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An old `ism' underpins the `Left Behind' series

BY LEO SANDON
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(KRT) - If you missed one or more of the 11 previous novels in the "Left Behind" series, not to worry. You can get up to speed by reading the latest volume, "Glorious Appearing," in which Christ returns, defeats Satan and establishes his millennial reign over the earth. This 12th installment sold 2 million copies before its publication date. Within hours after its release it was No. 1 on amazon.com's best-seller list. Authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are on a 12-day promotional tour that has long lines of readers queuing up at bookstores to get signed copies. More than 40 million "Left Behind" volumes have been sold.

The series, named from the title of the first novel, is based on the teaching that the End Times begin with the Rapture, in which true Christians are transported instantaneously and directly into heaven, leaving behind unbelieving friends and family to experience a seven-year Tribulation. The Tribulation is administered by Antichrist, who, under the control of Satan, persecutes all of those refusing to accept the Mark of the Beast. Christ returns to the earth, overthrows Antichrist and establishes his thousand-year kingdom on earth, the millennium alluded to in the Revelation to St. John.

"Glorious Appearing: The End of Days" begins with the conclusion of the Tribulation - "just over seven years since the Rapture." Gathered in the Middle East is the Global Community's Unity Army, the forces of Antichrist; in opposition are members of the Trib(ulation) Force and about 1 million members of a faithful Jewish remnant. Believers are looking to the heavens for the glorious appearing of Christ. They are not disappointed: "Heaven opened and there, on a white horse, sat Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

On the plains of the valley of Megiddo (Armageddon) and in Jerusalem, Christ in short order slays the forces of Antichrist, casts a chain-bound Satan into a bottomless pit and establishes his millennial kingdom. Interspersed with all of this action are passages from the Bible, sometimes paraphrased, spoken by Christ or by the archangels Gabriel and Michael. The passages are either didactic or admonishing in nature. Or both. The literary style is, well, crude.

So is the theology. And there is a theology here. Or at least a specific system of biblical interpretation. Newsweek is wrong when it refers to "Left Behind" as a "biblically correct best seller"; LaHaye is disingenuous when he states "that's what the Bible teaches" in referring to the religious content of his fiction. The thinking behind "Left Behind" is the dispensationalism developed by John Nelson Darby (1800-82).

Darby, a former Anglican priest who is never mentioned by American dispensationalists, divided time into a series of (usually seven) dispensations or periods. The last period or dispensation is to be a restored Davidic monarchy established in Israel by Jesus. Darby also emphasized and elaborated on the idea of the Rapture. His group was referred to as the Plymouth Brethren. These biblical literalists at first rejected all denominationalism but soon became an identifiable denominational body, subsequently splitting into at least six factions.

The Plymouth Brethren never became a significant denomination in the United States, but Darby's system of biblical interpretation has had enormous influence in American evangelicalism and popular culture. It was one of the sources of biblical fundamentalism. Today it has many more adherents than the homegrown and more sedate premillennialism of the Seventh-day Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses. Hal Lindsey's "The Late Great Planet Earth" (1970), the best-selling religious book of the '70s, was pop dispensationalism. LaHaye and Jenkins have successfully serialized Darby's thinking into popular fiction, plugging into Americans' continuing fascination with premillennial themes. The series is "biblical," violent, politically conservative, centered on America and clear about who is good and who is evil.

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