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### Rethinking the Rapture

Not all scholars are swept away by Left Behind's end-times scenario

By BILL TAMMEUS  
The Kansas City Star

If you are among the tens of millions of readers of the *Left Behind* fiction books, some scholars are worried about you. They believe the series may mislead you into believing a Christian theology of Rapture they say is based on poor biblical scholarship.

"Sadly, what gets 'left behind' by the Rapture plotline is the Bible itself," Lutheran pastor and scholar Barbara R. Rossing writes in her new book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*.

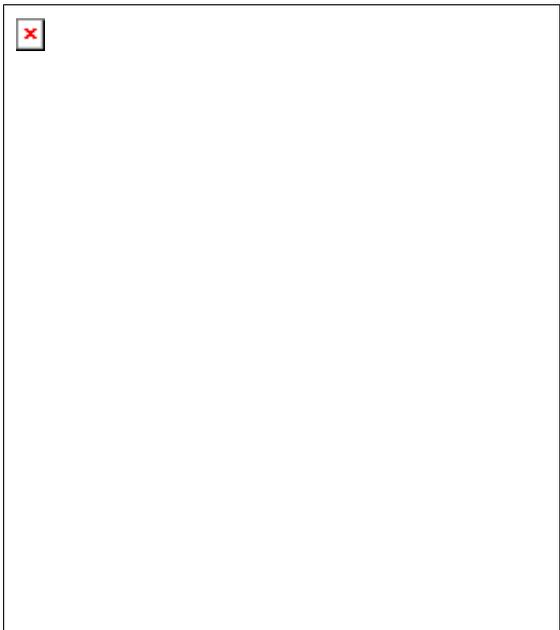
"Most Christian churches and biblical scholars condemn Rapture theology as a distortion of Christian faith with little biblical basis," says Rossing, an associate professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and former chaplain at Harvard University Divinity School.

But don't expect Rapture believers to agree. Wilburn T. Stancil, associate professor of theology and religious studies at Rockhurst University, notes that one prominent promoter of that theology, author Hal Lindsey, at least in his early writing, "not only disdains biblical scholars and religious leaders as impediments to the truth about the impending end-time scenario, but, in some cases, declares them to be participants in and agents of the very evil yet to come."

Rossing and others says that *Left Behind* authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins employ an end-of-

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the-world view known as “premillennial dispensationalism,” which has many vigorous defenders among Christians who call themselves fundamentalists. Based on the way its followers read the apocalyptic biblical book of Revelation, this theology suggests the world will go through a violent seven-year period of tribulation before Jesus Christ returns to Earth to reign in peace from Jerusalem for 1,000 years. (The term “millennium” comes from the Latin word *mille*, which means thousand.)

Followers of this belief also expect Christ will come and “rapture,” or elevate, true Christians off the Earth and into heaven before that trouble begins. Others will be “left behind” to deal with the turbulence. That scenario forms the background of the *Left Behind* books, the 12th and final of which has just been published.

Stancil, who has written extensively about premillennial dispensationalism, says it divides history “into time frames, or dispensations.” Many, but not all, followers of this system adopt the proposals of Cyrus I. Scofield, who published a popular reference Bible in 1909 that incorporates his ideas, Stancil says. Scofield described seven dispensations between the Creation and the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world.

Although Stancil says a belief in a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on Earth can be found in the writings of some early church fathers, Scofield's ideas are rooted in the thinking of John Nelson Darby, a 19th-century Church of England cleric who founded the Plymouth Brethren. Darby, who spent considerable time in America, may, in turn, have been amplifying the 1830 end-times visions of a 15-year-old girl in Scotland.

Stancil says premillennial dispensationalism has shown great “resiliency and adaptability” in the face of changing world events that premillennialists such as Lindsey interpret in light of their theology. Lindsey's 1970 book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, did much to popularize this theology.

Premillennial dispensationalism may seem “rigid and inflexible,” Stancil says, but, in fact, it is “capable of almost endless mutations.” Dispensationalists, he says, insist the Bible must be read literally, “though ironically, it's the symbolic ... interpretation of the Bible that fosters the adaptability found in Lindsey's view of the end times.

Rapture-based theology is misguided, Rossing says, because “God saves us not by snatching us out of the world, but by coming into the world to be with us.” She calls the rapture “an invented idea.” Theologian and author R.C. Sproul, founder of Ligonier Ministries of Orlando, Fla., holds a similar opinion, calling a rapture of the church at the start of seven years of tribulation “pure fiction” based on “manifestly flawed” theology.

Two other millennial schools of thought are prominent within Christianity, amillennialism and postmillennialism.

Amillennialism (literally “no millennium”) holds that good and evil will continue to coexist until Christ's Second Coming, the date of which is unknowable. Amillennialists reject the idea that Christ will establish a physical and literal reign of 1,000 years on Earth, but they see plenty of bad times between now and the end.

The amillennialist position is associated with St. Augustine, who lived and wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries. Several years ago David Wright, a professor of church history at the University of Edinburgh, noted in *Christian History* magazine that amillennialism “became the view of most



Christians in the West, including the Reformers, for almost a millennium and a half."

Postmillennialists, by contrast, believe that a golden age of peace, righteousness and prosperity will occur before Christ returns. In this scenario, most of the world gets converted to Christianity before the Second Coming, which occurs at the end of this peaceful millennium.

*Christian History* magazine says postmillennialism was "the view of most 19th-century evangelicals." The growth of the popularity of this view often is attributed to the 18th-century New England pastor, scholar and revivalist Jonathan Edwards.

In all three versions of millennialism, there are variations, including one called "historic premillennialism," which insists on the bodily return of Christ in history.

(Various kinds of millennialism also can be found in other religions. Some scholars suggest Christian millennialism grows out of what author and scholar Stanley J. Grenz describes as "a keen historical consciousness" that developed in Judaism.)

Some premillennialists think the Rapture will happen before the start of the seven years of tribulation. They call themselves "pre-trib." There also are "mid-trib" and "post-trib" adherents.

"We do not impose or enforce a particular millennial view on any of our theology faculties," says R. Philip Roberts, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Southern Baptist institution. "What is absolutely essential is a belief in the historical bodily return of Christ. You can find Southern Baptists who are pre-, post- and a- (millennial)... I would say that while a person may be pre-, post- or a-, they at least need to be pro."

All Christian millennial systems are drawn primarily from the book of Revelation, though other biblical texts also are cited.

But David May, a professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Seminary, an American Baptist institution in Kansas City, Kan., says that "if we asked any of the original readers-listeners of Revelation what millennial view they supported, they would have thought we were very strange."

The Book of Revelation has long fascinated and frustrated Christian leaders. For instance, neither Martin Luther nor John Calvin, leading 16th-century reformers, wrote a commentary on it. Luther said his "spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it — that Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized."

Calvin sometimes is quoted as saying that he didn't want to "add to the confusion" over the book and that "the study of Revelation either finds a man mad or leaves him that way." Scholars say those Calvin quotes may reflect his views but probably are apocryphal. Many, however, believe he found the book's apocalyptic nature too puzzling to write a commentary on it.

People who have studied the history of Christian millennialism say it provides a way for followers of Christ to resolve the problem of suffering and evil in the world, which John F. Haught, a theology professor at Georgetown University, calls "the open wound of religious thought."

In all versions of millennialism, evil loses in the end, and what Haught calls our "unfinished universe" is brought to a satisfying and just conclusion.

"The biblical view of things is that the world is shaped by promise," says Haught, who spoke recently in Kansas City, and the various versions of millennialism offer ways for God's promises to be fulfilled

Some scholars think Justin Martyr, a church leader who lived in the second century, may have been the first premillennialist, though some also point to a church father named Papias, who lived about the same time, as well as to Irenaeus, who came a bit later.

But the premillennial dispensationalism promoted by the *Left Behind* series has more recent roots as well as important implications for how its followers understand and react to world events.

Rossing, for instance, says people must understand Rapture theology "because of its growing influence on public policy." She writes that "peace and peace plans in the Middle East are a bad thing in the view of fundamentalist Christians, because they delay the countdown to Christ's return."

But the Bible, she writes, "does not provide a predictive screenplay for worldwide violence and disaster in the Middle East. Revelation's gift to us is a story of God who loves us and comes to live with us."

Stancil notes that premillennialists generally view the establishment of Israel in 1948 as "the one single event that started the ticking of the prophetic clock."

They view that, he says, as "the fulfillment of prophecy concerning the re-gathering of God's people ... For dispensationalism, the restored nation of Israel is the staging ground for the impending eschatological events."

Stancil says premillennialists often see wars, environmental degradation, plagues and natural disasters as evidence that the time of the Rapture is near, and with it will come an identification of the "anti-Christ," who will make things miserable for people left behind after the rapture.

Rossing views this theology as "an escapist interpretation (that) is the very opposite of the message of Revelation."

She and other scholars worry about the theology behind the *Left Behind* series because, she says, it can "encourage people to try to hasten the scripted apocalyptic events themselves, with deadly consequences for our world."

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### **Key texts**

*Passages of the Bible verses that premillennialists rely on heavily include:*

- *The book of Revelation, especially Chapter 20 (Verse 4 key);*
- *Chapter 24 of Matthew;*
- *1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18;*
- *Much of Daniel, especially 2:44, 7:27 and 9:27;*
- *Much of Ezekiel, especially Chapter 38.*



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