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JONATHAN CAHN'S AMERICAN REVELATION

by James Patrick Holding

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While John Hagee's "blood moons" theory has been garnering press, an equally contrived end-times scenario has also been gaining traction. Authored by Messianic rabbi Jonathan Cahn, *The Harbinger* (Frontline Publications, 2012) and its following volume *The Mystery of the Shemitah* (Frontline Publications, 2014) offer a mixture of homiletic biblical interpretations and obscure mathematical calculations. What makes Cahn's work stand out is his focus on the reputed application of biblical prophecy to America.

Although related, *Harbinger* and *Mystery* are poles apart in terms of their presentation models. *Harbinger* is a novel, in which the protagonist, Nouriel Kaplan, is visited by a mysterious angelic figure who presents him with nine clay seals representing "harbingers," or signs of judgment. The unnamed angel interprets the seals as pictographic representations of Isaiah 9:10: "The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones: the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars" (KJV). Kaplan is told that although this prophecy was originally for ancient Israel, it is now applied to America and has been re-enacted in events surrounding the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11. In contrast, *Mystery* is presented as nonfiction. It hypothesizes that America has suffered judgments based on regulations regarding Sabbath years (Lev. 25:1-4) and release of debts (Deut. 15:1-2). Cahn argues that economic upheavals like the recession of 2008 are God's way of enacting these texts in response to our disobedience.

It will not be possible in this space to disentangle each of Cahn's mistakes, but his chief methodological error is illustrated by an argument that the life of Jesus was imitative of pagan savior figures. According to some critics, Jesus was one of many

legendary deities that were “crucified.” But these critics have an expansive understanding of what it means to be “crucified.” In their view, any deity depicted with his or her arms outstretched—for whatever reason—ought to be deemed as “crucified.” This includes the Egyptian deity Shu, raising his arms to hold up the sky! In the same way, Cahn pursues an agenda of generous conceptual expansion to facilitate what appear to be uncanny matches.

REINTERPRETING ISAIAH 9:10

Cahn maintains that modern events saw a re-enactment of Isaiah’s words: the World Trade Center disaster re-enacted “bricks fallen down,” while the new Freedom Tower is a defiant “building with hewn stones.” A judicious reader might see in this little more than coincidence, given that buildings are demolished and replaced by bigger or better structures constantly. There is also little evidence that the Freedom Tower is intended as a defiant response to God’s chastening (as opposed to being a defiant response to the ideology of Islamic terrorists). However, Cahn asserts that the association with Isaiah 9:10 becomes uncanny when we realize that the verse was incorrectly used as a “message of defiance” (p. 74)¹ by American leaders in the aftermath of 9/11. Cahn notes that Isaiah 9:10 was used in an address by then-Senate Majority leader Tom Daschle on the third anniversary of the 9/11 disaster in 2004, and supposes it strange that out of more than thirty thousand Bible verses, Daschle featured Isaiah 9:10, which is so “obscure” that “people who read the Bible every day would probably have no idea that it existed” (108).

It is true that Daschle’s use of Isaiah 9:10 was contrary to the original intentions of Isaiah. But there is nothing incredible about Daschle having used it, because Isaiah 9:10 is not “obscure” at all. It was used as the title of a poem by the award-winning modernist poet Marianne Moore in the early 1920s. More significantly, the text was used in 1998 by President Bill Clinton as an encouragement to Floridians whose homes had been destroyed by a hurricane.² In all probability, Clinton’s use of the text inspired Daschle’s usage.

Growing in the Telling

Continuing his reapplication of Isaiah 9:10, Cahn connects the cutting down of sycamores and the planting of cedars to modern events. As he explains, the collapse of the World Trade Center resulted in the destruction of a single tree, which was later replaced by a “Tree of Hope” (82). The tree felled in New York was, Cahn admits, not the Middle Eastern sycamore of the Bible; it was an *English* sycamore. Likewise, the “Tree of Hope” was not a cedar; it was a Norwegian spruce.

Cahn resolves this difficulty by way of generous conceptual expansion. It does not matter, he says, that the Middle Eastern “sycamore” is actually a type of fig tree completely unrelated to the English sycamore; it only matters that both are designated with the same English word, *sycamore*. The failure in this argument is that the root word for *sycamore*, the Greek *sukomoros*, was widely applied to several different kinds of trees. The same phenomenon attends the English word *sycamore*, which has been applied to trees as varied as a European maple and an American plane tree. It is not a generic designation, but the term has been so widely applied that any suggestion of uncanniness with respect to the events of 9/11 is unwarranted.

Cahn’s generosity is even more pronounced with the second tree. He argues that the word “cedar” in Hebrew (*erez*) is “likely a generic word for the pine family” (90), and so the replacement of the American sycamore with a Norwegian spruce (also a conifer) fulfills Isaiah. The idea of a “pine family” of trees, however, did not come to exist until more than 1,500 years after the time of Isaiah, so the equation of *erez* with such a classification is questionable. In addition, the “pine family” is quite extensive, encompassing trees as varied as the spruce, cedar, cypress, and redwood. The odds of someone selecting a conifer as the “Tree of Hope” are not imposing.

More recently, Cahn has found significance in the fact that the “Tree of Hope” lived for only about a decade before it died.³ However, trees planted in downtown urban environments typically have a lifespan of no more than seven to thirteen years, so the demise of the Tree of Hope was in no way extraordinary.⁴

GOD BLESSED AMERICA?

Fundamental to Cahn’s arguments is that America was seen by its founders as a “new Israel” that was “in covenant with God” (19). As he puts it, “It can be argued that only two civilizations in human history were established, dedicated, and consecrated to the will, the word, the purposes, and the glory of God from the moment of their conceptions. The first was Israel; the second was America” (*Mystery*, Kindle edition, chap. 7).⁵

Notably missing from Cahn’s arguments, however, is any evidence that America’s founders believed that if America “would follow the ways of God, it would be blessed with the blessings given to Israel” (*ibid.*). It is true that certain early American preachers saw the nation as a “new Israel,” and Cahn also correctly identifies such sentiments among the Pilgrims and Puritans who settled in Massachusetts. However, these two groups were not America’s Founding Fathers, and while they may have consecrated their colonies to God’s purposes, they could not speak for the whole nation, especially a century later.

Does Cahn provide any reason to think America was specially “consecrated” by its founders? He first refers to St. Paul’s Chapel, a small church adjacent to the World Trade Center site, where Cahn says that, after his presidential inauguration, George Washington, with Congress, “bowed together in prayer to consecrate the new nation’s future into the hands of God” (206). Cahn makes much of this as proof that Ground Zero is “America’s ground of consecration” (208). However, a contemporary account of this service merely remarks, “The President, the Vice President, the Senate and House of Representatives, then proceeded to St. Paul’s Chapel, where divine service was performed by the Chaplain of Congress, after which the President was conducted to his house, by the Committee appointed for that purpose.”⁶ While Washington and his fellow leaders undoubtedly held prayers, there is no evidence that they “consecrated” America’s future into the hands of God, much less that they established a covenant after the manner of Israel, or supposed that God had established such a covenant with America.

Cahn’s only evidence for America as a “New Israel” in the eyes of the founders is equally unimpressive: “Benjamin Franklin proposed that the new nation’s Great Seal should feature the image of Moses parting the Red Sea, while Thomas Jefferson proposed that of the Israelites journeying through the wilderness” (*Mystery*, Kindle edition, chap. 7). But neither thought of America as a “New Israel” in the way Cahn imagines. Franklin chose the imagery as a way to compare King George III to the biblical Pharaoh, as shown by the accompanying motto he proposed: “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.”⁷ The intentions of Jefferson were no more in tune with Cahn’s interpretation; as a Unitarian deist, Jefferson could hardly have thought of America as a biblical covenant nation!

A SHEMITAH RECESSION?

The central thesis of *Mystery* also rests on generous conceptual expansions, this time related to economic history. Cahn makes much of American economic crises of the twentieth and twenty-first century overlapping with Shemitah (Sabbath) years, according to the Jewish calendar. For example, “The Shemitah fell entirely within and at the core of the Great Depression” (*Mystery*, Kindle edition, chap. 10). Given that the Great Depression lasted a decade, that it overlapped a Shemitah year is not remarkable. The length of other economic crises likewise sufficiently explains overlap with Shemitah years. More damaging to this correspondence is that America suffered multiple economic depressions or crises early in its history. One of the first such depressions (1807–1814) even occurred during the presidency of Thomas Jefferson. Apparently anticipating this objection, Cahn writes, “We would not expect that every Shemitah be linked to an economic or financial collapse, or that every economic or financial collapse

be linked to the Shemitah" (*Mystery*, Kindle edition, chap. 11). But by this very admission, Cahn undermines any argument for a meaningful pattern.

The Tishri Effect

Perhaps the most significant coincidence cited by Cahn is the historic concurrence of economic declines with the Hebrew month of Tishri (September–October), which is a time when debts are forgiven and the economic slate is wiped clean. Cahn reports that 60 percent of the largest point crashes in stock market history took place in Shemitah years, during Tishri (*Mystery*, Kindle edition, chap. 12). Even if Cahn is correctly corresponding Shemitah years with modern years, however, the significance of this is blunted by the fact that five of the ten point crashes took place during 2008. It is also questionable to compare stock market crashes to the forgiveness of debt. Nevertheless, Cahn finds it "mysterious and inexplicable" that such a pattern should emerge, as opposed to financial collapses having been "evenly distributed throughout the year" (*ibid.*). But there is no mystery to this at all. Observers have noted that October is "historically the most volatile month in the U.S. stock market,"⁸ while September is traditionally a bad time for stock and shares.⁹ The most reasonable explanation for this phenomenon is that when brokers return from summer breaks in September, they enact plans made over the summer to sell certain stocks. This leads to a stock market decline, followed by a reckoning of the effects as either positive or negative, which causes volatility in October.¹⁰

When all is said and done, what does Cahn see ahead? He again grants himself the gift of conceptual generosity, referring vaguely to "calamities" that "may take the form" of such things as military defeat or economic decline for America (217). He also warns that he is "against putting the workings of God in a box" (*Mystery*, Kindle edition, Introduction). But coming from a teacher behind a best-selling end-times project, it is difficult to imagine Cahn's caution as anything other than a failsafe against predictive failure.

James Patrick Holding is president of Tekton Apologetics Ministries and author of *Blood Liable?* (Amazon Kindle).

NOTES

- 1 All parenthetical references to a specific page number refer to *Harbinger*. All references to *Mystery* are explicitly identified.

- 2 *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1998* (Government Printing Office, 2000), 284.
- 3 “‘Harbinger’ Author Says Loss of ‘Tree of Hope’ a Warning,” wnd.com, <http://www.wnd.com/2014/08/harbinger-author-says-loss-of-tree-of-hope-a-warning/>.
- 4 Lara A. Roman and Frederick N. Scatena, “Street Tree Survival Rates: Meta-analysis of Previous Studies and Application to a Field Survey in Philadelphia, PA, USA,” AC Trees, <http://www.actrees.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/roman-scatena-2011-street-treemortality.pdf>.
- 5 In spite of this robust emphasis, Cahn strangely goes on to say that “no unique connection to ancient Israel is needed for America to be given a biblical sign of national judgment.”
- 6 *Journal of the First Session of the Senate of the United States of America*, <https://books.google.com/books?id=5t9DAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&d#v=onepage&q&f=false>.
- 7 Mark Skousen, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: 1706–1757* (New York: Regnery, 2005), 124.
- 8 Doug Short, “Market Tops and Bottoms since 1950,” Advisor Perspectives, <http://www.advisorperspectives.com/dshort/commentaries/SPX-Tops-and-Bottoms.php>.
- 9 Peter Day, “Why Stock Market Crashes Happen in the Autumn,” bbc.com, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-30793329>.
- 10 As recently as October 2014, for example, the market fluctuated by 1,500 points. Yet it still gained for the month by 2.4 percent. Tom Huddleston, Jr., “Oh, October: What a Month It Was for the Stock Market,” fortune.com, <http://fortune.com/2014/10/31/october-wild-monthstock-market/>.