

Harold Camping: 1994 and 2011

By Gary DeMar

Harold Camping is at it again. He is predicting that an eschatological “end” will take place in 2011.[1] After Edgar Whisenant’s *88 Reason Why the Rapture is in 1988* failed to deliver on its promise to predict the week of Jesus’ return, I thought that date setting had pretty much fallen out of favor with Christians. This is why I only mentioned Harold Camping’s *1994?* in *Last Days Madness* as just another misguided attempt at date setting. Who in his right mind would take Camping seriously? What a miscalculation on my part. Never again will I underestimate the gullibility and ignorance of Christians when it comes to interpreting prophetic issues. Camping sold tens of thousands of copies of *1994?* He appeared on “Larry King Live.” A two-day debate was held between Camping and two professors from Westminster Theological Seminary. I even debated Mr. Camping on a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, radio station. The media have given Camping’s view front-page coverage because of his calculated prediction that Jesus will return before October 1, 1994.

Who is Harold Camping? He is the president of the California-based Family Radio Network, a world-wide conglomerate of radio stations broadcasting a conservative and somewhat idiosyncratic Christian message. On a daily basis, Camping hosts a live call-in program entitled “Open Forum.” Listeners are invited to call, toll-free, and ask questions concerning biblical doctrines. For twenty years Camping has been working on calculating the time of Jesus’ return. He believed the end would occur sometime between September 15–27, 1994.[2] He did not know the exact day because Scripture says “no man knows the day or the hour” (Matt. 24:36). While this is true, Camping asserts that we can certainly know the month and the year that Christ will return. Camping is an anomaly in prophecy circles because he is a millennialist. Amillennialists are not known for setting dates.

Camping the Kabbalist

Camping’s prophetic methodology reads like the *Kabbalah*, a hermeneutical principle of finding hidden meanings in the text of Scripture. The human language of Scripture is examined and interpreted according to its numerical equivalents. By interchanging numerical equivalents, letters and words could be created, thereby allowing for new interpretations. The following example will illustrate that *1994?* is a mixture of the *Kabbalah*, numerology, and an overactive imagination that is typical of Camping’s methodology. Camping’s methodology and preoccupation with numbers may have something to do with the fact that he earned a B.S. degree in Civil Engineering from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1942.[3]

In John 21:1–14, we learn that Jesus’ disciples were about 200 cubits out from the Sea of Galilee engaged in their trade as fishermen. On this day the disciples catch 153 fish. According to Camping the Bible is teaching that the 200 cubits represent about 2,000 years between the first and second comings of Christ.[4] Since Jesus was born, according to Camping, on October 4, 7 B.C., one needs only to add 2,000 years minus one year for the year zero and “presto change-o,” out comes 1994! What about the 153 fish? The number 153 equals 3 times 3 times 17: “The number three signifies the purpose of God whereas the number seventeen signifies heaven. Thus we learn that [the] purpose of God is to bring all believers that are ‘caught’ by the Gospel into heaven.”[5]

Lucky Thirteen

Camping reconstructs the genealogies to fit his interpretive model—pinpointing Adam’s creation at 11,013 B.C. While his method is ingenious, there is no way of testing his conclusions.[6] While the exact year of creation is important to Camping’s overall system, it is his conclusion that the numbers 13, 130, and 13,000 have date-setting significance. He bases this on the following: Adam was 130 years of age when Eve gave birth to Seth (Gen. 5:3); Jacob was 130 years of age when he came to Egypt (Gen. 47:9); Jehoida was 130

years of age when he died (2 Chron. 24:15). Because of the 11,013 B.C. date for the creation of the world, Camping is stuck with the number 13,000 (11,000 years B.C. + 2000 years = 13,000 years; more about this later).

Camping searches the Bible to find a way of making the number 13 and its multiples significant. He does this by trying to convince his readers that while there are *apparently* 12 tribes, there are *actually* 13 tribes. He does the same with the number of apostles. While there seem to be only 12 apostles,[7] there are *in actuality* 13 apostles. Camping then moves in for the kill. While there are *apparently* 12,000 years for the duration of the earth, there are *actually* 13,000 years.

But we can play the numerology game as well as Camping: There are actually 14 tribes—the ten tribes + Joseph + Ephraim + Manassah + Levi = 14. Fourteen is the result of 2×7 , the number of the church (2) and perfection (7), according to Camping.[8] Fourteen thousand years becomes the duration of man's existence on earth. The same can be done with the number of apostles. Using Camping's math, there are really 15 apostles: "The twelve," including Judas (Luke 22:3), plus Matthias (Acts 1:26), Paul (1 Cor. 15:9), and Barnabas (Acts 14:14). But this will not do since neither 14 nor 15 fit with Camping's belief in the soon return of Christ and the arbitrary 13,000-year marker.

The supposed significance of the number thirteen is arbitrary. The numbers ten and twelve and their multiples are much more significant than the number 13.[9] Could not 12 and 120, the age of Moses when he died, really mean twelve thousand years? It certainly makes more sense than 13,000 years. Of course, if you divide 12,000 by 2—the number, according to Camping, that signifies the church[10]—you get 6,000. Bishop Ussher calculated that the world was created in 4,004 B.C. To get the number 6,000 for the duration of the earth, we can do the following: 4,004 B.C. + 1996 A.D.—one year from the change from B.C. to A.D. = 1995. Depending on what numbers we use, we can get the Bible to teaching almost anything.

No Fooling

You might think that I'm making this up, that I'm putting the worst possible spin on Camping's 1994? I assure you that his entire book reads like this. Consider the following:

Likewise, the Bible apparently assures us that there were to be 12,000 years in the duration of the earth. That is, creation occurred 11,000 years (remember 11,000 + 6 years) before Christ [Jesus was born in 7 B.C.]. And Revelation 20:1–3 teaches that Satan was to be bound a thousand years. Since it can be readily shown that Satan was bound at the cross so that Christ would not be frustrated in His program of salvation for the world [!], the duration of the earth should be 11,000 plus 1000 years for a total of 12,000 years.[11] Moreover, you recall that God told Noah in Genesis 6:3: "Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.'" While this 120 years could be the 120 years during which Noah constructed the ark, it apparently could also be a reference to the fullness of time for all mankind. The number twelve does signify the fullness of whatever God has in view. Then the 120 years could also signify 1200 years or 12,000 years or 120,000 years for the duration of man's existence on earth. Given all the other information in the Bible, we know that 12,000 years is the only number that can relate.[12]

Of course, Camping has a problem. He is one thousand years short. He must now figure out a way of stretching 12,000 to 13,000. It is at this point that he hunts for the mystical 13: 12 tribes become 13 tribes and 12 apostles become 13 apostles, according to Camping's numerics. "Now we should broach the question: Where does 13,000 years bring us? This is easily answered. Creation occurred in the year 11,013 B.C. Exactly 13,000 years later brings us to 1988. This was the thirteenth thousandth anniversary of the history of the world." Camping's calculations only take us to 1988, the end of the 13,000 years for the duration of the earth. "We see again how 13,000 years or the year 1988 stands out as the end of the world. Does that mean,"

Camping argues, “that we could expect the year 1988 to be a candidate for the year of Christ’s return? Surely it must be a very important year, but we know it cannot be the year of the end of the world because we have already passed the year 1988.”[14]

Did you follow this? Camping maintains that 12,000 years is the magic number, but this leaves him a thousand years short. The number 13 which becomes 13,000 becomes the missing component. But this only takes us to 1988. The reason 1988 is not the year Jesus will return is because Jesus did not return in 1988! Camping must now come up with six additional years to make 1994 the year Jesus will return. How does he do it? Camping goes to Daniel 8:14 and finds 2300 days that are to be, according to Camping, “the final tribulation period. . . . Therefore, six years later than 1988 (actually 2300 days), Christ would return and we would be at the end of this world’s existence. That is the year 1994.”[15]

Conclusion

As this brief analysis demonstrates, Camping’s methodology is subjective. He picks and chooses only those numbers that fit his system. Numbers that contradict his conclusions, Camping arbitrarily reformulates to give them the needed meaning to force compliance to his already developed methodology. Camping’s amillennial detractors have had difficulty dealing with him. Traditional amillennialists and the renegade amillennialist Camping refuse to deal with the very clear time indicators that set the parameters for interpretation. Until premillennialists and amillennialists deal with the time texts, we will see more books like *1994?*

Notes

[1]Harold Camping, *Time Has an End: A Biblical History of the World 11,013 B.C.–2011 A.D.* (New York: Vantage Press, 2005).

[2]Harold Camping, *1994?* (New York: Vantage Press, 1992), 531.

[3]<http://www.atlasbooks.com/marktplc/01508.htm#summary>
Camping, *1994?*, 503.

[4]Camping, *1994?*, 503.

[5]Camping, *1994?*, 504.

[6]For an explanation, see James B. Jordan, “[1994?—Not!](#),” *Biblical Chronology* (September 1993), 2.

[7]Using Camping’s math, there are really 15 apostles: “The twelve,” including Judas (Luke 22:3), plus Matthias (Acts 1:26), Paul (1Cor. 15:9), and Barnabas (Acts 14:14). The New Testament describes the number of apostles as “the twelve” (1Cor. 15:5).

[8]Camping, *1994?*, 371.

[9]Terry, Hartill, Lange, and Gunner, in their discussions of the interpretation of symbolic numbers, do not even list the number 13. They go from 12 to 40. See John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology: A Basic Study of the Use of Numbers in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1968] 1987), 122–123.

[10]Camping, *1994?*, 230.

[11]Why isn’t 120,000 the key number? It’s larger than 13,000, therefore, Jesus’ coming could still be in the future. David Chilton writes: “Consider the promise in the law: ‘Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments’ (Deut. 7:9). The God of the Old Covenant told His people that He would bless them to *the thousandth generation of their descendants*. That promise was made (in round figures) about 3,400 years ago. If we figure the Biblical generation at about 40 years, a thousand generations is *forty thousand years*. We’ve got 36,600 years to go before this promise is fulfilled!” [Paradise Restored: An Eschatology of Dominion](#) (Powder Springs, GA: Dominion Press, [1985] 2007), 221. Using Camping’s numerics we come up with the following: 40,000 years X 3 (the purpose of God according to Camping, the Trinity, the number of days Jesus was entombed, the number of apostles and tribes divided by 4, the approximate age of Jesus, 30—when He began His ministry— divided by 10, the number of cities in Decapolis) = 120,000.

[12]Camping, *1994?*, 440–441.

[13]Camping, *1994?*, 441.