

Leaving “Left Behind” Behind

BY JONATHAN SANDS WISE

Can biblical views of the end times, properly understood, survive the backlash against “Left Behind” theology of dispensationalists? Three books agree the ongoing debate must not detract from apocalypticism’s practical implication: that we should work in this world, filled with hope in God’s future.

As our teacher held up a large rocket-shaped song book, we would sit in the small attic of our church on miniature chairs and gleefully sing (or shout) “The Countdown” at the top of our lungs. “Somewhere in outer space, God has prepared a place for those who trust him and obey,” the song assured us, and then continued, “and though we don’t know when, Jesus will come again,” so call upon your Savior “while you may.” The song concluded, “three and two, the countdown’s getting lower every day!” with the clear message that we are almost at ‘one’ and... blastoff!

Though the image of God creating a heavenly home for us “somewhere in outer space” is quaint, and the song a seemingly innocent prompt toward faithfulness and wakefulness, its emphasis on our removal to an other-worldly heaven and countdown toward the Second Coming of Christ have made some question the truth and worth of both the song and the apocalypse that it seems to represent.

VARIETIES OF MILLIENNIALISM

Dispensational premillennialism, the view of the end times graphically depicted by the bestselling *Left Behind* series and assumed by “The Countdown,” predicts that Christ will come back to ‘rapture’ all Christians, taking

them to heaven before the onset of seven years of tribulation; then he will gloriously appear with all of the saints, rapidly defeat the Antichrist at Armageddon, and institute the millennium, his one-thousand-year reign on earth. As the first essay in Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung, eds., *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009, 208 pp., \$24.99) details, the history of such dispensationalism is quite short, beginning in the 1830s with the teaching of John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and England. Its effect has been disproportionate to its history, however, especially in America. For much of the early part of the twentieth century, dispensationalism was equivalent to fundamentalism, a force for truth and biblical conservatism in the face of mainline modernism and heresy.

Dispensational premillennialism represents only one of four main approaches to Christ's Second Coming. A close relative is historic premillennialism. Blomberg and Chung offer a generally readable and interesting collection of essays arguing for the relative merits of the historic version, as well as for the merits of premillennialism in general. With an essay outlining the recent history of millennial movements, an essay each on the Old Testament, Judaism, the New Testament, and the early Church, and other essays exploring the theological method of premillennialism, a Reformed and Covenantal approach to premillennialism, and holistic missiology, this edited volume covers most of the topics in good introductory fashion. While dispensationalism predicts a rapture before the tribulation, historic dispensationalism expects Christians to live through the tribulation before Christ comes to usher in a golden age of peace as the living Temple and Lord of earth. Historic premillennialists suggest that nothing in Scripture, Judaic tradition, or the experience or theology of the early Church should lead us to expect anything other than persecution and tribulation before the ultimate victory.

The other two main approaches to the end times, which Blomberg and Chung define in their introduction, are amillennialism and postmillennialism. Amillennialism, the most widely accepted view from the time of Augustine (354-430) until the 1800s, adopts a spiritual interpretation of Revelation 20:1-7, which describes Christ's millennial reign. Amillennialists hold Christ will not literally and physically rule on this earth at any time, but spiritually reigns for a figurative millennium now, after which he will create the new heaven and the new earth. Postmillennialism arose with the optimism engendered by the great missionary movements of the 1800s and argues that Christ will return after a great Christian millennium, a golden age ushered in by the labors of the Church.

Mainline denominations historically have been amillennialist, though general biblical illiteracy combined with the popular success of dispensationalism's pretribulation premillennialism has led many Reformed and Covenantal churches, including Presbyterian and Lutheran congregations,

to adopt this view of the end times. Barbara R. Rossing, a Lutheran professor of New Testament, argues strongly in *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004, 240 pp., \$15.00) that this is a scandalous state of affairs. Unlike the contributors to *Historic Premillennialism*, who make a strong biblical case against dispensationalism while retaining a respectful and fair tone throughout, Rossing is primed and ready to do verbal battle. Blomberg and Chung recognize that, though our views on the apocalypse certainly matter, they probably have been too significant at many times in history; in the conclusion, therefore, they adopt a “can’t we all just get along” view, while still insisting on the significance of the disagreements they are refereeing.

END TIMES EXPOSÉ

Barbara Rossing, on the other hand, has never met an argument against dispensational premillennialism that she does not like. But while her willingness to employ all arguments willy-nilly against dispensational views of the end times leads to a less than coherent positive position, the overall effect is undeniably a powerful cumulative case. It is ultimately unclear what view of the second coming Rossing supports, though she perhaps fits best into amillennialism; what is clear is what position she detests. While she is repetitive and ill-organized at points, her passion makes for a highly readable and engaging exposé of dispensationalist theology.

Rossing attacks the dispensationalist model on two grounds: “The dispensationalist system...must be challenged today both because of its false theology and also because of its growing influence on public policy” (p. 30). She charges more than twenty-five times that “this [dispensationalist] theology distorts God’s vision for the world,” and “is not biblical” (pp. 1-2), calling dispensationalist readings of Scripture “heresy” and “ridiculous interpretations” (pp. 48-49), and decrying dispensationalists’ focus on Armageddon as a “sickness” (p. 140).

While her rhetoric runs away with her at times, several of her arguments are quite powerful. Rossing’s discussion of the rapture is comprehensive and well-executed. As Blomberg points out in his essay in *Historic Premillennialism* as well, it is unclear in Jesus’ parable that says “one will be taken and one will be left” (Matthew 24:36-44; cf. Luke 17:20-37), which we should prefer – to be taken (as were those who were swept away in the great flood in Noah’s day!) or to be left behind. Dispensationalists – who interpret Jesus’ warning in Matthew 24:40 in light of Paul’s assurance that at the coming of the Lord “the dead in Christ will rise first” and living disciples will be “caught up” with them to meet Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) – look forward to being “taken” away from sinners and earthly tribulation. Rossing and Blomberg, however, argue that we are caught up with Christ much as a greeting party that goes out to meet a dignitary *comes back with him* into the city. Stephen L. Cook, in *The Apocalyptic Literature* (Nashville, TN:

Abingdon Press, 2003, 236 pp., \$22.00), further points out that Paul's contemporaries tended to speak of death as "snatching people away from the world, now and forever." "With the concept of rapture," Cook explains, "Paul offers a retort": death is indeed a snatching, but into life, not away from it (p. 180). Paul's vision is one of ingathering, not of separation, and all three books agree that a more careful reading demonstrates this fact.

The consistent message of Scripture and especially the Book of Revelation, Rossing argues, is that the only true power is "Lamb power," a lifestyle of vulnerability modeled on Christ. "In place of the vision of military Victory and power offered by Rome," she writes, "Revelation offers the amazing vision of the victory of God's slain Lamb, Jesus" (p. 108). Rossing's vision of hope is coherent and powerful, but it is difficult to see how she justifies this 'PG' version of Christ's return with the potent images of blood and warfare that we find in Scripture. Both dispensationalism and Rossing are forced at times into apparently strained readings of scripture texts, so the repeated charge that dispensationalism is *unbiblical* is both too strong and uncharitable. The better argument here would be that we can offer *better* readings of Scripture, and such an argument could be taken more seriously by opponents.

A CAREFUL RETURN TO SCRIPTURE

When Rossing does attempt to explain the blood and violence of Revelation, she usually employs on a historicist interpretation: the meaning of much of the book's imagery, she thinks, is exhausted by its reference to what occurred historically in Rome, while the rest is not a literal prediction of the future, but a vision for what it means to conquer as a follower of Christ through self-sacrificial Lamb power (p. 102). Stephen Cook objects that such historicist readings

are a way of "domesticating" the text, depriving it of its richness, alienness, and radicalness by pretending that it is simply about the past. Premillennialists and other futurists who see the text as exhausted by events yet to occur, likewise domesticate the text,

refusing to see that the apocalyptic texts of Scripture are equally about the present.

As a cure, Cook recommends what he calls a "premodern" reading of Scripture that "sees apocalyptic texts as symbolically rich, inspired literature that invigorates the imagination, offering readers new orientation and resolve about the life of faith" (p. 63). Premodern views accept what is alien

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(to our world) as reality, allowing that the transcendent can break into the mundane and ultimately will overturn it entirely. Revelation and other biblical apocalyptic texts are not simply about the past, nor simply about the future; they are about both the past and the present, and receive their ultimate fulfillment in the future as they are multiply realized through time (pp. 67-68).

While Cook's text is less readable and more academic than Rossing's stirring prose, it is carefully and competently argued and never stirs far from the apocalyptic literature he considers. Cook argues that apocalyptic texts have four significant theological contributions. First, in their vision of a cosmos-wide redemption, they counter the overly individualistic evangelical view of salvation. Second, they counter the liberal reduction of God's salvation to social programs by unblinkingly affirming that evil will persist until God radically overturns history. Third, they put readers in touch with transcendent reality as a backdrop to our current world. Finally, they offer us a deeper insight into the reality, nature, and threat of evil (p. 72 ff.). As the apocalyptic texts highlight, we live in a world that is finally so evil that its ultimate redemption can only be forced onto it by God.

PASSIONS AND POLICIES

In such a world of evil, our beliefs and scriptural interpretations matter, but perhaps even more important are the policies that they lead to. Such, at least, seems the best explanation for Rossing's passionate condemnation of dispensational premillennialism:

The dispensationalist version of the biblical storyline requires tribulation and war in the Middle East, not peace plans. That is the most terrifying aspect of this distorted theology. Such blessing of violence is the very reason why we cannot afford to give in to the dispensationalist version of the biblical storyline — because real people's lives are at stake. (p. 46)

The ethical vision of dispensationalism, according to Rossing, is one of unremitting violence toward non-Christians (at least during the tribulation), toward the earth that we get to blastoff from and escape, and even toward ourselves:

For [dispensationalists], the heart of God is, first of all, this heart of wrath and terror against the world — the wrath of the Lamb — not a heart of suffering love on behalf of the world. Indeed, what my students who grew up in dispensationalist or fundamentalist homes remember most powerfully from their childhoods is the fear and wrath of God and the Lamb. (p. 136)

Rossing offers no reason to believe that dispensationalism necessarily leads to any of this violence, and little to believe that it has; expecting violence in the Middle East is rather different from causing or glorifying in it. Indeed, she is so concerned to grasp every argument against dispensationalism that several of her charges seem contradictory. Dispensationalists,

she charges, are escapists, uncaring about the world and disastrously callous toward the environment because of their deterministic view of prophecy; seeing God as having settled the future in advance, they border on complacency. Immediately after issuing this complaint, she charges that this “can even encourage people to try to hasten the scripted apocalyptic events themselves, with deadly consequences for our world” (p. 93). It is difficult to see how such complacency and radicalism regarding earthly damage are meant to coexist in the dispensationalist ethic.

Certainly dispensational premillennialism might lead people to ignore the environment, but it equally might lead them to preserve all aspects of our world, since it is this very world (after a terrible tribulation) that Jesus will reign over during the millennium. Likewise, dispensational premillennialism may cause some to become complacent, but historically it was the prime engine for the missional movements of the twentieth century; as “The Countdown” urges, we do not know when Christ will return, and so we must call upon him while we may! It seems likely, then, that dispensational premillennialism is as liable to abuse as any other religious doctrine, but perhaps no more so.

The one point on which all of these authors agree is that apocalypticism, properly understood, should lead us to continue working in our current world while we wait for the final in-breaking of Christ. The biblical apocalyptic visions may seem utterly alien, but their effect should be immediate, Cook urges: “apocalyptic visions make sense of life and help compose and orient readers, but their impetus is outward, toward witness and involvement” (p. 77).

Ultimately, the debate among competing views of the end times, and especially the current backlash against the “left behind” theology of dispensationalists, is an interesting and important conversation. But this debate must not detract from apocalypticism’s practical implication: that we should live and work in this world filled with hope as we look forward and pray with John, “Amen. Come Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).



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