

CHAPTER 9

Eschatology and The Book of Revelation

Weapons of Mass Deception on the Road to Armageddon

Shake off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.

—Thomas Jefferson

Eschatology is the study of the end of history—the end of the world—from a religious perspective. Christians have probably written more obscure text about eschatology than any other religious topic. We are talking about the *End Times*, so hold onto your seats!

If you're not already familiar with the *End Times* prophecies in the Bible's Book of Revelation, you should read this last book of the New Testament and come to your own conclusions. Although the Book of Revelation was written in mysterious, symbolic language and code, many Christians choose to interpret it as literally—and as creatively—as possible. You too can make up your own religion.

A good point of departure is to Google some key words of biblical prophecy, such as: *revelation, End Times, prophecies, millennialism, rapture, Anti-Christ, Battle of Armageddon, Second Coming, red heifer, 666 (Mark of the Beast), tribulation, and Final Judgment*. You will find a treasure trove of information, including widely varying opinions regarding the prophecies and what they mean for Christians as well as non-Christians. You will find anything and everything, as well as their opposites.

If you are appalled by all the rightwing “holier than thou” Christian religiosity, you should nevertheless consider devoting some time to studying the End Times literature. More broadly, if you left Christianity because of its hijacking and distortion by the Religious Right, you should nevertheless consider studying it as much as you study other religions such as Islam and Buddhism.

In addition to all the helpful material on the Internet, you will also find a host of websites and discussion groups that accomplish nothing other than inciting hatred and violence by throwing gasoline on the growing fires of animosity towards Christianity and America. For some, that is exactly the goal—making certain that the road to Armageddon, Heaven and Hell is well lit.

To be clear, all Americans should fully support freedom of religion and separation of church and state. These protections should extend to all the various viewpoints of the End Times—even if you disagree with all of them—as well as to the religious beliefs of Jews, Muslims, Mormons, atheists and everyone else.

We include this End Times discussion here because:

- The End Times dogma profoundly affects America’s foreign policy, with millions of rightwing Christians using it as justification to vote for rightwing Republican militaristic leaders no matter how bad the outcome. In fact, the worse the outcome—the worse it gets in Iraq, for example—the *better* it is from an End Times perspective. Yes, the road to Hell is paved with “good” intentions.
- The rest of the world—including our long-term allies and potential allies, as well as the Islamic world we presumably are trying to favorably influence—waits for America to come to its senses.
- This religious dogma—coupled with Bush’s and the GOP’s natural inclination to divide and inflame people with “us versus them,” “good versus evil” policies—is making America more divided and acrimonious than anytime in the past century.
- The religious dogma reflected in our foreign policy has also polarized the world, except that instead of the roughly 50-50 polarization found in America (with the balance shifting slowly away from the neo-GOP and in the direction of sanity, as reflected in the 2006 midterm elections in the United States), the rest of the world is now 95-5 opposed to America’s imperial wars.

Most mainstream Protestants and most Protestant churches, as well as the Catholic Church (a frequent target of rightwing prophecies), do not read the Book of Revelation literally. They are not caught up in useless and sometimes dangerous speculation as to when the world will end and what exactly will transpire. Most are appalled that the rightwing fringe has gone bonkers on religious doctrine and polluted government in the process. With enormous influence over Bush and his party, this fringe has helped the GOP evolve into the Gang of Pharisees.

There are millions of Americans who carefully study and interpret the Book of Revelation and the End Times prophecies, sometimes developing their own theories and beliefs as to the specifics regarding the main End Times events, together with a correct *timeline* for everything.

For these people the End Times study is not an idle exercise, since for them it concerns the most important event of all—going to Heaven or Hell.⁷¹ Many search for signs of the End Times in current events here on Earth, especially happenings in the Middle East relating to Israel and the Palestinians, and in Iraq, the home of ancient Babylon.

⁷¹ They are going one place and you (maybe) and I (certainly) are going elsewhere. I recall a North Dakota sage telling me years ago that he preferred to go to Hell so he could be with his friends. On the other hand, can you imagine spending eternity in Heaven with religious bigots and flamethrowers like Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, Jerry Falwell, and James Dobson? Don’t bet on that unfortunate scenario, however. Your best strategy may be to go to Heaven so you *won’t* be with people like that!

There are *numerous* variations of the main events and the timeline for the End Times, simply because people have different interpretations of the key events of the Revelation prophecies, and when they will occur with respect to each other. Specific timelines result depending on what the individual believes regarding the key events: the *tribulation* (whether it's *pre-tribulation*, *mid-tribulation*, or *post-tribulation*); *millennialism* (whether it's *post-millennialism*, *pre-millennialism*, or *amillennialism*), and so forth.

The “wheels within wheels” nature of this religious interpretation and invention has split rightwing Christians into various camps, which may be quite bitter towards each other. To attract followers, many rightwing religious leaders compete on religiosity and certitude. In the process, they do America and Christianity a disservice. This is especially the case with those leaders who believe that the biggest crowds and biggest bucks are attracted most to the dog that barks the loudest with the most certitude and spittle.

If you are unfamiliar with the End Times prophecies, please have some patience as we wade through the main points in summary fashion. Yes, this chapter is just a summary of a complex religious topic about which countless thick books have been written and will be written. Because it is impossible to write such a summary satisfactory to everyone, many will disagree vociferously with what is written here, and some will feel offended. Having said that, let's barge ahead.

Here is some End Times terminology:

The rapture:⁷² the sudden, unannounced transportation of all true Christians to Heaven by Christ around the time of his Second Coming (more below on this “New Age” rapture phenomenon). When Christians use this term, it means they are going to Heaven. Already dead Christians will rise up from their graves (be resurrected); living Christians will then also be gathered up with the predeceased in the clouds; and together the two saved groups will meet Christ “in the air” and be with him forever in Heaven.

For the minority of Christians who are caught up in this new rapture interpretation, there are three principal variations of the rapture, which are called *pre-tribulation*, *mid-tribulation*, and *post-tribulation*. These refer to *when* the rapture will occur.

- **Pre-tribulation:** The rapture comes before the tribulation.
- **Mid-tribulation:** The rapture comes during the tribulation.
- **Post-tribulation:** The rapture comes after the tribulation.

Christians sometimes refer to these in shorthand as *pre*, *mid*, and *post*. For example, a rapture Christian may describe himself as *pre*, which means that he believes people will be raptured—taken by Christ to Heaven—*before* the period of great de-

⁷² The concept of the Rapture comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, although the word “rapture” is not found anywhere in the English translation of the Bible. The word “rapture” itself means “caught up” and is derived from the Latin word “rapere,” which in turn comes from the Greek word “harpadzo” found in 1 Thessalonians 4.

struction known as the tribulation.⁷³ Pre-millennialists (discussed below) popularized these three terms.

We'll discuss the rapture more later, including the concept of a "secret rapture," but first we need to cover some additional important terminology.

The tribulation: a period of great destruction, usually thought to be seven years, during which the Anti-Christ (Satan's agent) comes to power and reigns over the Earth. During the tribulation the Earth is destroyed by unimaginable plagues, wars, earthquakes, diseases and other horrible sadistic events, and Christians are severely persecuted. (This is even much more horrific than living in America and Iraq under GOP rule—really.) Everyone is killed except for the chosen Christians, and some say the number so saved is limited to 144,000.⁷⁴ Christ defeats the Anti-Christ at the battle of Armageddon, which marks the end of the tribulation.

Armageddon: During the last 50 years, the Battle of Armageddon has become a central topic of discussion in some Christian circles. The Anti-Christ starts this final terrible battle, and the victorious Christ and his heavenly armies finish it. This bloody battle, in which the Anti-Christ and his armies are slaughtered, takes place in the valley of Megiddo near Haifa, Israel. (I am not making this up.) God takes out his enormous wrath and anger on the human species and the world.⁷⁵ Jesus then reigns during the ensuing millennium of peace and paradise on Earth. Armageddon is especially important to pre-millennialists (more on this later). Pre-millennialists list more than a dozen key events on their eschatological timeframe, and Armageddon is one of them. Many see current events in the Middle East as signs that this battle is imminent. For many, an all-out war between Christianity and Islam in the Middle East would be wonderful news.

The millennium: As noted above, the millennium is a golden age of peace on Earth under the reign of Christ. End Timers disagree as to whether the millennium is literally a period of one thousand years. The Book of Revelation uses the term a "1,000 years" several times to describe the period during which Christ rules.⁷⁶ For background you should read Revelation 20:1-10. This Revelation scripture is among the most difficult and controversial text in the Bible. There are three different principal views of the millennium, which depend upon when Christ will return to Earth:

⁷³ Perhaps on-line matching services such as Match.com should take this variable into account when introducing prospective lovers. Would a "pre" and a "post" repel each other? Or do opposites attract?

⁷⁴ The limit of 144,000 is a minority view. After all, who wants to believe that only such a small number of Christians will go to Heaven, when there are hundreds of millions of people "competing" to be chosen?

⁷⁵ See Revelation 4-19, Matthew 24, and Daniel 9.

⁷⁶ The word "millennium" does not appear anywhere in the Bible, but a "thousand years" appears several times in Revelation 20. The ancient religion of Zoroastrianism was the first religion to describe such a period of universal peace.

- **Post-millennialism:** Christ will return after (“post”) the millennium, the long period of peace and prosperity on Earth during which Christ’s church prevails over evil in the world and most people convert to Christianity. Following this return of Christ—the Second Coming—there will be the tribulation, the victory of Christ over Satan, and the final judgment of both the living (the “quick”) and the dead. The “1,000 years” in Revelation is taken *figuratively*, not literally, and thus the millennium is not a definite knowable length of time. This post-millennialist view was the most popular view well into the 19th century, but very few End-Times Christians subscribe to it now.
- **Amillennialism** (also known as **non-millennialism**, meaning that there is no *literal* millennium): The millennium is not a *future* golden age on Earth during which everyone converts to Christianity. Rather it describes the *present* period in which we now live, and it thus refers to *both* Christ’s reign in Heaven with his saints who have died before us, *as well as* to Christ’s current spiritual reign on Earth though the Christian Church. Good and evil co-exist on Earth until that point when Christ returns to Earth—his Second Coming—to sort everything out, at which time there will be the rapture and the final judgment. This is a simpler, more straightforward view, and most mainstream Protestants subscribe to it—to the extent they think about it, if at all. The major protestant reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) held this view, although many newer groups of evangelicals and fundamentalists no longer do.
- **Pre-millennialism:** The “pre” means that Christ will return shortly *before* the millennium. The Anti-Christ will first appear and the extraordinarily painful tribulation will ensue. Christ will successfully overcome the Anti-Christ in the Battle of Armageddon, and the 1,000-year millennium of peace will then take place, followed by the Final Judgment. One problem with this is that most scholars believe the Bible does not support a 1,000-year gap between the Second Coming and the Final Judgment. In recent years this pre-millennialist view has become most popular among evangelicals and fundamentalists. Amillennialism once was their most popular view.

By the way, many so-called Christians on the extreme right speculated that President Bill Clinton was the Anti-Christ prophesized in the Book of Revelation.⁷⁷ However, applying any plausible test regarding the identity of the Anti-Christ, Bush certainly fits the bill much better than Clinton ever did, especially after Clinton left power without doing all those evil things befitting the Anti-Christ. So, in fairness, where are the Anti-Christ speculators among the Religious Right when it comes to Bush? The answer is that it is all rightwing politics, not religion. The Anti-Christ obviously cannot be a member of the Republican Party. Just for the record, Bush is not the Anti-Christ either.

Let’s now continue our discussion of the rapture.

⁷⁷ After Clinton’s presidency ended, Hillary became a popular choice for the Anti-Christ. I’m not joking.

Perhaps you have noticed a bumper sticker or two about the rapture, without understanding the message. Such a sticker might say something like, “Attention: Upon Rapture, This Vehicle Will be Driverless.”

Well, the driver is letting you know that he or she may suddenly disappear without warning and be transported to Heaven, leaving the driverless car careening down the road. Really. This sort of chaos will occur in the same instant all over town, and all over the world (except for Massachusetts where obviously there are no Christians worthy of being raptured). In that one instant, countless automobiles, trucks, aircraft and so forth will suddenly be left with no one in control. If by chance you are a passenger in such a situation, you must quickly jump into the driver’s seat and take the wheel.⁷⁸

The so-called “secret rapture” is at the center of what we have just described. According to this pre-millennialist viewpoint, Christians are taken up to Heaven by Christ during his Second Coming, but no one sees it happen. Millions of saved Christians instantaneously vanish, leaving behind their clothes and everything else. Accordingly, this has been called the “secret” rapture. Most Christians believe such a secret rapture is inconsistent with biblical text⁷⁹ describing Christ’s Second Coming as very visible and tumultuous.

Also, a serious problem with a secret rapture is that it effectively requires not only a Second Coming of Christ but also a later Third Coming at the end of the tribulation (i.e., before the Battle of Armageddon, the 1,000-year millennium, and the Final Judgment.) However, there is no biblical authority for this additional return of Christ, which would be the Third Coming.

Catholics and the vast majority of mainstream protestant Christians simply do not believe these modern, overwhelmingly American interpretations of the End Times. Nor do Eastern Orthodox Christians. Most Christians do not believe these neo-interpretations any more than they believe the Koran or the Book of Mormon.

An excellent critique of the End Times fever is *The Rapture Trap*, by Paul Thigpen. Although this book is written from a Catholic’s perspective, mainstream Protestant Christians who wonder what this rapture and End Times excitement is all about will also find it illuminating.

Mainstream Christians who have serious misgivings regarding this rapture craze should nevertheless respect the right of other Christians to believe what they wish—and perhaps you will decide to believe it too after you have studied it more, which is your right. At the same time, however, mainstream Christians should not feel that they are missing something important—they aren’t—or that they should buy into this legalistic doctrine just because it is promoted with such religious fervor both personally and through the mass media. The rightwing rapture viewpoint is difficult to miss on American religious radio because rightwing Christian radio dominates the market

⁷⁸ This raises some serious public policy questions. Should rapture believers be allowed to drive? Shouldn’t each be required to hire a DPD (“Designated Pagan Driver”)? Does not the safety of the rest of the citizenry count for anything? At a minimum, shouldn’t rapture believers pay higher auto insurance premiums?

⁷⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4.

for religious programming through its ownership or control of a huge number of radio stations.⁸⁰

The secret rapture is at the center of the incredibly popular *Left Behind* series of books (Number 1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list) that focus on the drama of all those people “left behind” when millions of Christians around the world disappear in one cataclysmic rapture. The first twelve books in this fictional series sold more than 60 million copies and helped spawn a huge industry with an End Times theme. By the way, if you liked the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, but thought it was a little short on gratuitous violence, then the *Left Behind* series should appeal to you.

The co-authors of the *Left Behind* series, Rev. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, also wrote another book, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, in which they explain why they “think this generation will witness the end of history.” By the way, we won’t. Countless other “biblical scholars” and nitwits such as Pat Robertson have opined as to exactly when the world will end. For them, their fiction is money in the bank. But they are all full of, well, baloney—now that is something you can bank on.

Early Christians believed Jesus would return during their lifetime. Jesus said to his disciples, “This generation shall not pass away till all be fulfilled.” (Luke 21:22-32. Similar text in Matthew 24:30-34 and Mark 1:24-30.) He also said: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” (Matthew 24: 35-36.)

Most of America’s rightwing Christian fundamentalists have narrow, time-limited, self-centered views of the world. Everything is about them, and everything is now. They expect the end of the world to occur during their lifetime, and many literally pray for the rapture to occur now.

Most readers of the popular *Left Behind* series do not know that LaHaye helped fashion the Religious Right, wants to turn America into a strict Christian fundamentalist nation, would turn public schools into fundamentalist centers with Christian prayer and creationism, would ban sex education and eliminate the Department of Education, despises the separation of church and state, attacks Catholics and others not subscribing to his extreme narrow views, and is a paranoid purveyor of bizarre conspiracy theories.

In the early 1990s Rev. LaHaye co-founded the Pre-Trib Research Center as a “think tank” to further “the cause of pretribulationism and the literal interpretation of Bible prophecy.” The Center publishes *The Pre-Trib Perspectives*, a monthly journal, “keeping the reader on the cutting edge of unfolding prophetic events.” He also founded the Tim LaHaye School of Prophecy where he teaches a one-year residency course of study in prophecy. The website notes, “Understanding Bible Prophecy can help you become a more confident Christian because knowing ‘how the story ends’ will help you realize that God has EVERYTHING under control!”

LaHaye, a Bob Jones University graduate, is among the most influential evangelical fundamentalist leaders in America. Although wacko, he cannot be considered

⁸⁰ Driving anywhere in America you will find both rightwing religious programming and rightwing political programming several times as you go from one end of the radio dial to the other. One hand washes the other.

a fringe player. In addition to ties to GOP illuminati such as John Ashcroft and George W. Bush, LaHaye is one of the Moral Majority's original board members, and in the early 1980s he also co-founded the Council for National Policy, a secretive theocracy-pushing organization on the far right with strong connections to the rightwing of the GOP.

To monitor the chances of the rapture happening anytime soon, go to Rapture-Ready.com and check the Rapture Index, which tracks 45 specific categories of events, e.g., “Volcanoes,” “Globalism,” “Occult,” “Oil Supply/Price,” “Gog (Russia),” “Liberalism,” “Beast Government,” “Ecumenism” and “W.”⁸¹ The index is even calibrated for convenient use, as follows:

- **Rapture Index of 85 and below:** Slow prophetic activity
- **Rapture Index of 85 to 110:** Moderate prophetic activity
- **Rapture Index of 110 to 145:** Heavy prophetic activity
- **Rapture Index above 145:** Fasten your seat belts

The website notes, “You could say the Rapture index is a Dow Jones Industrial Average of end time activity, but I think it would be better if you viewed it as prophetic speedometer. The higher the number, the faster we're moving towards the occurrence of pre-tribulation rapture.”

During most of Bush's watch, the Rapture Index has been in the highest category—“Fasten your seat belts.” For example, in 2006 it was well above 150—not a record, but still pretty dang good.

In a 1970 bestseller, *The Left Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsay carefully examined biblical text and Middle East events and concluded that the end of the world would occur in 1988—40 years after the founding of the nation of Israel. In case you don't remember, it didn't.⁸² But the book did scare the bejesus out of millions of young impressionable readers, which was exactly the point. Such books are part of an unholy array of *weapons of mass deception*—religious WMDs—intended to manipulate people through fear—fear of God, fear of Hell, fear of their shadow, fear of life—with the goal of converting them to a specific brand of rightwing Christianity and thus “saving” them, and perhaps causing them—totally a coincidence—to give their *savings* to a particular rightwing reverend or church. Cha-ching.

In the twelfth book in the *Left Behind* series, *Glorious Appearing*, Christ returns to Earth to torture and destroy all non-Christians, sending them to eternal suffering in Hell. Can you imagine the uproar in America if the shoe were on the other foot, and 60 million copies of an Islamic *End Times* series were purchased by Muslim readers, an Islamic version in which billions of Christians and other non-Muslims were tortured, flayed, spattered, mutilated, crucified, and, well, you get the idea. Suppose further that millions of American Muslims believed these Islamic novels reflected God's truth and were directly connected to current events in the Middle East.

⁸¹ OK, “W” is not really on the Rapture Index list, but he should be. An “umbrella” W could replace several other disasters, and the list would then be shorter and more manageable.

⁸² Since the world didn't end in 1988 as promised, you may be wondering if Lindsay, a wealthy man, refunded all the money paid for his books. Nope.

All good men and women of faith, both Christians and Muslims, should reject the militancy, hatred, and bigotry that come from their respective camps of extreme rightwing lunatics who want a “war of civilizations.”

Whether intended or not, the *Left Behind* novels effectively endorse and encourage the current bloody developments in the Middle East as necessary stages along the End Times boulevard. The disastrous imperial Bush policies in Iraq and throughout the greater Middle East are good news to the discerning rightwing Christian who is engaged in religious fantasies and looking forward to the Second Coming. After all, how can anyone question God’s plan and eschatology so clearly set forth in the Book of Revelation? Derivatively, how can anyone question Bush’s “plan?”

The secret rapture at the center of the *Left Behind* series, which is a *pre-tribulation* rapture, fortunately offers convenient “Bush-like Passes” that are especially attractive to those rightwing Christians who suffer from two character flaws:

- 1) A shortage of courage, and
- 2) A desire *not* to help the less fortunate in the world.

First, by getting beamed up to the safety of Heaven *before* the tribulation, these raptured Christians avoid all the blood and guts, death and destruction, that take place during the period of incredible suffering. From the safety of box seats in Heaven at the right hand of God, they can watch and enjoy the horrible suffering of their former neighbors, friends, and close family members who are left behind. Similar to a “Get-Out-of-Jail” card, the rapture is a free *avoid-the-consequences* card for true believers.

Second, most believers in this rapture also believe that the *only* way to Salvation—which means eternal life in Heaven with Jesus—is through the simple acknowledgement of Jesus as their personal savior, and *not* through good works on Earth. This convenient copout from hard work and justice is especially popular with rightwing GOP Christians in Texas who want to ignore Christ’s message of compassion for the less fortunate and vote for crony-capitalism Republicans who believe God’s motto is “Of the Rich, By the Rich, and For the Rich.”

Thus, regardless of the facts, these Republican voters from Texas can be counted on to support Bush and his GOP Busheviks. Sadly, a Republican congressman from Texas who claims to be a Christian has to be found in bed with, as they say, “either a live boy or a dead girl” before his supporters will dump him.

Much of the End Times excitement sweeping the United States, especially anything connected with the rapture, is best viewed as another slice of New Age stuff from America, but coming this time from the far right. The use of the “New Age” label here is not intended to disparage rightwing Christians, although some may be displeased with the association. When hearing the term “New Age,” most Americans associate it with a fairly recent, unorganized and decentralized spiritual movement involving a smorgasbord of ideas and techniques, such as channeling, pyramid power, meditation, crystals and anything outside mainstream religion.

New Age could also be used to describe that definitely disorganized late-1960s movement among American youth who wanted to positively change the world—with love, peace and a broader concept of God. Dissatisfied with traditional institutions,

many “members” of this New Age or hippie movement experimented with drugs⁸³ as part of their spiritual quest, in addition to exploring other religions and other traditions such as meditation and yoga.

Both fortunately and unfortunately, Americans are busy, creative, searching⁸⁴ people. Americans have invented lots of wonderful things—such as vaccines, the telephone, television, computers and airplanes—as well as lots of terrible things—such as the first atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, the Hummer, and virtually all other modern WMDs used around the world. We also are creative in spiritual matters, as we search for something better—or at least different—in which to believe, or at least to cause others to believe. Many rightwing televangelists search for that new clever twist that can expand their power and fatten their wallets.

The main points here are that: (1) this latest rapture phenomenon is *new* doctrine, dating only from the 19th century, and, (2) its most tremendous growth has been in America. Although its origins were in Great Britain in the early 1800s, it grew quickly in America when John Darby (1800-82) brought it from England to America.⁸⁵ The 1800s were a period of great spirituality in America, a time in which new religions (including the Mormon religion) and many new doctrines and interpretations took root. Darby coined not only the term “rapture,” but also other End Times terms such as “great tribulation” and “millennium.”

To be clear, it is the *right* of all Americans to believe what they wish, whether the idea is from the 1860s or the 1960s, but let’s not pretend that everything is clear and crisp when you open the Bible. It is not.

Unfortunately, much of the world knows there is far too much rightwing religious “wackocity” in America and in the Bush White House, but let’s leave the fruitful topic of American “wackocity” for another day. (For now, we’ll note only that “wackocity” is not a real word, but that in honor of W it should be, along with “decider” and “truthiness,” and that the “W-Scale” to measure “wackocity” should also be in honor of W.)

⁸³ Others including George W. Bush did drugs simply because it was fun, without wanting to make the world better.

⁸⁴ Sometimes Americans search, or pretend to search, for things that don’t even exist, such as WMDs in Iraq.

⁸⁵ John Darby (1800-82), leader of the Plymouth Brethren, preached in the mid-1800s concerning a secret coming of Christ, and he traveled several times to the United States in the latter stages of his life. His ideas became known as “Dispensationalism,” and they rapidly spread through many American and British congregations. He and his ideas became especially popular among American fundamentalists. The Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909, helped popularize his ideas, which included a secret rapture. Dispensationalism is so named because it divides all of history into seven progressive stages called “dispensations.” During each Dispensation God reveals more of his plan, and humans are tested in various ways, always failing. The Dispensational scheme has two distinct divine plans, one for Jews (the “earthly” people), and one for Christ’s Church (the “heavenly” people). Accordingly, the Bible has to be divided between those passages intended for Jews and those intended for Christians. As you can imagine, this footnote can only offer a slight hint of Dispensationalism’s incredible complexity. Also, you can understand why fundamentalists and many evangelical Christians are so focused on the Middle East, where they see God’s plan playing out. President Bush, thank you for your war on Iraq!

If you decide to research the explosion of American spirituality in the early 1800s, sometimes called The Second Great Awakening—The First Great Awakening having taken place in the 1730s and 1740s—you should check out the Millerites, the tens of thousands of followers of William Miller who believed the apocalypse and Christ’s Second Coming would occur on March 21, 1844, later changed to October 22, 1844. When Jesus did not reappear, the Millerites were bitterly disappointed, especially those who had given away all their possessions, and the nonevent became known as the Great Disappointment.

Perhaps the failed presidency of George W. Bush will be known in history as the Great Disappointment Redux.

By the way, addressing a group of conservative journalists on September 12, 2006, Bush said he sensed a “Third Awakening” in America that coincides with America’s struggle with terrorism. “A lot of people in America see this as a confrontation between good and evil, including me,” said Bush, but he didn’t say which side he was on. Another crusade, anyone?

As for the “secret rapture,” Christ *never* spoke about it, nor did any of his Apostles. It was all Greek to them.⁸⁶ The early leaders of the Church in the first three centuries after Christ—often called the Fathers of the Church—knew nothing and wrote nothing about the “secret rapture” and undoubtedly would have considered it blasphemy. These leaders include the leaders who knew the Apostles personally, and they include the following generations of leaders who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote the basic creeds of the Church and assembled the Bible as it exists today. Eastern Orthodox Christians also never heard of the “secret rapture.” Nor did Saint Augustine. Nor did the Catholic Church. Nor did any of the Protestant reformers, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley. Nor did any of America’s founding fathers who wrote the Constitution. Nor did the vast majority of American Protestants, including your author, *living today* who were raised in the Christian tradition. Whew!

Jesus must be having a good chuckle about all this made-in-America apocalyptic hogwash.

Well, what does Bush think about all this? Who knows? Probably not even Bush himself knows what he thinks. The truth is that Bush lived through the 1960s but chose poorly, which is one of his more prominent leadership skills. He did the 1960s backwards, upside down, and inside out. He chose the drugs and free sex part of the menu but passed on the Jesus part and helping others. He freely sampled the fun “sideshow for a few,” which was the focus of America’s media—marijuana, cocaine, alcohol and sex—but he went AWOL⁸⁷ regarding the main course—Jesus’ message of “peace, compassion, tolerance and love”—you know, all that Hippie stuff that is despised by so many practitioners of the exact opposite—“war, greed, bigotry and hate.”

Unfortunately for Bush, he chose poorly. Unfortunately for America, this man is now the poster boy for American-style Christianity. If Bush were to be scored in the

⁸⁶ Perhaps we should say, “It was all English and American to them.”

⁸⁷ Another Bush leadership trait.

Christian Olympics event of “Making the World Better,” all the judges would have to give him a 0.0.⁸⁸

Although Bush’s specific views on the End Times are not publicly known, he successfully causes his supporters to think he agrees with them. In any case, he does nothing to dissuade them of their views, or to discourage their efforts to have their particular brand of religion monopolize American politics.

Many rightwing Christians welcomed the current Iraq war and turmoil in the Middle East because these bloody events appeared—through a glass darkly—to fit several popular versions of the End Times prophecies. Many rightwing Christians believe that God established the permanent boundaries of Israel thousands of years ago, and that the Bible predicted the overthrow of the Iraqi regime. Millions believe that God is now carrying out his master plan through Bush and that we should therefore praise Bush and support the war.

Babylon’s role in the Bible is decidedly negative. It is portrayed as a center of decadence, greed, corruption and other forms of evil, and its fall and destruction are to be celebrated. Millions of rightwing American Christians speculate as to whether the chaos in Iraq means the end of the world is at hand. If in fact God’s grand plan is playing out before us, and we are about to witness the Second Coming, then Christians should not question the “details” of these events, such as the death of so many innocent people.

Is it possible that this rightwing “Christian” perspective helps explain why the Bush administration made so many terrible decisions in Iraq and turned the world against America? For example, when American forces entered Baghdad in April 2003, their commander in chief never bothered to ask whether the world-renowned National Museum of Iraq and other cultural assets were being protected. He apparently didn’t care. American forces however were under orders to protect the Iraqi Oil Ministry. Notwithstanding the Geneva Conventions, and notwithstanding numerous international requests during the run-up to the war that Iraq’s museums be protected, the Bush neocons did nothing to protect them. The predictable result was the loss of thousands of ancient books, manuscripts and artifacts covering several thousands of years of human history in what is now the GOP’s Messopotamia. Both the Western and Islamic worlds see the looting of the National Museum of Iraq and dozens of other museums and educational sites as a cultural catastrophe. On the other hand, how many Bush League Christians took *pleasure* in the loss of so many relics of false religions?

⁸⁸ Except for the Saudi judge.

SIDEBAR: Camp Babylon

The ruins of the ancient city of Babylon in Mesopotamia lie 55 miles south of Baghdad, in Babil Province just north of the modern Iraqi city of Hilla. Babylon, the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Babylonia and frequently referred to as the cradle of civilization, was home to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. According to Genesis, Babylon was the first city built after the Flood, and it plays a central role in rightwing biblical prophecy and the End Times.

American forces established Camp Babylon shortly after the 2003 invasion and transferred control of the base to Polish-led forces in September 2003. In 2005 the Iraqi government assumed control. According to a British Museum report and a January 15, 2005, article in the *Guardian*, the construction and operation of Camp Babylon caused “widespread damage and severe contamination to the remains of the ancient city of Babylon.” Insurgent attacks against the base also caused damage. Military vehicles and construction activities, including construction of a helipad, damaged significant archaeological sites. Sand and earth, sometimes containing important artifacts, were used to fill sandbags. Visitors noted that it was difficult to distinguish the ancient ruins from the new ruins.

Although rabid anti-Semitism has been alive and well in rightwing Christian circles for a long time,⁸⁹ especially in the old Confederacy, the rising popularity of End Times prophesy has caused Christian fundamentalists to support Israel. But this support has many perverse ironies, including the fact that fundamentalists still don’t have any particular high regard for Jews. Israel and the Jews are simply necessary pawns along the fundamentalists’ private exclusive path through the End Times to Heaven. The fundamentalists’ real unspoken message to Jews is: “We love the Jewish people because through them we will be raptured and go to Heaven. Yes, it is unfortunate Jews will burn in Hell for all eternity, but we warned them, and we can’t be blamed for their bullheaded refusal to convert to Christianity.”

Jews of course recognize the irony and the crocodile tears. Nevertheless, Israel has little choice but to embrace support from wherever it can get it, even from war criminals.

Another irony is that anti-Israel sentiment, always a problem, has been greatly inflamed by the inept rightwing policies of Bush in the Middle East, as well as the extreme rightwing Israeli policies that Bush encourages. The Bush administration has done more to damage Israel than any other administration.

The more Bush screws up in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, the more fundamentalists are comforted, and the more they want him to “stay the course.” Esca-

⁸⁹ American presidents have also exhibited anti-Semitic tendencies. Newly released White House tapes from 1972 show President Nixon and Billy Graham exchanging anti-Semitic banter, something for which Graham apologized after the recording was made public.

lating carnage and body counts are welcomed evidence that biblical prophecies are coming true.

The one-sided support by American Christian fundamentalists for Israel is based predominantly on extreme biblical interpretations and decidedly not on questions of justice, human rights, or international law. Bush's Middle East Mess unfolded without any rigorous policy debate as to what is best for Israelis, Palestinians, the Middle East, the United States, and the rest of the world. In fact, the Bush White House and the GOP Congress prevented that debate, as they slammed the brake on meaningful efforts to bring peace to Israel and the Palestinians.

At the center of Christian fundamentalist support for Israel is the belief that the construction of the Third Temple⁹⁰ in Jerusalem, as part of the reconstruction of the Kingdom of David, must take place before the eagerly-awaited End Times, including the Second Coming of Christ, can occur. Inconveniently, the construction site—the Temple Mount—must first be liberated from Islamic control. This will require the destruction of Al-Haram al-Sharif, the 35-acre Noble Sanctuary in Jerusalem, which is one of the three most important religious sites in Islam, and includes the Dome of the Rock at the center and the Al-Aksa mosque at the southern end.⁹¹ The most common belief is that the Dome of the Rock occupies the exact spot where the first two temples stood.

Since the creation of Israel in 1948 all American presidents, including Bush's father, strongly supported Israel but at the same time more or less worked to implement policies fair to both Palestinians and Israelis, with the goal of attaining peace through peaceful negotiations. That is, until Bush the Wrong.⁹² Bush rejected the policies of all American presidents, including his father, regarding the Middle East,

⁹⁰ King Solomon built the First Temple in the tenth century B.C., and the Babylonians destroyed it in 586 B.C. It was rebuilt as the Second Temple about seventy years later, around 515 B.C. The Second Temple was renovated by Herod the Great around 20 B.C. and destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. Part of the outer western retaining wall, the "Wailing Wall," is all that remains of the temple complex.

⁹¹ Although most mainstream Orthodox Judaism scholars oppose any attempt to build the Third Temple before the Messiah returns, many rightwing Israeli Jews wish to build the Third Temple as soon as possible. Many of them rejoiced in the recent birth of a "red heifer" on a religious kibbutz in Israel, a sign from God that they should start building the Third Temple in Jerusalem. In the 1980s a group of extremist Jews were arrested because they planned to blow up the Dome of the Rock. Apparently no red heifer had been born since the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in A.D. 70. The red heifer requirement comes from the Book of Numbers in the Bible, although cooperating rightwing Jews and rightwing Christians have different beliefs as to what the final end point is. For the Jews, the red heifer is tied to the start of their millennium, and the rebuilding of the temple—the Third Temple—will allow the Jewish messiah to enter Jerusalem. For many Christians, the Jews cannot rebuild the temple until after Christ returns in the Second Coming, and their Christian view of the millennium is quite different from that of the rightwing Jews. Also, all Jews will burn in Hell forever (unless they convert in time to Christianity.) This is a very short summary of the "wheels within wheels" complexity of all this. You may want to Google "red heifer" and jump in. You might also wish to reflect upon what Muslims think of all this.

⁹² Yes, "W" also stands for "wrong," as in "Bush the Wrong," "dead wrong" and "Religious Wrong."

by becoming a captive of the neocons and the Religious Wrong. The result is greatly increased bloodshed on a path away from peace, with greater suffering and risk for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Thanks to Bush, the way forward in the Middle East is much more difficult and dangerous. In every nation in the region, the prospects for progressive peaceful democratic reform have greatly diminished, and animosity towards America—the central victim of 9/11—has soared. America’s effectiveness and credibility in the region have been savaged, and Bush’s successor will have a much weaker hand to play.

America’s rightwing Christianist leaders played a major role in the tragedy by blindly supporting and encouraging Bush at each step on the road to Hell. The extra-loopy leaders with large television and radio audiences deserve extra credit.

Which, as we end this chapter, brings us to Pat Robertson, that first-class nitwit whose television program, *The 700 Club*, is beamed to millions daily by his Christian Broadcasting Network. When Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a massive incapacitating stroke on January 4, 2006, Robertson insinuated the next day on *The 700 Club* that God had caused Sharon’s stroke as punishment for his decision to withdraw Israeli troops and settlers from Gaza. Robertson declared, “The prophet Joel makes it very clear that God has enmity against those who, quote, ‘divide my land.’ God considers this land to be his.” Robertson also pointed out that the assassination of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 was “the same thing.” It was divine punishment for “dividing God’s land,” which was promised to the Jews in the Bible.