



## Prophets For Profit: Telling The Future - Fiction, Fact Or Funny

*Jim Willis*



Technically speaking, a prophet is one who is believed to speak for God, but generally speaking, when people hear the word 'prophet', they tend to think of one who sees the future. In popular parlance, 'prophesying' or 'telling the future' is the same thing. People have done this, seemingly, forever, using all kinds of methods,

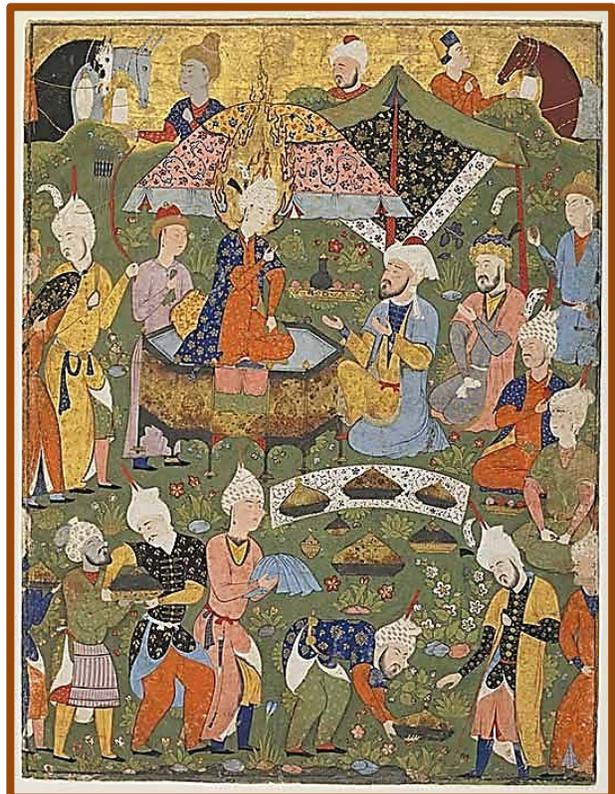
from looking at the pattern of birds in flight; throwing the bones, dice or sticks or reading cards or palms, to predict the future.



*Casting lots for tribal inheritance, woodcut for 'Die Bibel in Bildern', by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1860) (Public Domain)*

In aeromancy, one seeks the future by looking upward toward the skies. Weather forecasters do this all the time, of course, but the craft also include watching the patterns of birds and butterflies. Sometimes people 'draw straws' and this is called belomancy. Randomly

opening the Bible, or any book, for that matter, hoping for a message found in the first words read, is called the practice of bibliomancy. Prophets used to carve symbols on small bones, cast them on the ground, and determine the future by their positions, called astragalomancy. Using a special decks of cards to seek messages, is called cartomancy. The phrase, "It is in the cards," comes from this practice. Palmistry is the art of telling the future by reading creases on the open hand. Casting lots means to throw, or cast, objects such as dice or marked sticks, to see how they land. If dice is used, it is called cubomancy. This is probably what the Jewish prophets did when, in *Old Testament* times, they utilized the "urim and thummin" to determine God's will in a particular situation. A conjuror consults the spirits of the dead to foresee the future. A necromancer actually divines the future by reading dead bodies. Sometimes people follow advice given to them in dreams, called oneiromancy. Dowsing, with pendulums, forked sticks, or "L" rods, is technically known as rhabdomancy.



*Joseph Enthroned from the "Book of Omens" (Fa'Inama). The reader would flip randomly to a place in the book and digest the text having first viewed the image. (1550, Safavid Dynasty) (Public Domain)*

## Theomancy: Oracle Of God

Finally, there is Theomancy. This is when an oracle, speaking for God, declares a message from a deity that foretells what “must come to pass.” Usually, the message is a bit complicated, and if the future does not unfold quite the way it was supposed to, the fault lies in the interpretation, not the prophet. Here is a prophecy on the Last Judgement illustrating Theomancy from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian *Old Testament*: *“See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. I will make people scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir. Therefore, I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty, in the day of his burning anger”.* (Isaiah 13:9-13)



*The Great Last Judgement* by Peter Paul Rubens (1614-1617) (Public Domain)

And this, from the Apostle Paul, in the New Testament: *“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.”* (II Timothy 3:1-5)

For every passage of Scripture, there are probably at least two, and sometimes many, different interpretations. People tend to find in the Bible what they expect to find there. Arguments to the contrary seldom make a difference. Many so-called experts have made a living out of interpreting what the Bible says about THE END. But there is no standard of agreement.



*Charon and his boat of damned souls in the Last Judgement by Michelangelo. Sistine Chapel, Vatican (Public Domain)*

### **Number 666 Wrong Number**

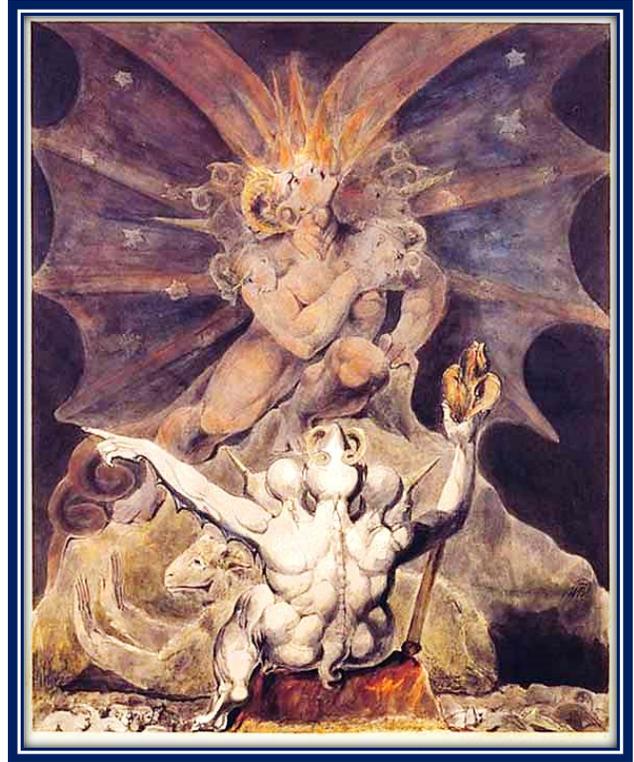
Take, for instance, the most argued-over number in the Bible—the famous 666. *“The [false prophet] also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.”* (Revelation 13:16-18)

These may very well be the most enigmatic verses in the Bible. They are certainly at the core of many a conspiracy theory, and private speculations, especially those published on the Internet, run rampant. The numbers have caused so many fears that some people refuse to use any check numbered 666. Highways in both Arizona and Texas have had their official numbers changed due to complaints from fundamentalists. Urban legends spread like wildfire, usually through people who claim they know people who are related to people who have had Social Security checks snatched mysteriously out of their hands by bank tellers who report that these checks were not yet supposed to be issued.

*The number of the beast is 666 by William Blake (1805)*  
Rosenbach Museum (Public Domain)

It is entertaining to speculate on the possibility that all this sound and fury might have been expended on the wrong number. A papyrus manuscript fragment discovered in Egypt sheds a different light on the issue of the number. It is purported to be a very early copy of a portion of the *Book of Revelation* that lists the number as 616, not 666. If 616 is indeed the original number used by the author of *Revelation*, it would change much of the numerological speculation surrounding the interpretation of this passage.

Whether or not the findings support the traditional text, what do the numbers really mean? Do they point to a yet-to-be-revealed Antichrist, an ancient figure known to the original author of the *Book of Revelation*, or a metaphysical power lurking behind the scenes of world history?



*Nero Views the Burning of Rome by Carl Theodor von Piloty (1861) (CC BY-SA 3.0)*

The many theories about the number 666 generally fall into one of three categories. The first is the Past-Historic School of Biblical Interpretation: Authors espousing this view include such New Testament scholars as Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. This is the interpretive scheme that insists the original authors of

Holy Writ must have been writing in terms their readers could have understood. If 666 refers to a man, it must have been a coded reference to someone who was alive at the time. Perhaps Nero, or one of the other Caesars, might fit the bill. After all, it was a time of persecution for the early church. Maybe the antichrist from "Babylon" was really Caesar from Rome.

The second theory is the Futurist School of Biblical Interpretation: Those espousing this view include popular authors such as Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, and Hal Lindsey. This school of thought, followed by most modern Evangelical Christian writers, believes that even if the prophecy has a meaning grounded in the past, it awaits a greater fulfillment in the future. They insist that the number refers to a man, and a system of economic control that will someday, just before the Second Coming of Jesus and the Battle of Armageddon, engulf the whole earth. New 666 candidates are introduced every year, but so far no one person or bureaucratic system has been positively identified.

*The Antichrist (the figure on the left, with the attributes of a king) by Herrad of Landsberg (about 1180), from the 12th-century Hortus deliciarum (Public Domain)*



The third is the Intuitive/Metaphysical School of Biblical Interpretation. The author credited with popularizing this kind of theology is Walter Wink, who was a professor of biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological School in New York City. His approach is more difficult to understand. Some background in both biblical interpretation and history is required to fully grasp the ideas he puts forth.

In 1984, Walter Wink published the first volume of what eventually became a trilogy, examining the language of power in the *New Testament*. His thesis was that first-century writers intuitively understood realities they could not fully explain, at least in language familiar to modern academic culture.

They understood, for instance, that human organizations, such as governments, seem to operate under forces quite beyond their own control, taking on a 'personality' that is bigger than any individual. In the United States, for example, it often does not seem to matter much whether Democrats or Republicans are at the helm. Policies may vary somewhat, but the Washington mindset grinds on. "Pork" projects, filibusters, back-room deals, and heavy spending continue unabated.

Similarly, in the private sector, the entire board of directors of General Motors could be replaced, but the company will continue on. And, of course, the military will lumber forth in their familiar fashion long after their inefficiency is proved beyond a shadow of a doubt. Change can be affected, but it requires a herculean effort. Even smaller institutions manifest this syndrome. Churches, for instance, or universities, develop 'personalities' that seem to last for generation after generation.

*Angels of the Apocalypse (CC0)*

Wink believed that the *New Testament* writers recognized this fact. They called the 'powers' that control these forces 'angels', or 'principalities', among other descriptive terms. He quotes from the *Book of Revelation*, for instance, where Jesus addresses comments not to the "church of Laodicea," but to



"the *angel* of the church of Laodicea." By this Wink does not mean that some fallen angel fluttered by and took control of the organization. Instead, he argues that human organizations actually develop traditions and customs that are so strong they almost take on a metaphysical life of their own. In order to change the institution, the 'angel', or spirit of tradition, the metaphysical reality of the institution, has to be changed. Whether the original authors intellectually understood all this modern psychology does not make any difference. They intuitively recognized the reality of it, and gave it a name.



How does this kind of thinking relate to the Battle of Armageddon and the number 666? The author of *Revelation* does not say that the number 666 refers to "a" man. He says that "it is man's number." In other words, it symbolizes humanity, not one distinct individual. Six is one short of seven, the number of perfection, assigned to God throughout the Bible. Thus, 666 represents either fallen humanity or humans striving to become more than they are. Because God is a trinity, humans fall three times short of perfection. As such, 666 represents a human system, not a man.

*The Whore of Babylon from 'Apocalipsis cum figuris', by Albrecht Dürer (1498) Houghton Library, Harvard University (Public Domain)*

## The Economics Of 666

But what system? It must represent an economic system because the number is associated with "buying and selling." As *Revelation 13:17* says, "No one could buy or sell unless he had the mark." Perhaps the early writers intuitively understood, even 2,000 years ago, that whoever controlled the economy controlled the population. The current economic system of Western civilization that has now spread to the entire planet, began, it is thought by many conservative biblical scholars, some 6,000 years ago, probably in Mesopotamia. It started with the Agricultural Revolution, an evolutionary leap that brought writing, cities, specialization of jobs, warfare over territory, male-dominated society, gods, and religions.

The time before the Agricultural Revolution is called pre-history. The time after the invention of writing, originating as a result of this revolution, is called history. In other words, "history," and the "buying and selling" economy that marks modern life, began about 6,000 to 8,000 years ago, at least according to this school of thought. This is also approximately when the Bible says the world began, if one is to take *Genesis'* dates literally. Perhaps the biblical writers really referred to the beginning of mankind's world, not "the" world. This is when Adam and Eve walked out of the Garden of Eden and began to earn their bread by toiling at agriculture, following God's command in *Genesis 3:19*, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food."



*First Work of Adam and Eve*  
by Alonso Cano (1660)  
(Public Domain)

Ever since the Agricultural Revolution, humanity has lived by trade. Civilizations rise and fall, but commerce is at the root of everything. Economic systems

have been put in place. They all revolve around who controls the means of production, or who can "buy or sell." But they all have one other thing in common. In each civilization, the rich tend to get richer and the poor tend to get poorer, until, eventually and inevitably, the civilization falls and something new replaces it. A spiritual, or metaphysical, economic power is in place. It demands of each of every person to participate. No one can really go it alone anymore. Everyone has a Social Security number. Everyone carries credit cards. Everybody has numbers, fingerprints, files, and computer databases. No-one can "buy or sell" without them.



*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Conquest, War, Famine, and Death by Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov (1887) (Public Domain)*

## The Interpretation Of Armageddon

As Walter Wink might well ask, is this what the biblical authors intuitively recognized, even 2,000 years ago? Does everyone wear the 'Mark of the beast'? As such, does Armageddon really refer to the demise of a 6,000-year-old social system that carried, at its root, the seeds of its own destruction? When the Agricultural Revolution began its long ascendance, did fallen humanity, who unknowingly invented it, place on their hand and forehead the 'Mark of the Beast'?

What, after all, does 'Antichrist' really mean? According to the author of *1 John*, everyone who fails to acknowledge Jesus the Christ is an Antichrist: "*Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the Antichrist.*"



*Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount by Carl Bloch (1877) (Public Domain)*

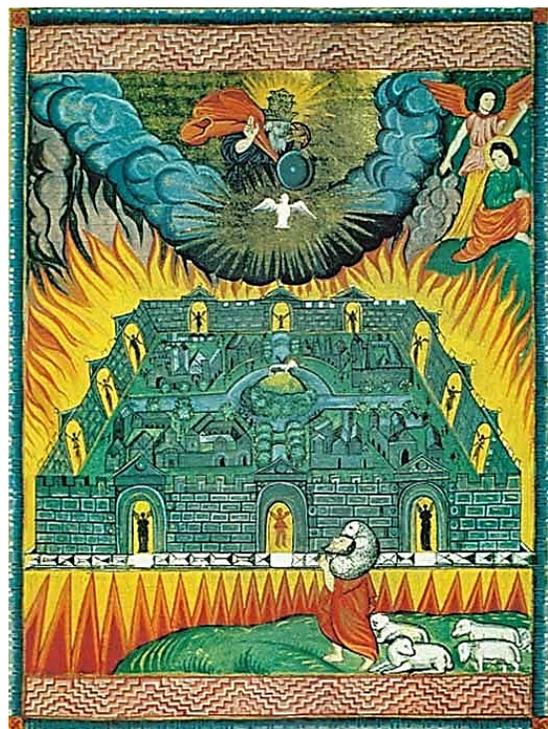
In other words, those who subscribe to the intuitive/metaphysical school of biblical interpretation believe that an 'Armageddon' will mark the destruction of the economic system that has been in effect for 6,000 years. It is contrary to the commands of Jesus. He ordered his followers to "give a cup of cold water" in his name, to "tum the other cheek," and "walk the second mile." Jesus insisted that 'true religion' meant giving, not hoarding. He never suggested anyone ever save for a rainy day.

To people who read the Bible this way, Armageddon represents spiritual warfare against the 'Prince of this world', who has held sway ever since the Agricultural Revolution. "Fight not against flesh and blood," says Paul in *Ephesians 6:10*, "but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of the dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Those powers are not 'beings' who were created by God and subsequently fell from grace. They are metaphysical powers inherent in a human invention, now called modern economics. Fed by greed and avarice, sins that are contrary to Christ, or 'antichrist', they have now grown so big as to take over the very lives of men and women. So great has their power become that such powers are simply taken for granted. But in the end, according to the biblical prophets, they will destroy mankind's civilization.

This is a totally different way of interpreting the *Book of Revelation* and its depiction of the Battle of Armageddon than those offered by biblical systems advanced before Wink's work in the 1980s. So, there is no single, Christian view of the future. Christians have divided and subdivided many times over the subject. Often within the same local church, even the same Bible-study circle, many different opinions will be aired. Still, one can categorize these differing views in a general way, understanding that shades of meaning exist within each category.

The Liberal, Nonliteral Views tends to read the end-of-history Bible passages as metaphors, written for specific people who lived at a specific time. According to this view, Jesus of Nazareth was a first-century Jew who understood the old Hebrew concept of the Divine in a fresh way. He attempted to teach his insights, was arrested by his detractors, and was crucified by the Roman government. But his ideas did not end with his death. All that he taught, all that he represented, all that he was, his very spirit, lived on in his followers after the Crucifixion. He will not literally return in a physical body. Rather, the church, his earthly body, carries on his ministry of love, reconciliation, and spiritual growth. Seen in this perspective, Armageddon is not a future war. It is a constant battle against institutional power, human sin, and entrenched evil.

*The New Jerusalem. Armenian manuscript by Malnazar and Aghap'ir in New Julfa bible (1645) (Public Domain)*



Some Christians who hold views of this kind envision a gradual evolution of human spirituality. Others think there will have to be a revolution. They believe that humans may have to go to the very brink of Armageddon before they shape up. Some liberal Christians believe that the Second Coming is personal, and experienced whenever the spirit of Jesus becomes a living reality for an individual. That person is then converted to living life in the spirit, rather than simply in the material world.

Others see the Second Coming as a metaphorical way of describing a quantum leap of the whole human race into universally recognizing the spiritual nature of life, rather than the material. Many believe that spirituality is the normal human condition, and was practiced by the ancestors. The proof, they say, lies in Stonehenge, the Pyramids, and other megalithic monuments that were built because the ancestors were in tune with something now forgotten. This 'great forgetting' is symbolized by the biblical story of Eden. Mankind has been cast out of the garden. The Second Coming of Jesus symbolizes the future 'great remembering', the turning back to a spirituality the human race experienced before Eden, in a time when "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

The Conservative, Literal Views Camp has quite a different understanding of the end times, but it, too, has some subdivisions. Many carefully nuanced theologies exist, each with very vocal proponents. They are similar in that their expositors are waiting for an actual, physical return of the same Jesus Christ who was born in Bethlehem, and whose story is told in the New



Testament gospels. Most agree that God has already decreed a day that will mark the end of the present age. Most agree that there will come a time of great tribulation. Where they disagree, sometimes even violently, is about the timing and order of events.

*The group of the Saved in The Last Judgement by Michelangelo. Sistine Chapel Vatican. (Public Domain)*

### **The Christian Rapture Theory**

There are different schools of the Christian Rapture theory: Pre-tribulationism: This school of thought holds that, at any moment, true believers will be changed into spiritual beings, or 'raptured', snatched up to be with God. Seven years of tribulation will follow, during which the antichrist will rule. Eventually he will be defeated at the Battle of Armageddon, when Jesus returns to earth. Christ will then reign for 1,000 years, or a millennium. At the end of that time, Satan, having been 'bound' following the battle itself, will be released.

He will raise an army that will again be destroyed by Jesus Christ. The world will then enter into eternity, wherein "time shall be no more."

In the Mid-tribulationism theory the events are the same, only the timing changes. The Rapture will not occur before the Tribulation, but rather at the halfway point. Three and one-half years after the start of the Tribulation period, the faithful will be snatched up to be with God. Then all hell will break loose on earth until the Second Coming. The Post-tribulationism postulates the same events, but again with different timing. The faithful will have to endure the entire seven years of Tribulation before the return of Christ. Then they will be 'raptured' at the Second Coming, ending the Battle of Armageddon. All three of the preceding views make up the Pre-millennial position. The Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Second Coming, all occur before the 1,000-year, or millennial, reign of Jesus Christ on earth.

The Post-millennialism differs from any of the others. Post-millennialism envisions either a literal or a symbolic 1,000-year period on earth during which the words of the Lord's Prayer, "*Thy kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven,*" will be fulfilled. This school of thought tends to view the Rapture and Tribulation as metaphors, rather than actual events. But some of its adherents teach otherwise. The Second Coming of Jesus, again viewed literally or symbolically by different camps, will take place at the end of the Millennium. The A-millennialists generally consider the 1,000-year millennium to be a metaphor for a long period of time. There will be no literal Millennium, just as there will probably be no literal Rapture, Tribulation, or Second Coming. In A-millennialism, metaphor and symbol are key words to remember when reading biblical texts.



*The Last Judgment by John Martin (1854) (Public Domain)*

Then there is the theory of Pan-millennialism: What started out as a seminary joke has, over the years, become a catchword that expresses the confusion and frustration many Christians feel

when hearing all the arguments for and against a specific biblical position. Each millennial position has its proof texts and proponents, who can be quite forceful when they expound their particular position. 'Pan-millennialism' supposedly came about because a seminary professor was asked by his students which millennial position he espoused, pre-, post-, or a-? "None of them," he said. "I'm Pan-millennial." "What's that?" his students asked. "Everything will pan out in the end!" the professor answered. The joke has been told now for about 50 years, in every seminary throughout the land. It has been repeated so many times, and passed on by so many students, that there are actually some ministers who, understanding it or not, hold to this position. Perhaps there is some real wisdom here.

*Top Image: Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist by Luca Signorelli (1499) (Public Domain)*

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