The World Will End in 1919
Daniel Among the Victorians

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This paper is about a man who believed that the world would end in 1919, basing his announcement on the book of Daniel. He was Henry Grattan Guinness, Irish-born evangelist and missionary, and he died without knowing that he was wrong.

Born in 1835, he was educated privately and went to sea at the age of seventeen. Returning home a year later, he experienced a religious conversion and was soon ordained and began evangelistic work. He was said to rival Spurgeon as a preacher. He established the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Missions (1873), and The Regions Beyond Missionary Union (1899), and traveled widely in all parts of the world. In 1889, he received a D.D. from Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. He died in 1910. His family appears to be collateral to the Guinness ale family, and he is said to have pronounced his name Guin-NESS to distinguish the two lines.

Grattan Guinness is interesting as the last great popularizer of the most common method of interpreting Daniel which the church has ever known. Now that we are living in the last days of the dispensational-futurist mode of interpreting Daniel, it may be worthwhile to look at the last days of that much more durable mode, the historicist. In the process we will learn something both about the book of Daniel and about the history of its interpretation.

DANIEL'S TIME PERIODS

The terms "historicist" and "futurist" refer to broad ways of interpreting biblical apocalyptic materials, especially Daniel and Revelation. The futurist sees the events which the text refers to as belonging to our future; they have yet to take place. This is the method of all popular apocalyptic writers at the present time, although it is not a method much used by the scholarly community. The historicist, on the other hand, sees the events which the text refers to as events which have, for the most part, already taken place; they belong to our history. It was the method used in the church for many centuries, since well before the Reformation, rising to a special prominence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and falling into decline as the nineteenth century progressed.

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And this brings us to the book of Daniel. It has always exercised an almost-occult attraction over many readers because of curious time periods mentioned in it which must elapse before the “end” and the coming of God’s kingly rule. When Daniel’s “end” is understood to be the “end of the world,” these time periods appear to offer a means of knowing precisely when that event will occur. We begin by considering them.

1. “A time, times, and half a time” = three-and-one-half years (7:25, 12:7).

2. “2,300 evenings and mornings” = 1,150 days = three years, two months, ten days (8:14).

3. 1,290 days (12:11) = three years, seven months.

4. 1,335 days (12:11) = three years, eight-and-one-half months.

5. “Seventy weeks” (9:24), divided into seven, sixty-two, and one, with the “one” subdivided into two halves (9:25-27). Assuming that each “week” means seven years, the total period would be 490 years, divided into forty-nine, 434 and seven, with the final subdivision into two three-and-one-half-year periods.

We have here several short periods and one long period. The short periods, although variable, are more or less the same length, and seem to correspond to the last segment of the long period.

This period is described throughout the second half of Daniel as a period of oppression to religious believers which would be followed by the fall of the oppressor and the arrival of God’s kingly rule. It is probably to be associated with a Hellenistic ruler in Palestine, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, whose rule included the sixties of the second century B.C. (174-163). This earliest known outburst of anti-Semitism ended with the fall of the oppressor (commemorated by the Jewish festival of Hanukkah), and gave way to a period of Jewish political independence which lasted about a century.

The basic figure of three-and-one-half years arose out of that persecution, perhaps as the actual length of time between the beginning of Jewish armed resistance to Epiphanes, led by the Maccabee family, and its end in the rededication of the temple (June 167-December 164 B.C.). I am disposed to see the variations among no. 1 - no. 4 above as having their rise in differing ways of calculating the onset and end of the resistance. In any case, the connection is with the oppression described in Daniel 7-12, and the numbers are calendric in the sense that they correspond to actual lengths of time.

The book of Daniel entered the canon long after the Maccabean period, at a time when it would have been clear that not all its hopes for the future had been realized. There had been a period of independence under priestly rule, but the Kingdom of God had not arrived. The book continued to be esteemed, therefore, not for historical reasons, but for typological reasons. That is, the Maccabean crisis came to stand for any oppression of faithful believers and for God’s intent to support them and eventually to intervene on their behalf. The book was taken up by Christians as well as Jews in this sense. Even the time periods were understood symbolically, as their reuse in
the book of Revelation shows.7
But as history prolonged itself and the divine kingdom tarried, this understanding failed and was replaced by a more literal reading. The book was understood to speak of the “end of the world” (and not ambiguously of the end of the persecution and the coming of God’s kingly rule), and the time periods were again given a calendric interpretation. These numbers, which had once referred to a concrete situation in the second century B.C., and had then been read symbolically in the first century A.D., came once more to be taken literally, but with reference to other historical circumstances. This was an epochal hermeneutic move. When the time periods had been linked to actual events in the second century B.C., they “fit.” When they were used typologically or symbolically they did not need to “fit.” But when they began to be applied to other historical circumstances, they could never match up in the same way.

Herein lay the difficulty. The Kingdom of God would arrive, in Daniel’s hope, at the end of certain brief periods of time. Since the divine rule had not yet come, its future arrival should still lie at the end of such periods of time—literal or figurative—and the faithful should wait accordingly. But interpretation did not wait. Since the starting point for these periods seemed to lie in Daniel’s own time,8 the interpreter in the early centuries of our era had to cope with the passage of centuries of time. And so the days in Daniel’s time periods were taken instead as years, long epochs stretching across the Middle Ages into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This is the “historicist” method of interpreting Daniel and Revelation, and it dominated the church’s reading of these books from the Middle Ages well into the nineteenth century. Grattan Guinness stands at the very end of that tradition. The present article is based on his book The Approaching End of the Age.9 All references are to the first edition (1878) unless specified.

THE YEAR-DAY SYSTEM
At the basis of this system is the substitution of years for days. Since our texts plainly speak of days, Guinness advanced the following arguments to show that such a substitution should be made.10

1. Since Daniel 7-12 obviously deals with symbols—grotesque composite animals which have never existed and which have horns that visibly sprout, grow and even talk—the “days” of Daniel should also be symbolic. And since the animals symbolize something vastly larger than themselves—an empire, for example—the day should symbolize something vastly larger than an actual twenty-four-hour day. What else should it be but a year?11

2. There are two passages in the Old Testament which explicitly make this substitution. In Num 14:34 the Israelites were punished by being kept in the wilderness for forty years, a year for each day of the abortive spy mission. Here a year explicitly corresponds to a day. And in Ezek 4:1-9, the prophet was commanded to perform the symbolic act of lying on his left side for 390 days and on his right for forty days, a day for each year of the sins of the
kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Here a day explicitly corresponds to a year.12

3. It was claimed by some that even Daniel 9 testifies to this symbolic 
equivalence, for it describes the 490-year period as “seventy weeks of years” 
(KJV); seventy weeks would be 490 days. Since, in all views of Daniel, this 490 
years had already elapsed, the book itself could be thought to offer positive 
proof that this is the way its numbers should be understood.13

4. It was also pointed out that if Daniel’s numbers referred to the ordinary 
passage of time, they are given in a peculiar form. Why would not the angelic 
guide speak of “three years and six months,” as the Bible does elsewhere (e.g., 
Luke 4:25, Jas 5:17), instead of “time, times, and half a time”? And why are 
there multiple expressions for the same period of time, such as forty-two 
months, and 1,260 days? The unusual forms of expression point to a non-
literal meaning.

5. A saying of Jesus is said to support the year-day theory. In Luke 13:33 
he spoke of continuing his ministry for “Today, tomorrow and the day 
following,” which could be understood as referring to the three years of his 
adult ministry. In this case, Jesus himself spoke of a day when he actually 
meant a year.

6. Finally, someone might ask, Why didn’t God say plainly what he meant? 
How could anyone in Daniel’s time know that a long period of time was 
intended? Here the historicist interpreter boldly grasped the nettle and 
claimed that God did not intend the ancient readers of Scripture to 
understand this. No, if they had thought the time would be so long, they 
would have grown lax in their hope and life, and would have grown weary of 
waiting for the Kingdom of God to come in. God wished the prophecies not 
to “be understood too early, when they would have interfered with the 
earnestness of continual expectation” (p. 312).

It was only much later, when the events spoken of in Daniel had begun to 
take place, that people realized that God had actually used a symbol and that 
the end would come some twenty-five centuries from Daniel’s time. God “did 
not intend it [the book of Daniel] to be understood for centuries” (p. 82, 
emphasis his). This view was defended as the “doctrine of progressive 
interpretation,” in which later biblical writers understood things better than 
earlier ones did, and later interpreters understood the Bible better than earlier 
interpreters did (at least, with reference to these calculations).14

On the basis of such arguments, the three-and-one-half years was 
understood to mean 1,260 years.15 This would be the length of the antichrist’s 
oppression of God’s people, and at its close, Christ would return and the 
Kingdom of God come in. The other numbers--2,300, 1,290, 1,335--would also 
denote years instead of days. This is why the scheme is called “historicist,” 
since the time covered stretches over many centuries of history, almost all of 
which lay in the interpreter’s past.

WHERE DOES THE COUNT BEGIN?
Historicist interpreters worked first of all with the period of 1,260 years,
and secondly with the 2,300 evenings and mornings, which they took as 2,300 rather than as 1,150 days. With these durations in hand, all you really have to know is when to begin counting.

Unfortunately, although the texts speak clearly of an arrogant oppressor of God's people, they are not specific enough to allow interpreters confidently to identify a specific event as the starting point for the countdown. For the book of Daniel in itself, the oppressing power is clearly Greece. But once Rome had assumed the imperial role in Europe and the Levant, it became the enemy instead. Rome, in some form or other, especially the Holy Roman Empire, remained alive until the Congress of Vienna (1815), and so for most of Christian history, interpreters of Daniel's calculations always had some "Rome" present to serve as the oppressor. Well prior to the Protestant Reformation, the oppressive "Rome" was understood as the political papacy, with the pope playing the role of the antichrist.

But at what point should the count begin? After the seventh century A.D., the 1,260 years was already too short to reach back to the Babylonian exile (587-536 B.C.). The development of classical Rome into the Holy Roman Empire took place slowly and its history affords various important events that might have some claim to be a pivotal transition or starting point. The publication of the Code of Justinian in 533 was sometimes used, but, as the 1,260 years would have run out in 1793, this date was not useful in the nineteenth century. The date of 800, Pope Leo's coronation of Charlemagne, would seem to be logical; one can hardly go further into the Middle Ages than Charlemagne to find the starting point for the oppression which the papacy was regarded as having inflicted. The 1,260 years would end in the year 2060, and for all we know now, someone in the twenty-first century may reintroduce these calculations.

But in the 1870s, the real difficulty was that the interpreters were living on borrowed time. The reason is that historicism correlated its interpretation of Daniel with that of Revelation, and most of the latter book was said to fall within the 1,260-year period. Every detail of it had been identified with successive events in European history from the time of the New Testament down to that of the writer.

For example, Revelation lists three cycles of disasters: the seven seals (6:1-8:5), the seven trumpets (8:6:11:19) and the seven bowls (15:1-16:21). The historicist interpreter held that the seals referred to events which accompanied the breakup of the old Roman Empire and had already occurred during the second, third and fourth centuries A.D. The seven bowls of wrath, latest of the three cycles, must refer to the last events before the return of Christ. Guinness followed E. B. Elliott, the last great historicist commentator on Revelation, who had identified six of the seven bowls with events of and following the French revolution (pp. 371-372). Time was obviously short, and a termis ad quem--a point of ending--in the year 2060 was simply too remote to be correct.

Thus, even with 1,260 years to play with, history may still overtake a school
of interpretation, and this is what happened in the nineteenth century. The French Revolution, standing 1,260 years from Justinian’s Code, had not proved to be a final terminus; the 1844 terminus (see below) passed without event; Elliott played for time by making the events of the French Revolution penultimate to the end; but by the last third of the century, the entire approach was threatened.

GUINNESS’S CALCULATIONS

But, historicists did not give up without a struggle, and that is why Grattan Guinness is interesting. He wrote voluminously on historicism at a time when it was already virtually discredited by having run out of time, and when futurism had long since appeared and asserted itself.20 He is on the transition between those two systems. He is also interesting because he utilized elaborate astronomical and mathematical calculations to buttress his calendaric conclusions. It is his specific calculations which point to 1919 as the end of the age.

My intention is initially to present his scheme favorably, so as to represent the impressiveness and weight which it carried in the circles where these calculations were pursued and encouraged. An analysis and critique will follow.

1,260 Becomes 2,520

Like his predecessors, Guinness also began working with the 1,260-year period (above, pg. 30, no. 1). His first problem was to get more time out of Daniel’s calculations. What was really needed was a point beyond the failed 1793 date, but closer than 2060. He found a clue in the “Seventy Weeks” passage (above pg. 30, no. 5), where the “half a week” of Dan 9:27 seems to be three-and-one-half years (1,260 days, which equals 1,260 years). If 1,260 years is half a week, Guinness reasoned, there must be another 1,260 years somewhere, and he therefore began to work with a period of 2,520 years (pp. 333, 352, 355).

This is an artificial number, nowhere mentioned in the Bible,21 but Guinness finds support for it from the unlikely book of Leviticus. Chapter 26 contains a long list of misfortunes which will befall the Israelites if they are disobedient to God (vs 14-15), nowadays sometimes spoken of as the “covenant curses.” Among these maledictions, God says three times, “I will discipline you sevenfold for your sins” (vs 18, 24, 28). The Hebrew says simply, “I will strike you seven for your sins,” which the KJV rendered, “I will punish you seven times for your sins.”22 Guinness calculates as follows: one “time” means one year; a year is 360 days; by the year-day theory, this means 360 years; seven times 360 is 2,520. Therefore, the “seven times” of punishment means 2,520 years of punishment.

This period would be “the times of the Gentiles,” an expression used by Jesus, “Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). Jerusalem began to be trodden down,
Guinness said, when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it and deported Judaean leaders to Babylon. He dates this event at 602 B.C., and so the 2,520-year period stretches to 1919 (pp. 360-361, 377, 439).

602 B.C. ——— 2,520 years ——— 1919

This has the advantage of returning the starting point for the count to the biblical period, since the Holy Roman Empire never trod Jerusalem down, but it does leave the “papal oppression” stranded. Although Guinness has constructed the 2,520 years out of two 1,260-year periods, he simply ignores the mid-point. The 1,260 years becomes a floating period within the longer “times of the Gentiles,” and he gives several sets of dates to which the 1,260-year oppression could correspond, not as alternates to one another, but all as satisfying the conditions.

The 2,300 Years

With this, Guinness had dealt with the three-and-one-half-year period by doubling it into a “full dispensational week,” and could move on to the other time periods, starting with the 2,300 evenings and mornings. When should it begin?

The number is in Daniel 8, which speaks of the oppressive actions of the “little horn,” including violence to the temple and to its services. Three times we hear that the daily morning and evening sacrifice has been suspended (vs 11, 12, 13), and once of the surrender of the sanctuary (v 13). When Daniel asks how long this oppression will last, the angel replies, “For 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be cleansed” (v 14). Dan 8:14 does not mention a starting point at all, so Guinness links the 2,300 years to the 490 years of Daniel 9, which begin with “the issuance of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem” (9:25). This “word” would be the decree of rebuilding issued by the Persian king Artaxerxes and mentioned in Neh 2:1. Accordingly, the 2,300 years run from 457 B.C. to 1844 (p. 430).

457 B.C. ——— 2,300 years ——— 1844

Since 1844 was already more than thirty years in the past when Guinness wrote, he cannot very well claim that the end of the age occurred then. But he at least has to explain how the sanctuary was cleansed in that year, since this is the specific wording of Dan 8:14.

The word “sanctuary” brings up the fact that in the late nineteenth century, Jerusalem was still part of the Ottoman (i.e., Turkish) empire, and therefore under the control of Muslims. Turkish abridgement of the religious rights of non-Muslims had been a concern of Europe for a long time, and England had made strenuous representations with the “Sublime Porte” to obtain tolerance for them. Guinness states that in 1844 the Ottoman empire acknowledged in writing that it would protect and guarantee these religious rights. That, he
says, represents the beginning of the end for the Turks, and begins to fulfil the prediction of Dan 8:14 for the city of Jerusalem itself.27

*Dealing With Disparity*

There are thus two spans of time, each with its own length and with different termini.

- 602 B.C. ——— 2,520 years ——— 1919
- 457 B.C. ——— 2,300 years ——— 1844

This appears to be awkward, since they really ought to end at the same time, especially since the vision of Daniel 8 is about the end, when the final cleansing of the sanctuary occurs.

But, there is a way of removing this awkwardness. One of Guinness's special interests was that the sun and the moon provide different systems of measuring the passage of time.

The solar year is about 365 1/4 days. There is no lunar year as such (or, rather, we call the lunar year a "month"), but twelve lunations cover about 354 1/3 days, about eleven days less than in solar reckoning. If you are calculating the extent of a long period of time--say, 2,520 years--it would make a difference which system you used, since the "lunar year" is about three percent shorter. The Jewish cultic calendar was tied to the agricultural year and was basically lunar, and so Guinness's interest in lunar measurement has a certain plausibility to it.

What if the 2,520-year period were "lunar" as well as solar?

\[
\begin{align*}
2,520 \text{ lunar years} \times 354 \frac{1}{3} &= 892,920 \text{ days} \\
892,920 \text{ days} \div 365 \frac{1}{4} &= 2,445 \text{ solar years}
\end{align*}
\]

If the times of the Gentiles be calculated from 602 B.C. using this figure, it comes out exactly at 1844, the same date as the end of the 2,300 years.

- 602 B.C. ——— 2,520 "lunar years" ——— 1844

The concurrence of both time periods in ending at 1844 is very striking.

The difference between solar and lunar reckoning of the 2,520-year period (technically called the "epact") is seventy-five years. Guinness then introduces the two measurements of Dan 12:11, 1,290 and 1,335 days (= years). If you assume that these are extensions of 1,260, the additions total seventy-five. He cannot doubt that 12:11 suggests the epact of the 2,520-year period, and so the "solar-lunar measures" of the times of the Gentiles, "as now accurately ascertained by modern science," confirm the Bible (p. 438).

Finally, since part of Guinness's method was to allow for multiple starting and stopping points for Daniel's time periods, he does the same for the 2,300 years.28 Twenty-three hundred "lunar years" are 2,231 solar years. "The second starting point" (p. 437) is 312 B.C., the beginning of the "Seleucid era"
of reckoning time, and the terminus comes out to be 1919. Thus both major
time periods--2,520 and 2,300--can be shown to end at the same two
endpoints, 1844 and 1919.

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With this, Guinness has incorporated all of the time references of Daniel 7-
12 into his scheme, showing that the times of the Gentiles, which began with
Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Jerusalem, would run out in 1919. “It is a
solemn fact,” he says, “that we are now living in the interval between these
two latest termini--in that supplementary seventy-five years which are created
by the inequality of the solar and lunar movements during the lapse of
the whole ‘seven times’” (p. 439). “In about forty years from the present time
(1878) the great week of the times of the Gentiles will have run out…” (p.
556).

Elsewhere, he becomes more cautious: although students of prophecy
“know that they are living in the time of the end” (pp. 564-565, emphasis his),
we must allow for multiple points of terminus. The twin periods of 2,520 and
2,300 years “appear to run out first in 1844 and fully in 1919, but whether our
data are accurate, and what the exact nature of the terminal event may be, it is
impossible to ascertain and foolish to surmise” (p. 565, emphasis his).31
Nevertheless, he compares Christians to travelers on a long train journey: the
time needed for the journey has elapsed, and they have already passed the last
station before their destination (p. 566).

SCIENTIFIC SUPPORT

I have drastically simplified Guinness’s argument, which fills hundreds of
pages. He goes on to buttress his position with an elaborate array of
mathematical and astronomical calculations, showing that the number seven is
divinely imprinted on the world of nature and in the Bible, and that the
numbers 1,260 and 2,300 also have a special divine character when both solar
and lunar reckonings are considered.

The Number Seven

Regarding the former, he believes that the number “7,” with its multiples
and fractions, has been divinely appointed as a basic unit in the duration of
time, both in ordinary human life and in biblical statements of duration. “The
week reigns supreme” (p. 278). Thus, wherever he can find a period of time
divisible by seven, he regards this as proof that the number has special divine
importance. The occurrence of septiform periods of time in human life is
given as evidence for the importance of the number itself (pp. 265-383). “A

septiform periodicity has been, by God Himself, impressed upon nature” (p. 277).

Soli-lunar Cycles

The interplay of solar and lunar measurements of time is more complicated. Because of the fractional character of the actual solar and lunar measurements, the year and the month very rarely come out even. It would have been nice, Guinness remarks, if God had arranged the solar and lunar measurements to coincide with each other. For example, a solar year might have been exactly twelve thirty-day months (p. 388). But because 365 1/4 is not evenly divisible by 29 1/2, a great many lunations must go by before you get one whose end coincides exactly with the end of the solar year.

It was already a concern of the Greeks to determine how much time must elapse before this happens, and the ancient astronomer Meton discovered that in nineteen years the sun and the moon come out nearly even. Such a period of time, in which the solar and lunar time reckonings come once more to agree with each other, is a “soli-lunar cycle,” and Guinness holds that any such elapse of time would be a duration of special significance in the divine order of things.

He cites the researches of an eighteenth-century astronomer, Loys de Cheseaux, which showed that the periods 1,260 and 2,300 years were such “soli-lunar cycles” (pp. 395-403, quoting de Cheseaux at length). Since Daniel, living in neo-Babylonian times, could not well have known what only modern astronomy has discovered, Guinness follows de Cheseaux in concluding that these two durations were divinely revealed to Daniel, and, accordingly, prophetic periods of pivotal significance in the divine plan.

Guinness goes farther still, and tries to show how the biblical time periods in which he is most interested, including their epacts, can be analyzed into septiform numbers. Thus, he calculates the epact of 490 years at “twice seven solar years, and seven months,” while that of 2,300 years is “seventy lunar years, and seven months” (p. 443). “The epacts of the prophetic periods of Scripture form a remarkable septiform series” (p. vi).

The case of 1,260 years is different. Guinness analyzes it as 66 Metonic cycles of 19 years each, with a remainder of 6 years. This is striking to him, because the events covered in the biblical writings by this particular time period (in its various forms) are the persecutions of the arrogant oppressor (see above, pg. 30, and note 7). In Revelation 13, the second beast, which Guinness identifies with that oppressor, is associated with the number “666” (the “mark of the beast”). Guinness finds this number hidden in the 60 plus 6 Metonic cycles and the remainder of 6 years. “God has—in secret cipher—engraven this stigma, this mark of reprobation, on the very brow of the period of the self-exalting blaspheming, saint-persecuting, power” (p. 419).

He brings in these two sets of mathematical demonstrations—septiform numbers and soli-lunar cycles—in order to assert that “the periodicity of nature, and the periodicity of Scripture, are demonstrably two parts of one
whole" (p. 234). His intent is apologetic. The study of science is marked by "a pleasing element of certainty" (p. 234); if he can show that the "Bible times and seasons harmonise with the system by which the entire universe is regulated," the divine inspiration of Scripture may be regarded as proven, to account for which "will tax the ingenuity of infidels" (p. 235).

These calculations cannot really figure in Guinness's historical computations, because the time periods themselves are given in the Bible. But the elaborate system of congruences which he works out using them gives the entire book an aura of scientific accuracy and preciseness. He is not interested in "speculations about the future," and his book "DEALS NOT WITH THEORIES BUT WITH FACTS" (p. x, emphasis his). Unlike others who have calculated the times of the Gentiles and the end of the age using only historical data, Guinness is able to incorporate his projections into a much larger scheme which seems to be embedded into the very structure of the cosmos, from the gestation period of the ovum of the wasp (half a week), to the length of human life (ten septenaries or seventy years), to the coinciding of the sun and moon after the elapse of 2,300 years.

Historicist biblical interpretation was seriously threatened by futurism, but no one had ever before shown that the historicist method depended on scientific observations which linked it with the workings of the solar system. The effect, especially on uncritical hearers and readers, of his elaborate presentations of the divine character of septiform numbers and soli-lunar cycles, was to secure historicism in the very fabric of the cosmos.32

ANALYSIS

When the first edition of The Approaching End of the Age appeared, the terminus of 1919 was forty years in the future. Guinness died in 1910, before finding out that he was wrong, although a revised edition of this book appeared as late as 1918. He was proved wrong by history, but we must also ask the question, Where did he go wrong in his calculations? Everything comes out so neatly. How could such striking agreements be accidental?

The answer is that they are not accidental. They have been arranged that way by Guinness himself.

He works with two basic numbers, 2,520 years and 2,300 years, and there is an oddity in his handling of each which serves as a clue. For the first, he never tells us how he knows the 2,520 years should be counted from 602 B.C. Of course, he says that this is the time of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem and therefore the beginning of the Holy City's treading down by the Gentiles. But how does he know that year was 602 B.C.?

For the second, he holds to the 1844 terminus for the 2,300 years, even though it is awkward to do so because it had already passed without the arrival of the end suggested Daniel 8. Why would he not abandon the 457 B.C. starting point, and settle for his other date, 312 B.C., which by lunar reckoning also comes out to 1919?
The 2,520 Years

To return to the first. The actual date of Jerusalem’s fall was 587 B.C., a date quite clearly fixed by secular sources. Guinness cites no authority for the date 602 B.C. He simply asserts it.

You might think that Guinness did not know what the twentieth century has learned; granted. But he should be expected to know what the nineteenth century had learned, and he does indeed quote authorities for many of his dates.

He refers several times to the gentleman-scholar H. Fynes Clinton, whose elaborate chronographic studies of Greece and Rome were published during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Guinness quotes thirteen dates from Clinton for a series of events from the biblical deluge to Jesus’ birth. The date for Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple is given there as Anno Mundi 3552 (or 586 B.C.).

In a fold-out chart, Guinness gives “The Scripture Chronology of the World,” taken from the four-volume commentary on Revelation by E. B. Elliott. It contains fifty dates, from A.M. 1 to 6006, Guinness’s own year of 1878. Elliott’s date for “the captivity” is A.M. 3522 or 606 B.C.

And this is not all. Guinness actually knows the correct date of 587 B.C. (p. 557 note).

And so he cites four separate dates for the destruction of Jerusalem. One is the correct date of 587 B.C., and another is a well-informed, early-nineteenth-century date of 586 B.C. Why does he not use them? How can he set aside Fynes Clinton, after saying that his dates are “about the nearest possible approach to truth, and...probably a very near approach indeed” (p. 300)? Of course, he needs time, and so an early date is preferable. But why wouldn’t he count from 606, for which he could cite Elliott’s authority?

But, no. The “final fall of the throne of Judah” and the “latest commencement” of the times of the Gentiles is 602 (pp. 360, 411, etc.). It remains his key date, and it is precisely the one which he does not justifiy in any way. Where does this date come from?

The tenacity with which Guinness holds to the 602 date, when by his own tacit admission it has no justification, tells us that it is a date which is in some way necessary to his scheme. It is not that history requires it; his network of calculations requires it in some way. It is a date which cannot be changed, for some reason we have yet to discover.

The 2,300 Years

We turn now to the second time period, 2,300 years, running from 457 B.C. to 1844. Although Dan 8:14 does not give a starting point for this period, the clock could not begin running on it until the temple was rebuilt, since the oppressions associated with the period feature the temple and the cult. This suggests a link with one of the other periods in Daniel, the 490 years, which starts with “the issuance of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem” (Dan 9:25). For Guinness, this is 457 B.C. (see p. 430). The 490 years, then, are
coextensive with the first part of the 2,300 years (p. 427, 430). The slender thematic linkage of the two Daniel passages provides a starting point.

But 1844 was over thirty years in the past, and his claim that Dan 8:14 had been fulfilled at that time is lamentably weak. Not only that, Guinness actually plots another span for the 2,300 years which ends where he wants it to, in 1919. Since Dan 8:14 states no starting point for the count, the thing for him to have done was to justify 312 B.C. as a starting point and abandon the 1844 date altogether.

Besides that, the date had been used before as the date of Christ's return, to the great disappointment of its believers. It was the terminus awaited by the followers of William Miller, some of whose views were taken up by the Seventh Day Adventists. As the nineteenth century moved towards its close, the 1844 date belonged primarily to fringe Adventist groups such as the Millerites and the Russellites (later Jehovah's Witnesses).

The date is--or should have been--an embarrassment to Guinness. Why does he insist on it as a pivotal date in his scheme?

The answer lies in Guinness's linkage of Dan 8:14 to Dan 9:25. He has done this in order to provide some justifiable starting point for the 2,300 years, but to do so he has linked the 490 years with the 2,300 years. This linkage has a fatal entailment, for he cannot now move the 2,300 years without also moving the 490 years.

And the 490 years was not movable.

Here is why. In general, interpreters believed the 490 years, or at least the larger part of it, ran down to the time of Christ. He was "Messiah the Prince" of Dan 9:25, who would be "cut off" at the end of the sixty-nine weeks. It has never been easy to get a calculation which would neatly end at the time of Christ's crucifixion and Guinness does not try to do so. The period extends, he says, to "the days of 'Messiah the Prince'" and had therefore long since been fulfilled. Guinness has taken this interpretation over from many decades, if not centuries, of calendaric study and speculation, and when we get to it, we have gotten to the one set of dates which he must accept and work with.

A different starting point for the 490 years would destroy a fulfillment with Jesus Christ. There was simply no way Guinness could abandon the interpretation that "Messiah the Prince" was Jesus. No one in the orthodox interpretive tradition ever doubted this, and it was simply a given for anyone working on Daniel. But this meant that, as long as he linked the start of the 2,300 years with the start of the 490 years, the 1844 date was also a given for him, and the other biblical data must be made to conform to it.

Counting Backward

The only problem now is to fix the terminus a quo--the beginning point--of the 2,520 years. The Babylonian capture and destruction of Jerusalem is obviously the correct general period for the beginning of the oppression, and, since he has locked himself into 1844 as an end point, the 2,520 years should
Alas! Subtracting 2,520 years from 1844 yields 677 B.C., nearly a century too early. But wait a minute. That is using solar years. What about using the 360-day year? That would be the equivalent of 2,485 years. Oh, dear. Still too early; the terminus a quo would have to be 641 B.C. Well, there is one more possibility. Suppose we use true lunar reckoning in which one year is twelve lunations or 354.367 years? Counting 2,520 such “lunar years” equals 2,445 solar years...which reaches back to 602 B.C. Bingo!

In my view, this is how Guinness arrived at the date 602 B.C. for the beginning of his times of the Gentiles. He gives no justification for it, for he has reached it artificially, from within an existing scheme of calculations, and not from history. He holds on to it, even when he is aware of other dates for Nebuchadnezzar, for he cannot move from it without losing his link to 1844 and to the fulfillment of the 490 years in the coming of Christ.

From this point, it was easy for him to reach the terminus of 1919, by counting 2,520 solar years forward from the starting point of 602 B.C. (Note that if he had used 360-day years instead, his terminus would have been 1883, only five years beyond the publication of his book. I do not know whether he ever considered this, but it would have been easy to consider that date too close for comfort.)

There was only one more step necessary: to find in the Bible the seventy-five year difference between the solar and lunar reckonings of the 2,520 years. Here the still-mysterious numbers of Dan 12:11 came to his rescue. Assuming that they are variants of some sort on the number 1,260, there are indeed an extra seventy-five days (years for Guinness) between them. This discovery must have been very striking to him; it would be more impressive to us if he had used both numbers; but 1,290 does not figure, since the seventy-five days can be gained from 1,335 alone. At one point he says he does not know whether the seventy-five years should be added to 1844 or 1919 (p. 485). But if 1883 was too close for him, 1919 plus seventy-five, or 1994, might have seemed too distant. Besides, it would allow a cushion of seventy-five years in case the end did not arrive in 1919.

I assume that he reached the 312 B.C. starting point in the same way, by playing with the 2,300 years until he found a suitable terminus a quo. Subtracting 1919 from 2,231 solar years (which equals 2,300 “lunar years”) brought him to 312 B.C., which, by coincidence, was the beginning of the Seleucid era of reckoning. Antiochus IV was one of the Seleucid rulers, lending a spurious plausibility to this starting point, which cannot otherwise be defended.

SLIPPAGES IN METHOD

Was Guinness dishonest? One would hate to say so, for we know how strongly our preliminary conclusions influence our later deliberations. And he would probably say that the date 1844 was a fixed terminus, and therefore he was justified in counting backwards to reach a starting point. But his legerdemain with figures certainly strikes us as slippery, and one thinks that at
some point, he must have known he was fudging.

There are several features of Guinness’s working method which make his final outcome possible, and which probably served as a cushion against the cognitive dissonance which we think his methods would surely have caused.

First, he allows for multiple termini for the same time period. He says that great events never happen in isolation, but always have precursors. For example, he presents the 1,260-year papal oppression as three different possible epochs (p. 423), and the 2,520 years as four different epochs (pp. 361, 376–377). And so he could allow several dates which correspond to various stages in the beginning and ending of the oppression which he calls the times of the Gentiles. This explains his repeated statement that the year 602 B.C. is the “latest commencement” of the times of the Gentiles.

Second, he finds a safeguard in being able to disregard minor differences. The justification for this is:

1. with such long periods, minor differences are really negligible;
2. the ancients may not have observed the solar and lunar movements accurately; \(^{40}\) and
3. God did not wish to be so precise with people that they would know exactly when the end would come, for then they would become cavalier and would leave off their spiritual duties. \(^{41}\)

Third, he has years of three different lengths available to him: the solar year of 365 1/4 days, the “lunar year” of 354 1/3 days, and the 360-day year which he variously calls the “calendar” year or the “Sabbatical” year.

Fourth, Guinness is both careless and highly selective. Careless, in that he frequently quotes dates differently (usually off by a year), and sometimes seems simply to have done his calculations wrongly. \(^{42}\)

The selectivity applies more to his pseudo-scientific work. He claims that the number seven and its multiples are deeply imbedded in biblical chronology; but he ignores important biblical numbers which cannot be analyzed this way, such as the number twelve and forty.

And he says that the figures of 1,260 and 2,300 years are “soli-lunar cycles” of very great accuracy. But, in fact, there are periods of time which are more accurate in the coincidence of sun and moon. One of them is 315 years, with a discrepancy of not quite three hours. \(^{43}\) Another is 1,040 years, with the very small discrepancy of just over an hour. Guinness refers to both of these numbers, but makes no use of them at all, presumably because they are not mentioned in the Bible. But, one might argue, if God were going to reveal “soli-lunar cycles” to Daniel, why not reveal those which had the greatest accuracy?

Now, anyone with three different years to choose from, plus the right to find multiple starting and stopping points, plus the liberty to disregard small discrepancies, plus the selectivity to which all humans are subject, can certainly make any time period come out anywhere he wants it to.
REFLECTIONS

I have had several reasons for writing this paper.

First, I was drawn into study of Guinness's writings because I found twentieth-century apocalyptic writers quoting him. For example, in 1926, Oswald J. Smith wrote that Guinness discovered that 1917 [sic] was a "terminal year in the history of the Jews," and sure enough, in 1917 the Balfour Declaration was issued, through which the Jews were enabled to think of a homeland in Palestine. I found it ironic that Smith and other futurists should quote an arch-foe of futurism, and wondered just what Guinness had said and how he arrived at his conclusions.

Second, Guinness belongs to the social and intellectual history of a particular time and place. Even his eccentric use of septiform numbers and soli-lunar cycles does not belong entirely to the category of curiosa, but is at home in a preoccupation with chronology and statistics characteristic of Victorian England. And the transition from historicism to futurism is a fascinating chapter in the popular interpretation of biblical apocalyptic. It has yet to be fully documented, but Guinness's last hurrah for historicism instantiates the renewed vigor with which any system defends itself against cognitive dissonance. We see with our own eyes what happens when a whole system of prediction is overtaken by history.

Third, a major factor, I admit, was my conviction that everyone, historicist or futurist, who claims to determine specific modern dates from the figures of Daniel can do so only by means of the kind of fudging with the evidence which we see in Guinness. Careful scrutiny of a writer's work will invariably turn up misrepresentation or mishandling of the evidence.

For example, Oswald Smith fundamentally misrepresents Guinness. To start with, Smith has the year wrong; for another thing, Guinness did not say that 1919 was a terminal year in Jewish history, but that it was the probable end of the age; and then his entire system of understanding biblical apocalyptic is at odds with Smith's. I have elsewhere given a brief critique of the attempt to show that Daniel's 69th week ends on the very day of Jesus' triumphal entry. Today's most widely read apocalyptic popularist, Hal Lindsey, has done the same thing by loosening the return of Christ from the absolute countdown point of 1948 of his early writings, and substituting a clutch of multiple starting points (the taking of old Jerusalem in 1967 and the entry of Greece into the European Economic Community in 1981).

When we have made every allowance for the very human impulse to protect our own views, with which we all must struggle, we must still call this what it is.

It is dishonest.

The interests of the system have come to override exegetical integrity. This is not Bible study, it is indoctrination into a system which can be squared with Scripture only by misrepresentation and legerdemain. It is wrongly dividing the Word of Truth, and the Church will allow it to her own very great peril.

In today's world of popular apocalyptic interpretation, the futurist model is
the only one in use. People who dissent from it are said not really to believe the Bible. I think it is helpful for us to see that dispensationalist futurism is only the latest in a series of schemes for interpreting Daniel and Revelation, and has not yet had even the long life which historicism had.

Here the history of interpreting Daniel gives us perspective. Today’s futurism is not a divine system, but one of many human approaches to this material. My own view is that no calendaric approach to Daniel and Revelation is a suitable one, but the basic point is that today’s Church has the right to choose a method which is appropriate to the biblical materials, so that we may listen afresh to what the Spirit of God will say through Scripture.

* * *

A Prayer for Those who Interpret Scripture

O God, the creator of morning and evening, of cycling seasons and echoed aeons, of time, of eternity; who formed the world with words, who made us speaking beings, who appeared in time as Word made flesh:

Grant us the gift of the Advocate, to chasten us with divine sharpness, to cleanse all that blinds us to the truth of Scripture, the cynicism that disregards, the reluctance to hear, the fear of being wrong, the determination to be right, the eagerness to impress and to recreate us open, alert, and intent;

That we may struggle with words and meanings, wrestle until they yield their sense, frame the truth vivid and memorable, and speak as the Spirit has spoken;

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.
Notes


2. This recognition probably came about because of his influence on Rev. A. J. Gordon, long-time minister of the Clarendon Street Baptist Church in Boston. Gordon, who was on the board of Brown at the time, had adopted many of Guinness's views on eschatology, and quotes him frequently in articles written for the paper which he edited, The Watchword. (I owe this information to Rev. Scott Gibson, whose researches on Gordon have included compiling an index to The Watchword.) Gordon was doubtless close to Brown's president, Rev. Ezekiel Gilman Robinson, former president of Rochester Theological Seminary and of the American Baptist Missionary Union, who presided at his last commencement in 1889. (I thank Martha L. Mitchell, Brown University archivist, for this information.)


4. Earlier interpreters usually held this to mean 2,300 days.

5. An alternative is that the three-and-one-half year figure was symbolic, being half of seven, a number which has always signified completeness. In this case, the number would symbolize a finite period of time: the persecution will have a limited duration.


7. Time, times and half a time (12:14); as forty-two months (11:2, 13:5); and as 1,260 days (11:3, 12:6). I hold that Revelation, like Daniel, focuses more on the persecution than on an absolute end to all things, sharing Daniel's ambiguity about the "end."

8. Modern dispensationalism, which takes the time periods literally, boldly asserts that the three-and-one-half-year period does not begin until just before Christ's return; it belongs in its entirety to the future.


10. See the section in End titled "Prophetic Chronology," especially pp. 309-329. Guinness acknowledges dependence on Thomas Birks's First Elements of Sacred
Prophecy (London: W. E. Painter, 1943), but some such system of equivalence goes back at least to the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b), attributed to Rabbi Qattina (ca. 300), and was explicitly used by Saadia Gaon (882-946) in The Book of Beliefs and Opinions (Samuel Rosenblatt, trans., Yale Judaica Series I [New Haven, 1948], p. 296-298); Rabbi Aqiba (ca. 40-134) was later said to have held such an opinion, see William G. Braude, The Midrash on Psalms, (Yale Judaica Series 13 [New Haven, 1959], p. 97-98). I thank Rev. Michael Farris for the rabbinic information, drawn from his thesis on Daniel 9:24-27 (University of Toronto, in progress).

It could, of course, be a century, or even a decade. But such an equivalence would yield numbers so large that the end would be impossibly remote. Interpreters seem to prefer an end near enough to motivate intense religious devotion. This is probably also the reason that no one ever sought to apply the year-day principle to the 490-year period of Daniel 9; it is the only time period in Daniel to be spared. For to do so would yield 178,850 years (490 x 365). The selective and subjective character of calendrical interpretation is already apparent.

By rights, the Ezekiel passage should have led interpreters to reduce the 490-year period back to 490 days (seventy weeks).

This is not a strong argument, as the Hebrew reads literally “seventy heptads of years,” i.e., seven years for each year. The word “week” enters English translations because the most frequent heptad in the Bible is of days, but there is nothing in the word itself which implies “seven days.”

The first two major parts of End are devoted to “Progressive Revelation” and “Progressive Interpretation,” respectively, comprising a total of 139 pages. The plea that God did not intend earlier generations fully to understand the biblical prophecies was commonplace in nineteenth-century prophetic interpretation.

The actual number 1,260 does not occur in Daniel, but Revelation refers to the three-and-one-half-year time period as 1,260 days, and this numeral was always transported back into the interpretation of Daniel. Guiness did so on the grounds that “earlier and more elementary predictions” must be understood in light of Revelation, much as the “latest and fullest edition” of a book throws light on “an earlier and less explicit one” (p. 54).

This is made clear by the text itself; see Walters, “The End (of What?),” p. 33-34.

This is already attested in Revelation’s reuse of the animal symbolism of Daniel 7—the four animals are rolled together into one (chap 13)—and in the Eagle Vision of the Apocalypse of Ezra 12.

Thus the French Revolution became involved. Sometimes Napoleon was the antichrist, but in other writers he was celebrated as the one who broke the political power of the Roman Catholic Church in France.

First bowl (Rev 16:1), foul sores = social and moral evil in the wake of the French Revolution.
Second bowl (v 3), sea becomes blood = naval wars of 1793-1815.
Third bowl (vs 4-7), rivers become blood = wars on the Danube, Rhine and Po, 1792-1805.
Fourth bowl (vs 8-9), scorching heat = Napoleonic wars of 1809-1812.
Fifth bowl (vs 10-11), beast’s kingdom into darkness = waning of papal political power.
Sixth bowl (vs 12-16), drying up of Euphrates = decline of the Ottoman Empire, 1820s and 1830s.


21. “This is inferred from Scripture rather than distinctly stated in it; but the inference is so well grounded as to be of almost equal weight with a distinct declaration” (p. 352, emphasis his).

22. The word “times” is not in the Hebrew, although ellipsis of pe’amim (“times”) may be assumed. But this word does not mean “time periods,” but “occurrences,” and is not the same as the words used in Dan 7:25 (Aramaic, ’iddan) and 12:7 (Hebrew, mō‘ēd). In giving the Leviticus passage a chronological sense, Guinness misunderstands it at a basic level.

23. A difficulty which Guinness’s vigorous anti-Catholicism never allowed him to recognize at all. The villain was, of course, Islam. Hence, the Crusades, to rescue Jerusalem from the infidel.

24. This is largely an arbitrary choice, to which we return below, p. 13.

25. Followers of William Miller found themselves in the same situation, having used the same calculations to predict Christ’s return in 1844. Their solution has been to posit a heavenly sanctuary, also mentioned in Rev 11:19, to which Christ came in 1844 and which he is now in the process of cleansing. See Desmond Ford, Daniel (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), p. 189.

26. Pp. 430-436. The Turkish Sultan Abdul Mejid had promulgated sweeping reforms, including religious tolerance for non-Muslims, in November 1839. This is the obvious candidate for a crucial religious event in the Levant, but it is too early to fit Guinness’s calculations. Guinness has in mind, as a long footnote shows, a letter of March 21, 1844, from the Sultan to Sir Stratford Canning agreeing to give up the death penalty for Muslims who apostatize to Christianity. (His date is correct; see E. C. Blech in Cambridge Modern History, vol. 11 [1909], p. 275.) This was a significant move, but does not really qualify for Guinness’s description; the “decree granting religious toleration” had been made five years earlier.
27. Of course, Guinness wrote before World War I, when the Ottoman empire came to
an end. But he believed that its decline, which had long been noted in Europe, was
predicted in the book of Revelation. His anti-Muslim bias was probably typical of his
own time and place, and in popular apocalyptic writings, Islam had long shared the
stage with the pope as the diabolical oppressor.

28. “As with all the other periods we have considered, this 2,300 years seems to have a
double commencement and conclusion” (p. 430).

29. Guinness erred in his calculation here (see note 36), and the correct terminus
should be 1920. In later editions he gives it as “1919-20,” tacitly acknowledging his
error but still holding on to 1919 (e.g., End, fifth ed., p. 440).

30. On the 490 years, see below p. 13.

31. Already in 1880, Guinness had changed these dates to “1844-48” and “1919-23,”
and had replaced the clause “whether our data are accurate” with the words, “whether
these are the final dates.” This is in the “Fifth Edition,” but I do not have access to
editions between the first and the fifth.

32. In the revision of End which appeared in 1918 (see note 9), virtually all of
Guinness’s scientific material was omitted.

33. Guinness gives the dates only in their Anno Mundi form, which prevents the reader
from knowing their equivalent in the Julian calendar (see p. 300).

34. This chart faces p. 229, but the dates are given only in their A.M. form (see
preceding note). The 606 B.C. date also appears on the chart facing p. 380.

35. See note 26.

36. They had first fixed 1843 as the date, and expected Christ’s return then; but, when
He didn’t come, they reexamined their calculations and discovered that they had made
an error of one year, and that the 2,300 years actually ended in 1844. The error is
noteworthy in itself; since there are two years “1,” when you subtract B.C.-year numbers
from a total number of years, you must add in an extra year. (You collect one when
you pass “Go.”)

37. Contemporary dispensationalists, using a starting point in 444 B.C. instead of 457,
end the 69th week on the very day of Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, see
Harold W. Hoechner, “Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, VI: Daniel’s
a brief critique, see Walters, “The End (Of What?),” p. 45.

38. Including the conversion of the Gentiles and the destruction of the Temple, p. 287;
it is “the period of the Advent, the atoning death, and the world redeeming work of
the Son of God,” p. 415.

39. This explains his mistake of one year, see note 29 above.
40. Although, surely, this has nothing to do with the numbers revealed in Scripture!

41. I find the same extraordinary latitude in the Schofield Bible, where the annotator says, “Prophetic time is invariably so near as to give full warning, so indeterminate as to give no satisfaction to mere curiosity” (p. 915, note 2).

42. For example, the date is 553 on p. 425, 552 on p. 400; 677 on p. 430, 676 on p. 360; 606 on p. 411, 605 on p. 315. I have tried to verify many of his calculations involving solar years, lunar years, and the epacts between them, some successfully, some without success.

43. Guinness’s primary astronomical source, de Cheseaux, discovered this, and then realized that the biblical 1,260 was four times 360. But the discrepancy is four times as large, too.


45. I owe this observation to my colleague in the Toronto School of Theology, Prof. Thomas McIntire, as I do also references to Steven J. Gould, Time’s Arrow; Time’s Cycle (Harvard: 1987) and to David Landes, Revolution in Time (Harvard: 1983).

46. See note 37.