is a large black circle containing the subtitle text. The main title is written in a white, serif font at the top, and the authors' names are at the bottom.

ARMAGEDDON
Now

THE
END OF THE
WORLD
A TO Z

JIM WILLIS AND BARBARA WILLIS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jim and Barbara Willis bring varied backgrounds to this study of religious and scientific theories regarding the possibility of the end of life as we know it.

Jim has served as an ordained minister with the United Church of Christ for more than thirty years. He is an author, musician, college professor, and lecturer, teaching courses in comparative religion and cross-cultural studies. His study of the world's religions, *The Religion Book: Places, Prophets, Saints, and Seers*, was published by Visible Ink Press in 2004. He has recorded and produced two albums of gospel music while serving as the writer, producer, and host of the *Through the Bible* series, a daily drive-time radio program. His hobby is long-distance bicycle riding, which he documents in *Journey Home: The Inner Life of a Long-Distance Bicycle Rider*, published in 2002.

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When not engaged in historical research, writing books, hiking, or singing folk concerts, Jim and Barbara do ministry together in Florida, where Jim is senior pastor of the Port Orange United Church of Christ.

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ARMAGEDDON POW

This book is dedicated to
(in chronological order)

Adam, Jim, Mariana, Melissa, Jan,
Skyla, Joey, and Sam

You are the pathfinders who will
find the way to our future.

ARMAGEDDON Now

THE END OF THE WORLD
A TO Z

JIM WILLIS AND BARBARA WILLIS



DETROIT

ARMAGEDDON
POW
THE END OF THE
WORLD
A TO Z

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43311 Joy Rd. #414
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Art Director: Mary Claire Krzewinski
Typesetting: The Graphix Group

ISBN 1-57859-168-6

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress

Printed in the United States of America

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

Starting in 542 CE, bubonic plague swept across Europe, stretching as far as the British Isles. The death rate reached proportions similar to what a nuclear holocaust might have produced. Whole cities were abandoned and simply disappeared. Anarchy ruled. Uneducated peasants, caught in a religious trough between the old way we now call Druidism and the new faith of Roman Christianity, sought relief in one or the other. Meanwhile, scholars began to predict, and perhaps even welcome, the end of the world. A groundswell of religious eschatological hope carried the yearning for a better tomorrow as payment for the suffering of today.

On October 5, 1813, at the battle of the Thames in Ontario, the great Shawnee war leader Tecumseh was killed while protecting a British retreat from American forces during the War of 1812. His body was never located, and rumors persisted that he not only had prophesied this very event but also had vowed to rise from death to lead his people in a victorious return to an almost mythical golden age before the coming of the whites.

In July of 1945, a mushroom-shaped cloud towered over Alamogordo, New Mexico, marking the beginning of the nuclear age. Never before had the human race unleashed such power—a power that owes its inception to the forces of war and destruction.

Beginning in 1957, British scientists began measuring the earth's protective ozone layer over Antarctica. By 1984 it became apparent that something was wrong. A large seasonal hole had appeared. Arguments swirled around possible causes. Some insisted that the breach was a naturally occurring phenomenon. Others accumulated evidence suggesting it might foreshadow a human-induced ecological disaster.

Over the course of a few brilliant summer nights in 1994, scientists watched with awe as the comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 broke apart and slammed into the planet Jupiter. Pictures that flashed around the world showing the July 16–22 event were

both spectacular and unnerving. In cosmic terms, Jupiter isn't that far away. What if Earth had been the target?

Peering into the void, *Armageddon Now: The End of the World A to Z* crosses the religious and secular divide to examine the history of apocalyptic beliefs. This encyclopedic, multicultural overview covers doomsday theories, predictions, omens, revelations, and speculations; prophets, proselytizers, physicists, theologians, presidents, and prime ministers; and historic events, biblical accounts, and contemporary phenomena related to a growing endtime undercurrent in the popular culture. From the Rapture to the Resurrection, *Armageddon Now* explores and explains end-of-the-world scenarios from scientific, secular, religious, and supernatural points of view.

Among the nearly two hundred entries, many, as might be expected, touch upon religion. After all, scenarios about the end of the world, or at least of the human race, figure prominently in the scriptures and doctrines of many religions and have done so for thousands of years. The beliefs of Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, New Age groups, and many others find their place in *Armageddon Now*. In America today, a sizable and vocal minority of Christians believe strongly in a literal Armageddon—a final battle between good and evil—that many of them expect to experience firsthand. And some, using scripture as prophecy, interpret political, economic, or natural events, from the establishment of the European Common Market to the death of Pope John Paul II, as omens that the end is nigh.

But the concept of Armageddon doesn't end with religious theories. So pervasive has the word become that even secular predictions of disaster often warn of an "ecological Armageddon" or a "nuclear Armageddon." And so the scientific community has a voice in these pages as well. We look at potential destroyers of humankind as small as viruses and as large as comets and asteroids. We examine human-caused devastation and naturally occurring phenomena. We consider the effects of uncontrolled population expansion, the depletion of natural resources, global warming, disease, political strife, and technology run amok. We review scenarios that involve the utter destruction of humanity and those that signal an end to a civilization or lifestyle as we know it.

Nor are the avowedly religious and plainly scientific standpoints the whole story. For example, *Armageddon Now* considers the predictions of Nostradamus and Edgar Cayce, prophets of the past. It delves into American Indian traditions and examines the Mayan calendar for clues to the possible timing of the earth's final days.

Armageddon Now also summarizes Hollywood's serious and not-so-serious treatments of a favorite topic: the end of the world and postapocalyptic anxiety. And we present case studies showing what happens when prophets gather believers around them to await the end, only to have their hopes dashed when the end doesn't arrive.

Some eighty illustrations help bring the last days into focus, and a bibliography offers sources for further doomsday study. Fire or ice, bang or whimper, asteroid or alien, act of God or human folly, *Armageddon Now: The End of the World A to Z* offers the first and last word on the end of everything.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book surveying a religious, scientific, and historical landscape as broad as this could not have come into being without a copy editor who is secure in his craft. He must also possess familiarity with a wide-ranging host of academic disciplines. Gerry Anders is such an editor. He knows where to draw lines and he knows how to have fun. He will not allow any claimed scientific fact to go unchallenged, but he appreciates silly science-fiction movies, too. Gerry can talk at some length about American evangelical theology or the latest theories from Stephen Hawking while remembering details about *Superman and the Mole Men* that I have long since forgotten.

As always, Christa Gainor of Visible Ink Press offered a sounding board, shoulder to cry on, and general psychological prop. The “Joey” mentioned in the dedication is her son. The other names are those of our kids (now grown up) and grandkids. May they live in a world that learns lessons from its past.

While the draft for most of this book was being written we lived in Nogales, Arizona, and ministered to the United Churches Fellowship there on the border. Emery Boepple served as our administrative assistant and was always ready to talk, commiserate, and exchange ideas. Emery and the people of UCF will always have a special place in our hearts.

The people of the Smoki Museum in Prescott, Arizona, introduced us to the Hopi, but we also want to thank those who work in America’s great jewels: our national and state park systems. Wherever our research carried us as we studied the Anasazi and Mound Builders, the employees and volunteers of our parks went out of their way to help us dig deeper into the myths and legends of past American cultures.

The authors also thank proofreader Vanessa Torrado-Caputo, indexer Lawrence Baker, permissions manager Diane Sawinski, photo digitizer Robert Huffman, designer Mary Claire Krzewinski, typesetter Marco Di Vita of the Graphix

Group, and Visible Inkers Martin Connors, Roger Jänecke, Roger Matuz, Mary Beth Perrot, and Terri Schell.

To all of you: Thank you!

A



ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.... See, I have told you ahead of time.... Immediately after the distress of those days

‘the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’” (Matt. 24:15–29)

These enigmatic words, attributed to Jesus of Nazareth in the first book of the New Testament, are some of the most disputed in the Bible.

They certainly ring with prophetic doom. With their images of a darkened sun and moon, and stars falling from the sky, they seem to be describing the end of the world. But what do they mean?

Two poles of opinion anchor a vast spectrum of interpretation. On one end of the spectrum are those who say that all prophetic Bible passages were aimed at the audience who first heard them. Authors of Holy Writ were speaking to their contem-

poraries, and we must interpret their words by studying history to understand the culture and times—in this case, the first century CE. According to this school of thought, the clue to prophecy is to be found in events familiar to those who first read the words of the prophet.

The theologian Marcus Borg, among others, calls this the “past-historic” view of biblical interpretation, and it is typical of what is usually called “liberal” theology.

At the other end of the interpretive spectrum are those such as author and evangelist Tim LaHaye, who insist that biblical prophecy was aimed at future generations—perhaps even our present day. When daily newspapers begin to herald events similar to those described by the original authors of the Bible, then and only then can the prophecies be properly understood. Even the original authors didn’t understand what they were writing about, because those who were inspired to write were transported forward in time to glimpse technological societies they couldn’t possibly comprehend.

This interpretation is called the “futurist” view of biblical interpretation and is typical of what is usually called “conservative/evangelical” theology.

Matthew 24, however, presents a unique problem for both interpretive schools. Jesus talked about a time even farther back in history than his own when he quoted the prophet Daniel (see Daniel). But a careful reading of the book of Daniel discloses that the “abomination that causes desolation” to which Jesus referred is mentioned in three separate chapters that seem to have been written by two authors, one of whom wrote in Hebrew and the other in Aramaic.

The futurist school of interpretation simply claims that Daniel was written by one far-seeing prophet who, using two different languages, described the same future day to which Jesus was referring in Matthew 24. There might be room for coincidence, in that past events may have foreshadowed the future event Jesus talked about, but that only shows that God sometimes used “Coming Attractions,” as it were, to warn humankind of what will transpire if people don’t shape up. In any case, as far as we know, there have never been any past examples of stars falling from the sky while the sun and moon became dark. So both Daniel and Jesus must have been referring to a day yet in our future.

The past-historic school has a more complicated task. Looking for cultural explanations in Daniel’s day is only the first difficulty. The interpreters also have to read the historical/archeological record to find similar events in the time of Jesus. So the “abomination that causes desolation” needs a bit of research before we can understand how theologians of the past-historic school see the enigmatic passage of Matthew 24.

First we need to define some terms. There are at least four closely nuanced ways to translate the word *abomination* from the original Hebrew used in the book of Daniel. The definition most accepted is that of something “appalling” or “detested.” Meanwhile, *desolation* carries with it the idea of stark emptiness. So another way of saying “the abomination that causes desolation” would be, “the detested thing that appalls [Jewish people] so much that it causes them to leave the holy place [the temple] empty.”



Darkened sun and moon above the great earthquake from Revelation. *Fortean Picture Library*.

For those who belong to the past-historic school of biblical interpretation, two such events conveniently stand out. One happened during the time when, according to these scholars, this portion of Daniel was written. The other happened shortly after Jesus' time.

In 167 BCE, the days to which past-historic scholars believe Daniel 9, 11, and 12 refer, Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria profaned the altar of the temple at Jerusalem. Some accounts say he sacrificed a pig there. Pigs, according to Jewish law, are "unclean," nonkosher animals. Others say he erected a statue to the god Zeus. Perhaps he did both, which would have polluted the holy altar and broken the first and second commandments referring to "having no other Gods" and forbidding the worship of idols. Either act would have been "appalling," an "abomination" that would have caused good Jews to leave the profaned temple "desolate" or empty.

The words attributed to Jesus could have been a similar historical warning. In 70 CE, shortly before the gospel of Matthew was written, Roman legions under Titus destroyed the temple at Jerusalem, setting off the great Diaspora, the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world that lasted right up until the birth of Zionism and the declaration of a Jewish state in 1948. With the destruction of the temple, Jews

could no longer correctly worship within the parameters of their sacrificial system because the temple altar, according to the Torah, was the only place such sacrifices were permitted to be offered. The temple site was left “desolate.”

So those who follow the past-historic method of biblical interpretation believe that the words attributed to both Daniel and Jesus refer to specific historic events. They were written for the people of those long-lost days, to whom these events would have had special significance. The part about sun, moon, and stars is simply metaphorical hyperbole.

The futurists are not convinced. When Israel, during the 1967 Six-Day War, gained access, for the first time in more than eighteen centuries, to the ground upon which their beloved temple once stood (see Temple at Jerusalem), many Jews and Christians rejoiced because they believed that the long “abomination that causes desolation” was almost over. A new temple could now be built, ready to greet the Messiah—either, for Jews, for the first time, or, for Christians, the second time.

Those who hold this view offer different opinions as to the nature of the “abomination” that made the temple site “desolate.” Some say it is simply the presence of the Muslim mosque that sits on the site. Various fundamentalist groups have identified the “abomination” with the practices of the entire Christian church, the Roman Catholic denomination, the League of Nations, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the doctrine of the Rapture (see Rapture), the religion of Islam, or the nation of Rome. Each sect tends to claim that the scriptures clearly teach its position, and most quote myriad Bible verses and passages to back them up, utilizing complicated systems of biblical dates and prophetic riddles.

All agree, however, that there will be yet another “abomination of desolation.” A third temple will be built, and someday the antichrist (see Antichrist) will ascend its steps, declare himself to be God, and demand worship from the inhabitants of the earth. This final “abomination” will signify the beginning of the end and bring about the final judgment of God (see Revelation) and the battle of Armageddon (see Armageddon, Battle of).

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ABRAHAM AND MONOTHEISM

Did the Abraham of Genesis exist? No one knows for sure, but according to Bruce Feiler, author of *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, it really doesn’t make a whole lot of difference. What is important is the story of Abraham, what Abraham represents not only to modern-day monotheism but to the politics of the Middle East—which, in this nuclear age, can threaten the very future of life on the planet.



Abraham, at God's command, preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac (right); at the altar (left), an angel stops the knife. *Fortean Picture Library*.

The great patriarch of the Hebrew Bible is also the spiritual forefather of the New Testament and the grand holy architect of the Qur'an. Abraham is the shared ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is the linchpin of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is the centerpiece of the battle between the West and Islamic extremists. He is the father—in many cases the purported biological father—of 12 million Jews, 2 billion Christians, and 1 billion Muslims around the world.

And that's the problem.

Historically, when the descendants of Abraham engaged in religious disputes over who was the inheritor of the lands promised by God to the patriarch as recorded in the book of Genesis (see Abrahamic Covenant), warfare was limited by technology. But now we have nuclear weapons to consider. A war in one part of the world, especially as populated and volatile as the Middle East, could quickly escalate into global disaster. And when the United States of America, half a world away from the scene of the conflict, was attacked on September 11, 2001, partly because of its support for Jewish Israel over Muslim Palestine, the battle was brought home to people who thought they were far removed from it.

The modern conflict is rarely couched in such flat assertions as “We are Abraham’s descendants and you are not” or “God gave this land to us and not you.” But in the early 1960s the theme melody from the movie *Exodus*, with lyrics written after the film became a hit and sung by Pat Boone, expressed the deep religious feelings underscoring events that headlined many an evening news program fifty years later: “This land is mine, God gave this land to me.”

Western audiences, grown used to the political doctrine of separation of church and state, sometimes have a difficult time understanding the deeply religious/political upheaval of a part of the world long familiar with religious argument spilling over into hatred, warfare, and terrorism. Even if the biblical account of Abraham is not interpreted as reliable biography, however, it still points up the fact that the ancestors of today’s opposing factions in the volatile Middle East were arguing about land and autonomy back in the time when the story was first written. And that was a very long time ago, indeed!

The Man

Who is Abraham? Who is this man who continues to have such a profound influence over a world that can’t even prove he existed?

He is considered to be the father of both Judaism and Islam (through his sons Isaac and Ishmael, respectively) and the spiritual father of Christianity, according to Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 4, verse 1. Indeed, except for the name of Jesus, Abraham’s name appears more times in the Christian New Testament than does any other.

He is first introduced as Abram (the name means “exalted father”), living in Ur of the Chaldees, in what is now Iraq. The ancient city of Ur, a Sumerian capital, has been excavated. As a result of archeological work done there, many believe that a people called Hapiru, or Hebrew, lived in Ur until about the time of the biblical narrative, roughly 2000 BCE. They apparently migrated to Haman, in northern Mesopotamia, and then, it is assumed, to Canaan, later called Palestine, now Israel. Critical scholarship, however, like all sciences, is continually in flux, and it must be noted that further research sheds doubt on the connection.

Abraham is presented as a man of great faith, although, like most biblical heroes, with feet of clay that make him disarmingly appealing. The religious “call” that begins his story occurs in Genesis 12:1–3:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

“So Abram departed,” according to the Bible, without a single word of protest or explanation. This act of unquestioning faith became the foundation for three religions. The story of Abraham as presented in the Bible is the story of the beginning of monotheism, the belief in one God. The three great monotheistic traditions of the world today all trace their origins to this same period of history.

Monotheism: A New Concept of Time

Monotheism introduced important ideas to the world beyond the concept of one God. Considerable evidence suggests that before the advent of monotheism, humans tended to think of time as circular. “What goes around, comes around” is a concept familiar to Hinduism, Native American belief systems, Shamanism, and Druidism, to name just a few of the polytheistic and pantheistic religious traditions in which time is viewed as having no beginning and no end.

But monotheism postulates a specific beginning. “In the beginning,” says the first verse of the Bible, “God created the heavens and the earth.” The Qur’an continues the theme: “He [Allah] it is Who created the earth in Six Days, and is moreover firmly established on the Throne [of Authority]” (57:4).

Whenever there is a beginning, there is an implied ending. Linear thinking about time is one of the hallmarks of monotheism. Timelines are among its legacy.

Monotheism: A New Concept of Reality

Duality is another aspect of monotheism. The first story of the monotheistic tradition depicts humans with a dualistic choice. They are faced with the temptation to eat of the tree of dualism—the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2 and 3; see Adam and Eve), of right and wrong. Monotheism gave the world a good God and an evil devil in conflict with each other. Eventually, it insists, good must overcome evil. That’s the whole point of time. Time is the battleground on which Ahura Mazda confronts Ahriman, Yahveh battles “the Satan,” God defeats the devil, Allah vanquishes Iblis. The long war will end with good conquering evil at a final battle sometime in the future. An Armageddon of some sort marks the end of time.

So Abraham’s story marks the beginning of the end. And there is ample evidence that those who first wrote the story recognized that the cultural conflicts they incorporated into it were already part of the experience of people living four millennia ago. When Ishmael, for instance, considered by many to be the “father” of Islam, is born to Abraham and Hagar, the obviously prejudiced Hebrew authors of Genesis tell of an angel who prophesies of the young child and his descendants:

He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone’s hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward all his brothers. (Gen. 16:12)

When Abraham’s grandchildren Jacob and Esau are born, the ancient Hebrew authors, writing from a Jewish perspective, make it apparent where their loyalties lie

in the matter of two future races of Abraham's descendants. Of Esau, "father" of the Edomites, who will later be among those called Palestinians, the Bible prophesies:

You will live by the sword
and you will serve your brother.
But when you grow restless,
you will throw his yoke
from off your neck. (Gen. 27:40)

Monotheism: The Continuing Battle

Prophecy and biblical literalism aside, then, the conflict threatening the world today in the Middle East has a long history. What makes the continuing story so volatile, however, is that those who live it today are armed with nuclear missiles. The Christian writer of the book of Revelation placed the final battle for the world, the battle of Armageddon, right in Abraham's neighborhood. So it seems obvious that even the early Christian movement recognized the old struggle that we still read about in our newspapers and experience in our streets today. The battle has spread from Abraham's backyard to the streets of New York and the cities of Europe. The children of Abraham are still at each other's throats, demanding that the nations of the world side with one or the other.

Abraham's story is not yet finished.

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ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The word *covenant* means "promise" or "contract." In the case of Abraham it refers to a specific promise God is purported to have made to the patriarch who represented the twentieth generation of humans as recorded in Genesis 12:2–3:

"I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

Are biblical promises binding today to people who do not recognize as authoritative the Bible that records them? To most of modern Western civilization the answer is obvious: of course not. Why should one religion's scriptures have anything to do, politically, with people of a different tradition? But while Western newspapers continue to describe the Middle East in political language, the people who live there seem

more often to express their views in religious terms. Dr. Abdel Aziz Rantisi, who before he was killed in an Israeli missile attack was a prominent leader of Hamas, a group that many in the West consider to be a Palestinian terrorist organization, openly attacked the president of the United States as “the enemy of Muslims.” A *New York Times* article published on March 29, 2004, quotes Dr. Rantisi: “America declared war against God, and God declared war on America, [President George W.] Bush and [Israeli prime minister Ariel] Sharon.”

This kind of language reveals a religious, apocalyptic (see Apocalyptic Writing) view of current events that underlies the political, geographical, and economic wrangling. And we cannot make the mistake of ridiculing only Islamic national leaders who, during the Persian Gulf War, for instance, called America the Great Satan and vowed that Allah would defend his chosen people in the “mother of all battles.” During those days it was also popular to end every American political speech with the words “God bless America.” When viewed in this way, the Gulf War was a holy war—God against Allah.

In a similar vein, countless generations of young Jewish boys, at their bar mitzvahs, have read in faltering tones the words *Vayomer hashen el-Avram lech-lecha*, “The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Go forth.’” Such memories produce powerful religious convictions, to the point that it seems perfectly normal for rabbis in Israel and around the world to say, “God gave this land to our father Abraham.”

But Abraham wasn’t the first man to step foot on Canaan’s bloody ground. Others were there already. And when the Jews were led away from their beloved country after the first-century CE Roman solution to the “Jewish problem” destroyed Jerusalem, there were Gentiles who settled back in for a long occupation of the country their ancestors had called home since before Abraham’s time. They were still there when the United Nations, prompted by the rebirth of Zionism, declared Israel a Jewish state in 1948.

So whose land is it, anyway?

Notwithstanding the claims of the Jewish people, there are others who have a scriptural claim upon the land of Israel. The Qur’an of Islam declares Abraham a paragon of piety (16:120). He submitted to God. The word *Muslim* means “one who submits.” So to followers of Islam it is perfectly proper for the Muslim presence to declare itself so prominently in the capital of Israel, even if it means that the ancient Jewish temple site is now home to the Mosque of Omar, the “Dome of the Rock.”

Meanwhile, many Christians believe they ought to have a say in the matter. The Bible declares that God will bless those who bless Abraham’s descendants. Even though President Jimmy Carter’s brother Billy was once quoted as saying, “There are a whole lot more Arabs than Jews over there,” the typical evangelical/conservative Christian position is that America and the nations of the West had better side with Israel because that is God’s will. Muslims in the region, of course, are well aware of the support of many American Christians for Israel.

It is not by accident that the final battle of the world is usually predicted to take place right in the middle of Abraham’s old neighborhood. The Middle East, from the

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