

## ***Left Behind* No More? An Evangelical Preterist Interpretation of Revelation in *The Last Disciple* series**

Margaret E. Ramey

Biblical interpreters have found a new arena for fighting—fiction! Because novels are easily accessible and understandable, they can function as powerful propaganda tools for swaying the masses. We need mention only *The DaVinci Code* as one example of the effect that fiction can have on reshaping the image of Jesus in the public square. The battle currently being waged, however, is over eschatology rather than Christology, and the two opposing groups come not from different theological parties but from the same evangelical camp.

Most are already aware of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series, which espouses a premillennial dispensationalism popular within modern American evangelicalism. The novels are set in the not-so-distant future and begin with the rapture of all the "real Christians." The characters who have been "left behind" then experience a seven-year tribulation during which the post-rapture Christian converts rally forces against the antichrist and try to withstand various wars, plagues, and famines that take place prior to Christ's return and his thousand-year reign of peace on the earth.

Many, however, may not have heard of the newer *Last Disciple* series written by Hank Hanegraaff, better known in evangelical circles as the Bible Answer Man and as the president of the Christian Research Institute, and Sigmund Brouwer to intentionally counter *Left Behind's* eschatology with a preterist interpretation of Revelation and other apocalyptic writings.[1] Unlike futurist positions, such as the one seen in the *Left Behind* series, the preterist position is a historical one, which advocates that Revelation should primarily be understood as a letter written to churches in the first century C.E. Insisting that context should determine its meaning, interpreters locate Revelation's symbols and prophecies within the first century rather than transposing them onto later time periods. In the *Last Disciple* series, we see this commitment to interpreting Revelation via its historical context first and foremost in the fact that the novels are historical fiction rather than futuristic fantasy as are the *Left Behind* novels. From the first page of the trilogy, its preterist position is made clear by the designation of its setting as "ten months after the beginning of the tribulation" (65 C.E.; *Last Disciple*, 1).

At first glance, Hanegraaff's novels appear to be worlds apart from their fictional, evangelical cousins (and according to their settings, they literally are). The eschatologies dramatized through these novels are vastly divergent, as we shall see through exploring the preterism of the *Last Disciple* series, but what turns out to be most striking about this new series is not its differences but its similarities with the *Left Behind* novels that arise from several hermeneutical assumptions regarding prophecy and symbols.

### **Interpretation of Prophecy in the *Last Disciple* Series**

While Hanegraaff's eschatology, as seen in the *Last Disciple* series, most predominantly resembles the preterist position, Hanegraaff, unlike LaHaye, does not hold rigidly to one model. For example, a thoroughly preterist position would argue that the fulfillment of Revelation's prophecies can be seen only in the first century, but Hanegraaff believes that prophetic visions are capable of interweaving both current and future events and that their imagery is broad enough to allow for secondary reapplications in later contexts. According to

him, biblical prophecies speak first to the current situations of those original addressees by calling for repentance or resolution in the face of destruction or persecution, but they also are meant to raise hopes about the end of times and God's final purposes, so that not only the first recipients but also all those who follow in their wake can continue to believe in and be affected by those prophecies. In the afterword to his second novel, Hanegraaff writes, "Thoughtful readers of Revelation should be quick to distance themselves from either a purely preterist or a fully futurist label. Revelation not only predicted fore-future events, such as the coming apocalypse in John's lifetime, but also chronicles events that will take place in the far and final future" (*Last Sacrifice*, Afterword).

In an effort to avoid these extremes, Hanegraaff divides the foretelling aspect of prophecy into the fore future (immediate future), the far future (future farther off), and the final future (end of times future) (*Last Disciple*, 319, 308). With such a distinction, Hanegraaff will happily leave unfulfilled in the series many of Revelation's prophecies that, according to him, refer to either the far or final future rather than to the fore future, which is the setting of the novels. One example of this distinction should suffice.

Hanegraaff dates the writing of Revelation to the early to mid 60s and believes that most of its prophecies refer specifically to the fore-future fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.[2] These dramatic events are the climax to which the series' action leads and to which its Christian characters who have access to John's letter look in anticipation. While these events can be pictured as being fulfilled, the physical return of Christ will most likely not be depicted in *The Last Temple* because Hanegraaff understands Christ's return as a final future prophecy.[3]

While Hanegraaff clearly diverges from LaHaye and other evangelicals on some aspects of prophecy, he still shares many evangelical characteristics in his hermeneutical approach to prophecy. For example, while distinguishing between the fore, the far, and the final futures, Hanegraaff continues to view prophecy primarily as predictions about the future. In the series, events foretold in John's letter, such as the destruction of the Temple (see Rev 11:1-2), are still in the future for John and his readers. Because he portrays the fulfillment of Revelation's prophecies as future events, Hanegraaff remains within the evangelical camp and stands opposed to any scholarship that would view prophetic literature as only reflections on events in either the recent or distant past.

For Hanegraaff, as for LaHaye, reading prophetic literature is like reading a newspaper in advance.[4] The prophecies in Revelation are seen as a sequence of events that must be fulfilled prior to the return of Christ even though they are spread over a much longer span of time according to Hanegraaff. In fact, the tagline for *The Last Disciple's* dust jacket and for the series website reads: "Imagine a letter that could *tell your future*. Written in *Code*. Deciphering it could set you free. What's inside reveals the truth about *the end of the world*" [italics mine].[5]

Such a sequential reading of Revelation as coded events appears popular among evangelicals, including Hanegraaff. Perhaps this popularity results from a shared belief that such a display of foreknowledge about future events proves that Scripture is truly a divine revelation. On the novel's website, Hanegraaff says that if Revelation was written prior to the Temple's fall, then John's vision was a "divine prophecy." He concludes, "With this understanding, a look at the historical facts of the events that immediately followed the writing of Revelation reveals the

*staggering precision* of many of the vision's prophecies, an *astounding accuracy* that also serves as compelling evidence for its *divine inspiration*" [italics mine].[6]

His early dating of Revelation also demonstrates a tendency towards literalism that Hanegraaff cannot quite shake. For example, when Rev 11:1-2 speaks of the Temple being measured, Hanegraaff interprets this statement literally and argues there must have been a physical building still standing in order for this prophecy to be fulfilled. Therefore, he concludes that Revelation was written prior to the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. Futurist interpreters, like LaHaye, while agreeing that there must be a physical building in order for it to be measured, insist that the prophecy foretells of the Temple being rebuilt prior to the antichrist's arrival. Thus, while he may differ from LaHaye on the timing of the fulfillment of Revelation's prophecies, Hanegraaff agrees with him that the composition of the letter must precede the fulfillment of the prophecies in that letter. Otherwise, Revelation could not be considered "divine prophecy."

Prominent interpreters of Revelation, however, contend with this type of coded sequence interpretation. Richard Bauckham, for one, states, "Revelation does not predict a sequence of events, as though it were history written in advance. . . . It is a misunderstanding found both in the 'historicist' tradition of interpretation . . . and in the 'futurist' tradition." [7] Indeed both LaHaye and Hanegraaff share in this misunderstanding, and although this "history in advance" interpretation may form the basis of exciting plotlines, it is perhaps not the most responsible exegesis of Revelation.

### **Interpretation of Symbols and Apocalyptic Imagery in the *Last Disciple* Series**

Once again, Hanegraaff's interpretation of Revelation, seen this time through his handling of its symbols and apocalyptic imagery, is more flexible than that of either strict preterists or premillennial dispensationalists like LaHaye. The following conversation, concerning the lamb symbol in Revelation, between the rabbi Darda and Damian, the Roman bounty hunter, gives insight into Hanegraaff's view on symbols:

Damian: "Lamb? Sheep are stupid beasts. Smelly and need constant attention."

Darda: "You are thinking like a Roman. Not a Jew. You want to interpret the symbols in a *literal sense*. But symbols are so much richer than mere words. They show us things that are invisible. . . ." (*Last Disciple*, 308).

Two of the symbols that Hanegraaff refuses to portray literally are the marks of the Beast and the Lamb. With this decision, he again parts company with LaHaye, who portrays both marks as physical ones in his series. In the *Last Sacrifice*, Hanegraaff has Issachar, a Jewish-Christian silversmith in Alexandria, explain, "one's beliefs and behavior mark whether one serves the Lamb or the Beast. The forehead symbolizes what you believe, and the hand symbolizes what you do. Yes, I have been marked, and my beliefs and actions are plain enough to the guild for them to bar me" (*Last Sacrifice*, 285). Issachar's example shows how a person's beliefs and lifestyle choices are enough to mark a Christian even without any physical branding. Issachar's refusal to join with the rest of his silversmith guild in worshipping Caesar results in his removal from that group and also limits his ability to "buy or sell." This ostracism finally leads to his family's impoverishment.

Hearing Issacher's story, Vitas, a Roman, responds, "You endure this slavery. Your family suffers. To prosper, all you have to do is accept Caesar as do many other Jews" (*Last Sacrifice*, 285). But Issacher refuses to "worship the Beast," saying that John's Revelation has given him hope that the Beast will not last long and that those who suffer or perish under his reign will have eternal hope (see Rev 13: 16-17).

The novel suggests that from a Roman point of view it is treasonous for anyone to refuse to worship Nero as Lord and Savior. From the heavenly perspective, however, into which Revelation's readers are drawn through its apocalyptic imagery, it is Nero who is treasonous by claiming titles that rightly belong only to the Lamb. The choice between the Roman Empire and the kingdom of heaven comes to a head in John's secret epistle and forces readers to decide between the two. There can be no cozy accommodation to the Roman world for those who belong to the Lamb. Hanegraaff makes this clear when he has a rich Roman cast off his wife, who has become a Christian. When she tells her husband, "The Christos is my Savior," he responds, "No! I preside at a temple where Nero is worshipped as almighty savior. Do you want to destroy my livelihood?" (*Last Disciple*, 26).

Through such scenes, Hanegraaff introduces what many consider to be Revelation's main function—to counter the Roman imperial worldview that was the dominant ideology of the first century. Revelation's readers are caught up in the apocalyptic imagery that helps them see their own world through a heavenly perspective. The symbols and images provide a counter narrative to those presented by Rome and teach the letter's recipients that Christ, not Caesar, is Lord.[8] Hanegraaff clearly understands the anti-imperial nature of Revelation and presents this secret letter circulating among the Christians as a subversive epistle with treasonous statements directed specifically at Nero.

The anti-imperial nature of Revelation is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the way in which Hanegraaff incorporates the famous 666 symbol into the novel's plot. As Greek graffiti consisting of the three letters  $\chi$ ,  $\xi$ ,  $\varsigma$  begin to appear on walls around the city and in the emperor's palace, Nero grows ever more fearful of the symbol and paranoid that it is connected with him personally. Therefore, he charges Helius, one of his highest officials, to learn as much as he can about this symbol and to destroy its source. Through the investigations of Helius and other characters, we learn that the symbol  $\chi\xi\varsigma$  translates to the number 666 and that, as Nero rightly suspected, it is related with Nero himself.

Hanegraaff explains these connections the same way that scholars do—through gematria, an ancient practice according to which letters can represent numbers. Those who understand the principles of gematria know that every word has a numerical value that can be discovered by adding the values of each of its letters together. In Rev 13:18, we find an example of this practice when readers are told to calculate the number of the Beast: "Here is wisdom. Let the one having understanding calculate the number of the beast ( $\theta\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$ ), for it is the number of a man, and his number is *six hundred, sixty, six* ( $\acute{\epsilon}\xi\alpha\kappa\omicron\sigma\iota\omicron\iota \acute{\epsilon}\xi\eta\kappa\omicron\nu\tau\alpha \acute{\epsilon}\xi$ )."

Gematria demonstrates not only the connection between the Beast " $\theta\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$ " and the number 666, but it also gives the actual name of the Beast—Nero—because when "Nero Caesar" is transliterated into Hebrew ( $\text{נְרוֹן קֶסֶר}$ ), the number of his name equals 666.[9]

The graffiti symbol " $\chi\xi\varsigma$ " that Hanegraaff uses throughout the novel in place of the number comes from textual variants found in Papyrus 47 and 051. In these variants, the numerical

words *six hundred*, *sixty*, and *six* (ἑξακόσιοι ἑξήκοντα ἕξ) in Rev 13:18 are exchanged for the symbol χξς, which in gematria equals 666. These variants suggest that at least some scribes understood that the phrase was intended to be understood by using gematria.[1]

While Hanegraaff's interpretation of the 666 symbol surpasses that of LaHaye's because of his location of the symbol within its first century context through the explanation of the practice of gematria and the emphasis on the symbol's anti-imperialist nature, he is unable to completely overcome the tendency to reduce symbols to literal referents. Many scholars stress that the identification of the number of the Beast with Nero is not about identifying Nero personally as the Beast, but is about pointing towards the beast-like qualities of the Roman Empire personified most fully in Nero's reign. Ignoring what has been learned through surveys of first century literature—that Nero, as the prototypical bad emperor, often served as a symbol either for the entire empire or for other beastly emperors[11]—Hanegraaff takes the number and correlates it directly with Nero himself. Instead of opening up the symbol for further meaning, he closes it down with a one-for-one correlation and is guilty of the very literalism of which he accuses LaHaye.

This observation leads one to ponder precisely how different Hanegraaff's approach to symbols is from that of LaHaye's. Each reduces symbols to literal referents, and often the only difference between them is that Hanegraaff places those referents in a first century context whereas LaHaye places them in a twenty-first century context. Such a literal interpretation limits the potential of the imagery. As Bauckham has suggested, Revelation depicts the future in images precisely because they can do both more and less than literal predictions. While they cannot provide a specific timeline of the future because they are not history written in advance, they can offer glimpses into God's purposes for that future. It is those glimpses that are meant to reshape readers' attitudes and invite their participation in God's plans.[12]

## Conclusion

While Hanegraaff is not above the literalism of interpretation seen in the *Left Behind* series, his work still has much to recommend it. In comparison with LaHaye's novels, his series provide a more balanced interpretation of Revelation that takes both the genre and the historical context of the letter seriously. He stresses the need to locate the letter within its first century context and lets readers vicariously experience one possible, if extremely far-fetched, scenario of how the first recipients would have experienced it. In addition, he recognizes the function of apocalyptic literature, which is to fortify the faithful in the midst of oppression by providing a heavenly perspective on their current situation. Finally, he interacts with some of the best of biblical scholarship when he highlights the anti-imperial nature of the letter's symbols.

Hanegraaff provides a helpful counterbalance within evangelicalism to the predominant premillennial dispensationalism encapsulated in the *Left Behind* series. Most importantly, he attempts to shift the evangelical focus from rapture to resurrection. Hanegraaff states on his website: "In our view the great and glorious hope of believers is not found in rapture but in the blessed hope of resurrection." [13] If nothing else, perhaps his readers will be encouraged to re-center their faith on what has historically been the hope of Christianity rather than remain captivated by this more recent fixation on being *left behind*.

**Margaret E. Ramey**, Messiah College

## Notes

- [1] Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer, "The Last Disciple: Interview with Sigmund Brouwer and Hank Hanegraaff," n.p. [cited 30 July 2009]. Online: <http://www.gather.com/viewArticle.action?articleId=281474977022949>. *The Last Disciple* (2004) and *The Last Sacrifice* (2005) are the first two novels in this projected trilogy that will be completed with the release of *The Last Temple* (forthcoming).
- [2] Along with a majority of scholars, LaHaye rejects this early dating of the letter. Instead, he opts for the later compositional date of 95 C.E. (Hank Hanegraaff, "Hank Speaks Out: Dating the Book of Revelation," n.p. [cited 31 August 2009]. Online: [http://www.equip.org/hank\\_speaks\\_outs/dating-the-book-of-revelation](http://www.equip.org/hank_speaks_outs/dating-the-book-of-revelation)).
- [3] Hank Hanegraaff, "Hank Speaks Out: The Rapture," n.p. [cited 30 July 2009]. Online: [http://www.equip.org/hank\\_speaks\\_outs/the-rapture](http://www.equip.org/hank_speaks_outs/the-rapture).
- [4] LaHaye expresses this idea almost verbatim when he has the lead pastor of the tribulation force say of Revelation: "This millenniums-old account reads as fresh to me as tomorrow's newspaper" (*Tribulation Force*, 67). Not surprisingly, the pastor's literal interpretation of Revelation is then vindicated by the next day's news.
- [5] The website can be found at [www.decipherthecode.com](http://www.decipherthecode.com).
- [6] Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer, [www.decipherthecode.com](http://www.decipherthecode.com), n.p. [cited 16 April 2007]. Online: <http://www.decipherthecode.com>.
- [7] Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 150 fn156.
- [8] Bauckham, *Revelation*, 8, 17.
- [9] Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 387.
- [10] Barbara Aland et al., eds., *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 659.
- [11] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 37.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 93.
- [13] Hank Hanegraaff, "Christian Research Institute," n.p. [cited 23 April 2007]. Online: <http://www.equip.org>.