

# KEEPING THE END IN MIND: *LEFT BEHIND*, THE APOCALYPSE AND THE EVANGELICAL IMAGINATION<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

The *Left Behind* novels, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, illustrate how rapture fiction has become established as a highly successful sub-genre of Christian literature. However, their public reception – within popular and scholarly contexts – reflects an instrumentalisation of the novel that obscures their significance as cultural expressions of evangelical identity. This article challenges this tendency, drawing from social scientific research into reader negotiation of texts within the evangelical world, and argues that both processes of engaging with the novels, and the novels themselves, mirror an evangelicalism that is not simple, univocal or homogeneous, but is complex and conflicted.

## **The Emergence of Rapture Fiction**

In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, historian Mark Noll laments the theology produced by evangelical writers during the late modern period. Evangelical scholarship has, according to Noll, failed to pursue an “in-depth interaction with modern culture”,<sup>2</sup> preferring instead the safety of its own networks and institutions, hence its reputation for out-of-date thinking and close-mindedness. The same cannot be said of the evangelical imagination, and the creative industries have been increasingly adopted by evangelicals keen to engage with wider cultural innovations. Proceeding in tandem with the developments discussed by Noll, an increasingly prominent body of evangelical fiction has emerged, its most popular and evocative works inspired by distinctly apocalyptic themes. All were ultimately inspired by John Nelson Darby’s 19<sup>th</sup> century formulation of the end times, characterised by the rapture, tribulation, rise of the Antichrist, battle of Armageddon, and culminating in the triumphant second coming of Jesus in advance of the millennium. Within a generation of Darby’s death, Joseph Birkbeck Burroughs had published *Titan, Son of Saturn: The Coming World Emperor*, a lengthy book in which the author warns his readers of events foretold in the scriptures *via* the medium of what he calls a “religious story”, which recounts the rapture and coming of the Antichrist, passages of narrative drama interspersed with supporting Bible verses and a decoding of other ancient writings.<sup>3</sup> If this were not evidence enough, the theological motivations of the author are clear from the appendices that systematically argue for scriptural authority, including an endorsement of creationism over “men’s changeable teaching of evolution”,<sup>4</sup> and in the “Preparatory Advisement”, printed beneath the list of chapter headings, that begins: “This story is true”. Not much more than a decade later, Sydney Watson published the first in his trilogy of rapture novels, *In the Twinkling of an Eye*, soon followed by *The Mark of the Beast* and *Scarlet and Purple*.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by his reading of *Long Odds*, a pamphlet by a General Robertson, Watson was more confident than Burroughs in the power of the fictional tale to bring readers to a proper understanding of Christian truth. As such, he felt less need to incorporate excursus sections of Biblical evidence to support his narrative, and instead allowed his characters to voice the fear, hope, and faith surrounding the foretold end times, with heroic protagonists like successful journalist Tom Hammond embodying the initially sceptical, then curious, and finally fully converted observer of pre-rapture events unfolding in early twentieth century London.

After Watson, rapture fiction thrived most in the United States, where the initial influence of Darby's theology was further catalysed by global crises – not least the First World War, rise of Soviet communism and nuclear threat - that pointed, for some, to a coming apocalypse. As Crawford Gribben puts it, “Disaster fictions always sell, and the reason they sell to evangelicals is because these kinds of fictions emerge as the movement anticipates a future of acute crisis.”<sup>6</sup> This tendency was intensified by Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*<sup>7</sup>, a hugely influential dispensationalist decoding of contemporary geopolitical events that sold 28 million copies within the twenty years following its publication in 1970.<sup>8</sup> In addition to shaping the mood of cold war era evangelicalism, Lindsey's book inspired further examples of rapture fiction, like Frederick Tatford's *The Clock Strikes*,<sup>9</sup> which followed Lindsey's mapping of future military conflict. From this point on, the genre appears to have adopted a dual hermeneutic, looking to a Darbyite reading of the scriptures on the one hand, and an anxious eye on global political intrigue on the other. In effect, the latter became an unending source of inspiration for new dramatic retellings of the end times, in addition to provoking popular reflection on the validity of its inherent theological claims. In its presentation as ‘fiction’, the drama of end times themes was heightened by a medium keen to exploit the appeal of violence, pyrotechnics, and heroic struggle so effectively popularised in mass media entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

This was the literary context into which emerged the best-selling *Left Behind* series. The novels, written by evangelical leader and evangelist Tim LaHaye and evangelical author Jerry B. Jenkins, adopt the genre of the adventure thriller in recounting the ‘last days’, beginning with the rapture, when all of the faithful are miraculously transported into heaven (leading to the earthly disappearance of millions of people, and – in LaHaye and Jenkins' narrative – all of the children, including the unborn, on earth). The rapture understandably causes widespread panic, as trucks collide without their drivers, parents search in vain for their children, and governments lose control of nations driven to a state of chaos. The novel follows the lives of several individuals: Rayford Steele, a pilot and family man increasingly frustrated at his wife's attempts to convert him to her Christian faith, his strong-minded daughter Chloe, their pastor Bruce Barnes, who rails against God after finding himself ‘left behind’, and intrepid journalist Cameron ‘Buck’ Williams, whose coverage of tumultuous events in the Middle East draws him into the intrigue surrounding the rapture, and particularly those most likely to benefit from the resulting power vacuum. These characters go on to form the core of the ‘tribulation force’, the remnant of newly converted Christians who make it their mission to fight the forces of evil during the seven year period of the tribulation. At the heart of their struggle is the mysterious figure of Nicolae Carpathia, a Romanian diplomat who rises to become secretary general of the United Nations, then effectively world president, and who is exposed as the Antichrist. The tribulation is characterised by global conflict, suffering and social upheaval, with Christians increasingly persecuted by those representing the new world order, based around global unity and centralised power. Its climax arrives at the battle of Armageddon, when the Antichrist is finally defeated, coinciding with Jesus' return to earth, where he reigns over the new kingdom of God.

### **The Instrumentalization of *Left Behind***

Given its global popularity,<sup>11</sup> alignment of narrative content with agendas associated with the New Christian Right, and established status of LaHaye as a prominent spokesperson for this movement,<sup>12</sup> it is no surprise that *Left Behind* has generated controversy. It divides its

readership, and the loudest commentators are either acolytes who embrace the books' theological content or critics suspicious of the same ideas. That the popularity of these novels should provoke such a response is understandable, especially given the emotions associated with apocalyptic ideas; violence and death are common tropes, and it is worth remembering that the first *Left Behind* novel was published during the same year as the siege at Waco, when heavy-handed tactics by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms served to confirm the violent apocalyptic scenario the Branch Davidians were expecting, with tragic results.<sup>13</sup>

However, popular fears and politically charged hyperbole are not a strong basis for understanding religious rhetoric and its social implications. Not least, this kind of response has tended to encourage an *instrumentalization* of the novel, i.e. a tendency to articulate its significance chiefly in terms of a means to a particular end, most frequently assumed to be some kind of ideological agenda. Both supporters and critics alike tend to treat the novels as carriers of propositional truth claims; however clothed they may be in the subtleties of narrative, observers are keen to highlight what lies beneath, what they are *really* about, whether they like it or not. This engenders an oversimplification of the relationship between religious ideas and their human embodiment, and is a tendency that extends beyond popular discourse into more serious treatments of the *Left Behind* phenomenon.

For example, Crawford Gribben's *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis* offers a considered appraisal of the *Left Behind* series, grounded in a thorough understanding of the historical and theological traditions that inform it, but his critique sets the novels against the "careful and balanced articulation of biblical truth", and finds them wanting.<sup>14</sup> He refers to the series' "wider displacement of biblical norms"<sup>15</sup>, the novels viewed through the lens of a particular model of Protestant evangelical orthodoxy, and the characters, their conversations and behaviour, are treated as channels for a propositional Christian truth. A more uncompromising attempt to disprove and discredit *Left Behind* is found in Barbara Rossing's *The Rapture Exposed*,<sup>16</sup> which attempts to rescue the Bible in general, and the Book of Revelation in particular, from being tainted by *Left Behind's* purportedly erroneous interpretation. Carl Olson's *Will Catholics be Left Behind?* attempts to undermine the series' Darbyite dispensationalism by pointing to its "invention" in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, contrasting this with two millennia of Christian teaching that inform Roman Catholic perspectives on the end times.<sup>17</sup>

Less overtly theological treatments follow a similar pattern. Mark Sweetnam acknowledges the importance of treating the novels as complex cultural artefacts, while at the same time discussing them as if they were simply vehicles for dispensationalist theology. He refers to how the books offer a "renegotiation of evangelical norms", reflecting a preoccupation with how *Left Behind* stacks up against a presumed model of evangelical orthodoxy.<sup>18</sup> He also states that "the novels all undertheorise conversion",<sup>19</sup> suggesting a projection of scholarly expectations on to a very different literary form (after all, is it fair to expect novels to *theorise* anything?). Melanie McAlister attributes to the novels a quest to "authorize fundamentalist mappings of American global politics."<sup>20</sup> Daryl Jones interprets *Left Behind* as a vehicle for a variety of anti-liberal agendas, framed by the New Christian Right, including on abortion, sexuality and the role of the family.<sup>21</sup> It seems that the incontestable theological resonance of the novels, coupled with their unquestioned commercial success, has led its commentators to reconceive them as carriers of potent ideas, and then to evaluate them in terms of the legitimacy of these ideas. The emerging contributions largely adhere to a liberal/conservative

framework, and thereby reinscribe the logic of the ‘culture wars’ distinctive of US public discourse since the 1970s.

In one sense, the widespread instrumentalization of *Left Behind* is understandable given that Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins openly declare their role as both novelists in the business of entertainment *and* promoters of truth. As such, their novels are conceived – at least in part - as tools for evangelism.<sup>22</sup> They are keen to provoke individuals to a decision of faith, and according to the stories sent to the authors from grateful readers, they have achieved some very real success.<sup>23</sup> It is also understandable that those detracting from LaHaye and Jenkins’ portrayal of the end times, on Christian, political or moral grounds, would want to challenge story-bound ideas that have achieved such astonishing global exposure. But this does not necessitate treating the novels solely or even predominantly in instrumentalist terms, taking authorial intention as a straightforward indicator of narrative meaning. In a curious reversal of Roland Barthes’ ‘death of the author’,<sup>24</sup> attempts to praise or condemn *Left Behind* struggle to detach the meaning of the books from the evangelical profile of Jenkins and especially LaHaye. This is in the interests of some commentators as it then makes it easier to take issue with the authors’ supposed message, and some cynics may judge LaHaye and Jenkins’ work far too populist to merit the usual subtleties of literary criticism. But such an approach has two serious weaknesses: first, it engenders a homogenisation of *Left Behind*’s audience, and thereby misrepresents the Evangelical Protestant constituency associated with the series; and second, it implies a simplification of the relationship between reader and text. I offer a response to each of these issues in turn.

While most sources are vague about the precise constituency of the *Left Behind* readership, advocates and opponents polarise public discourse about the series by often assuming a blanket association with American Evangelical Protestantism. This is a far from straightforward descriptor, and sociological studies point to three related patterns of change that have complicated this movement in recent decades. First, internal diversification reflects the emergence of a range of evangelical sub-parties and tendencies, from progressive, ecologically minded Christians who retain an evangelical emphasis on social engagement and a personal relationship with Jesus, to left-leaning critics of neo-conservative politics who see in Jesus a call for social justice, to Bible-centred traditionalists suspicious of the world and those who govern it, to neo-evangelicals driven by a passion to convert western culture to a proper Biblical standard, often lobbying those on Capitol Hill as a means to this end.<sup>25</sup> The ‘Bible believers’ are not (if indeed they ever were) a homogeneous group, and are actually growing more diverse as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Second, the once close alignment between evangelical Christianity and right-wing politics is fragmenting, so that neither can be assumed to be a simple carrier of the other.<sup>26</sup> Prominent evangelical authors writing on political matters in the run up to the 2008 presidential election reflected a significant interest in issues traditionally associated with the Left, including climate change, poverty and war, as well as a willingness to accommodate to religious pluralism, and a desire to decouple the evangelical movement from the Republican Party.<sup>27</sup> Third, while evangelicals still make up a large proportion of the US population, the latest national surveys suggest that atheists/agnostics now make up a comparable proportion (i.e. around 25%).<sup>28</sup> Evangelical advocates punch well above their weight in the public spheres of US culture, but their public profile is not a straightforward mirror of their grassroots expression.

Evangelical Christianity is less united, less a vehicle for right wing politics and less dominant in the USA than it once was. Moreover, the dispensationalist Christianity associated with *Left Behind* cannot be easily placed as a hermeneutical template over specific evangelical

factions, denominations or parachurch organisations. It is not at all clear how many US citizens embrace the dispensationalist interpretation of scripture; methods of measuring this constituency are frustratingly unreliable and inconsistently applied, and authors citing definite figures often base their claims on out of date sources, media-sponsored polls of limited reliability or pure conjecture.<sup>29</sup> In better understanding the Christianity enveloped among those engaging with the books, it makes more sense to acknowledge a dispersed and diverse audience. In the only book length scholarly analysis of how US Christians engage with the *Left Behind* series, Amy Johnson Frykholm interviewed committed readers from a wide range of denominational backgrounds, including Presbyterians, Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Mormons, a readership extending well beyond the “white evangelical mainstream”.<sup>30</sup> The novels’ penetration of mainstream consumer markets, not least *via* its associated merchandise, also warns against overly confident claims about a niche readership. *Left Behind* recruits enthusiasts from across the Christian spectrum and beyond. While many may claim the ‘evangelical’ label, what they have in common is far less clear than might be expected.

Frykholm’s book, *Rapture Culture*, is also instructive in challenging preconceptions about how *Left Behind* is appropriated by those who read the books. The scare stories of some liberals suggest a literary poison infecting the minds of vulnerable Christians,<sup>31</sup> and commentators also often assume readers are essentially passive in their acceptance of any inherent ideological message.<sup>32</sup> However, Frykholm’s research suggests a far more subtle picture. In her analysis of how readers of apocalyptic fiction negotiate their way through these texts, she discovered that the *Left Behind* novels are read by evangelicals in a variety of ways, on their own terms as fiction, and with an evident sense of irony. The anxiety of liberal opponents, that Christian conservatives will not have the critical facility to negotiate these stories responsibly, conveys a misguided impression that they serve as political manifestos or textual plausibility structures for an insidious worldview, one that conservatives of a certain persuasion will find difficult to resist. (In this respect, the public response to *Left Behind* evokes the alarmist debates about ‘brainwashing’ associated with New Religious Movements during the 1980s<sup>33</sup>). And yet the process of finding meaning in the texts appears far more complex, calling for a more subtle approach that avoids the totalizing of audiences and the neglect of readerly negotiation.<sup>34</sup>

### **Reclaiming the Reader: Insights from the Social Sciences**

The set of assumptions that associates evangelical textual engagement with an uncritical absorption of authoritative, univocal meanings can be challenged on the basis of social scientific research that empirically examines the experiences of readers. Frykholm’s work is highly instructive in this respect, and presents *Left Behind* readers not as isolated, passive individuals but active agents engaged in a meaning-making process, often in open dialogue with friends, family, co-believers and church leaders.<sup>35</sup> The process of reading is social, binding individuals together in significant networks reinforced by the image of a Christian community with clear boundaries that is projected by the novels. However, in generating discussion, it also provides contexts for “challenges to religious authority, for differences to emerge and be expressed”, including on the quality and theological legitimacy of the novels themselves, and in doing so, “points out theological and social differences over which readers then must grapple.”<sup>36</sup> This challenges understandings that assume ‘meaning’ is a hermeneutical end facilitated by a process of textual engagement, instead presenting reading as a process of social engagement that does not demand epistemic closure, resolution or

consensus. In this sense Frykholm's work echoes recent research into Bible reading among US evangelicals, research that upsets entrenched understandings of text, reader and the 'literalism' presumed to connect the two. For authors such as James Bielo<sup>37</sup>, Susan Harding<sup>38</sup> and Brian Malley<sup>39</sup>, the significance of the scriptures for Protestant evangelicals cannot be detached from the social processes of textual engagement, structured by "communities of practice".<sup>40</sup> In such contexts, meaning is forged out of processes of negotiation, and texts – including the Bible – are engaged as resources within this process. Harding highlights how evangelicals create narratives for themselves, drawing on Biblical ideas and images, and vocalising these narratives in social settings – sometimes in the tradition of public testimony – as part of the process of learning how to embody their Christian identity.<sup>41</sup> The achievement of a settled, agreed meaning one can attach to a particular text might not be of primary importance, in some cases treated as secondary to the process of discussing and evaluating the *possibilities of meaning* emerging from the text.<sup>42</sup> In this sense Bielo stresses the social context of Bible reading; even in solitude, the process of meaning-making engages with a community of recognised voices. This radically situated process is illustrated in an account offered by one of Frykholm's interviewees, a *Left Behind* reader on the margins of evangelicalism.

"Susan's doubt is tied to her lack of a religious community, but at the same time, she is well aware of the demands, restrictions, and beliefs of evangelicalism, to which she nominally belongs. In discussing the novels, she very often takes up orthodox positions that she also later, in another context, undermines."<sup>43</sup>

Taking account of readerly negotiation highlights the hermeneutical limitations associated with instrumentalising the text. In assuming a relatively homogenous and passive audience, we misrepresent the complex, interactive process of meaning-making that emerges from an engagement with the *Left Behind* novels. An ideological context certainly frames this process, but it does not determine it, and readers draw from broader social contexts to " 'create the message' of the texts for themselves."<sup>44</sup> Within the context of this mode of engagement, authority – and hence the rationale behind any instrumentalising tendency – is at best unstable, and narrative meaning achieves what Robert Howard calls a "plasticity" that allows diverse interpretations to be forged from a single text.<sup>45</sup>

The literature on the social life of the Bible alerts us to the dangers of making quick assumptions about the consumption of *Left Behind* as a cultural text; it also reminds us of the essentially contested, conflicted and complex make-up of contemporary evangelical identities in western cultures. This complexity is reflected, I would argue, in the narrative development of the novels. While commentators often present the *Left Behind* canon as a straightforward body of ideas, a coherent 'message' that is without nuance or tension, I would suggest this is overstated. Gribben is on to something when he describes the series as a "barometer of the changing evangelical condition"<sup>46</sup>, but this condition, and the novels mirroring it, are more complex and less ideologically univocal than is often argued. This is explored below *via* a particular example: the novels' presentation of knowledge and its proper sources.

### **Left Behind with Common Sense Realism**

In keeping with the literal meaning of 'apocalyptic', the unveiling of truth is central to *Left Behind*, as the protagonists realise they are living in the end times and seek to persuade others of this. Their professed source for this new knowledge is of course the Bible. Characters

whose faith is held up as a model do not refer to any Christian authority beyond the scriptures. Religious officials are often portrayed as corrupt, misguided or unchristian<sup>47</sup>, and the only major clerical character in the first novel – the pastor Bruce Barnes – is notable for his informality and open acknowledgement of fallibility (in the first book, he offers an extended account of how his pre-rapture Christianity was ‘phony’). His role is to guide the other members of the tribulation force by pointing them to the appropriate Biblical passages in making sense of their experiences.

And yet the scriptures are not simply set out as vessels of truth that demand an unquestioning faith; rather, they highlight truths that have their manifest supporting evidence in human experience.<sup>48</sup> The truth is presented as plain and obvious, for those willing to see it. The indebtedness of the US evangelical movement to the philosophical tradition of ‘Common Sense Realism’ has long been recognised. The epistemological arguments of Thomas Reid and Francis Bacon, in particular, are presented by historians as filtering into pre-civil war America, shaping popular cultural assumptions about what can be known and how. The ‘common sense’ claim that our perceptions of the world can be depended upon as offering direct knowledge, rather than being filtered by ideal forms of some kind, has underpinned evangelical orientations to the Bible as a straightforward and unmediated source of truth, and furnished evangelicals with a set of counter arguments against the ‘higher criticism’ that gained ascendancy during the late nineteenth century. This epistemological relationship has persisted throughout the twentieth century, remaining particularly acute within dispensationalist thinking. Writing in 1985, Mark Noll argued that this melding of influences led to “the widespread evangelical assumption that proper theology is constructed by joining the *facts* of Scripture into a scientific system.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the popular theology published by Tim LaHaye before *Left Behind* reflects the same assumptions.<sup>50</sup> In subsequent years, and as popular evangelicalism has come to look to alternative media for theological inspiration, rapture fiction might be viewed as a kind of surrogate for such a ‘system’, while its medium as a novel carries an inherent potential for divergent responses (see above). The medium allows - perhaps encourages - what sociologist Christian Smith has called “pervasive interpretive pluralism”,<sup>51</sup> while its advocates *affirm* its emergent message as unchanging, unified, coherent, Biblical truth.

This essentially ambiguous representation of the basis of meaning is affirmed in the books’ own narrative. In *Tribulation Force*, Pastor Bruce Barnes preaches to his newly founded church on the book of Revelation, demonstrating to his listeners how the prophecies associated with the four horsemen of the apocalypse are being fulfilled in the contemporary political innovations of Nicolae Carpathia. In one sense it is presented as an exercise in Biblical scholarship and evidence-based persuasion; Bruce says he has “read more, prayed more, and studied more this week than ever”; as he speaks he is described as referring “to his notes, to the reference books, to the Bible”, while most of the congregants are taking notes, following him with a Bible of their own. And yet what emerges is conceived as plain truth, unadulterated by human input; Buck reflects on Carparthia’s own captivating speeches, but sees them as “choreographed, manipulated. Bruce wasn’t trying to impress anyone with anything but the truth of the Word of God.” Correspondingly, Bruce’s interpretation of what are complex metaphorical passages is described as a “literal” reading; on the one hand, he acknowledges different interpretations of the timing of the tribulation, but then distances himself from readings that present these passages as “mere symbolism”. As placed within the reflections of Rayford Steele, listening to and increasingly inspired by Barnes’ sermon, “All of a sudden it was alright to take Scripture at its word!”<sup>52</sup>

But scripture is not simply taken at its word. Rather, affirmations of literalism enter into the narrative interspersed with attempts to negotiate a more complex hermeneutic. In one respect, the events of the *Left Behind* novels present a vivid endorsement of common sense realism; the more the stories unveil the fantastical public events of the tribulation, the less belief in the truth of the Bible becomes a matter of faith, and the more a case of logical induction. After all, faced with the bodily disappearance of millions of people across the globe, a disappearance witnessed by millions more, the rapture becomes a fairly plausible explanation. Evidence from experience genuinely reinforces the validity of the scriptures, so long as they are taken as linear prophecies of future human destiny: “history, written in advance”.<sup>53</sup>

The *Left Behind* novels embody and affirm a dual hermeneutic that proclaims authority, consistency and ‘plain truth’ in the common sense tradition, alongside a fictional play of meanings that carries multiple tendentious associations and some significant ambiguity. This is not restricted to their presentation of knowledge and its sources; indeed, an analogous ambiguity can be found within the novels’ management of two other major themes. First, the presentation of Roman Catholicism in the novels breaks from the traditional dispensationalist invective about the Antichrist; the Pope is raptured, and several Catholic churches are presented in a highly positive light.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church plays a key role in the Antichrist’s rule, and the authors retain mocking references to forms of religion commonly associated with Protestant stereotypes of Catholicism.<sup>55</sup> The authors retain a Protestant suspicion of religious officials and ritual, and yet appear mindful of recent developments whereby evangelicals and Catholics have shared the same platform; the old boundaries remain, but their defence is less aggressive and less assured. Second, the elevation of subjective experience as a centre of the Christian life is far from straightforward, on the one hand celebrating US individualism in its suspicion of one-world government (an ambition of the Antichrist),<sup>56</sup> on the other struggling to convey diversity in the novels’ portrayal of Christian converts. The central characters struggle with their decision to come to faith – and emotional trauma is used to validate the conversion of men in particular - but once the decision is made, individual subjectivity is merged into a fairly uniform contingency of Christians who “talk the same, act the same, and have the same values.”<sup>57</sup> *Left Behind* mirrors contemporary evangelicalism, but its tensions are retained, not resolved, in the books’ narrative. In this sense, instrumentalist readings are challenged by both patterns of readerly negotiation and by the expression of evangelical culture found in the novels themselves.

## **Conclusions: Reclaiming Imagination**

The anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano claims that imagination can facilitate our sense of domination over the real, by valorising our capacity to challenge its rules and break with its conventions.<sup>58</sup> This is especially striking in the case of apocalyptic ideas, which historian Stephen O’Leary links to ideas of utopia: “The utopian imagination is – suddenly, powerfully, briefly – inflamed by the immediate prospect of radical change, by visions of an apocalypse now.”<sup>59</sup> And yet this imaginative expansion of real-life possibilities by no means guarantees their realisation; apocalyptic expectation can just as easily engender an empty hope, which in turn may fund emerging understandings of life’s boundaries. Foregrounding imagination within our approach to rapture fiction provokes a greater sensitivity to the tensions inherent in this literature, tensions, I would argue, that reflect attempts by evangelicals to negotiate their relationship with western modernity since the beginnings of

the twentieth century. Having studied various forms of Christian fundamentalism, Crapanzano is all too aware of the tendency among its advocates and its critics to focus upon fixity, closure and, especially in apocalyptic circles, finality. He questions those who attribute such characteristics to an anxiety before the unknown, the uncertain or the unstable<sup>60</sup>, suggesting we could just as easily “attribute the desire for fixity to the pleasures of invention and (illusory) domination”,<sup>61</sup> associating a desire for the narrative rendering of ideas not with the pathological, but with a positive human urge towards control *via* creativity.

In one sense, *Left Behind* frustrates the imagination, especially in its unrelenting determination to map the tribulation and end times in exhaustive narrative detail. Nothing is left to the imagination, arguably in the service of a consumerist thirst for immediate satisfaction and impatience with deferred meaning. *Left Behind* demystifies the end times, offering instead a narrative seam within which readers may position themselves. Some may associate this tendency with a peculiarly American evangelicalism manifest in a garrulous interaction, intolerant of silence, inaction or pause.<sup>62</sup> And yet, there is also a recognition that dramatic momentum demands a strong and recurring sense of the unknown or unpredictable, and in *Left Behind* this is invested in its core characters, whose fate is always in the balance. Initiated dispensationalist readers may be fully aware of the chronology of the end times that pervades the series, and therefore know how the story ends; what they do not know is whether Ray, Chloe, Buck and Bruce will make it to the final chapter.

This is one of the many ways in which *Left Behind* cuts against the instrumentalist assumptions of its commentators, who keep ‘the end’ in mind both in a focus on the eschatological, but also in a misleading preoccupation with the stated aims and ambitions of its authors. LaHaye and Jenkins may have clear and obvious intentions, but the narrative form of the novels counts against interpretations that reduce their meaning to such ends. The history of Protestant Christianity has often been characterised by a tension between a thirst for the discursive articulation of definitive truth, and a wariness towards those ineffable realities that somehow underpin such expressions. In one sense the emergence of a distinctively apocalyptic genre of fiction has provided a means of holding these two phenomena in tension within an acceptable medium. In tracing the history of rapture fiction, from Burroughs, through Watson, Tatford, to LaHaye and Jenkins, we see how the novel becomes increasingly accepted as a medium of Christian truth, as evidenced in these authors’ increasing confidence in releasing the narrative from explicit Biblical punctuation – as most strikingly evident with Burroughs – and allowing the narrative to foster creative possibilities not so obviously drawn from a canon of accepted dispensational teaching. In this sense, *Left Behind* is not a simple vessel for evangelical ideas, as often proclaimed by its critics, but is one site for the expression and negotiation of evangelical tensions, forged out of a confrontation with western modernity.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> J.B. Burroughs, *Titan, Son of Saturn: The Coming World Emperor, A Story of the Other Christ* (Oberlin, Ohio: The Emeth Publishers, 1905).

<sup>4</sup> Burroughs, *Titan, Son of Saturn*, p. 427.

<sup>5</sup> S. Watson, *In the Twinkling of an Eye*, Old Tappan (NJ: Spire Books, 1921); *The Mark of the Beast* (Edinburgh: B. McCall Barbour, 1974); *Scarlet and Purple* (Edinburgh: B. McCall Barbour, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> C. Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006), p. 61.

- <sup>7</sup> H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970).
- <sup>8</sup> C. Gribben, "Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition", *Literature and Theology* 18/1 (2004), p. 81.
- <sup>9</sup> F. Tatford, *The Clock Strikes* (London: Lakeland, 1971).
- <sup>10</sup> It is perhaps no accident that cold-war influenced rapture fiction experienced most success and mass exposure at the same time that the big budget disaster films became so popular in Hollywood. The genre defining *Airport* appeared in 1970, the same year that Lindsey's book was published, while Irwin Allen's *The Poseidon Adventure* was released the following year, followed by *The Towering Inferno* in 1974, all achieving massive success at the box office.
- <sup>11</sup> While situated within an established tradition of rapture fiction, *Left Behind* has achieved commercial success well beyond its predecessors. Working with figures from *Publishers' Weekly*, *USA Today* and *Newsweek*, Wikipedia has the total sales figures of books within the *Left Behind* series in excess of 65 million, and its commercial success extends into a variety of related products, including 3 movie adaptations, numerous spin off volumes, both fiction and popular theological, audio books, and CDs of the *Left Behind* radio series.
- <sup>12</sup> Tim LaHaye was co-founder, with Jerry Falwell, of the Moral Majority, the conservative campaign group established in the 1970s to lobby for the advancement of evangelical causes within American public life. He is also the author of a number of popular and self-help books on marriage, sexuality, interpreting the Bible and living a Christian life in a secular America, all from an evangelical – some might say fundamentalist – perspective.
- <sup>13</sup> See L. Foster et al, 'Forum: Interpreting Waco', *Religion and American Culture* 8/1 (1998) 1-30.
- <sup>14</sup> Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis*, p. 90.
- <sup>15</sup> Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis*, pp. 91, 92.
- <sup>16</sup> B. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
- <sup>17</sup> C.E. Olson, *Will Catholics be Left Behind? A Catholic Critique of the Rapture and Today's Prophecy Preachers* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2003).
- <sup>18</sup> This tendency is also very much in evidence in Sweetnam's treatment of dispensationalism more generally. See M. Sweetnam, 'Defining Dispensationalism: A Cultural Studies Perspective', *Journal of Religious History* 34/ 2 (2010) 191-212.
- <sup>19</sup> M. Sweetnam, 'Introduction', in C. Gribben and M. Sweetnam (eds) *Left Behind and the Evangelical Imagination* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2006), p. 5.
- <sup>20</sup> M. McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular: The Left Behind Series and Christian Fundamentalism's New World Order', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102/4 (2003) 773-798; p. 782.
- <sup>21</sup> D. Jones, 'The Liberal Antichrist – *Left Behind* in America', in K. Newport and C. Gribben (eds), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 97-112.
- <sup>22</sup> T. LaHaye and J. B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, ILL:Tyndale, 1999).
- <sup>23</sup> See T. LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins, *These Will Not Be Left Behind: True Stories of Changed Lives* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 2003).
- <sup>24</sup> R. Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148.
- <sup>25</sup> D.M. Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); C. Smith, *Christian America: What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000); R. Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), pp. 155-6.
- <sup>26</sup> R. Putnam and D. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010); Smith, *Christian America*, p. 128.
- <sup>27</sup> J.G. Stackhouse, Jr., 'A Variety of Evangelical Politics', *Christianity Today*, November (2008) 52-57; also see M. Guest, 'Evangelicalism and Capitalism in Transatlantic Context', *Politics and Religion* 4/2 (2010) 257-280.
- <sup>28</sup> B.A. Kosmin and A. Keysar, 'American Religious Identification Survey [ARIS 2008]: Summary Report' (Hartford: CT: Trinity College, 2009).
- <sup>29</sup> E.g. In a 2004 article, Crawford Gribben refers to the "estimated eight million Americans... 'firmly committed' to the variety of millennialism the novels advance.", citing the Introduction to Dwight Wilson's *Armageddon Now!*, published in 1977. Wilson himself cites no source for his claim. Gribben, "Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition", p. 78; D. Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel since 1917* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), p. 12.
- <sup>30</sup> A.J. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: OUP, 2004), p. 68.
- <sup>31</sup> R.K. Fenn, *Dreams of Glory: The Sources of Apocalyptic Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 6.
- <sup>32</sup> In his analysis of online discussions of apocalyptic themes following 9/11, Robert Howard acknowledges an active negotiation of fresh elements introduced into apocalyptic discourse, but nevertheless retains an essentialist notion of "core values" that are shared and "internalized" among Christian End Times believers. See R.G. Howard, 'Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity in Online Apocalyptic Discourse After September 11, 2001', *Journal of Media and Religion*, 5/1 25-47; p. 33.
- <sup>33</sup> For a critical discussion, see E. Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
- <sup>34</sup> C. Gribben 'After Left Behind – The Paradox of Evangelical Pessimism', in K. Newport and C. Gribben (eds) *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 113-130; p. 117.
- <sup>35</sup> This is reinforced in Dawn Llewellyn's work on female readers in the UK, who, while engaging with preferred texts in private, do not seek an escapist experience but allow the books to challenge and develop their religious and spiritual lives. D. Lewellyn, 'Riskier Reading: Women's Spiritual Reading and the Search for Religious Knowledge', in M Guest and E Arweck (eds), *Religion and Knowledge: Sociological Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 167-182.

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- <sup>36</sup> Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, pp. 46-8.
- <sup>37</sup> J.S. Bielo, 'On the Failure of 'Meaning': Bible Reading in the Anthropology of Christianity', *Culture and Religion*, 9/1 (2008) 1-21.
- <sup>38</sup> S. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- <sup>39</sup> B. Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004).
- <sup>40</sup> Bielo, 'On the Failure of 'Meaning'', p. 4.
- <sup>41</sup> Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, p. 60.
- <sup>42</sup> Bielo, 'On the Failure of 'Meaning'', p. 5.
- <sup>43</sup> Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, p. 77.
- <sup>44</sup> Frykholm, *Rapture Culture* p. 87.
- <sup>45</sup> Howard, 'Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity'.
- <sup>46</sup> Gribben, 'Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition', p. 92.
- <sup>47</sup> This is a theme LaHaye and Jenkins inherited from previous examples of the rapture fiction genre, e.g. see Watson, *In the Twinkling of an Eye*, pp. 258-9.
- <sup>48</sup> Andrew Strombeck makes a similar point in arguing that, within the novels, faith is presented as a "market-based decision; believing Christians are simply rational economic actors making a good choice given the available options." A. Strombeck, 'Invest in Jesus: Neoliberalism and the Left Behind Novels', *Cultural Critique* 64 (2006) 161-195; p. 168. The present argument is consistent with this interpretation, but focuses on what the narrative implies about the status of knowledge, rather than the status of individual decision making.
- <sup>49</sup> M.A. Noll, 'Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought', *American Quarterly* 37/ 2 (1985), p. 231 (my emphasis)
- <sup>50</sup> E.g. see T. LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1980).
- <sup>51</sup> C. Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011).
- <sup>52</sup> T. LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins, *Tribulation Force* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1996), pp. 62-67. Similar tensions are evident in a passage describing Rayford delivering a sermon, using Bruce's notes, on Revelation 6. See T. LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins, *Nicolae* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1997), pp. 324-7.
- <sup>53</sup> Cited in Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis*, p. 56.
- <sup>54</sup> T. LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins, *The Remnant* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 2002), p. 343.
- <sup>55</sup> For example, the succeeding Pope is named Pontifex Maximus Peter the Second, the elaborate title reflecting a vain, pretentious character interested in power over truth (LaHaye and Jenkins, *Tribulation Force*, p. 279). Evocations of idol worship also appear via the character of Guy Blod, a homosexual artist commissioned with the task of producing a larger than life statue of Carpathia made of bronze (T. LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins, *The Indwelling* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 2000), pp. 61-66). Blod is rather mockingly portrayed as a camp, self-involved fop, embodying a range of qualities commonly vilified by the US evangelical movement, and implying, Strombeck argues, a neoliberal emphasis upon "efficiency over cultural enrichment". Strombeck, "Invest in Jesus", p. 178.
- <sup>56</sup> T. LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins, *Soul Harvest* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1999), p. 324.
- <sup>57</sup> Strombeck, "Invest in Jesus", p. 180.
- <sup>58</sup> V. Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Philosophical Anthropology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 19.
- <sup>59</sup> cited in Fenn, *Dreams of Glory*, p. 1.
- <sup>60</sup> e.g. Zigmunt Bauman presents fundamentalism as a response to the postmodern condition. See Z. Bauman, 'Postmodern Religion?', in P. Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 55-78.
- <sup>61</sup> Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, p. 23.
- <sup>62</sup> Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, p. 50.