

# The Grand Design of God: Edwards' Biblical Understanding of the Shape of World History

DOUGLAS A. SWEENEY

Nowhere is the difference between Edwards' metaphysical and spiritual view of the world and later secular perspectives more apparent—even striking—than in his biblical understanding of the shape of world history.<sup>1)</sup> Only a century after his death, many leading scholars came to think the world was much older than the Bible seemed to say, that the races had evolved by means of natural adaptation from diverse, early life forms, and that non-spiritual forces (natural, social, and/or cultural) were the most important drivers of historical development. In the early modern West, though, especially in Edwards' world, most scholars still contended that the Bible was the most important book of world history. They trusted that the earth was several thousand years old, that all humans had descended from the same historic pair—Adam and Eve, the crown of creation, made in the image and likeness of God to superintend the rest of the world—and that supernatural powers (such as God and those He deputized to help Him do His will) proved the most important shapers of historical events. Pace what Perry Miller said of Edwards' modern disposition, he was certainly no exception.<sup>2)</sup> When it came to the nature of history he was even more

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1) This article has been adapted from Chapter 7 of *Edwards the Exegete: Biblical Interpretation and Anglo-Protestant Culture on the Edge of the Enlightenment*, 137-59, 2016, reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press ([www.global.oup.com](http://www.global.oup.com)).

2) Miller tended to speak of Edwards as a modern prodigy stuck in a pre-modern cage. As he wrote in *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1949), 183, "it would have taken him about an hour's reading in William James, and two hours in Freud, to catch up completely" with the latest in psychology (for instance).

spiritual, supernatural—at times apocalyptic—than his peers. Neither natural, nor human, nor any kind of history was intelligible to him without recourse to God. As he said at the end of his life, “God not only created all things, and gave them being at first, but continually preserves them, and upholds them in being.” And this supernatural sustenance “is perfectly equivalent to a continued creation, or to his creating those things out of nothing at each moment of their existence.” If God ceased this work, the wheels of history would halt. The universe would disappear. Not only the past but the future rested firmly in His hands.<sup>3)</sup>

Edwards stood in a long line of leading Christian intellectuals—from Eusebius to Augustine, Bede to Foxe, Mather to Millar—who conceived of change through time first and foremost in relation to the gradual unfolding of the Lord’s eternal plan for the redemption of the world.<sup>4)</sup> Edwards knew these writers well. They contributed to his thinking from at least his teenage years.<sup>5)</sup> But he would not have had to turn to them for such a view of history. Most Christians in his day took its outlines for granted. They discerned them in the Bible, which depicted God as the source and sovereign Lord of all that is. Whereas many pagan cultures favored cyclical views of history, full of fate and repetition, lacking transcendental purpose, Jews and Christians, in particular, thought that history was progressive, full of

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3) Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (hereafter *WJE*), (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 3:400-01.

4) See C. A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of God: The Literary Form of the Christian View of History*, Ideas and Forms in English Literature (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

5) “St. Austins Conversion,” “Eusebius ecclesiastical hist,” an “Abstract of the Book of Martyrs,” “Dr. Mathers Magnalia,” and “Millars History of the Propagation of Xtianity” are listed in Edwards’ “Catalogue,” in Edwards, *Catalogues of Books*, ed. Peter J. Thuesen, *WJE* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 26:117-318. Yale’s Dummer Collection held an English edition of Eusebius (which included the extensions of Socrates of Constantinople and Evagrius Scholasticus of Antioch), *The Auncient Ecclesiastical Histories of the First Six Hundred Yeares after Christ*, trans. Meredith Hanmer (London: Richard Field, 1619); as well as a ten-volume (in seven) version of Erasmus’s edition of the works of St. Augustine, *S. Augustini Opera Omnia* (Basiliae: Froben, 1569), which included *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*).

meaning and direction that was indicated in Scripture. Men like Edwards taught that history had devolved from the inner-Trinitarian counsel of God. It began with the fall of the angels, then the creation and fall of humans, after which it took its shape from God's design to rehabilitate a remnant of the lost. It passed through Noah and his sons, who survived the great flood, then continued through their offspring, who overspread the earth and founded all the ancient nations. It centered on the Israelites, elected by the Lord to shine a light upon the world. Then it culminated in Jesus, the Israelite Messiah who redeemed the world from sin. It would end, Edwards claimed, with the Savior's second coming and His wedding to the church, with whom He pledged to live forever in a lustrous New Jerusalem.<sup>6)</sup>

He presented this scheme most famously and fully in his lengthy sermon series on the history of redemption, which he intended to expand into a published *magnum opus* in historical dogmatics—a theology, he claimed, “in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history, considering the affair of Christian theology, as the whole of it, in each part, stands in reference to the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ.”<sup>7)</sup> He employed it elsewhere too, though, and surely understood that its most prominent components had been tested long before. Other early modern Calvinists had structured their theologies according to the progress of redemption in the Bible (if not also in the pre- and post-biblical events sketched on Edwards' broader canvas). This method had gained traction among conservative disciples of Johannes Cocceius during the seventeenth century, who were looking for a way to ground their work more securely in the storyline of Scripture than they thought the more topical scholastic writers did.<sup>8)</sup> Some

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- 6) This sort of realistic reading of the narratives of Scripture was featured well in Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), which provided a simplistic yet profound explanation of the waning of such reading with the waxing of historicism in modern biblical studies.
  - 7) Edwards, Letter to the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, October 19, 1757, in *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn, WJE (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 16:727-28.
  - 8) See especially Herman Witsius, whom Edwards read and cited. For Edwards'

scholars have suggested that the biblical view of history that supported their endeavors waned in eighteenth-century Europe, hinting that Edwards and his ilk waged a rearguard action.<sup>9</sup> But most have come to recognize that biblical assumptions about the ends and means of history pervaded Edwards' early modern Anglo-American world.<sup>10</sup>

Edwards himself had such a high view of Scripture's credibility and comprehensive scope on the plane of "big history" that he used it as a map to chart the history of the universe. It began in heaven above, then descended through the cosmos to the very pit of hell before orienting itself in relation to the earth and its history of redemption.

This cartography, like that of many doctors of the church,<sup>11</sup> placed the plight of fallen humans in celestial perspective. It demonstrated, first, that the human race was young, at least compared to many other things that God had created. Second, and relatedly, it showed that human beings have not always stood on the same rung of the ladder of universe. Long before

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interest in Witsius, see Edwards, *Catalogues of Books*, 26:227, 291-92, 307, 312-13, 316-17, 472. For an English-language survey of the life and thought of Witsius, see Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 331-52 (quotation from 335). On Cocceius and his legacy, see especially Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669)* (Leiden: Brill 2001).

- 9) See, for example, Peter Harrison, *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 99; and Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 188.
- 10) For more on these assumptions and their prevalence in Europe on the eve of Edwards' work, see Patrides, *The Grand Design of God*, who devotes a small chapter to Edwards' understanding of history (119-23); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19-78; and William Poole, *The World Makers: Scientists of the Restoration and the Search for the Origins of the Earth, The Past in the Present* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010).
- 11) Most influentially in Edwards' world, Augustine, *City of God*, 11-12; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, qq. 50-64; John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Geneva: Oliua Roberti Stephani, 1559), 1.14.3-19; and Francis Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae . . .*, 3 vols. (Geneva: Samuel de Tournes, 1679-85), 4.8, 7.1-2, all of whose mapping Edwards followed only tacitly.

the Spirit breathed life in Adam's lungs, another being, known as Lucifer, "was the . . . crown of the whole creation." He "was the brightest part of the heaven of heavens," chief among the angels. He was "the firstborn of every creature," God's special favorite. He had only to obey to remain at God's right hand.

But when it was revealed to him, that as high and as glorious as he was, that he must be a ministering spirit to the race of mankind that he had seen newly created, that appeared so feeble, mean and despicable, so vastly inferior not only to him, the prince of the angels and head of the universe, but also to the inferior angels, and that he must be subject to one of that race that should hereafter be born, he could not bear it. This occasioned his fall, and now he with the other angels he drew away with him are fallen. Elect men are translated to supply their places, and are exalted vastly higher in heaven than they.

The human nature of Christ would later take the place of Lucifer—now called Satan, which means "adversary" in Hebrew—as the "firstborn" of creation, the "head and prince" of heaven. Joined personally to the Son of God, Jesus lifted the late, human members of creation to a far higher rank than the angels could attain.

Satan aspired to be like the Most high, but God exalted one of mankind, the race that he envied, and from envy to whom he rebelled against God, to be indeed like the Most High, to a personal union with the eternal Son of God, and exalted him to proper divine honor and dignity, set him at his own right hand, on his own throne, and committed to him proper divine power and authority, constituting him the supreme, absolute and universal Lord of the universe, and judge of every creature, and darling of the whole creation.

Without the fall of Satan's cohort, the logic of creation and redemption would have differed. The angels, not humans, would have ruled over

creation. Lucifer, not Christ, would have shone throughout the heavens as “the bright and morning star” (Isaiah 14:12; Revelation 22:16).<sup>12)</sup>

But not only did his angels fall, Satan lied to Adam and Eve, tempting them to fall and thus triggering the history of redemption. Originally, humans were created in the image and likeness of God. Even their bodies beamed with beauty now difficult to conceive. “’Tis no improbable conjecture,” Edwards ventured in a sermon based on Genesis 3:11 (“Who told thee that thou wast naked?”), “that the bodies of our first Parents while in their state of Innocency appeared with such a beauty [and] had such a luster [and] Glory from head to foot that far more than supplied the want of Garments.” This corporeal investiture, moreover, corresponded to the beauty of their holiness and love. “When G[od] Created adam he Endowed him with an ability to do that which was Good[,] yea an ability Perfectly to obey God’s Commands.” In the language of the Reformed-Augustinian tradition, he possessed “original Right[eousness].” He “had the Sp[irit] of G[od] . . . in him.” Though clearly not “impeccable” before his fall from grace, he received enough assistance “as was sufficient with proper care [and] watchfulness and a due improvem[en]t forever to prevent his sinning.” He “Enjoyed a blessed Communion with God,” who “spoke to him” and “conversed with him.” If Adam had maintained this relationship with God, he and his heirs would have won a confirmation of their status. “After a due time[,] if man had stood he was to be confirmed [and] men would have [been] put beyond all Possibility of falling.” No one knows just how long his probation would have lasted. It “was to be as Long as divine wisd[om] should determine,” Edwards quipped. But if Adam had endured, he would have “Eaten of the Tree of Life as a seal of his Reward.” Adam, Eve, and their descendants would have earned “Eternal life.”<sup>13)</sup>

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12) Edwards, “Miscellanies” No. 936, in *The “Miscellanies” 833-1152*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw, *WJE* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 20:191-92.

13) Edwards, sermon on Genesis 1:27 (August 1751), Box 13, F. 934, L. 2r., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Genesis 3:11 (February 1739), Box 1, F. 2, L. 1r., L. 2v., L. 20r., Beinecke; and Edwards, sermon on Genesis 3:24 (n.d.), Box 1, F. 3, L. 7v., L. 2r., Beinecke.

Adam sinned, however, violating his probation and disfiguring the race. He “had a mind to be like God.” And this arrogance resulted in “the most sorrowful [and] melancholy Chap[ter]” in the Bible (Genesis 3). After Adam disobeyed God by doing Satan’s bidding and partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God withdrew His Holy Spirit. This left Adam and Eve “destitute” of “Original Righteousness” and “moral Excellency of mind,” in effect leaving the primal pair “under the dominion of sin.” They retained their rational faculties, the “natural image” of God, but “lost the holy Im[age] of G[od],” that is, the “moral image” of God “wherein man’s Beauty [and] Excellency chiefly consisted.” Moreover, inasmuch as Adam functioned as the father of the race—in whom the rest dwelled seminally, or ontologically—he took the rest down with him. Now all of us are “born without the Image of God’s Holiness.” The Lord does not blame the race for all that Adam did. He alone ate forbidden fruit and “murder[ed] . . . his Posterity.” But all stand complicit in the race’s fall from grace. Human nature fell in Eden, Edwards noted on his map, using texts such as Genesis 3, Romans 5, and Ephesians 2. Humans learned the hard way that, whether or not they liked it, they were one another’s keepers.<sup>14)</sup>

From that day forward, all humans entered the world without the Spirit in their souls, lacking Adam’s original righteousness, guilty of the fall, plagued with scarcity and sin. They dispersed across the earth and formed separate, hostile nations. “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth . . . And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart” (Genesis 6:5-6). God decided to destroy most of the world with a flood, saving Noah and his three sons—Ham, Shem, and Japheth—who alone remained to father all the nations of the world (with the help of their wives, of course). With a firm push at Babel, Ham’s people moved to Africa, the Semites spread through Asia, and the Japhethites journeyed into what became Europe. From a human point of

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14) Edwards, sermon on Genesis 3:24 (n.d.), Box 1, F. 3, L. 1r., L. 5v., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Genesis 1:27 (August 1751), Box 13, F. 934, L. 2r.-v., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Genesis 3:11 (February 1739), Box 1, F. 2, L. 6r., Beinecke; and Edwards, *Original Sin*, WJE, 3:380-412.

view, things appeared pretty grim. But long ago, in Genesis 3, God had sent a ray of hope: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman,” He warned Satan, “and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (v. 15). Then gradually, throughout the rest of Old Testament history, God clarified that He had made a new way of salvation, the covenant of grace, which replaced the now impossible arrangement made with Adam (the covenant of works, which Adam failed to maintain). A Messiah would be sent. Those who trusted in this promise would be rescued from their sin, reconciled with God and neighbor. The “Cov[enant] of Grace,” as Edwards put this in a sermon on Hebrews 9:15-16 (“[Christ] is the mediator of the new testament,” etc.), “is that Covenant which G[od] has Revealed to man since he failed of life by the Covenant of Works, Promising Justification [and] Eternal life to all that believe in” Christ. God “Revealed” it “unto Adam” shortly after he rebelled, when “G[od] Promised that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head.” It was not based on works, like the first covenant was, but included one “Condition,” which is “faith in Jesus [Christ.]” And though it would not be ratified till Christ died for sin, taking the place of fallen sinners, God applied it retroactively to all who believed. “God was so satisfied in this attonem[en]t for sin,” Edwards explained, “that on the account of it he Justified [and] saved sinners many ages before it was offered. [Christ] had Covenanted with the F[ather]” (in a “covenant of redemption” between the persons of the Trinity) and “in that Cov[enant] had agreed [and] promised to offer this sacrifice.” His pledge “was so pleasing” to the Father, Edwards claimed, that God “was willing on the account of it to save [and] Justify sinners many ages before hand[,] as he did from the beginning,” nearly “4000 years before this sacrifice was offered.”<sup>15)</sup>

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15) Edwards, sermon on Hebrews 9:15-16 (June 4, 1740; January 1753), Box 11, F. 824, L. 1v., L. 3r., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on 2 Samuel 23:5 (Summer-Fall 1729), Box 1, F. 77, L. 3r.-4r., Beinecke; and Edwards, sermon on Hebrews 9:13-14 (November 1738), Box 11, F. 823, L. 15r., Beinecke. A similar exposition of the covenant of grace (and the federal theology) may be found in Edwards’ sermon on Hebrews 12:22-24 (1740), Box 11, F. 837, L. 6r.-v. and *passim*, Beinecke.

The sacrifice of Christ was enabled, Edwards taught, by the Lord's call of Abraham (who stood in the line of Shem) to beget a great nation set apart from the world as a beacon of divine light and bastion of holiness from which the Savior would emerge—the nation of the Jews. After the flood, things continued as they had since the fall. The race reverted to its habits of “corruption” and “idolatry.” But God had promised Noah not to flood the earth again (Genesis 9:8-17). So He did a “new thing,” sanctifying one tribe in which to manifest His presence. God's people had not been set apart before in this way. They “were wont to dwell with [others] without any bar or fence.”

The effect before the flood . . . was that the sons of the church joined in marriage with others, and thereby almost all soon became infected and the church was almost brought to nothing. The method that God took then to save the church was to drown the wicked world and save the church in the ark. And now the world before Abraham was called was become corrupt again, but now God took another method. He did not destroy the wicked world and save Abraham and his wife and Lot in an ark, but he calls these persons to go and live separate from the rest of the world.

Later Old Testament history focused closely on the Jews, who reflected gospel light to one degree or another during the centuries to come. They began “small and weak,” but “gradually grew greater and more and more flourishing till Solomon's time,” the apex of their glory. Then, tragically, given their assignment as torchbearers on the course of world history, their light began to fade. They “were gradually diminished and dwindled, first by the nation's dividing into two kingdoms, and then by the captivity of the ten tribes, and then the captivity of the kingdom of Judah, and then after that by various calamities they suffered after the captivity, under the Persian, Grecian, and Roman monarchies, until at last the scepter departed from Judah, and they were put under a Roman governor.” By the end of the Old Testament, they struggled to survive. The light of God grew dim

before the dawn.<sup>16)</sup>

Even as Rome ruled the Jews, however, Christ came to earth, flooding the universe with light. The call of Abraham was fulfilled. The root of Jesse sprouted a branch that soon swayed the whole world (Isaiah 11; Romans 15). Indeed, the incarnation of God in the person of the Messiah proved to be the great climax of the history of redemption. By Edwards' estimation, Christ arrived four millennia after Adam's fall from grace, another two before the dawning of the golden age to come, and a third before He comes again to judge and rule the world, putting an end to mundane history. (Like so many Christians before him, Edwards reckoned that the world would last for 7,000 years.) Jesus' time on earth was short, "between thirty and forty years." But the season from His birth through his victory over death became "the most remarkable article of time that ever was." More was done in that period to redeem the world from sin, in fact, than ever before or since. Edwards told his congregation,

Though there were many things done in the affair of redemption from the fall of man to this time, millions of sacrifices had been offered, yet there was nothing done to purchase redemption . . . . But as soon as Christ was incarnate, then the purchase began immediately without any delay. And the whole time of Christ's humiliation, from the morning that Christ began to be incarnate till the morning that he rose from the dead, was taken up in this purchase. And then the purchase was entirely and completely finished . . . . [T]hat very morn that the human nature of Christ ceased to remain under the power of death, the utmost farthing was paid of the price of the salvation of every one of the elect.

Old Testament history shadowed forth this redemption—but only Christ

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16) Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson, WJE (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 9:158-59; and Edwards, "Notes on Scripture" No. 271, in *Notes on Scripture*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, WJE (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 15:226-27.

secured it. The Messiah “was the antitype of all that had been done, by all the priests, and in all their sacrifices and offerings, from the beginning of the world.”<sup>17)</sup>

But this was not the end of the story. Even after the resurrection and the closing of the canon, Edwards charted further progress in the history of redemption—from the persecution of Christians in the ancient Roman Empire to the ongoing battle with the Roman antichrist to the final Day of Judgment and the New Jerusalem.<sup>18)</sup> Looking keenly at the signs and wonders warming up New England, he even wondered whether God was doing something in his own day to hasten the millennium. “There is now an outpouring of the Sp[irit] of G[od] begun,” he suggested to his people in the spring of 1741, which may comprise “the beginning of that outpouring of the Sp[irit] that is to introduce the Glorious times of the Ch[urch].” Moreover, as he boasted two years later in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1743), when millennial summer dawns “the light will rise in the West” (i.e., the Western hemisphere) “till it shines through the world.”

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17) Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, WJE, 9:294-95, 318.

18) For more on Edwards’ eschatology, see especially Stephen J. Stein, “Providence and the Apocalypse in the Early Writings of Jonathan Edwards,” *Early American Literature* 13 (Winter 1978/79): 250-67; John F. Wilson, “History, Redemption, and the Millennium,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 131-41; Reiner Smolinski, “Apocalypticism in Colonial North America,” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, Volume 3, Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1998), 36-71; Brandon Withrow, “Jonathan Edwards: Revival, Millennial Expectations, and the Vials of Revelation,” *Trinity Journal* 22 (Spring 2001): 75-98; Linda Munk, “Jonathan Edwards: Types of the Peaceable Kingdom,” in *Millennial Thought in America: Historical and Intellectual Contexts, 1630-1860*, ed. Bernd Engler, Joerg O. Fichte, and Oliver Scheiding, Mosaic: Studien und Texte zur amerikanischen Kultur und Geschichte (Trier: Wissenschaftlichen Verlag, 2002), 215-28; Stephen J. Stein, “Eschatology,” in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 226-42; Glenn R. Kreider, *Jonathan Edwards’s Interpretation of Revelation 4:1-8:1* (New York: University Press of America, 2004); and Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 566-79.

And if we may suppose that this glorious work of God shall begin in any part of America, I think, if we consider the circumstances of the settlement of New England, it must needs appear the most likely of all American colonies, to be the place whence this work shall principally take its rise.

And if these things are so, it gives us more abundant reasons to hope that what is now seen in America, and especially in New England, may prove the dawn of the glorious day: and the very uncommon and wonderful circumstances and events of this work, seem to me strongly to argue that God intends it as the beginning or forerunner of something vastly great.

Edwards claimed in *Some Thoughts* that he had “long insisted on this.” But no sooner had New England’s great “work” begun to wane than he was criticized for making such a grandiose prediction—and began to backpedal. When his Scottish friend, the Presbyterian William McCulloch of Cambuslang, echoed his suggestion “that the glorious Revival of Religion, and the wide and diffusive Spread of vital Christianity, in the Latter Times of the Gospel, should begin in the more westerly Parts, and proceed to these more easterly,” Edwards posted a demurral. “It has been slanderously reported,” he replied defensively in March of 1744,

that I have often said that the millennium was already begun, and that it began at Northampton. A doctor of divinity in New England [Charles Chauncy], has ventured to publish this report to the world from a single person, who is concealed and kept behind the curtain; but the report is very diverse from what I have ever said. Indeed, I have often said, as I say now, that I looked upon the late wonderful revivals of religion as forerunners of those glorious times so often prophesied of in the Scripture, and that this was the first dawning of that light, and beginning of that work which in the progress and issue of it would at last bring on the church’s latter-day glory. But there are many that know that I have from time to time added, that there would

probably be many sore conflicts and terrible convulsions, and many changes, revivings and intermissions, and returns of dark clouds, and threatening appearances, before this work shall have subdued the world, and Christ's kingdom shall be everywhere established and settled in peace, which will be the beginning of the millennium.

Edwards split a few hairs, but was not telling a lie. He conjectured that the millennium itself would likely come about the year 2,000 from the ancient land of Judah. His prayer was that the Lord would use New England's great work to thaw the earth with gospel spring and plant seeds for a harvest that would bear fruit later. He was never quite sure what to make of the history of redemption in his own time and place.<sup>19)</sup>

When it came to other epochs, Edwards sounded more certain, far more certain than most mainstream theologians today. He was sure that in the time from the transatlantic Awakening to the great millennial age the Roman antichrist would fall and the race, including Jews, would repent and turn to Christ. Such cataclysmic change would not occur overnight. It would "not be Introduced without very Great [and] General commotions [and] overturnings[,] in which professing [Chris]tians will doubtless have Great Trials," Edwards owned. The Catholic Church was the "great whore" of Babylon, after all, the mighty "beast" of Revelation. And the Jews had resisted Christianity for centuries. But, finally, a Protestant utopia would emerge. "After the fall of anti[christ,] during the Glorious time that shall succeed which is called a thousand years," the church will thrive in a steady "state of . . . triumph over her Enemies." Satan "shall be Chained up." The grace of God will fill the earth. And the "saints shall be like Trees that are alwaies Green," he pledged. Indeed, the glorious time to come will bear

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19) Edwards, sermon on Zechariah 12:10 (April 1741), Box 6, F. 416, L. 1v., Beinecke; Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England . . .*, in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, WJE (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 4:353-58; Letter from William McCulloch to Edwards, August 13, 1743, extract, *Christian History* 1, no. 46 (Boston, January 14, 1744), 362; and Letter from Edwards to McCulloch, March 5, 1744, WJE, 16:135-36.

“the Greatest Resemblance [to] Heaven” of any period in our history. The world will heed the word of God as never since the fall. And its knowledge of the Bible will expand exponentially. “Difficulties in Scripture shall then be cleared up,” Edwards vowed, “and wonderful things shall be discovered in the word of God that were never discovered before.”<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the golden age, Satan will terrorize the world for one last, dreadful term before the Lord leaves him impotent to harm the saints again and then separates “sheep” from “goats” for judgment and reward (Matthew 25:31-46). “And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, And shall go out to deceive the nations,” inciting them to war (Revelation 20:7-8). Of course, the forces of the righteous will prevail in the end, but not without a great struggle. After God secures the battle and subdues Satan forever, He will resurrect the bodies of the whole human race, reunite them with their souls, and pass judgment on their works. “The book of Scripture will be opened,” Edwards warned his congregation, and “their works will be compared with the Word of God.” Those without faith in the perfect work of Christ on their behalf will receive a guilty verdict. Then the universe will melt in a great conflagration and the guilty will be banished to its everlasting ruins. Edwards laid this out alarmingly in several Sunday sermons, hoping to scare people straight. “Heaven [and] Earth shall be all in a flame [and] the Elements shall melt with fervent heat [and] the Earth with all the works that are therein shall be burnt up [and] all devils [and] wicked men shall be Consumed,” he proclaimed. He rehearsed the gory details in a “Miscellanies” notebook:

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20) Edwards, sermon on Matthew 24:35 (n.d.), Box 7, F. 502, L. 3v.-4r., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Isaiah 62:6-7 (April 1741), Box 5, F. 336, L. 5r.-v., Beinecke; Edwards, “They Sing a New Song” (November 13, 1740; November 1752), in *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch, with Kyle P. Farley, *WJE* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 22:227; Edwards, sermon on Revelation 14:18-19 (n.d.), Box 14, F. 1144, L. 1r., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Zechariah 8:20-22 (February 3, 1747), Box 6, F. 412, L. 3r., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Revelation 3:12 (July 1740; August 1752), Box 12, F. 894, L. 1v., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Isaiah 41:19 (June 1742), Box 4, F. 302, L. 1r.-2v., Beinecke; and Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, *WJE*, 9:480-81.

When the powers of heaven come to be shaken by the terrible voice of the great judge of the world in pronouncing the cursed sentence, and his mighty power casts down these globes [suns, stars, planets, etc.], and brings 'em together with such a prodigious velocity as to bring 'em all into one heap in a very little time, one huge conflagration, and those heavy worlds of liquid fire are sent down in a terrible storm, like burning rain, by thousands and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, with such a prodigious velocity and almighty fury as to bring 'em all together in a very little time, with probably many million times greater celerity than that of lightning; when such infinite bodies of fire, with all the planets and comets belonging to them, thus clash one with another with an immensely forcible collision and infinite rage of their flames, it will probably extremely attenuate their parts and increase their action.

He went on in this way for several pages of his notebook, reflecting on the astrophysical aspects of apocalypse hinted at in Scripture before devoting his attention to the future of the church and its relationship with God, which was always the great *telos* of his biblical view of history.<sup>21)</sup>

The inhabitants of heaven will descend for the Judgment, cheering the saints at their verdict. Then the Savior and His bride will join the Father and the Spirit, served by all the holy angels, in a new habitation, far removed from the furnace of the former, fallen world. St. John described it this way: "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God

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21) Edwards, "The Day of Judgment" (December 1729), in *Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, *WJE* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 14:528; Edwards, "Miscellanies" Nos. 929-931, *WJE*, 20:172-88; Edwards, "Miscellanies" No. 952, *WJE*, 20:218; Edwards, sermon on Hebrews 12:29 (n.d.), Box 11, F. 839, L. 15v., Beinecke; and Edwards, "The Torments of Hell Are Exceeding Great" (September or October 1728), *WJE*, 14:312-13.

himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Revelation 21:1-3). This will be a "Royal City," a "magnificent[.] Glorious City," which will "Come down from G[od] out of Heaven," Edwards affirmed. There "the saints' union with Christ" will be "perfected," he continued: "the soul shall live perfectly in and upon Christ, being perfectly filled with his Spirit, and animated by vital influences; living as it were only by Christ's life, without any remainder of spiritual death, or carnal life." Christ will lead the "assembly in their Praises" in that place. For its bliss "consists not only in contemplation, and a mere passive enjoyment; but consists very much in action. And particularly, in actively serving and glorifying God." It will afford a haven of rest and reward for the righteous, with "higher degrees of glory" for "higher degrees of good works," but will not feature clouds, harps, and long, flowing robes. It will be a real city, full of energy and action: the eternal intensification of the saints' love and service to the Lord and His redeemed. Paradise regained.<sup>22)</sup>

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For most in Edwards' world, Scripture functioned as the main frame of reference for interpreting the rest of human knowledge. The Bible absorbed the world, to borrow a phrase from George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, and their students. Secular knowledge really never was their basic frame of reference. The Bible and its teachings were, for them, the most basic.<sup>23)</sup>

Most scholars once assumed that the hotter sort of providential history declined during the long eighteenth century. Gone were the horrors of

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22) Edwards, "True Saints, When Absent from the Body, Are Present with the Lord" (October 12, 1747), in *Sermons and Discourses, 1743-1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, *WJE* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 25:231-32, 242; Edwards, sermon on Hebrews 12:22-24 (April 1740), Box 11, F. 833, L. 3r.-v., Beinecke; Edwards, sermon on Revelation 19:5-6 (November 1748; 1751), Box 12, F. 920, L. 1v., Beinecke; and Edwards, "None Are Saved by Their Own Righteousness" (late February or March 1729), *WJE*, 14:338.

23) On this notion in Lindbeck and Frei, start with George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 117-18; and Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 17-65.

the Thirty Years War, in which theologians fueled the fire of military conflict with apocalyptic zeal. Dispelled was the fog of the English Civil War, in which men like Oliver Cromwell asked the clergy for assistance reading signs of the times. During the Restoration period and the age of the Enlightenment, cooler heads prevailed. Apocalypticism waned.<sup>24)</sup> Revisionary scholarship has altered this impression, demonstrating the persistence of a biblical view of history well beyond the wars of religion—even among the learned.<sup>25)</sup> So perhaps the time is ripe for a new scholarly synthesis that pays due attention to the work of such people. Edwards' teaching looks hot and supernatural today, from a late modern perspective. It was even somewhat hotter than the views of most of his peers. But he stood side-by-side with an army of dissenters, especially in the colonies, who retained a big, providential understanding of history.

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- 24) Notable examples of this consensus view include Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions from the Reformation to the Eve of the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 245; and Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 322-23.
- 25) On the persistence of apocalyptic and supernatural thinking in the long eighteenth century (among leading modern thinkers), see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), 100-42 and *passim*; R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 9-12 and *passim*; Stein, "Transatlantic Extensions: Apocalyptic in Early New England," in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents, and Repercussions*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Anthony Wittreich (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 266-98; David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 118; Neil Hitchin, "The Evidence of Things Seen: Georgian Churchmen and Biblical Prophecy," in *Prophecy: The Power of Inspired Language in History, 1300-2000*, ed. Bertrand Taithe and Tim Thornton, Themes in History Series (Stroud UK: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 119-39; S. J. Barnett, ed., *Isaac Newton's Observations on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), iv, 1-2, and *passim*; Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773 to 1804* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2004), 210, 383; and Jeffrey K. Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth: Joseph Mede (1586-1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 41-74.

**Abstract**

Many have argued that Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is the most influential thinker in U.S. American history. Yet few have understood the thoroughly biblical foundations of his early-modern worldview. This article explores Edwards' biblical understanding of the history of the world, centered as it was on the history of the redemption of the world in Jesus Christ, the crux of his philosophy of history. It discusses Edwards' views of many relevant biblical texts, including his comments on the Apocalypse (on which he kept a notebook) and its bearing on his Christian historiography. Nowhere is the difference between Edwards' metaphysical and spiritual view of the world and later secular perspectives more apparent—even striking—than in his biblical understanding of the shape of cosmic history. When it came to the nature of history he was even more spiritual, supernatural—indeed apocalyptic—than his peers.