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APOCALYPTICISM AND NUCLEAR WAR

By: Randall Reed

Apocalypticism has been a part of Christian history since at least the end of the first century. Christianity has been replete with examples of apocalyptic fever, sometimes stemming from arcane mathematical equations, sometimes from dramatic political and social events. The rise of Protestantism with its move to put the Bible into the hands of laity, created a new world in which apocalyptic speculation was now available to everyone. The tumultuous political events in seventeenth-century England, and the rise of Dispensationalism in the nineteenth century, both were the result of this. However, when Dispensationalism became dominant in the United States, a new chapter of apocalypticism, this time tightly focused on political events, dominated the stage. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki along with the brutality exhibited in the two World Wars and the subsequent establishment of the state of Israel, created a new environment for an unexpected validation of Dispensationalism. With the continual threat of nuclear annihilation as part of the cold war, a new popularized understanding of the imminence of the end of the world erupted. This new millenarianism was propagated by a variety of groups, most notably, Evangelical Christians. Today, the Left Behind series (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995) has continued the dispensationalist tradition of terror, but voices have been raised in protest to it, including a new eschatological movement called "Preterism."

HISTORY OF APOCALYPTICISM

"Apocalypticism is the mother of Theology." This statement, made by Ernst Kasemann, one of the preeminent New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, indicates the importance of apocalypticism for the development of Christianity (Kasemann 1982). While the debate rages as to whether Jesus himself advocated the imminent end of the world, there is little doubt that the notion of an apocalyptic climax to history coming extraordinarily soon was advocated by the apostle Paul, and reaches a full canonical exploration in the book of Revelation. Likewise, the historical Jesus aside, the first presentation of the life of Jesus in the New Testament, the gospel of Mark, is unrelenting in its

interpretation of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet culminating in the so-called little apocalypse in Mark 13.

The apocalypticism of the New Testament thus is undisputed. In fact, the early Christians' emphasis on the end can be seen in the writings of later epistles, who continued to defend the notion even when it became clear that Jesus's return, and the soon to follow end of the world, was not immediately forthcoming. Peter II (an epistle probably writing in the late first century c.e. or early second century c.e.) quotes scoffers who say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." The epistle writer's response is to argue that God's time is God's own saying, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:4–9). Even in the light of unfulfilled eschatological expectations, early Christians maintained an allegiance to an apocalyptic theology.

The practice of setting dates started not long after Christianity started. The Epistle of Barnabas in the second century predicted the demise of the world after 6,000 years from its creation. This was derived by taking the book of 2 Peter's helpful equation of a day equaling 1,000 years, and then multiplying it by the days of creation (chapter 6). While no exact year was set by Barnabas, the focus on temporal calculations was thereby established. By the third century, Jesus's life had been inserted into the calculation as the midpoint of the last day by Hippolytus of Rome. By exactly setting the date of Jesus's birth, the end could be reliably predicted as 500 years after that date. In the fifth century this was extended to both 700 and 800 c.e., yet as those dates drew near, the apocalypse still seemed forestalled. Ultimately, as the year 6000 (from the supposed date of creation) approached, the whole system seemed problematic. In light of this, the calendar change to Anno Domini (a.d.), which changed year one to the year Jesus was born, functioned to revise all dates and calculations. The fact that this shift occurred about the time the old calculation system appeared to be heading towards disconfirmation should not be ignored.

As the year 1000 c.e. approached, another rise in apocalypticism occurred. Previous scholars have actually overemphasized the importance of 1,000. Two factors were important here: First, the Anno Domini system had yet to be universally accepted within Christendom. Second, historical evidence shows a lack of signs of true apocalyptic fervor, items like wills, weddings, and contracts appear to have been made with no fear of an impending end. Still, there is evidence of a "heightened millennial expectation" (Baumgartner 2001, 56). Additionally, political stresses seemed to indicate that the time of the end was at hand. With the Norse attacks in the north, and the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem, many saw signs of the end clearly fulfilled by current events. And as Pope Urban inaugurated the first Crusade, he referred to the impending Second Coming, which demanded that Jerusalem be retaken for Christ's return.

With Martin Luther and the rise of Protestantism, the focus on eschatology changed its tenor. Luther himself was not an apocalypticist. While he understood the papacy as a form of generalized antichrist, he eschewed any sense of date setting. While previously he had a sense that the end might be near; as the Pope failed to heed his call to reform, the Turkish continued incursions into Christian lands (including the capture of Constantinople), and his movement met trouble in some quarters, so he was led to a surer conviction that the apocalypse was at hand. Still, more important than his own

convictions, was the move to put the bible in the language of the laity. Suddenly, in conjunction with the advent of the printing press, the book of Revelation went from being something selectively quoted from by the clergy (mostly on All Saints Day), to something available for the masses to use for millennial speculation. Despite his own vacillation and misgivings on apocalyptic in general, and the book of Revelation in particular, Luther must be credited with being the father of modern apocalyptic speculation, even if unintentionally, through the widespread distribution of the Bible in the vernacular.

A good example of this can be seen in England in the seventeenth century. The Puritan Revolution of England was infused with millennial concerns from its very inception. The Pope was identified as the antichrist, and when King Charles I proceeded to try to have Parliament arrested, he was seen as ally of the antichrist, and an apocalyptic battle was joined between the forces of Christ (Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army) and the forces of the Beast (Charles' loyalists). When the King was ultimately defeated (in 1646) and the Puritans took control, there was a new expectation that the time was at hand when "King Jesus" would come and take the throne. This was conjoined with the idea that 1666 was a momentous year prophetically. Different millennialist groups arose around this time including the Ranters, the Levellers, the Diggers, the Quakers and the Fifth Monarchy Men (who included Lords, generals and members of parliament). The apocalyptic flame dimmed considerably after the Restoration, yet the Quakers (though in a decidedly less millennialist version) still continue to this day. The explosion of millennial groups during this time can be linked, at least partially, to the availability of the biblical text started by Luther. In England, the creation and distribution of the King James Version Bible fueled the proliferation of apocalyptic movements.

THE RISE OF DISPENSATIONALISM

As we move to the modern era, the single most important person to the apocalypticism found in evangelical and fundamentalist denominations and churches, is John Nelson Darby. John Nelson Darby developed the notion of dispensationalism. The basis of dispensationalism was the notion that the world could be divided up into seven ages (dispensations). The first four dispensations are mostly found in the first two books of the bible: The Adamic Convention, The Noahic Covenant, The Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant then lasts for the rest of Jewish history until the coming of Jesus. Jesus's death initiates the fifth age of the Gentiles, and the sixth age of the Spirit. The seventh age would follow with Jesus's return and the advent of the millennium reign of Christ.

While Darby eschewed any attempt to set the time of Jesus's return, his approach to Jesus's first coming was less circumspect. Darby held that Jesus's earthly appearance in Galilee had been divinely and accurately predicted by Daniel's 77s prophecy in Daniel 9.

While the dating had some problems, Darby argued that Jesus's life was exactly 69 weeks of years (69×7 or 483 years) from the time of Artaxerxes's decree, allowing Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem and reconstruct its walls in 444 b.c.e. Christ's return therefore should have occurred in the seventieth week, seven years after his crucifixion by this dating system. However, when the Jewish people of the time failed to embrace Jesus as their messiah, Darby believed, the prophetic time clock was stopped. Christ returned was thus postponed to a later time.

This was predicated upon a division Darby made that was pivotal for dispensationalism: the distinction between earthly Israel and the heavenly Church. For Darby, the prophecies in the Bible were either about the Church or Israel.

Prophecies pertaining to Israel could not be applied to the Church, and vice versa. The result of this is that prophecies relating specifically to the church are very few. Most pertain to the Church's establishment and power and then its removal before the great tribulation. It is Israel that is center stage for most prophecies, and particularly those at the end. The dispensationalists hold that the Church exists in the great parenthesis between dispensations; a time not included in the biblical timetable of history, and of indeterminate length.

Of course, with the dissolution of Israel as a nation following the Jewish War of 70 c.e. and the Bar Kochba revolt of the second century, Israel was no longer a player on the world stage. Dispensationalism held that the end times would begin with the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel where the temple would be rebuilt. Thereafter, the anti-Christ arises, who would appear to bring peace to the Jews, but ultimately breaks his agreement with them and plunges the world into a time of great tribulation. The tribulation will last 1,260 days (3 1/2 years) ending with the final battle of Armageddon, the defeat of the anti-Christ, and the return of Jesus.

A key doctrine that the dispensationalists held was the notion of the "rapture." The rapture is the taking of the church off the earth by God. Christ will descend in the air, and the believers will be caught up with him and be taken to heaven, safe from the ensuing terrors on earth. There is some dispute as to when the rapture occurs. Three positions, pre-tribulationist, mid-tribulationist and post-tribulationist have been suggested. However, the majority of dispensationalists have held to a pre-tribulationist understanding of the rapture. The rapture will occur before the tribulation, and the church will be spared the horrors that will confront the rest of humanity.

The actual development of the doctrine of the rapture is a debated area. The term "rapture" does not appear in the Greek text of the New Testament, it is rather an English translation of the Latin word used in the Vulgate (*raptio*) which means caught up and derives from 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which says, "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up (*raptio*) together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." While Darby claimed the notion of the rapture was apparent from his reading of scripture, modern historians have suggested that it was first formulated in the visions of a teenager named Margaret MacDonald, and taken over by Darby from her (Rossing 2005, 22). Nevertheless, regardless of its origin, the rapture became a distinguishing doctrine among dispensationalists.

In the United States, the historical popularity of dispensationalism can be attributed to several factors. First, dispensationalism was adopted by a number of traveling evangelists, such as Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday, who were extremely popular. Second, in the wake of modern biblical criticism, that was seen by many as casting doubt on the biblical text, the hyper-literalism of the dispensationalists seemed a bulwark against liberal questions. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the Scofield Reference Bible became an immensely popular version of the Bible, which contained in its footnotes the dispensationalist reading of the scriptures. Dispensationalism then was now readily accessible to the lay reader, shown in the footnotes of the Bible itself. These three things came together to foster a growing movement of dispensationalism among Evangelicals, and soon led to the dominance that premillennarianism dispensationalism came to have.

It is perhaps also important to note one other momentous point in the development of dispensationalism: The founding of the nation of Israel in 1948. Dispensationalists were active in supporting Zionist causes as far back as the nineteenth century. Still, when the United Nations acted to form the nation of Israel, this was, in the eyes of dispensationalists, the unmistakable hand of God at work in history. The dispensationalist had predicted the return of the Jews to Israel, and now their greatest hope had been fulfilled. Likewise, with the expansion of Israel in the 1967 war to include the capture of Jerusalem, dispensationalists thought they saw the fulfillment of scripture before their very eyes. In every timetable that would be established after this point, the founding of the state of Israel would be the key starting point.

APOCALYPTICISM AND THE COLD WAR

The founding of Israel was preceded by the end of World War II, and was clearly an important event for apocalypticists of the dispensationalist variety. However, another extraordinary event occurred at the end of World War II, which would likewise have tremendous import for modern apocalypticism: the advent of the nuclear age. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were traumatic historic events, and they highlighted a new expansion in human destructive ability. When the Russians followed with a demonstration of their own nuclear ability, the nuclear arms race began with a vengeance.

Christian apocalypticists quickly turned to 2 Peter 3:10, which said, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” The similarity with the devastation wrought in Japan was apparent for the pre-millennialists. Moreover, a corner had been turned. Humanity’s newfound destructive power would soon initiate the cataclysm of the end. As Donald Grey Barnhouse stated in 1945, “It is already too late. The threads of inevitability have been caught in the mesh of the hidden gears of history and the divine plan moves towards the inexorable fulfillment” (Boyer 1994, 117–118). Never before had humanity the power to bring the kind of destruction prophesied in Revelation. Now it had.

In light of this mounting threat to human life, prophecy writers emphasized the inevitability of the future cataclysm. The Bible had predicted such disaster, they insisted, and any attempt at mitigating or controlling this power was ultimately doomed to failure. The words of the prophet Zechariah (14:12) seemed particularly apt,

This is the plague with which the LORD will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths

These words seemed an accurate representation of the effect of a nuclear explosion, and were predicted by God. To this end, nascent peace movements in the 1950s and 1960s were spurned by dispensationalists as vain attempts to change the preordained future that had been spelled out by prophecy. The nuclear arms race with its motto of “peace through strength” was only the precursor to the end. Prophecy clearly foretold the fiery future, and human actions could not prevent it. Note that during the 1950s and 1960s this was a time of political quietism for most evangelicals. The time would come later when evangelicals would be far more activist in their support for notions of nuclear development.

The first 70 years of the twentieth century then, represents an interesting conflation of events that were all appropriated within the dispensationalist schema of the end times. While often times, dispensationalists were perplexed at exactly how world events fitted into their vision of the end, they remained confident that it was only a matter of seeing events through “God’s eyes.”

Yet at the same time, the increase in conflict in the Middle East, and the constant threat of nuclear war, moved apocalyptic notions out of the pulpit and on to the front page. Government construction of bomb shelters, the game of nuclear chicken during the Cuban missile crisis, and the various conflicts engaged in by the United States and the Soviet Union, all made apparent that a final cataclysm was no longer a matter of religious speculation confined to a few “bible-thumping nuts,” but a real and present possibility that could occur at any point. Cinematic explorations of the possibility of nuclear annihilation from *On the Beach* to *Dr. Strangelove*, indicated a new apocalyptic pocket in the American psyche.

This then became fertile land in which dispensationalism might speak a message that both played upon those fears, and spoke of escape from them. In 1973, Hal Lindsey published *There’s a New World Coming*, which popularized dispensationalism in a way that hadn’t been done since the *Schofield Bible*. The book was quickly a best seller and was followed up by a series of books, *Late Great Planet Earth*, *Rapture*, and *The Liberation of Planet Earth*. Lindsey continues to publish into the 2000s, though his later books have not been as popular as his earlier work. Lindsey’s work was well received because of its relevance. Lindsey argued that John of Patmos (the author of *Revelation*), being a first-century Christian, could not have viewed the technology and events of the twentieth century and understood it; he did not have the technical background to be able to do so. Thus *Revelation*, for Lindsey, is written in the conceptual language of the first century to describe the events of the twentieth century.

For Lindsey, nuclear war is part and parcel of the end-time scenario. Written in the midst of the cold war, Lindsey imagines the war of “Gog” against Israel as a Russian invasion. The European Union (here called New Rome) mounts a defense. Lindsey quotes from Ezekiel 38 which predicts “torrential rains and hailstones, fire and brimstone.” This, says Lindsey, “could well be describing the use of tactical nuclear weapons” (Lindsay 1972, 149). Likewise, following the defeat of the Soviet Army, Lindsey once again turns to Ezekiel 39:6 which predicts “fire on Magog and upon . . . the coastlands.” Here Lindsey substitutes the U.S.S.R. for Magog and “various continents” as the coastlands, suggesting, “God could allow the various countries to launch a nuclear exchange of ballistic missiles upon each other” (*New World*, 150).

More recently, the popularity of Hal Lindsey has been eclipsed by the literary phenomenon know as the *Left Behind* series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Sales numbers have been staggering, and the authors continue to churn out book after book, series after series, envisioning the end times. Much like Hal Lindsey’s work, the appeal of the *Left Behind* series is that it translates the hyper-symbolic language of *Revelation* into an action-packed narrative. But here again, the threat of nuclear war is present. The anti-Christ launches an attack on major cities in the United States, England, Mexico and Canada, which at first appears to be nuclear, but in the end, only the missile launched against London has a nuclear warhead. Later, the anti-Christ goes nuclear again against the Christian community which is located in Chicago. The narrative point is clear, during the time of the tribulation the anti-Christ will feel free to use a form of nuclear terror to ensure his will is obeyed. While this is different than the nuclear exchanges envisioned by Lindsey, the ever-present fear of nuclear war is still effectively marshaled by dispensationalists.

What remains consistent between Lindsey and LaHaye and Jenkins, and indeed between most premillennarian dispensationalists, is the promise of escape. The rapture remains the ultimate trump card of the dispensationalist. However horrifying the visions of nuclear disaster are, the promise of dispensationalism is that the Christian can walk free from fear, for they will not be present for the tribulation. Dispensationalists have been criticized for more and more elaborate visions of the world devastated by nuclear, ecological, and biological catastrophe, yet they only do so because they are confident that they will be exempted from such suffering through the secret rapture of the church.

We thus can see the intersection of modern apocalypticism and the threat of nuclear destruction. The terror of the atomic age has, on the one hand, made apocalyptic notions a concern of modern people, as they see increasing threats that look to bring about the end of the world. As fear rises about our perilous position in the world, the message of dispensationalism, which on the one hand emphasizes our powerlessness in the face of such threats, and on the other hand offers a free pass out of this impending doom, has a new appeal. Now, instead of dreading the progress on nuclear arms and the threat of nuclear war, one can relish it, as it is a sign of the ever-closer arrival of Jesus with the rapture.

This approach to the threats concerning humanity has been criticized by a number of writers. Barbara R. Rossing states, "In place of healing the Rapture proclaims escape. In place of Jesus' blessing of the Peacemakers, the Rapture voyeuristically glorifies violence and war. . . . This theology is not biblical" (Rossing 2005, 1–2). Daniel Wojick suggests "apocalyptic traditions tend to deny the efficacy of human effort to improve the world and may encourage a passive acceptance of human-made crises and potential disasters" (Wojick 1999, 214). And Tina Pippin reminds us about apocalypticism in general: "If hope is a moral action, we must be moral about the way we hope" (Pippin 1999, 8). A vision of mass slaughter through nuclear annihilation may generate hope for those expecting the rapture but such hope is clearly morally questionable.

Such criticism has not been always general, or from academic sources. Two conservative Christian leaders, Gary North and Gary DeMar have both been very critical of the dispensationalist vision, arguing that dispensationalism essentially looks forward to another Jewish Holocaust. They argue it is an unequivocal part of the dispensationalist schema, that after the rapture, Israel will experience significant persecution that could well number in the millions. Such a program that encourages Zionist objectives, only to see those same Jews massacred by the forces of the anti-Christ, is morally unconscionable, they argue.

What is clear then, is that while the Left Behind series, and the dispensationalist vision they novelize, has tremendous popularity, it bespeaks a desire to escape the world's problems, and often marshals those problems as a way of forwarding itself. Such a position is not without its critics, though they have nowhere near the mass appeal of LaHaye and Jenkins. But a new eschatological position which rejects dispensationalism, called "Preterism," is starting to become more popular, forwarded by Hank Hanegraaff of the Christian Research Institute, R.C. Sproul, and Gary DeMar. Preterists believe that all prophetic texts in the New Testament have already been fulfilled with the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. While this movement is still in its infancy, it may ultimately represent a theological challenge to dispensationalism and its terrifying future.

See also Christian Zionism; Nationalism, Militarism, and Religion; Separation of Church and State.

Further Reading:

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