Left Behind and the Evangelical Imagination

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Left Behind and the Evangelical Imagination

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Introduction: Left Behind: The Challenge of the Unfamiliar

Mark S. Sweetnam

The essays collected in this volume contribute to the developing discussion of 'the bestselling fiction series in American history'.[1] At the same time, as the volume's title suggests, they pay close attention to the cultures of American evangelicalism. That these two interests should come naturally—even necessarily—together is surprising. But come together they do, in the phenomenon that is Left Behind. The Left Behind franchise has grown well beyond its novelistic beginnings to accommodate a series aimed at children, comic books, and a number of cinematic adaptations. This success had humble origins. The eponymous debut novel, *Left Behind* (1995), co-written by 'prophecy scholar' Tim LaHaye and prolific ghost writer Jerry B. Jenkins, enjoyed little success beyond the boundaries of the American evangelical subculture. The series quickly overcame this slow start, however, and, after 1998, each new novel topped the *New York Times* bestseller list—a record of commercial success that, crucially, did not document its similar success in Christian bookshops. The figure of 60 million sales between 1995 and 2005 represents an enormous and unprecedented crossover success and marks out Left Behind as a publishing phenomenon.[2]

Of course, the phrase 'publishing phenomenon' has been so overused as to lose all meaning. When every month seems to bring a newer and more 'phenomenal' book, series, or author, it is difficult to get too excited about the label. But if ever the tag was properly earned and accurately applied, it was so in the case of Left Behind. The success of this series of adventure novels, and the constellation of spin-offs to which they gave birth, is both

1. Tristan Sturm, 'Prophetic Eyes: The Theatricality of Mark Hitchcock's Premillennial Geopolitics', *Geopolitics* 11 (2006), p. 250 n. 14.

2. Sturm, 'Prophetic Eyes', p. 250 n.14. See Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 129-30, for a more detailed discussion of the series' success.

remarkable and surprising. It would be remarkable no matter what the content of the novels, but it is surprising for a range of reasons: the niche market targeted by the authors' previous literary enterprises, the novels' distinct shortage of literary merit and, above all else, the novels' focus and structural dependence on a specific and recondite form of evangelical eschatology. A great many factors seemed to militate against the success of the series, and there were few features to indicate that the novels would ever be more than just another experiment in countercultural fiction. But succeed they did, washing over the boundary between sub- and mainstream culture to exert considerable influence on the shape of popular culture in the twentieth century *fin de siècle*. That influence, it seems, was to be short-lived; neither Left Behind nor any of its imitators have really succeeded in retaining control of the public imagination or the lucrative market that comes with such control. But fleeting though the moment may have been, that it existed at all is worthy of our notice.

If Left Behind had an impact on popular culture, it also had an impact on the scholarly community. It is less than two decades since Paul Boyer, in his own groundbreaking study of evangelical millennialism, lamented that the subject had 'received little scholarly attention'.[3] It is just over four years since the present author argued that this position had not changed significantly.[4] Today, however, this position would be considerably harder to maintain. The success of Left Behind has made the series a lightning rod for interest in the contours and implications of evangelical millennialism. This volume, indeed, is testament to this, gathering together contributions both from a number of those established scholars who have been at the forefront of commentary on the Left Behind series and the cultural phenomena that it represents and from new scholars who have just begun working on the novels. Their efforts to answer the questions posed by Left Behind have resulted in a hitherto unprecedented level of engagement with the detail of dispensational theology in its various manifestations. The more responsible cultural studies scholars have found themselves wading through the unfamiliar grounds of Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* and the writings of John Nelson Darby in their effort to understand the theological suppositions that lie behind LaHaye and Jenkins's novels. Others have disdained this quality of engagement, and have considered it unnecessary to move beyond the most generalized and unnuanced understandings of evangelicalism and millennialism. In doing so, some have told us a great deal

3. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), p. ix.

4. Mark Sweetnam, 'Tensions in Dispensational Eschatology', in Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 173-92.

about Left Behind, but all have told us even more about the methodological difficulties of cultural studies.

The principal source of these difficulties is the way in which the critics of the novels have worked from the specific to the general. With only a few exceptions, critics have come first to Left Behind and to dispensationalism only in their effort to understand the novels' worldview. Even with the best possible intentions, this is a problematic sequence. Without a breadth of understanding that embraces the very considerable variety within the dispensational tradition, critics, unless they do a good deal of work, are obliged to accept the novels' claims to embody dispensational theology in a very unproblematic way. And this premise is difficult to grant without assuming, consciously or unconsciously, an extremely patronizing attitude to dispensationalism. Which other theological system would we be prepared to judge based on nothing more than its portrayal in a fictional series? Over two centuries of development and vigorous internal and external debates have made modern dispensationalism a multifaceted and sophisticated theology, and critical engagement with Left Behind or with any other product of dispensational culture must, of necessity, take account of that. No one, after all, would seriously suggest we base our understanding of Roman Catholicism on the work of Graham Greene, or, to use a rather closer comparison, of High Church Anglicanism on the writings of P.D. James.

Some steps have been taken to address the need for a methodological framework within which to address rapture novels. Crawford Gribben's work has been of considerable value in this regard, helping to integrate Left Behind with its generic prototypes, and emphasizing the fairly long historical background to the development of the genre. This has been a particularly helpful contribution in view of a general and, at times, surprising lack of originality in Left Behind. Gribben has unearthed a genre history that, in some ways, is rather more homogeneous than we might have been inclined to expect. But he has also identified a great deal of diversity within the tradition and has highlighted the caution that is required when approaching rapture novels as religious cultural products:

> [T]he variety of beliefs among dispensational and evangelical believers illustrates the dangers in reading its literature as indicative of a homogenous religious culture. Prophecy novels do not provide privileged access to an unchanging cultural *mentalité.* There is no simple way of describing their relationship to a broader evangelicalism—or even, more precisely, their relationship to dispensationalism … [T]he fictional mode establishes a series of discourses that can be used to both consolidate and challenge dominant trends in the contexts of its production.[5]

5. Gribben, *Writing the Rapture,* p. 19.

This advice is salutary in the extreme. The Left Behind books may be simple as novels, but as signifiers, they refer, in a notably complex way, to a world that is notably complex.

But if the question of genre has been, to some extent, addressed, the contours of the doctrinal milieu that informs the novels have been less fortunate. The content of the dispensationalist view of Scripture that undergirds LaHaye and Jenkins's project remains *terra incognita* to far too many of the scholars who have worked on the novels. In short, the success of the novels and the critical industry generated by this success have thrown into sharp relief the definitional problems of dispensationalism. It is worth emphasizing that Left Behind did not cause these problems. Dispensationalism has never been provided with a convenient definition. In the context of theological studies, however, works like Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (1965) have provided a basic, though ultimately unsatisfactory, effort to outline the sine qua non essential to dispensationalism. The move to the arena of cultural studies that has come about as a result of Left Behind has simply made the existing problem more urgent and more obvious: obvious in the patchy degree of theological acuity brought to the subject by scholars, and urgent because our attempt to evaluate the significance of these novels is hamstrung from the beginning by our lack of an adequate definition.

Only recently has an attempt been made to address this problem. In a journal article published in 2010 I attempted to provide cultural studies scholars with a useful definition of dispensationalism.[6] The definition does not attempt the impossible task of recounting accurately the features and foibles of every variety of dispensational theology. It does, however, describe five essential emphases of dispensationalism, and so offers a useful yardstick by which claims to dispensational identity and orthodoxy can be evaluated. The five emphases traced by this definition are as follows:

1. A commitment to evangelical doctrine.
2. A commitment to a literal biblical hermeneutic.
3. A recognition of distinction in manifestations of divine dealing with humankind, which insists on the uniqueness and importance of both Israel and the church in the divine plan.
4. An expectation of the premillennial, imminent return of Christ.
5. An emphasis on apocalyptic and millennial expectation.

Taken together these characteristics furnish us with a robust definition of the dispensationalism that underlies Left Behind. As such, they allow us to evaluate the novels' claim to speak as dispensational texts, and also allow

6. Mark S. Sweetnam, 'Defining Dispensationalism: A Cultural Studies Perspective', *Journal of Religious History* 34.2 (2010), pp. 191-212.

us to understand the reasoning behind some of the novels' apparently more recherché features.

In general, there can be little doubt about the evangelical emphasis of the Left Behind series. The novels were, indeed, conceived from the beginning as an evangelical tool. *Left Behind* (1995), the first novel in the series, records the conversion of Rayford Steele as almost the first item of business, and the remaining novels in the series abound in exemplars of evangelical conversion, as understood by the authors. Furthermore, the textual culture that has grown up around the novels eagerly attests to their remarkable success in edifying readers, as well as entertaining them, while attempting to make still greater evangelical capital of their success.[7] But the precise details of the novels' commitment to the norms of historical evangelicalism have been called into question.[8] The justification for this can be seen not just in the novels' rather mealy mouthed extension of the boundaries of evangelicalism to include the pope (on the basis that he had flirted with 'Lutheran heresy') but more organically in their instantiation of evangelical teaching. The justification for this emerges clearly when we compare Left Behind to the template provided by one of the most enduringly useful definitions of evangelicalism. David Bebbington has argued that the evangelical movement has historically been marked out by four key stresses—conversionism, activism, crucicentrism, and biblicism.[9] Conversionism and activism have left their clear impress on the Left Behind project. While it is true that the novels all undertheorize conversion, they all insist on the importance of conversion as a vital element of eternal life and present usefulness. Furthermore, the novels' espousal of activism could scarcely be stronger—their protagonists do, after all, band together to oppose, if not to overthrow, the world government of the Antichrist, and they leverage an impressive range of technological *nous* to that end. It is in the areas of crucicentrism and biblicism that the extent of Left Behind's renegotiation of evangelical norms becomes apparent. Historically, evangelicals have insisted on the centrality of the cross, both in the preaching of the gospel and in the living out of the Christian life. In its hymnody, its literature, and its preaching, the cross has been given a central and defining significance. In Left Behind, however, the cross is elided. Its centrality in conversion is diminished by the language of the sinner's prayer, and its place in Christian

7. See, for example, Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, Norman B. Rorher, *These Will Not Be Left Behind: True Stories of Changed Lives* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003).

8. See, especially, Crawford Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006).

9. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 2-17.

life is denied by the novels' consistent failure to develop, or even to suggest, a coherent theology of suffering.[10] Furthermore, the endemic uncertainty about the grounds of salvation for these 'tribulation saints' destabilizes any consistent focus on the cross. Left Behind is not unique in this regard, but our understanding of these novels, specifically, as evangelical texts must be nuanced by these considerations.

The novels' commitment to biblicism is, equally, an area where a nuanced understanding is essential. On the face of it, the novels' insistence that prophecy is fulfilling Scripture and that Scripture is vital to understanding and correctly interpreting events that are taking place all around is as biblicist as could be. A closer examination, though, reveals that Left Behind's view of Scripture is problematic. The tensions in the series' biblicism are most acutely revealed in the character of Bruce Barnes. From the beginning of the series, this newly converted pastor is charged, before and even after his death, with interpreting prophecy for his new flock and for the millions of believers worldwide who log on to the Web site of the 'Tribulation Force' for fresh prophetic exegesis and insight even as tribulation days darken around them. Until his death in the third novel of the series, Barnes devotes himself to understanding prophetic Scripture and records his findings on his laptop. After his death, this laptop comes to have immense significance, for it contains the one and only authoritative exposition of Scripture countenanced in the novel. No one seems to read their own Bible: everyone is rapt to hear what Bruce Barnes had to say about the events he foresaw taking place. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Barnes's laptop becomes figured as a magisterium of definitive and authoritative teaching—the only reliable interpretation of Scripture. Despite the strength of the historical evangelical emphasis on biblicism for all, on the importance of regular personal Bible reading as a cornerstone of Christian piety, in these novels, everyone seems happy to let the experts at it. To be fair, other characters have their hands full fighting Antichrist. But no one ever seems to realize that Scripture is as available to them as it is to the experts. Nor does it ever seem to be the case that these experts are mistaken or misinterpret the import of prophetic Scripture. Once again, Left Behind is not unique in this regard. Ironically, given the insistence of early dispensationalists that the theology would and did emerge inevitably from a careful study of Scripture alone, the dispensationalist tradition has shown a marked propensity to lionize prophetic interpreters and to depend heavily on their interpretation of prophetic Scripture. Indeed, LaHaye and Jenkins are hardly the worst offenders in this regard. Morris Cerullo's *Omega Code* (1981) takes the tendency to its illogical conclusion. The novel's characters

10. See Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis*, pp. 70-74

construct a computer bank to process the biblical 'data' they feed it and to answer questions about unfulfilled prophecy. This is the trope of prophecy expert taken to extreme—characters with no biblical knowledge who rely on a computer to interpret prophecy, crunching Scripture to arrive at a single authoritative interpretation. But even the less excessive approach of Left Behind to the perspicuity of Scripture must problematize any easy assumptions about the identification between evangelical doctrine and the teaching embodied in the novels.

The same is true of the novels' commitment to the literal interpretation of Scripture. This approach to hermeneutics has been one of the most important defining features of American dispensationalism and has been a site of frequent skirmishes between dispensationalists and their opponents. Indeed, there has been an increasing tendency to foreground hermeneutical issues in recent debates, and, as the concept of literal meaning has become increasingly problematic, dispensationalists have found themselves fighting vigorous defensive battles to defend both the possibility and the appropriateness of a literal interpretation of Scripture.[11] This emphasis leaves a clear impress upon the books in the Left Behind series. Indeed, it is the importance of this emphasis that helps to account for one of the novels' most striking features. While earlier writers in the dispensational tradition have been comfortable with an approach to literal interpretation that allows, for example, the judgments of Revelation to be read in terms of nuclear holocaust or military hardware, Left Behind consistently resists the charm of technological warfare and retains the essentially supernatural character of the judgments that fall on the world during the time of tribulation. That LaHaye and Jenkins have felt it necessary to approach their material with an unwavering and artistically challenging literalism is indicative of their indebtedness to the doctrinal structure of dispensationalism, but it is also revealing of the contemporary stresses of that dispensationalism—the novels refuse to give hostages to fortune by reimagining the contents of John's Revelation in terms of the twenty-first century.

Dispensationalism's insistence on the enduring difference between Israel and the church, and the nature of God's dealings with both, has always been a basic tenet of the movement. It has also given dispensationalism its most potent and distinctive impact on the socio-politics of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century worlds. The general philo-Semitism engendered by dispensationalism's insistence on Israel's continuing importance as a

11. See, for example, Thomas D. Ice, 'Dispensational Hermeneutics', in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994). See also Earl D. Radmacher, 'The Current Status of Dispensationalism and its Eschatology', in Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (eds.), *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 171.

nation in divine purpose has been more particularly expressed at times, and especially in an American context as a Christian Zionism whose support for the state of Israel, as presently constituted, has been both profoundly militant and potentially military.[12] Left Behind certainly partakes of this sort of militancy. From the opening and abortive attack upon Israel by Russia, Israel generally and Jerusalem more particularly are vitally important sites of conflict; and Israel is a uniquely important player in end-times prophecy.

It is one of the enduring paradoxes of dispensationalism that the theology which, above all others, has consistently championed the cause of Israel and the Jews is also frequently criticized as anti-Semitic. This paradox is the result of a deeper tension within dispensationalism, which does expect a glorious future for the Jews, but only after the horrors of the tribulation (the seven-year period of unprecedented divine judgment following the removal of believers from the Earth in the rapture) have resulted in the deaths of countless individuals. In addition, some commentators have expressed concern that the blessing of the Jewish characters in the novels is predicated upon their abandoning their Jewish belief and converting to Christianity.[13] To a degree, these criticisms fail to allow for the evangelical agenda of the Left Behind project. The inherent conversionism of evangelicalism always makes blessing—temporal or eternal—dependent on saving faith in Christ. For some secular critics, this seems troubling; but this is an index of a failure to sympathetically understand evangelicalism on its own terms rather than an indication of the series' inherent racism.

But Israel's role in the economy of Left Behind is even more complex than these general concerns might suggest. These novels pose unusually complex, problematic and subtle questions about the place of the Jews in divine purpose. These questions spring from the fact that, in the context of dispensational norms, the novels in the Left Behind series are marked by a distinct paradigm problem. Generally, dispensationalists suggest that the rapture—in removing all Christians from the Earth—will move Israel back to the centre of divine purpose. So, evangelization and service will, during the tribulation, be primarily carried out by Jewish believers who have recognized Christ as their messiah. This paradigm is complicated, in the novels, by the authors' evangelistic priority. The novels are self-consciously designed to provide lessons for a (mostly Gentile) present-day readership and are designed to model conversion and Christian service for twenty-first-century American Christians. To accomplish this purpose, the authors have

12. For a discussion of this context, see Nicholas Guyatt, *Have a Lovely Doomsday* (London: Ebury Press, 2008).

13. See Sherryll Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem" in the *Left Behind* Novels', *Literature and Theology* 19 (2005), pp. 367-83.

displaced Jewish believers from the mainstream of tribulation activity and put a band of gung-ho, 'above average American Joes' at the centre of the programme of tribulation activity. While Jewish characters do form part of the 'Tribulation Force' that fights back at Antichrist's evil empire, they are neither the primary initiators nor the most important shapers of that struggle. Gentile converts, 'tribulation saints', dominate the force and the action of the novels. Whatever the motive, this shift in emphasis constitutes no small challenge to the teaching of mainstream dispensationalism. It is worth noting that this 'paradigm problem' has implications for the novels that go beyond simply the place that they give to Jewish agency. Much of the confusion in details of Christian life and ecclesiology that have been noted in the series spring from this layering of paradigms, and are a basic difficulty stemming from the novels' determination to address the present through the novelization of the prophetic.

In the novels, as in wider dispensationalism, the rapture—Christ's secret return to the air to summon Christians from the Earth to the air and thence to Heaven—is the point where the present and the prophetic collide. Manifestly, this event is central to the whole genre of 'rapture fiction', kick-starting the action, initiating the tribulation, and unleashing the Antichrist. While some interpreters of prophecy within the wider dispensational tradition have adopted mid- or post-tribulation positions, predicting the return of Christ halfway through or at the end of the tribulation, respectively, these positions have always been niche views. There has, however, been an overwhelming dispensational consensus on a pretribulational rapture. Most dispensationalists, therefore, have expected, and continue to expect, the imminent, premillennial return of Christ to the air in the rapture. Within the dispensational framework, an imminent return is, of necessity, a premillennial return—no prophecy remains to be fulfilled before Christ returns. This—apparently nice—distinction is a crucial one in understanding the nature of dispensational teaching. Since the 1970s, a series of prophecy interpreters have produced a mutation of futurist dispensational exegesis.[14] This 'dispen-sensationalism' retains some of the features of dispensationalism but marries them to an agenda of sensationalist date-setting and an unrelenting focus on the 'signs of the times' as harbingers of the rapture and the events of the tribulation. Because this approach to Scripture does, very often, arise out of a dispensational background, and because such interpreters generally cherry pick the most dramatic elements of the dispensationalist schema of end-time expectation, they are often confused with each other. This tendency is compounded by the fact that these sensationalist interpreters of prophecy are highly politically involved, have a high public

14. See Sweetnam, 'Tensions in Dispensational Eschatology'.

profile, and are often flamboyant characters to boot. Their hawkish support for Israel and trigger-happy attitude towards the Muslim world in general, and Iran in particular, also give them a capacity to attract attention and concern lacking in the more staid dispensationalist. But the differences go far beyond media friendliness, and it is exceedingly important that this sensationalizing mutation of dispensational essentials be clearly distinguished from dispensationalism proper.

Left Behind manages to complicate this distinction as well. On the one hand, the rapture is seen as an imminent event. The characters who come to faith after the removal of the church are all taken by surprise by Christ's return. And this surprise is not limited to worldly airline pilots: Pastor Bruce Barnes also finds himself overtaken by the sudden fulfilment of prophecy. Christ's coming is a cataclysmic event, unexpected by any of the novels' protagonists. Unexpected it may be, but unheralded it was not. The opening pages of *Left Behind*, the first novel in the series, give rather more than a nod to the dispensensationalist tradition. The novel opens with Buck Williams's account of Russian attack on Israel, which was utterly repelled without the loss of a single Israeli life. A Russian attack on Israel has been a consistent feature of dispensensationalist expectation and is confidently predicted as a sign of the times by many of the movements' leading prophecy interpreters. For *Left Behind* to include this attack before the rapture is an indication of the influence of this sort of thinking on the series as a whole. However, it is also important to notice that no one in the novels appears to read this sign of the times. We have access only to the thoughts of those who had been both unbelievers and irreligious before the rapture; contemporary Christians disappear too rapidly from the story for their expectations to feature very much. There is, however, no indication that these Christians were raised higher on the tip-toes of expectation by the dramatic circumstances of the Russian attack and its divine repulsion, that their expectation of the rapture was in any sense more acute. Ultimately, *Left Behind* does share the general dispensationalist emphasis on an imminent rapture, but only barely; and its flirtation with the tropes of sensationalist historicism is a telling indication of the proximity of LaHaye, in particular, to some sensationalizers of prophecy.

Finally, it has been a consistent feature of dispensationalism that it has endorsed both apocalypticism and millennial expectation. Dispensationalists expect apocalyptic global upheaval before and after the millennium, but it is the premillennial tribulation-based apocalyptic that receives the most attention. And, while some critics of dispensationalism have argued that it is a theology that undervalues the millennial aspect of God's programme for the Earth, in reality, millennial expectation has always been a vitally important feature of dispensationalist thought. It is true that the earthly aspects of that millennium do, in the view of some dispensationalists, pertain most

particularly to the future of Israel. Emphasizing the heavenly future of the church does not, however, equate with disregarding the importance of the earthly rule of Christ with all its benefits. Once again, Left Behind is a less-than-perfect fit with the norms of dispensationalism. There is no shortage of the apocalyptic—LaHaye and Jenkins do not fail to make abundant use of the lurid judgments and destructions of the Revelation. But the series fails to develop any meaningful millennial expectation, and even the 'glorious appearing' of Christ, which inaugurates his earthly reign, scarcely seems to be a significant object of expectation for the 'Tribulation Force'. This failure to emphasize the millennial is the more remarkable when we recall that it is these 'tribulation saints'—those who come to faith after the rapture—who are, in dispensationalist teaching, the most immediate participants in millennial bliss. Once again, it is possible to trace the influence of the sensationalist school of prophetic interpretation in these features. Following the enormously influential Hal Lindsey, these interpreters have placed a huge emphasis on the rapture and the tribulation, but have very little to say about the return of Christ or the kingdom that he is to set up. For all their emphasis on geopolitics, these interpreters of prophecy have little interest in the global consequences of divine rule. Left Behind follows this tendency and, in concentrating on the derring-do of the Tribulation Force, seems to lessen the importance of millennial hope and the urgency of longing for Christ's return. This is the result of artistic as well as theological limitations. *The Glorious Appearing* (2004), the series' culminating novel that narrates Christ's return, demonstrates only too clearly the difficulty of novelizing an event like this.

It should be clear, at this stage, that the novels in the Left Behind series are far more complexly determined cultural artefacts than some critics have allowed. And, what is true of the novels is, a fortiori, true of the textual and cinematic culture that has developed around the success of the novels. Each step away from the novels has introduced new artists and new agendas and, with them, new complexities. In approaching the series, responsible scholars cannot allow themselves the luxury of simplistic assumptions and unnuanced conclusions.

The scholars whose work is collected in this volume all share an appreciation of the complexity of the Left Behind worldview and the need for critics of the novels to engage carefully with the contours of that worldview. They are all conscious that the Left Behind novels and films emerge from a distinctive tradition of evangelical theology, but are cautious about overestimating the neatness of fit between the historical accounts of this theology and the version instantiated in Left Behind. In bringing this awareness to the study of Left Behind, these essays make a vitally important contribution to the task of understanding these cultural products and the communities that produce and consume them.

The essays in the first section of this collection, then, provide an in-depth discussion of the treatment of a number of important themes within the novels. Amy Frykholm investigates the theme of gender in the novels. Focusing on the tendency of rapture fiction to feature the stock character of the young, female martyred by the forces of Antichrist, she goes on to read this recurring character as a type of a passive and suffering church in a hostile and persecuting world. But Frykholm also draws attention to the way in which the violence perpetrated against these young females is often highly eroticized in its treatment. Frykholm examine the implications of this sexualized violence for our understanding of Left Behind and situates the novels in the traditions of sentimental and domestic fiction, a move which significantly advances our understanding of Left Behind. Jennie Chapman's chapter also interacts with genre expectations. Addressing the role of the conspiracy narrative in Left Behind, she nuances the general assumption that the conspiracy plots that proliferate in rapture fiction have been simply poached from secular accounts of subversion that emerged from the radical right in America during the twentieth century. In contrast, Chapman emphasizes LaHaye's consistent positing of a secular–humanist plot at work deep within American society. She also lends weight to the theological side of the equation, outlining the long history of 'conspiracist' themes in dispensational writing and, especially, in the writings of John Nelson Darby, the foundational expositor of modern dispensationalism. Crawford Gribben's chapter addresses the treatment of Jews and Muslims in Left Behind. Contextualizing the treatment of the 'Abrahamic other' in the rapture fiction tradition, Gribben reflects on the significant differences in the treatment of Jews and Muslims in Left Behind as contrasted with earlier novels. Gribben discusses evidence that evangelical authors are re-imagining their relationship with Jews and Muslims. These groups, he suggests, are increasingly seen by evangelical Christians as sharing the social commitments of contemporary evangelicalism in the face of growing government hostility to all expressions of religious faith. By bringing theological and historical nuance to bear on the text of the Left Behind books, Gribben reads the novels as a barometer of American evangelical paranoia. In the final chapter in this section, Jarlath Killeen examines the treatment of the Roman Catholic Church in the world of Left Behind. Killeen identifies a profoundly ambiguous attitude to Catholicism in the novels and argues that the tensions that emerge are, at least partially, accounted for by the emergence of lobbying and campaigning alliances between evangelicals and Catholics on a range of social issues. Rounding out his treatment of the issue, Kileen then examines the predominantly negative Catholic response to the series and argues that these responses are both cause and effect of the series' ambivalence towards Roman Catholicism. He goes on carefully to nuance these issues, situating Left Behind in the wider context of American anti-Catholicism

and examining the significance of radically millennial Catholicism for our understanding of Left Behind.

Beyond doubt, Left Behind, in examining these issues, has been formed by the beliefs, views and presuppositions of its authors, and of the wider community of which those writers form part. Equally though, the project has manifestly been designed to form and shape contemporary society; and, as we have noted, their success in this enterprise has been considerable. In his contribution to this volume, John Walliss concentrates on rapture films, and particularly on the cinematic adaptations of the early Left Behind novels. He outlines the way in which these films speak to an evangelical audience, representing the fears, hopes and concerns of that audience. But Walliss also emphasizes the evangelical intent and ambitions of the Left Behind films, and addresses the paradoxical failure of these apocalyptic films to gain significant crossover appeal, even as highly successful secular films made great capital of pilfering the apocalyptic and millennial tropes that are the native air of Left Behind. In doing so, he raises fundamental questions, not just about Left Behind and the audiences that consume it, but also about the nature and limits of film itself.

The Left Behind phenomenon is unusual in many ways. At the same time, the novels do emerge from a number of significant traditions. For this reason, the essays in next section of this volume engage, in some detail, with the background of Left Behind, both theological and cultural. Marisa Ronan's contribution traces the role of Christian fiction in the shaping of evangelical identity and situates Left Behind within this cultural tradition. Ronan interrogates the subcultural status of evangelical culture and highlights the enduring entrepreneurialism of twentieth- and twenty-first-century evangelicalism in its use of popular culture as a tool of evangelical progress. For Thomas Ice, it is the theological rather than the cultural background that is significant. As a prominent figure in North American dispensationalism, Ice draws on his familiarity with and involvement in the Left Behind project. He argues that the dispensationalism that is embodied in Left Behind is not, as some polemics have suggested, a novel development in the history of the church, but a long-standing theological option. Theological issues are also at the heart of Katie Sturm's discussion of ecumenism in Left Behind. Building on some of the themes addressed in this introduction, Sturm argues that dispensationalism's insistence on the possibility and necessity of a literal scriptural hermeneutic plays a crucial role in informing the series' approach to other, non-evangelical, varieties of faith.

It has been a basic guiding principle of this collection that the contributors pay due attention to the text of Left Behind, that they eschew simplistic comment for nuanced critique. It is in keeping with this approach that this volume gives the final word to one of the series' authors. Writing on behalf of Jerry B. Jenkins, Kevin Zuber responds to the criticisms and commen-

tary provided by the contributors to this collection. This is the first time one of the creators of Left Behind has addressed many of the most important issues and concerns that have been raised by commentators, and this authorial insight makes a vitally important contribution to this volume and to the wider debate on the intention, influence and importance of the series.

Left Behind is a phenomenon. Its place in literary culture is unique. In the novels of the series, and in the surrounding texts and products, a vitally important but critically ignored strain of evangelicalism made its presence and its relevance felt at the turn of the twenty-first century. In giving expression to the beliefs, prejudices, fears and concerns of American evangelicals, Left Behind touched a nerve in wider society and achieved unprecedented crossover success. As cultural scholars, the novels demand our engagement. In their apparently simplistic but highly problematic treatment of social and theological issues they complicate this engagement. But they also reward it, providing the careful and attentive scholar with unparalleled insights on dispensationalism, on American evangelicalism and on the project of cultural scholarship itself.

1. Rapture Fiction and the Predicament of Christian Male Leadership

Amy Frykholm

In the early twentieth century, a movement called 'muscular Christianity' sought to address what adherents saw as the problem of the feminization of churches. It sought to infuse Christianity with a masculinity, virility, and power that it feared was lacking. Tightly connected with fundamentalism, this movement was determined to stem the tide of modernity that seemed to propel women out of their homes and into public life, and that seemed to challenge basic assumptions about the God-ordained roles of men and women in society.[1] Central to muscular Christianity was the task of re-establishing male leadership in the church. Nearly a century after its beginnings, conservative Christianity in the United States is still having the same conversation. A recent cover from a magazine published by Biola University, one of the original fundamentalist universities, proclaimed that churches are 'driving men away'.[2] Despite the almost overwhelming male leadership in America's conservative churches, several recent books, published by conservative Christian presses, insist that men 'hate church' or that the church has rendered men 'impotent'.[3]

1. For historical analyses of 'muscular Christianity', see R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Donald E. Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

2. Holly Pivec, 'The Feminization of the Church: Why Its Music, Message and Ministry Are Driving Men Away', *Biola Connections* (Spring 2006), pp. 10-17.

3. David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Books, 2005); and Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Company, 1999).

How can that be? Conservative Christianity has given the last century of its existence in the United States to maintaining traditional social order, to asserting male dominance and female submission. In conservative traditions, women cannot preach or pastor a church; sometimes they are not even allowed to stand up in front of the congregation or pray publicly. An entire industry of books, lectures and other religious materials has been devoted to teaching women how to stay in their place and not to give in to the temptations of formal, public leadership, while teaching men how to claim leadership roles in family and church.[4] It appears that this is a trenchant problem, one that a century of rhetoric has not solved.

The predicament of male leadership in conservative Christianity can be illuminated by dispensational fiction. Simultaneous with the development of 'muscular Christianity' came the rise in dispensational theology, which is commonly understood as a response to many aspects of modernity and specifically to fears of losing social power.[5] With waves of diverse immigration bringing Catholic, Jewish and Asian immigrants to American shores, with historical biblical criticism challenging cherished assumptions about the Christian faith, and not least, with the movement of women both socially and politically, conservative Christians in the early part of the twentieth century felt that their entire culture was on the brink of destruction. This was made vivid in their eschatology. They envisioned having the true people of God, the true church, caught up to heaven in an event that was called the 'rapture'. Then they envisioned that the rest of the world would suffer until the end of time when a conqueror Christ would return to battle Satan.

4. To say that women have been encouraged to stay out of formal leadership is not to say that they have not had power. A considerable bibliography on the complex dynamics of gendered power in conservative congregations elucidates this. See, for example, Brenda Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); and Judith Stacey and Susan Elizabeth Gerard, 'We Are Not Doormats': The Influence of Feminism on Contemporary Evangelicals in the United States', in Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowerhaupt Tsing (eds.), *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1990), pp. 98-117.

5. See my *Rapture Culture:* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First-Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990); and Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) for various versions of this understanding.

This vision of the end of the world was based on a particular way of reading prophetic biblical texts, and dispensational scholars took their task very seriously. They produced the most popular Bible ever, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909; 1917), which detailed, in footnotes, this version of what the Bible says. Obsessed with reading the hidden 'truth' of scripture and decoding the messages left there for them, they did not necessarily recognize that their efforts had all the elements of a great epic fiction as well: a beast rising out of the ocean, a wayward woman, heroic martyrs, a returning conqueror king. In fact, many early dispensationalists had a prejudice against fiction and believed that 'Christian fiction' was an oxymoron that could not be overcome by references to the Bible.[6] Novels—like cigarettes, dancing, movies, alcohol and card playing—were worldly and therefore unacceptable pastimes.

Another commonly held assumption is that when fiction did develop in fundamentalist culture, it was fiction by and for women. Fiction was soft and feminine, antitheological, and therefore anti-manly. In this version of the history, Christian fiction rose first as the pioneer romance novel that then gave way to a greater variety that we know today.

But in fact dispensational fiction is a form of fundamentalist Christian fiction that preceded the frontier romance of the 1970s. Written by and primarily for men, particularly white men, it reads as a record of religiously conservative, socially powerful, yet increasingly marginalized people imaginatively wrangling with their fears of losing cultural power.[7] Black people, Jews, communists, Catholics, capitalists, immigrants, and uppity women all have a place in this repository.[8] These books record the perceived fragility of white, male, Protestant power, constantly under threat, a threat that will ultimately lead to a worldwide and very final disaster in which their power will finally be acknowledged as God ordained and perfectly right. The sexism of the genre is intimately linked with its racism—both expressing a similar anxiety. Theological disagreements and social concerns gave rise to a certainty that the world was on the brink of collapse, headed for certain destruction, and that the best any worthy Christian could do was prepare oneself and one's loved ones for the coming of the end. Very early in its

6. In interviewing readers of the Left Behind series, I noted that this opposition to fiction is not entirely dead. One older reader that I encountered had read the entire series but objected strongly to it on the grounds that it contained 'too much fiction'. See Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, pp. 139-40.

7. Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 381. We should note that *intent* to reach male readers is not the same as actually reaching them, and we do not have much evidence one way or another about the readership of early rapture novels.

8. Gribben traces this thread through rapture fiction in *Writing the Rapture*.

development, this theological impulse was fictionalized. Somehow, despite objections about the frivolity of fiction, fiction seemed the best way to tell this story and to make it come alive for readers and potential believers.

Dispensational fiction (also called 'prophecy fiction' or 'rapture fiction') imagined the imminent destruction of humankind through the events outlined in the eschatology of 'dispensational premillennialism', including the rapture of the true church, the rise of the Antichrist, the suffering of the tribulation and battle at Armageddon. The popularity of this kind of fiction by the year 2000 (embodied in the best-selling Left Behind series) stands in contrast to the obscurity of its beginnings. As Crawford Gribben points out in *Writing the Rapture* (2009), early examples and perhaps most of the examples of this genre—if it can be called that—have been lost to time.[9] Self-published or published by very small religious presses, often tract-like in form and content, these stories did not necessarily survive the twentieth century, although their ideas certainly did. Over time this literature developed a formula that contains stock characters and outlines of plots that are nearly as predictable as the hard-boiled detective novel or the historical romance.[10]

Unlike female Christian fictions, which justified their existence by the righteousness of their main characters, this fiction is less sure of itself. It is an odd mixture of story and exposition, part sermon and—again very unlike fiction by and for women—often includes lengthy footnotes explaining various ways of interpreting biblical passages, admonishing or acknowledging critics or explaining how the author has come to this or that understanding.[11] Yet the novels themselves contain all the elements of fiction: a plot defined by biblical prophetic events, characters and some kind of 'ordinary' setting into which the extraordinary events of the rapture break. In addition and in contrast to the ordinary folk who populate the narrative as heroes and heroines, there are also the epic characters like the Antichrist, the Beast, the false prophet, and less often that I would have thought, the whore of Babylon.

One of rapture fiction's closest affinities is with the comic book or graphic novel. Exaggerated forms of good and evil, an epic plot line (earthquakes, floods, plagues, mass destruction), and larger-than-life characters are hallmarks of both rapture fiction and the comic books—genres that were

9. Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, pp. 57-58.

10. I detail some of these stock characters insofar as they relate to gender in 'The Gender Dynamics of the Left Behind Series' in Bruce Forbes and Jeffery Mahan (eds.), *Religion and Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2nd edn, 2006), pp. 270-87.

11. For a bibliography of examples, see Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, pp. 387-406.

developing simultaneously if independently until the work of Jack T. Chick and the Left Behind series.[12]

Though graphic novels and rapture novels occupied very different corners of the social landscape in both the United States and Britain, the graphic novel was driven by some of the same market forces as rapture fiction: increasingly cheap production for ever more niche markets. Comic books were largely considered 'pulp' fiction, produced with commercial purposes for a nonreligious audience. They had a reputation of being racy, sexually daring and politically edgy, but also came quickly into the mainstream. In theory, they would have been off-limits to the sober and antiworldly fundamentalist crowd developing an interest in rapture fiction.

Yet like comic books, rapture fiction was by and for male readers. The early fundamentalist movement was an attempt to find a hearing among men for religious ideas. As Margaret Bendroth put it, fundamentalism 'reversed the Victorian formula' that said that women had a 'natural' proclivity for religion. Instead, they argued that men, in fact, were the closer to God and needed therefore to forcefully assert their place in the churches.[13]

Ironically, rapture fiction, carried forward by fundamentalism, is not so much concerned with the question of regaining cultural power, but with its loss. In rapture fiction, Christians grow increasingly isolated; they are arrested and martyred by the Antichrist. They regain their power only when Christ at last triumphs over the Antichrist—an event that has very little play in rapture fiction as a whole. The focus is on loss, danger and death.

As an antimodern form of literature, dispensational fiction exists as a record of adaptation: Left Behind is far less antimodern than its predecessors. Conservative Christians have adapted to the modern world and begun contemplating how to use it to their advantage, while dispensational heroes have become increasingly worldly, savvy and strong.

Yet the problem of Christian male leadership has stayed central to the texts. When conservative Christian men created a fiction that suited their ideology, it shined an odd light on their predicament. No Christian man can ultimately be a superhero. He cannot prevail against the world anymore than he could prevail against Christ. Getting saved by someone else turns you, the muscular Christian, into the damsel in distress, the one in need of a saviour.

12. For a review of Jack T. Chick's cartooning, see Daniel K. Raeburn, 'The Holy War of Jack T. Chick', *The Imp* 2 (Chicago: self-published, 1999). Tyndale House published the first two books of the Left Behind series in graphic novel form from 2000 to 2006. They appear to have suspended this project.

13. Margaret Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 3.

Male dispensational Christians are not and cannot ever be superheroes. They will never be as powerful as the Antichrist, who in turn will never win in his battle against Christ. Male Christians cannot replace Christ as the ultimate hero, but as they fall helpless before the Antichrist, they appear too weak to be worthy of their saviour. Meanwhile, the tradition has imbedded such tricky notions as calling the church 'the Bride of Christ', thus feminizing the men who decide to join up.

Women, on the other hand, have the odd benefit of venerating a male saviour who ultimately saves them even as they head to their deaths. No earthly man can do for them what Jesus can; earthly men are comparatively irrelevant. Even as women are being told to 'submit' and to 'surrender', they achieve a far less fraught victory than their male counterparts. In rapture fiction, their deaths lead to Christ's glory. In order to take their place in this world, they do have to die, a significant tradeoff. But their power comes, like Christ's, from renunciation. The trope of the female martyr emerges in the fiction in the 1930s and persists through Left Behind, when Chloe is the only central member of the postrapture Christians whose death by the Antichrist's forces occupies an entire book in the series.

Men have not had this benefit. When they do die in rapture fiction, it is not as heroes, but as fools. And they are as often condemned as saved. Masculinity in these fictions begins as an intellectual enterprise that focuses on disputes about the Bible; it gradually comes to be defined as anti-intellectual and intensely physical. By the time of Left Behind, true men would possess both great physical strength and great emotional depth. Christian masculinity would be an enterprise far more of the heart and body than of the head. Meanwhile, women grow in initiative and agency, never perhaps sharing power with men, but becoming increasingly capable of acting on their own. Dispensational fictions, particularly Left Behind, retain their anxiety about female power, but female characters take on an unexpected depth, reflecting perhaps a significant development in the dynamics of gender in both dispensationalism and evangelicalism.

We can begin tracing the problem of male leadership in one of the earliest rapture novels, one that Gribben points to as 'consolidating the genre', Sydney Watson's *In the Twinkling of an Eye* (1916).[14] The hero, Tom Hammond, is immediately known to us as 'a king among men', handsome, 'exceptionally clever', and ambitious.[15] Hammond, like the later Buck Williams, is a man at home in the world. Although we meet him just as he has lost his job, we learn immediately that he has bigger plans for himself, and within just a few pages, he receives the opportunity he is looking for: a

14. See Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, Chapter 2.

15. Sidney Watson, *In the Twinkling of an Eye* (Boston: Fleming H. Revell, 1933), p. 12.

wealthy benefactor offers him the opportunity to start his own newspaper. The story that the novel traces is the story of Hammond from a secular man to a Christian one, from ambitious journalist to documenter of the end times. When the rapture finally occurs at the end of the novel, Hammond no longer needs the world, and his only question has been transformed into a sign that hangs above his desk: 'Today, perhaps?'

For Hammond, the journey to dispensational faith is an intellectual one. He attends lectures and does reading to come to his conclusion that Jesus is in fact coming soon. He is persuaded by the rhetoric and Bible study of believers around him. Hammond embodies the hero of dispensational fiction in that he conforms to the portrait of manliness that the larger, seemingly secular, culture presents, yet he ultimately must leave that culture. His success in it becomes meaningless. Besides discerning the truth for himself and issuing warnings to others, he has no task but to disappear and miss the dangerous consequences of the postrapture descent into darkness. Though Hammond becomes an admired columnist for his newspaper, he is not, finally, a leader or a hero. He is simply correct about his end-times hunches and his understanding of biblical prophecy.

The women in this novel are unfailingly gentle and beautiful. Beauty has a certain tragedy attached to it, but many passages of the novel go on at length about the attractiveness of each of the three women central to the narrative: Hammond's Jewish love, Zillah; Madge Finnesterre, who marries an unbelieving minister; and Barbara Joyce, whose husband is an abusive drunk. Each of these women's earthly fates—whether comic or tragic—depends on the faith of the men they marry. If the men become believers, the women are happy and loved and disappear with their husbands in the rapture. If not, then they escape the brutes that they have married through the rapture. But none of these women could attract the sympathy required without central testimony to their beauty, grace and charm.

Two decades later on the other side of the Atlantic, the relationship between male and female and the church and the world was envisioned in rapture fiction in a dramatically different way. Forrest Loman Oilar's *Be Thou Prepared for Jesus is Coming* (1937) focuses on a heroine instead of a hero. And unlike *In the Twinkling of an Eye*, most of the action takes place after the rapture in the destructive events of the tribulation. The story begins with two ordinary 'Jews' who become converted to Christianity before the rapture but leave behind two unconvinced children. The rest of the story follows the fates of Jane and Frank on their divergent paths. Our heroine, Jane, is a 'frail but lovely girl' who, in the middle of the book, has been captured by the Antichrist's forces and is about to be martyred in a public arena. Jane's brother, Frank, and a young preacher named Joel are also captives, and they look on as Jane is tied to a stake in front of a bloodthirsty crowd. Frank, an atheist, is impotent at the sight of his sister's danger, but

Joel, a convert, is transformed into a Herculean superhero. In picturing him, the reader is instructed to think of the biblical Samson. As the executioners advance on Jane, he snaps 'the heavy wrist chains like matches' and dashes to Jane's side.[16] He punches one assailant in the chin and breaks the neck of another with one blow. He then wages a battle against several would-be assassins, including a 'burly Negro' and someone called The Champ. Yet somehow his heroics do not prevent Jane's death. She 'realized her plight, closed her eyes and murmured a prayer. Her severed head rolled in the dust, but her victorious soul was "loosed".'[17]

Reading this scene in *Be Thou Prepared*, I became convinced of the relationship of the book to the newly burgeoning genre of graphic novels. I can see the 'POW!' as Joel breaks the jaws of his would-be attackers. I can see them rise up one after another in the neat boxes of cartoon images, and I can see Joel's muscles grow beyond the ordinary arms of an ordinary man. In fact, it was in returning to this passage after several years that I truly began to understand rapture fiction as a genre of male fantasy. Joel fits nicely into B.J. Oropeza's description of Superman: 'otherworldly, handsome, confident, and *powerful*', someone who could 'take on the macro-evils of this world'.[18] On the other hand, unlike the superhero who is ultimately successful in his dealings with evil, the 'ultimate' for Joel is not his own success. Even though Joel defeats The Champ, all of his strength is no match for the Antichrist, who in turn is no match for Christ.

The active masculinity of Joel and the passive femininity of Jane underline the masculine and feminine ideals of rapture fiction, though they are both ultimately ineffective against the Antichrist's forces—at least in this world. Hearkening back to Victorian ideals of men and women, Oilar oddly suggests that women as 'more spiritual' have 'greater duties' in the Kingdom of Heaven.[19] But the ideal postrapture man is both a preacher and a fighter, muscular Christianity incarnate. Jane, meanwhile, establishes one of rapture fiction's key stock characters: the young, beautiful, fragile but strong in faith, female martyr.

If Joel is the ideal man, Frank provides another essential message to a male audience. Frank remains a skeptic, unsure about risking his own life and safety, uncommitted in light of his sister's religious certainty and, unlike Hammond, unable to overcome the intellectual hurdles to faith. He

16. Forrest Loman Oilar, *Be Thou Prepared for Jesus is Coming* (Boston: Meador, 1937), p. 286.

17. Oilar, *Be Thou Prepared*, pp. 287-90.

18. B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel according to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 2.

19. Oilar, *Be Thou Prepared*, p. 313.

is eventually damned by his wavering; he sacrifices righteousness for an imagined worldly security.

Women in rapture novels 'disappear' in two different ways: they are raptured or they are martyred. Both are causes of celebration. Female agency perhaps reaches its height in rapture fiction through death. Death is the highest 'women's work', and a great deal of rapture fiction is focused on watching women die. No prophecy fiction novelist is more obsessed with this than Pentecostal televangelist Ernest Angley. More than half of Angley's novel *Raptured* (1950) details the deaths of postrapture Christian martyrs, the majority of them female. Like Oilar, Angley offers us a beautiful, young heroine, Hester Bell Wilson. In this Civil Rights era novel, Hester's beauty is nearly always mentioned in conjunction with her white skin. Whenever Angley wants to convey the femininity of the women that the Antichrist is about to kill and a frailty similar to Jane's, he emphasizes their whiteness: 'As she held out two milky white hands, a pair of shining handcuffs were snapped onto her wrists, but she did not show any emotion.'[20] In prison, a guard tries to get Hester to change her mind about taking the mark of the Beast. When she refuses, 'his hands itched to take her creamy, white throat into their strong grip and choke the life from her body'.[21]

Unlike Jane, Hester has no would-be rescuer. There is no counterpart male hero. Her father, converted to Christianity by Hester herself, dies as a martyr before Hester does. The only other man in the book is Jim, son of a faithful raptured woman, who has never been man enough to stand up to his wife, to claim his mother's faith and to save his own soul. Instead, as the novel ends, he beats his head on the rocks and mourns his eternal damnation. Like Frank in *Be Thou Prepared*, Jim serves as a warning to Angley's readers. One should compare one's faith to Jim's, note his hypocrisy and lack of courage, and change one's own beliefs so as not to face his fate. Like Oilar, Angley finds it difficult to depict effective male Christian leadership in the end times.

Despite this gap, Angley goes beyond simply warning people to believe now or face the trials of the end times. He seems to take pleasure in the torturing of his female Christian victims, lingering over descriptions of their deaths, the expressions on their faces, inventing still more horrible ways for them to die. The scenes even flirt with the pornographic, like this scene where a young woman is brought to her death in front of a squad of the Antichrist's henchman. Again, notice how Angley intertwines righteousness, femininity and race:

20. Ernest Angley, *Raptured: A Novel of the Second Coming of the Lord* (Akron, OH: Winston Enterprises, 1950), p. 160.

21. Angley, *Raptured*, p. 178.

> A beautiful frail young woman was pulled savagely down between two lines of soldiers by a crude giant of a man. Her golden blond hair glistened in the sunlight, making a beautiful background for her milky complexion. Her eyes had the glow of divine glory. Her lips quivered slightly, but that was her only sign of fear ... Then with a shout of 'Honor to the Beast!' the guard gave the woman a sudden shove, and into the pit she fell ... A fearsome boa constrictor coiled its huge body around hers, and her last scream was followed by a choking sound as the slimy snake squeezed the life from her body.[22]

What Dan Raeburn calls the 'spiritual porn' of dispensational cartoonist Jack T. Chick is found in Angley as well.[23] Angley lingers over sexualized images of the death of this woman. While the reader, of course, identifies with and sympathizes with the woman thrown in the pit, I wonder what I am supposed to take away from the slow glee of this scene. Should I fear the suffering that will be mine if I am not taken in the rapture? Do I admire the courage and (of course) the beauty of this woman and long to be like her? If I were a male reader, my dilemma might perhaps be still more complicated. Do I imagine myself dying as a martyr like this woman? Do I imagine saving her from the Antichrist's forces and sacrificing my life for hers? Or do I see myself in her attackers?

By the time we reach the phenomenon of Left Behind with its broad appeal to both male and female readers, the question of male leadership has become a more specific and visible area of consideration for rapture writers.[24] Like earlier rapture fiction, most of the characters in Left Behind would be very comfortable in the pages of a graphic novel, and indeed Tyndale House, the publisher of the series, released the first two novels as graphic novels between 2000 and 2006. Hattie Durham, for example, is the provocative airline stewardess who eventually becomes the lover of the Antichrist. Jenkins's ambivalence about Hattie is evident on nearly every page. For example, in the very opening moments of the series, Hattie Durham is the alluring woman who distracts hero Rayford Steele from 'thoughts of his family' just as the rapture arrives. Rayford continues to be attracted to her for the next several books, but we are also repeatedly told that she is 'stupid'. She is frequently treated as a dumb blond without substance, but in a way that seems simultaneously erotic and fearful of female sexual power. Perhaps ambivalence about Hattie's femininity is better con-

22. Angley, *Raptured*, pp. 165-67.

23. Raeburn, 'The Holy War of Jack T. Chick', pp. 7-8.

24. In a 2001 survey, The Barna Research Group found that 57 percent of Left Behind's readership was female and 43 percent male. Details on this survey are available at www.leftbehind.com.

veyed with a certain curve of cleavage and a particular wave of blond hair in a comic book.

Jenkins seems much more comfortable with his portrayal of Chloe, Rayford Steele's daughter who converts early and becomes a central member of the Tribulation Force. Like her female predecessors Jane and Hattie, she is beautiful and eventually martyred, but unlike them, she is not frail. We know her to be a spunky and adventurous woman, someone who knows her own mind and who capitulates to her husband only when biblically required. In the eleventh novel, entitled *Armageddon*, Chloe sneaks out of the Christians' bunker to examine a suspicious vehicle. She is captured by the Antichrist's forces, taken to prison and eventually beheaded. She is the first original member of the Tribulation Force, since the second book of the series, to die and one of two martyrs before the final battle between Christ and Satan. Her imprisonment and death are covered in explicit detail.

Chloe's martyrdom has to be understood first in the unique blend of Christianity and guns that Left Behind provides. No other martyr in the history of rapture fiction or perhaps in all of Christian hagiography starts off so well armed. Jenkins reminds us repeatedly of Chloe's affinity for guns and her desire to have them with her. In the midst of the tribulation, her mindset is clearly military. In the bunker she admits her preference to 'pray and pass the ammunition' when discussing how to interact with the Antichrist's forces.[25] When she heads out of the bunker on her ill-fated mission, she brings her Uzi with her.

Yet when she is captured by the forces of the Antichrist, she does not use her gun, but instead turns to words as weapons. Chloe's sharp tongue and sarcastic attitude surely take her a great distance from the women as paragons of gentle virtue that dominate earlier rapture fiction. In direct contrast to Hester's straightforward loveliness, she is rude and mean-spirited in communication with her captors. Virtue, for Chloe, means strength under pressure, her memorization of Bible verses and her ability not to reveal the location of her family while being tortured. Expressions of love or concern for her captors, present in Jesus' own example, are consigned to the abstract. In her cell, she reflects on her growth as a believer: 'The more she learned and the more she knew and the more she saw examples of other believers with true compassion for the predicaments of lost people, the more Chloe matured in her faith. That was manifest in a sorrow over people's souls, a desperation that they see the truth and turn to Christ before it was too late'.[26] Yet clearly her captors are beyond redemption and therefore unworthy of this compassion. In her captivity, she shares the same tone of voice and

25. Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, *Armageddon* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), p. 19.

26. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Armageddon*, p. 232.

dismissive outlook as her captors. As she nears her death, an angel 'Caleb' gives her the power to speak about her faith, but not the power to love.

As a young, 'beautiful' Christian martyr, Chloe's 'image' becomes central to the narrative. This is not the effusive recitation of 'beauty' that is important in *Be Thou Prepared* and *Raptured.* On the one hand, one of Chloe's captors comes to 'make Chloe up' for the television cameras. Chloe is not concerned about this kind of appearance. Instead she is concerned about appearing to be a Christian while on television. While standing at the guillotine and, with the help of angelic intervention, preparing to give her last words of testimony to her television audience, Chloe first has to overcome an impulse of violence against her antagonist. 'In her flesh she wanted to wrench away and spit at him, but she was aware of the international television audience and that this was her last opportunity to impact anyone for Christ.'[27]

Her portrait of a fierce and even vicious Christian womanhood stands as an important contrast to the tradition. Clearly the boundaries of faithful womanhood have expanded beyond the dutiful, beautiful and gentle. Chloe speaks her mind as forcefully as any man. She is strong, decisive and eager to do battle. Her death is not about her virtue so much as about the spectacle of her faith in the face of opposition.

Chloe's representation in the Left Behind series is illustrative of the ambivalence about women's power that is at work in American evangelicalism and dispensationalism in particular. When the rapture occurs, Chloe is a student at godless Stanford and is not raptured because she is too intellectual to be a believer. When she converts, her intelligence transposes into 'spunkiness' that is supposed to make her cute and adventurous. As the scars of the tribulation pile up, she loses her initial beauty, but keeps something that makes her attractive to her husband, whose appearance and physical beauty are remarked upon more often than hers.

The specific ambivalence about Chloe's power is how such a talented woman should properly occupy herself. The family-values orientation that guides the book suggests that after Chloe marries Buck and has a child, she should stay home to care for their son. Home is a very loose word since the tranquil domestic picture provided by this ideology is not possible during the tribulation. The Christians live in abandoned buildings and bunkers. Furthermore, the tribulation that Jenkins imagines has far too much labour to be accomplished for Christians to allow one such talented person to do nothing. So Chloe becomes 'CEO' of a Christian cooperative that allows goods to be transported globally in a secret, underground network. To accomplish this, she works from a computer at home, while caring for

27. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Armageddon*, p. 256.

her son. She is both a full-time mother *and* a CEO. Clearly the guidelines for Christian womanhood are undergoing a dramatic expansion.

While women in rapture fiction are often in need of help and rescue, women martyrs play such a significant role in rapture fiction because women can be acknowledged as great heroes of the faith, but can also be rendered powerless. They disappear rather than act. Since the subtext of dispensationalism, insofar as it applies to gender, is to get women to move out of the way so men can retake the churches from their overly feminized character, it makes sense that faithful women would have to step aside. In the case of rapture fiction, this happens as faithful women are either raptured or martyred.

Yet somehow this does not provide men with the platform for leadership one might expect. The men who surround Chloe—her husband, Buck, and her father, Rayford—are like Joel, unable to prevent her death or perform rescue. The parts of *Armageddon* that do not detail Chloe's death detail the helplessness of these men to save her. Like Joel, we know them as physically strong and good-looking. Unlike Joel, however, Jenkins's heroes mostly wring their hands as they realize Chloe's fate. They do not even have anybody to punch.

Like rapture heroes of previous generations, Rayford and Buck fulfill all the cultural expectations of manhood. They are physically strong, successful, handsome and worldly. One reason, perhaps, that Rayford continues to be burdened by an attraction to Hattie is to show that, despite his faith, he remains a sexually potent man. Christianity seems to have a softening effect on men, and Rayford's lust is a way that his creators can demonstrate his masculinity. Yet, there is no question that his Christian faith changes him, and those changes are marked with some ambivalence. Soon after his conversion, Rayford tries to understand his wife's faith by dressing like her (wearing one of her aprons to cook Chloe dinner) and acting like her: putting his family first and using traditionally female modes of nurture to care for Chloe.

Buck desires to assert his leadership over women early in the series. There is his perennial struggle over what it means to be the 'spiritual leader' in his family with Chloe, who has little interest in his leadership. But even before that, when Buck is working surreptitiously for the Antichrist, he struggles to assert genuine power over a woman named Verna. Verna's refusal to capitulate to him, we learn, is because she is a lesbian. When people are behaving properly, the text seems to argue, they know their proper place, and they correctly acknowledge their leaders. But improper sexuality and hierarchical confusion go together. The conflict between Buck and Verna is the conflict between good and evil, proper and improper, order and chaos.

We learn as the series progresses that a Christian man is a man of deep emotion. His Christianity is more of the heart than of the head. While Left

Behind does contain sermonizing passages similar to those found in most rapture fiction—expositions on biblical texts and calls to belief—it shows its characters, especially its male characters, embracing Christianity and becoming adept at expressing feeling. This represents a significant shift, and reflects, I would argue, changes in evangelical understandings of manhood that have been embodied in men's organizations like The Promise Keepers. Male 'headship' is promoted, but in the course of asserting leadership, men must become more sensitive, more caring and more emotional.

The issue of male leadership nearly always arises in Left Behind in conjunction with who is the proper leader of the Tribulation Force. The eventually worldwide organization settles (without democratic process) on Rayford, and Rayford is frequently referred to a 'natural leader' for no reason that is explicitly given. The one unspoken reason is, perhaps, the combination of his race and gender. In several different scenes brown, black and female people concede leadership to him.[28]

The other person who concedes leadership to the proper leader is the intellectual. In most of rapture fiction, one stock character is the overly-intellectual, effeminate minister who leads his flock in the wrong direction. Men of 'great learning' are typically looked upon with derision and suspicion. Rapture fiction has often given these men satirical names like Dr Know-It-All, Dr Morehead and Dr Bland. This demonstrates the trend in rapture fiction toward anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism, the path through which dispensationalism became a powerful mode of popular belief, often over and against clergy.

Left Behind does not have this same character. Instead, the man of great learning is a Jewish scientist named Chaim Rozenweig, and Dr Rozenweig does take a highly intellectual path to faith. He is the source of many of the books' lectures on the subject of biblical faith, and he is treated with a great deal more respect than previous intellectuals, though for reasons that are never articulated he doesn't have the same 'natural' leadership as Rayford or Buck. Perhaps this has something to do with his Jewishness, his status as a non-American, or his intellectual capacity. For whatever reason, he is not the true leader that Rayford is.

Buried in dispensational fiction is a certain set of paradoxical assertions about male leadership. As dispensationalism and fundamentalism walked hand in hand through the twentieth century, they agreed that female leadership was a hallmark of decline; yet in fiction, they couldn't quite articulate a truly heroic male leader who wasn't also anxious about his leadership. To

28. I examine this in 'What Social and Political Messages Appear in the Left Behind Books?: A Literary Discussion of Millenarian Fiction', in Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 184-86.

be a Christian meant to submit to the lordship of Christ, a position that could not be reconciled with worldly success. And yet, as conservative Christianity embraced its broader culture's definition of manhood, it couldn't conceive of a less-than-worldly hero. This odd predicament is made visible in characters from Tom Hammond to Rayford Steele, only intensifying its paradoxes as time goes on.

Popular fiction is always in dialogue with life as people live it. It is not a reflection of reality nor is it completely separate from reality. One cannot make an immediate line from the treatment of characters in the Left Behind series to declarations by Southern Baptists that women are not designed by God to lead. For example, my research into the reading practices of readers of the Left Behind series taught me that gender was not a primary category through which readers interpreted their interaction with the novels.[29] The primary distinction that interested readers was the distinction between Christian and non-Christian. This by no means excludes gender roles and stereotypes from being significant, but it does qualify that significance. Readers were not consciously attending to gender, were not interested in my questions about it and resisted the idea that it mattered. In their own lives and relationships, they almost never described a model of male headship and female submission as being meaningful and valuable, nor did I hear my 'predicament of male leadership' reflected in their comments. They were looking for models of faithfulness, and they found these in the strength of the characters who lived under tremendous pressure. This image of perseverance enlivened their imaginations for at least a few hours of absorbed reading. Thus, when we are considering the role of gender in dispensational fiction, we should be clear that we are attending to a secondary interest of the texts' readers.

Another problem with fiction is the question of author intent. Authors of popular fiction often answer questions about scholars' criticisms of their work by saying, 'That was not my intent.' The problem here is a disagreement about how fiction works. For many popular authors and for their audiences, fiction is understood as a work of the conscious mind. An author is able, through writing, to capture his imagination on paper and has total control over the final product. Critics, however, have never understood fiction this way. When the imagination begins to function in the creation of a narrative, many elements, and even a deep understanding of what is happening, escape even the author's grasp. Popular authors, especially, work with an already given set of ideologies that their work does not seek to question. To extend these ideologies, they often draw on already formed stereotypes,

29. See Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, especially Chapter 5.

stock characters and formulaic expressions. The critic's job is to explicate what these mean.

So how should we understand that predicament? Fiction helps make visible some of the deeper models and ideology at work in a worldview. It gives us a way to talk about these models sifted out from the complexities of everyday life. Perhaps then, the way that gender functions in rapture fiction teaches us not how gender works for individual rapture believers but why the pitch for male leadership has not met with much success in American conservative Christianity. It functions in a series of contradictions and is inhibited by the outside culture.

2. Dispensationalism, Conspiracy Theories and Left Behind

Jennie Chapman

Conspiracism, broadly defined, is an interpretive practice that attributes the unfolding of history to a small, secret coterie of elites who wield enormous powers of manipulation and control over a largely unwitting public. The conspiracist constructs a model of history in which nothing is random, accidental or coincidental. Everything is connected, and appearances are almost always deceptive.[1] Though many conspiracy theories are highly specific—focusing on particular events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the death of Princess Diana or the assassination of President Kennedy—others are far vaster in scope. Michael Barkun notes that, since around 1990, a cluster of theories concerning power and secrecy have coalesced around a totalizing 'superconspiracy', connoted by the phrase 'New World Order*',* which claims that an interlocking consortium of individuals and cabals from the worlds of finance, politics and big business is secretly plotting to overthrow nation states and institute a one-world socialist government with a single currency, government and religion.[2] Without assuming that all the members of the diverse and now somewhat fragmented dispensationalist community invest in conspiracist narratives as an explanatory model of history, I argue that the 'paranoid style' generally and New World Order theories in particular have a strong foothold in the evangelical premillennial world-

1. See Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

2. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy,* p. 64. According to Barkun, 1990 is significant because it marked the end of the Cold War, leaving a conspiracy theory vacuum that was once filled with anti-Communist rhetoric. 'New World Order theory', he suggests, 'seemed to provide a graceful way of exiting the domain of international relations and refocusing on domestic politics' (p. 64).

view.[3] This chapter seeks to explore the role this style of thought plays in the most culturally prominent expression of dispensationalism to date—the Left Behind series.

Why Conspiracy?

The conspiracist framework undoubtedly holds many attractions for the mass-market fiction writer. Conspiracies are an almost inevitable part of a number of popular genres including detective stories, thrillers, and action novels, where they allow the authors to inject crucial elements of intrigue and suspense into their narratives, not only engaging the reader but offering her a sense of empowerment through an invitation to join the protagonist in solving the mystery and thus enter an elite, exciting world of gnostic, hidden knowledge. In the case of Left Behind, a series of high-octane supernatural thrillers that has garnered favourable comparisons with the novels of Tom Clancy, these merits have surely influenced the authors' employment of conspiracy motifs.[4] Indeed, conspiracy is perhaps an especially useful device in prophecy fiction. As the outcome of the story is necessarily known in advance (one Left Behind character describes his experience of living in the end times as '[s]ort of like watching a delayed ball game where you already know the final score'), conspiracies can add a frisson of intrigue to an otherwise (by its very nature) predictable narrative.[5] But is it possible that these motifs do something more than merely titillate? Does their presence in LaHaye and Jenkins's depiction of the end times reveal something important about the way in which the authors and audience perceive the world today?

The plot of the first novel, *Left Behind* (1995), is underpinned by a biblicized variation on the aforementioned New World Order superconspiracy theory. Hence, the rise of the Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, is facilitated by a secret cabal of financiers who surreptitiously assist Carpathia in his manipulation of the United Nations. Carpathia's friends in high places pull the strings necessary to remove the current UN secretary-general and have the young Romanian replace him, despite his political inexperience. Once in power, Carpathia is able to use the infrastructure of the United Nations as the basis for global domination, instituting the one-world government,

3. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996 [1st edn 1964]).

4. For example, the inner cover of *Left Behind* carries a quote from *New York Times,* describing how the novel 'combines Tom Clancy-like suspense with touches of romance, high-tech flash and biblical references'.

5. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Armageddon* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), p. 351.

currency and religion dreaded by conspiracists both premillennialist and secular. It is no accident that the United Nations should be selected as the Antichrist's foil. The organization has come to occupy a central position in end-times conspiracism, revealing not only the politically conservative fears of multilateralism and challenges to national sovereignty harboured by many dispensationalists, but perhaps also the underlying fatalism of a doctrine in which attempts to foster peace among nations are misguided at best and satanic at worst.[6] The texts additionally incorporate a range of broader structures that underpin the logic of conspiracy: for example, the belief in persecution; the fear of outsiders; suspicion of institutional authority; a dualistic worldview which emphatically eschews ambiguity and relativism; the rejection of dominant narratives and normative constructions of social truth; and the tendency towards violence or violent rhetoric.

It is often through the language of conspiracy that dispensationalists bridge the cognitive space between the future prophesied in Scripture and their daily lives. The conspiracy theory performs an important function in connecting eschatological 'signs of the times' to current events. In doing so, it offers a compelling alternative to the dominant (i.e. 'secular' or 'liberal' and therefore for many dispensationalists inherently suspect) narrative. It conjectures, for example, that certain wars may be less to do with the strategic imperatives publicly proclaimed by politicians than with the signs God gives to his people as the end approaches; that certain leaders may not be simply dishonourable or corrupt but harbingers of a one-world-obsessed Antichrist.[7] In these hermeneutic gestures we observe the high degree of flexibility that is built into New World Order theory: by drawing an analogy between the cabals of the New World Order and the activities of the Antichrist and his minions, dispensationalists can quite easily adapt the basic conspiracist narrative to fit their eschatological precepts. This process of articulation is assisted by the fact that the interpretive style of today's prophecy popularizers mirrors that of conspiracy theorists. Both piece

6. The patriotism of American dispensationalists such as LaHaye would appear to be more of a product of their conservativism than their eschatological views; popular contemporary dispensationalists such as Hal Lindsey note (often with some dismay) that there is no mention of America in biblical prophecy.

7. For example, many contemporary prophecy popularizers, including the Left Behind authors, are emphatic in their connections between the 'wars and rumours of wars' described in the 'little apocalypse' of Matthew 24–25 and current conflicts; in *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), Hal Lindsey strikes a series of analogies between the impending tribulation and contemporary geopolitical events such as the rise of Communist China, Soviet expansionism, the formation of the European Common Market and conflict in the Middle East, giving rise to charges that his hermeneutic is rather more historicist than futurist and therefore quite a departure from dispensationalism proper.

together disparate evidence in order to create a coherent story that gives meaning and purpose to history. Conspiracists often begin with a theory and subsequently accumulate evidence that supports it; similarly, most political, cultural and economic developments can be slotted into a preformed eschatological narrative—one popular rapture Web site features a daily newscast that frames its reports according to contemporary dispensationalist preoccupations.[8]

Separatism and the Myth of Victimhood

'As it coalesced as a political force in the late 1970s', write Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons, 'the new Christian Right adopted many themes from the Birch Society and consequently became a major source of conspiracist narrative during the 1980s and 1990s.'[9] Thus right-wing conspiracies initially propagated in secular circles have since been appropriated by conservative evangelical leaders as a strategy for politicizing the evangelical grassroots.[10] LaHaye, for example, has used the notion of a 'humanist plot' to rouse Christians to action, insisting that while the seven-year tribulation narrated in the Left Behind series 'is predestined and will surely come to pass … the pre-tribulation tribulation—that is, the tribulation that will engulf this country if liberal humanists are permitted to take control of our government—is neither predestined nor necessary'.[11] By proposing the notion of pretribulation tribulation, LaHaye shifts his readers' attention from the 'by-and-by' of a prophesied future to the present moment, asking them to analogize current events involving liberal politicians, the Middle East and 'smart chip' technologies with prophecies about the Antichrist, Babylon and the mark of the Beast.

8. See the Rapture Index at http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html, which assesses and charts the prophetic significance of various events—false christs, occult activity, ecumenism and even interest rates—and calculates from this data the proximity of the rapture: 'The higher the number, the faster we're moving towards the occurrence of pre-tribulation rapture.' At the time of writing, the chart showed a very high 'fasten your seatbelts' rapture index of 163 (accessed 18 August 2008).

9. Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guildford Press, 2000), p. 198.

10. It is widely reported that LaHaye was himself involved in the John Birch Society, giving lectures to and running training seminars for the organization in the 1960s. See, for example, Rob Boston, 'If best-selling end-times author Tim LaHaye has his way, church-state separation will be Left Behind', *Church and State* 55.2 (2002), available online at http://www.au.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5601&news_iv_ctrl=0&abbr=cs_&JServSessionIdr011=lw0i262th1.app13a, accessed 7 August 2008.

11. Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1980), pp. 217-18.

Yet this clearly paranoid style of rhetoric did not originate with Tim LaHaye and his ilk. Left Behind can be read as a palimpsest of the various moral, political and cultural worldviews that have accumulated around the core of American dispensationalism since the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, while the ideas expressed in recent prophecy literature often depart, as Mark Sweetnam has demonstrated, in several important ways from the tenets of orthodox dispensationalism, I wish to show how some of the religious proclivities of modern dispensationalism's first proponent, John Nelson Darby, are taken up by the writers of Left Behind.[12] I am particularly interested in how Darby's strong disdain for and desire to separate from 'the world'; his denunciation of collectivism, or as he put it, 'association'; and his cultivation of a myth of victimhood have been articulated in LaHaye and Jenkins's contemporary eschatological narrative. My contention is that Darbyite thought, with its moral dualism, separatism and otherworldliness, fostered in early dispensationalists a predisposition towards the paranoid style—a proclivity that was bolstered by the fundamentalists' humiliation during the 1920s controversy and reinforced by the apocalyptically charged anxiety of the Cold War years, finally reaching full flower during the era of evangelical political mobilization in the last quarter of the twentieth century.[13] Ironically, those very ideas that fostered a deep sense of apoliticism in Darby and his followers are now being pressed into the service of politics by their twentieth-century successors.

'In our contact with the world', Darby wrote, 'we are always defiled. Our feet are on the earth. We are washed; but we walk on the earth that is defiled.'[14] For Darby, a former Church of Ireland clergyman who seceded from the church and assumed leadership of the Plymouth Brethren move-

12. See Mark S. Sweetnam, 'Tensions in Dispensational Eschatology', in Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 173-92.

13. The 1910s and 1920s saw a struggle to define American Protestantism and resulted in a schism between modernists/liberals who believed that adapting Christian teachings to new scientific discoveries was necessary for the survival of the church into the modern age and so-called fundamentalists who advocated an uncompromisingly literalist doctrinal approach. This conflict was brought into relief by the Scopes Trial of 1925, in which legislation outlawing the teaching of evolution in school science classes was challenged by teacher John Scopes. For detailed analysis of the trial and its lasting effects on American Protestantism, see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

14. John Nelson Darby, *Prophetic Writings,* II*,* in William Kelly (ed.), *Collected Writings of J.N. Darby* (London: G. Morrish [n.d.]), p. 77.

ment, the world was hopelessly corrupt and becoming inexorably worse.[15] The church was rife with apostasy and worldliness, more concerned with 'appealing unto Caesar' than watching for the coming millennium.[16] Far from engaging with a degraded world in the hope of Christianizing it, Darby believed the only moral choice for the Bible-believing Christian was to avoid any association with it: in fact, '[s]o far as the Christian enters into the ways of the world, it is a complete prostitution'.[17] Separation from the world is not merely desirable: to do otherwise is positively sinful.

The desire for separation articulated by Darby has a biblical rationale, but may also have been influenced by the political and religious context in which Darby produced the exegetical work that led to the construction of his dispensational system.[18] According to Crawford Gribben, the established churches in Ireland and Scotland perceived the Brethren as a 'threat to the social and ecclesiastical *status quo*', and produced scathing polemics against Brethren creeds.[19] Jonathan Burnham concurs: 'to the outside world the early Brethren were often perceived as religious zealots, at odds with both English society and the cause of true religion'.[20] But Darby found a way to ameliorate this antagonism by understanding it as a necessary element of the earthly experience of the true church. 'All the precepts of the gospel suppose a state of persecution', he proclaimed. 'Everything supposes opposition.'[21]

A myth of persecution, then, was adopted by the earliest dispensationalists as a palliative narrative through which their sense of victimization could be understood and accepted, even embraced. But despite the cultural and political prominence enjoyed by American evangelicals at the turn of the

15. Darby was not strictly speaking the 'founder' of the Brethren, though this is often assumed; rather, he developed a series of theological ideas already nascent within Dublin's evangelical community.

16. Jonathan D. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict: The Controversial Relationship between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 27.

17. Darby, *Prophetic Writings,* II*,* p. 101.

18. Much of Darby's antipathy for the world is enunciated as part of his commentary on Revelation, particularly the passages that relate to Babylon. He writes, for example, 'The great principle seen in Babylon is worldliness … The most abominable form of worldliness is that of those who call themselves Christians, separated unto God by the blood of the Lamb, and are living in worldliness' (Darby, *Prophetic Writings,* II*,* p. 62).

19. Crawford Gribben, '"The worst sect a Christian man can meet": Opposition to the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and Scotland, 1859–1900', *Scottish Studies Review* 3.2 (2002), pp. 34-53.

20. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict*, p. 97.

21. Darby, *Prophetic Writings,* II*,* p. 144.

twenty-first century, it is a narrative that remains potent in the culture. Gribben argues that 'the paradox of evangelical eschatology is the same in the early twenty-first century as it was in the late nineteenth: evangelicals are embracing pessimism and separatism at precisely the moment when their influence is at its height'.[22] The Left Behind texts in many ways embody the malaise that Gribben identifies, despite their triumphalist refrain that '[w]e've already won … It's just a case of going through the motions.'[23] The myth of victimhood is introduced early in the series and becomes increasingly prominent in the course of the narrative. But while this persecution is often quite real in the context of the novels—the Antichrist finally deals with dissenting Christians by public execution—at other times it is provoked or even simulated by the protagonists. Left Behind's hero figure, Rayford, is plagued by thoughts of the abuse he might receive for his beliefs, reacting with acute defensiveness to even the *possibility* of a challenge to his faith by a nonbeliever. Shortly after his conversion, for example, Rayford commences (with some ostentation, it must be said) to read the Bible in the company of a junior work colleague, asserting pointedly, 'You understand that I don't care what you think of me, don't you?' Interestingly, the colleague in question, Nick, seems indifferent towards Rayford's religious proclivities, and hardly affronted by them. When Rayford asks Nick—who has thus far sat silently—whether he is offending him by reading scripture, Nick is noncommittal: 'As long as you don't expect me to listen'.[24] Yet Rayford goes on to convince himself of his workmate's outright hostility. '*Doesn't want to talk to me anymore,* Rayford thought. *Knew what was coming and shut me down before I could open my mouth.*'[25] We should note here that Rayford's choice of reading matter has not been challenged by Nick: in fact, faced with Nick's utter lack of interest, Rayford is forced to goad him into responding: 'Is it going to offend you if I sit and read this for a while?' he asks as Nick remains impassive. In this passage, it seems that Rayford is actively seeking hostility towards his faith. But if Gribben is correct in his contention that dispensationalism's 'credibility depends on the increasing marginalization of evangelical faith', then Rayford's odd behaviour can be understood as an act of identity-fashioning in which his sense of selfhood is

22. Crawford Gribben, 'After *Left Behind*—The Paradox of Evangelical Pessimism', in Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 113-30, 114.

23. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Apollyon* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), p. 160.

24. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Tribulation Force* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), p. 2.

25. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Tribulation Force*, p. 1 (emphasis in original).

negatively dependent on the constitutive figure of the unbelieving 'other'.[26] The myth of victimhood that underpins LaHaye and Jenkins's rendition of evangelicalism is a necessary component of a faithful identity.

It is this sense of persecution and victimization that legitimizes the Tribulation Force's decision to eschew evangelism in favour of escape. Even in the earlier books—and certainly in the later ones—few attempts are made by the Christian protagonists to spread the word of the gospel. The members of the Tribulation Force initially seem caught between the evangelical imperative to go out into the world and witness, and the fundamentalist dictum that casts the world as a dangerous place into which Bible-believing Christians venture at their peril. But they are finally unable to effectively negotiate their liminal position 'in the world but not of the world'. Instead, they choose what might be considered the path of least resistance, increasingly sequestering themselves from the world in order to keep pure their fragile, beleaguered evangelical identities. And the further removed the Tribulation Force is from its enemies, the more reified and mysterious those enemies become, and the more paranoid the Tribulation Force grows in turn, moving from underground bunker to safe house to fortified city in a desperate effort to maintain the spiritual purity Darby envisioned for the true church.

The Threat of Humanism: Tim LaHaye's Apocalyptic Apologetics

Tim LaHaye's rise to prominence began some twenty-five years prior to the publication of *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* in 1995. A graduate of the fundamentalist Bob Jones University and the conservative Western Seminary, LaHaye became involved in politics through a number of conservative Christian advocacy groups, including his own Californians for Biblical Morality, established in 1979.[27] In 1981 he founded the Council for National Policy, a conservative 'alternative to … the liberalism of the Council on Foreign Relations', with other notable conservatives including Paul Weyrich and Jerry Falwell—although the full membership list has been kept strictly confidential.[28] During the 1970s and 1980s, while he was gaining fame as a key member of the Moral Majority and as cofounder (with his wife, Beverley) of the antifeminist organization Concerned Women for America, LaHaye produced a number of books that reflected his strongly conservative, fundamentalist views, including *The Battle for the*

26. Gribben, 'After *Left Behind*', p. 115.

27. LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, p. 199.

28. David D. Kirkpatrick, 'Club of the Most Powerful Gathers in Strictest Privacy', *New York Times*, 28 August 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/08/28/politics/campaign/28conserve.html, accessed 9 March 2011.

Mind (1980), *The Battle for the Family* (1982) and *The Battle for the Public Schools* (1983). It was in these apologetics that LaHaye's comprehensive and wide-ranging theory of a 'secular humanist conspiracy' took shape. These polemical texts, with their hermeneutic of suspicion and New World Order conspiracism, can help us to understand in more detail the themes that animate, albeit more subtextually, the Left Behind series.

A brief note concerning my methodology may be in order here, for I am conscious that the intentional fallacy looms over an analysis that reads fiction vis-à-vis its author's opinions, values and beliefs—which in our present case are set forth in LaHaye's nonfiction texts. Certainly, such caveats would be entirely appropriate with regard to most other forms of fictional literature, and I would concur that the practice of reading literature in search of what an author *really* means in the light of her life experiences or public pronouncements, while not as heinous as some might have it, is often a flawed project. However, I think the Left Behind novels occupy a liminal space that troubles traditional literary categories. Unlike what might be cautiously described as 'high' literature, their artistic or aesthetic credentials are subordinated to their functionality as documents of evangelical witness. And perhaps in contrast to 'popular', or what was once called 'middlebrow', literature, their imperative to entertain is only secondary to their imperative to edify. Far from being *l'art pour l'art*, LaHaye and Jenkins's texts are additionally—perhaps primarily—evangelical exhortations, devotional tracts and political treatises. Left Behind is suffused with—and is ultimately the product of—the authors' moral, religious and political views, views shared by the ideal reader it constructs. Taking the hybrid nature of the Left Behind text into account, we must tailor our analytical approach accordingly; this perhaps means that the utility of the 'death of the author' approach that has become orthodoxy in contemporary literary studies must be reconsidered.[29] In the case of Left Behind and evangelical fiction more generally, an analysis that is attentive to the constitutive work of the authors' own beliefs and values may usefully expand the growing literature on this important cultural phenomenon.

At the heart of LaHaye's apologetics is the premise that 'we are being controlled by a small but very influential cadre of committed humanists'.[30] Liberals, feminists, prochoice lobbyists, gays, intellectuals and atheists are allied, he claims, in a quest to create a humanist America that will pave the way for its eventual secession to a one-world socialist regime. Though this group represents only a tiny minority of the general population—LaHaye

29. See Roland Barthes's seminal essay, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 143-48.

30. LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, p. 142.

cites Gallup polls which suggest that 84 percent of Americans affirm the enduring validity of the Ten Commandments, while 94 percent believe in a Supreme Being—it exercises disproportionate influence in government, education and the media.[31] But how has such a numerically insignificant group of atheists and liberals managed to take control of a largely 'pro-moral' America, asks LaHaye? Through a deliberate plan, he claims, to infiltrate those areas of public life where they can exercise the greatest influence. This, he suggests, is why the 'six per cent' of American citizens who reject Christianity and embrace secular humanism are disproportionately represented in public office, education and in every area of the media. Such views are given undue prominence not because they reflect a broad American consensus, but rather because 'millions of nonhumanists have been duped by [the humanists'] designs, naïvely accepting some of their teachings'.[32] That '[m]ost of our people don't even know a war is being waged, and when they hear of it, they refuse to accept it as fact' only underlines the insidious efficacy of the conspiracy.[33]

In *Mind Siege,* LaHaye delineates the 'five basic tenets of humanism': 'atheism', 'evolution', 'amorality', 'autonomous man', and 'globalism'. The last tenet is of particular interest for our enquiry, for it is here that LaHaye's conspiracy about a New World Order, to be inaugurated under the auspices of the United Nations, is outlined:

> The humanists discovered early that the United Nations offered a tremendous springboard to a one-world government with a socialistic economic system. Humanism's purpose is to supersede national boundaries by a worldwide organization possessing international sovereignty. Many believe the UN provides them such a vehicle, which is why so many American leaders in the legion UN organizations are committed humanists.[34]

It is also important to note how residual anticommunist impulses emerge in the peculiarly socialistic emphasis of the one-world government foreseen by the author. According to Berlet and Lyons, the 1980s and 1990s 'saw a shift among many Christian Right leaders from anticommunist scapegoating to a more comprehensive and elastic conspiracy theory centred on a sus-

31. Tim LaHaye, *The Hidden Censors* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), p. 14; Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Family* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1982), p. 43.

32. LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, p. 58.

33. Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Public Schools* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1983), p. 200.

34. Tim LaHaye and David Noebel, *Mind Siege* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), p. 83.

pected plan by secular humanists to take God out of society'.[35] For LaHaye, however, I would argue that humanism *is* communism in all but name: in other words, secular humanism becomes a code word for communism. Through this rhetorical sleight of hand, the author is able to erase or at least elide the historical fact of the Soviet Union's disintegration, and reinscribe Cold War paranoia onto a post-Cold War narrative.

The employment of the phrase 'secular humanism' also has a salutary effect on the author's credibility. By avoiding explicitly labelling his antagonists as communists, LaHaye deflects potential criticisms that might dismiss his observations as anachronistic Cold War paranoia, and peremptorily evades charges of crackpot conspiracism. LaHaye employs 'thin end of the wedge' logic to delineate the precise nature of the relationship between humanism and communism, which he understands not as discrete ideologies but as positions on a sloping continuum whereby accepting the former precipitates an inexorable slide towards the latter. 'Humanism is the mother, communism the daughter; humanism is the root, communism the branch', he explains, suggesting that the inevitable outcome of humanistic philosophies is far-left totalitarianism.[36] By doing so, the author hails a reader who understands that, despite a vastly altered geopolitical landscape, insidious forms of communism remain a very real danger to America's promoral majority. The denouement of the Cold War has not removed Russia from end-times discourse; rather, writers such as LaHaye and Jenkins rearticulate Cold War paranoia to fit current concerns, or simply reiterate it in coded language.

Secular Humanism and the New World Order

'Former president George Bush did not originate the idea of a "new world order"', write LaHaye and Jenkins in their prophecy guide, *Are We Living in the End Times?* 'He merely popularized the phrase. Satan, the master conspirator, had just such a world government in mind centuries ago.'[37] The authors are indeed correct in their observation that New World Order theory has a history that reaches much further back than 1991, when George H.W. Bush inadvertently sparked a frenzy of speculation among conspiracy theorists by uttering the loaded phrase in a speech to Congress.[38] The belief that secret elites are colluding to engender a global, socialist, totalitarian

35. Berlet and Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America*, p. 228.

36. LaHaye and Noebel, *Mind Siege*, 83.

37. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), p. 160.

38. See http://www.millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/digitalarchive/speeches/spe_1990_0911_bush, accessed 19 August 2008.

government has its roots in Illuminati conspiracy theories which can be traced at least as far back as 1798, when the Scottish scientist John Robison produced the Illuminati theory ur-text, *Proofs of a Conspiracy.*[39]

But since Robison's day the notion of a New World Order has become so ubiquitous in a variety of conspiracy discourses as to have been almost emptied of intrinsic meaning: hence, New World Order theories appear across the spectrum of secular, New Age and premillennialist conspiracy cultures. In the premillennialist context with which we are concerned here, the New World Order is the name given to the regime that the Antichrist will inaugurate in the wake of the rapture. In Left Behind, our antagonist uses the existing infrastructure of the UN as a platform from which to launch a diabolical regime that does away with national governments, currencies and cultures. By the end of the twentieth century, New World Order ideas had become so thoroughly entwined with popular dispensationalism that Robert Alan Goldberg contended that '[v]irtually no-one of significance in the domain [of premillennialism] rejects New World Order beliefs'.[40] What is interesting, however, about the conspiracy theories alluded to in Left Behind is that they are most often referred to with little explanatory context, emerging as floating signifiers in the text. To make full sense of these allusions, the reader must complete the circle of signification initiated by the authors. The ideal reader envisioned by LaHaye and Jenkins, therefore, is familiar with the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Christian Right, and thus prone to understand these code words as part of a paranoid interpretation of current events: specifically, that 'Christian' America is in the thrall of a secular humanist plot.

The repetition of the term 'New World Order' is the clearest example of the almost surreptitious integration of conspiracy code into the Left Behind narrative. In the very first book, *Left Behind,* the prospective Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, holds court with the American press following a resounding speech to the UN assembly: 'with the end of the Cold War in the 1990s … your next president, Mr. Bush, recognized what he called the 'new world order', which resonated deep within my young heart'.[41] By having Carpathia cite a speech that has acquired legendary status among students of the New World Order, the authors forge an implicit connection between right-wing conspiracism and dispensational eschatology—which, as we have seen, share enough structural and rhetorical characteristics to make this analogy plausible. By doing so, they hail an

39. Lindsay Porter, *Who Are the Illuminati?* (London: Collins & Brown, 2005), p. 16.

40. Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 184.

41. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995), 182.

audience already familiar with—and moreover, sympathetic to—New World Order discourse. Through such subtextual intimations, the novels' political sympathies and imperatives are revealed. The authors continue to use the phrase to describe Carpathia's regime throughout the series—in fact, its insertion into the narrative becomes more frequent as the series progresses. Carpathia repeats the phrase during another speech later in *Left Behind,* and it is used again in *Assassins, Armageddon,* and four times in the final instalment, *Glorious Appearing*. Readers familiar with the authors' previous nonfiction work will be fully cognizant of the phrase's ramifications.

Furthermore, the citing of particular phrases that appear in most New World Order narratives interpellates a knowledgeable reader who understands their significance in the wider context of a conspiracist worldview:

> Alan, there are books about this stuff. People make a hobby of ascribing all manner of evil to the Trilateral Commission, the Illuminati, even the Freemasons, for goodness sake. Dirk thought Todd-Cothran and Stonagal were part of something called the Council of Ten or the Council of Ten Wise Men. So what? It's harmless.[42]

At first glance, this quote seems to enunciate an *anti*-conspiracist position, as Buck derides and repudiates Alan's conspiracy theories. Yet even as he does so, he reels off a list of conspirators—'the Trilateral Commission, the Illuminati, even the Freemasons'—that will be familiar to some readers as part of the incremental plot against Christians that will culminate in the tribulation. The last reference to the 'Council of Ten', meanwhile, alludes to a common belief among conspiracy-minded dispensationalists that a gathering of ten important politicians—or ten nations—will be the embodiment of the ten-horned beast described in Revelation (17.3, 16). Crucially, the authors' maintenance of a critical distance between themselves and their conspiracy-minded characters pre-empts and neutralizes the accusation that the novels engage in paranoid ranting at the expense of serious exegesis. Nevertheless, the fact that Alan and Dirk turn out to be correct—there really *is* a conspiracy involving all these organizations, as the knowledgeable reader of the novels will have discerned—countervails the negative connotations of the term 'conspiracy'. As the well-worn maxim goes, you can't be paranoid if they really are out to get you.

The authors thus hail an ideal reader who is already *au fait* with and sympathetic to New World Order theory: as such, the veracity of conspiracist discourse is assumed a priori. By using conspiracy code words in Left Behind, LaHaye and Jenkins can invoke a whole range of right-wing conspiracy theories without potentially compromising their religious impera-

42. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind,* 127.

tives and credibility by rehearsing them explicitly. The novels interpellate the canonical language of American right-wing conspiracy theories even as they ostensibly dismiss the theories themselves, perhaps because these stories have proved so effective in energizing America's evangelical population. In his *Battle* series, LaHaye effectively utilizes the paranoid style as a rallying cry to fellow believers. After cataloguing the myriad social ills inflicted upon the 'true' America by humanist interlopers—from communist messages in Hollywood films, to the 'look-say' method of teaching reading, to antidiscrimination laws that protect gay men and women—LaHaye often ends his diatribes with a call to arms: 'We moralists have been silent long enough! ... Since you now realize that we really represent the majority in this country, you must raise your voice so all can hear.'[43] LaHaye's belief in a secular humanist plot to 'drive the Christian church in America underground' animates his political zeal; perhaps tales of a concerted anti-Christian conspiracy are the only effective way to motivate those premillennialists who have traditionally maintained an apolitical position, preferring to direct their energies towards evangelism.[44]

Yet, curiously, the conspiracism depicted within the Left Behind narrative lacks the teeth to similarly motivate the novels' fictional Christians: the preordained nature of human experience during the tribulation makes political action futile. The paranoia of the characters—directed not just towards avowed supporters of the Antichrist but outsiders of all spiritual hues—manifests itself not in aggressive evangelism but Darbyite separatism. The protagonists are politically paralyzed by their own apocalyptic certainty concerning both the trajectory of history and the fate of their own eternal souls. It is true that the novels' setting in the apocalyptic 'not-yet' problematizes straightforward comparisons between the postrapture world of the narrative and the 'normal time' inhabited by its readers.[45] Nonetheless, it may be that, unlike the conspiracism of the LaHaye apologetics, Left Behind's paranoid motif may have an enervating effect upon its readers. Despite living in 'normal time' and thus being afforded greater agency than their heroes in the novels, Left Behind's readers may also choose to withdraw and await the glorious appearing. The (quite literal) bunker mentality of the novels' evangelical characters—with whom the readers are supposed to identify—may have the unintended effect of creating exactly the sort of political quietism that LaHaye excoriates elsewhere in his oeuvre.

43. LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind,* p. 192.

44. LaHaye, *The Hidden Censors*, p. 74.

45. Timothy Weber offers a cogent analysis of the premillennial tension between the present 'now' and the anticipated millennial 'not yet' in *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

When Is a Conspiracy Not a Conspiracy?

The desire for credibility is, I would argue, the primary reason for the authors' coyness when it comes to endorsing or elaborating certain conspiracy memes. Even in the apologetics, where the connections between LaHaye's claims and contemporary conspiracy theories are far more readily discernible, the author is reluctant to state his own position on such notions. In *The Battle for the Public Schools,* the author states that '[m]any people … maintain that a conspiracy has been operating, first in Europe and presently in our country, in an attempt to destroy Judeo-Christian moral values'—a claim that quite obviously alludes to Illuminati theory.[46] But despite giving tacit credence to the claims of these 'knowledgeable parents and taxpayers', and extensively and approvingly quoting conspiracist 'experts' such as Dan Smoot and Claire Chambers, LaHaye is professedly equivocal as to whether such a conspiracy really exists.[47] Rather, he intimates, it may be a phenomenon that looks and operates very much like a conspiracy, thus circumventing the taboo attached to a literal interpretation of that signifier. Peter Knight notes that the slippage between literal and metaphorical conspiracy theories—between 'actual' conspiracies and phenomena that only 'look like' conspiracies—has allowed the proponents of such ideas to disavow the conspiracist logic of their views: both Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf, for example, state that their studies of contemporary sexism are categorically not conspiracy theories.[48] There are good reasons for this evasiveness: Knight observes that 'the very label "conspiracy theory" often functions as an accusation of unprofessional research and unsophisticated thinking', while Mark Fenster states that '[i]n political discussions … one can hurl no greater insult than to describe another's position as the product of a "conspiracy theory"'.[49]

46. LaHaye, *The Battle for the Public Schools,* p. 46.

47. Dan Smoot is a former FBI agent turned conservative commentator whose weekly *Dan Smoot Report* delineated a large-scale communist conspiracy operating in America; he also wrote *The Invisible Government,* which accused the Council on Foreign Relations of plotting a one-world socialist government. See http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20224/20224-h/20224-h.htm for the full text, accessed 4 August 2008. Claire Chambers is author of *The SIECUS Circle: A Humanist Revolution* (Belmont, MA: Western Islands, 1977), a conspiracy theory text published by the John Birch Society press, Western Islands. Here, the author proposes that sex education in America is part of a plot by communists to control young people. Both authors and others similar are quoted throughout the LaHaye apologetics.

48. Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 118.

49. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 137; Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota

The fear of 'contamination' by an abject discursive Other in the form of a 'crackpot' conspiracy theory explains why, in the first Left Behind novel, Buck states that 'if it's not a conspiracy, it's something organized'.[50] By making this seemingly redundant semantic distinction, the authors seek to preserve the credibility of their narrative, insisting upon its basis in a rational, scientific reading of the Bible rather than a conspiracy theory that places them alongside 'ufologists', alien abductees and the likes of David Icke, who avers that the British royal family has been infiltrated by extra-terrestrial reptilian impostors. Moreover, dispensationalism's early roots in common sense philosophy and strict rationalism remain influential in curbing the urge towards all-out sensationalism.[51]

It is the desire, then, for theological credibility that produces a crisis of authenticity in a text that struggles to reconcile the exigencies of fiction-writing with the exigencies of biblical exegesis. The first requires that the reader is engaged, titillated and, most importantly for a 16-part series, encouraged to keep reading.[52] But the second imperative curtails the first by limiting the authors to fictional representations that are consonant with a dispensationalist approach to the Bible. While one could question whether the authors have fulfilled this stipulation, the desire to be perceived as serious students of biblical prophecy has a chilling effect on the extent to and manner in which conspiracy theories may be used in the novels. In short, conspiracies are invoked to create suspense, only to be disavowed to restore credibility.

Webs of Significance: Readers and Conspiracy Theories in Left Behind

According to Clifford Geertz, the data of culture are 'a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit'.[53]

Press, 1999), p. xi. This argument is also treated extensively in Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008). Thanks to Peter Knight for this reference.

50. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind,* 214.

51. See Mark A. Noll's exploration of the impact of common-sense philosophy upon evangelicalism, 'Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought', *American Quarterly* 37.2 (1985), pp. 216-38.

52. There are twelve books in the original series, which delineates the seven years of tribulation between the rapture and the second coming of Christ; but these have been supplemented by three prequels, *The Rising* (2005), *The Regime* (2005) and *The Rapture* (2006); and a sequel, *Kingdom Come* (2007).

53. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 10.

While Left Behind seems in many ways to be fairly straightforward and even one-dimensional, the allusions to secret societies, international cabals, mind control and technological surveillance contained therein signify a comprehensive 'second world' that complements, but is not required by, the novels' primary significations—that is, a theological narrative of millennial desire, hope and eventual victory. For some members of Left Behind's audience, the conspiracy memes I have discussed will spark instant recognition. These readers already use biblical prophecy as their lens for viewing and interpreting world events: they are alert to signs of the times such as corrupt politicians, rising crime, natural disasters and secularization, and use this heightened awareness to construct a history framed by a popular dispensationalism that has become suffused with New World Order conspiracy theories.[54]

But, as Amy Frykholm has demonstrated, the 'webs of significance' woven in Left Behind differ from reader to reader.[55] While those readers already immersed in the politicized milieu of conservative evangelicalism are likely to find layers of meaning in phrases such as 'New World Order', others who focus primarily on the novels' spiritual messages of hope and salvation may find these references innocuous or even meaningless. Left Behind readers who have also read LaHaye's nonfiction will immediately recognize the conspiracist argot invoked in the novels and the political ideas it connotes. Those who do not, however, should not find their overall grasp of the narrative unduly affected. This would surely not be the case for the reader who has no prior knowledge of the complex doctrine of dispensationalism. Readers of the novels from nonevangelical denominations, Frykholm discovered, found the 'Protestantese' employed by the authors almost impenetrable.[56]

Rather than being uninhibited conspiracist diatribes—as some critics have been wont to suggest—the Left Behind novels invoke conspiracy themes in a more complicated manner.[57] The series has been written in such a way as to signify to those 'in the know' a shared knowledge that current developments may prove prophetically significant, and a shared convic-

54. See, for example, Amy Frykholm's discussion of the books with readers Cindy and Katie, in *Rapture Culture:* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 118-20.

55. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 5; quoted in Frykholm, *Rapture Culture,* p. 9.

56. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture,* 72.

57. See, for example, Rob Boston, 'If best-selling end-times author has his way, church-state separation will be Left Behind'; Edmund D. Cohen, 'Review of the Left Behind Tribulation Novels: *Turner Diaries* Lite', *Free Inquiry* 21.2 (2000). Online edition available at http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=cohen_21_2, accessed 19 August 2008.

tion that a conspiracy—or at least 'something organized', to repeat Buck Williams's circumlocution—is at work in the United States that will have profound historical consequences. Yet these intimations are articulated in whispers, appearing as phantoms and traces in a text that cannot be reasonably classified as a straightforward, monolithic conspiracy narrative. As such, the authority of the writers as serious and judicious expositors of biblical prophecy remains intact, at least in the eyes of their ideal audience. What the authors do not say about conspiracy theories, then, is as important, if not more so, than what they do say. Through a complex process of interpellation, the authors hail an audience sympathetic to their politics without having to neglect the evangelical message that they hope will save Left Behind's readers from the fate of its protagonists.

3. Left Behind, Prophecy Fiction and the Clash of Civilizations*

Crawford Gribben

Describing the increasingly visible differences between Europe and the United States, neoconservative political commentator Robert Kagan, participant in the Project for the New American Century, made the perceptive assertion that 'America did not change on September 11. It only became more itself.'[1] That national self-realization must have come as something of a shock to those who believed they were witnessing a 'sudden evaporation of apocalyptic feeling at the end of the twentieth century',[2] for one of the most significant of American cultural trends of the early twenty-first century has been the unanticipated revival of popular apocalyptic writing. 'Prophecy novels' are currently some of the best-selling novels in the world. Their purpose is to convert the masses while reminding their evangelical readers that 'the Tribulation is both now *and* yet to come' and providing them with the correct degree of 'tension' in their relations with the cultural mainstream.[3] The spectacular success of these novels suggests that a powerfully apocalyptic imagination underpins the brave new world of American hegemony.

There is little doubt that a series of foreign policy initiatives have been grounded in this popular expression of faith, and little doubt that the new American empire has been underpinned by widespread, and often extremely conservative, religious commitments. A reviewer in *Foreign Affairs* noted

* I would like to thank John Wallis, Kenneth Newport, Peter Knight, Liane Tanguay and Mark Sweetnam for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Robert Kagan, *Paradise & Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), p. 85.

2. James Berger, 'Twentieth-Century Apocalypse: Forecasts and Aftermaths', *Twentieth Century Literature* 46 (2000), p. 388.

3. Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 4, 26.

that these 'dismally written, thinly plotted novels' reflect 'one of the greatest orgies of religious marketing since itinerant indulgence sellers infuriated Martin Luther'; but also noted that 'foreign policy students in the United States and abroad are increasingly searching to understand their influential worldview'. The effort is made necessary by the fact that 'tens of millions of American voters' adhere to the eschatological system the novels espouse, 'a third of Americans believe that current events in the Middle East were prophesied in the Bible, and 44 per cent expect to see the literal return of Christ in their lifetimes'.[4] As these statistics suggest, popular religiosity can now be identified as a key component of the 'broad ideological gap' that increasingly separates Europe from the United States.[5] Nevertheless, the politics of the American Christian Right are 'increasingly influential on the global political scene', Didi Herman has asserted; 'conservative Protestant theology is fast becoming the dominant world religious orthodoxy'.[6] In the United States, at least, its power seems almost pervasive. As one character in a recent rapture novel puts it, 'I was beginning to think I was the only man in America not on the subscription list for this religious hooey.'[7] But the products of this popular apocalypticism must not be so carelessly dismissed. Its theology is politics. It may not be the politics of which one approves, but it is a politics that matters. Darryl Jones has described the series as 'the unhinged right-wring ranting of a crazy old coot … But we should never forget that this crazy old coot is the biggest-selling author in the most powerful nation in the history of the world.'[8] In its descriptions of Jews, Muslims and the modern American empire, therefore, contemporary rapture fiction reflects and encodes the twenty-first century clash of civilizations.

Prophecy Fiction and American Paranoia

In the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Bush administration's interminable standoff

4. Walter Russell Mead, review of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Armageddon* (2003), *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2003), available online at http://foreignaffairs.com/articles/59079/walter-russell-mead/armageddon-the-cosmic-battle-of-the-ages. See also Walter Russell Mead, 'God's Country?', *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2006), available online at http://foreignaffairs.com/articles/59079/walter-russell-mead/gods-country.

5. Kagan, *Paradise and Power*, p. 11.

6. Didi Herman, 'The New Roman Empire: European Envisionings and American Premillennialists', *Journal of American Studies* 34 (2000), p. 24.

7. Tim LaHaye and Greg Dinallo, *Babylon Rising* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004), p. 240.

8. Darryl Jones, 'The Liberal Antichrist', in Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), p. 104.

with 'old Europe' and the UN, cultural commentators are increasingly noting the importance of Left Behind, a series of end-of-the-world novels that imagines the future in astonishingly familiar terms. The series, known by the title of its eponymous debut, represents the ultimate American conservative doomsday, a postmodern expression of the 'paranoid style in American politics':[9] the rise of a charismatic European leader, his international eclipse of the nation state, the establishment of his world government in Iraq, increasing tension between the American president and military, nuclear conflict between America and the West, and the final—and almost imminent—destruction of American life.[10] If this series' apparently remarkable prescience is not enough to demand critical attention, its sales certainly should.[11] Since 1995, the series has sold over 60 million copies.[12] Several of the later titles have debuted at the top of best-seller lists. The ninth book in the series, *Desecration* (2001), displaced John Grisham from the number

9. Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), pp. 3-40.

10. Jerry B. Jenkins and Timothy LaHaye, *Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995); *Tribulation Force* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996); *Nicolae* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997); *Soul Harvest* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998); *Apollyon* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999); *Assassins* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999); *The Indwelling* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000); *The Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000); *Desecration* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001); *The Remnant* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002); *Armageddon* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003); *The Glorious Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004).

11. A variety of approaches to Left Behind can be found in Daniel Hertzler, 'Assessing the 'Left Behind' Phenomenon', in Loren L. Johns (ed.), *Apocalypticism and Millennialism: Shaping a Believers' Church Eschatology for the Twenty-First Century* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000); Thomas M. Doyle, 'Competing Fictions: The Uses of Christian Apocalyptic Imagery in Contemporary Popular Fictional Works', *Journal of Millennial Studies* 1.1 (2001), available online at www.mille.org; Melani McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics and the Popular: The *Left Behind* Series and Christian Fundamentalism's New World Order', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003), pp. 773-98; Crawford Gribben, 'Before *Left Behind*', *Books & Culture* (July/August 2003), p. 9; Christopher Tayler, 'Rapt Attention', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 May 2004, p. 36; Crawford Gribben, 'Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition', *Literature and Theology* 18 (2004), pp. 77-94; Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture:* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The series has also been discussed in Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

12. 'Apocalypse Soon: 'Left Behind' Series Picks Up Steam', *Chicago Tribune*, 14 March 2002, compared sales of 50 million *Left Behind* novels with sales of 61 million novels by John Grisham and 38 million by Stephen King in the period 1995 to 2000. Up-to-date sales figures are available on www.leftbehind.com.

one spot in *Publishers Weekly*, which he had held since 1994, by becoming the best-selling adult hardback novel in the world. Today, the novels represent the best-selling fictional series in the world, and some of the best-selling fiction ever in the United States. With its authors being featured on the front cover of *Time* in 2002 and *Newsweek* in 2004, the series offers final proof—if final proof were needed—of the prominence of this prophetic culture in the mainstream of American life.[13]

Like other prophecy fictions, Left Behind draws on established tropes in popular American evangelicalism to offer a significant rewriting of the movement's eschatology and traditionally patriotic aspiration.[14] Its authors, Christian novelist and biographer Jerry B. Jenkins and 'prophecy scholar' Tim LaHaye, have created a powerful franchise whose interests include board games, graphic novels, audio recordings, Web sites, Bible study aids and a controversial video game. While the popular culture of evangelicalism has regularly drawn inspiration from apocalyptic, never before have its eschatological discussions generated so many sales or so much critical comment. Despite their massive crossover appeal, however, the novels dramatize an extremely polemical version of one kind of evangelical end-of-the-world view—a prophetic paradigm known as 'dispensational premillennialism'. Adherents of this dispensationalism understand the Bible to teach the imminence of the 'rapture' (Christ's catching away to heaven of all true believers); the subsequent unveiling of the Antichrist, whose totalitarian government will crush all dissent; the seven-year period of divine judgment known as the 'tribulation'; and Christ's second coming to destroy the evil empire and begin his thousand years of millennial rule.[15] Despite the series' fictional trappings, however, its authors believe the theological paradigm is unequivocally true. In Left Behind, a 'post-Rapture dispensational soap opera',[16] the paradigm is developed to reflect the contemporary cultural and geopolitical concerns of one important section of American opinion. Biblical apocalyptic is applied to the modern world, and theologi-

13. *Time*, 1 July 2002, and *Newsweek*, 24 May 2004.

14. For a discussion of the popular culture of evangelical dispensationalism, see Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel since 1917* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 2nd edn, 1991), and Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).

15. For a comprehensive introduction to classical dispensationalism, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980 [1st edn 1958]). For a discussion of the varieties of dispensational thought, see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Bridge Point, 1993), pp. 9-56.

16. Michael G. Maudlin, 'Inside CT', *Christianity Today,* 5 October 1998, available online at http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/(1998)october5/8tb006.html.

cal fiction increasingly overshadows political fact. As one of the series' characters asks, 'Is there anyone here who still considers the prophetic teaching of Scripture mere symbolism?'[17]

For this reason, while the novels 'claim to be about the future', they are also 'very much about the present'.[18] Following a long dispensational tradition—for even the earliest leaders of the movement were 'social reactionaries', 'warriors and escapists at the same time'[19]—the novels offer a painfully myopic, neoconservative vision of American Christian responsibility. Their presuppositions have generated immense critical concern: one recent writer described their content as 'hard-core right-wing paranoid anti-Semitic homophobic misogynistic propaganda'.[20] But in attracting a readership of over 60 million, the novels have influence far beyond America's eight million or so committed adherents of dispensational faith.[21] As the series' distinctive brand of evangelicalism appears to be addressing a wider population, the Bush administration's political discourse appears to be increasingly reflective of its cultural logic, to the extent that one recent commentator has wondered whether the worldview the novels espouse might now '*be* the mainstream of American life'.[22] This identification of dispensational hegemony—if it can be verified—seems strange in the light of Paul Boyer's suggestion in 1992 that evangelical millennialism 'has received little scholarly attention', and Michael Williams's observation in 2003 that 'in the last half century dispensationalism has been virtually ignored by systematic theologians'.[23] Future study of its silent revolution, if that is what the novels signal, may point to the significance of rapture fiction in its palace coup.

The novels are certainly fascinated by the Middle East, and their success may be to some extent both a cause and a consequence of recent American policy in the region. Nevertheless, as we have noted, a growing body of scholarship alleges their anti-Semitism. In a hostile assessment of the series' value, Sherryll Mleynek, for example, has asked whether there is, or ought to be, 'a moral or ethical aesthetic self-discipline, or restraint, exercised when writing about the Jews after the *Shoah*', suggesting that

17. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Tribulation Force*, p. 65.

18. McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics and the Popular', p. 782.

19. Michael Williams, *This World Is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2003), pp. 11, 56.

20. Anne Lamott, 'Knocking on Heaven's Door', in *Travelling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), p. 60, quoted in Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, p. 177.

21. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, p. 39; Wilson, *Armageddon Now!*, p. 12.

22. McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics and the Popular', pp, 792-93.

23. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. ix; Williams, *This World Is Not My Home*, p. 7.

the fictionalizing of Jewish history in rapture novels can be paralleled with 'Holocaust denial'.[24] Specifically, she urges, the novels

> foreground the 'Jewish problem' by making Jewish conversion the *sine qua non* of the Second Coming. If the Jews (continue to) resist conversion, and (again) do not recognize the Messiah, they betray humanity by preventing the Second Coming. If they convert, they, themselves, become the 'ultimate' solution to the 'Jewish problem'—erasure.[25]

In fact, Mleynek is so impressed by her claim that her article repeats 'erasure' three times.[26] But the charge is misinformed. Left Behind actually encodes the foundational trope of dispensationalism in asserting an eternal difference between Israel and the church—the eternal nonerasure of Jewishness.[27] Mleynek's argument misunderstands the most fundamental component of dispensational theology. Similarly, she accuses dispensationalists of advocating the 'supercession of Judaism by Christianity'[28]—ironically, given that dispensationalism, more than any other theological factor, was responsible for undermining the old supersessionist mentality of the mainstream Protestant churches (despite contrary claims by Katie Sturm in this volume). Despite her claims, the novels are probably not anti-Semitic, whatever else they may be—or, at least, they are no more anti-Semitic than the series of pro-Zionist American presidents who have maintained or at least acted upon the same structure of beliefs. More accurately, another commentator has noted that the Left Behind novels show 'evangelicals in the United States … exporting their apocalyptic dispensational pro-Zionism to the rest of the world, with devastating consequences in the Middle East'.[29] The disjunction between idealism and error is, at times, jarring. The novels' rewriting of the Muslim world often borders on the ridiculous: Mel Odom's *Apocalypse Dawn* (2003), for example, recognizes Turkey's status

24. Sherryll Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem" in the *Left Behind* Novels', *Literature and Theology* 19.4 (2005), p. 370.

25. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 374.

26. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', pp. 374, 376, 381.

27. See Erling Jorstad, *The Politics of Doomsday: Fundamentalists of the Far Right* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970); Melvin Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1976); Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* (Bullsbrook, WA: Veritas, 1987); Yaakov Ariel, *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865-1945* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991); and Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

28. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 377.

29. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 25.

as 'a key Western ally in the turbulent Middle East'[30] but imagines that the Turkish army—representing a nation with fewer than one thousand evangelical Christians, and one that the novel recognizes is '98 percent Islamic'[31]—would be provided with specifically Baptist chaplains.[32] Assessing the massive cultural impact of this method of eschatological thinking, therefore, scholars should be particularly sensitive to Left Behind's description of the 'Abrahamic other'. As their remarkable prescience suggests, there is immense significance in the portrayal of Jews and Muslims in some of the world's best-selling novels.

Jews and Muslims in the History of Dispensationalism

This clash of civilizations motif, and the danger of the Abrahamic other, is certainly not unprecedented in dispensational history. The rapture fiction genre, from which the Left Behind novels emerge, stretches back to at least the 1870s.[33] The genesis of rapture fiction, and its interest in Muslims and Jews, can thus be traced to a period contemporary with the negotiation and consolidation of a dispensational orthodoxy in the second half of the nineteenth century. By that stage, dispensational exegetes had developed the paradigms established by the Anglo-Irish clergyman-turned-dissenter, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). In North America, his 'influence on end-time thinking … was both profound and pivotal, more so perhaps than any other Christian leader for the last 200 years'.[34] The second generation of dispensational exegetes agreed on a number of basic concepts that would be popularized through the Bible Conference movement at the end of the nineteenth century, and, at the beginning of the twentieth, the fundamentalism controversy, the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909; 2nd edn, 1917) and Dallas Theological Seminary, founded in 1924.[35] In contemporary America, dispensationalism wields immense political significance: there are perhaps between 25 and 30 million actively Zionist Christians in America; but it has

30. Mel Odom, *Apocalypse Dawn* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), p. 4.

31. Odom, *Apocalypse Dawn*, p. 366.

32. Odom, *Apocalypse Dawn*, p. 364.

33. Gribben, *Writing the Rapture,* pp. 219-26; Crawford Gribben, 'Rethinking the Emergence of Rapture Fiction', *Brethren Historical Review* (forthcoming).

34. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 66.

35. David J. MacLeod, 'Walter Scott, a Link in Dispensationalism between Darby and Scofield?', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153.610 (1996), pp. 155-76; R. Todd Mangum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2009). For the early growth of dispensationalism, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

also been reported that Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, two of the more famously outspoken Zionist premillennialists, have claimed the support of one hundred million Americans.[36]

Although significant divisions between dispensationalists have remained, the movement's theologians have drawn upon a common heritage of prophetic study to detail the course of church history and the future of the Jews in God's providential design. From its beginning, dispensationalism has drawn upon the strong Judeo-centrism of Puritan writing to argue that Israel's scattered tribes would return to their own land.[37] This often-political Zionism was 'largely nurtured and shaped by Christians long before it was able to inspire wide-spread Jewish support'.[38] By the same token, dispensationalists found in scriptural prophecy a distinctive future for the descendants of Ishmael, often perceived to be Arabs. Throughout the history of the movement, these prophetic claims have existed in tension, and the presentation of their apparently zero-sum relationship stands as a barometer of the changing condition of Jewish–Arab tension and especially their reception in American evangelical thought.

From the beginning of the movement, therefore, dispensational writers have focused their apocalyptic concerns on the state of the Middle East. Regularly insisting on the need for a 'literal interpretation', they have traditionally argued that biblical prophecy should not be 'spiritualized': in biblical prophecy, 'Israel' means Israel, and is never used as a metaphor for the church (as supersessionists and others claim). Prophecies of Israel's return to the land, therefore, refer to exactly that. The dispensational emphasis on the Jewish nation as 'God's timepiece' has therefore been insistent.[39] But this has caused some difficulty. The establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 generated one of the most significant and potentially destabilizing changes in dispensational thought. Before 1948, dispensational writers had argued that the next event on the prophetic calendar was the rapture, and that prophecies of Israel's restoration to the land would only be fulfilled, as the *Scofield Bible* put it, 'at the return of the Lord as King' after the tribulation.[40] Any earlier returns—and at least one such return was necessary in Scofield's panorama—would not fulfil the conditions of biblical prophecy.[41]

36. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 23.

37. For an excellent discussion of this subject, see Richard W. Cogley, 'The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Restoration of Israel in the "Judeo-centric" Strand of Puritan Millenarianism', *Church History* 72 (2003), pp. 304-32.

38. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 19.

39. The description of Israel as 'God's timepiece' has been taken from the Prophecy News Watch Web site, www.prophecynewswatch.com, accessed 2 July 2004.

40. *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1917 [1909]), note on Gen. 15.18, 25.

41. *Scofield Reference Bible,* note on Rev. 7.14, p. 1337.

J. Dwight Pentecost's comprehensive study, *Things to Come* (1958), which bore the imprimatur of leading scholars at Dallas Seminary, echoed this older perspective by implying that Israel would be gathered before the tribulation so that they could be scattered during the tribulation and restored, finally, after the tribulation.[42] Increasingly, however, dispensational writers agreed, against their earlier claims, that the re-establishment of the state of Israel had, in fact, been a fulfilment of Scripture.

The contrast between these positions was marked in the competing claims of successive editions of the *Scofield Bible*: while the original editions (1909 and 1917) had assumed that Christ would return before Israel's restoration to the land, the *New Scofield Bible* (1967) indicated instead that the second coming should be expected after Israel's restoration to the land.[43] This view, which illustrates the quiet evolution of dispensational thought, was most widely popularized in 1970, when Hal Lindsey, one of the most prominent writers linked to the modern dispensational movement, stated in a book that has sold some 28 million copies that the foundation of Israel had been a 'paramount prophetic sign',[44] and implied that the rapture would occur within forty years—one biblical generation—of 1948: 'Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.'[45] Meanwhile, Lindsey's hinting at the prophetic significance of 1988 was confirmed by former NASA engineer Edgar Whisenant, but the dismal failure of Whisenant's expectations did not prevent his subsequent revision of the two-million-selling *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*.[46] Revised texts rescheduled the rapture for 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992 and, finally, 1993.[47] Although Whisenant was something of a fringe figure—though his sales suggest the astonishing dimension of this fringe—Lindsey was operating well within dispensationalism's popular mainstream, and the prophetic expectation they shared drew explicitly upon the centrality of Israel in the movement's prophetic schema. Lindsey's Web site still describes 1948 as 'the year the end began'.[48] The view has found impressive advocates: in 1978, Jimmy Carter stated that 'the establishment of the nation of Israel is

42. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 280.

43. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 155.

44. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970; London: Marshall Pickering, repr. 1971 [1st edn 1970]), p. 43.

45. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 54.

46. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 305.

47. *88 Reasons* was also published as *The Rosh Hashanah 1988 and 88 Reasons Why*. See Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 130, and Gary North, 'Publisher's Preface', in the 1991 edition of Wilson, *Armageddon Now!*, pp. xi-xii. Whisenant's further titles are listed on www.amazon.com, accessed 25 June 2004.

48. www.hallindseyoracle.com, accessed 1 July 2004.

the fulfilment of biblical prophecy and the very essence of its fulfilment'.[49] President Reagan included in his cabinet such dispensational figures as Attorney General Ed Meese, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and Secretary of the Interior James Watt.[50] One recent commentator has concluded that 'George Bush, Sr, Bill Clinton and George Bush, Jr have not appeared to share the same dispensational presuppositions of either Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan'; nevertheless, 'they have maintained, however reluctantly, the strong pro-Zionist position of their predecessors'.[51]

Throughout the twentieth century, therefore, dispensationalists have been regularly accused of Zionism. In the second edition of his Bible, published in the same year as the Balfour Declaration and the Russian Revolution, C.I. Scofield identified the Jewish nation—scattered, but about to be restored—as 'always the centre of the divine counsels earthward'.[52] Indeed, the narrative of Israel's past, present and future was so significant as to drive his narrative of the Christian church into an admitted second place. The church was merely a 'parenthesis' in the plan of God, which centred, irrevocably, in the earthly exaltation of his chosen people. Thus, as Michael Williams has summarized, Scofield's Israel

> sustains a completely different relationship to the fall, human culture, the physical world, and history than does the church of Jesus Christ. The Christian flees the world; the Jew masters it. The Christian is separated from history; the Jew exercises a dominion over history and ultimately appears as the very object of history. The Christian finds all temporal existence to be a meaningless vale of tears; the Jew gives meaning to all temporal reality. The Christian is a pilgrim; the Jew is a potentate. The Christian is a sinner in need of a gracious redemption; the Jew appears only to require a kingdom and a king.[53]

As Williams has aptly summarized, Scofield 'stood in awe of the Jew',[54] and his theological descendants have often developed this awe to display an unqualified support for the Israeli state: 'While books by apocalyptic dispensationalists sell in their millions, few concern themselves with con-

49. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 86, quoting speech by President Jimmy Carter on 1 May 1978, *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 78 no. 2015 (1978), p. 4.

50. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 214.

51. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 89. Hugh B. Urban describes the links between dispensationalism and neoconservatism in 'America, Left Behind: Bush, the Neoconservatives, and Evangelical Christian Fiction', *Journal of Religion and Society* 8 (2006), pp. 1-15.

52. *Scofield Reference Bible,* note on Isa. 10.12, p. 722.

53. Williams, *This World Is Not my Home*, p. 124.

54. Williams, *This World Is Not my Home*, p. 123.

temporary issues of peace and justice, other than to warn of a counterfeit peace which the Antichrist will offer Israel.'[55]

But this reference to counterfeit peace illustrates the ambivalence of this celebration of Israel. For the prophetic scenario to be fulfilled, Israel must be regathered to the land, and must enjoy total control of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. But dispensational writers argue for these rights so that Jews will be in position to agree to Antichrist's solution to the problems of the Middle East, and then to face the most horrific period of calamity, war and persecution the world has ever known, the period of 'unexampled trouble' outlined in Revelation 11–18.[56] In the dispensational imagination, this future Jewish holocaust will be paralleled by the contemporaneous destruction of three-quarters of the population of a world controlled by the Antichrist.[57] This unstable philo-Semitism demands an active hope and political complacency. Disorder and chaos in the Middle East can only confirm Israel's centrality to the 'wars and rumours of wars' that will characterize the last days before the rapture (Mt. 24.6). The shedding of Jewish blood in the Promised Land confirms the legitimacy of dispensational hope.

But Jewish claims to the land could not overturn the privileges of Ishmael's decedents, for Muslims, too, have a place in the prophetic scheme. Scofield had noticed that God's promise to Abraham—'I will make of thee a great nation' (Gen. 15.18)—would be fulfilled in Abraham's 'natural posterity', the Hebrew people; in his 'spiritual posterity', all those, Jews or Gentiles, who are people of Abraham's faith; but also, significantly, through Ishmael, father of the Arabs.[58] Although God insisted that the covenant blessing would go through Isaac to the Hebrews, Ishmael too was destined to become 'a great nation' (Gen. 17.20). While Scofield was prepared to admit to these promises, subsequent dispensationalists grew in anti-Arab feeling throughout the 1920s.[59] Donald G. Barnhouse, Presbyterian pastor and editor of *Revelation*, reminded his readers that 'there are promises of Ishmael as well as to Isaac',[60] but dispensational publications increasingly took sides in post-1948 tensions between Jews and Palestinians, and consistently opted to support Jewish rights over Palestinian rights. Ishmael's promises were neglected in Pentecost's *Things to Come* (1958), which discussed the millennial redistribution of Palestine between the twelve tribes without any reference to the previous occupants of the land.[61] Similarly, in

55. Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, p. 199.
56. *Scofield Reference Bible,* note on Rev. 7.14, p. 1337.
57. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Tribulation Force*, p. 60.
58. *Scofield Reference Bible,* note on Gen. 15.18, p. 25.
59. Wilson, *Armageddon Now!*, pp. 71, 101.
60. Cited in *Evangel*, 16 July 1949, p. 7.
61. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 508-11.

His Land (1970), a feature film produced by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, the youthful and recently converted British pop star Cliff Richard guided his audience into the prophetic significance of the Six-Day War and the recent Jewish occupation of the Old City of Jerusalem, almost entirely by-passing the plight of the dispossessed. Palestinians would know the blessing of God, one brief remark suggested, but only in the millennial kingdom whose prophetic inception was being made possible by the current Israeli occupation. Lindsey also indicated his belief in the future conversion of Egypt.[62]

More recently, as tensions in the Middle East have escalated, dispensationalists have returned to their earlier interests in the promises given to Ishmael—but present them in an increasingly hostile light. The doyen of Dallas Theological Seminary, John Walvoord, published *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East* (1974) to comment on the oil crisis of the 1970s. It was republished, with the subtitle *What the Bible Says about the Future of the Middle East and the End of Western Civilisation*, to comment on the First Gulf War in 1991. Charles Dyer also drew on the environment of the First Gulf War in publishing *The Rise of Babylon: Is Iraq at the Centre of the Final Drama?* (1991). A revised edition of Dyer's book appeared with the Second Gulf War in 2003. But recent writers have also attempted to turn Islamic tradition against the Islamic retention of the Temple Mount. Quoting a passage from the Qur'an (Surah 17:7) that they claimed predicts a Jewish return to the Temple Mount, Thomas Ice and Randall Price suggest that 'it might be possible to see Islam one day leave the site without controversy'.[63] That is certainly the expectation of Mark Hitchcock, who does expect the Israeli–Palestinian problem to be solved—but only, significantly, by the Antichrist.[64] Necessarily, therefore, evangelical Christians will never see the solution to the problems of the Middle East. They will be raptured before the crisis ends, and the diplomacy that solves the problem will come from the pit of hell. As this brief analysis suggests, twentieth-century dispensational writers have viewed Jews and Muslims with intense ambivalence, as competing claimants for the Promised Land, whose struggle is a continuing necessity until the coming of Christ and then the world's most wicked dictator, who will be the initial broker of peace. Dispensationalism dramatizes and theologizes an enduring clash of civilizations.

62. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, pp. 79-80.

63. Thomas Ice and Randall Price, *Ready to Rebuild: The Imminent Plan to Rebuild the Last Days Temple* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992), p. 93.

64. Mark Hitchcock, *Is the Antichrist Alive Today?* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002), p. 39.

Jews and Muslims in Earlier Prophecy Fiction

Throughout their history, prophecy fiction has been a particularly sensitive register of the ambivalence and hostility of these civilizations in conflict. The difficulty of describing the eschatological importance of the Middle East was registered in the most regularly reprinted of the earlier rapture fiction sequences. Three titles, by Sydney Watson, were published in the general European crisis that generated World War I. *Scarlet and Purple* (1913), *The Mark of the Beast* (1915) and *In the Twinkling of an Eye* (1916) were, until Left Behind, the best-known titles in the genre.[65] As a number of recent articles have suggested, the Watson novels are particularly significant for the Left Behind project.[66] Perhaps most importantly, Watson's novels constituted the first series in the rapture novel genre. But, beyond this, they clearly offer characters and incidents that later work adopts. One of the main series' characters in Left Behind is Cameron 'Buck' Williams, for example, a thirty-year-old bachelor journalist who finds love, loses his job, and gets the opportunity to start his own Web-based news portal, which quickly achieves international success. In Watson's series, almost ninety years before, a main character is Tom Hammond, likewise a thirty-year-old bachelor journalist who finds love, loses his job, and gets the opportunity to start his own newspaper, which quickly achieves international success.[67] One important difference between the two characters, however, is that Hammond's love interest is obviously related to Watson's philo-Semitism. The romance between Hammond and Zillah Robart is evidently to be read as symbolic of the uncomplicated mutuality of evangelical Christians and religious Jews in earlier dispensational thought.

Many of the similarities between Watson's trilogy and Left Behind derive from both series' commitment to advancing basic dispensational tropes. This is necessarily the case, as both series reflect the education of their protagonists in evangelical, and particularly dispensational, thought. These series, with rapture fictions in general, share a commitment to a chronological pattern that the reader, skilled in dispensational thought, can anticipate: the Antichrist will arise after the rapture, the society over which he presides will be technologically advanced, and he will wield immense power over his population even as he patronizes a worldwide religion and

65. Watson's trilogy was composed of *Scarlet and Purple: A Story of Souls and 'Signs'* (London: William Nicholson & Sons, [1913]; repr. Edinburgh: B. McCall Barbour, 1974); *The Mark of the Beast* (London: William Nicholson & Sons, [1915]; repr. Edinburgh: B. McCall Barbour, 1974); *In the Twinkling of an Eye* (London: William Nicholson & Sons, [1916]).

66. See Gribben, 'Rapture ', pp. 77-94.

67. Watson, *In the Twinkling of an Eye*, pp. 12, 46.

an international currency reform involving the dreaded 'mark of the Beast'. It is adherence to these staple elements of plot that qualifies fictions for the genre. But within these guidelines authors have found ample room for manoeuvre. Throughout the history of the genre, rapture novelists have used their fictions to sensationalize current prophetic speculation, allowing their readers to imagine what might happen if, as has been variously expected, the Antichrist would appear as a communist, or, as Watson suggested, the Antichrist would appear as a Jew.

Between the 1910s, when Watson's fictions were published, and the 1990s, when Left Behind first appeared, dispensational writers continued to contour their expectations to parallel current habits of thought. World wars, the Cold War and the triumph of global capitalism have each been reflected in the narratives the genre has advanced. Thus Watson's prophetic expectations reflected the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of his age. On the one hand, Tom Hammond enjoyed a growing romance with Zillah Robart. Her family's orthodoxy was sympathetically represented, and through the introduction of her brother-in-law, Abraham Cohen, readers were introduced to the idea that the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem might be a good thing, and that Jews would certainly return to their ancient Promised Land.[68] As if to confirm the value of all things Jewish, the rapture occurs on the evening of Passover.[69] On the other hand, the novels also present a Jew as the Antichrist—and suggest he might be the reincarnation of the demon that had previously been incarnated as Judas Iscariot.[70] They suggest that this Jewish Antichrist will destroy Britain's status as a nation-state, in a political subtext that encodes a range of cultural anxieties about Jews, Muslims, Catholics and Europeans. Although the 'peoples of all the world' had 'always associated' Britain with 'safety and liberty',[71] 'Romanism' had declared 'its aim to win, or coerce Britain back into her harlot fold'.[72] The Vatican's devilish purposes would be served by the Antichrist, who would sweep Britain into his 'revived Roman Empire'.[73] The British monarchy would thus be 'under the supreme rule of a Jew' whose European empire would be based in a rebuilt Babylon.[74] The novels presented a unique combination of concerns. But Watson insisted that faithful Jews still held the key to the future: 'the first sign of [Christ's] return is an awakening of national

68. Watson, *Scarlet and Purple*, pp. 162-63.
69. Watson, *In the Twinkling of an Eye*, p. 219.
70. Watson, *The Mark of the Beast*, pp. 15-17.
71. Watson, *The Mark of the Beast*, p. 97.
72. Watson, *Scarlet and Purple*, p. 147.
73. Watson, *The Mark of the Beast*, p. 51.
74. Watson, *The Mark of the Beast*, pp. 58, 51.

life among the Jews, that shall immediately precede their return—in unbelief—to their own land.'[75]

Fifty years later, in the 1970s, rapture novelists were reiterating the same concerns. Dr Frederick A. Tatford, former director of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, included in *The Clock Strikes* (1971) a reference to the Antichrist solving the problems of the Middle East.[76] Perhaps a different point of view might have been expected from Salem Kirban, himself a successful 'prophecy scholar' and, to boot, a Christian Arab. But Kirban's novels are unremarkable in their depiction of Middle East politics, and their contribution to the genre is to firmly locate the centre of the postrapture imagination in the United States. (It is also of interest to note that the protagonist of Kirban's *666* (1970)—also a journalist—experiences the rapture on a plane, like Buck Williams in the opening scene of *Left Behind*.[77]) Other fictions in the 1970s echoed this narrowing of the dispensational prophetic vision, as popular exponents of the system began to focus more narrowly on the end-times role of—or end-times experience in—the United States. In Donald W. Thompson's films, *Thief in the Night* (1972), *A Distant Thunder* (1977), *Image of the Beast* (1981) and *The Prodigal Planet* (1983), America's antithesis is again the UN, whose religious agency, the United Nations Imperium of Total Emergency, devilishly demands its adherents to 'UNITE'. More recently, *Soon* (2003), the first title of Jerry B. Jenkins's later series, likewise abandons international concerns to focus its plot on a futuristic and highly dystopian Unites States. Reflecting the erosion of its oriental curiosity, prophecy fictions have switched their focus from the Middle East to the United States, where the clash of civilizations has become internalized.

Jews, Muslims and Left Behind

But this concentration on exclusively American concerns is not typical of Jenkins's earlier work in the Left Behind series. In fact, when the Left Behind novels are read in conjunction with the work of Sydney Watson a remarkable congruity of concerns appears. Reviewing the series, Gershom Gorenberg, an Israeli journalist, identified both its 'contempt' for Judaism and its certainty that Catholicism is 'the devil's handmaiden'.[78] But the presentation of both religions is more tempered than Gorenberg suggests. The

75. Watson, *In the Twinkling of an Eye*, p. 132; cf. Watson, *Scarlet and Purple*, p. 163.

76. Frederick A. Tatford, *The Clock Strikes* (London: Lakeland, 1970), p. 12.

77. Salem Kirban, *666* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), p. 35.

78. Gershom Gorenberg, 'Intolerance: The Bestseller', *The American Prospect* 13.17, 23 September 2002, pp. 1, 4.

series' presentation of Roman Catholicism is examined elsewhere in this volume: the novels include the pope and apparently nonevangelical Catholics in the rapture of the true believers, but retain dispensationalism's earlier conviction that the Catholic Church will play a central role in the unveiling of the final one world religion.[79] Thus, on the one hand, Catholicism exerts a powerful cultural hold even on these 'tribulation saints': in a moment of crisis, Chang protects himself involuntarily with the sign of the cross;[80] but, on the other, the world's last pope—the eschatological 'false prophet' Pontifex Maximus Peter—identifies Orthodox Jews and postrapture Christians as the special targets of the new regime's fury:[81] 'The religious Jews and the fundamentalist Christians are the only factions who have not brought themselves into step with Enigma Babylon Faith.'[82] Of course, serving the novels' evangelistic purpose, the best Jews are converted Jews; and the Tribulation Force, the group of characters around whom the plots revolve, eventually includes Tsion Ben-Judah and Chaim Rosenweig among its members. But the value of their Jewish heritage is never denied. Both are given leading roles, confirming Heath Carter's conclusion that 'the Jews we meet in *Left Behind* are genial, heroic figures'.[83]

The same qualities could not be attributed to the novels' representation of the Palestinian struggle. The expanding series' original twelve volumes—each of around four hundred pages—contain hardly a hint that the Israel its characters frequently visit is engaged in a contested occupation of formerly Palestinian territory. The issue of Muslim rights in the Jewish state is entirely overlooked. As in earlier rapture fictions, the new one world religion finds its initial centre in the Vatican[84]; but, in a trope that acquired in the late 1990s an entirely new significance, the eventual world dominance of Babylon is sure:

> New Babylon will, within a very short time, become the most magnificent city the world has ever known. Your new international capitol will be the centre of banking and commerce, the headquarters for all Global Community governing agencies, and eventually the new Holy City, where Enigma Babylon One World Faith will relocate.[85]

79. Gribben, 'Rapture Fictions', pp. 86-88.
80. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Desecration*, p. 67.
81. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Tribulation Force*, p. 402.
82. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Assassins*, p. 225
83. Heath Carter, unpublished presentation at the Centre for Millennial Studies, Boston University, November 2002.
84. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Tribulation Force*, p. 279.
85. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Soul Harvest*, p. 212.

Iraq becomes the centre for economic, political and religious tyranny. As one character in LaHaye's most recent fiction puts it, 'the dark power of Babylon—*will* rise again!'[86]

Too bad, then, that President Gerald Fitzhugh, America's leader at the beginning of the tribulation period, is described as 'the greatest friend Israel has ever had'.[87] His foreign policies, though dispensationally right-on, are too lately pursued. With the defection of the US military to the leader of the UN, Fitzhugh's plans to lead Egypt, England and 'patriotic militia forces in the U.S'. suddenly end in the nuclear exchange that leaves American cities in ruins.[88] Meanwhile, the UN leader, the young Romanian Nicolae Carpathia, negotiates massive changes in the religious world. Muslims leaders agree to move the Dome of the Rock mosque to New Babylon, and Israeli Jews reclaim the Temple Mount and begin to rebuild the Temple.[89] Carpathia is adulated, then deified, his statue lit by burning Bibles.[90] As his identity as Antichrist becomes increasingly obvious, he establishes a global religion, supported by 'faith guides': 'no one was called a reverend or a pastor or a priest anymore.'[91] To further his ambitions, he makes and then breaks a covenant of peace with Israel.[92] No longer secure in peace, the Jewish faithful flee to Petra in Jordan, a 'perfect defensive location'[93] where, following biblical archetypes, they are fed with quail and manna, and drink water from rocks.[94] The Antichrist, meanwhile, establishes his headquarters at the Knesset, and uses the resources of the Jewish state against its former citizens.[95] He hates 'the Jew',[96] and is the most systematically anti-Semitic character in the series: 'I will sanction, condone, support and reward the death of any Jew anywhere in the world. … Imprison them. Torture them. Humiliate them. Shame them. Blaspheme their god. Plunder everything they own. Nothing is more important to the potentate.'[97]

In Left Behind, Islamic resistance is equally insistent, and Muslim characters appear early in the series.[98] Working against the novels' patriotic and

86. LaHaye and Dinallo, *Babylon Rising*, p. 44.
87. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Tribulation Force*, p. 370.
88. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Tribulation Force*, p. 424.
89. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Tribulation Force*, pp. 277, 402.
90. Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Indwelling*, pp. 288, 330.
91. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Nicolae*, pp. 358-59.
92. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Desecration*, p. 168.
93. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Desecration*, p. 98.
94. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Desecration*, p. 363.
95. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Desecration*, p. 115.
96. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Desecration*, p. 389.
97. Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Remnant*, p. 81.
98. Muslim characters do not make an appearance in the novels published after September 11, 2001.

dispensationally sound Iraq-o-phobia is the suggestion that faithful Muslims, like faithful Jews, will hold out against the final evil: 'these "zealots" still read the Koran, wore their turbans, almost totally covered their female population, and practiced the five pillars of Islam.'[99] They are forced into religious opposition by the idolatry of the new regime, and into political dissent by Carpathia's destruction of Mecca.[100] Muslims will unite with Jews and Christians to resist the new regime's wicked demands: 'Christians and Jews are not the only holdouts against the new Pope Peter.'[101] But, like the best Jews, the best Muslims will convert. Albie, a black-marketer and native of Al Basrah, appears as an anti-Carpathia Islamic adherent in *Soul Harvest* (1998) and *Apollyon* (1999), and reappears as a major character with his conversion and newly acquired membership in the Tribulation Force in *The Mark* (2000).[102] Like the Jewish characters, his adherence to one variant of the Abrahamic tradition serves the purposes of his conversion to evangelical faith. Islam may be as useful a preparation for Christianity as Judaism. Thus the Left Behind novels develop a traditional dispensational ambivalence about the Abrahamic other, but allow no negotiation about the significance of the Antichrist's capital city in Iraq. At Babylon, 'the final sin of man will culminate'.[103]

What these novels represent, therefore, is a rewriting of Middle East politics that is every bit as significant as their earlier rewriting of evangelical attitudes to the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike earlier rapture fictions, Left Behind portrays Jews and the Jewish nation in an entirely sympathetic light: they are the 'good guys' who only need to be converted to discover it. Even the portrayal of Islam suggests significant theological revision. Mirroring the policies of the George W. Bush administration, the novels break up the Muslim world into an opposition of 'true Muslims', the religious faithful, who are potential allies, and those who support an evil empire with a hegemonic vision led by a dangerously charismatic leader in Iraq. The series reflects one influential response to the early twenty-first-century clash of civilizations.

Jews and Muslims after Left Behind

The links between rapture fictions and American foreign policies are even more obvious in Jenkins's *Soon* (2003). The novel, which is the eponymous debut of a new series detailing life immediately before the rapture,

99. Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Remnant*, p. 282.
100. Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Remnant*, p. 282.
101. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Soul Harvest*, pp. 116-17.
102. His conversion is recounted in Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Mark*, pp. 113-17.
103. Jenkins and LaHaye, *Assassins*, p. 174.

presents a futuristic dystopia that considers the condition of America in 2046.[104] The novel projects a series of religiously driven conflicts, citing the World Trade Center attack and the invasion of Iraq as crucial catalysts in an international confrontation between the United States and a coalition from the 'axis of evil' that spreads throughout Europe until 'the globe was ablaze with attacks, counterattacks, reprisals, and finally, an all-out nuclear war that most thought signalled the end of the world'.[105] Washington, DC, is destroyed in an Islamic attack,[106] and the Pentagon is destroyed by a North Korean missile, 'the largest warhead ever to land on American soil'.[107] Nuclear explosions in China severely disrupt its topography and generate a tsunami that rushes across the Pacific to destroy life on the US western seaboard.[108] But Muslims are the victims as much as the agents of terror in this destabilized world. Explaining their hostility to religion, characters in *Soon* remember how evangelical fundamentalists once 'persecuted homosexuals, assassinated abortion doctors … and bombed stem-cell research labs … And after the terrorist attacks of '05, it was the extremists who defied the tolerance laws and rioted, killing Muslims.'[109] Significantly, however, *Soon* avoids discussing the Jews. Israel is unmentioned, and the signs indicating the imminence of the rapture have nothing to do with Israel but a great deal to do with the disruption of American life. America, it seems, has a prophetic destiny all of its own, independent of the earlier focus on the Middle East. Simultaneously, people of all faiths become the victims of this humanistic totalitarian state. If the first instalment is anything to go by, *Soon* represents the final erosion of philo-Semitism in the melting-pot of sympathy for the Islamic faithful. When all religions are the victims of the totalitarian regime, former 'others' become fellow victims of wider hostility to faith. The novel's clash of civilizations becomes a confrontation between those who have faith—of whatever kind—and those who do not.

Conclusion

The evolution of this discourse of civilizational conflict makes the genre's claim of prophetic certainty somewhat problematic. Perhaps the most ironic

104. For a discussion of the significance of this text, see Crawford Gribben, 'After *Left Behind*: The Paradox of Evangelical Pessimism', in Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End*: *Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 113-30.

105. Jerry B. Jenkins, *Soon: The Beginning of the End* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), p. 4.

106. Jenkins, *Soon*, p. 10.

107. Jenkins, *Soon*, p. 17.

108. Jenkins, *Soon*, p. 9.

109. Jenkins, *Soon*, p. 35.

trope in rapture fiction is the regularly reiterated claim that the discussion of prophecy the novels offer is ultimately incontrovertible: 'Prophecy was once again coming to life before his eyes.'[110] Characters in rapture fictions claim objective access to the future: 'God has given us in the Bible an accurate history of the world, much of it written in advance. It is the only truly accurate history ever written.'[111] Tsion Ben-Judah, the converted rabbi, is not alone in being prepared to stake his credibility and the credibility of Scripture on the events he anticipates: 'If this does not happen, label me a heretic or mad and look elsewhere than the Holy Scriptures for hope.'[112] But these totalizing claims cannot disguise the fact that the theology and cultural presuppositions the genre represents are continually changing. The Left Behind novels are a form of polemic, designed primarily to convince nondispensational evangelicals, and nonevangelical Christians, of the propriety and orthodoxy of dispensational thought.[113] This observation is true of the rapture fiction genre as a whole. But the very claims the genre makes for itself—claims for the transparency of its prophetic exegesis—are evidence of the deeply encultured nature of this form of popular evangelicalism. Rapture fictions may not tell us much about the end of the world, but they tell us a great deal about the changing but often unreflecting nature of an important section of evangelicalism, and perhaps the thirty million American readers its novels can attract. No wonder this religious genre is interesting the readers of *Foreign Affairs*. The democratic participation of many of the genre's readers may provide one important reason for considering the place of Jews and Muslims in evangelical rapture fiction.

110. Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Mark*, p. 284.

111. Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Remnant*, p. 228.

112. Jenkins and LaHaye, *The Mark*, p. 149.

113. Heath Carter, unpublished presentation at the Centre for Millennial Studies, Boston University, November 2002; Gribben, *Writing the Rapture,* passim.

4. Tim LaHaye, Left Behind and the Catholic Church

Jarlath Killeen

In late 1987, Tim LaHaye surprised many by announcing his support for Jack Kemp, rather than his ideological bedfellow Pat Robertson, in the race to become the Republican presidential nominee. LaHaye apparently believed that there was no likelihood of Robertson getting enough votes, so he decided to back a horse who was at least in with a chance.[1] He was soon appointed co-chairman of Kemp's campaign, but political success was not to be theirs. LaHaye quickly became a public liability when the *Baltimore Sun* printed his description of Catholicism in his 1974 book, *Revelation: Illustrated and Made Plain*, as a 'false religion' which prevented its adherents from gaining salvation. Together with the fact that LaHaye's church had helped fund the notorious 'Mission to Catholics' in the 1970s, an evangelism of American Catholics by 'Biblically-based Protestants' led by a former-Carmelite-priest-turned-Catholic-basher Bart Brewer, these comments made LaHaye look like an anti-Catholic bigot. Other remarks indicating LaHaye's belief that God had, in effect, turned his back on the Jews when they failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, were the final straw.[2] The pressure and the bad publicity became too much to take, and LaHaye stood down from his role in Kemp's campaign—though that did not appear to help Kemp's candidacy, and Vice President George H.W. Bush went on to run for the Republicans and win the presidency.

The accusations of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism are things LaHaye has never been able to get away from, although the Left Behind

1. Duane M. Oldfield, *The Right and the Righteous: The Christian Right Confronts the Republican Party* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), pp. 141-42.

2. John Cloud, 'Meet the Prophet: How an Evangelist and Conservative Activist Turned Prophecy into a Fiction Juggernaut,' *Time*, 1 July 2002, online at www.time.com, accessed 3 October 2008.

series (1995–2007) is, in part, a very clear attempt to put the former to bed.[3] The treatment of Catholicism in the series has not attracted very much academic attention, but those who have looked at the issue have argued that LaHaye has not left behind his old prejudices, but rather disguised them in a very unsuccessful way.[4] Part of the difficulty is the source from which LaHaye draws much of his understanding of Catholicism. As Carl Olson points out, LaHaye's knowledge and opinion of Catholicism are drawn from Alexander Hislop's infamous *The Two Babylons; or, The Papal Worship Proved to Be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife*, first published to a certain kind of acclaim in 1853, and never out of print since. In this 'study', Hislop, a Free Church of Scotland minister, argues that Nimrod, a shadowy figure from the book of Genesis, and his consort, Semiramis, established an evil religious cult in the city of Babylon which seemed to disappear after their death but which had only gone underground, to eventually re-emerge, apparently fulfilling the prophecies in Revelation 17 concerning the 'Mystery Babylon', in a horrific hybrid with Christianity in the theology and rituals of the Catholic Church.[5] LaHaye's debt to Hislop is well known, and in *Revelation Unveiled* (1999), he claims frankly that 'the greatest book ever written on [Babylon] … [is] the masterpiece *The Two Babylons*', which he believes has 'never been refuted'.[6] In *Are We Living in the End Times?* (1999), LaHaye[7] argues that while every false religion descends from the primal religion of the pagan Babylonians, Roman Catholicism is to be particularly reviled because it mixed this false mystery religion with the truths of Christianity, producing a truly horrible offspring including 'prayers for

3. An unsuccessful one, apparently. When they have examined the 'Jewish question' in the series, many have come to the conclusion that the novels represent a more subtle version of anti-Semitism; see Sherryll Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem" in the *Left Behind* Novels', *Literature and Theology* 19.4 (2005), pp. 367-83.

4. Carl E. Olson, 'No Rapture for Rome: The Anti-Catholics behind the Best-selling *Left Behind* Books,' *This Rock*, November 2000; http://www.nativityukr.org/various_files/Rapture_article.html, accessed 3 October 2008; Carl E. Olson, *Will Catholics Be 'Left Behind'? A Critique of the Rapture and Today's Prophecy Preachers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003); Carl E. Olson, 'The Best-Selling Bigotry of *Left Behind*,' *Catalyst*, December 2004; http://www.catholicleague.org/research/leftbehind.htm, accessed 3 October 2008; Jimmy Akin, 'False Profit: Money, Prejudice, and Bad Theology in Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* Series', special report from *Catholic Answers*, 2003; http://www.catholic.com/library/false_profit.asp, accessed 3 October 2008; and Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 130-34.

5. Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons; or, The Papal Worship Proved to Be the Worship of Nimrod and his Wife* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, n.d.), pp. 25-90.

6. Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 266; Olson, 'No Rapture for Rome'.

7. As LaHaye is the ideological and theological motor behind books he 'co-authors', I will refer to him simply as the authority behind arguments made in these books.

the dead, making the sign of the cross, worship of saints and angels, instituting the mass, and worship of Mary'; indeed, for LaHaye every distinctive aspect of Catholicism can be traced to Nimrodian Babylonian mystery religions.[8]

Hislopian history is filtered into the Left Behind series in coded form. The rise of Cardinal Peter Matthews to the position of Pontifex Maximus Peter II depends heavily on Hislop, who devotes a great deal of space to establishing a connection between papal power and Babylonian perversion:

> The College of Cardinals, with the Pope at its head, is just the counterpart of the Pagan College of Pontiffs, with its 'Pontifex Maximus', or 'Sovereign Pontiff', which had existed in Rome from the earliest times, and which is known to have been framed on the model of the grand original Council of Pontiffs at Babylon … the title … for a *thousand* years had had attached to it the power of the keys of Janus and Cybele.[9]

Likewise, Matthews's espousal of a 'One World Faith' called 'Enigma Babylon' with its home base in Rome is clearly taken from *Two Babylons*, based on Hislop's claim that 'the Church which has its seat and headquarters on the seven hills of Rome might most appropriately be called "Babylon", inasmuch as it is the chief seat of idolatry under the New Testament, as the ancient Babylon was the chief seat of idolatry under the Old'.[10] For LaHaye, many elements of Babylonian paganism also find expression in New Age religion and in the persistence of such practices as astrology and occultism, and he draws these elements together with Roman Catholic Babylonianism in the figure of Matthews: when Pontifex Maximus cameos on stage during the great meeting of the 144,000 witnesses in *Apollyon* (1998), he appears like a maleficent Gandalf or Dumbledore, wearing a

> high peaked cap with an infinity symbol on the front and a floor-length, iridescent yellow robe with a long train and billowy sleeves. His vestments were bedecked with huge, inlaid, brightly coloured stones and appointed with tassels, woven cords, and bright blue, crushed velvet stripes, six on each sleeve, as if he had earned some sort of double doctorate from Black Light Discotheque University.[11]

8. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), p. 173.

9. Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 206.

10. Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 2.

11. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Apollyon* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), p. 54. Other uses of Hislop's *Two Babylons* within conspiracy culture include Des Griffin's *Fourth Reich of the Rich* (1976), which argues that the earth was originally populated by the angels thrown out of heaven after the rebellion of Lucifer who went on to form an evil system in Babylon by Nimrod, filtered into the Babylonian mystery religions, which then became grafted on to Christianity by the Catholic Church, which is therefore a satanic organization, and which plans to take over the

Of course, the Left Behind series re-articulates some rather less arcane versions of the anti-Catholic menace also. In *Assassins* (1999), Matthews makes clear that he wishes temporal as well as spiritual power to be devolved from Carpathia to himself—reviving the old accusation that the popes are interested in making a political comeback. Matthews believes that 'Carpathia's day is past' and demands that he be recognized as his successor.[12] It is also in this book that Tsion Ben-Judah claims that Matthews is the 'harlot' (the famous 'whore of Babylon') mentioned in Revelation 17. Moreover, in the depiction of Nicolae Carpathia, there may be an implicit anti-Catholic agenda, since he is described in *Left Behind* (1995) as 'blond and blue-eyed, like the original Romanians, who came from Rome', has a strong 'Roman' jaw and nose, and is of 'Italian heritage'.[13] The Antichrist is a 'Roman'—just like Matthews.

That there is a persistent and perhaps even basic anti-Catholicism to the series is, then, a justifiable accusation. However, the fact is that LaHaye's anti-Catholicism is hardly left of field or even right of centre when it comes to American cultural life. The American colonists, of both Anglican and Puritan variety, fled an England that was united perhaps only by a common belief that Rome was the source of world iniquity and the epicentre of the 'Dark Ages', and they carried that belief into the New World, which they saw as a potential utopia freed from the influence of Romanism. This view of America as an expression of Protestant modernity was central to the national consciousness that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. If, as Michel de Certeau has argued, 'modern Western history essentially begins with the differentiation between the past and the present,' in which the past is defined as tyrannical, superstitious, backward and barbaric, terms that became synonymous with medieval Catholicism, Americans cast themselves as pioneers for the non-Catholic future.[14] Jenny Franchot quotes one writer in the *American Quarterly Review* in 1831 insisting that Americans should 'bear in mind that they are the patriarchs of modern emancipation', and in the nineteenth century, historians like William H.

earth through the Illuminati, which was also founded by satanic forces. The former BBC sports presenter-cum-theorist of reptilian overlords David Icke is also in debt to Hislop, claiming in his *The Biggest Secret* (1999) that the Catholic Church is the same as the Babylonian Brotherhood; see Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 132-33.

12. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Assassins* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), p. 225.

13. Jerry B. Jenkins and Timothy LaHaye, *Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995), pp. 70, 241, 270.

14. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (trans. Tom Conley; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 2.

Prescott and Francis Parkman configured American history as a step on the progressive road to perfection, and a protest against monarchy and papacy which represented stasis and, indeed, atavism.[15] Ray Allen Billington notes that 'in America natural conditions intensified [the anti-Catholic inheritance] even though there were almost no Catholics in the colonies during the seventeenth century … The isolation of the people, the introspection to which they resorted in their wilderness homes, the distance which separated the colonies from the mother country and from Europe, all fostered the bigotry which they had brought from the old world'—what Donald Rumsfeld calls 'Old Europe'.[16] This led to an extreme sensitivity concerning Catholic and foreign threats to American independence.

In the growth of 'nativism' in the 1840s and the emergence of the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s, anti-Catholicism took centre stage politically, and the Catholic Church was castigated as a foreign influence whose adherents were little better than brainwashed zombies programmed to obey whatever order was issued from deep within the bowels of the Vatican, an iniquitous, sexually scandalous centre of vice prophesied in Revelation as the whore of Babylon. Publications such as *The Anti-Romanist* (1834), *The Protestant* (also named *The Reformation Advocate* and *The Protestant Magazine*, and started in 1830), and a host of others, dedicated themselves to uncovering the pope's plots not only to reclaim dominion over western Europe but to extend his power even to the new American Eden, warning against any complacency about the papacy's 'increase in political influence', which was a clear and present 'danger' to the liberty of America itself; and these conspiracy theories flourished throughout the nineteenth century.[17] Others emphasized the sexually dissolute nature of Catholicism. Maria Monk's *The Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836) was perhaps the most famous of the anti-Catholic tirades, in which Monk 'disclosed' how she had been induced into a convent and forced by her Mother Superior to have sex with priests, the children of which unions were strangled (after having been baptized), and witnessed the execution of any nuns who refused to submit to the sexual advances of the priests, before she escaped in order to reveal to the world what had been going on. On 30 January 1830, *The Protestant* synopsized a general feeling that 'Popery is a compound of all that is senseless in Pagan idolatry and polluting in Heathen sensual festivity—a direct contradiction to Christianity. It is emphatically

15. Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 3-4.

16. Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1938), p. 4.

17. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, pp. 56-57.

the Antichrist—the Apocalyptic Babylonish mystery condemned to utter destruction'.[18]

LaHaye's views are perfectly in tune with this mainstream American version of Catholicism rather than some obnoxious, right-wing heresy from it. Of course, it is often claimed that the kind of anti-Catholicism briefly outlined above has been banished from the centre and migrated to the cultural margins, but this cannot sustain close examination. The argument that although the view of the Catholic Church as literally the whore of Babylon still appeals to a limited constituency, such language is unacceptable to, for example, cosmopolitan and liberal readers on the east and west coasts does not hold much water. This argument ignores the basic nature of anti-Catholicism for modernity and for modernity's incarnation—America. If the figure of the Jew necessarily haunted Christian Europe, so the Catholic bogey plagues the post-Reformation West, and it simply cannot be superseded. Both modernity and America need anti-Catholicism to remain ideologically viable. Just as Chick Publications feeds the fundamentalist right a diet of anti-Catholic classics required to perpetuate the traditional language of the Catholic menace, so, in a variety of ways, the mainstream media continues to flood the market with a carefully calibrated version of the old story. Anti-Catholicism in American life has not disappeared; it has merely found new avenues and modes of expression, no longer dependent on the literalism inherited from sixteenth-century Protestantism. Calling the pope the Antichrist is now rather frowned upon in the cosmopolis, but depicting him as a woman-hating, homophobic, paedophilic, irrational terrorist seems to be *de rigueur*. 'Liberal' anti-Catholicism derives, and gains much intellectual and rhetorical sustenance, from traditional versions of anti-Catholicism. As the historian Philip Jenkins argues, the imagery of 'modern anti-Catholic activism, with its liberal and feminist affinities … would have been broadly familiar to nativist Protestants a century or two ago'.[19]

Jenkins's study of the 'new anti-Catholicism' details hundreds of mind-boggling examples demonstrating this. For instance, in 1998, the acclaimed dramatist Tony Kushner considered it acceptable to call John Paul II a 'homicidal liar' guilty of at the very least 'endors[ing] murder', followed by 'mitred, chasubled and coped Pilates'.[20] Between 2001 and 2002 the renowned *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd constantly returned to the old themes of the Catholic Church as a crucible of sexual perversion and tyranny. In column after column she attacked the Church as an institution of 'cloistered, arrogant fraternities' whose 'indulgences, conducted in secret,

18. Quoted in Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, p. 358.

19. Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 23.

20. Quoted in Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism*, pp. 1-2.

have hurt the welfare of their most vulnerable charges'; argued that 'mandatory celibacy—stifling God-given urges—draws a disproportionate number of men fleeing confusion about their sexuality'; and claimed that 'lust ran unchecked—in a tortured, destructive form—in the Catholic priesthood … Greed … prompted Catholic prelates to defame victims rather than face civil fines and depleted contributions'. In her accusation that the Catholic Church is an institution whose 'deeply anti-democratic spirit' is at odds with 'the open, modernizing spirit of America', the rhetoric of the nativists is alive and well—and this from one of the most respected liberal columnists in the country.[21]

Anti-Catholicism still operates as a 'vast superstructure of prejudice', as it did in seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Britain, and LaHaye knows how to tap into this vast reservoir of bigotry.[22] While in his nonfiction he could preach plainly to his own congregation who could be expected to accept and endorse the view of the Catholic Church as literally anti-Christian, when he wished to speak to a wider American audience he needed to find a language and a symbolic structure through which to feed a central and traditional theological, political and social view of the Catholic Church as the enemy of modernity; and the success of the Left Behind series suggests that this is precisely what he achieved. As children of modernity, liberal humanism and Protestant fundamentalism are siblings and share the same prejudices despite hating each other. Fundamentalism is not only a modern phenomenon; it embraces modernity—usually enthusiastically—and rejects completely any medieval inheritance, which it views as tainted with the evil of Catholicism. Caricatures of fundamentalist America as antimodern, or antiscience, or antitechnology are very wide of the mark. The deeply promodern ideology of Left Behind is visible in every book of the series, particularly in its slavish devotion to techno-novelty, the industrial-military complex, neoliberal economics, neoconservative politics, and in the language of Hislopian history the American left and right find common ground.[23]

21. Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism*, pp. 153-54; see also Robert P. Lockwood (ed.), *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2000).

22. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 36.

23. Melani McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular: The *Left Behind* Series and Christian Fundamentalism's NewWorld Order', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003), pp. 773-98; Andrew Strombeck, 'Invest in Jesus: Neoliberalism and the *Left Behind* Novels', *Cultural Critique* 64 (2006), pp. 161-95; Amy Frykholm, *Rapture Culture:* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 122-29.

Anti-Catholicism is one of the discourses that links together the 'red' and 'blue' states, the liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, à la carte Christians and pretribulation, premillennial evangelicals, atheists and fundamentalists. When the time came to write the Left Behind series, LaHaye had perfected a means by which to speak to enormous numbers of Americans, many of whom had nothing politically, socially or intellectually in common with fundamentalism, except for the common language of anti-Catholicism (the language, I suggest, of the American Religion), bringing the argument of *The Two Babylons* to a new readership.

Thus, anti-Catholicism is central to the structure of the entire series. However, contrarily, the series also articulates a more recent fundamentalist desire for rapprochement with American Catholics in a way that highlights the very complexity of contemporary American cultural life, because LaHaye has not only to articulate his own theological view of the end times, in which Catholicism is part of the arsenal of the enemy, but he also has to appeal to a Catholic readership and to Catholic allies in his political and cultural causes.

This is clear from a number of aspects of the series. In the first place, LaHaye took a risk by having the pope as one of those true Christians who were raptured in *Left Behind*. In *Tribulation Force* (1996), Buck records that 'a lot of Catholics were confused, because while many remained, some had disappeared—including the new pope, who had been installed just a few months before the vanishings'.[24] This is a significant change from previous Darbyite views about what would happen to all Catholics at the rapture, and perhaps a recognition that John Paul II had been accepted as a hero by some fundamentalist leaders, including Jerry Falwell, who proclaimed him as the 'best hope we Baptists ever had'.[25] Although the raptured pope is actually titled John XXIV, he may be a coded version of the late pontiff who was at that time still *in situ*. Moreover, the constant expressions of animosity uttered by both Carpathia and Leon Fortunato against Peter Matthews lend weight to LaHaye's claim in an interview with the *Chicago Sun-Times* (6 June 2003) that Mathews is not a representative of the Catholic Church but a 'renegade' Catholic.[26] Leon Fortunato, and not Peter, is the 'false prophet' predicted in Revelation. Moreover, in *The Mark* (2000), in a valiant effort to make sure that the entire world worships only Nicolae, Leon travels to the Rome in order to bring about the destruction of 'every Vatican relic, every icon, and every piece of artwork that paid homage to the impotent God of

24. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Tribulation Force* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), p. 53.

25. Richard John Neuhaus, 'The Right to Fight: Mechanic of the New Right—with No Apologies', *Commonweal*, 9 October 1981, pp. 555-59.

26. Quoted in Olson, 'The Best-Selling Bigotry of *Left Behind*'.

the Bible'.[27] Thus, the Vatican is seen as one of the last spaces dedicated to the biblical God left in a world controlled by the Antichrist.

The risk involved in this was demonstrated by the vitriol poured out on the series by some other fundamentalists, and perhaps in anticipation of this, approval of the raptured pope is qualified by the revelation that he had been a reformer who had 'stirred up controversy in the church with a new doctrine that seemed to coincide more with the "heresy" of Martin Luther than with the historic orthodoxy they were used to'.[28] This is compounded by Matthews's claim that the rapture had 'winnowed out' any Catholics who 'opposed the orthodox teaching of the Mother Church', which seems a clear indication that there is a deep divide between the 'non-Christian' traditionalist Catholics like himself, and the reforming Catholics, like the raptured pope, taken up by Jesus, a gap that seems to be cemented when Matthews opposes the Lutheran doctrine of grace when put to him by Buck. However, Matthews also says that he lost a sister and an aunt to the rapture, and points out that 'they had left the church' because 'they opposed the teaching'. Now, it is unclear whether the objectionable teaching is the Lutheran views of John XXIV or the traditional doctrines of the church, but given Matthews's presentation it would seem that his relatives left the church because of the *new* teaching—because they remained staunch Catholic traditionalists. This suggests that both traditional Catholics (or some traditional Catholics) and 'Protestantizing' Catholics are 'real' Christians deserving rapture.

That Matthews's traditionally minded sister and aunt became disillusioned with the Catholic Church because of its modernizing drift accords with what has actually happened within the historical church since Vatican II. Commentators and historians have described a cleavage within the contemporary Catholic Church revolving around notions of tradition and reform; groups have sprung up, led in many cases by women, arguing that the church is moving towards apostasy and has been infiltrated by enemies of the truth trying to jettison all that is central to 'traditional' Catholicism.[29] Accusations levelled include a de-emphasizing of the teachings on transubstantiation, an undermining of Marianism, a democratizing of structures of church authority and a dilution of sexual and familial ethics. Their view of the 'modernizing' church is well captured in Matthews, who prays to 'animal deities',[30] renounces much 'Catholic thought and scholarship', dumps all belief in miraculous events including the virgin birth, which suggests

27. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *The Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000), p. 333.

28. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Tribulation Force*, p. 53.

29. John Cornwell, *Breaking Faith: The Pope, the People and the Fate of Catholicism* (London: Penguin, 2002).

30. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Apollyon*, pp. 54-55.

a discarding of Catholic doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.[31] These are simply not the actions of a 'traditional' Catholic, in other words, and they distance Matthews from historical Catholicism completely, while also suggesting that traditional Catholics who oppose his reforms are allied to the Tribulation Force in spirit.

Although LaHaye is still committed to a version of the end times which sees the Antichrist as arising within and from Catholic Europe and indeed the Catholic Church itself, in the battle with secular humanism he may feel that some Catholics who feel marginalized by the postconciliar church could be useful allies and that alienating *them* is counterproductive. The Left Behind series marks (interestingly) not only a new articulation of very deep American anti-Catholicism but also represents an attempted rapprochement with certain kinds of Catholics who feel alienated with their own church because they see it infected by the very diseases LaHaye sees destroying the West—the infections of secular humanism.[32] These alienated Catholics have looked to build political and social bridges with Protestant fundamentalists who share a similar feeling that the contemporary world is going to hell in a handcart. Through its ambiguity concerning traditional Catholicism and the ambivalent depiction of Matthews, the Left Behind series capitalises on a number of different fissures in American and global Catholicism, which have allowed new alliances to emerge, and which are changing the face not only of the Catholic Church but of American political life.

The growth in political intimacy between disillusioned Catholics and Protestant fundamentalists is shown by the similarity in their voting patterns. Traditionally, Catholics supported the Democratic Party, especially in presidential elections, but by 2004 a majority of 'active' Catholics (who attend Mass once a week), were voting Republican, helping George W. Bush win the presidency in an extremely close election. This shift by 'active' Catholics to Republican support came about largely due to a shift in Catholic electoral concerns from strictly 'political' to more broadly 'cultural' matters (birth control, gay rights, sex education, perceived state interference in family life, pornography and particularly abortion), and these Catholics found their views echoed within the evangelical base of the Republican Party, forging what Charles Colson has called an 'ecumenism in the trenches' of the culture wars.[33]

31. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Nicolae* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997), pp. 359-61.

32. I will resist the terms 'traditional' or 'right wing' Catholics here because I consider these terms not only patronizing and derogatory, but also extremely misleading, for a number of reasons.

33. See George J. Marlin, *The American Catholic Voter: 200 Years of Political Impact* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004); John McGreevy, *Catholicism and*

A rapprochement between Catholics and evangelicals was formalized in the statement *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* issued in 1995, whose signatories included Pat Robertson and Charles Colson. This was the culmination of a process that began when fundamentalists realized that Catholics could be both theological enemies and political allies in the aftermath of Pat Robertson's failed attempt in 1988 to secure the Republican nomination for president.[34] Robertson, together with Ralph Reed, understanding that the Moral Majority had been stymied by its too-close association with Jerry Falwell's Baptist Bible Fellowship, decided to build religious bridges and established the more clearly nondenominational Christian Coalition, through which they specifically sought to make inroads in the Catholic demographic. They issued invitations to prominent conservative Catholics to speak at the annual conferences of the Christian Coalition; some Catholics even made the leadership of the Coalition; most importantly, the 'Catholic Alliance' was launched by those associated with the Coalition in 1995 in a (fairly successful) bid to increase connections with the Catholic community. The Catholic Alliance has since become separately incorporated and is no longer associated (except in general orientation) with the Coalition.

Catholic Alliance has not been welcomed by the American Catholic establishment, and many bishops expressed distrust and discomfort with its existence. However, for Catholics who feel marginalized by what they perceive as the liberalizing of the church, many within the Catholic establishment are part of the problem; for the disillusioned, authority has shifted towards groups who have not been slow to criticize the cardinals and bishops they see as enemies within.[35] On the Eternal Word Television Network—an organ of alienated Catholicism—its founder Mother Angelica caused a minor controversy when, after the release of a pastoral letter on the Eucharist and the liturgy by Cardinal Bishop Mahony of the archdiocese of Los Angeles, she announced on air that her 'obedience in that diocese would be absolutely zero. And I hope everybody else's in that diocese is

American Freedom: A History (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2003); David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and James M. O' Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

34. In his book *Reckless Faith* (1994), John MacArthur accused his fellow evangelicals of selling out the gospel, arguing that Catholics 'are not entitled to be embraced as members of Christ's body', and that the ECT statement discouraging evangelization between the churches leaves 'trapped millions of Catholics in a system of superstitious and religious ritual that insulates them from the glorious liberty of the true gospel of Christ'.

35. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

zero.' Indeed, those on EWTN often complain that those in ecclesiastical authority (except for the pope) cannot be trusted to bring the full light of truth to faithful Catholics, and that it has been left to them to take over the job.[36] In a scathing critique of EWTN, Raymond A. Schroth argues that it operates as an alternative pedagogic authority, driven by apocalyptic and millenarian readings of the culture and anger against the direction of the church since Vatican II. Schroth aimed his analysis at EWTN because, as he explained, to many Mother Angelica and her network 'are the American Catholic church', and they propound a view of the world as on the brink of Armageddon. EWTN certainly gravitates towards Catholic figures who believe that in the very near future disaster and destruction will be rained down from on high unless the Blessed Virgin Mary intervenes and asks God to relent. This is particularly the message to be discovered in the lessons in catechetics delivered by Fr John Corapi, a gifted orator with a very clear message of conformity or hell, and where every problem that arises in the world is a coded warning from God to get our act together.

In this atmosphere marginal Catholic groups and LaHaye supporters begin to sound very much alike, and many have forged a nebulous alliance, not in the spirit of ecumenism but because of a feeling that the end times are close if not already upon us, and that a crucial battle has to be won. The key areas in which this discursive alliance has been built are cultural and moral, particularly in the areas of family life and sexual ethics. This coalition does not actually depend on membership of organizations, but works successfully on the more nebulous goal of sympathy and general support, whereby political activism promoted by, for example, the Christian Coalition can count on the support of those Catholics who are not signed-up members.[37] The success of the Christian Coalition in making a political and

36. Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, 'Liturgical Confusion-Criticism over a Pastoral Letter', editorial, *Commonweal*, 30 January 1998, available online at http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/liturgical-confusion-0; John L. Allen, Jr, 'Mahony Sees Nun's Critique as Heresy Charge: Cardinal Roger Mahony; Dispute with Televangelist Mother M. Angelica, *National Catholic Reporter*, 5 December 1997, http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/1997d/120597/120597d.htm, accessed 3 October 2008.

37. R.S. Appleby, 'Catholics and the Christian Right: An Uneasy Alliance', in C.E. Smidt and J.M. Penning (eds.), *Sojourners in the Wilderness: The Christian Right in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 93-113; Mary E. Bendyna and Clyde Wilcox, 'The Christian Right Old and New: A Comparison of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition', in C.E. Smidt and J.M. Penning (eds.), pp. 41-56; R.C. Liebman, 'Mobilizing the Moral Majority', in R.C. Liebman and R.Wuthnow (eds.), *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation* (New York: Aldine, 1983), pp. 50-73; C. Wilcox, *God's Warriors: The Christian Right in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Mary E. Bendyna, John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, 'Uneasy Alli-

cultural impact on American life clearly acts as a model for the kind of 'conservative coalition' offered by Left Behind's Tribulation Force. Although no individual Catholic member is focused on, the absence of denominational emphasis is important. Responding to criticism of the lack of Catholic characters highlighted within the Tribulation Force, Jerry B. Jenkins pointed out that 'true believers in Christ, regardless of their church "brand" will be raptured'.[38]

These links between evangelicals and marginal Catholics have been greatly fostered by the rise of a Catholic apocalyptic. Traditionally, Catholicism has been resistant to millennial theories, but in the last 150 years, and particularly since the Second Vatican Council, millennial themes have decisively entered the Catholic imaginary as a response both to the apparent moral debauching of the world and the divisions within the universal church. Much contemporary Catholic apocalyptic has emerged from figures and groups organized around female visionaries who have experienced apparitions of the Virgin Mary who comes carrying warnings of end times, the last judgment and the need for conversion before the coming of the Antichrist, often drawing on the apparitions and 'secrets' of Fatima for support. Speculation concerning the content of the 'third secret' of Fatima has been rife within these groups, many believing it predicted the emergence from within the Vatican itself of the Antichrist, enabled by 'renegade' cardinals and bishops. This belief allows these groups to claim complete loyalty to the 'real' Catholic Church, divine sanction from an impeccably Catholic source, the Virgin Mary, and also see the church as the vehicle for the Antichrist. Thus, a point of contact was formed with the basic anti-Catholicism of American culture which configured the pope as the whore of Babylon. Moreover, also in common with the view promulgated by LaHaye and consistent with the conspiratorial rhetoric of Left Behind, many of these Catholic apocalyptic groups believe that there is a vast conspiracy in operation, connecting corrupt cardinals within the Vatican, the United Nations and the European Union, all dedicated to the promotion of a one-world government and religion through globalization, a cashless society and methodologies of control—such as PIN numbers and identity cards (marks of the Beast), thus inaugurating the end of days. While clearly these are themes that connect an overwhelming number of conspiracy theorists, what is important is that the growth of Catholic versions of these theories have allowed for a closer cultural dialogue between fundamentalists and Catholics.

Perhaps the most interesting of these Catholic apocalyptic theorists, from the point of view of the Left Behind series, is the New York seer

ance: Conservative Catholics and the Christian Right', *Sociology of Religion* 62 (2001), pp. 51-64.

38. http://www.amazon.com/Left-Behind-Store-Books/b?ie=UTF8&node=297836.

Veronica Lueken, a Bayside housewife who first experienced supernatural visits when St Thérèse of Lisieux called on her while she was praying for the recovery of Robert Kennedy on 5 June 1968. The Virgin Mary was Lueken's most frequent visitor, though the archangels Michael and Gabriel, saints Joseph, John, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Aquinas, Bernadette and even Jesus Christ turned up over the years. Lueken gathered a large group of supporters around her, eventually raising enough money to build a shrine at Flushing Meadows Corona Park dedicated to 'Our Lady of the Roses', the title the Virgin requested be bestowed upon her by the Bayside pilgrims. The messages Lueken received are alarming in their apocalyptic intensity and include predictions of the destruction of New York City, a meteor-like 'Ball of Fire' destined for the world, earthquakes and other natural disasters. What is interesting is the powerful mixture of kitsch Catholicism and anti-Catholic Gothic in her warnings, as well as her surprise endorsement of the rapture.

Lueken's apparitions articulate many of the standard anti-Catholic stereotypes typical of Protestant apocalyptic, but are steeped in Catholic devotional paraphernalia as well.[39] She tells of terrible sexual activities going on within the secret enclaves of convents, monasteries, seminaries and churches, sexual relations between priests and nuns, abortions in convents and nuns dancing in leotards (1 October 1988). She constantly returned to the claim that agents of Satan were active in the Catholic hierarchy right up to the papacy. In perhaps her most bizarre assertion, Lueken announced that Paul VI had been drugged and replaced by an imposter: 'Now there is one who is ruling in his place, an impostor, created from the minds of the agents of Satan. Plastic surgery, My child—the best of surgeons were used to create this impostor … Behind him, My child, there are three who have given themselves to Satan' (27 September 1975). She insisted that 'Satan, Lucifer in human form, entered into Rome in the year 1972' (7 September 1978). In 1989, Lueken maintained that Jacinta, one of the children of Fatima, sent her a message about 'Antichrist into Mitres'; miraculous photographs taken of Lueken in ecstasy purport to show 'Bishop Rat burrowing into the Church', 'the slippers of the papacy', and 'the Face of a Cardinal in a high position in the Vatican involved in Freemasonry'.

In apparitions to Lueken, Our Lady accuses cardinals, bishops and priests of actually conspiring with Satan who has come to impose a one-world government and a one world religion, along with a single currency, through that

39. Three sites contain all the messages transmitted through Lueken: http://www.smwa.org/Message/Text/Index__The_Message_from_Heaven.htm. This presents the messages in chronological order; http://www.ourladyoftheroses.info has both a chronological and a thematic order of the information; http://www.tldm.org/directives/directives.htm is a thematic directory.

great instrument of evil, the United Nations, aided by the Vatican, anticipating events of the Left Behind series: 'The greatest harm to mankind is being promoted through the channel of My Son's Church. Many who wear the red hats have not turned to My Son. They reject His Divinity; they reject Him as part of the Godhead. They reject Him as their God, and they have joined forces with the prince of darkness and his consorts' (28 December 1976). Behind this conspiracy is one man, the Antichrist, whose 'outside' looks 'holy and human; but he's … actually a creature of hell' (13 April 1974). This is the 'individual' who 'in darkness of spirit and insanity of sin, shall set mankind into a major War that shall bring about the destruction and annihilation of nations' (28 May 1977), although—shockingly for a traditional Catholic—not before the rapture has taken place, since 'a grouping would have been taken up into Heaven, My child and My children, to await the terrible devastation that falls upon mankind' (28 May 1983). This rapture will save those who have stayed true to the true Catholic faith (Lueken's own followers).

Lueken died on 3 August 1995 but left a vibrant cult that still issues her message to any interested readers; and she, in any case, was hardly alone in her Catholic anti-Catholic apocalypticism, echoed by other seers all over the world, and in the journalism of Catholic periodicals such as *Fatima Crusader* (launched in 1978, and fully committed to the belief in a communist world conspiracy infiltrating the Vatican in which several top cardinals are in fact communists), *The Wanderer*, *Crisis* magazine, the topical *Human Life Review*, *The Angelus*, *The Remnant*, *Fidelity* (now *Culture Wars,* edited by the intellectual E. Michael Jones), and groups like the Apostles of Infinite Love, a Canada-based sedevacantist group established in 1962. As Michael W. Cuneo notes, Protestant millenarianism acts as an implicit source for much of this Catholic apocalyptic.[40] These developments help to account for why the Left Behind series finds itself in tension regarding its depiction of Catholicism, oscillating between Hislopian Catholophobia and a subtle courtship of disillusioned Catholics who could serve as political and cultural allies.

40. Michael W. Cuneo, 'The Vengeful Virgin: Case Studies in Contemporary American Catholic Apocalypticism', in Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (eds.), *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 177.

5. Evangelical End-Time Films: From 1941 to the Present*

John Walliss

In 2001, two multimillion selling novels were adapted to celluloid. Both were the work of Christian authors and dealt with ordinary individuals struggling to live in extraordinary times—individuals, often unheroic in nature, taking part in a momentous clash between the forces of good and those of absolute evil. In both cases, the source of this evil was personified in a demonic figure who, from his centre of power in the east, sought to bring the whole world under his terrible dominion. Both films were also followed shortly after by sequels, again based on subsequent books in their respective series of novels. One of these films, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), directed by Peter Jackson, would eventually gross $871,368,364 and earn four Oscars and over 70 other awards.[1] The other, *Left Behind: The Movie* (2000), directed by Vic Sarin, did not fare so well, making only $4,221,341 at the box office after an arguably ill-thought-through marketing campaign and being panned by the critics as, to quote one *Washington Post* reviewer, a 'blundering cringefest'.[2] Indeed, such was the film's failure that one of the series' authors, Tim LaHaye, went so far as to actually sue the filmmakers for not giving him the end-times blockbuster that they had allegedly promised.[3]

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1. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737.

2. D. Howe, '"Left Behind": Heaven Help Us', *Washington Post*, 2 February 2001. Left Behind box office source: http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/1804383520/info, accessed 24 May 2007.

3. See M.R. Smith, 'Left Behind: Author LaHaye Sues Left Behind Film Producers', *Christianity Today*, 23 April 2001, at http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/april23/14.20.html, accessed 24 May 2007.

Left Behind: The Movie was a milestone within the genre of evangelical Christian filmmaking from which it emerged. On one level, it represented a summation of trends and themes within its particular genre stretching back over half a century.[4] On another, it represented a watershed moment. After the failure to achieve the mainstream success of *Left Behind* and its sequels—*Left Behind: Tribulation Force* (2002) and *Left Behind: World at War* (2005)—evangelical filmmaking has seemingly stalled. The production company behind the film, for example, has not produced another movie in the intervening three years since releasing the third *Left Behind* film, and several of its mooted projects, such as a *Left Behind* television series and a fourth film, appear to have never left pre-production. The stream of evangelical films released before the advent of the new millennium has also slowed to a trickle, with only one—*The Moment After II* (2007)—being released since *Left Behind: World at War.*

In this chapter, my aim is to trace the development of rapture films from the 1940s to the present day, focusing in particular on the place of the Left Behind series within the development of the rapture film genre. In doing so, I will locate the series within its genre, highlighting the ways in which it drew on, developed and in some cases rejected earlier tropes, motifs and *dramatis personae*. While acknowledging that the film series is, of course, inspired by the literary series of the same name, I will show how the ways in which these ideas were translated into celluloid may be understood within the context of a particular genre and the aesthetic of a particular production company, Cloud Ten.[5] Following on from this, I will then discuss the release of *Left Behind: The Movie*, its failure at the box office and critical reception, and the consequences that these have had on the rapture film industry. Finally, I will conclude by discussing two recent releases by the mainstream production company The Asylum/Faith Films—*The Apocalypse* (2007) and *2012: Doomsday* (2008)—and what these mean for the future of the rapture film genre.

From The Rapture *to* Left Behind

As far as can be ascertained, the genre of rapture filmmaking began with the release of the ten-minute, nonfiction presentation, *The Rapture,* by Carlos

4. For an in-depth discussion of these themes, see John Walliss, 'Celling the End Times: The Contours of Contemporary Rapture Films', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 19 (2008), available online at http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art19-endtimes.html.

5. It is also, of course, equally plausible that earlier films, such as *A Thief in the Night*, inspired the writers of the Left Behind series. This is a reasonable hypothesis considering the former film's almost cult-like status within the U.S. evangelical community (see Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4th edn, 2006]).

Baptista in 1941. Baptista, an Illinois businessman of Venezuelan descent, had produced his first film, *The Story of a Fountain Pen*, two years before; and *The Rapture* was released on 16mm through his Scriptures Visualized Institute.[6] Despite its brevity and simplicity, the film set up a number of themes and motifs that continue to find echoes in contemporary rapture films. *The Rapture*, for example, introduces the viewer to the social chaos caused when vast numbers of Christians are taken up into the clouds with Jesus. 'Speeding trains', we are told by the film's narrator, 'will plunge unsuspecting passengers into a black eternity as Christian engineers are snatched from the throttle'. Families will also be torn apart, 'with fathers missing from some, mothers missing from others, babies snatched from others'. It also introduces the motif of many 'unsaved' individuals being left behind, and beseeches the viewer to 'accept [Jesus] as your saviour' before it is too late. The film is, however, silent regarding the fate that awaits those left behind; there is, for example, no emphasis beyond referring to 'unspeakable torment' of the horrors of the tribulation period. Nor is there any mention of the millennial kingdom, an omission that continues within the genre right down to the present day. Indeed, for Baptista, the only tragedy of the rapture is that the removal of Christians from the earth will mean an end to evangelizing, giving to missions and praying for 'the lost'.

However, it was the 1972 film by Russell Doughton and Donald Thompson, *A Thief in the Night*, and its three sequels, *A Distant Thunder* (1977), *Image of the Beast* (1981) and *The Prodigal Planet* (1983) that really defined the contours of the rapture film genre. Indeed, in many ways all subsequent rapture films may be seen as variations on the themes and motifs, and sometimes characters, developed in the *Thief* series. Like *The Rapture* three decades before, films in the *Thief* series were shot on 16mm film and were shown predominantly within churches and at evangelical youth camps, where they were invariably followed by an altar call, the films' shocking and often gruesome portrayal of the tribulation, it was hoped, being sufficient to convince any undecided viewers to accept Jesus as their saviour.[7]

The *Thief in the Night* series' main contribution to its genre was primarily within two areas: first, its postrapture salvational economy and, second, its portrayal of the postrapture geopolitical rule of the Antichrist through a reborn Roman Empire. Whereas *The Rapture* had implied that all Christians would be taken away in the rapture, leaving only 'the unsaved' behind to

6. B. Hess, 'A Brief History of Christian Films, 1918–2002' (no date), http://www.avgeeks.com/bhess/christian_film_history.html. *The Rapture* is available to view and download at http://www.archive.org/details/RAPTURE.

7. Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*; Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

face the tribulation, the *Thief* series introduces the idea that many Christians will also be left behind. These nominal Christians, the films claim, may believe themselves to be Christians, but they are instead practicing a form of 'apostate' religion. Consequently, they will be left behind while genuine Christians—understood as 'Bible-believing' Christians who have undergone a born-again conversion—are taken in the rapture. In *A Thief in the Night*, for example, the viewer is introduced to the character of Patty, a young woman who believes she is 'a good person' and therefore a Christian. She is, however, terribly wrong and finds herself left behind after her husband, Jim, and her best friend, Jenny, both of whom had recently been born again, are taken in the rapture.

The first film in the series also sets up a similar binary opposition between two Christian leaders—pastors Balmer and Turner—who again represent respectively this distinction between genuine and apostate Christianity. Turner, for example, is presented as almost a caricature of a mainline Christian: a man who rejects a literal reading of the Bible (believing it instead to be 'the poetic expression of those greater principles by which man lives with man'), is critical of evangelicals and is only concerned with maintaining his position among his flock by not rocking the theological boat. In marked contrast, Balmer is shown as an archetypal true evangelist: a pastor who preaches the Bible from his pulpit without adding his own interpretation, who is well versed in the 'signs of the times', and who warns his congregation constantly that they are living in the end times. Consequently, Balmer is taken up in the rapture—the viewer seeing him disappear while putting up a 'the end is near' notice on his church sign—while Turner is left behind, ultimately going insane in *A Distant Thunder* at the realization that he has led his flock astray.

The *Thief* series also differs from its predecessor by emphasizing more explicitly both the fate of pre-pubescent children left behind within the salvational economy. Whereas *The Rapture* had made a passing reference to how 'babies' would be 'snatched' from some homes at the rapture, the *Thief* series portrays a salvational economy, based on a particular reading of 1 Cor. 7.14, wherein children would be taken only if they had at least one parent who had been born again. Similarly, the series introduces the idea that it is possible for individuals to be saved during the tribulation, a scenario that has, again, become a central trope of rapture films. From *A Distant Thunder* onwards, every rapture film has featured at least one postrapture conversion as a central plot device. This 'second chance' is, however, shown not to be open to all, but, rather, drawing on a reading of 2 Thessalonians 2, only those who either did not hear the gospel before the rapture or who heard but did not reject it. As one of the main characters in *The Prodigal Planet* puts it, 'if anyone before the rapture heard and understood the plan of salvation

from a friend, a pastor in church, or in a movie or TV and rejected it, the opportunity for a second chance now would be about zero'.

Finally, the series was also noteworthy for its portrayal of the rule of the Antichrist and the rise of the reborn Roman Empire during the seven-year tribulation period. Creating a template that, again, would find echoes through to the present, the series interprets the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation through the lens of geopolitics by showing the Antichrist, Brother Christopher, rising to global power as head of UNITE (the 'United Nations Imperium of Total Emergency'). Claiming to want only to bring the world together, UNITE quickly decrees that all 'citizens of the world' should receive an electronic barcode (the 'mark of the Beast') on their foreheads or right hands, all those refusing to do so being arrested 'in the interest of world safety'. Going further, the series also portrays how those who convert during the rapture quickly become martyrs at the hands of UNITE, their deaths at the guillotine becoming yet another much repeated motif within the genre.

It would be difficult, then, to underestimate the importance of *A Thief in the Night* and its sequels in the development of the rapture film genre. Indeed, one commentator has gone so far as to claim that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to argue that the impact of the series on the evangelical film industry was akin to the advent of sound and colour technologies in Hollywood.[8] Not only did it define the contours of the genre, providing in the process some of its recurring motifs and tropes; it also influenced a subsequent generation of filmmakers to present end-times visions in celluloid.

The most significant of these filmmakers were the Lalonde brothers, who saw *Thief* while children and who formed Cloud Ten Productions in the mid-1990s. Cloud Ten's major contribution to the genre has been predominantly in its attempt to bring higher production values and more mainstream appeal to rapture films. Whereas *A Thief in the Night* was shot on a budget of $68,000, featured a cast of willing amateurs and preached a message explicitly aimed at Christian audiences, Cloud Ten has self-consciously attempted to market its films to mainstream audiences by bringing in well-known actors and utilizing larger and larger budgets (at least by the standards of what had gone on previously in the genre). Their first film, *Apocalypse: Caught in the Eye of the Storm* (1998), for example, was shot on video and cost $1,000,000 to produce, a figure that was subsequently dwarfed within a few years by the production costs of their fourth film (*Judgement*, 2000: $11 million) and their first *Left Behind* release ($17.4 million). From their second film, *Revelation* (1999), Cloud Ten began to shoot on 35mm

8. Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, p. 64.

film and also began to cast name actors in its productions. *Revelation*, for example, starred Jeff Fahey (of *The Lawnmower Man* fame) alongside Nick Mancuso (*Under Siege*) and the model Carol Alt, while *Tribulation* starred Gary Busey (*The Buddy Holly Story*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Point Break*, *Under Siege*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) and Margot Kidder (Lois Lane in the original *Superman* trilogy of films). Finally, again in an attempt to reach a more mainstream audience, who would arguably be put off by the label 'Christian film', Cloud Ten sought to market its films as 'supernatural thrillers' or simply as exciting films that also happen to be produced by Christian filmmakers. Thus, in their DVD blurbs, for example, *Revelation* is described as a 'Supernatural-Thriller'; *Tribulation* promises 'danger, deception, and intrigue'; while *Left Behind: The Film* describes itself as the 'Best-Selling Independent Film of the Year!' Cloud Ten's DVD packaging is also often indistinguishable from other 'secular' films in the same genre, and often contains similar kinds of 'extras', such as 'making of' features, deleted scenes and the like. It is only when one looks more closely, and, indeed, begins to watch a film that it becomes apparent that one is dealing with a Christian product.

In terms of their actual content, Cloud Ten presentations follow on from *The Thief* series, focusing on both the reign of the Antichrist and the fate of individuals in the postrapture salvational economy. The *Apocalypse* series depicts the postrapture rise to power of the Antichrist in the form of the 'European Union President' Franco Macalusso. Claiming to be none other than 'the God of your fathers', Macalusso promises humanity 'a new age of peace and prosperity … [and] … human enlightenment! ... Heaven on earth!' and establishes a unified global order, O.N.E. (One Nation Earth; motto *Mundus Vult Decipi—The World Wants to Be Deceived*), with himself at its head. Like Brother Christopher in the earlier series, he then instigates the mark of the Beast, using virtual reality technology to lure humanity into taking the mark in what is called the 'Day of Wonders'. All those who refuse to do so are executed by guillotine in the VR world, their bodies also somehow dying in reality as well. Each film also traces the path from often-militant nonbelief to belief of their principal characters, with each receiving a postrapture second chance to undergo a born-again conversion.

The series also continues in the tradition of the *Thief* series by deluging the viewer with scare tactics, particularly in its portrayal of the Antichrist's persecution of those who become Christians after the rapture. *Apocalypse*, for example, draws clear parallels with the Holocaust by showing Christians (referred to as 'Haters' because of their opposition to the new order) being assaulted by mobs before being rounded up and put in cattle trucks to be sent to concentration camps. Indeed, the film's dramatic finale is the televised execution of one recent convert as a lesson to others. Similarly, *Revelation* shows O.N.E. agents tracking down a group of Christians who

are accused of various heinous crimes, such as blowing up school buses, orphanages and old peoples' homes, crimes that are actually, the viewer soon discovers, committed by O.N.E itself in an attempt to discredit the Christians in the eyes of the world. Indeed, in *Judgement*—which centres around the show trial of a leader of the Christian community for 'crimes against humanity'—we see that O.N.E. has gone so far as to establish a 'Haters Hotline', where concerned citizens can report those they suspect of being Christians/'Haters' to the authorities.

In other ways, however, the *Apocalypse* series breaks significantly from its predecessor. Rejecting the former series' distinction between 'genuine' and 'apostate' forms of Christianity, *Apocalypse* portrays all Christians being taken in the rapture, leaving behind only nonbelievers. Similarly, all pre-pubescent children are also taken in the rapture, a shift arguably reflecting the growing influence of right-to-life rhetoric within the evangelical community.[9] Also notable is the series' treatment of the Antichrist's creation of a one world religion, a motif that was underdeveloped in the former series. In the later films in the *Thief* series, for example, the 'World Church' is portrayed briefly in one scene as pro-corporation and anti-Israel, more concerned with secular matters—particularly making profit from war—than with the spirit. In contrast, in the *Apocalypse* series, the Antichrist's one world religion is linked explicitly with the New Age movement and forms of 'self spirituality' more generally, a shift again arguably reflecting a growing critique of such spiritualities among contemporary evangelical Christians over the last two decades.[10] Thus, in the series, the Antichrist is portrayed as a form of New Age guru, offering humanity the key to unlocking their hidden potential in exchange for loyalty. In one of his first tel-

9. See, for example, C. Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, new edn, 2006). See also the excellent HBO documentary *Soldiers in the Army of God* (dirs. Marc Levin & Daphne Pinkerson, 2005).

10. Similar themes are also explored in *Tribulation*, where two characters are shown becoming unsuspecting conduits for malignant forces by 'meddling' with the occult (specifically, in 'psychic phenomena'). For evangelical critiques of New Age spiritualities, see Hal Lindsey, with C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), Chapter 10; Constance E. Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow*: *The New Age Movement and our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House Publishers, 1985); D. Groothuis, *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988); R. Baer, *Inside the New Age Nightmare* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House Publishers, 1989); M. Noonan, *Ransomed from Darkness: The New Age, Christian Faith, and the Battle for Souls* (El Sobrante, CA: North Bay Books, 2005).

ecasts, for example, after announcing that he is God, he declares to the world in a speech replete with New Age buzzwords that 'we are ready to take the next great step of evolution' and that 'he will show [humanity] the wonderful powers that lie within you, waiting to be unleashed; powers that have been your birthright from the very beginning'.

The most commercially successful rapture film to date is, however, not a Cloud Ten production, but rather the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) release *The Omega Code* (1999). Costing $7.2 million to produce, *The Omega Code* brought together veteran British actor Michael York (*The Four Musketeers, Logan's Run, Austin Powers*)[11] with Casper Van Dien (*Starship Troopers*), Michael Ironside (*Scanners*, *Top Gun*, *Total Recall*) and Michael Biehn (*The Terminator, The Rock, The Abyss, Aliens*), and, crucially, was the first rapture film to receive a theatrical release. Whereas *Apocalypse* and all the subsequent films in its series were released straight to video, *The Omega Code* opened at 305 US cinemas and eventually grossed $12,614,346 at the box office.[12] This success, however, came at a theological price. Although the film contained a number of expected themes and motifs, such as the rise of the Antichrist at the head of the United Nations, a number of elements were notably absent, arguably in an attempt to win over mainstream audiences. Conspicuous by their absence, for example, were any references to the rapture, the Antichrist's persecution of Christians, or the mark of the Beast. Also absent were the extensive scriptural quotations or attempts at exegesis that had become a hallmark of the genre since the *Thief* project. Indeed, as a number of Christian critics bemoaned, *The Omega Code*'s conversion narrative was reduced to its lead character saying 'Save me Jesus'.

Left Behind: The Movie *and Its Aftermath*

The cinematic release of *Left Behind: The Movie* in early 2001 may thus be understood as the summation of various trends in rapture filmmaking. At the time of its release, *Left Behind* was the most expensive evangelical Christian film ever made, costing more than the first three films in the *Apocalypse* series and over twice as much as *The Omega Code*. It also opened

11. York subsequently published his diaries of making *The Omega Code* and its sequel, *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* (2001). See M. York, *Dispatches from Armageddon: A Devilish Diary* (Hanover, NH: Smith & Kraus, 2001).

12. Indeed, it was the top-grossing film per screen on its opening weekend in the United States, earning an average of $7,745 per screen. See P. Stack, 'Decoding Success of Christian Thriller: "Omega Code" a Hit, But It Won't Play Here', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 November 1999, at http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1999/11/06/DD39063.DTL&type=movies, accessed 28 May 2008.

at three times as many screens as *The Omega Code* had the year before, a clear development, again, from the straight-to-video *Apocalypse* series.[13] *Left Behind: The Movie* and its sequels may also be located clearly within the context of both the rapture film genre and the aesthetics of Cloud Ten Productions. Like the *Apocalypse* series, *Left Behind* and its sequels focus on the Antichrist's rule through the United Nations and the ways in which recently converted Christians try to resist him. Crucially, drawing on a motif that goes back to *Image of the Beast* and *The Prodigal Planet*, the series focuses on the ways in which Christians use the Antichrist's own technology against him. The series, in particular, portrays the media as a site that, although under the Antichrist's control, may still, nevertheless, be subverted by his opponents in order to promote a Christian counterdiscourse, a theme arguably reflecting evangelicals' increasing use of media technologies over recent decades.[14] Similarly, the series continues the *Apocalypse* series' critique of alternative spiritualities, portraying the Antichrist's one world religion as replete with New Age images and phrases such as 'God is in us. God is us. We are God.' Like the *Apocalypse* series, the *Left Behind* series also portrays children being automatically taken in the rapture; *Left Behind: The Movie*, in particular, features several shots of parents crying over empty pushchairs or pleading for information on their children's whereabouts.

In other ways, however, the *Left Behind* series diverges from Cloud Ten's previous releases. Taking influence from the novels, for example, the film series reintroduces the distinction between 'genuine' and 'apostate' Christians, showing how even a pastor may be left behind. More importantly, the *Left Behind* series eschews almost completely Cloud Ten's previous penchant for portraying the Antichrist's persecution of Christians. Also absent are any references to the forced imposition of the mark of the Beast. Instead, the violence is typically left very much at the implicit level—alluded to in several places but left off-screen.[15] It is only in *Left Behind*: *World at War*

13. Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*.

14. See, for example, S.M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Significance of the Electronic Church* (London: Sage Publications, 1988); Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990); Q.J. Schultze, *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1990); J. Peck, *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Televisio*n (Cresskill, NY: Hampton Press, 1993); L. Kintz and J. Lesage (eds.), *Media Culture & the Religious Right* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

15. In *Left Behind: The Movie*, for example, the character Bruce Barnes bluntly tells the other members of the Tribulation Force that 'admitting you're a Christian during the Tribulation is just like marking yourself for death'. Later in the third film he reflects in a prayer how: 'Father, if we do nothing but admit to knowing you and loving you they send us for re-education. If we lift a finger to spread your word they sentence us as terrorists. Even if we make it to court, it's a dark and fearful world.'

that the persecution of Christians is shown, but even here it is not only emphasized much less than in the *Apocalypse* series, but the manner of the persecution (the Antichrist infecting Bibles with chemical agents to poison believers) is much less gory than in previous Cloud Ten releases.[16]

Despite Cloud Ten's high hopes for it, in commercial terms, *Left Behind: The Movie* was an almost complete failure, grossing around a third of that earned by *The Omega Code*. Indeed, such was the film's failure at the box office that Tim LaHaye—who had signed over the rights to the novels in 1997 before they became immensely successful—attempted to sue Cloud Ten, claiming that he had been promised a big budget production to rival Hollywood apocalypse films such as *End of Days* (1999).[17] Although a variety of factors may have contributed to the film's failure, arguably the most important was the way in which Cloud Ten chose to market the film. Lacking the marketing and distribution budget of a major Hollywood studio, it decided to promote the film instead via word of mouth among evangelicals, a strategy that had seemingly paid dividends for *The Omega Code* a year or so before. It also decided to prerelease the film to video, hoping that viewers would not only enjoy the film enough to go and see it on its cinematic release, but would also, again, promote it among their social networks. This strategy, however, backfired badly, with most of those who purchased the video seemingly happy to watch the film at home rather than pay again to see it at the cinema.[18]

Left Behind's attempt to achieve mainstream success was also arguably undermined by the mostly critical reviews it received. While most reviewers chose to ignore the film, those who did review it were typically scathing of what one reviewer referred to as its 'apocalypse on a shoestring' aesthetic'.[19] One *Washington Post* reviewer, for example, bemoaned *Left Behind* as 'a blundering cringefest' characterized by 'unintentionally laughable dialogue, hackneyed writing and uninspired direction', as well as poor special effects. In particular, he goes on to note how the film's 'relatively modest budget … shows all too obviously when it's time for large scale scenes':

16. It is interesting to note that this plot development is not found in the novels but is, instead, a Cloud Ten addition (possibly inspired by the murder device in the semiotic murder-mystery novel [and subsequent film], *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco).

17. See Smith, 'Left Behind: Author LaHaye Sues Left Behind Film Producers'.

18. Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*; Nicholas Guyatt, *Have a Nice Doomsday: Why Millions of Americans Are Waiting for the End of the World* (London: Ebury Press, 2007).

19. G. Hendrix, 'The 'Left Behind' Films: How to End the World on a Budget', *Slate Magazine*, 1 December 2005, at http://www.slate.com/id/2131365/, accessed 24 May 2007.

> A fleet of warplanes streaking across the sky at the beginning of the film look like what they are: cut-rate, computer-generated effects. And it's obvious that the various scenes of 'mass hysteria' rarely involve more than a dozen hired extras. At one point, when Buck leaves Steele's house to find that private pilot, Chloe offers to join him. 'No' says Buck. 'I can't let you go outside. It's madness out there'. Uh, no, Buck, just a few extras outside. Really, she'll be fine.[20]

Similarly, *Variety* reviewer Joe Leydon noted how *Left Behind*'s 'dialogue is stilted, the characters are one-dimensional and the performances bland, even when judged by the standards for this niche-market genre'. Going further, he noted that although the film's special effects are 'unremarkable … there's nothing here that looks as laugh-out-loud cheesy as some f/x shot in "The Omega Code"'.[21] The failure of *Left Behind* and its sequels to achieve mainstream success has impacted on the rapture film industry in a number of ways. Primarily, the flurry of rapture films released in the late 1990s has slowed to a trickle, with Cloud Ten seemingly having completely abandoned making end-time films. Indeed, it would appear that the California production company Signal Hill Pictures has usurped Cloud Ten's position as the principal evangelical filmmaking company in North America, a shift that in many ways represents a return to the low budget aesthetic of early rapture films. Signal Hill's first release, *The Moment After* (1999), for example, was produced at a cost of $90,000 and, in the tradition of *A Thief in the Night*, features a number of the producers' friends in acting and producing roles as well as several properties belonging to them, while *The Moment After II* (2007) and *Six: The Mark Unleashed* (2004) cost $456,974 and $600,000 respectively.[22] Moreover, again in marked contrast to Cloud Ten's desire to cross over into the mainstream and 'send the message to Hollywood', Signal Hill's releases are marketed almost exclusively to the evangelical community and released straight to video/DVD and/or exhibited in churches.[23]

20. D. Howe, '"Left Behind": Heaven Help Us', *Washington Post*, 2 February 2001, available online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/entertainment/movies/reviews/leftbehindhowe.htm.

21. J. Leyden, 'Left Behind,' *Variety*, 5 February 2001, at http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117797221.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&query=leydon+%22left+behind%22, accessed 24 May 2007.

22. Two-thirds of the funding for the latter film came from TBN (e-mail correspondence from Christiancinema.com CEO, Bobby Downes, 22 May 2008).

23. 'Church Theatrical Releases', where a church pays for a licence from the production company to show a particular film for a certain period of time (typically its 'opening month'). For an overview of how this process works, see the Web site for *The Moment After* and its sequel, http://www.momentafter.com.

Conclusions

In contrast, then, to their printed-word equivalents, rapture films have not achieved any real level of mainstream success. Whereas the Left Behind novels have sold in the tens of millions and generated significant revenue for both their authors and publishers, their celluloid equivalents have, by and large, made little or no impact on the mainstream. Consequently, contemporary evangelical filmmakers have not only abandoned their attempts to break into the mainstream but have in fact gone full circle and returned to their low-budget, niche-market roots. Thus, whereas Cloud Ten once spoke about breaking through into the mainstream and 'sending a message to Hollywood', it now offers its films exclusively to what it terms 'Cloud Ten Church Cinemas' and exhorts its viewers, 'Don't let Hollywood win the battle for the souls of society.'[24] Indeed, it would appear that evangelical filmmakers might even have given up on the rapture and the end times completely. The major studio producing rapture films in the 1990s, Cloud Ten, has seemingly abandoned them to distribute more general Christian releases, such as *The Genius Club* (2006), *Smugglers Ransom* (2007) and *Saving God* (2008). Similarly, Signal Hill's next project will be a re-release of *Lay it Down* (2001), a film that is set not in the tribulation but among street racers in modern-day California.[25] It is thus somewhat ironic that in the last year or so one nonevangelical film company has been bringing the rapture—and an evangelical message of sorts—into the mainstream. Beginning in 2007, The Asylum—a studio well known for its low-budget, straight-to-DVD 'mockbusters'[26]—has released two end-time films, *Apocalypse*

24. http://www.cloudtenpictures.com/churchcinema/boxofficeinsouls.php, accessed 21 May 2008. Similarly, Doug Phillips, the founder of the San Antonio Independent Christian Film Festival, speaks of his ambition 'to build a replacement industry', and to see Christians 'break[ing] up the monopoly of Hollywood'; quoted in R. Wayne, 'San Antonio Film Festival Richly Rewards Movies with Biblical Worldviews', *Crosswalk.Com* 2008, http://www.crosswalk.com/movies/11573167.

25. Whether this represents an evolution in the evangelical film industry or an acceptance of market forces and audience demand is an interesting question. Bobby Downes acknowledged both as salient factors to me, claiming that, although he would not rule out releasing a *Moment After III* at some point in the future, he felt that 'there are so many other stories we are wanting to tell through film and now have the opportunity to do so and are equally important to share'. He also added that 'in the past, films about the End Times would be sure to be accepted by the church and would (on the business level) get investors their money back. Investors (although believers) do really care about getting their investment back. They will not invest in future films without getting their original investment back'; e-mail correspondence, 22 May 2008.

26. 'Mockbusters' are low-budget films with titles and often plot lines derived from a successful film in the same genre. The Asylum, for example, has released *I Am*

(2007) and *2012: Doomsday* (2008) through their subsidiary, Faith Films. Both films attempt to graft elements of rapture films—most notably the rapture, water turning to blood and conversion narratives—onto mainstream 'end-of-the-world' film plots (*The Apocalypse*, for example, draws obvious comparisons with the Hollywood blockbusters *Deep Impact* [1998] and *Armageddon* [1998], while *2012: Doomsday* draws on the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar and various New Age prophecies that the world will end in 2012).[27] Thus, for example, in *The Apocalypse*, a mother and father race across America to be with their daughter in Los Angeles as a giant asteroid heads towards the earth. The mother, a Christian, tells her husband that the asteroid is part of 'His plan' and beseeches him to look for salvation before she is killed by a falling beam and disappears, or 'goes home', as it is referred to in the film. In the closing moments of the film, he finally reaches his daughter, after undergoing an off-screen conversion experience and asks her to pray with him as the asteroid enters earth's atmosphere (and presumably wipes them out along with the rest of humanity).[28]

The film's evangelical message and presentation of end-times content is thus, at best, muddled. As one evangelical reviewer on Amazon.com noted:

> Theologically [*The Apocalypse*] may appeal to most of evangelical America, but will leave those with a deeper interest in Biblical teachings on salvation and eschatology … wanting. There is a lot of emphasis on 'having faith' and 'making your faith stronger', but little is said about what one needs to have faith in or believe. There is no clear exposition of the Christian gospel … the writers sprinkle in some evangelicalese here and there, along with some references to 'God taking back his own' and so forth. But for people seeking answers to the real questions of life, death, the afterlife, and what the Bible teaches about salvation, the story does not deliver. We hear more about Lord Krishna saving a small bird in the midst of a battle than we do about Christ's sacrifice on the cross and God's plan for reconciliation with man.[29]

Omega, *Transmorphers*, *The Da Vinci Treasure* and *Pirates of Treasure Island*. See R. Potts, 'The New B Movie', *New York Times*, 7 October 2007, at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/magazine/07wwln-essay-t.html?_r=1&oref=slogin, accessed 24 May 2007.

27. For a discussion of these prophecies, see, for example, R.K. Sitler,'The 2012 Phenomenon: New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar', *Nova Religio* 9.3 (2006), pp. 24-38.

28. This scene is reminiscent of the finale of *Deep Impact*; however, in the Hollywood version, although the father and daughter die, humanity is saved the apocalyptic consequences of a direct hit.

29. http://www.amazon.com/review/R1T32U8D8NKJJ3/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm, accessed 27 May 2008.

Individuals in the films disappear in the rapture, but this happens as each person dies, rather than being 'caught up together' (1 Thess. 4.17). Similarly, there is no tribulation period or millennial kingdom in either film, only the mass extinction of humanity or, at the conclusion of *2012*, the notion that, as one character puts it, 'this isn't the end, it's just the beginning.' Indeed, perhaps most damningly, the aetiology of the apocalypse in both films—references to 'His plan' aside—is fundamentally a naturalistic one, with no evidence whatsoever of supernatural entities of any kind.[30]

Arguably this situation stems from the fact that the filmmakers, who are themselves not evangelicals, do not have as their primary aims either portraying a theologically accurate version of the end time or 'winning souls for Christ'. Rather, as one of The Asylum's partners, David Michael Latt, stated in an interview with the *New York Times*, the decision to produce end-time films with some evangelical content was motivated largely, if not exclusively, by financial considerations:

> We were planning on making 'The Apocalypse' as a straightforward doomsday movie … but certain buyers told us that they wanted a religious film. So we consulted priests and rabbis [*sic*] and made it into a faith-based film about the end of the world … Whether it's giant robots attacking the earth or something from the Bible, we're just happy to be making movies.[31]

How, then, should The Asylum/Faith Film's output be seen in terms of the argument of this chapter? Should *The Apocalypse* and *2012* be seen as evidence of rapture films breaking into the mainstream? While it might appear at first glance that The Asylum/Faith Film's bringing of some degree of evangelical content to the mainstream may challenge my claim that the genre has little or no chance of achieving crossover success, I would argue that this is not the case. Indeed, I would go further and argue that, ironically, there is also a good chance that evangelical audiences may also reject the films. The Asylum/Faith Films releases are, as discussed above, neither fish nor fowl; on the one hand their evangelical content, although weak compared to other rapture films, is still too explicit to appeal to mainstream audiences (a fact borne out by, for example, Amazon.com reviews),[32] while

30. Interestingly, The Asylum has also released two films drawing on Antichrist motifs: *666: The Child* (2006) and *666: The Beast* (2007). These, however, are devoid of evangelical content and are, instead, a derivative version of the *Omen* trilogy (1976, 1978, 1981).

31. Quoted in Potts, 'The New B Movie'. This lack of evangelical belief is also manifested in the audio commentaries on each film where, in contrast to those found on evangelical releases, both director and actors typically ignore or gloss over scenes with evangelical content.

32. See, for example, the reviews of *2012*: http://www.amazon.com/review/product/B000YV2EFY/ref=cm_cr_dp_all_summary?%5Fencoding=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending, accessed 24 May 2007.

on the other, as noted above, their evangelical content is too heterodox and evangelically unconvincing to appeal to evangelical audiences. Not only this, but it is also likely that the films may also not be taken seriously or even ignored by audiences through their association, albeit as a subsidiary, with The Asylum—a studio notorious for its low-budget, often critically savaged, straight-to-DVD 'mockbusters'.[33]

The future for the rapture film genre does not, therefore, look good. Seemingly abandoned by evangelical filmmakers looking for new stories and the (arguably futile) possibility of crossover success, and now surviving alone through the theologically heterodox and evangelically tokenistic releases of The Asylum/Faith Films, the genre is currently a million miles away from where it was a decade ago. Then, Heather Hendershot predicted that the future of the genre lay in one of two directions—either mainstream success at the expense of theological content and evangelical intent, or a rejection of such theological and evangelical compromises at the expense of alienating mainstream consumers.[34] Instead, a third, arguably much worse, possibility seems to have come to pass: evangelical filmmakers have lost (if not abandoned) the genre and now see it cross-pollinated by nonevangelicals with Mayan cosmology read through New Age prophecy, the story of Krishna and the lapwing, and Hollywood doomsday epics, and yet still denied mainstream success. Whether this situation will change in the near future is open to speculation, but my own sense is that, in marked contrast to its textual equivalent, the celluloid rapture is still very far from achieving any real mainstream success.

33. Again, the Amazon.com Web site is arguably the best evidence of this.
34. Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, p. 208.

6. Literalism and Exclusivity in Left Behind

Katie Sturm

For many American evangelicals, the first reading of *Left Behind* (1995) inspired thoughts of the imminent return of Jesus to planet Earth, and Christians across the United States wondered whether or not they really were living in the biblical end times. The imagination of many evangelicals flared, and many rushed to express an opinion on the series. The dramatic rhetoric, fast-paced storyline and emphasis on biblical texts created an eager expectation that was difficult to suppress. However, it soon became evident that there were significant theological difficulties within the texts. Far from being a universal expression of the evangelical gospel, the series is highly contested and extremely difficult to digest theologically. Can an evangelical disagree with this worldview, which permeates and influences so much of the American evangelical imagination? This question initiates a pursuit to find greater understanding of the hermeneutical and ecumenical considerations of Left Behind and its school of thought. This chapter will investigate the power of the 'literal' hermeneutic embraced by Left Behind and its theological partners as part of its dispensational heritage and the difficulties with its approach to intrafaith and interfaith interaction.

Both fictional and theological, the Left Behind series deals with a highly specific interpretation of eschatology. The authors use fiction to offer a theological account of the end of this world. The starting point of the series, the rapture, is depicted as a global event, taking all 'true' Christian believers up to heaven. Following the rapture, the authors chronicle the global adventures and trials of those 'left behind' as they integrate this cataclysmic event into their understanding of life and spirituality. The authors reference numerous Scripture passages throughout the series to identify ways in which prophecy is being fulfilled, including prophetic texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament passages from the Olivet discourse, Revelation, and the Pauline Epistles, and from Hebrew Scriptures traditionally considered as belonging outside the prophetic genre. The authors

interpret these passages, regardless of genre, as a sort of biblical blueprint for the end of the world. The series directly places these Scripture passages into the context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, using current political and global situations and sociocultural factors as prophetic markers.[1] While criticism of the weaknesses of the books abound, it is important, from an evangelical perspective, to note some of their strengths. The books promote personal piety and a strong doctrine of justification by faith. There is a strong emphasis on the power of the gospel to transform lives and the importance of biblical truth. The theological foundations of the series, however, leave many other perspectives 'outside the fold' as potentially heretical and cast a shadow of doubt on the salvation of those who do not land solidly in their hermeneutical camp.

A Theological Tradition

The theologians behind the Left Behind series depend heavily on a so-called literal interpretation of Scripture. Current theological trends make it difficult to assert any hermeneutic as objective or purely 'literal'—which usually means completely factual and without exaggeration or embellishment. However, LaHaye insists that 'the Bible should be interpreted normally, as with any other piece of sane literature, by a consistently literal hermeneutic which recognizes the clear usage of speech figures.'[2] The word 'normal' indicates that this interpretation is typical or natural, while the use of the word 'sane' implies that any other interpretation is sheer lunacy. All claims of insanity aside, this method of interpretation is not so unproblematic or as obvious as LaHaye suggests. Rather, the tradition of a literal hermeneutic has its roots in the Scottish Enlightenment (reflecting the theories of such scholars as Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, Adam Smith, and Dougald Steward), which emphasized a 'common sense' approach to academic inquiry, assuming that 'all humans possessed by nature a common set of capacities—both epistemological and ethical—through which they could grasp the basic realities of nature and morality'.[3] This common sense approach indicated a method of reception of Scripture by which readers instinctively grasp the Bible as a simple text. The assertion that these interpretations are not, in fact, interpretations but rather simple readings

1. For numerous examples, consult Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999).

2. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, 'Pre-Trib Research Center Doctrinal Statement: Pre-Trib Perspectives', http://www.pre-trib.org/about/what-we-believe, accessed 1 September 2010.

3. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 85.

offers an intellectual dilemma, as it seems nearly impossible to approach the text from a purely objective viewpoint. For those who follow a 'literal' hermeneutic, the very idea of 'literal' reception being a 'hermeneutic' is an oxymoron. Literalism is not an interpretation, coloured by experience or tradition, but is considered a 'normal' reading of the text. These theologians also disregard the difficult work of scholars in accumulating and compiling difficult fragments of *koine* Greek papyri or long Hebrew scrolls into a comprehensive, legible text from which scholars eventually produce an English-language translation. Issues of translation or language processing are not seen as 'interpretation', even though many words from either Greek or Hebrew simply have no clear correlation in English. The reading of Scripture in this tradition, however, invariably returns to the simplest reading. Any other reading is accordingly less pure or a distortion of the text through supplementation or augmentation.

By receiving this hermeneutic as 'normal', readers can relinquish intellectual responsibility for the difficult questions that arise from the Left Behind series' interpretation of Scripture. The series does not encourage theological investigation into doctrine or tradition, but rather emphasizes the need to read the Bible in a simple manner. It is understood that any simple reading will arise at the same conclusions as the series' authors. To read too much into the reading will only distort the text. This considerably diminishes the careful work of two millennia of theologians. The Bible is seen as self-explanatory, and any issues that arise can be directed towards practical application in everyday life rather than towards theological investigation or awareness. Ironically, in Left Behind, the characters Pastor Bruce Barnes and scholar Tsion Ben-Judah must use quite complex theological interpretation to explain the strange occurrences of the rapture and tribulation, a narrative move that undermines the claim that the undergirding biblical texts are self-evident. But if the authors decide to have characters interpret Scripture, and choose not to print the biblical passages themselves, they are admitting the need for a certain level of interpretation. This consideration of practicality above theological inquiry is part of the wider problem of evangelical anti-intellectualism. The history of the intellectual engagement of evangelicals reveals a tendency towards an 'ethos [that] is activistic, populist, pragmatic, and utilitarian … [and] allows little space for broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment'.[4] Over several centuries, evangelical life became closely connected with American values, and 'the formal thought of evangelicals—that is, the consideration of nature, society, history, and the arts—weakened.'[5] In this way, the average reader can 'separate religion

4. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, p. 12.
5. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, p. 67.

from scholarship and the arts, and it either evaporates or becomes the prisoner of practical men and of their needs'.[6] Depth, complexity or differing opinions on the language and symbolism of these texts recede to obscurity in light of the priorities of personal growth and evangelism.

Amy Johnson Frykholm's study of the readers of Left Behind reveals that 'for the most part, readers engage with *Left Behind* for two primary and intertwined purposes—entertainment and edification'.[7] Their enjoyment of the series is complemented by their desire to apply themes of the story practically in their personal lives, most notably in prayer, Bible study and evangelism. Predominantly, however, readers have trusted the authors to do the theological work of interpreting Scripture. By taking the authors' assertion of normal interpretation at face value, Left Behind readers could emerge from their personal Bible study with a highly specialized view of the texts. In order to view some of these potential dangers, it is necessary to critically investigate the theological tradition known as 'dispensationalism' as a framework for the Left Behind school's interpretation of Scripture.

Dispensational History

Tim LaHaye and the Left Behind school present their approach to a theological tradition known as dispensational (pretribulation) premillennialism. This tradition applies dispensational theology to Scripture and asserts that the rapture of the church will happen before both the millennial reign of Jesus Christ mentioned in Revelation 20 (premillennialism) and before a seven-year series of trials and hardships known as the tribulation (pretribulation).[8] These events are critical in the series' interpretation of

6. John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: 'In aid of a grammar of assent'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 14. While Coulson is referring to a different event in time, it is important to notice similarities. Coleridge's comment in his *Lay Sermon* is directly concerned with religion and imagination stemming from 'an unfettered obsession with economic growth' (pp. 13-14). This same obsession is also prominent in Northern American evangelicalism, especially with the rise of congregations asserting that Christians can name the promises of Scripture—including material blessing—and 'claim them' as their own. Therefore, his comments are apropos for the current investigation into this series.

7. Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture:* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 102. This book acts as an excellent sociological resource for understanding the mind of the Left Behind readership. Frykholm also addresses critical issues such as gender, socio-cultural issues and economics.

8. For further study of the development of dispensational thought, see Mark Sweetnam, 'Defining Dispensationalism: A Cultural Studies Perspective', *Journal of Religious History* 34.2 (2010), pp. 191-212. For a comprehensive analysis of other prominent texts on dispensational history, see also Michael Williams, *This World Is Not my Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Fearn: Mentor, 2003); J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,

prophetic texts, but the defining hermeneutical lens is considerably wider. While asserting a 'plain' or 'literal' reading of the Bible, the Left Behind perspective depends heavily on the tradition of dispensationalism and its associated interpretive framework. Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, the theologians entrusted with the task of defending the theology of the Left Behind series, offer a comprehensive definition of dispensationalism.[9] This definition indicates the importance of the Bible, its role in offering God's plan for history to humankind and the appropriate response of humankind to these truths. Included in these beliefs about the Bible are the following: first, the Bible is not only inspired, but also inerrant; second, it provides a literal framework for understanding history, understood as past, present and future activity; and third, it is the way in which God chose to reveal the plan for history to humanity.[10] God's plan is not enacted all at once, but is revealed in different ages, or 'dispensations', and clearly differentiates between his goals for Israel and for the church, with the ultimate goal of bringing glory to himself. Finally, humanity's response to this revelation must necessarily be an individual response to Jesus Christ as 'the goal and hero of history'.[11] In the series, individualism is most evident in the repetition of the 'Sinner's Prayer'—a device well known to evangelical communities in conversion stories. There are many versions of this prayer, but the basic structure includes an acknowledgment and repentance of sin, asking Jesus to enter into the sinner's heart or life, thanking God for the atoning work of Jesus on the cross and accepting the gift of grace.[12] This prayer seems the defining criteria for the beginning of a life of a proper faith in Jesus Christ.

Hitchcock and Ice also include some statements that seem to preclude ecumenical engagement. They assert that 'only genuine believers in Christ are open to the teachings of the Bible' and that 'salvation through Christ is a prerequisite to properly understanding God's Word' while insisting that all

1964); Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology.* IV. *Ecclesiology, Eschatology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948); and Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965).

9. For the purposes of this paper, the theological statements of Mark Hitchcock, Thomas Ice and Tim LaHaye will be considered in concert. Tim LaHaye's introduction to *The Truth behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), pp. 5-9, reveals his clear support and agreement with the authors. It is appropriate, therefore that Hitchcock and Ice's statements and theological viewpoints are closely associated with the theology of the authors of Left Behind.

10. The definition is laid out in great detail in Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, pp. 179-80.

11. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, pp. 179-80.

12. For further examples and a detailed discussion of some theological flaws with this method, see Crawford Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), pp. 71-74.

the preceding beliefs are 'the same as saying that we believe what the Bible literally teaches'.[13] This assertion—that salvation and its concurrent belief are contingent upon a dispensational interpretation of Scripture—opens the possibility for an exclusivist view of salvation. Taken to its conclusion, their argument could suggest that those who read the Bible differently might not have full salvation in their attempt to assert that salvation is a prerequisite for dispensational understanding. In order to be able even to read the Bible, a person must be a believer in the manner described by these theologians. This definition places literal interpretation within a distinct communal hermeneutic. The authors' appeal to a plain sense of Scripture must be tempered with an understanding of this communal context. Thus, the socialization of the reader to a particular understanding of the text informs its plain sense.[14] The claim of the authors is that their interpretation is literal, meaning it 'looks to the text, the actual words and phrases of a passage' as opposed to 'allegorical or nonliteral interpretation [which] imports an idea not found specifically in the text of a passage'.[15] This section will investigate the effectiveness of this claim within the constraints of the definition of dispensationalism in light of the authors' interpretive activity.

As Thomas Ice notes in his chapter in this book (see Chapter 8), a number of historians have criticized dispensationalism as a relatively new theological phenomenon. It gained notoriety in North America in the second half of the nineteenth century through the activities of J.N. Darby, D.L. Moody and C.I. Scofield.[16] Darby first came to the United States from England in 1862, and his theological interpretation and impassioned speaking influenced a number of key theologians. He returned to the United States on several occasions, strongly influencing Moody, who eventually established multiple Bible institutes for missionary training. The Moody Bible Institute in Chicago maintains this influence today. James Brooks, a Presbyterian minister in New England, was also strongly influenced by Darby, going so far as to establish a conference in Niagara Falls, New York. Under Brooks's mentoring, C.I. Scofield converted to evangelical Christianity. He is best known for *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909; 1917), which interlaced pas-

13. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, pp. 71-74.

14. Kathryn E. Tanner, 'Theology and the Plain Sense', in Garrett Green (ed.), *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), p. 63.

15. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 165.

16. Where not specifically cited or quoted, the majority of the following historical information can be found in greater detail in Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), and Stephen Hunt (ed.), *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001).

sages of Scripture with interpretations elucidating dispensational theology.[17] The authors of Left Behind hold their dispensationalist forefathers in high regard. Millennial theology is considered an ancient and highly esteemed tradition. Millennial theologians are given a special place in the fictional series' prequel, as they are blessed personally by Jesus Christ for their theological contributions and perseverance under persecution. Moody and Scofield are among those granted this honour.[18] Dispensationalists claim that premillennial theology can be found in ancient texts, including the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament itself.[19] While this may be the case, the dispensational understanding of eschatology needs to be investigated.

The Ramifications of Reading the Text

The Hebrew Bible plays an important role in the theological system of Left Behind as part of the Christian canon and as an eschatological source. The role of Israel is important to this theology, but any conflation of the church with Israel is considered inappropriate. Dispensational writers also clearly indicate the importance of God's promises to and covenants with Israel. In discussing the Abrahamic covenant, three promises are expressed: '1) a land to Abram and Israel, 2) a seed or physical descendants of Abraham, and 3) a worldwide blessing (Genesis 12:1-3)'.[20] Hitchcock and Ice use various passages from Deuteronomy to illustrate the importance of these covenantal promises. The authors assert that the promises have yet to be completely fulfilled, and that the establishment of the political state of Israel in 1948 is the 'super-sign' for the beginning of the process of fulfilment.

Although the authors assert that 'the Bible insists many times over that *Israel is not finished in history*', the Israel of Scripture is not necessarily identical with its current political entity.[21] Therefore, the emphasis on the covenantal promises to Israel in Scripture should not be unilaterally applied to Israel as a current political identity. While the authors of the fictional series seem to differentiate between Israelis and Jews, the covenantal promises to Israel are applied to the nation-state, regardless of its behaviour on

17. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, p. 171. It is also interesting to note that Tim LaHaye has followed in Scofield's footsteps in producing the *Prophecy Study Bible,* which also provides Bible students with premillennialist theology alongside the text of Scripture. LaHaye, strangely, seems distanced theologically from the originator of dispensationalism, J.N. Darby (see Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis*).

18. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *The Rapture: In the Twinkling of an Eye* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), pp. 255-57, 272-73, 287-88.

19. Hitchcock, Ice and LaHaye use the term 'Old Testament' to refer to the Hebrew Bible. In deference to the Jewish tradition and contemporary scholastic trends, I have chosen to use the term 'Hebrew Bible'.

20. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 59.

21. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 59.

the international stage or its formal religious conviction.[22] They interpret various passages regarding Israel through a lens of current events, which indicates a nonliteral approach. Their appeal to references to Israel in Romans 11 in order to justify support of Israel as a political entity contradicts Paul's own understanding of Israel as an ethnic people, his 'kindred according to the flesh' (Rom 9.3).[23] Thus, the conflation of these two ideas reflects an interpretive move that is strictly nonliteral. The authors are reading twentieth-century international political situations into their interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. They follow the precedent set by the *New York Times* best-selling author Hal Lindsey, who also interpreted Scripture in light of current events; however, the interpretation falters as 'literal' when interspersed with anachronisms from latter periods.[24]

This is especially true in regard to interpreting what the authors consider prophetic literature. The authors obviously interpret these passages in light of their knowledge of the advent of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah in the first century. Because the authors hold the dispensational view that the Bible (as a whole) is an explanation of God's plan for history with Jesus as the 'hero', they cannot efficiently come to the text from an objective or unbiased viewpoint. Their contention that Jesus is the Messiah foretold by the Hebrew Scriptures imports a postresurrection understanding into their interpretation. Granted, a number of prominent theologians in other disciplines—and even the New Testament authors themselves—participate in this hermeneutical tradition. However, while other theologians acknowledge the hermeneutical leap in the process, the dispensational 'literal' contention does not. The language of salvation in the New Testament is distinctly different from that of the Hebrew Scriptures, even though both emphasize the prominence of God as the agent of salvation. While dispensational theology asserts the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ, the Hebrew Scriptures offer different models for salvation, often connected with the Exodus and Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt or the future hope offered to the nations through the Abrahamic promise. This discrepancy clarifies the difficulty of harmonizing a literal interpretation of the Hebrew Bible with a Christ-centred salvation claim. As these theologians continue to assert the

22. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind,* p. 55.

23. All scriptural references are from the New Revised Standard Version: Anglicized Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), unless otherwise noted.

24. Hal Lindsey gained notoriety and evangelical influence with the release of his best-selling book *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970. The book reflected a sensationalized version of dispensationalist theology, offering biblical interpretation inflected by current events. His influence must be noted, as he not only affected the Christian publishing arena, opening the way for authors such as LaHaye and Jenkins, but also brought a 'Rapture-centred' school of theological interpretation into common evangelical discourse.

validity of God's promises to Israel, they must account for the salvation act of Jesus Christ as part of the larger narrative, importing the idea back into the Hebrew Bible. While helpful for their fictional representation of the end of the world, this can create friction in Jewish-Christian dialogue by failing to acknowledge that traditional Judaism rejects this interpretive framework.

In order to reconcile these two ideas, dispensational theologians assert that Jesus 'literally' fulfilled messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Hitchcock and Ice quote scholar Paul Tan's assertion that 'on the basis of New Testament attestations and the record of history, the fulfilment of Bible prophecy has always been literal'.[25] This seeming fulfilment, however, does not take into account the varied strands of messianism in the first century. The Christian selections of so-called messianic prophecies from the Hebrew Bible include numerous passages that were never associated with a messianic figure in traditional Jewish thought.[26] This interpretation reads New Testament accounts back into the Hebrew Bible, thus creating (according to the authors' definition) an allegorical interpretive framework. Further, in asserting a literal fulfilment of future prophecies based on this allegorical interpretation, the authors construct a logical fallacy. While belief in the certainty of a frighteningly uncertain future can be appealing, this assertion of literal fulfilment implies that the Bible simply needs to be decoded correctly in order to foresee the events of the future. Unfortunately, this is not the 'normal' practice in either Judaism or the Christian tradition. By attributing a futuristic interpretation in light of the life and work of Christ, they import an idea relatively unknown in Judaism until after the destruction of the Second Temple. The role of a spiritual messiah, as understood in the first-century church, is predominantly a Christian construction, and does not find a foothold in Judaism until much later. Thus, contentions that authors of the Hebrew Scriptures were intentionally writing the messiah into their texts become anachronistic.

Early Church Interpretation and the Millennium

Much of Left Behind deals with apocalyptic imagery and the idea of a millennial reign of Jesus Christ on earth. Both Ezekiel and Daniel form an

25. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 176, quoting Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: Assurance, 1974), p. 63.

26. Magnus Zetterholm (ed.), *The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p. xxii. Further ecumenical analysis of these problems will be covered in a later section in this paper. However, for those looking to read further, please see Markus Bockmuehl and James Carleton Paget, *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007), and Sherryll Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem" in the *Left Behind* Novels', *Literature and Theology* 19.4 (2005), pp. 367-83.

apocalyptic foundation for the New Testament authors as well as the authors of the series. Judaism, as the root of Christian faith, 'had created a vast apocalyptic literature that had a powerful influence on Christian millennialism'.[27] Jewish apocalyptic is rooted in the 'trauma of exile in Mesopotamia and the destruction of the Temple, followed by the triumphant return and the Temple's rebuilding, and perhaps Zoroastrian influence'.[28] Ezekiel and Daniel are quintessentially apocalyptic, and the New Testament authors draw heavily from apocalyptic books in presenting both imagery and events.

The dispensational understanding of the millennium is critical for understanding the authors' belief in a pretribulation, premillennial rapture. The early church had its foundations in Second Temple Judaism, with its traditions, Scriptures and practices. The person, work, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth placed Jewish followers of Jesus into a difficult hermeneutical position. The church needed to develop new ways of interpreting the Hebrew Bible in light of the strange and unusual circumstances surrounding Jesus, and thus looked to texts from the vast wealth of Jewish tradition, including intertestamental literature and rabbinic discourse. New Testament authors refer to Hebrew Scriptures, but also use imagery reminiscent of some noncanonical Jewish histories and apocalyptic texts. As a genre, apocalyptic was crucial to early Christian self-understanding. Understanding eschatology in light of persecution and death becomes a critical issue for many New Testament texts. The texts from this period indicate that 'there was a developing thought in much Jewish literature of a coming resurrection and the establishment of a "millennial kingdom"—although the length of this kingdom varied, with a thousand years being only one of the possibilities'.[29] These references to a millennium lend weight to the dispensational belief that millennialism is an ancient phenomenon.

New Testament Scriptures play an important role in delineating the parameters of this millennium. The sole New Testament reference to a thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ appears in Revelation 20. It is also important to note that 'Revelation met with a mixed response' among its earliest readers and 'its use in the early Church was also closely circumscribed'.[30] Thus, it seems a rather tentative foundation for such a complex theological doctrine. It also seems important to note that the structure of Revelation is not strictly chronological, and the prophetic voice indicates a conditional sense to the warnings. Thus, as Craig R. Koester points out, 'the warnings

27. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, p. 9.

28. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, p. 11.

29. Stanley E. Porter, 'Millenarian Thought in the First-Century Church', in Stephen Hunt (ed.), *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), p. 63.

30. Porter, 'Millenarian Thought in the First-Century Church', p. 66.

that are given are not simple predictions of coming disasters, but are issued in conditional form, so that the threat will only be carried out if repentance does not occur'.[31] There are other New Testament passages that refer in other ways to eschatological principles, but, in order to be understood as premillennial texts, they must be read through the lens of Revelation 20. In this manner, the idea of the literal reign of Christ for one thousand years imported into texts in Ezekiel and Daniel or even some New Testament Gospel passages becomes allegorical or nonliteral, as Ezekiel, Daniel and the Gospel authors are not writing in the same context as the author of Revelation. Other New Testament passages do mention an eschatological kingdom, however, even if not referring to a literal millennium (see Heb. 12.22-24; 2 Pet. 1.11; Lk. 16.19-31; 23.42-43; 16.19-31; John 14; Matthew 24; 1 Thess. 4.13-18).

Because of promises in the Gospels that some believers will not taste death before the kingdom of God comes in power (Mk 9.1), the death of Christians in the first century presented a problem. The belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ strongly influenced the New Testament writers as well as their initial interpreters, the patristic theologians, whose discussions of the 'kingdom' contain enormous variety.[32] Pauline letters could be seen to support the idea of a 'rapture' of the church, although the details of the event are not clearly articulated. The most significant passage referring to the rapture is in 1 Thessalonians 4, in which Paul attempts to provide an interpretive framework for the death of fellow believers. Members of the Christian community had been expecting Jesus to return before their deaths.[33] In this way, Paul presents an answer to the dilemma of Christian death:

> Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ

31. Craig R. Koester, 'Revelation and the Left Behind Novels', *Word and World* 25.3 (2005), p. 279.

32. The variety of ways of understanding the kingdom can be seen in something as simple as the gospel writers' choices of terms. Matthew refers primarily to the 'kingdom of heaven' (although he does mention the 'kingdom of God' on a number of occasions) while Mark, Luke and John primarily refer to the 'kingdom of God'. The parables that Jesus uses to describe the kingdom also display some variety, and in John, Jesus refers to it belonging to him (18.36). Luke also refers to the kingdom as being 'within' believers (17.21).

33. This idea is most clear in the Synoptic gospels (Mt. 16.28; Mk 9.1; and Lk. 9.27).

> will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words (1 Thess. 4.13-18).

Paul is attempting to deal with a very difficult concept that is literally 'life and death' to fellow believers. This is a consideration for present-day readers as well, in that the belief in a literal rapture provides readers and 'believers hope that they might avoid not only the catastrophic events of the last days, but also their own personal deaths'.[34] It creates more questions about life, death and the afterlife than it answers. Many films representing the rapture show the raptured believers' clothes left behind in order to indicate their having been taken up to heaven—sometimes even cleaned and neatly folded and pressed![35]

These examples of interpretations of the New Testament reveal the difficulty for anyone claiming a purely literal or non-allegorical interpretation of Scripture. The millennial theology of Revelation does not include specific rapture passages, and those passages chosen by the authors indicate 'harmonization of several passages into systematic conclusions'.[36] The Left Behind theologians criticize their peers in the early church, claiming that 'their views of prophecy were undeveloped and sometimes contradictory, containing a seedbed out of which could develop various and diverse theological viewpoints',[37] yet they also want to stand on some of their conclusions, especially those of Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian.[38] Pointing out the flaws of the early theologians while supporting some of their conclusions implies that greater authority be ascribed to the contemporary authors as more fully developed or more appropriately harmonized theologically. Unfortunately, this does not take into account the historical context of modernity with its emphasis on rational argumentation and philosophy. The authors are importing a twenty-first-century understanding of philosophy and theology into their interpretation of the text. While a literal or 'plain sense' interpretation allows readers to interact with the text in a less threatening or confusing way, there is some loss of the power of metaphor in the text itself. Coulson illustrates this point, insisting that metaphor and

34. Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 139.

35. See *Apocalypse: Caught in the Eye of the Storm* (1998) or *Left Behind: The Movie* (2000) by Cloud Ten Pictures for examples of clothing 'left behind'.

36. Specifically Jn 14.1-3; 1 Cor. 15.50-57; and 1 Thess. 4.13-18; Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 27.

37. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 192.

38. Mark Hitchcock, 'Leaving the Truth Behind', http://www.leftbehind.com/channelendtimes.asp?pageid=877&channelID=71, accessed 21 December 2007.

allegory can 'cope with what is ambiguous and paradoxical in human experience, without attempting to reduce the questions to answers'.[39] Religious experience, as one of the most ambiguous and paradoxical, depends all the more on metaphor.

Literal interpretation does not exist in a vacuum. Kathryn Tanner points out, 'the plain sense of a text has not always existed along with that text; one cannot assume its constant availability in the attempt to trace its recognition and changing forms over differences of time and place'.[40] The Left Behind series is clearly written from the context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century North America, quite different from the context of the New Testament authors. Unlike Christians in modern North America, those of the first century did not enjoy freedom of religion and most often were persecuted, martyred and exiled. Even though many North American evangelicals claim to be losing civil liberties and insist that a violent persecution of the faith is coming, the comparison to those put to gruesome death in both ancient and contemporary history is insensitive at best, and cruel at worst.[41] Thus, difficulties arise in attempting to assert that any twentieth-century author can completely distance himself from two thousand years of history and tradition to present an interpretation of Scripture that is objective. As will be discussed in the next section, many of these difficulties lie in the area of ecumenical understanding.

Ecumenical Issues

John D'Arcy May's understanding of ecumenism 'includes the religious affirmation of the unity of humankind with all its ethical implications'.[42]

39. Coulson, *Religion and Imagination*, p. 24.

40. Tanner, 'Theology and the Plain Sense', p. 64.

41. Many North American evangelicals are attempting to reclaim an identity of persecution, claiming that their freedoms are being removed by actions in legislatures and the Supreme Court. This identity emerged alongside the Scopes trial, the conclusion of the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade,* and actions of the Democratic party in government. By reclaiming a persecuted identity, evangelicals can assimilate portions of ancient millennialism that also depend on an identity grounded in persecution. As recently as the 2008 election, the noteworthy organization Focus on the Family released a document titled 'Letter from 2012 in Obama's America', which plays to this theme in order to garner political support for the McCain–Palin ticket. It offers some incredibly vehement language regarding the potential eradication of Christian civil liberties under the leadership of a Democratic party presidency, using footnotes from court cases to 'prove' its point; see focusfamaction.edgeboss.net/download/.../pdfs/10-22-08_2012letter.pdf, accessed 20 January 2009.

42. John D'Arcy May, 'Integral Ecumenism', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25 (1988), p. 577.

This is quite a difficult path to navigate in the exclusivist understanding of salvation espoused by the dispensationalist theology of the Left Behind series, as it asserts the purity of its beliefs as universal or absolute truth. First, the series raises questions regarding the validity of other Christian traditions. The strong emphasis on significant personal conversion and literal interpretation of Scripture presents other Christians as incomplete, misleading and even at times blatantly evil. Second, it presents difficulties for interaction with other faith systems. Whether Jewish, Muslim or otherwise, those in other faith traditions are treated with suspicion and understood as something to be either feared or converted. This understanding prevents any opportunity for dialogue or learning. In this way, there is a true ecumenical problem, in which there is a 'breakdown of communication between or within communities of faith'.[43]

Intrafaith Ecumenism: Whose Jesus?

The theological tradition of the series claims exclusive rights to Christianity. There is relatively little room for doctrinal differences, and salvation as understood particularly in the dispensational context is necessary for correct interpretation of Scripture.[44] LaHaye even goes so far as to say that Revelation is unintelligible unless read literally and that those who use allegory or symbolic interpretation are 'false teachers'.[45] In the series, salvation is clearly explained. The authors intentionally present evidence that not all those who consider themselves Christians are actually saved. A primary character, Rayford Steele, in conversation with his daughter, says, 'if the Christians are gone and everyone else is left, I don't think anyone is a Christian'.[46] Only those with what dispensationalists consider appropriate salvation are taken by God in the rapture, and those 'left behind' were somehow lacking or inadequate in faith and salvation. To illustrate this point, they use the character of Pastor Bruce Barnes, who was one of the few left behind in a dispensationalist church. In discussing his own story of the rapture, Barnes claims to have 'set up [his] own brand of Christianity that may have made for a life of freedom but had cost [him his] soul'.[47] The description of Barnes's faith describes failure to tithe, nonliteral understandings of Scripture, participation in church community without proper doctrinal belief, acceptance and tolerance of other faiths and failure to evangelize

43. May, 'Integral Ecumenism', p. 577.

44. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, pp. 179-80.

45. Tim LaHaye, 'Introduction', in Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, pp. 6, 8.

46. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995), p. 165.

47. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 198.

others in conversation. The picture presented is that there is a very clear understanding of 'true' Christianity and that those who fail to fall within these clear boundaries are deficient or insufficient in their salvation. Unfortunately, the series neglects to undertake a thoughtful interaction with different denominations or an understanding of the complexity of theological dialogue and debate.

The interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church in the novels also presents difficulty, as Jarlath Killeen notes in his chapter in this book (see Chapter 4). The series implies that Roman Catholic conversion is not fully salvific. In the series, the pope is raptured after having had a Protestant-inspired conversion experience, which is explained in terms of his recovery of Martin Luther's theology. His successor, Peter Mathews, or Pope Peter II, becomes the leader, or Pontifex Maximus, of the evil One World Faith established by the Antichrist. Mathews is depicted as greedy, insensitive and pluralistic. Tim LaHaye is also well known for derogatory comments against the Roman Catholic Church based on his disdain for their eschatological stance of amillennialism—the belief that the millennium is not a literal event. These comments effectively distance other theological traditions in Christianity. This controversy is compounded when the Roman Catholic Church and the weight of its tradition are demonized. Hitchcock and Ice identify the Reformation as the moment of liberation of the Bible for the people and the triumph of millennialism over the Roman Catholic Church and its 'thousand years of suppression'.[48] The language is loaded, and falls heavily on sensitive ears. The rejection of an ecumenical perspective leads dispensationalists into an antagonistic theology. The Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ as diverse and performing many functions can exist only on a superficial level (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). The spiritual dimension of diversity is lost unless participants and believers 'begin to move from identifying themselves in opposition to one another to identifying themselves in relation to one another'.[49] In this way, dispensationalism imports its own understanding of identity and theology into its system of interpretation. If no other Christian communities have validity in their theological pursuits unless aligning with dispensationalism, then two thousand years of effort, theology and church tradition become worthless.

Interfaith Issues: Wholly Other?

The series does not isolate Christian dissenters as the only 'other', but also brings Judaism and Islam into discussion, as Crawford Gribben argues in his chapter in this book (see Chapter 3). While Hinduism, Buddhism and vari-

48. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 197.

49. 'A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics', World Council of Churches, Paper #182, 200.3, 2005, section 4.33.

ous other faiths are incorporated into the One World Faith, their doctrines or beliefs are not investigated independently. This in itself is a statement reflecting the authors' Abrahamic and Western bias. The lack of interest in Eastern religions reflects both arrogance and apathy towards significant world faiths. The authors' neglect of these faith systems, however, is relatively tame in comparison to their discussion of both Islam and Judaism.

Since the attack on the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001, the presentation of Islam by North America—and in particular, North American evangelicals—has moved towards a demonization of both the faith and its adherents. The Left Behind series is no exception. The Muslim male characters in the novels are represented as aggressive, normally with military backgrounds and tendencies towards violence or connections with organized crime. In the prequel to the series, *The Rapture*, the Muslim Abdullah Smith is shown losing his temper and showing violent and abusive tendencies towards his wife, Yasmine, for her choice to leave Islam in order to follow Jesus.[50] She accepts his choice with the appropriate submission for a conservative evangelical woman, but her representation neglects certain elements of gender roles in Middle Eastern culture. In the series, Muslim women are often given qualities normally associated with North American or European women. For example, Yasmine is presented in the guise of an independent, self-assured woman who independently converts to Christianity and leaves her husband because he refused to convert as well.[51] The authors neglect the strong negative opinion of divorce in Islam, instead sanctioning this sort of belief and behaviour as typical of any woman in Arabic culture. There is clearly a discrepancy between the series' portrayal of Muslim culture and life and its reality.

Islam is also considered the ultimate enemy of Israel and is associated with Russia in the series' prediction of an attempt to destroy Israel described in both *The Rapture* and *Left Behind*. Russia in concert with Islam is seen as a primary antagonist to both Israel and followers of Christ. Hitchcock and Ice argue that 'Russia will have five key allies: Turkey, Iran, Libya, Sudan and the nations of Central Asia [and that] ... many of these nations are hotbeds of militant Islam and are either forming or strengthening their ties'.[52] This rhetoric reflects an attitude that is not only negative but borders on the hostile. Tim LaHaye betrays his true feelings about Islam in his article reflecting his interpretation of the events of September 11, 2001. He clearly takes issue with Islam, and his opinion enters into the world of his books. He represents Islam as 'godless', saying:

50. LaHaye and Jenkins, *The Rapture*, pp. 45-48.
51. LaHaye and Jenkins, *The Rapture*, pp. 45-48.
52. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 54.

> We should not be deceived by the well publicized belief in 'Allah' as though the Muslim and Arab world truly believe in God. The god they believe in is definitely NOT the God of the Bible, either in the Old or New Testaments. Not only do they practice the unbiblical concept of advancing their beliefs by the sword, they also do not acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah or savior of the world.[53]

In this quotation, LaHaye does not differentiate between the religion of Islam and that of fundamentalist Islamic militants. This conflation is an enormous theological and ecumenical difficulty. By claiming that 'the truth is only one religion points to God and we need to be more aggressive in proclaiming it',[54] LaHaye is also seemingly endorsing a more aggressive mode of evangelism. Islam has richly diverse theological and ethical traditions that are completely neglected in this analysis as well as in the novels. In this way, LaHaye builds a logical 'straw man' in order to proclaim Islam's inherent fallacies instead of giving due scholarly attention to its complexity.

The negative portrayal of Islam pales, however, in comparison to the series' interaction with Judaism. The unrelenting support of Israel seems to indicate a certain level of pro-Jewish sentiment. This seeming support inevitably runs aground amidst the logical conclusions of dispensationalist theology's trajectory for God's covenant with Israel. Sherryll Mleynek has provided an investigation of these issues.[55] Initially, the dispensational assertion of the validity of the covenant with Israel seems to be an affirmation of Jewish identity and faith. But significant issues arise in dealing with the salvation and characterization of Jews in the novels. Jews are presented as those who need to find their messiah specifically in the person of Jesus Christ or face an eternal damnation. The traditional Christian understanding of messiah differs from both ancient and contemporary Judaism. Jewish messianism often reflects a participatory arrival of the messiah. The Jewish community is to be actively engaged in mitzvoth or in the process of *Tikkun Olam*—the healing of the world—in order to facilitate the messiah. Thus, there is an obligation on the part of both the individual and the community to rebuild and heal the world. Unfortunately for the authors of the series, this view has more in common with postmillennialism, in which the church is preparing a millennial kingdom for Jesus to reign over when he returns.

53. Tim LaHaye, 'The Prophetic Significance of Sept. 11, 2001', http://www.pretribulationrapture.com/pretrib/lahaye2.htm, accessed 1 September 2010.

54. LaHaye, 'The Prophetic Significance of Sept. 11, 2001'.

55. Some of the issues that Mleynek discusses will be addressed here, but for a more in-depth analysis of post-*Shoah* reception of the novels, see Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', pp. 367-83.

By applying a premillennial rhetoric to Jewish beliefs, the novels threaten to distort the reality of the Jewish tradition.[56]

Issues of Jewish identity come into question with the supposition that the conversion of the Jews will bring about the return of Jesus. By demanding salvation specifically through conversion—and conversion as understood explicitly by the authors—they import an evangelical understanding into the covenant of Adonai with Israel. By 'converting' in this particular way, they are thus erasing significant aspects of their Jewish identity. The marks of mitzvoth and faithfulness in community and communion with Adonai disappear in light of individualistic conversion and Christocentric salvation. Proper Protestant theology and dispensationalist interpretation of Scripture mark the faithfulness of the Jewish characters in the novel, rather than talmudic or midrashic associations and faithfulness. Although the Left Behind authors might argue otherwise, this presents a supercessionist theology. In this theology, 'the Tribulation is the event by which Jews and all their traditions are finally superseded, erased',[57] in favour of a messianic tradition that ignores the traditional view of *Tikkun Olam*.[58]

The repeated use in the series of the phrase 'the Jewish problem' also shows insensitivity to the stark reality of Jewish identity in the aftermath of the *Shoah*.[59] This rhetoric implicitly refers back to the horrific ordeal faced by Jews during World War II. By using the phrase, the authors are granting intellectual permission to their readers to use language that inherently disrespects Jewish persons and diminishes the reality of the Holocaust. Dispensationalists assert that God is faithful to Israel and that 'God's plan for history includes a purpose for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'.[60] Mleynek thoughtfully points out that this reveals a severe ignorance of one of the most predominant questions in the aftermath of the *Shoah*. Where was God at Auschwitz? By asserting purpose and promise, the authors imply—however unintentionally—that the death camps were part of God's plan for Israel. This is a truly unsettling thought. Modern Jewish theological identity depends on a thoughtful interaction with the character of a God that allows Auschwitz. The authors' refusal to interact with post-*Shoah* Jewish theology in the novels allows readers to do the same. It releases the reader from the intellectual responsibility of understanding the role of Christian theolo-

56. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 376. It is important to note that Jewish beliefs should not be conflated unilaterally with postmillennialism, as that strand of theology is a distinctly Christian belief having to do with the return of Christ following the thousand years of peace and the kingdom of God.

57. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 376.

58. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 374.

59. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 374

60. Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth behind Left Behind*, p. 179.

gians and authorities in setting the cultural and political stage in which the Holocaust could take place.

The characterization of Jewish people in the series also presents a problem. The authors use the word 'Israeli' when discussing the plunder following Russia's attack.[61] In this depiction, the Israeli characterization is 'collectively mercenary, reinforcing the stereotype of the money-seeking, usurious, greedy Jew'—an association made all the worse by the simultaneous mention of 'Holocaust' and 'furnace'.[62] To ignore the implications of such an association—however unintentional—is ethically irresponsible. The further characterizations of the predominant Jewish characters, Rabbi Tsion Ben-Judah and Chaim Rosenzweig, represent a similar ignorance. The pronunciation key for 'Tsion' given in *Tribulation Force* incorrectly associates the rabbi with the city of Zion.[63] Both men are associated with the liberation of Israel from evil—Chaim with his scientific formula, and Tsion with spiritual liberation through Jesus. Because so much of the rhetoric of the novels is concerned with the conversion of the Jews, these men become iconic. The Jews become an iconic 'other' not to be destroyed as the non-believers, but rather to be converted in order to usher in the millennium. To remove intellectual responsibility from either the authors or the readers is to deny the 'conflict between admiring the Jews and converting them, between the survival of the Jews as Jews, or their instrumental use as the agents of the Second Coming'.[64] In light of the *Shoah*, this conflict cannot ethically be ignored or denied. It is the ethical responsibility of the Christian theologian to address it thoughtfully and compassionately.

Conclusion

The analysis of the dispensationalist interpretation of the authors presents an intellectual difficulty. Because the authors have defined their hermeneutic in a manner differing from their practice, it can create confusion. The World Council of Churches argues that 'safeguards against selective and prejudicial readings are also imperative in the realm of academic and scholarly interpretation, with particular attention to the wider testimony of Scripture and the experience of the many oppressed'.[65] An ecumenical approach to this tradition and hermeneutic provides this. The arguments of this paper should not negate the many positive qualities of the Left Behind series. They have inspired many believers to return to reading the Bible.

61. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, pp. 11-12.
62. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 376
63. See Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 382 n. 30.
64. Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem"', p. 380.
65. World Council of Churches, 'Treasure in Earthen Vessels', section 3.28.

They have also reinforced the importance of certain moral standards and the importance of the good news of the gospel. The purpose of this chapter, rather, is to illuminate the ways in which dialogue must be opened with dispensationalists in order to further refine theological thinking across the board. By dealing with these ecumenical ramifications, Left Behind readers can begin to understand their own traditions and the preconceptions that they bring to the reading and interpretation of Scripture. In this way, 'differences can be an invitation and a starting point for the common search for the truth, in a spirit of *koinonia* [fellowship] that entails a disposition to *metanoia* [repentance], under the guidance of the Spirit of God.'[66] Thus, understanding of the dispensational hermeneutic and its ecumenical consideration opens the possibility for healing, reconciliation and understanding between fellow believers and fellow human beings.

66. World Council of Churches, 'Treasure in Earthen Vessels', section 3.30.

7. Left Behind and Evangelical Literary Culture

Marisa Ronan

This chapter argues that American evangelical writers have formed both social and theological boundaries through identity production, and that such identity production has been particularly marked in the case of the evangelical subculture in the changing theological landscape of contemporary America. Richard Lints astutely contends that

> Normative prescriptions about the formation of a theological framework will be ineffective without a preliminary account of the cultural lens through which evangelicals view their approach to the theological project. It is imperative to not only understand the culture into which the evangelical proclamation of the gospel goes but also the culture out of which the evangelical framework is shaped in the first instance.[1]

As such, this chapter will explore evangelical cultural production as a manifestation of symbolic boundary construction in and against the mainstream, examining the complex relationship between evangelicalism and culture both within the Left Behind series and in the wider history of Christian fiction. Symbolic boundaries serve in the creation of specific models of identity formation and preservation through the setting of imagined borders confirming a subcultural status through self-identification, usually through processes of 'othering'.[2] This is linked, I argue, to patterns of accommo-

1. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 29-30.

2. Christian Smith in his exploration of American evangelicalism utilizes the term to link evangelicalism's collective-identity formation to the use of symbolic boundaries, which I find useful: 'Boundary markers are ... central to the formation of collective identity because they promote a heightened awareness of a group's commonalities and frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out-group'. See Smith, *American Evangelism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 93. Michele Lamont and Virag Molnar ('The Studies of Boundaries in the

dation and resistance, in which evangelicals move from being within the mainstream to being on its margins, a process that requires the creation of a strong evangelical identity. Evangelical entrepreneurialism has contained evangelical identity within its subcultural boundaries by re-versioning mainstream cultural formats for consumption within that subculture, most notably within the publishing paradigm. None of these efforts has enjoyed greater success than Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's Left Behind series.

Literature has consistently served in the construction of identities, and Christian fiction is no exception to this rule. Within a subculture this dynamic is increased, facilitating the formation of a group identity through the perpetuation of symbolic boundaries and subcultural relativism. This process does not remain static as entry into the cultural realm can both solidify and blur subcultural boundaries. My analysis of Christian fiction and the Left Behind novels explores evangelical cultural engagement and determines that secular modernism facilitates a strengthening of evangelical subcultural identity through opposition to the 'other'. The movement in American culture from Protestant dominance to its decline and the resulting and necessary solidification of evangelical subcultural boundaries that followed are key to the construction of a distinct evangelical theological and cultural identity. The process of modernization would signal the decline of the evangelical Protestant stronghold and, by the late nineteenth century, position the potent emerging secularism as an antithesis to the Protestant worldview. This chapter reviews the subcultural flux that marks evangelicalism through an analysis of the literary forms it has utilized since its Puritan inception to the present day. As such, it is an exploration of a culture on the margins that struggles to be assimilated into the mainstream while simultaneously revelling in its separation. My analysis of Christian fiction strives to modify the scholarly condescension that has greeted the Christian fiction genre and to detail the historical materiality of Christian literature that reaches back to the origins of America as a nation and throughout its literature as a whole.

Christian fiction can serve to unite a readership in its creation of a fictional manifestation of the evangelical Christian worldview that conveys the possibilities of a united evangelical America. Ulf Hannerz contends that

Social Sciences', *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 [2002], pp. 167-95) provide a useful examination of symbolic and social boundaries wherein they define symbolic boundaries as 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality'. They are, they argue, 'an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources'. In this chapter I explore how evangelicals have sustained the use of symbolic boundaries evident from their earliest origins to the contemporary era.

'some subcultures remain weak because they draw on a shared involvement only in some limited field of activity, with continuous intrusions from a diversity of perspectives generated elsewhere in the round of life'.[3] Nevertheless, American evangelicalism has imposed, through identity production, a framework for all facets of life from schooling and political alignment to specific models of evangelical cultural engagement. Within literature, evangelical ideology is compounded through the use of a specific scriptural reading, validating fiction through a referential treatment of the Bible, a rhetorical move that may serve to endow Christian fiction with some of the authority of an inerrant biblical text. Popular evangelical fiction acts as cultural dialogue and actively penetrates subcultural boundaries. Hence the power of such literature is confirmed, and a very specific moral code of conduct validated. This process has been central to the creation and success of the Left Behind series. The series adeptly drew on symbolic boundary construction within the narrative and through the use of a specific mode of evangelical literary production, the history of which can be traced to the nation's origins.

Literature proved an invaluable tool in formatting religious ties from the influential trans-Atlantic conversion narratives and spiritual biographies that proved popular in New England in the seventeenth century to the surge in the production of religious literature during the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s. The literary form embraced by the Awakening's leaders and used to record the extent of the newly revived religious fervour acted to claim a space for faith within the literary sphere. A faith-infused literature would thus work to challenge the secular literary boom that was being imposed upon the distinctly religious character of the American literary tradition. America appears unique in its history and culture of reading. Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David D. Hall argue that the secular novel experienced little success in eighteenth-century American contexts, with 'Thomas Newton's *Dissertation on the Prophecies* (1758), a book by an English minister explicating the prophetic parts of Scripture, appear[ing] more often in bookseller and library catalogues than did the "Enlightenment" texts or, for that matter, [Richardson's] *Pamela*'.[4] While circulation

3. Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organisation of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 73.

4. David D. Hall and Elizabeth Carroll Reilly, 'Part Two: Customers and the Book Market', in Hugh Amory (ed.), *A History of the Book in America: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2007), p. 399. Newton's *Dissertation on the Prophecies* is also evocative of the millennial assumptions that many Americans had embraced. *Dissertations* forms a part of what had become an emerging millennial literary tradition with an eager audience. The uncertainty of the times due to the strength of secularizing forces no doubt contributed to interest in the

of novels increased, aided by the growth of a public library system, by the mid-eighteenth century significant doubts about the moral propriety of the novel had gained ground. The utilization of the novel to convey the message of the gospel would for decades encounter the prevailing view that fiction was no place for theological reflection. While the publishing industry eventually extended beyond ecclesiastically approved forms, a deep distrust of fiction defined evangelicalism, as is evident in much of the writing of the American Tract Society (ATS). Founded in 1825, it strove to instill an evangelical literary tradition that would counter the growing secular publishing industry. Evangelicals warned of the 'satanic press', with the ATS declaring that 'the plagues of Egypt were tolerable, compared with this coming up into our dwellings of the loathsome swarms of literary vermin to "corrupt the land", to deprave the hearts and ruin the souls of our citizens'.[5] The Puritan endorsement of literacy that classified the early decades of American nation-building had introduced, as an unintended side effect, the threat of a mass-publishing industry and the dissemination of a secular literature far removed from the careful constructions of evangelical orthodoxy.

By the nineteenth century the formal literature of tracts and pamphlets was being replaced by the Christian novel as it became clear to many evangelicals that the might of the fictional form could not be contained. The conception of a Christian fiction form acted to allay the monopolization of leisure by secular endeavours. Liturgical regulation was maintained through the careful policing of the act of reading itself. The novel as a classification proved problematic. Cathy N. Davidson notes that 'well into the nineteenth century, virtually every American novel somewhere in its preface or its plot defended itself against the charge that it *was* a novel, either by defining itself differently ("Founded in *Truth*") or by redefining the genre tautologically as all those things it was presumed not to be—moral, truthful, educational and so forth'.[6] American literature, so entrenched in the Christian fabric of its origins, struggled to circumvent the need to claim fiction as a morally responsible medium. What is important is that Christian fiction would, despite all that stood against it, actively strive and succeed to create a place for the Christian voice within this most questionable of genres. By the second half of the nineteenth century, religious publishers had recognized the futility of their rejection of fiction, and began to

genre. See *Dissertation on the Prophecies Which Have Remarkably Been Fulfilled, and at This Time Are Fulfilling in the World* (London: J.F. Dove, 1832).

5. David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of the Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 79.

6. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 40.

identify a new avenue in which to witness. Inspired by the eloquence of the Bible, many Christian writers believed that the novel could serve to address an audience increasingly distracted by the secular culture at large. By the end of the nineteenth century the Christian tale had grown so popular that Harriet Beecher Stowe exclaimed, 'Soon it will be necessary that every leading clergyman shall embody in his theology a serial story, to be delivered in the pulpit.'[7] The Christian novel created not only an avenue in which to proselytize but also provided a platform on which to assert evangelical identity against the 'other' of mainstream secularism, situating symbolic boundaries through its cultural production. This dual usefulness has remained a definable attribute of evangelical Christian fiction, and can be seen especially clearly, as I will later argue, in the Left Behind series.

Evangelicalism succeeded in creating what James Davison Hunter terms a 'cognitive minority' retaining societal leverage within a distinctly classifiable sphere.[8] The late nineteenth century had wrought a monumental shift in evangelicalism, fracturing the evangelical faith into what would become two distinct factions of conservative and mainline Protestantism. As a result, 'orthodox Protestantism's dominance of American culture was increasingly giving way to a "neutral", "rational" version of cultural discourse that left little room for religious authority'.[9] The challenge of modernity would ensure that a restructuring of evangelical Protestantism would usher in a strengthened religious orthodoxy, inherently defined by its opposition to the canons of modernity. This codification rendered it forever bound to the opposition of the multitudinous scope of modern exposition. The opening decades of the twentieth century had seen an evangelical movement of self-identified fundamentalists move from the mainstream into a separate subculture with its own theological, social and educational networks that secured the production of a distinct fundamentalist identity and that sought to preserve Christian truth in the face of scientific enquiry.[10] Their cultural isolationism is seen by Hunter to be 'Orthodoxy in confrontation with

7. David S. Reynolds, 'From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of the Pulpit Storytelling in America', *American Quarterly* 32.5 (1990), p. 479.

8. 'Indeed, it had successfully shed the stigma of being a religious sect and had come to enjoy a central place in American culture'. See Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 45. This cognitive minority as identified by Hunter exposes the success of the evangelical symbolic boundaries and its service in identity production. The creation of a publishing network acted to solidify the evangelical identity existing outside of but parallel to the American mainstream.

9. Christian Smith, *American Evangelism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 6.

10. George M. Marsden maintains that the wider coalition of contemporary American evangelicals' identity is substantially grounded in this fundamentalist era. See

modernity'. Thus, evangelicalism sought in Christian publishing a mode of identity production separate from the mainstream as an active mode of preservation. What we see in the following decades is the construction of a publishing industry serving to placate the sidelined evangelical faith and create a publishing network that bore witness to battles within and outside of evangelicalism.

The emergence and success of Christian fiction can be traced within a number of genres that found popularity in a distinctive Christian literary heritage. The evolution of Christian literature in the latter half of the twentieth century became entwined with the narrative of the embattled Christian soldier, bound to its systematic rejection of modernism and utilization of the end-times narrative. The Puritan belief that the colonists would create the conditions for God's return are re-imagined in the twentieth century where the religious apostasy and declension, rising secularism and geopolitical uncertainties point, it would seem more clearly, to the end of days. As such, the predestinary narrative is reiterated: the chosen are those who have, like their predecessors, survived societal exclusion, religious and moral societal bankruptcy, and liturgical infighting. The emerging apocalyptic literature of the twentieth century reflected this paradigm. Religious reading in the twentieth century is thus influenced by the specific context of retaliation to rising secularism and acts as a mode of secured identity production.

This repositioning of the Christian prerogative, facilitated by a duplication of a publishing network that serves to promote and control the growing literary paradigm of Christian fiction, ensured a crossover from a Christian audience to a growing mainstream readership, to the extent that the Left Behind novels frequently topped the *New York Times* bestseller list. Mainstream culture, 'so antithetical to evangelicalism, now offered a mode from which to disseminate a particular Christian ideology through "social distribution"'.[11] Jan Blodgett contends that 'religious fiction continually straddles the line between secular and sacred, at once part of the pattern of accommodation and a symbol of separation'.[12] Christian fiction, governed by specific Christian publishers, writers, agents, editors and sales outlets, works to promote evangelical doctrine, the veracity of the Bible and the primacy of Jesus Christ. 'In resolving the tension between ministerial intentions and industry imperatives, the gatekeepers of Christian publishing maintain the general conventions that shape the popular Chris-

Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

11. Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity*, p. 7.

12. Jan Blodgett, *Protestant Evangelical Literary Culture and Contemporary Society* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 13.

tian evangelical aesthetic.'[13] Evangelical fiction is a single manifestation of Christian evangelicalism's cultural projections signifying a reality carefully constructed for an American audience. For the Left Behind series the rapture story becomes a valuable tool in creating a coded world where the evangelicals are proven to be part of a pre-ordained plan that sees the devout saved and the doubters damned. The novels thus reinforce the inerrant nature of the Bible through a 'real-time' imagining of Revelation's prophecies.

LaHaye and Jenkins and the Christian fiction writer more broadly have succeeded in the creation of a metadiscourse that is shaped and defined by a biblical morality; consequently an evangelical reality is, beyond subcultural boundaries, dually validated within both fiction and society. Writing within the religious market requires a maintenance of the characteristic features that elevate Christian or evangelical fiction above general-market fiction. Doctrinal perspectives vary by publishing house, working to shape a given writer and genre. The apocalyptic genre, of which the Left Behind series forms part, thus observes patterns that characterize the genre. A Christian worldview is paramount to the configuration of a narrative, with evangelical motifs clearly evident to the reader, binding the plot to a clearly identifiable evangelical faith. Penelope Stokes, in her guide to Christian writing, states that 'a Christian worldview offers a perspective of the universe that includes a spiritual vision, order and moral resolution'.[14] While Christian nonfiction details the strategies for spiritual and moral growth, fiction provides an account of the struggles that exist for evangelicals in the modern world. In the Left Behind series this struggle takes place postrapture in what LaHaye and Jenkins observe to be the period of tribulation. Those 'left behind' must structure their lives by strict evangelical codes that render them more than ever outsiders in a world darkened by the end of days. As such the novels act as a manual of sorts for the reader with the instruction that time may be running out and the challenges ahead are great. The subcultural boundaries after the rapture are thus solidified further, and it becomes clear through visible markings who in fact belongs, clearly classifying the secular 'other'.

The use of the secular 'other' is framed by the evangelical distrust of modernism that permeates the end-time narrative of LaHaye and Jenkins's series. What takes place within such fiction is the manifestation of the historic battle between the evangelical Christian faith and Enlightenment ideals. Evangelical writers like LaHaye and Jenkins sought to exploit the

13. Jonathan Cordero, 'The Production of Christian Fiction,' *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 6 (2004), p. 1, http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art6-xianfiction.html.

14. Penelope J. Stokes, *The Complete Guide to Writing and Selling the Christian Novel* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1998), p. 17.

loss of faith in progress that appeared to mark society within late modernity, playing on the 'intensified sense of meaningless at the heart of modernity, and the consumer system's increasing inability to compensate', allowing an opportunity for religion to re-enter the mainstream.[15] The use of popular fiction acts as cultural dialogue, an active reinforcement of subcultural boundaries coupled with a challenge to the secular norm. Within the Left Behind series secular humanists offer the greatest contrast and threat to the values and teachings of the evangelical community. For evangelicalism, the enemy has been clearly classified within their specific doctrinal belief structures, defining a whole belief system, a system easily acted out within the apocalyptic drama of contemporary Christian fiction.

LaHaye and Jenkins employ the escalating sense of fragmentation and discontinuity and society's acceptance of apocalypticism to criticize modernist faith in rationalism and progress. Within the Left Behind novels both writers consistently undermine the use of academic reasoning in the wake of the rapture. Captain Rayford Steele is addled by his pseudosophisticated daughter, who has also been left behind. She reminds him that he too 'ran everything through a maddeningly intellectual grid—until recently, when the supernatural came crashing through his academic pretence. But like the cabbie said, you'd have to be blind not to see the light now, no matter how educated you thought you were.'[16] This criticism of the failed legacy of the Enlightenment is reiterated through Buck, a famous and highly successful journalist who postulates how he had

> stared his own mortality in the face and had to acknowledge that something otherworldly—yes, supernatural, something directly from God almighty—had been thrust upon those dusty hills in the form of a fire in the sky. And he had known beyond a doubt for the first time in his life that unexplainable things out there could not be dissected and evaluated scientifically from a detached Ivy League perspective.[17]

Buck's spiritual struggle, like Rayford's, is played out in detail for the reader, providing a mirror for their concerns and spiritual failings grounded specifically in the error of holding too much faith in an academic and rational order of existence. Within the first novel of the series both men must overcome doubt in the supernatural and embrace their spiritual instincts. Buck's conversion reaches its peak in his realization that he had ignored the spir-

15. Robert A. White, 'Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures', in Stewart M. Hoover (ed.), *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), p. 95.

16. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (1995; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), p. 237.

17. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 394.

itual realities of the pre- and postrapture events apparent around him to the extent that they did not 'impact on his own introspective inventory'.[18]

> In the lonely darkness he came to the painful realization that he had long ago compartmentalized this most basic of human needs and had rendered it a nonissue. What did it say about him, what despicable kind of subhuman creature had he become, that even the stark evidence of the Israel miracle—for it could be called nothing less—had not thawed his spirit's receptiveness to God.[19]

The strength of the evangelical dismissal of modern rationality is apparent: for the writers, false hope in mainstream secular institutions is to be ridiculed.[20] The rapture, they believe, will reset the balance in favour of evangelicalism, and such modernist stalwarts of university institutions are of little use during the tribulation. A re-versioning of the terms 'rational' and 'intellectual' act to compound the validity of evangelicalism and the eschatological narrative and strike against the legacy of societal dismissal of evangelicalism over these specifics. Hence the doubt originally raised by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) can work to facilitate the evangelical abhorrence of Enlightenment ideals. This trend is further pronounced by the later application of post-

18. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 395.

19. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 395.

20. In LaHaye's nonfiction book *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), which follows on from *Battle for the Mind: You Are Engaged in a Battle for the Mind, a Subtle Warfare* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1980), similar themes are explored. The book, written with evangelical activist David Noebel, reworks Francis Schaeffer's distrust of Western materialism into a battle cry against forces of modern secularism. A model of a fundamentalist utopia is conveyed within the instructive nonfiction text where church and state are united as a force for good. LaHaye secures this message by translating the nonfiction *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth* into a fiction novel aimed at the teen market and entitled *The Mind Siege Project* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2001). LaHaye's teen novel follows a group of high school social studies students who take a boat trip on the Chesapeake Bay for a lesson in diversity and moral relativism. The class eventually concludes that these ideas have dire consequences not considered in the more sedate setting of academic discourse. LaHaye and co-author David Noebel attempt to expose the academic world as sanctimonious and hypocritical, highlighting the boundaries of their tolerance when confronted with religious freedom. The translation into fiction, *The Mind Siege Project,* sees similar themes reiterated. In a passage that attempts to expose secular humanism as morally ineffectual and illegitimate, LaHaye writes: 'All week long Jodi had been told that concepts of right and wrong were outdated. According to Mrs. Meyer's [leader of the diversity/tolerance lessons] view of the world, Jodi would be under no obligation to save the life of another. It's survival of the fittest, right? Every man for himself. Just mind your own business and do what works for you—that's your truth.' See *Mind Siege*, p. 72.

modernism as a mode of quasi-evangelical reformation and revitalization in the writing of Brian McLaren and other 'emergents'. Implicit in the Enlightenment was the assumption that human beings had the ability to discover the secrets of the universe and thereby exert some control over their own destiny. The search for reason and emancipation thus induced a lessening of the gulf between God and humanity, an act deplored and condemned by evangelicals who saw the existence of truth in God's word alone.

The emergence of a moderate Enlightenment in America, while sustaining a religious discourse for a time, could not stave off the secularizing force of the Enlightenment despite American Protestantism's best effort that it should do so. The nineteenth-century displacement of the theologian from a place of eminence mirrored a growing distrust with the intellectual order and an actualization of the defining evangelical system of anti-intellectualism that had found origins in the American Enlightenment and which has continued in varying degrees to this day. Yet we observe within the Left Behind series a constant need for intellectual validation sought through the positioning of central characters as highly successful airline pilots, Pulitzer-prize winning journalists, world-renowned theologians and Nobel Prize recipient scientists. Here, LaHaye and Jenkins reflect a concerted effort on the part of evangelicals to dislocate from the public perception of the closed-minded, intellectually stunted evangelical. This could be seen as an effort to confute Mark A. Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), which charged that the scandal was that there is not much of an evangelical mind. For Noll, 'American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been so for several generations', a situation he attributed to their failure to adopt 'in-depth interaction with modern culture'.[21] LaHaye and Jenkins work to rewrite the evangelical as immersed in modern culture while aware of its inherent dangers. This intensely commodified popular fiction genre, building on an inherited Christian literary tradition, functions to re-establish evangelicalism in the society.

The premillennialism that emerged during the nineteenth century in the face of strengthened secular rationalism is re-invoked within the Left Behind novels as a construction of preservation. The worst fears of Protestant America had been actualized by the twentieth century with the defining force of the Christian nation usurped by a secular modernity that restructured the political and educational infrastructure. The founding of an evangelical institutional and publishing network in the early twentieth century was central to sustaining a viable evangelical identity and securing a future for a people who faced escalating marginalization from the

21. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 3.

American mainstream. Within the Left Behind series the evangelical network culture is reinstated to deal with the postrapture chaos and impending tribulation.[22] For the characters in LaHaye and Jenkins's novels, the establishment of a ministry acts as the epicenter of all resulting networks. New Hope Village Church and its pastor Bruce Barnes in particular instill calm in those suffering great grief from the loss of loved ones in the rapture. A once failed and unauthentic evangelist, Barnes presents a soteriological message of redemption urging others that it is not too late to be saved.[23] Rayford resorts to Scripture in the wake of the rapture only to see it as simply 'religious mumbo jumbo', something out of his reach of perception.[24] It is through Barnes that Rayford comes to faith, and under his careful direction the Scriptures and the veracity of the rapture become clear, with Barnes asserting that 'as important as all the other sermons are, nothing matters like this one'.[25] The taped sermon forms the centrepoint of the emerging evangelical network that will become by the second novel known as the 'Tribulation Force'. The tape confirms the importance of evangelical literature through the self-reflexive championing of Bible prophecy texts, placing the Left Behind series as part of a larger dispensationalist narrative working to link prophecy fiction to the vast body of evangelical nonfiction.

The redemptive power of Christian fiction is encapsulated in the elevation of the conversion narrative, acting as a mode to unite people in the Durkheimian view of a collective consciousness. A shared perception of moral deterioration provides the social and political force that inspires many evangelical texts. Indeed, tropes of decay and decline as indelibly linked to

22. Glenn W. Shuck examines network culture in detail in his chapter 'The Network Culture/Beast System', locating the evangelical network culture within a universal system drawing on Manuel Castell's 'Information Technology Paradigm' as a contextual frame for his analysis of the Left Behind series. While Shuck argues that the evangelical network culture rises within the novels as a response to what they see as the Beast system, I contend that the Tribulation Force and the international network that they create within the novels reflect an evangelical legacy of highly organized network systems that came into play due to evangelical isolationism and the solidification of symbolic boundaries (Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* [New York: New York University Press, 2005], p. 88).

23. Barnes also serves to highlight that even those within respected evangelical positions can lack true faith and will not be saved by their weak allegiance; in the rapture only the true believers will be saved. Barnes admits that he had been 'a phoney, I had set up my own brand of Christianity that may have made for a life of freedom but had cost me my soul'. See *Left Behind,* p. 198. LaHaye in particular appears to be highlighting the threat of inauthentic evangelicals even within the religious hierarchy.

24. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 122.

25. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, p. 200.

modernity have become central to evangelical expression. Anthony Giddens asserts that lessons may be learned from fundamentalism—at the very least that contemporary nihilism is wrong to proclaim that 'nothing is sacred'. He states that 'religion not only refuses to disappear but undergoes a resurgence' in the context of this nihilism.[26] Evangelicals have consistently seen the allegorical within the apocalyptic. LaHaye and Jenkins's writing utilizes the narrative of damnation and incremental repetition that was typified by Jonathan Edwards in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741). As a series, the Left Behind novels seek radical conversion, acting as a self-help manual of a special kind, shaped by the belief in human impotence and a profound sense of morality. We witness at the close of *Left Behind* a detailed account of the conversion narratives of the main characters, their spiritual struggles and New Hope Village Church as a location for public conversion. The canonical language of conversion is invoked throughout the novel, engaging in a ritual action of conversion as an actualization of evangelical acceptance.[27] Peter G. Stromberg asserts that the 'very logic of the conversion experience, from the perspective of the believer, necessitates the claim that it is an historic event, the conversion, which transforms the believer'.[28] The Left Behind novels thus act as an extended postrapture conversion narrative, where conversion is repositioned by the very proximity to the end of days. In being left behind, the characters of the series are made aware of the 'real' and inherent dangers to their souls should they refuse to recognize that the rapture has indeed taken place. The centrality of conversion narrative and the series' constant evocation of the failed evangelical thus act to warn the readers of their own pressing need to convert.

LaHaye in particular is immoveable in his belief that 'evangelicals must engage the humanists or risk losing their evangelical values in advance of the Tribulation', during what he calls the 'pretribulation tribulation'.[29] Thus, the othering of secular society is an active pursuit of change within the evangelical subculture. The time constraints of the threat of tribulation and the real fear of the consequences of a societal failure to align with evangelicalism create a far greater imperative to frame boundaries than can be seen in relation to other subcultures: for evangelicals the trajectory of humanity is at stake. Such rapture fiction has come to typify Christian fic-

26. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 195.

27. See Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), for a detailed analysis of the history of the conversion narrative.

28. Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 14.

29. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast,* p. 55.

tion in recent years, compounding the stereotype of the irrational evangelical awaiting an apocalyptic end that scholars have been quick to embrace. As such, an unrepresentative view of evangelical fiction and indeed evangelicalism as a whole pervades the general perception and some scholarship of this literary genre and subculture. While the phenomenon of the Left Behind series should not be ignored, analysis should include subgenres that are similarly influential within the evangelical culture, particularly those of emergents such as Brian McLaren. Hebdige criticizes the academic penchant for the study of spectacular subcultures and what he sees as a failure to actively engage with subcultural phenomena across the board. He argues that an exoticization of subcultures takes place often within the media.[30] Thus, subcultural studies had to move beyond the spectacular and often masculine subcultures sensationalized by the media to include a more thorough exploration of the varying subcultures that exist throughout society. Even acknowledging the success of the apocalyptic genre we must be careful not to reduce conceptualizations of the evangelical subculture in a similar way.

The unification of biblical prophecy and fiction narrative has thus served to create a neat and instructive vision of the end times that highlights faith in LaHaye's and Jenkins's specific theological belief system. Malcolm Gold observes that 'Christ's oration to the believers communicates not through sermon, Bible study or debate, but Jesus himself, who becomes the vehicle through which this theology is mediated', using the very biblical texts that both authors deem significant.[31] Thus the voice of Jesus is essentially translated through LaHaye's and Jenkins's specific biblical reading. The book of Revelation and prophecy belief is thus carefully structured for the author's specific intentions. Those who fail to support the evangelical worldview are significantly punished within the text; their lack of faith is seen as an affront, but more so it is their collective ability to marginalize evangelicals that is conveyed as the greatest threat. The series works on many levels to collectivize evangelical identity, to create a visceral world in which the persecuted evangelicals triumph. Grounded in prophecy belief, the Left Behind novels offer a pre-ordained narrative that charts the fate of the evangelical people. Evangelicalism is shaped by its very mediation through the fiction form. Self-reflexive signification imbues the evangelical literary endeavour with a complex operation whereby sanctification is sought within a medium that requires substantiation. The actual cost of the literary endeav-

30. Dick Hebdige argues that 'the way in which subcultures are represented in the media makes them both more and less exotic than they actually are'. See *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 133.

31. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), p. 45.

our remains, however, unclear. What is certain is that Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins have extended all notions of evangelical literary production not only through selling upwards of 60 million copies but creating an associated industry of films, graphic novels, video games and a whole plethora of related merchandise that serve to brand evangelical rapture belief, both strengthening and challenging evangelical subcultural boundary construction.

8. Left Behind and the Dispensational Tradition

Thomas Ice

Tim LaHaye first conceived of the Left Behind concept while noticing a pretty young flight attendant flirting with a handsome pilot on a flight in the United States. As he considered the scene, he wondered what would happen if the rapture occurred while on an airplane flight. And the rest is history—almost. Even though LaHaye was a veteran author whose books had sold over 11 million copies before *Left Behind*, he quickly realized that he was not a novelist. He found someone he thought would do well as a writer for the project and signed a contract to produce the rapture novel. After reading the finished product, he said he paid a lot of money to throw the manuscript in the trashcan. For the next few years he did not actively pursue his desire to produce a good rapture novel, which he had hoped all along would be a tool to reach many with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was when he hired his current literary agent that connections were made with Jerry B. Jenkins, who shared the agent and LaHaye's dispensational theology. It was at this point, when the agent brought the two writers together, that the plan for the Left Behind novels began to take shape.

In January 1995, LaHaye first told me about the Left Behind project (initially it was to have been a single book, then it grew to three and eventually to a series of fifteen books). He had just talked on the phone with Jenkins and told me that he was excited about prospects for the novel and thought it might sell as many as a quarter million copies. Of course LaHaye was wrong. It only sold about 83,000 copies its first year, but then it began to take off. Even though the series has been completed, its total sales are approaching the 65 million mark. LaHaye hoped that Left Behind would have an impact, but had no idea that it would accomplish what it has, both in terms of sales and spiritual results. Any sincere evangelical wants to be used by God to spread the gospel in their world. In his motives and desires, LaHaye was likely no different from J.N. Darby in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Origins of the Rapture

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) was no doubt the modern developer of dispensational (pretribulation) premillennialism. However, it is not clear that Darby was the first individual in postbiblical church history to formulate some form of pretribulationism. A substantial number of pre-Darby rapture theologians have been recovered in the last couple of decades. Several key voices from church history held to some form of pretribulationism before the 1830s.

What should one look for in examining the historical record of the church in regard to pretribulationism? William Bell has formulated three criteria for establishing the validity of a historical citation regarding the rapture. If any of his three criteria are met, then he acknowledges such a reference is 'of crucial importance, if found, whether by direct statement or clear inference'. Bell's criteria are as follows: (1) any mention that Christ's second coming was to consist of more than one phase, separated by an interval of years; (2) any mention that Christ was to remove the church from the earth before the tribulation period; (3) any reference to the resurrection of the just as being in two stages.[1]

The Shepherd of Hermas

The *Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 140 CE) speaks of the possibility of escaping the tribulation. This is a disputed statement concerning pretribulationism, but appears to be strong enough for consideration under Bell's second category:

> You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly (*Shepherd of Hermas* 1.4.2).

Pseudo-Ephraem On the Last Times

A clearer statement of the pretribulation rapture can be found in a sermon penned by Pseudo-Ephraem entitled *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World* or *Sermon on the End of the World*, dated between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. This sermon includes a concept very similar to the pretribulation rapture more than one thousand years before the

1. William E. Bell, *A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology* (PhD thesis, New York University, 1967), p. 26.

writings of John Nelson Darby. The sermon is considered to be 'one of the most interesting apocalyptic texts of the early Middle Ages'.[2] Concerning the timing of the rapture the sermon reads:

> We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, what is imminent or overhanging . . . Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that he may *draw us from* the confusion, which overwhelms all the world? . . . For all the saints and elect of God are gathered together *before the tribulation*, which is to come, and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins.[3]

Pseudo-Ephraem presents at least three important features found in modern pretribulationism: (1) there are two distinct comings: the return of Christ to rapture the saints, followed later by Christ's second advent to the earth; (2) a defined interval between the two comings, in this case three and one-half years; and (3) a clear statement that Christ will remove the church from the world before the tribulation.[4] The fact that Pseudo-Ephraem placed the rapture three and a half years before the tribulation is not an argument for a mid-tribulation rapture because it appears that for him the whole tribulation was only three and a half years in duration. In this context, it is worth remembering that Darby first believed that the rapture would occur three and a half years before the second coming.[5] Therefore, we can assuredly say that the pretribulation rapture position is not a recent view. It was held and preached possibly as early as 373 ce.

Brother Dolcino

In 1260 ce a man named Gerard Sagarello founded a group known as the Apostolic Brethren in northern Italy.[6] He founded this order after he was

2. Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 136.

3. Italics added. An English translation of the entire sermon can be found on the Internet at vwww.pre-trib.org/articles/view/on-last-times-antichrist-and-end-of-world-english.

4. Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, 'The Rapture and Pseudo-Ephraem: An Early Medieval Citation', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995), p. 12.

5. Jonathan David Burnham said, 'Until at least 1845 Darby taught that the rapture would occur three-and-a-half years before the second coming. He connected the rapture with the casting out of Satan from heaven in Revelation 12, an event he believed triggered the "great tribulation" period' (*The Controversial Relationship between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby* (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1999), p. 128 n. 126.

6. For more on Sagarello (Segarelli), Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren, see Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachi-*

turned down for membership in the Franciscans. At that time it was against church law to form any new ecclesiastical order, so the Apostolic Brethren were subjected to severe persecution. In 1300, Gerard was burned at the stake, and Dolcino took over leadership of the movement. Under his hand, the order grew and eventually numbered in the thousands. The study and teaching of end-time prophecy was of central importance to the Apostolic Brethren.

Dolcino died in 1307, and in 1316 an anonymous notary of the diocese of Vercelli in northern Italy wrote a brief treatise in Latin that set forth the deeds and beliefs of the Apostolic Brethren. This treatise was called *The History of Brother Dolcino*.[7] 'They would preach the immediate advent of Antichrist,' notes Marjorie Reeves, 'and when he appeared Dolcino and his followers would be removed to Paradise … When Antichrist was disposed of, they would descend again to convert all nations.'[8] Francis Gumerlock explains that Dolcino believed that

> within those three years Dolcino himself and his followers will preach the coming of the Antichrist. And that the Antichrist was coming into this world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; and after he had come, then *he [Dolcino] and his followers would be transferred into Paradise*, in which are Enoch and Elijah. And in this way they will be *preserved unharmed from the persecution of Antichrist.* And that then Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist. Then they would be killed by him or by his servants, and thus *Antichrist would reign for a long time*. But when the Antichrist is dead, Dolcino himself, who then would be the holy pope, and his preserved followers, will descend on the earth, and will preach the right faith of Christ to all, and will convert those who will be living then to the true faith of Jesus Christ.[9]

Several points in this statement are very similar to modern pretribulation theology: the Latin word *transferrentur*, 'they would be transferred', is the same word used by medieval Christians to describe the rapture of Enoch to heaven; the subjects of this rapture were to be Brother Dolcino and his followers. This was not a partial rapture theory because Brother Dolcino considered the Apostolic Brethren to be the true church in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, it also appears that the purpose of the rapture was to preserve the people from the persecution of the Antichrist; the text presents the 'transference' of believers to heaven and the 'descent'

mism (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 52, 70, 242-48, 318, 414-15, 487.

7. See also L. Mariotti, *A Historical Memoir of Fra Dolcino and his Times* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1853).

8. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, p. 246.

9. Francis Gumerlock, 'A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century', *Bibliotheca sacra* 159 (2002), pp. 354-55.

of believers from heaven as two separate events; and the text also shows that quite a long gap of time must intervene between the rapture of the saints to heaven and the return of the saints from heaven.[10]

The ancient witnesses presented thus far are enough to show that the pretribulation view is not a recent invention. But, in addition, classics scholar Francis Gumerlock has claimed that he has three file drawers full of ancient antecedents to the pretribulation rapture, mainly from the Middle Ages, which he is working through and hopes to publish in a few years.[11]

The Post-Reformation Church

It has been claimed that some Puritans separated the rapture from the second coming. Increase Mather, for example, taught 'that the saints would "*be caught up into the Air*" beforehand, thereby escaping the final conflagration—an early formulation of the Rapture doctrine more fully elaborated in the nineteenth century'.[12] Whatever these men were saying, it is clear that the application of a more consistent, literal hermeneutic was leading to a distinction between the rapture and the second coming as separate events.

Others began to speak of the rapture. Paul Benware notes:

> Peter Jurieu in his book *Approaching Deliverance of the Church* (1687) taught that Christ would come in the air to rapture the saints and return to heaven before the battle of Armageddon. He spoke of a secret Rapture prior to His coming in glory and judgment at Armageddon. Philip Doddridge's commentary on the New Testament (1738) and John Gill's commentary on the New Testament (1748) both use the term *rapture* and speak of it as imminent. It is clear that these men believed that this coming will precede Christ's descent to the earth and the time of judgment. The purpose was to preserve believers from the time of judgment. James Macknight (1763) and Thomas Scott (1792) taught that the righteous will be carried to heaven, where they will be secure until the time of judgment is over.[13]

Thomas Collier in 1674 makes reference to an apparent pretribulation rapture; and, while he rejects the view, he indicates his awareness that such a view was being taught in the late seventeenth century.[14] There is also the

10. Gumerlock, 'A Rapture Citation', pp. 356-59.

11. Noted in Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *Breaking the Apocalypse Code: Setting the Record Straight about the End Times* (Costa Mesa, CA: Word for Today, 2007), p. 31.

12. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 75.

13. Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 197-98.

14. Thomas Collier, *The Body of Divinity, or, a Confession of Faith, Being the Substance of Christianity* (London, 1674), pp. 585-86.

interesting case of John Asgill, who wrote the following book in 1700: *An argument proving, that according to the covenant of Eternal Life revealed in the Scriptures, Man may be translated from hence into that Eternal Life, without passing through Death, although the Human Nature of Christ himself could not be thus translated till he had passed through Death*. As a result of writing this book, Asgill was removed from the Irish parliament in 1703 and then from the English parliament in 1707. 'His book had been examined and pronounced blasphemous, and had been burnt by order of the House without his having been heard in its defense.'[15] Asgill spent the last thirty years of his life in prison because of his book on the rapture.

Morgan Edwards

One of the clearest references to a pretribulation rapture before the time of Darby came from a Baptist named Morgan Edwards, the founder of Brown University. Edwards saw a distinct rapture three and a half years before the start of the millennium. The teaching of Edwards, who wrote about his pretribulation beliefs in 1742 and published them in 1788, is significant. He argued that 'the *distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years*':

> I say, *somewhat more—,* because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's 'appearing in the air' (I Thessalonians 4:17); and this will be about three years and a half before the *millennium,* as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many 'mansions in the father's house' (John 14:2), and disappear during the foresaid period of time. The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for 'now the time is come that judgment must begin', and that will be 'at the house of God' (I Peter 4:17).[16]

Notice that Edwards makes three key points that are consistent with the pretribulation view. First, he clearly separates the rapture from the second coming by three and a half years. Second, he uses the same verses as modern pretribulational theologians (1 Thess. 4.17 and Jn 14.2) to describe the rapture and support his view. Third, he believed the judgment seat of Christ (rewarding) for believers will occur in heaven while the tribulation is raging on earth. The only significant difference between modern pretribulation theology and the theology of Edwards is the time interval of three and a half years between

15. William Bramley-Moore, *The Church's Forgotten Hope or, Scriptural Studies on the Translation of the Saints* (Glasgow: Hobbs & Co., 1905), p. 322.

16. Morgan Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties* (Philadelphia: Self-published, 1788), p. 7. This entire book is available on the Internet at http://www.pre-trib.org/articles. The spelling of all quotations from Edwards has been modernized.

the rapture and the second coming, instead of seven. However, this does not mean that Edwards was a mid-tribulation theologian, since it appears that he believed the total length of the tribulation was three and a half years.

A French Connection?

Timothy C.F. Stunt has recently made the case that two French theologians also taught a two-stage coming of the Lord. These Roman Catholic thinkers, Bernard Lambert (1738–1813) and Jean Agier (1748–1823), are said by Stunt to have taught a pretribulation rapture as early as the late 1700s. Stunt makes the case that Darby could have been influenced by these teachings before the Irvingite movement even formed. 'While the Jesuit [Lacunza] sees Christ's return as one simple event at the beginning of the millennium,' notes Stunt, 'Lambert expects the event to be in two stages and foresees an intermediate coming when Christ first gathers his saints.' 'Agier also wrote of an intermediate coming in his earlier commentary on the Psalms (1809), he appears to have abandoned the idea after studying Lacunza's work.'[17] Crawford Gribben supports Stunt's claim concerning the French connection. 'What is certain, therefore,' he notes, 'is that the idea of a two-stage second coming was circulating some time before Darby heard Margaret Macdonald's ecstatic utterance in autumn 1830.'[18]

It is therefore simply not historically accurate to say that the pretribulation rapture is a recent invention, dating from around 1830. Norman Geisler says, 'heresies can be early, even in apostolic times (*cf.* 1 Timothy 4 and 1 John 4), and (re)discovery of some truths can be later (like pretrib). The final question is not whether the early Fathers held it but whether the New Testament taught it.'[19] A person may choose to reject the pretribulation rapture position on other grounds, but no rejection of this view should be based on the mistaken notion that it never appeared in history until around 1830.

Darby and the Rapture

Did key elements of the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture originate with either Edward Irving (1792–1834) or the broader Irvingite movement and were they then conveyed to Darby and the Brethren? This is the general

17. Timothy C.F. Stunt, 'Influences in the Early Development of J.N. Darby', in Crawford Gribben and Timothy C.F. Stunt (eds.), *Prisoners of Hope: Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1880* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 64.

18. Crawford Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2006), p. 36.

19. Norman L. Geisler, 'Review of Hank Hanegraaff's *The Apocalypse Code*,' http://www.normangeisler.net/ReviewApocalypseCode.html.

thesis put forth in dozens of books and articles for many years. However, I do not believe that there is merit to such a position since Irving and his movement never taught pretribulation theology and because Irving and Darby came from very different eschatological systems. Dave MacPherson is convinced 'that the popular Pre-Trib Rapture teaching of today was really instigated by a teenager in Scotland who lived in the early 1800's', who was connected with the broader Irvingite movement.[20] 'If Christians had known [this] all along', bemoans MacPherson, 'the state of Christianity could have been vastly different today.'[21] He thinks this ignorance has been due not merely to historical oversight, but rather to a well-orchestrated 'cover-up' carefully managed by clever pretribulation leaders.[22] MacPherson complains: 'during the first 18 centuries of the Christian era, believers were never "Rapture separators"; they never separated the minor Rapture aspect of the Second Coming of Christ from the Second Coming itself'.[23]

In 1983 MacPherson declared, 'fifteen years ago I knew nothing about Pre-Trib beginnings'.[24] He began his quest by writing to his father and received an answer that indicated a lack of consensus among scholars, 'so I decided to do some research on my own'.[25] MacPherson's investigation gathered steam when he found a rare book in 1971 by Robert Norton, *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets; In the Catholic Apostolic Church* (1861). 'The important part in Norton's book', claimed MacPherson, 'is a personal revelation that Margaret Macdonald had in the spring of 1830.'[26] MacPherson uses this finding to project the notion that the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture is of demonic origin.

Since the 1970s in America, it has become commonplace for writers of articles and books against pretribulationism to bring up some form of the argument that Darby got key elements of his view from an Irvingite source. Marvin Rosenthal is typical of this approach, writing that the pretribulation rapture was of Satanic origin and unheard of before 1830. 'To thwart the Lord's warning to His children, in 1830', contends Rosenthal, 'Satan, the

20. Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983), p. 7.

21. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 180.

22. The cover-up emphasis is greatly stressed in MacPherson's *The Incredible Cover Up* (Medford, OR: Omega Publications, 1975). Jim McKeever's foreword compares the pretribulation cover-up to the Watergate cover-up, which dominated political news in America in the 1970s. MacPherson even alleges that Dallas Seminary groomed and commissioned Hal Lindsey for the purpose of popularizing the pretribulation rapture for the Jesus movement in the early 1970s (pp. 131-32).

23. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 15.

24. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 47.

25. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 47.

26. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 47.

"father of lies", gave to a fifteen-year-old girl named Margaret McDonald a lengthy vision.'[27] Similar examples could be multiplied.

Mark Patterson claims Irvingite eschatology is an antecedent source to Darby and pretribulationism.[28] 'Irving's writings in *The Morning Watch* reveal that he was, above and before anything else, a pretribulational-premillennial theologian', declares Patterson. 'This cannot be overstated. From his meeting with Hately Frere in 1825 until his death in December 1834, Irving's every thought and writing was shaped under the aegis of his imminent Adventism and premillennial convictions.'[29] Initially, Patterson denies any intention to connect dispensationalism with Irving's teaching:

> It is not my purpose here to correlate or equate Albury's premillennialism with contemporary dispensationalism or to prove the source of the latter is to be found in the former. My intention is simply to demonstrate that Albury's hermeneutic led to a specific systematic theology that I believe is best described as 'nascent dispensationalism'. The precise relationship between Albury's theology and that which will follow in John Nelson Darby, the Plymouth Brethren, and especially 20th century dispensationalism, while remarkable, lie beyond the purview of this thesis.[30]

Later, however, he makes the broad claim: 'In the end, and at the very least, Irving must be considered the paladin of pre-tribulational pre-millennialism and the chief architect of its cardinal formulas.'[31]

MacPherson's Claims

Irvingite Robert Norton included a handwritten account of Margaret Macdonald's 'prophecy',[32] which MacPherson says was the fountainhead for

27. Marvin J. Rosenthal, 'Is the Church in Matthew Chapter 24?', *Zion's Fire* (November–December 1994), p. 10.

28. Mark Rayburn Patterson, *Designing the Last Days: Edward Irving, The Albury Circle, and the Theology of The Morning Watch* (PhD thesis, King's College, London, 2001).

29. Patterson, *Designing the Last Days,* pp. 228-29.

30. Patterson, *Designing the Last Days,* p. 136.

31. Mark A. Patterson and Andrew Walker, '"Our Unspeakable Comfort": Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture', in Stephen Hunt (ed.), *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 115. Walker says, 'The hunch that Irving, rather than Darby, has a greater claim to be the father of modern Dispensationalism stems from my research on Irving . . . The credit for finding the evidence that at the very least Irving and the Albury circle predate Darby's mature view on the pre-tribulation Rapture belongs entirely to Mark Patterson' (p. 98 n. 1).

32. Macdonald's revelation was first published in a book by physician Robert Norton, who later married Margaret, *Memoirs of James and George Macdonald, of Port*

Darby's development of the pretribulational rapture doctrine.[33] MacPherson does not say that Macdonald included a clear statement of the pretribulational rapture, but that she 'separated the Rapture from the Second Coming before anyone else did'.[34] According to MacPherson, Darby pilfered this two-stage teaching from Macdonald and then developed it systematically, skillfully passing it off as the fruit of his personal Bible study.

Macdonald's so-called revelation that MacPherson cites to make his case revolves around two key phrases. 'Margaret dramatically separated the *sign* of the Son of man from the *coming* of the Son of man,'[35] declares MacPherson, based on her phrase, 'now look out for the sign of the Son of man'.[36] MacPherson argues that 'she equated the *sign* with the Rapture—a Rapture that would occur *before* the revealing of Antichrist'.[37] He bases this on her statement, 'I saw it was just the Lord himself descending from Heaven with a shout, just the glorified man, even Jesus.'[38]

MacPherson makes two major errors in his attempt to argue that Macdonald originated the basis for the pretribulation rapture. First, it is highly doubtful that the Macdonald 'prophecy' refers to a two-stage coming of Christ, as MacPherson contends. Therefore it would be impossible for this source to be the basis for a new idea if it did not contain those elements. Stunt tells us 'that the text of Margaret Macdonald's prophecy (published by Robert Norton, in 1840) is so very confused that it hardly provides a basis for constructing a coherent eschatology and there is no evidence that this particular prophecy was characteristic of all her utterances'.[39] MacPherson has misinterpreted Macdonald's words by equating her use of 'sign' with a rapture. Rather, she is saying that only those who are spiritual will see the secret *sign* of the Son of Man that will precede the single, post-tribulation second coming of Christ. In other words, only those who have the light of

Glasgow (London: John F. Shaw, 1840), pp. 171-76. Norton published the account again in *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets: In the Catholic Apostolic Church* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1861), pp. 15-18. The two versions have some significant differences. Norton's *Memoirs* version is longer than the later *Restoration* version. The earlier version has at least 19 instances where the account adds a significant amount of words not found in the more economical later edition of Margaret Macdonald's utterance. Dave MacPherson records a compilation of both versions in *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1994), pp. 249-52.

33. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* pp. 50-57.
34. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 121.
35. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 128.
36. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 125.
37. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 129.
38. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax,* p. 126.
39. Timothy C.F. Stunt, 'The Tribulation of Controversy: A Review Article', *Brethren Archivists and Historians Network Review* 2.2 (2003), p. 93.

the Holy Spirit within them will know when the second coming will take place because this spiritual enlightenment will enable them to have the spiritual perception to see the secret sign (not the secret rapture). These are her own words as recorded by Norton:

> all must, as Stephen was, be filled with the Holy Ghost, that they might look up, and see the brightness of the Father's glory. I saw the error to be, that men think that it will be something seen by the natural eye; but 'tis spiritual discernment that is needed, the eye of God in his people . . . Only those who have the light of God within them will see the sign of his Appearance. No need to follow them who say, see here, or see there, for his day shall be as the lightning to those in whom the living Christ is. 'Tis Christ in us that will lift us up—he is the light—'tis only those that are alive in him that will be caught up to meet him in the air. I saw that we must be in the Spirit, that we might see spiritual things. John was in the Spirit, when he saw a throne set in Heaven . . . it is not knowledge *about* God that it contains, but it is in entering into God— . . . I felt that those who were filled with the Spirit could see spiritual things, and feel walking in the midst of them, while those who had not the Spirit could see nothing.[40]

Macdonald is clearly concerned with spiritual insight for several reasons. First, Stephen *saw* into heaven; he was not raptured or taken to heaven. Second, the sign will be seen only by the spiritually enlightened. It will not be a natural or physical sign, but one perceived by 'spiritual discernment'. Third, she is discussing 'the sign of his appearance', not his actual appearance. Fourth, once a person has been so enlightened, he will not need direction from others. He will be guided directly by 'the living Christ'. Finally, the emphasis is on seeing: 'John was in the Spirit, when he *saw'*, 'those who were filled with the Spirit could *see*'. D.H. Kromminga observes that Macdonald's 'prophecies made it plain that the return of the Lord depended upon the proper spiritual preparation of His Church'.[41]

John Bray agrees that Macdonald was teaching a single coming, not a two-stage event. 'The only thing new in her revelation itself seems to be that of just Spirit-filled Christians being caught up at the second coming of Christ following heavy trials and tribulation by the Antichrist.'[42] In other words Macdonald seems to have been teaching a post-tribulation and partial rapture. Bray further explains:

40. Norton, *Memoirs*, pp. 172-77 (emphasis in original).

41. D.H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church: Studies in the History of Christian Chiliasm* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1945), p. 250.

42. John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, n.d.), pp. 21-22. It is interesting to note that Bray argues that Emmanuel Lacunza, a Jesuit priest from Chile, writing under the assumed name of Rabbi Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, as a converted Jew, came up with a two-stage coming in the 1790s.

> It seems to me that Margaret MacDonald was saying that Christians WILL face the temptation of the false Christ (antichrist) and be in '*an awfully dangerous situation*', and that only the Spirit IN US will enable us to be kept from being deceived; and that as the Spirit works, so will the antichrist; but the pouring out of the Spirit will '*fit us to enter into the marriage supper of the Lamb'*, and those filled with the Spirit would be taken while the others would be left . . . Margaret MacDonald did teach a partial rapture, of course, but this did not necessarily mean that the teaching included a tribulation period FOLLOWING THAT for the other Christians . . . It would not be right to take for granted that Margaret MacDonald believed in a tribulation period following the appearing of Christ unless she had definitely said so.[43]

Another point MacPherson makes to support his opinion is that 'Macdonald was the first person to teach a coming of Christ that would precede the days of Antichrist'.[44] This would mean, according to MacPherson, that Macdonald had to be teaching a two-stage coming. However, it is highly questionable, as already noted, that Macdonald was referring to the rapture, as MacPherson insists. Also Macdonald was still a historicist; she believed the church was already in the tribulation and had been for hundreds of years. Therefore the Antichrist was soon to be revealed, but before the second coming. She said believers need spiritual sight so they will not be deceived. Otherwise, why would believers, including herself, need to be filled with the Spirit to escape the deception that will accompany 'the fiery trial which is to try us', associated with the Antichrist's arrival? Further, she certainly includes herself as one who needs this special ministry of the Holy Spirit, as can be seen from this passage from her 'revelation':

> now shall the awful sight of a false Christ be seen on this earth, and nothing but the living Christ in us can detect this awful attempt of the enemy to deceive . . . The Spirit must and will be poured out on the church, that she may be purified and filled with God . . . There will be outward trial too, but 'tis principally temptation. It is brought on by the outpouring of the Spirit, and will just increase in proportion as the Spirit is poured out. The trial of the Church is from the Antichrist. It is by being filled with the Spirit that we shall be kept. I frequently said, Oh be filled with the Spirit—have the light of God in you, that you may detect Satan—be full of eyes within—be clay in the hands of the potter—submit to be filled, filled with God . . . This is what we are at present made to pray much for, that speedily we may all be made ready to meet our Lord in the air—and it will be. Jesus wants his bride. His desire is toward us.[45]

43. Bray, *Origin*, pp. 20-21 (emphasis in original).
44. MacPherson, *Incredible Cover-Up*, pp. 155-56.
45. Norton, *Memoirs*, pp. 174-76.

Charles Ryrie also notes a further misunderstanding of Macdonald's 'prophecy':

> She saw the church ('us') being purged by Antichrist. MacPherson reads this as meaning the church will be raptured before Antichrist, ignoring the 'us'. In reality, she saw the church enduring Antichrist's persecution of the Tribulation days.[46]

Macdonald, then, was a post-tribulationist. She believed the church would go through the tribulation. This is hardly the beginnings of pretribulation theology. John Walvoord observes that

> readers of MacPherson's *Incredible Cover-Up* will undoubtedly be impressed by the many long quotations, most of which are only window dressing for what he is trying to prove. When it gets down to the point of proving that either MacDonald or Irving was pretribulationist, the evidence gets very muddy. The quotations MacPherson cites do not support his conclusions.[47]

Stunt also notes that

> none of the contemporary witnesses of the Clydeside utterance made any mention of Margaret Macdonald proclaiming a new doctrine. In fact it is only with some difficulty that one can identify what MacPherson calls her 'pretribulationist' teaching in the transcript of 1840, and when in 1861 Norton quoted from her prophecy he omitted the passage which referred to 'the fiery trial' which 'will be for the purging and purifying of the real members of the body of Jesus'—a passage which clearly assumes that Christians will go through the tribulation.[48]

Second, in spite of MacPherson's great amount of research and writing he has yet to produce hard evidence that Darby was influenced by Macdonald's utterances, regardless of what they meant. MacPherson only assumes the connection. Throughout MacPherson's writings, he keeps presenting information about issues, developments and beliefs from Great Britain during the early 1800s, apparently thinking that he is adding proof for his thesis that 'the popular Pre-Trib Rapture teaching of today was really instigated by a teenager in Scotland who lived in the early 1800's'.[49] Much of the information is helpful and interesting, but does not provide actual evidence for his thesis. Even if Darby developed the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture after Macdonald's utterance, specific proof would be needed to make a link

46. Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know about the Rapture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), p. 71.

47. John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 44.

48. Stunt, 'The Tribulation of Controversy', p. 93.

49. MacPherson, *Great Rapture Hoax*, p. 7.

between Macdonald and Darby. Instead MacPherson offers only speculative guesses about how Darby used his training for the law profession to manipulate Christians by hiding the supposed true origins of his teaching on the rapture.

F.F. Bruce says, 'Where did he [Darby] get it? The reviewer's answer would be that it was in the air in the 1820s and 1830s among eager students of unfulfilled prophecy . . . direct dependence by Darby on Margaret Macdonald is unlikely.'[50] Stunt draws a similar conclusion when he says,

> When considering the new eschatological framework which was taking shape around 1830, my own suspicion is that a significant element in its origin is to be found in the profound anxiety and bewilderment induced by a series of what seemed to be cataclysmic or even apocalyptic events. Catholic emancipation, revolutions on the continent of Europe, the death of George IV and two general elections in close succession, rural and urban violence (in which, for example, the Bishop of Bristol's palace was burnt down), the ongoing agitation for reform, as well as the scourge of cholera—these are some of the more obvious factors which we have to consider when asking why many people felt that they had reached a watershed in prophetic development and why the possibility of deliverance from tribulation seemed so attractive.[51]

Roy Huebner considers MacPherson's charges as 'using slander that J.N. Darby took the [truth of the] pretribulation rapture from those very opposing, demon-inspired utterances'.[52] He concludes that MacPherson

> did not profit by reading the utterances allegedly by Miss M. M. Instead of apprehending the plain import of her statements, as given by R. Norton, which has some affinity to the post-tribulation scheme and no real resemblance to the pretribulation rapture and dispensational truth, he has read into it what he appears so anxious to find.[53]

Columba Flegg notes that the Brethren teaching on the rapture and the present invisible and spiritual nature of the church 'were in sharp contrast to Catholic Apostolic teaching . . . attempts to see any direct influence of one upon the other seem unlikely to succeed . . . Several writers [referring specifically to MacPherson] have attempted to trace Darby's secret rapture

50. F. F. Bruce, review of *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* in *Evangelical Quarterly* 47 (1975), p. 58.

51. Stunt, 'The Tribulation of Controversy', pp. 96-97. He adds, 'This inquiry into the emotional and spiritual mind-set of men and women who lived 160 years ago requires sympathetic understanding rather than the polemics of judgment. In this respect, the help given by Mr. MacPherson's book is minimal' (p. 97).

52. R. A. Huebner, *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered* (Millington, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1976), p. 13.

53. Huebner, *Truth of Pre-Tribulation Rapture*, p. 67.

theory to a prophetic statement associated with Irving, but their arguments do not stand up to serious criticism.'[54]

It seems, then, most likely that Margaret Macdonald did not teach *any* of the features of a pretribulation rapture theology as MacPherson suggests, and therefore she could not have been a source for the origin of that doctrine. The most likely origin of modern pretribulationism is Darby's study of the Bible and meditation. Walvoord concludes,

> Any careful student of Darby soon discovers that he did not get his eschatological views from men, but rather from his doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, a concept no one claims was revealed supernaturally to Irving or Macdonald. Darby's views undoubtedly were gradually formed, but they were theologically and biblically based rather than derived from Irving's pre-Pentecostal group.[55]

Huebner's Likely Suggestion

Roy Huebner argues that Darby first began to believe in the pretribulation rapture and develop his dispensational thinking while convalescing from a riding accident during December 1826 and January 1827 (more likely December 1827 and January 1828).[56] If this is true, Darby would have had a head start on any who would have supposedly influenced his thought, making it chronologically impossible for any of the 'influence' theories to have credibility. Huebner demonstrates that Darby's understanding of the pretribulation rapture was the product of the development of his personal interactive thought with the text of Scripture as he and his associates have long contended.

Darby's pretribulation and dispensational thinking, says Huebner, was developed from the following factors. First, 'he saw from Isaiah 32 that there was a different dispensation coming . . . that *Israel and the Church were distinct*'.[57] Second, 'during his convalescence JND learned that *he ought daily to expect his Lord's return*'.[58] Third, 'in 1827 JND understood

54. Columba Graham Flegg, *'Gathered under Apostles': A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 436.

55. Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, p. 47.

56. R.A. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby: Precious Truths Revived and Defended*. I. *Revival of Truth 1826–1845* (Jackson, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 2nd edn, 2004), pp. 7-18. Stunt's research supports an adjusted date for Darby's convalescence, more likely December 1827 till January 1828. See Timothy C.F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815–35* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), p. 171.

57. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby*, p. 10 (emphasis in original).

58. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby*, p. 12 (emphasis in original).

the fall of the church . . . "the ruin of the Church"'.[59] Fourth, by 1827 Darby also was beginning to see a gap of time between the rapture and the second coming.[60] Fifth, Darby himself said in 1857 that he first started understanding things relating to the pretribulation rapture 'thirty years ago'. And 'with that fixed point of reference, Jan. 31, 1827', Huebner argues, we can see that Darby 'had already understood those truths upon which the pre-tribulation rapture, i.e., the pre-Revelation 4 rapture, hinges'.[61] Therefore, when reading Darby's earliest published essay on biblical prophecy (1829), it is clear that while it still has elements of historicism, it also reflects the fact that for Darby, the rapture was to be the church's focus and hope.[62] Even in this earliest of essays, Darby expounds upon the rapture as the church's hope.[63] It is not unusual for inconsistencies to arise in one's thought when transitioning from one system (historicism) to another (futurism).

Irvingite Influences?

Mark Patterson claims that 'Irving must be considered the paladin of pretribulational premillennialism and the chief architect of its cardinal formulas'.[64] He adds the following:

> In addition to the *a priori* dismissal of Irving, there exist two fundamental errors common among those who uncritically assume Darby to be the source of the pre-tribulation Rapture. First, few acknowledge the degree to which Darby's theology reflects the very millenarian tradition in which he was immersed. The core principles of his theology—literalistic hermeneutic, apostasy in the Church, the restoration of the Jews to their homeland, details of Christ's coming, and his belief that biblical prophecy spoke uniquely to his day—were concepts held, discussed and propagated by a large body of prophecy students. Second, the development of Darby's own theology, in spite of how he remembers it, was from 1827 to even as late as 1843 in a largely formative stage.[65]

59. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby*, p. 11.
60. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby*, p. 16.
61. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby*, p. 16.
62. J.N. Darby, 'Reflections upon the Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in It', in *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, II (Winschoten, Netherlands: H.L. Heijkoop, repr. 1971), pp. 1-31.
63. Darby, 'Reflections upon the Prophetic Inquiry,' pp. 16-18, 25, 30.
64. Mark A. Patterson and Andrew Walker, '"Our Unspeakable Comfort": Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture', in Stephen Hunt (ed.), *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 115.
65. Patterson and Walker, 'Our Unspeakable Comfort', pp. 114-15.

There are a number of problems created when one sees too great a similarity between Irvingite historicism and Brethren futurism. Patterson appears to make such errors.

The 'core principles' of Darby's theology, as expressed by Patterson, are too broad and general. Look at this list of Darby's core principles, and compare them to those of Irving and his followers. First, consider the 'literalistic hermeneutic'. Patterson himself describes Irving and the Albury hermeneutic as not just literal since that 'tells only half the story'. Instead, he argues, Irving is best understood as following a 'literal-typological methodology'.[66] This is typical of the quasi literalism of historicism. By contrast, Darby was a consistent literalist, and did not attempt to make days into years or find historical fulfillment of seal, trumpet or bowl judgments in the church's past history, instead seeing these judgments as future literal events. Also, Irving and Albury believed many of the passages that spoke of events in a future Jewish tribulation were unfolding before their eyes. For example, Babylon was seen as a symbol of the apostate church in their own day. David Bebbington distinguishes between the historicist hermeneutic and a futurist form of literalism:

> Historicists found it hard to be thoroughgoing advocates of literal interpretation. There was too great a gulf between the detail of biblical images and their alleged historical fulfillment to make any such claim possible. Futurists did not suffer from this handicap. Consequently, they shouted louder for literalism—and, among the futurists, the dispensationalists shouted loudest of all. J.N. Darby was contending as early as 1829 that prophecy relating to the Jews would be fulfilled literally. As his thought developed during the 1830s, this principle of interpretation became the lynchpin of his system. Because Darby's opinions were most wedded to literalism, his distinctive scheme enjoyed the advantage of taking what seemed the most rigorist view of scripture.[67]

Thus, Irving and Albury do not have a common hermeneutic with Darby as Patterson contends.

No doubt both held the apostasy of the church, but even this similarity reflects a great chasm of differences between the Albury historicist view and that of the futurist. The Albury view of apostasy is tied to their historicist view of Revelation. It taught that the church had just finished the 1,260 days, which are really 1,260 years that ended with the defeat of Antichrist (i.e. Roman Catholicism) in 1789 in the French Revolution. These events forewarned the impending rise of the whore of Babylon (Revela-

66. Patterson, *Designing the Last Days,* p. 76. See also p. 62.

67. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 89.

tion 17–18), which is also a symbol of the apostate church.[68] On the other hand, Darby, as a futurist, held that the apostasy of the church was predicted primarily in the New Testament epistles and would increasingly characterize the end of the current church age.[69] His view is very different from the historicist notion, which has a completely different role for the apostasy. Albury's historicism saw apostasy as a harbinger of the second coming of Christ to the earth, while Darby saw the ruin of the church as a characteristic that precedes an imminent rapture of the church followed by literal events of the seven-year tribulation.

Both approaches do see a restoration of the Jews to their homeland, but as with the previous two issues, there are significant differences. Darby believed that the Jews would return to their land in unbelief and then be converted during the seven-year tribulation. He says, 'At the end of the age the same fact will be reproduced: the Jews—returned to their own land, though without being converted—will find themselves in connection with the fourth beast.'[70] However, Irving believed that concurrent with this present age, 'when the Lord shall have finished the taking of witness against the Gentiles … [he] will turn his Holy Spirit unto his ancient people the Jews'.[71] Shortly after that time, Christ will return.[72]

The last two items mentioned by Patterson are 'details of Christ's coming, and his belief that biblical prophecy spoke uniquely to his day'. These are so broad that they could be said to characterize just about any evangelical view of eschatology, whether amillennial, premillennial or postmillennial, whether preterist, historicist, futurist or idealist. Every approach has details of Christ's coming, and certainly every system believes that its view speaks uniquely to its day. More important are the differences concerning

68. See Edward Irving, 'Preliminary Discourse by the Translator', in Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* (London: L.B. Seeley & Son, 1827), p. xxxiii.

69. See the following passages relating to church age apostasy: Rom 1.18-32; 10; 16.17-18; 2 Cor. 11.1-15; 13.5; Gal. 1.6-9; 5.1-12; Phil. 3.2, 18-19; Col. 2.4-23; 1 Tim. 1.3-7; 4.1-3; 6.3-5; 2 Tim. 2.11-26; 3.1-9; 4.15; Tit. 1.10-16; Heb. 2.1-4; 3.7-4.13; 5.12-6.12; 10.26-31; 12.14-17; 1 Pet. 3.19-20; 2 Pet. 2.1-22; 3.3-10; 1 Jn 2.18-23; 3.4-12; 4.1-6; 2 Jn 9; Jude 3-23. On Darby's view of the ruin of the church, see *Letters of J.N. Darby*, III, pp. 297-305, for his explanation of how he came to his view. See the following essays for expositions of his view: *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, I, pp. 117-23, 138-55, 169, 198, 250; IV, pp. 10-36; XIV, pp. 88-90, 272-300; XVI, pp. 384; XX, pp. 189, 192; XXI, pp. 209.

70. John Nelson Darby, *The Hopes of the Church of God, in Connection with the Destiny of the Jews and the Nations as Revealed in Prophecy* (1840), *Collected Writings,* II (Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, repr. 1971), p. 324.

71. Irving, 'Preliminary Discourse', p. v.

72. Irving, 'Preliminary Discourse', p. vi.

the details of Christ's coming as seen by the different systems, for these differences would arise in relation to how each prophetic view spoke uniquely to its day. Thus, it is less than compelling to see how Irving and Albury's eschatology is the forerunner to Darby, pretribulationism and dispensationalism. Instead, it is Irving and Albury that Darby and the new school of futurism was reacting against. Concerning Patterson's second point, I agree that it was a process of about fifteen years in which Darby developed a mature system; however, the initial idea of something like a pretribulation rapture would come in an instant, even though it might take a decade and a half to work out the implications and settle one's conscience. Just such a scenario appears to fit what we know of Darby. Further, there is little in Darby's intellectual legacy that would suggest that he was incapable of producing a unique theology.

Irvingite Historicism

If one conducts an extensive examination of Irving and Irvingite doctrine, one will see that they were still overwhelmingly historicist, while Darby and the Brethren had become clear futurists.[73] Flegg, an Irvingite scholar who grew up within the church, notes that the differences between the two movements are far reaching:

> The later Powerscourt Conferences were dominated by the new sect. The Brethren took a futurist view of the Apocalypse, attacking particularly the interpretation of prophetic 'days' as 'years', so important for all historicists, including the Catholic Apostolics . . . It was the adoption of this futurist eschatology by a *body* of Christians which gave it the strength to become a serious rival to the alternative historicist eschatology of the Catholic Apostolics and others. Darby introduced the concept of a *secret* rapture to take place 'at any moment', a belief which subsequently became one of the chief hallmarks of Brethren eschatology. He also taught that the 'true' Church was invisible and spiritual. Both these ideas were in sharp contrast to Catholic Apostolic teaching, and were eventually to lead to schism among the Brethren. There were thus very significant differences between the two eschatologies, and attempts to see any direct influence of one upon the other seem unlikely to succeed—they had a number of common *roots*, but are much more notable for their points of disagreement. Several writers have attempted to trace Darby's secret rapture theory to a prophetic statement associated with Irving, but their arguments do not stand up to serious criticism.[74]

73. For an excellent overview and relatively brief presentation of Irving's eschatology by Irving himself, see his 'Preliminary Discourse', pp. i-cxciv.

74. Flegg, *'Gathered under Apostles',* p. 436 (emphasis original). Flegg's chapter on Catholic Apostolic eschatology is extensive (249 pages), more than half the volume of the book.

When reading the full message of Irvingite eschatology it is clear that they were still very much locked into the historicist system that views the entire church age as the tribulation. After all, the major point in Irving's eschatology was that Babylon (false Christianity) was about to be destroyed and then the second coming would occur. This was a classic historicist exposition. He also taught that the second coming was synonymous with the rapture.[75] Irving believed that it was the single return of the Lord that was getting near. This is hardly pretribulational since Irving believed that the tribulation began at least 1,500 years earlier and he did not teach a separate rapture, followed by the tribulation, culminating in the second coming. Ernest Sandeen tells us:

> Darby's view of the premillennial advent contrasted with that held by the historicist millenarian school in two ways. First, Darby taught that the second advent would be secret, an event sensible only to those who participated in it . . . There were, in effect, two 'second comings' in Darby's eschatology. The church is first taken from the earth secretly and then, at a later time, Christ returns in a public second advent as described in Matthew 24 . . .

Second, Darby taught that the secret rapture could occur at any moment. In fact, the secret rapture is also often referred to as the doctrine of the any-moment coming. Unlike the historicist millenarians, Darby taught that the prophetic timetable had been interrupted at the founding of the church and that the unfulfilled biblical prophecies must all wait upon the rapture of the church. Darby avoided the pitfalls both of attempting to predict a time for Christ's second advent and of trying to make sense out of the contemporary alarms of European politics with the Revelation as the guidebook.[76]

The Irvingite View of the Rapture

Even though Irving and his Albury disciples spoke often about the translation of saints to heaven, they clearly did not hold to any form of a pretribulation rapture. Flegg's definitive work on the Catholic Apostolic Church makes it clear that 'the translation may not be simply a single event at the time of the first resurrection, but spread over a short period of time prior to it'.[77] This does not sound like pretribulationism! Flegg further explains what is meant:

75. Edward Irving, 'Signs of the Times in the Church,' *The Morning Watch* 2 (1830), p. 156.

76. Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 62-64.

77. Flegg, *'Gathered under Apostles',* p. 434.

> This period of great tribulation was inevitable, but would be escaped by an elect body (those referred to by St. Paul in I Thess. 4:16–17) who would be resurrected by Christ or translated (caught up in the clouds) through the operation of the Holy Spirit at the beginning (morning) of the Second Advent. This was the *first resurrection*—the gathering of the 'first-fruits', the resurrection from/out of the dead of which the New Testament spoke and which was indicated by the woman in travail (Apoc. 12:1–2). The Old Testament 'saints' would participate in it, and both the resurrected and the translated would receive their resurrection bodies and remain standing with Christ upon Mount Zion.[78]

We see from the above notation that the Irvingite rapture is part of the second coming. Thus, their doctrine teaches a brief interval between the rapture and the second advent, not a rapture followed by a multiyear tribulation and then a new event, the second coming. Patterson cites 74 examples of what he calls a 'pretribulational rapture'.[79]These references are, however, better viewed as references to the second coming, as described above, including a translation of believers. This is not pretribulation theology as taught by Darby, the Brethren or any form of contemporary dispensationalism.

Conclusion

While Irving and the Albury group had a few eschatological ideas that were unique, a belief in the pretribulation rapture was not one of them. It is impossible for one to follow the historicist approach and also believe that the rapture will occur before the tribulation, since historicists believe that the tribulation began hundreds of years ago. It is also true that Irvingites spoke of a soon coming of Christ to translate believers to heaven, but this view was part of their second coming belief that they could have derived from Manuel Lacunza's writings, which were not the product of futurism at that point.[80] Such a view has elements similar to those seen in Robert Gundry's version of post-tribulationism. Gundry holds that there will be a rapture or catching up to meet the Lord in the air 'to form a welcoming party that will escort the Lord on the last leg of his descent to earth'.[81]

On the other hand, Darby most likely thought of and then developed the idea of pretribulationism in the process of shifting to futurism. Paul Wilkinson notes that 'Darby found an exegetical basis in Scripture for his doctrine of a pretribulation rapture. As a careful student of the Bible, Darby

78. Flegg, *'Gathered under Apostles',* p. 425.

79. Patterson, *Designing the Last Days,* p. 165 n. 87.

80. Manuel Lacunza, also known as Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, *The Coming of Messiah*, pp. 99-101; 214-17; 248-51; 266-67.

81. Bob Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), p. 109.

had no need to appeal to an oracle for his doctrines. The unfounded and scurrilous accusations of MacPherson and his sympathizers contravene the whole ethos of John Nelson Darby, a man of integrity to whom the word of God was paramount.'[82] Tim LaHaye believes that whether Darby was influenced by the Bible or not, pretribulation theology is found within the pages of Scripture.

> John Darby gained his views primarily from his study of the Word of God, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the influence of emerging premillennial biblical literalists, who were moving from the Historical school of interpreting prophecy to the Futurist position. But even if he didn't, that doesn't change anything. The pre-Trib position is supported by Scripture. Surely that is enough![83]

82. Paul Richard Wilkinson, *John Nelson Darby and the Origins of Christian Zionism* (University of Manchester, 2006), p. 322.

83. Tim LaHaye, *The Rapture: Who Will Face the Tribulation?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2002), p. 187.

Response:
Left Behind and the Evangelical Worldview

Kevin D. Zuber for Jerry B. Jenkins

> Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Cor. 10.11).[1]

Many of the readers of the Left Behind novels would find it surprising that there is scholarly interest in the series. Likely for most, the Left Behind books were simply a good read—fast-paced and engaging fiction that yields a few hours of wholesome enjoyment; for others they were an exercise in engaging with their views on the eschatology of the Bible through the medium of fiction—the books reinforce the basic outline and message of the Bible's teaching of the 'end times' as that teaching has been instilled in them by their pastors and teachers; and for others the books were read (perhaps at the recommendation of friends and family, or perhaps out of curiosity) as an introduction to the soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) as well as the eschatology of (dispensational, premillennial) evangelicalism—in other words, as one might read a religious tract that explains the gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ and the hope for eternal life in him.

For many readers the Left Behind series is of interest precisely because it avoids the dry and scholarly approach to themes of salvation, justification, sanctification, Christian living (in a hostile world), not to mention eschatology (the very word is off-putting), and presents realistic characters dealing with issues that concern them as believers, even if the situations are imaginary. The reaction of such readers to the scholarly analysis of the Left Behind series in this volume would likely be puzzlement.

1. All quotations from Scripture are taken from the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, CA: Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1995).

The authors of the series share that puzzlement. Indeed, Amy Frykholm acknowledges that authors of popular fiction 'often answer questions about scholars' criticisms of their work by saying, "That was not my intent."'[2] She explains that as critics may see fiction as a work of the imagination as well as of the conscious mind, so the critics may see 'many elements, and even a deep understanding of what is happening' that 'escape even the author's grasp'. She explains that authors may 'work with an already given set of ideologies', that such authors draw on these ideologies (in the case of the Left Behind series, I would suggest 'theology' would be more accurate) in their work (to form 'stereotypes, stock characters and formulaic expressions') and that 'the critic's job is to explicate what these mean'.[3] Frykholm has a good point and her comments offer a partial explanation for the puzzled. In short, the scholarly task of literary and cultural analysis of a work of fiction (such as the Left Behind series) may be undertaken to discover the ideological (or theological) underpinnings of the worldview in such a work.

My task is to respond to some of that analysis as presented in the other chapters of this volume. To do so I would like to first present key elements of the worldview of the authors; that is, I intend to make explicit certain basic elements of the evangelical Christian worldview. In other words, I would like to make Frykholm's task as critic easier, for I intend to clarify the 'set of ideologies', or rather, the elements of the worldview, that informed the Left Behind series. This will enable me to interact with some of the analysis of the others in this volume—what I believe they got right, as well as what they missed (and why). Also, I intend to discuss the question of 'the other' in the Left Behind series and (again, working with an evangelical Christian worldview as a starting point) present an alternative understanding of how the authors think about Catholics, Muslims, Jews and matters of gender. That being the case, I will begin by outlining some presuppositions of the evangelical Christian worldview and the Left Behind books.

The Bible Is the Inspired and Inerrant Word of God ('How Can I Know the Truth?')

Evangelical Christians take the Bible seriously. We hold, virtually as an axiom, that the Bible is inspired (2 Tim. 3.16; 2 Pet. 1.20-21) and therefore 'entirely true and never false in all that it affirms'.[4] Simply put, an evangelical Christian holds that the Bible is fully true. With this conviction of

2. Frykholm chapter in this volume, p. 29.
3. Frykholm's chapter in this volume, p. 30.
4. Paul D. Feinberg, 'Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of', in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2nd edn, 2001), p. 156. It should be noted that while it is certainly the case that inerrancy is a key presupposition

biblical inerrancy in mind, the evangelical Christian accords the Bible the presumption of historical accuracy—both in what it records about the past and what it prophesies for the future—and of essential consistency across the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. Some see this as a problem, but evangelicals see this as a strength; the Bible's consistency, given the several authors, genres and the span of time in composition, is for evangelicals evidence of the Bible's inspiration.[5]

Furthermore, we hold that the message and meaning of the Bible are accessible to any reader of the Bible,[6] not only to scholars and academ-

of dispensationalism, it is not a tenet of dispensationalism alone; see the statement at http://www.etsjets.org/?q=about, accessed 1 June 2009.

5. See Craig C. Hill, *In God's Time: The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 200-203. The claim of inerrancy and the principle of literal interpretation are not understood by the evangelical Christian in such a way as to suggest there are no textual, historical or interpretive difficulties in reading the Bible; however, to even begin to address them would take us well beyond the purposes of this article. There is a vast body of literature written by evangelical Christian scholars addressing such questions, and I would encourage interested readers to familiarize themselves with that literature. Let me just note that while we acknowledge the problems and difficulties, we attribute them (for the most part) to either a lack of sufficient information (there is simply not enough information to reconcile some textual or historical difficulties), or to a lack of consistency on the part of interpreters (that is, they often inject theological or philosophical bias into the interpretation) or there is a failure to pursue careful exegesis (or frankly, at times, there is a lack of interpretive honesty) on the part of the human interpreters. In other words, we presume the 'fallibility' of the human interpreters (an unarguable proposition) and accept the Bible as the inerrant Word of God.

6. I need to qualify that point just a bit and address a point made in Katie Sturm's chapter in this volume. While affirming the essential 'clarity' of the Bible, evangelical Christians also recognize the need for 'spiritual illumination'. That is, while the Bible, in and of itself, has the quality of 'clarity', humans have the limitation of 'spiritual blindness' (2 Cor. 4.4) that must be overcome before one can understand the Bible (this explains, in part, why some people see 'difficulties and problems' in Scripture [see n. 4 above]). When Sturm quotes Hitchcock and Ice as asserting 'only genuine believers in Christ are open to the teachings of the Bible' and 'salvation through Christ is a prerequisite to properly understanding God's word' (Sturm's chapter for this volume, p. 103) I believe they are referring to the need for 'spiritual illumination', which requires that one be regenerated by the Holy Spirit (see Jn 3.3, 'unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God'). The matter is nicely summed up by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2, where he points out that the wise men 'of this age' do not understand 'God's wisdom' (seen preeminently in the cross of Christ, 1 Cor. 1.18; 2.8) because 'a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised' (2.14). On the other hand, the things 'revealed through the Spirit' (2.10), in words 'taught by the Spirit' (2.13) (understood broadly as the revelation of the written Word of God), are given 'to us' (2.10), that is, to believers, to 'he who is spiritual' (2.15) 'so that we may know the things freely given to us by God' (2.12), such that 'we have the mind of Christ' (2.16).

ics but also to average readers. This is related to the classic Reformation doctrine of 'perspicuity'—the clarity of Scripture.[7] This is not to discount or ignore the difficult questions of textual criticism ('the difficult work of scholars in accumulating and compiling difficult fragments of *koine* Greek papyri or long Hebrew scrolls into a comprehensive, legible text from which scholars eventually produce an English-language translation'[8]), or the questions of canonicity (how the inspired books came to be recognized), or the problems of translation, or the myriad thorny issues of hermeneutics (interpretation).

However, while the evangelical Christian readers of the Left Behind books are certainly not conversant with those scholarly issues directly, many are aware that there are evangelical scholars, Bible scholars, and theologians who are. Evangelical readers, through various means—by way of sermons from their own pastors, popular-level books on these issues (such as those written by Tim LaHaye himself), other media sources (Christian radio for instance)—are sufficiently aware that these issues have been addressed by Bible scholars and theologians in evangelical (and dispensational) Bible colleges and theological seminaries.[9] In other words, many evangelical

Now, I think it is unfair of Sturm to go on to suggest that this point by Hitchcock and Ice implies that 'salvation and its concurrent belief are contingent upon a Dispensationalist interpretation of scripture' (Sturm p. 104 in this volume). This surely is not the claim. It appears to me that the problem of an 'exclusivist view of salvation' and the consequent 'distinct communal hermeneutic' is the apostle Paul's problem before it is a problem for dispensational theologians.

7. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 105-11.

8. Sturm's chapter in this volume, p. 101.

9. Again, even to review these issues in detail would be quite beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I feel it necessary to respond to one or two points. First, I suggest that Sturm's assertion that 'literal interpretation' 'has its roots' in Scottish common sense philosophy (e.g. Hutcheson, Reid, Smith and Steward) is questionable at least. 'Literal' verses 'allegorical' interpretation is at least as old as the Reformation and even in the light of 'current trends' has able defenders both outside (see Kathryn Greene-McCreight, 'Literal Sense', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker/SPCK, 2005], pp. 455-56), and inside dispensationalism. Indeed, Ryrie (*Dispensationalism* [Chicago: Moody, 1995 (orig. 1996)], pp. 80-82) gives several reasons, philosophical and biblical, for maintaining literal hermeneutics. My point here is just to say that attributing 'literal interpretation' to one narrow philosophical school is simplistic.

Also, as I suggest above, there are reputable Bible scholars and theologians who hold to a 'literal' or 'plain' reading of the Bible, who are quite aware of 'current trends' in hermeneutical theory in general and who are proficient in matters of textual criticism and exegesis in the original biblical languages. The subtle (or not so subtle) suggestion of 'evangelical anti-intellectualism' (Sturm's chapter in this volume, p. 101) is unwarranted and frankly unfair. The works of able scholarly advocates of scriptural inerrancy and of

Christian readers of the Left Behind books know enough to know that evangelical scholars have addressed those questions and they are confident that the theology of the Left Behind books is credible and biblically accurate.

My point is this: the picture of the 'theologically unsophisticated readers' of the Left Behind books, completely in the dark about the difficulties of biblical hermeneutics and who simply 'have trusted the authors to do the theological work of interpreting scripture' is (to *under*state the point) somewhat *over*drawn. Evangelical Christians are some of the most biblically knowledgeable people on the planet. They know their Bible. It is true that most of them read and study the Bible in mostly pragmatic and utilitarian ways; but this is because, it seems to us evangelicals, that this is one of the main purposes of Scripture—to show us and teach us how to find salvation and enjoy the life (physical and spiritual/temporal and eternal) that God has given us. Indeed, many of the texts that deal with prophetic themes are actually motivational texts encouraging believers (now, at the present time) to 'be comforted' (1 Thess. 4.13-18), be 'steadfast and immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord' (1 Cor. 15.58), 'live pure lives; be righteous' (1 Jn 3.1-3; Rev. 22.11). In other words, the readers of the Left Behind series are not escapists looking forward to the end of the world, but are being trained by the reading and study of prophetic passages in the Bible; they are reading for encouragement and inspiration to live out their own Christian faith in sometimes difficult circumstances, in the present.

In short, from one who is inside the community of dispensational evangelicalism, I am dubious of the notion that the evangelical Christian reader of the Left Behind books will simply 'take the author's assertion of normal interpretation' at face value. A lot more—more personal Bible study, more sermons, more Sunday school lessons—have gone into the average dispensationalist's thinking than the outline of the end times that informs the Left Behind series. In a way, one of the reasons for the success of the Left Behind series is just that it remains faithful to a biblical and eschatological narrative with which dispensational evangelical Christians are already familiar; and the prophetic themes in the books are understood to support the same

literal biblical hermeneutic are readily accessible by any who are willing to look for them; indeed, this is my point above—evangelical Christians know that the Sunday school lessons, the popular devotional literature and yes, even the novels they read are informed by (in part based on and often written in references to) the works of highly competent and respected evangelical scholars. The 'myth' of evangelical anti-intellectualism is so pervasive that those who affirm it are likely only to quote others who affirm it without substantiation. Thriving publishing houses, nationwide and international educational ministries and Bible conferences, not to mention Christian Web sites with thousands of pages of scholarly and semischolarly works, are all supported by evangelical Christian readers. That they do not subscribe to 'liberal scholarship' does not mean they are anti-intellectual.

purposes (of comfort, encouragement and challenge) of the prophetic texts of Scripture on which they are based.

The Reality of the Supernatural ('What Is the World Really Like?' 'Who Am I?')

Another key element of the evangelical Christian worldview is the acceptance of the supernatural. This obviously is a feature of the Christian worldview that comes from the Bible itself. Based on what they read in the Bible, evangelical Christians readily accept, as a given in the real world, the direct involvement of the transcendent God in the affairs of the world at large and in the lives of his people. He is really, actually, and daily engaged with his creation and with his creatures. This includes but is not limited to the manifestation of the miraculous.

In the Bible Christians read of 'miraculous victories' over the enemies of Israel (by Gideon, Samson, David), 'miraculous provision' of food (the manna in Exodus, the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospels), 'miraculous healings' (in the Gospels), 'miraculous conversions' (Paul in Acts 9). We read of God 'walking with', 'speaking to', 'judging' and 'saving' people; we read of the ministry of angelic beings (to Daniel, to Mary); and we read of Satan and his minions, the demons (in the Gospels). The worldview of the Bible is inescapably filled with the supernatural. Some evangelicals see the miraculous still in evidence today, but all evangelical Christians believe that the supernatural—in terms of God's direct, if providential and mediate, but nevertheless authentic and ongoing involvement in their lives—is real. They give evidence of such every time they pray.

This acceptance of the supernatural is specifically grounded in two historical events, two key beliefs—the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first is the claim that God has come (irrupted, broken into) into 'space and time and history' for a purpose, namely to die an atoning death; and the second—also in time and space and history—is the proof of that first claim is so. These two events, in the evangelical Christian worldview, in effect define its metaphysics—'being', the world, the cosmos, reality as it really is.[10]

10. Here again, there is more to explicating this point than the scope of this article will allow. Briefly, I would like to quote the words (and direct the reader to the works) of Thomas F. Torrance. Torrance would probably not classify himself as an evangelical, but this statement sums up very well the point I want to make about how the incarnation and resurrection inform a Christian metaphysic: 'As such then, the incarnation and resurrection together form the basic framework in the interaction of God and mankind in space and time, within which the whole Gospel is to be interpreted and understood. But they are *ultimates*, carrying their own authority and calling for the intelligent commitment of

To understand the readers of the Left Behind series, this aspect of the evangelical Christian worldview has to be kept in view. For them, because they accept not just the viability but the necessity of the supernatural, the catching away of millions of believers by God in the blink of an eye (see 1 Cor. 15.52), has a prima facie plausibility. The direct judgments of God—be it plagues on Pharaoh's Egypt in Exodus 7–12 or the 'seal judgments' on the earth in Revelation 6—are not improbable or fanciful. In my opinion this aspect of the evangelical Christian worldview is ignored by those seeking to understand works like the Left Behind series.

Nowhere is the evangelical Christian belief in the reality of the supernatural more vital for understanding the evangelical Christian mind than in the matter of conversion. For the evangelical Christian, conversion, more specifically his or her own conversion, is not to be explained in purely psychological, much less sociological, terms (even if elements of these are involved in one's conversion). For an evangelical Christian, both in terms of the existential event and the spiritual reality, one's conversion means he or she has experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration—a supernatural change in 'the heart'—the very center of one's being.

This experience is singular and radical, involving a change that is at once a moral and an epistemological change, as the biblical metaphors of 'opened eyes', 'new hearts', 'renewed minds' indicate. But the evangelical Christian who has experienced this work of the Spirit knows the experience is in a sense ineffable but communicable. That is, as a supernatural event, while the outward effects can be described, the personal experience of the work of the Holy Spirit is comprehensible only to others who have likewise been regenerated. As Paul describes it, 'the Spirit testifies with our spirit' (Rom. 8.16); if the Holy Spirit has ever so 'testified', you know what Paul is referring to—if you have not, you do not (see Jn 3.8, 'The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit').

My purpose is not to wax mystical but to explain that the readers of the Left Behind series, at least those who are operating with the evangelical Christian worldview, do not find the scenarios of rapture, cosmic judgment and direct divine involvement with human beings to be incredible. Acceptance of and identification with these scenes (events) are not to be attributed primarily to temporal conditions, psychological tendencies or shifts in the Western cultural paradigm.

The overall climax (eschatology) envisioned in the Left Behind series fits well with the supernaturalism of the biblical worldview taken as a

belief, and providing the irreducible ground upon which continuing rational inquiry and theological formation take place' (Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976], p. 20).

whole. For those with an evangelical worldview, this it is not escapism—it is fulfillment. And those readers identify with the conversion narratives of the main characters, who themselves are brought out of the complacency of a naturalistic perspective on reality to a realization that God is indeed involved with his creatures. The shock of the irruption of the supernatural experienced by the characters in Left Behind is one many evangelical (born again) Christians can relate to even in this prerapture time of world history. For many of them (particularly, but not exclusively, for those who did not grow up in evangelical churches) the realization that God was indeed truly active in the lives of his people—and by way of conversion, that he is directly involved in their lives, personally and individually—was as 'world changing' as the events of the rapture and subsequent judgments on earth proved to be for the characters in Left Behind. My point is that while the evangelical Christian readers of Left Behind are riveted by the depictions of the eschatological supernatural events described in the books, they identify with the presence of the supernatural in the lives of believers at a more fundamental level. In other words, they are interested in what the authors think is going to actually happen, but they find the novels compelling because they know (in certainly a much less dramatic way) what the characters are experiencing—namely, God is at work in the world and in them.

While the Christian characters in previous instances of 'rapture literature' seemed much less 'real'—stock characters (women were pious, chaste, 'damsels in distress'; men were either unsaved 'brutes' or 'godly' but somewhat 'wimpy'), the Christian characters in the Left Behind are presented—as 'real life Christians' know they themselves are—as complex and at times conflicted people. In the series, Chloe wants to be the Christian wife she knows she should be but finds that difficult when her own talents and personal drive, and the need of the moment, call for her to act. Buck wants to honor his wife but at times finds it easier to simply 'command her' (which meets with the resistance one might expect). Rayford is a man who experiences many of the same pressures and strains that evangelical Christian men do today; he wants to be faithful to his calling as father, leader—but he is not perfect. Sometimes his thoughts take him where he'd rather not go: his decisions are at times less than ideal; his relationships are complicated. He needs to be 'tough and tender'. His depiction may indeed represent something of the cross-currents of 'the problem of male leadership' in contemporary evangelical Christianity; but I think there may be deeper issues. The quintessential example of the 'tough and tender' man is Jesus himself—who was 'tempted in all things as we are yet without sin' (Heb. 4.15).

Rayford is one of many characters—in and out of the biblical narrative—who serve as 'servant-leaders' under the leadership of Christ. However, like David in the Old Testament and Peter in the New, these servant-leaders

under the headship of Christ are not Christ—they are admittedly flawed servant-leaders. This in no way is meant to diminish them, or their importance; it does mean that, all the members of the body ('the force') are vital to the ongoing work and that all are ultimately dependent upon the true head, the ultimate servant-leader.

In short, to consider the issues of leadership in the evangelical mind one needs to consider the relationship of the leaders to the 'body' and the 'head'—those cross-currents, intracommunity, are often more important than the wider cultural factors in understanding the 'the problem of male leadership' in contemporary evangelical Christianity.

The Evangelical Mission ('Why Are We Here?')

The final feature of the evangelical Christian worldview to mention here is the sense of mission. Evangelicals are widely known for their efforts at evangelism and outreach. Of course, this comes most directly from the command of Christ, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations' (Mt. 28.19) and 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation' (Mk 16.15). The example of the early church as recorded in the book of Acts is the pattern to go 'even to the remotest part of the earth' (1.8) preaching the saving death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 15.3-4). The simple gospel message—'all have sinned' (Rom. 3.23); 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor. 15.3); faith in Jesus Christ, 'for by grace you have been saved through faith' (Eph. 2.8)—is preeminent in the thinking of an evangelical Christian as he or she thinks about his or her own life, and death, and time and eternity. And that thinking is preeminent as the evangelical Christian thinks about others.

Evangelical readers of the Left Behind series are familiar with the motivation of the characters to share their faith. Indeed, the pressure to get the message out is just as acute for evangelicals in the prerapture world as for those who are believers during the tribulation—time is always short. But this again is not unique to twenty-first-century Christians—as if it were due the pressures of culture and modernity. Paul himself wrote that 'the night is almost gone, and the day is near' (Rom. 13.12). Each generation of believers has felt the compulsion to get the gospel out to a lost humankind; the pressure of eternity looms for us. In other words, the evangelical Christian reader of the Left Behind series is not so much looking for the threats of secular humanism or international conspiracies as motivation for evangelism (as real as these threats may be); they are the existential threat for the characters (and may be in the near future for the living church) but they are not the primary motive for evangelism.

Another issue is the so-called danger of the perceived pessimism and (as noted) the escapism of the Left Behind books in particular and of

dispensational premillennial theology in general. On the one hand, it is an understandable critique; for hundreds of thousands of our 'fellow travelers' on earth to have an 'apocalyptic mindset' might harbinger a frightening prospect for the culture, the environment, for efforts to 'get along' with others. (This is particularly poignant in terms of the prospects for peace in the Middle East and the apocalyptic vision for that area according to dispensational theology.) However, what has just been noted should help to allay such suspicions. While dispensational evangelicals do believe the 'apocalyptic vision' is going to be played out (but only in God's time) the motivation is not to 'help it along' but to reach out to others while there is still time. Indeed, while Tim LaHaye is promoting the end-time teachings of dispensationalism and warning of the rising threat of secular humanism, he is actively working to mitigate that threat and to promote causes that would, if successful, slow or even reverse the cultural and moral decline that will portend the coming of the end. This may seem contradictory to the critics, but it should calm their fears. Evangelical Christians, even dispensationalists, have traditionally been concerned to use our God-given time and talents to serve others, particularly by sharing the gospel with them.

The Question of 'the Other' in the Left Behind Series

This seems a major issue for the other authors in this volume. To illustrate how the readers of the Left Behind series view the question of others (and how this is a reflection, I think, of the evangelical Christian mind on this matter), I want to begin with something in Amy Frykholm's work. In the chapter included in this volume, and her major work, *Rapture Culture,* she approaches her analysis with 'gender issues' in view.[11] In her book she makes this explicit: 'In particular, gender is, in my view, central to *Left Behind.*' In her interviews with readers she sought to pursue this analysis. But the readers did not seem to have the same view: 'Most readers have little interest in engaging with me on the question of gender.'[12] She concedes that 'my research into the reading practices of readers of the Left Behind series taught me that gender was not a primary category through which readers interpreted their interaction with the novels'. Indeed, I think she tellingly observes, 'The primary distinction that interested the readers was the distinction between Christian and non-Christian.'[13]

I think I can supply some insight into this. First, as I have just noted, a key feature of evangelical Christian thinking is the evangelistic mindset.

11. Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

12. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture,* p. 91.

13. Frykholm chapter in this volume, p. 29.

Christians do think in terms of 'the other', but 'the other' is seldom, if ever, defined in terms of gender *and* I would suggest not primarily defined in terms of other cultural identities—other religions, other races, other nationalities. This is not to suggest that evangelical Christians do not recognize these distinctions; they do, and they recognize the (potential) 'oppositional' (not to say adversarial) nature of the (cultural, theological, even political) juxtaposition of these groups to their own evangelical commitments.[14] But the Left Behind series is not read with these commitments vis-à-vis 'the other' in view. In other words, there is no blatant 'us *versus* them' in an oppositional way in these books.

The pattern for relating 'to others' in the novels is to be seen through this 'evangelistic mindset'. Overall 'the other', even when identified as Jew, Muslim, woman (e.g. Hattie), is most often seen as someone who needs to be saved or in the case of several key characters, someone who has become saved. Again, the basic division is between Christian and non-Christian. The various cultural identities—Jew, Muslim, and others—are introduced not to suggest that those cultural (or gender) identities are inferior; they are not portrayed as mere foils to highlight the superiority of 'Christian-ness or male-ness', and to see them as such is to miss the crucial point—namely, no cultural, ethnic, or even religious identity will, of itself, keep one from becoming a Christian. The point is no one is 'excluded' (there is no absolute 'other'), but anyone may come in to the community of believers in Christ. This is the most basic view of the 'other' in the Left Behind series and it reflects a key feature of the evangelical Christian mindset. Anthropologist Paul G. Heibert helps clarify this point. He asks,

> What is a biblical worldview of others and otherness? First it affirms the commonality of all people. The Scriptures lead us to a startling conclusion: *at the deepest level of identity as humans, there are no others—there is only us*. On the surface humans are males and females, blacks, browns, and whites, rich and poor, old and young; beneath these features there is one humanity.[15]

14. I think in this regard that Marisa Ronan (in her chapter for this volume, pp. 119-32) has a valid point; the Left Behind series employs and expands on the 'symbolic boundary markers' that evangelicals have fashioned to create, preserve and maintain their identity as a subculture with the wider culture and with regard to other subculture groups. But this is nothing remarkable; all such subcultural groups engage in this endeavor in one way or another. And it should be observed that this in and of itself need not be seen as evidence of 'triumphalism' or an exercise in 'prejudice'. In my opinion the Left Behind series avoids both of these evils.

15. Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2008), p. 289.

The biblical picture is of one humanity, made in God's image and, sadly, one humanity fallen in Adam's sin (Rom. 5.12). We are all one in our need for salvation—and there are no cultural, national, racial or gender barriers to the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. This is revealed in the Old Testament story of Ruth, a Moabite woman who comes to faith in the God of Israel; this is revealed in the New Testament in the story of Cornelius (Acts 10), a Gentile who comes to faith in Christ. When the matter of salvation is in view, the 'other' in biblical narrative is not someone to be excluded, but someone who is to be reached—to be included; not an enemy but a mission field.

Thus the major distinction in humanity, as evangelicals see it and as the Left Behind series portrays it is that there are Christians and non-Christians, and the objective in articulating this distinction is not to draw boundaries that exclude or marginalize the 'other' but to highlight the need to bring the 'other' to faith in Christ. Evangelicals recognize that 'others' will see this as a rejection of their faith, their culture, their identity, and perhaps that is unavoidable—all we can say is, 'That is not our intent.' We are simply trying to be faithful to a message from Jesus and the apostles—'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me' (Jn 14.6), and so 'there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4.12).

With that understanding in view I will make a few comments on some specific 'others' that have been identified in Left Behind.

Catholics

Evangelicals have had a long and convoluted relationship with the system of Roman Catholicism—to say the least. To attempt to simplify the perspective, as I see it, in the Left Behind novels, it may be said that the 'system' of Catholicism—the institution that promotes a 'works-based salvation'—is viewed as inimical to evangelical faith (justification/salvation by grace through faith alone, Eph. 2.8-9). This is to affirm little more than a traditional Reformation understanding (as represented in the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin). That view of the system is not, however, the view that evangelicals have of individual Catholics. While there are some quarters where 'Catholic people' and the 'Catholic system' are viewed as one and the same, many evangelicals (including it seems the authors of the Left Behind series) are aware that individuals 'in the Catholic church' have a different faith than that of 'the system'. That is, there are individuals who have put their faith solely in the finished work of Christ. This of course raises a number of ancillary issues (e.g. how can a person of 'genuine/saving faith' continue in the practices of a false system? Does this mean that an individual Catholic has to renounce his or her Catholic faith; i.e. 'secretly become an evangelical Protestant?'). These questions are not addressed directly in the Left Behind novels simply because the focus is (and the belief is) that it

is not practice but faith that is the most important determination of who is included in the rapture—because faith in Christ is the sole criterion for who is saved and who is lost in the (ultimate) end.

The suggestion that 'there is a persistent and perhaps even basic anti-Catholicism to the series' is to my mind not 'a justifiable accusation'.[16] Perhaps too much of the vitriolic history of theological debates (not to mention cultural clashes) between Catholics and Protestants is read into the (relatively minimal) references to Catholics and Catholicism in the Left Behind novels. The authors of Left Behind are opposed, it seems, to the Catholic system of a works-based salvation that they see as 'false' teaching, but their views are not terribly radical in that regard; and the conclusion that 'anti-Catholicism is central to the structure of the entire series' is, in my opinion, unfounded.[17]

Muslims

The attempt to determine the view of Muslims in the Left Behind series is frustrated by the simple fact that there is too little material to work with. In short, the issues of the 'Palestinian question', the reality of radical Islam and the cultural clash of Islam and the West are given only peripheral mention (if that). Muslims are depicted in the Left Behind novels as resistant to the hegemonic designs of the Antichrist as they (in many quarters) are to the hegemonic tendencies of Western culture today. This appears to me to be a view of Muslims without prejudice; whereas many Westerners today are defensive about Muslim resistance to Western ideas, the Left Behind series sees that attitude, when employed against the forces of the Antichrist, as something 'heroic'. In general, however, 'benign ambivalence' to the Muslim question may best describe how the Left Behind series depicts Muslims—except to say again that there is no inherent barrier, as far as evangelical Christianity is concerned, to a Muslim coming to faith in Christ. If that sounds less than 'generous' to Muslim faith (Islam), I would only observe that that is a long-standing opinion not limited to the authors of Left Behind. But again, it does reflect a conviction that all 'others' outside of faith in Christ are welcome to come in.

Jews

I have to say that accusations of anti-Semitism in the Left Behind series are the most baffling. On the one hand, dispensationalists have been criticized

16. Killeen's chapter in this volume, p. 72.

17. Killeen's chapter in this volume, p. 76. I regret that the constraints of this article prevent me from elaborating further; the point requires and deserves some extensive and nuanced discussion. See comments on pp. 63-64 of Gribben's chapter for this volume.

for their overt Zionism and political support of Israel[18] and on the other hand as envisioning a Jewish history that has been labeled by one writer a virtual 'Holocaust denial'[19] and a future Jewish history that amounts to another Holocaust (in the tribulation). Here again I believe Gribben is on the right track when he writes, 'the novels are probably not anti-Semitic'.[20] I think he could have been bolder and left out 'probably'.

A centerpiece of dispensational theology is that God's promises to the nation of Israel (that is, the covenants with Abraham (Gen. 12.1-3; 15.1-19) and David (2 Sam. 7.8-17) are 'irrevocable' (Rom. 11.29). We believe that 'God has not rejected His people' (Rom. 11.1) and that Israel, as a nation, has a central place in God's plans for bringing salvation to, and blessing of, 'all the families of the earth' (Gen. 12.3c). In short, we believe God has a special love for Jews—so must we. Beyond that, when we think of individual Jews, we have only a love and concern for them; as the apostle Paul expressed it, 'my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is for their salvation' (Rom. 10.1).

Conclusion

Frykholm's work notes that readers of the Left Behind novels 'see the characters not as gender types, but as personality types'.[21] The phrase 'personality type' has some truth but misses another point. She notes later that the readers seemed to identify well with characters of strength, especially in respect to matters of faith. To my mind this way of reading the narrative of the Left Behind books reveals that the readers have been reading their Bibles. As noted earlier, evangelicals have been taught well how to read the Bible, if not through formal teaching on biblical hermeneutics, then indirectly by listening to many sermons, sitting through years of Sunday School and Vacation Bible School classes, by seeking personal application from the biblical stories of 'heroes (and villains) in the Bible'. In short, they have read the Bible stories asking, What am I to learn from Abraham's life? What lessons are to be found in the experience of Daniel? Do I have the patience of Job? How can I have the quiet faith of Ruth? What does the life and faith of Paul teach me about my life and faith?

The gender, cultural circumstance, ethnic background and social status of the above examples are recognized but not considered the primary

18. See Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon* (Leicester: IVP, 2004).

19. Sherryll Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem" in the *Left Behind* novels', *Literature and Theology* 19.4 (2005), p. 370.

20. Gribben's chapter in this volume, p. 54.

21. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, p. 91.

point of identification. (Men of faith can learn from the humility of Mary Magdalene; women of faith can learn from the boldness of Paul.) The readers of the Left Behind series have probably consumed another staple of evangelical Christian literature, the Christian biography, and perhaps, an enduring favorite of Christian readers, the venerable *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). And of course, the Gospels themselves are stories of Jesus that portray his example for his followers. The way all of this literature is used by evangelical Christian readers is the way the readers of the Left Behind series read those novels—they identify with the faith of the characters. The cultural, religious, gender or ethnic background of the characters adds color to the personality but means relatively little to the reader who views them as either role models of faith to be emulated or conversely failures in faith to be avoided. The verse from the apostle Paul quoted at the top of this article might be taken as a good summary of the way evangelical readers have embraced the Left Behind series.

Index

Characters in the Left Behind series are indexed under their surnames. The titles of films are listed alphabetically.