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The New Apocalyptic: Modern American Apocalyptic Fiction and its Ancient and Modern Cousins

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This paper compares and contrasts modern American Christian apocalyptic fiction with two related genres, early Christian and modern secular apocalyptic literature. Starting with a description of early Christian apocalyptic literature, it compares these to the content, form, and function of the *Left Behind* series. While the *Left Behind* series may not typify modern Christian apocalyptic fiction, its popularity places it firmly in the realm of pop culture.

[1] The Jewish and Christian communities from around the turn of the Common Era produced numerous apocalyptic writings. These writings have undergone a significant amount of scholarly analysis, which continues to this day. Modern American Christians also produce apocalyptic writings, in addition to films, music and other media. These, too, have been analyzed by scholars.

[2] This paper offers a brief comparison between these the ancient and contemporary apocalypses. While neither early Christian/Jewish nor modern Christian apocalyptic writings are monolithic in form or content, they do contain sufficient generic similarities to allow for some general statements to be made about differences in content, form, and function. These differences will be studied for their ability to tell us something about modern Christians who produce and consume these writings, as well as the way modern American Christian apocalyptic fiction interacts with ancient Christian and modern secular apocalyptic thought.[\[1\]](#)

[3] This study of modern American apocalyptic writing will largely be confined to the *Left Behind* series. While these books cannot be said to be representative of the genre, their enormous popularity clearly places them in the realm of pop culture. Despite the almost universal negative judgment of the critics, the *Left Behind* books have sold tens of millions of copies. Much of the rest of Christian apocalyptic writing remains on the fringes of culture, despite the popularity of non-Christian apocalyptic media.

[4] One of the difficulties in studying and comparing various apocalyptic media is the larger question of the definition of *apocalyptic*. This is compounded when attempting to make comparisons across cultures and millennia.

[5] In 1979, the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature produced the following description of the genre of apocalypse, relating specifically to ancient apocalyptic writings: "Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it

envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (Collins 1979, 9)

[6] In a later attempt to expand the definition, David Hellholm lists thirty-three characteristics of apocalyptic writing that he calls *semes*. A *seme* is the “minimal distinctive unit (of the content substance)” of a particular genre (Hellholm 1986, 22 n 15). He places these *semes* into the categories of *content*, *form* and *function* (1986, 22-23).

[7] Hellholm recognized that no piece of early Christian/Jewish apocalyptic literature contained all thirty-three *semes* (1986, 24). The question is not whether a particular piece of literature is or is not apocalyptic, but rather how many of the *semes* any particular writing contains. So it should not come as a surprise to us that modern Christian writings usually categorized as apocalyptic do not include some of these characteristics. Rather, we can learn more about modern Christian thought by studying which *semes* are present and which are absent. These will say much about how modern apocalypses may function in the production and/or maintenance of a particular worldview within modern American culture.

[8] The rest of this study will analyze the *Left Behind* books, using Hellholm’s *semes*, using his general categories as a way to organize the study. Along the way, we will use secular American apocalypses as another point of comparison. While secular American apocalypses hardly constitute a monolithic form, enough study has been done on this genre to be able to make useful comparisons between it and the *Left Behind* series.

Content

[9] Under the heading of *content*, Hellholm lists a number of *semes* that also describe the *Left Behind* series. For example, he includes “s1. Eschatology as history in future form;” “s2. Cosmic history divided into periods;” and “s5. Combat between dualistic micro-cosmic powers.” While it is important not to make too much of these parallels, it is worth thinking about the impulse that may lie within them.

[10] While these three parallels connect ancient and modern Christian apocalypses, they would also encompass much of modern secular apocalyptic writing.^[2] Thus, while the *Left Behind* series borrows from its ancient kin, it also fits well with modern science fiction. This further allows us to recognize the rather fuzzy line between entertainment and paraenesis. If the *Left Behind* series has much in common with secular science fiction, to what extent is it read as entertainment rather than as a serious attempt to describe the way the world will/may actually end?

[11] Paraenesis is also one of Hellholm’s characteristics (s9). Paraenesis is a complex term, but indicates that the composition is meant to persuade the reader of something. Given that the *Left Behind* series is written as fiction, its paraenetic function is not easy to discern, except when we remember that apocalyptic novels are *about* the future but *for* the present (#1 above). This will be discussed in more detail under the section devoted to *function*.

[12] These four parallels connect ancient and modern Christian apocalyptic literature. Yet they also begin to show how modern genres intersect with modern apocalypses. This double influence will be tracked throughout the rest of this study.

[13] This accounts for four of the eleven characteristics of the content of ancient apocalypses. The remainder highlight some of the differences between ancient and modern apocalypses. The most significant are s3 and s4: s3. Description of the other-world and s4. Combat between dualistic macro-cosmic powers. (Note the parallel with s5 above).

[14] These two characteristics provide a stark contrast between the *Left Behind* series and ancient apocalypses. In the book of Revelation, much of the action takes place in heaven. The actions in heaven also affect actions on earth, but the reader watches the action from above (Rev 4:1), looking down with heavenly gaze on the various forms of destruction poured out on the earth.

[15] In contrast, the *Left Behind* series' view is strictly terrestrial. Although the narrator is omniscient to some degree, there is no attempt to directly narrate the discussion in heaven. Descriptions of worldwide events are placed in the mouths of humans. Even when actions on earth appear to be direct heavenly intervention, the action is described from down below, usually through the eyes of the various characters.

[16] This also means that there is no account of a heavenly battle. The battle between God and Satan takes place through their various proxies on earth. The outcome of the battle is never in doubt, at least not in the mind of God's agents. In addition, God's agents on earth are convinced that Satan, too, is aware of the unavoidable outcome of the final battle, but pursues his course anyway. The question of why Satan pursues a battle that he knows he will ultimately lose is a common one in Christian apocalyptic circles. This question is part of the larger question of determinism, where the strict determinism of apocalypticism does not mesh well with the free-will emphasis of American thought.^[3]

[17] In the book of Revelation, the macrocosmic battle scene is largely confined to a few verses (12:7-9), and even here the intervention of God is unnecessary, as the archangel Michael is able to defeat the dragon on his own. The lack of description of the battle does not allow it to be of significant interest to the reader. It rather serves as explanation for why a heavenly being is making trouble on earth—why the heavenly battle comes to earth.

[18] These differences in the content of ancient and modern apocalypses highlight some of the places where the *Left Behind* series diverges from its origins. These changes also begin to show how the *Left Behind* series is a very modern American apocalypse, with significant formal similarities to the American action-adventure genre. This will become even more evident as we study form.

Form

[19] It is when we study the form of modern Christian apocalyptic writing that we see the stark contrast with its ancient cousin. Of the sixteen characteristics of ancient apocalypses that Hellholm lists, the only one that the *Left Behind* series contains is the first one, "s23. Narrative framework." All the rest are different.

[20] To summarize Hellholm's list, ancient apocalypses are accounts of a special revelation given to a person, who is taken up to heaven and shown and told about events that are to come. These visions are highly cryptic in nature, but are

subsequently interpreted for the prophet and thence to the reader. None of these features hold true for the *Left Behind* series. It claims not to be a new revelation, but (merely) an interpretation of the revelations in the Bible, revelations that are thought to be accessible to anyone who reads the Bible.

[21] This means that the *Left Behind* series must be written in a form quite different from ancient apocalypses. The form of the *Left Behind* series is borrowed more from secular apocalyptic fiction, which is usually placed in the science fiction section of the bookstore. In this way, it might be best to categorize the *Left Behind* series as religious sci-fi, rather than apocalyptic literature.^[4]

[22] Mara Donaldson has studied the relationship between biblical apocalyptic and fantasy literature, and notes that modern fantasy has “enacted” biblical apocalyptic “in a way that the Bible itself sometimes no longer seems capable of doing” (Donaldson 1992, 115). Readers unable to decode the themes and social critique in biblical apocalyptic and prophetic literature can more easily do so in modern fantasy and sci-fi.

[23] It is also important to note here that ancient apocalypses, with their fantastic beasts and many-headed monsters, bear a closer resemblance to fantasy than to sci-fi. Revelation looks more like *The Lord of the Rings* than like *Star Trek*.^[5] The *Left Behind* series, for its part, lacks the beasts and symbolism of its ancient cousin. In this way, it is more like sci-fi than fantasy.

[24] The transformation of form from first-hand fantastic revelation to interpretive realist sci-fi is important. David Frankfurter says the most important characteristic of early Christian apocalypses is the notion that the contents were *revelation* (the actual definition of the Greek word *apokalypsis*) (Frankfurter 2000, 416). He notes that the characteristics of “otherworldly gnosis, secret teachings and the sacred book of revealed wisdom” were a more important part of apocalypses than was eschatology (2000, 416).

[25] Yet a transformation of form does not necessarily mean a change in purpose. The change is more stylistic than functional. In each case, the credibility of the message hinges on the authority of the writer. The shift is from the authority of the prophet as the one who brings the divine word to the authority of the interpreter of prophecy, the one who correctly decodes the symbolic language in the ancient prophecy. In modern Christian apocalyptic literature, prophecy itself is thought of as finished; only interpretation remains. Yet the authority of the writer is still central. The question of the reader is “Who are you, and why should we listen to you?”

[26] Scholars have long noted the prevalence of charismatic leaders in apocalyptic movements (see Walliss 2006, 29). The *Left Behind* series is interesting in this regard, in that it is written by someone claiming expertise in prophecy interpretation, while simultaneously claiming that its interpretation would be obvious to anyone who read the Bible carefully.

[27] Claiming the status of interpreter rather than prophet also allows the modern writer to avoid a significant problem. For a prophet, the primary test is correct foretelling (Deut 13:1; 18:22). You can tell a true prophet from a false prophet if what they predict actually happens. Clearly this is not the case for interpreters. Somehow interpreters always manage to transform their message when predictions

don't come true –Hitler becomes Stalin, Russia becomes Iraq becomes Iran, the nuclear threat becomes terrorism, etc. One of Tim LaHaye's earlier books was titled *The Coming Peace in the Middle East* (1984). Apparently not all of his interpretations of biblical prophecy have been correct, but this does not appear to have affected sales of his later books.

[28] It is also important to note the interpretive method used in modern apocalyptic writings. The claim is that they interpret the Bible "literally," the only acceptable option for conservative Christian readers. This also helps explain the realism of the modern apocalyptic form. "Literal" readings should naturally lead to realistic depictions of our world.

[29] The claim of literalism, however, is not backed by careful analysis of their actual reading strategy. Mark Reasoner analyses this in his essay on interpretive methods. He notes that LaHaye often interprets the Bible symbolically so that certain verses fit with his rapture ideas (2004, 84-85). The most obvious example of this is the whole idea of rapture. This is one of the cornerstones of the *Left Behind* series, yet is not found in the Bible unless one takes significant liberties with the plain sense of the text (Reasoner 2004, 80-83; Rossing 2004, 19-46). The use of non-literal, symbolic interpretation is, of course, necessary for any serious reading of the book of Revelation. The question becomes which parts of the Bible should be read symbolically.

[30] In these and other ways, the form of modern apocalyptic writing is quite different from ancient apocalypses. This change in form arises naturally out of the modern claim to be literal interpretations of the Bible, rather than new prophecies. This turn towards a realistic depiction of future events also means that the *Left Behind* series has much in common with modern science fiction. This parallel may have implications for how these books are read by modern readers (Frykholm 2004a, 23).

Function

[31] Under the general heading of the function of ancient apocalyptic writing, Hellholm lists four semes/noemes. A close comparison of ancient and modern Christian apocalyptic writing using these categories provides useful insights into the similarities and differences between ancient and modern apocalyptic fiction.

Groups in Crisis

[32] The first seme in Hellholm's list is "s28. Intended for a group in crisis." In the first few centuries of the Christian church, sporadic persecution, mostly on the local level, was certainly part of the experience and rhetoric of many of the scattered groups of believers (Frankfurter 2000, 442). So it is interesting that apocalyptic literature should remain an important force in modern American Christianity. How does crisis literature work in a pluralistic, open society that is politically dominated by people professing Christian faith?

Who Are These People?

[33] The first hurdle in assessing this question is to try to ascertain who it is that is reading the *Left Behind* series. While thus far much of the attention has been on the

literature itself, the readers also need to be accounted for. Readers are what transformed the *Left Behind* series from a marginal work into a significant part of pop culture.

[34] It is generally held that the readers of the *Left Behind* series are to be found in the camp of evangelical or fundamentalist Christians. So we could begin by trying to discern why American evangelicals might be drawn to apocalyptic fiction.

[35] This solution becomes more difficult when we attempt to discover the characteristics of the evangelical community(s), or its boundaries. A number of major studies have recently appeared on American evangelicals, yet very little information is available that speaks directly to the question of evangelicals and apocalypticism.

[36] Paul Boyer has written on apocalyptic beliefs, but does so solely on the basis of literature published by and for evangelicals (1992). This sort of study is useful for the official party line, but does not usefully tell us about how ordinary people incorporate apocalyptic beliefs into their lives.

[37] Charles Strozier's study deals directly with apocalyptic beliefs, but deals with fundamentalists, whom he claims are all apocalyptic (1994). The boundaries between fundamentalism and evangelicalism are fuzzy, yet the use of distinct terms suggests that many in these groups wish to make a clear distinction between them.

[38] Christian Smith has written extensively on the subject, based on interviews with ordinary people rather than church officials or publications (1998, 2000). His work is useful in describing some aspects of evangelical belief and culture, and is very useful in illustrating the problems involved in identifying who is and who isn't an evangelical (see 2000, 17). His studies, however, do not deal with the question of apocalyptic beliefs.

[39] The same is true of the new study by Greely and Hout (2007). They prefer to use the term "conservative Christians," which suggests different boundaries than "evangelical." For our purposes, however, their study is of limited use since it lacks any discussion of apocalyptic beliefs.

[40] The difficulty of identifying the boundaries of a group called "evangelical," when compounded by the realization that not nearly all of the readers of the *Left Behind* books identify themselves with this group, means that we need to be very careful in making assumptions about the relationship between *Left Behind* series readers and evangelicals. This problem is highlighted by Amy Frykholm, who has specifically studied readers of the *Left Behind* series.

[41] Frykholm notes that most readers of the *Left Behind* series identify themselves as evangelicals, but for many of these, "evangelical" is not a meaningful label (2004a, 22). For many, "evangelical" is part of the boundaries that are necessary for apocalyptic literature to be meaningful—the boundary between the righteous microcosm and the evil macrocosm (2004a, 14). Yet the boundaries do not require physical separation and are important as rhetoric, yet are often difficult to see in practice (2004a, 23).

[42] She also notes that the negotiation of these flexible boundaries is found within the *Left Behind* series itself. The *Left Behind* series portrays Christians as wealthy,

technologically savvy, and exerting a powerful cultural influence (2004a, 36). In these and other ways, their separation from the world is not defined by asceticism, renunciation, denominational boundaries, or even, as Loren Johns notes, any particular interest in following the way of Jesus (<http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/Leftbehind.htm>).

[43] Frykholm's work is also helpful in noting that the *Left Behind* series is often read as just another pop culture book (2004a, 23). Its status as "Christian" literature is not significant. Mostly what readers of the *Left Behind* series have in common is that they have read the *Left Behind* series. Reading *Left Behind* is often done within a social network (40), groups of people who share the books and talk to each other about what is happening in the books. While Frykholm says that these networks provide interpretive communities that can give credence to the books' premise (68), I wonder how different these networks are from the informal networks of Harry Potter readers. My children have certainly become heavily invested in the Harry Potter series, but the actual effect of these books on their lives is difficult to quantify.

[44] Crawford Gribben, in his study of the *Left Behind* series, speaks to this question by noting the overlap between evangelical apocalyptic expectation and American political discourse (2004, 113). He claims that the success of *Left Behind* suggests that apocalyptic thought is very much mainstream in American life (115). This is especially curious given that apocalyptic narratives assume the marginality of the Christian position, and include an "expectation of victimhood" (115). It has always puzzled me (as a Canadian) how the American identity is simultaneously consumed with both its underdog status and its place as "leader of the free world." This schizophrenia is also part of, and upheld by, Christian apocalyptic literature, in which the allies of an omnipotent deity still perceive themselves as powerless and helpless members of a marginal group.

What Crisis?

[45] This discussion leads naturally, then, to the second hurdle in connecting ancient and modern apocalyptic thought, namely the identification of the crisis being addressed. If readers of *Left Behind* are citizens of the richest, most powerful (and therefore most God-blessed?) nation in the world, what is the problem that requires God to intervene with massive destruction and world-ending wrath?

[46] In his two major studies of American evangelicals, Christian Smith notes that separation is a major part of evangelical identity. "American evangelicalism... is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is—or at least perceives itself to be—embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it" (1998, 89). He also recognizes that this type of identity can be self-fulfilling, since it creates the separation that it proclaims as the problem (178-216). The form of this identity is noted in the subtitle of his book, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled but Thriving* (1998).

[47] "Embattled" appears to be a popular word among evangelicals. A search on the *Christianity Today* website produces hundreds of hits in numerous articles spanning many decades. Yet the specifics of the identity of the enemy are not so easy to pin down. While Jerry Falwell spurred the evangelical and fundamentalist communities towards political involvement against a common enemy, the identity of the enemy that he fought (secular humanism, homosexuality, and abortion) may be quite

different from the enemy fought by a new generation of politically engaged evangelicals, who are as likely to highlight consumerism, corporate culture, or pollution as the enemy.

[48] The question of the nature of the crisis being addressed by modern apocalyptic fiction is also taken up by numerous scholars. Glenn Shuck, in his book on *Left Behind* and evangelical identity, argues that *Left Behind* is a response to the threat that network culture poses to the traditional worldview (2005, 1-2). In his words, “LaHaye and Jenkins succeed because they offer meaning, however stark and gloomy, to believers struggling to make sense of the rapid cultural changes they perceive swirling all around them” (2005, 3).

[49] Another theory is suggested by G. P. Makris in his textbook on Islam. In attempting to explain Islamism, he compares it with Christian fundamentalism. In contrast with Islamism, Makris states that Christian apocalypticism arises out of a need to resolve an epistemological contradiction at the heart of American fundamentalism/evangelicalism (2007, 195). The contradiction involves individualism and free-market economics, leading to “the structuring of autonomous individualism responding to the operations of the spirit” on the one hand, versus the identification of America with the “City on the Hill” or “New Jerusalem” on the other hand (2007, 196). This contradiction, then, is only resolvable with the “millenarian destruction of the current order and the establishment of a paradise of autonomous individuals” (2007, 196). Makris also notes that this apocalypticism operates within the general framework of secular neo-conservatism.

[50] In contrast, O’Leary’s work on the rhetoric of apocalyptic literature argues that apocalyptic literature acts as a solution to the problem of evil, a symbolic theodicy (1994, 24). Apocalyptic, for O’Leary, provides the mythic framework for a specific social group to work out the larger question of why God needs to allow evil in the world (1994, 41).

[51] Frykholm agrees with O’Leary that rhetorical analysis is an important part of the study of apocalyptic, but relates the rhetoric not to the specific problem of theodicy, but the more general need “to persuade people of their need for faith, and to persuade others of the superiority and rightness of that faith” (2004a, 11). In other words, apocalyptic literature preaches to the choir, reminding them of why they are in the choir, while encouraging others to join the choir.

[52] It is Gribben who most directly deals with the irony of apocalyptic pessimism in a time of political ascendancy. He notes that evangelicals are “embracing pessimism and separatism at precisely the moment when their influence is at its highest” (2006, 114). The *Left Behind* series sold record numbers of apocalyptic books at a time when the presidency and both houses of Congress were controlled by conservative Republicans, the party usually thought to be most amenable to evangelical ideas.

[53] So how does a group claim its marginal status at the same time that it enjoys historic levels of political influence in the most powerful nation in the world? Perhaps part of the answer can be found within pop culture. Is the political influence of evangelical Christians matched by their influence or even the acknowledgement of their existence in pop culture? How many evangelicals do we see on television shows today? In a nation where one third of people claim the word “evangelical,” is this reality evident on TV?

[54] To study this question, I engaged the help of my then-11-year-old daughter Erin. I asked her to watch for signs of religion while watching television aimed at her age category. In her capacity as researcher, she dutifully watched *Arthur* (PBS), *Postcards from Buster* (PBS), *That's So Raven* (Disney/ABC), *Kim Possible* (Disney/ABC), *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (Disney/ABC), and *Hannah Montana* (Disney/ABC) on a semi-regular basis.

[55] This rather relaxed form of research seemed fitting in dealing with the problem of the diversity of pop culture. A complete study of the question of the presentation of Christians on television would be impossible. Even if someone could watch everything, this would not speak to the question of what a person might encounter in their casual viewing. In a two-hundred-channel world, very little can be said definitively about the “average viewer” or what “someone” might see as they flip channels.

[56] In her viewing, Erin found more references to Judaism than Christianity, despite the difference between Jewish and Christian population numbers in the U.S. She saw an equal number of rabbis and ministers (one each), except in the background at wedding scenes. These shows also had numerous Jewish characters, not matched by anyone with an expressed Christian faith.

[57] For example, on *That's So Raven*, when Cory's friend has a bar mitzvah, Cory does not have a parallel tradition to be part of. His black heritage allows him to create a “bromitzvah,” but there is no suggestion that he participate in catechism or confirmation. Yet, in another episode, his sister knows a Christian minister well enough to get a reference from him.

[58] It is important to note, however, that the Judaism encountered in her viewing was largely cultural. It was part of people's identity, part of “knowing who you are.” So she saw bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, but little reference to faith or God. The Jews she saw were also not necessarily practicing. The Francine character in *Arthur* is Jewish, but notes that “There are lots of ways to be Jewish.”

[59] In general, there was a lack of explicitly religious characters. No one goes to church, synagogue, or mosque on regular basis, or reads a bible. Being Jewish is cool, but not too Jewish.

[60] The exception is *Postcards from Buster*, a PBS spin-off from the *Arthur* series. In this series, Buster, a cartoon rabbit, talks about various cultural traditions among the immigrant community in America, with occasional references to their religious traditions—e.g. (Arab) Christian, Jewish, Muslim. One could certainly get the impression that religion is part of ethnic heritage, but most people are “plain old American.”

[61] The lack of explicitly Christian characters in these programs might lead to the conclusion that Christians are being left behind in pop culture. Into this picture, however, we would also need to ask the question of whether or not this lack is something new. Did children's programming used to include more Christian characters?

[62] This question is important because of the explicitly nostalgic character of American apocalyptic thought. Glenn Shuck's study of the *Left Behind* series notes

that this is one parallel between American apocalyptic thought and American populism (2005, 76-77). Each of these movements sees American society as not so much evil as out of control, not like the good old days (2005, 77-78). This begs the question of “out of whose control?” and larger issues of who “should” be in control of America.

[63] These issues are significantly different from the questions that occupied the minds of most early Christian apocalypticists. The early church had no “golden age” to look back upon (depending, of course, on their connection to the story of Israel). In any case, the golden age of David’s kingship was a millennium earlier, and not part of anyone’s recollection of “the good old days.” Jesus never ruled an earthly kingdom, nor did the early church have any reason to expect political power any time before the return of Jesus.

[64] Once again, the question of nostalgia leads us back to the issue of whether American Christian apocalyptic thought is part of or separate from mainstream American apocalyptic thought. Another way to examine this question is to look at the issue of fear. Fear is a necessary part of apocalyptic thinking—both the fear of God and the fear of the other. This is one subject where American apocalyptic is in line with early Christian apocalyptic. Both contain many images that terrify the reader. Whether it is the seven bowls of God’s wrath or Stalin standing in for the Antichrist,^[6] apocalyptic fiction both creates and assuages fear, in a scenario not unlike horror movies or science fiction novels.

[65] The success of this formula has not been lost on politicians. Presidents and kings have often both created and consoled fear, encouraging citizens to allow them to lead insofar as they can offer salvation from the terror (that they have created).

[66] This is also one place where modern Christian apocalypticists are necessary for the continuation of apocalyptic thinking among many modern Christians. In my classes, I often find that students experience the book of Revelation as fear-inducing but not fear-relieving. Since ancient apocalyptic literature can no longer complete the circle for the modern reader, new texts are necessary to fill that gap. The success of the *Left Behind* series is predicated on both the creation of fear (suspense), but also the assurance that everything will turn out right in the end (necessitating continual purchase of the books). Stopping after the first book would be like stopping after the first book of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The fear has been created but not assuaged.

[67] Earlier I noted that part of the self-identity of American evangelicals was that it sees itself as “embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it” (Smith 1998, 89). This, too, is part of secular American identity. The agenda of conservative Christian politics also induces fear in some people. So we can delineate three levels of “embattled but thriving” in American culture:

1. evangelicals, who see themselves as threatened by secular, hostile forces within American culture,
2. non-evangelicals, who see American society (as they understand it) threatened by evangelicals, and
3. larger American culture, which sees itself as threatened by forces

within and without.

[68] While a complete bibliography on fear-based identities in America would itself require dozens of pages, the tone of the argument can be noted by looking at an exchange between two popular authors. Chris Hedges, former war correspondent for the *New York Times*, has written a new book entitled *American Fascists: the Christian Right and the War on America*. His perspective is a secular one, and he fits clearly into the (b) category. At risk of oversimplification, Hedges talks about scary fascist Christians, who want to make America in their own image.

[69] Commentator Warner Huston responds to this book in an article for the online magazine *The Conservative Voice*. His perspective is also secular, but he brings a conservative perspective to the question of the popularity of right-wing Christianity among Americans. His counter-claim is that people are joining the Christian right in response to the scary Marxists who are running America. He claims that the real problem is lunatic hotbeds of revolution like Harvard Divinity School.

[70] This sort of “logic” strongly indicates that something else is going on. Since both people are trying to make money at this, and fear sells, it is not particularly difficult to see the root of the discussion. Nonetheless, neither writer denies the basic apocalyptic premise that America is being threatened by some sort of group attempting to undermine its foundations (whatever those might be).

Solution

[71] If apocalyptic literature is written to groups in crisis, it must offer them something in response to that crisis. In Hellholm’s categories, this is taken up in some 29, “Exhortation to steadfastness or repentance.” These two responses cover a wide range of possible actions, but also delimit the reader’s engagement with the problem. Neither steadfastness (keeping on keeping on) nor repentance (entering even further into the realm of the embattled) directly confronts the perceived enemy.

[72] In ancient Christian apocalyptic thought, the world is seen to be under the control of evil. Since evil is evil because it is evil (rather than because of bad parenting or childhood trauma), there is no point in attempting to change it. The only way forward is through the direct intervention of God. The role of the faithful is to remain pure. Evil will be conquered, and the believer must be quietly steadfast until the end (e.g., Rev 12:11).

[73] American Christian apocalyptic thinking shares the concern for purity. This is part of the notion of separation—what separates us from them is that we are good. Thus Jerry Falwell called his movement the *Moral Majority*. While the Moral Majority did not limit itself to apocalyptic thinking, its founder, Jerry Falwell, worked from an apocalyptic framework.

[74] Yet the rise of the Moral Majority as a movement within the American political scene also raises a number of possible contradictions within American apocalyptic thinking. One is the question of separation. How does a claim to be the *Moral Majority* fit with the separation basic to the mindset of embattled people?

[75] The second issue arises in Frykholm’s study of *Left Behind* readers. She notes that readers of the *Left Behind* series are not interested in separation from American

culture (2004a, 22). These readers manage to combine Christian apocalyptic with American apocalyptic without noting how each would define “them” in a different way.

[76] Both secular and sacred modern apocalyptic thought share with early Christian apocalyptic the notion of repentance. Yet in all cases, repentance takes a very particular form. Repentance, as noted earlier, is repentance from not fully claiming the status of “us.” In Revelation, this is explicitly taken up in the address to the church in Laodicea, where they are condemned for being “neither cold nor hot” (3:15). In American apocalyptic, it is often a response to ideas of American’s special calling in the world, using phrases like “city on a hill” and “manifest destiny.”^[7] In modern Christian apocalyptic, it is often seen as the need for others to repent so they can become part of “us.” In each case, repentance cannot suggest that perhaps the problems of the embattled community are a result of actions of the community itself. The community is righteous and innocent, a victim of the evil “them.”

[77] A major difference between secular and sacred apocalyptic thought in America occurs when the question arises as to the needed response to evil. Secular apocalyptic is usually in the activist camp. “Doing nothing” is not an option for Americans. Partially this is a result of the needs of the various genres of apocalyptic media. Movies or books where the heroes simply sit and wait would be very dull. Purity sounds like a great ideal, but doesn’t fill theatres. Partly, also, this is typical of the American mindset. “You can’t just do nothing” is a typical response to problems that arise.

[78] Modern Christian apocalyptic, on the other hand, tends to be passive in its response to evil (Walliss 2006, 26). This arises naturally out of a fatalistic worldview (Wojcik 1997, 3). What is the purpose of action when all results are fore-ordained? Since nothing can hinder or advance God’s purpose, action is meaningless.

[79] The *Left Behind* series is less passive than most Christian apocalyptic novels (Shuck 2005, 7). The characters create the Tribulation Force, designed to combat the workings of the Antichrist, and even attempt to kill him. In studying this new activism, Shuck notes that LaHaye is concerned about what he calls the “pre-tribulation tribulation,” the problems that will occur if secular humanists take control of “our government” (2005, 4). LaHaye sees this period as neither predestined nor necessary, and therefore open to active response.

[80] The solution to evil proposed in Christian apocalyptic literature also attempts to dissuade readers from certain forms of action. For example, anti-war activities are not allowed, since war is part of the coming of the end.^[8] Pacifism is also suspect, since this is perceived as a tool of the Antichrist. Any movement toward global unity (such as the United Nations) is also proclaimed as part of the evil empire (Frykholm 2004b, 168-77). There is also an anti-intellectual bias in *Left Behind* (Jones 2006, 111), suggesting that we shouldn’t think too hard about the problem.

[81] The book of Revelation also includes a strong call to purity and separation. Where it differs is in its signs of the presence of evil. In Revelation, all human military is on the side of evil, and believers are called to purity, not taking part in the evil that is war (Rossing 2004, 135-40). Revelation does have a strongly anti-empire bias, but does not make distinctions between good empires (America) and evil empires. The battle at Armageddon (16:14-16) is not between good and evil human

forces, or between Israel and its enemies, but between Jesus and “all the kingdoms of the world” (i.e. everyone except the small Christian minority).

Outcome

[82] In Hellholm’s classification, ancient apocalyptic literature also functions through a “promise of vindication and/or redemption” (same 30). This same links naturally to the two we have just discussed. A group in crisis (same 28) is exhorted to remain steadfast (same 29) so that, in the end, they will be part of the group that is proved righteous or correct in their beliefs (same 30).

[83] This scenario is also found in modern Christian apocalyptic fiction. This is hardly surprising, for it follows the plotline of many movies and television shows (Snyder 2005). The hero moves through a series of difficulties and crises, only to emerge, tired but triumphant, rewarded for having seen things through to the end. Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of California on the back of this scenario.

[84] This plotline, however, does not always apply in same way to secular apocalyptic thought. The Christian story involves believers become victors, reigning with Christ in the new utopian Jerusalem (Revelation 21). Purely secular apocalyptic literature cannot offer any such conclusion. Steadfastness may lead to survival (Wojcik 1997, 119), but the world imagined in post-apocalyptic fiction is rarely described in glowing terms.

[85] This scenario changes, however, when secular apocalyptic is also nationalistic. Then, in the post-apocalyptic world, [insert your nation here] can arise (or continue or return) as the true glorious leaders of the world reborn.^[9] The overlap between this scenario and the Christian ones is itself interesting, since American Christian apocalyptic displays a variety of attitudes towards the American empire, due to the ambivalence of living in a nation with occasional messianic pretensions.

Conclusion

[86] Modern American Christian apocalyptic fiction is a complex form when studied in terms of its origins and its ongoing relationship with popular culture. While claiming to be a straightforward “literal” interpretation of biblical apocalyptic literature, it both influences and is influenced by modern secular culture.

[87] The specific example focused on in this paper, the *Left Behind* series, shares many formal elements with the modern genres of science fiction and action/adventure, while still claiming to be biblical. Because of its generic similarities to an entertainment medium, while also claiming to be a portrayal of possible future events, we might want to place it in the general category of edutainment.

[88] The worldview in these books borrows both from the book of Revelation and from American nationalism. Insofar as these are incompatible, *Left Behind* follows the general worldview of conservative American Christian apocalyptic thinking, while portraying a more activist role for the believer in the apocalyptic scenario.

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Notes

[1] One of the difficulties in comparing ancient and modern apocalyptic writings is that the word "apocalyptic" means somewhat different things in these cases. While the definition of ancient apocalyptic is dealt with below, in modern English "apocalyptic" generally refers to media that concern the end of the world (itself a phrase thought of in a variety of ways). *Secular* apocalyptic writing, then, encompasses stories about the end of the world where God is not the cause of this end. There are, so far as I know, no ancient secular apocalypses.

[2] For a detailed study of the connection between secular and Christian apocalypses in America, see Wojcik 1997.

[3] Note the subtitle of Wojcik (1997): *Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America*.

[4] For more on apocalyptic and science fiction, see chapter five in Bertonneau and Paffenroth (2006, 161-194).

[5] This distinction is far from clear, but does provide a useful general overview.

[6] For a list of people who have been identified as the Antichrist, see www.raptureready.com/rr-antichrist.html.

[7] For a populist apocalyptic version of the history of these ideas, see Northcott 2007, 14-55.

[8] For a discussion on the pro-nuclear stance of some Christian apocalyptic leaders, see Kilde 2004, 65.

[9] I suspect this is truer for some nations than others. As a Canadian, I know that we are the model for how the world should work, but we have no expectation that others in the world will follow our example.

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