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The “Left Behind” Series

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Article Description

*This is a review of the “Left Behind” book series
by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, which
advocates dispensational premillennialism.*

“On a flight from Chicago to London, several passengers aboard Capt. Rayford Steele’s plane suddenly and mysteriously disappear. When Steele radios to London to report the situation, he discovers that the incident on his plane is not an isolated phenomenon but a worldwide occurrence. As Steele begins his search for answers, he learns that the Christ has come to take the faithful with Him in preparation for the coming apocalyptic battle between good and evil.”

The foregoing is the promotional blurb for the first volume in the so-called “Left-Behind” series, co-authored by Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye.

The series of seven books is creating a sensation among religious readers and apparently becoming an effective medium for the advocacy of the eschatological (end of time) dogma known as “dispensational premillennialism.” The various titles in the Jenkins/LaHaye sequence are: Left Behind, Tribulation Force, Nicolae, Soul Harvest, Apollyon, Assassins, and The Indwelling.

One of the leading elements of dispensationalism is the doctrine of “the rapture,” i.e., the supposed “snatching away” of the saints at the time of Christ’s return (reputedly in the not-distant future). The proponents of this doctrine claim that when the rapture occurs, the unrighteous will be “left behind,” hence the background for this “left behind” series of religious-dramas.

The tragic fact of the matter is, the doctrinal premises upon which the books are based are no-less fabricated than the fictional story-lines with which they are presented. Let us focus upon the so-called “rapture” theory, since it is central to this controversy.

The rapture notion asserts that some seven years before he begins his earthly, millennial reign, Christ will secretly and silently come to earth. At that time, he will “snatch away” his saints to heaven.

Advocates of this dogma contend that it is biblically based in 1 Thessalonians 4:14ff. There Paul speaks of believers being “caught up” to be with the Lord in the air (v, 17). The truth is, however, the Thessalonian reference is an allusion to the visible Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world, and not to some mythical, secret arrival prior to that to effect a rapture.

In the book of Revelation, chapter 4, verse 1, a heavenly voice beckons to John: “Come up hither” Supposedly, this is a reference to the rapture of the church.

In the footnote of his Reference Bible, C.I. Scofield commented on this passage. “This call seems clearly to indicate the fulfillment of 1 Thes. 4:14-17. The word ‘church’ does not again occur in the Revelation till all is fulfilled.”

So what? The word “church” does not occur in 2 Timothy, Titus, 1st Peter, 2nd Peter, 1st John, 2nd John, or Jude. But what would such omissions indicate about an alleged “rapture”? The mere absence of a word within a given context provides no evidence at all.

Moreover, the final mention of the church in Revelation does not refer to some heavenly, raptured organism; rather the term is plural, “churches” (22:16), and it is employed of congregations in their individual, earthly capacity.

Professor Alan Johnson, a premillennialist associated with Wheaton College, confesses: “There is no good reason for seeing the invitation for John to come up into the opened heaven as a symbol of the rapture of the church” (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Frank Gaelebein, Ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, Vol. 12, p. 461).

Robert Mounce agrees: “There is no basis for discovering a rapture of the church at this point” (The Book of Revelation, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, p. 134).

The doctrine of the “rapture” became popular a few years ago when Hal Lindsey published his little book, The Late Great Planet Earth. He described the event as follows:

“There I was, driving down the freeway and all of a sudden the place went crazy . . . cars going in all directions . . . and not one of them had a driver. I mean it was wild! I think we’ve got an invasion from outer space!” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970, pp. 124-25).

Lindsey’s explanation for this frantic scene, as drawn from his imagination, is that these automobiles were being driven by Christians, who were suddenly and mysteriously caught up to be with the invisible Christ.

The word “rapture” is derived from the Latin *rapio*, which means “to seize,” “to snatch.” Though this word is not in the Bible, dispensationalists claim the idea is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. There Paul speaks of the Second Coming of Christ; he declares that those living saints who witness the Lord’s return will be “caught up” (*harpagesometha*) in the clouds to meet him.

To use this context, though, as proof of a silent, secret return of Christ is, as Alexander Reese, a premillennialist, acknowledged — one of the sorriest attempts “in the whole history of freak exegesis” (quoted by George Murray, *Millennial Studies*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948, p. 137).

The “rapture” theory is contradicted by the following biblical facts:

1. Christ’s return will not be invisible; rather, it will be universally

manifest.

“For as the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen [from phaino, “to shine”] even unto the west; so [houtos, “in this manner”] shall be the coming [parousia] of the Son of Man” (Mt. 24:27).

As those early disciples “beheld” [theaomai, “to see, look at”] Christ’s departure to heaven, so in like manner [tropos, “in the same way”] will he come again (Acts 1:11).

The Lord’s coming will involve a “revelation” [apokalupsis, “to uncover”] of his being (2 Thes. 1:7), because at that time Christ will be “manifested” [phaneroo] — a term which, when employed in the passive voice (as in 1 Jn. 2:28), means to “show or reveal oneself, be revealed, appear to someone” (Arndt & Gingrich, Greek Lexicon, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967, p. 860).

Moreover, as Jesus was visible during his first “appearing” [epiphaneia] on earth (2 Tim. 1:10), so will he be visible when he appears at his second coming (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Tit. 2:13).

Finally, of his coming it is said that Jesus shall “appear” [horao, “become visible”] a second time (Heb. 9:28). If the advocates of the rapture theory are correct, the Lord will not appear until his third coming!

2. Christ’s coming will not be inaudible; rather, scripture indicates that the Second Advent will be accompanied by considerable sound phenomena.

The Lord will descend from heaven with a “a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God” (1 Thes. 4:16). This has been called the noisiest verse in the Bible.

Too, when Jesus comes again, “the heavens shall pass away with a great noise” (2 Pet. 3:10). That hardly accords with the notion that the return of the Lord will be a silent, secret event.

The truth of the matter is, the rapture theory is relatively recent. The idea appears to be traceable to a Pentecostal movement of the early 1800’s — founded by Edward Irving (1792-1834). A recent writer says:

“The idea of a two-stage coming of Christ first came to a Scottish lass, Miss Margaret Macdonald of Port Glasgow, Scotland, while she was in a ‘prophetic’ trance” (Robert Brinsmead, Present Truth, September, 1974, p. 28).

Brinsmead quotes from a book, published in 1861, by Dr. Robert Norton, a member of the Irvingite group. This volume, titled *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets: In the Catholic Apostolic Church* (p. 15), as quoted by Brinsmead, reads as follows:

Marvelous light was shed upon Scripture, and especially on the doctrine of the second Advent, by the revived spirit of prophecy. In the following account by Miss M.M.—, of an evening

during which the power of the Holy Ghost rested upon her for several successive hours, in mingled prophecy and vision, we have an instance; for here we first see the distinction between that final stage of the Lord's coming, when every eye shall see Him, and His prior appearing in glory to them that look for Him.

George Murray, in his excellent volume, *Millennial Studies*, has also quoted the renown Greek scholar, S.P. Tregelles, who, in 1864, wrote:

"I am not aware that there was any definite teaching that there should be a Secret Rapture of the Church at a secret coming until this was given forth as an 'utterance' in Mr. Irving's church from what was then received as being the voice of the Spirit" (op. cit., p. 138).

The rapture theory thus rests upon the same sort of bogus "revelations" as Shakerism (founder Ann Lee had visions and claimed to speak in seventy-two languages), Seventh-Day Adventism (Ellen White thought she took a trip to heaven), and Christian Science (Mary Baker Eddy's revelations told her there is no death).

The dispensational dogma, with all its peculiar elements (including the notion of a secret rapture), is at variance with the teaching of the Bible, and careful students of Holy Writ will reject it.



"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." Acts 1:11