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***Which is worse: No eschaton or the wrong one?***

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What do you think? As humanity moves forward through time, are things getting better or getting worse? Think back over your own lifetime and those of your parents and grandparents, and take everything into account: Ethics, disease and health care, education, jobs and wealth, technology, suffering, oppression, war and the general burdens and joys of life. Do you think conditions are generally improving, despite occasional downturns, or do you think that they are deteriorating, even though there are the occasional bright spots?

Most evangelical American Christians during the 18th and 19th centuries, which means most American Christians, thought that matters were gradually improving. God was helping Americans bring the gospel to people from the east coast to the western frontier, as well as to the deepest dark of Africa and the exotic reaches of Asia. These efforts were assisted by advances in education, health care and technology; indeed, Christians saw the invention of the steamship and the railroad as tools for helping spread the gospel faster. Soon, they believed, "all the world" would know the joy of Christianity.

When William Miller and his followers took the opposite approach in the 1840s, they predicted that matters were deteriorating. They believed things were getting so bad that the eschaton, the literal end of the world, was almost upon them and that Jesus would "take them home" to heaven on Oct. 22, 1844, before it arrived. Tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands sold their worldly possessions and gathered on tops of mountains and hills to be raised up. It did not happen. Miller was discredited, and most of his followers returned to their towns to try to pick up their previous lives and beliefs, although some became the foundation of the Adventist church.

Religions other than Christianity also have considered the direction of the world's progress. Jews, for centuries, had no doubt that life was bad and that they were oppressed. This was particularly true in medieval Europe, where Jews had no rights, were often herded into ghettos or other restricted living areas, forbidden to own land, and subjected to frequent attacks by their Christian neighbors. These attacks were known as pogroms; they were most common in the Easter season, but could happen at any time, resulting in injury, rape, destruction of homes and businesses, even death of numerous Jews. True, matters

improved significantly in the 18th and 19th centuries when Jews became citizens and gained many rights, but this was destroyed by the Holocaust during World War II.

Like the Millerites, Jews expected God to relieve their suffering, and as the centuries rolled by, they came to believe this would happen at the eschaton, the end of the world when God would right all its wrongs. Jews lacked the fervor and excitement of the Millerites, but every year at Passover they would pray "next year in Jerusalem." This short phrase encapsulated the larger belief that God would take them, the Chosen People, out of exile and return them to the Promised Land of Israel. This would restore the promise God made to Abraham and to Moses about the proper place of Jews in His world.

As the 19th century passed into the 20th, a split developed among the Jews. While Orthodox Jews continued to pray "next year in Jerusalem," Zionist Jews decided to make that prayer a reality. Mostly younger and secular, these Jews thought they knew better than their elders. In the early decades of the last century, tens of thousands flocked to Palestine to establish a Jewish homeland. Following WWII, they created a Jewish nation called Israel, which they established following extensive fighting against Arab armies. Holocaust survivors and Jews from around the world migrated there to join in the new state. More and more Jews could actually celebrate Passover in Jerusalem.

For many Orthodox Jews, especially the Ultra-Orthodox, this success was seen as failure. The Zionists were mostly secular Jews, having rebelled against their Orthodox parents or grandparents. The Zionist movement was secular and led by human beings rather than God. The "ingathering" was accomplished without a messiah, without prayers. It created a secular, in many ways socialist, society, not a religious community guided by a divine blueprint. Jewish life improved, oppression was overcome, but without God's hand being visible.

Sixty years later, many of the Ultra-Orthodox still consider the state of Israel to be illegitimate. It is a continuing reminder not of the failure of divine deliverance from a deteriorating world, but of a deliverance that was not divine.