



Crawford Gribben. *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xi + 258 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-532660-4.



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Unto the (Popular) Ends of the Earth

The commercial success of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind* novels has created renewed scholarly interest in evangelical literature. Crawford Gribben's *Writing the Rapture* traces the history of prophecy fiction from its diverse and heterodox beginnings, through various contortions and conflicting positions, as it reflected dispensational premillennialism and evangelical culture. The author's premise is that prophecy fiction provides snapshots of popular evangelical culture, and while the book investigates the chronology of prophecy fiction in history, its method is better described as cultural analysis.

Prophecy fiction is a type of literature and film that focuses on the future end of the age. However, despite its eschatological aspirations, it is really about the present. Prophecy fiction, insists Gribben, attempts to critique modernity by creating antimodern anxieties among religious conservatives, and by providing a comprehensive mythology for American life, in order to reassure evangelicals that they have a divine destiny in the face of marginality and apparent cultural deterioration. Ironi-

cally, evangelicals are themselves steeped in a modernist worldview and have appropriated modernist principles for their own purposes. Certainly, the use of a specific type of literal biblical hermeneutic collapses the text into uniform and unilateral principles that can be systematized into a comprehensive order, and the development of a dispensational schemata of chronological time attempts to place order on the world, similar to the rationalizing and compartmentalizing principles of modernity. Yet the undertone of Gribben's arguments is that the social policies and practices of Anglo-Saxon superiority, America's "manifest destiny" to build civilization through subjugation of native peoples, and the binary opposites of modernity expressed in sociopolitical tensions are evidence of modernist appropriations.

The chapters in the book represent six periods of the shifting foci in prophecy fiction, starting with its eclectic beginnings, orthodox consolidations, the period of the Great Wars, the Cold War, evangelicalism's renewed political engagement, and finally the Left Behind phenomenon. Although Gribben is very good at trac-

ing the rise of dispensational premillennialism to an elite circle at Trinity College Dublin and Oxford University in the 1820s and 1830s, later to be popularized by John Darby and the Scofield Reference Bible, I find it curious that Gribben presupposes that this particular eschatology constitutes evangelical orthodoxy, even as he reveals that in each time period different constellations of ideas were at work. He also seems to imply that evangelicalism is defined by fundamentalism even though fundamentalism historically emerged in the 1920s, and despite the fact that nineteenth-century evangelicalism was defined by a postmillennialist belief in the church's responsibility and activity to make way for the kingdom of God in this world. Perhaps, as Gribben argues, the shift from postmillennialism to premillennialism and its corresponding shift from religious optimism to pessimism and the insertion of a "secret rapture" helped evangelicals deal with the seemingly overwhelming problems of urbanization, industrialization, large-scale immigration, and global conflicts, but at the cost that evangelicals abdicated their responsibilities in the political, economic, and social spheres. Certainly, claiming that dispensational premillennialism defines evangelical eschatology can be maintained only with a narrow view of what constitutes evangelical Christianity. Left unstated in Gribben's discussions is the fact that in the history of Christianity, millennialism itself is a heterodox position and dispensationalism is a novel belief.

By Gribben's own account, dispensational premillennialism and its insistence on a secret rapture (evangelicals cannot seem to decide if this rapture occurs before, during, or at the end of the Great Tribulation) has waned with the rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, which has strongly influenced evangelical beliefs in the latter half of the twentieth century. Although Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority exerted influence for evangelicals in America to engage politics as a way of advocating for fundamentalist Christian values, the real impetus for social engagement has come from the Pentecostal-Charismatic sector. Frank Peretti's *Piercing the Darkness* (1986) and Pat Robertson's *New World Order* (1991)

and fictional piece *The End of the Age* (1995) focus on prophecy, but shift away from dispensationalism and a belief in the rapture. Peretti critiqued the prophetic determinism and "dispensational escapism" to suggest that the "future was open and that the spiritual condition of America could be changed" (p. 111). Robertson not only "distanced himself from the dispensationalism he had once endorsed," but also embraced the distinctly Pentecostal eschatology of the "latter rain," which expected a great spiritual revival and "widespread social transformation" ushering in the end of the age (p. 120). Significantly, Peretti was an Assemblies of God pastor who became a carpenter and Robertson was a Southern Baptist minister with charismatic sentiments, who vied for the American presidency. With the loss of an Antichrist figure external to the United States at the end of the Cold War, either in German leaders during the world wars or Communist leaders during the Cold War, evangelicals started to look inside the United States, to "pedophilic satanic cults," and eventually to New World Order conspirators to define the adversary, as a way to assess the perceived deterioration of American values (p. 107). Interestingly, evangelicals shifted from separation and apathy to political engagement as the hallmark of evangelical activity. Underneath the surface of these discussions is the rising influence of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity on the cultural landscape of evangelicalism, significantly changing its ethos and identity.

Despite these points, Gribben's monograph is an excellent and nuanced evaluation of a sorely underdeveloped area, and offers insight into the hopes and fears of American evangelicalism, at least at the popular level. He has brought together disparate primary sources, and offers a nuanced reading of prophecy fiction and its role in defining popular evangelicalism. The book has stimulated new ways of thinking on the role of fiction in defining evangelical beliefs, norms, and values, and invites further research to determine what level of influence prophecy fiction has on evangelicalism outside the United States and comparisons between popular and professional theologies in the evangelical religion.

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