

Left Behind: Fact or Fiction?

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:

This newsletter was largely prepared during the ten days (January 12 to January 21) my wife and I were privileged to spend in the two beautiful islands of St. Croix and St. Thomas, which are part of the US Virgin Islands. In both islands I spoke at a rally of about 1500 believers. We enjoyed not only the warmth of the weather, but especially the warm reception and response of our fellow-believers and friends.

In St. Thomas I was interviewed during the week by the two radio stations for a total of three hours. One of the stations offered to air our Sabbath Divine Service. This means that my sermon on "The Sabbath Rest for Human Restlessness" was heard in all the Virgin Islands. Truly I can say that the reception and response was marvelous. Every where I found people eager to deepen their understanding and experience of biblical truths.

While enjoying the warmth of the Caribbean sunshine, I could not help but relate the concept of the book and movie *Left Behind?* to our family members whom we had left behind in the cold Michigan weather. It is reassuring to know that in God's plan no family member needs to be left behind in the eternal cold of death. We can all look forward to live together as united families in the eternal warmth of Divine love.

The interest for the movie *Left Behind?* is surpassing all expectations. This coming week many churches are planning to show the movie at a special service in conjunction with its official release on February 2, 2001. Apparently, even some Adventist Churches plan to show the movie this week as a basis for a discussion of the biblical teachings on the Second Advent. At least this is what discussion groups like SDANET are reporting.

The idea of using a movie on the Second Advent to stimulate a fuller investigation of this doctrine, has some merit. The problem is that the video version of the movie *Left Behind?* that I have seen it in preparation for this newsletter, hardly provides the basis for reflecting on the nature, manner, and results of Christ's Return. The reason is simple. The fundamental concept of the movie is a blatant misrepresentation of the biblical teachings on the Second Advent. It negates the unity and finality of Christ's Return. The whole drama is based on pure fiction, not biblical facts.

The analysis I am submitting goes beyond a review of the movie itself. Instead, it aims at helping people understand some of the fundamental fallacies of the dispensational theology which has popularized the belief in the secret Rapture. It is unfortunate that few people stop to reflect on the ethical implications of *Left Behind* as far as God's character and His plan for the human family.

If you find this analysis helpful, feel free to share it with your church members and friends. You have full permission to download this study and reproduce it in any format you choose for distribution to your church members and friends.

LEFT BEHIND: FACT OR FICTION?

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The best-selling book *Left Behind?* which has inspired the newly released (February 2, 2001) multimillion dollars movie by the same title, reminds me of a conversation between a preacher and an actor. The preacher asked the actor: "Please explain to me, Why is it that the people are ecstatic when you talk about fiction, but they fall asleep when I proclaim to them biblical truths?" The actor responded: "The secret is that I talk about fiction as if it were truth, while you preach about truth as if it were fiction."

There is no question that Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have done a masterful job in making people believe that their fictitious novel about the sudden vanishing away into thin air of million of Christians, is biblical truth. A major reason for their success is that their fiction is based upon what most Evangelical Christians have been taught to believe as truth, namely, that soon believing Christians will be secretly and suddenly snatch away from this earth, leaving behind a mass of unbelieving Jews and unconverted people, who will have to go through the worst Tribulation this world has ever seen.

This doctrine, known as the "Pretribulation Secret Rapture," is undoubtedly one of the greatest deceptions of our time. It has an enormous appeal, especially because it promises people a way out of the final tribulation. Nobody wants to suffer. To avoid pain people swallow all sorts of pain killers. And many are willing to swallow even the deceptive teaching of the Secret Rapture, in their hope to avoid the End-time tribulation. Unfortunately, this popular doctrine grossly misrepresents the biblical teachings which promises believers protection in the final tribulation, and not removal from it. It also destroys the unity and finality of Christ's Second Coming, which is presented in Scripture as a single event occurring after the Great Tribulation. Furthermore, the Rapture misrepresents also God's character by portraying Him as a discriminatory Being who gives preferential treatment to the Church, which He secretly raptures away, leaving behind Jews and unconverted people to suffer the worst tribulation mankind has ever seen to cause some repent and be saved.

The authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins would have never imagined that *Left Behind*, first published in 1995, would become, according to Barnes & Noble, "One of the top ten best-selling books of the 20th century." The skyrocketing sales inspired the authors to expand their project by producing a series of 12 books, 7 of which have already been published: *Left Behind*, *Tribulation Force*, *Nicolae*, *Soul Harvest*, *Appollyon*, *Assassins*, and *The Indwelling*. Surprisingly, these books have reached the *New York Times* best-seller list, and have resulted in an interview of LaHaye and Jenkins on *Larry King Live*. On February 2, 2001, the much-publicized movie *Left Behind, The Movie*, produced by Cloud Ten Pictures, opened in theaters across the United States and is on sale on videocassette on chain stores like Wal-Mart.

A Parallel between *Left Behind* and *The Late Great Planet Earth*

The success of *Left Behind* reminds me of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* which was also made into a movie. The book was touted by the publisher in 1970 as "the best-selling nonfiction book of the decade," selling more than thirty million copies worldwide. Somebody said that Lindsey's book was selling faster than McDonald's hamburgers. These books have much in common, since they dramatize the alleged secret and sudden snatching away of believers from the earth and the tribulation events to be experienced by those left behind. The difference between them is that Lindsey dared to predict the approximate time of what he calls "the Great Snatch," namely, by 1981, while LaHaye and Jenkins speak of the imminence of the Rapture, without setting dates.

Lindsey calculated the approximate date of the secret Rapture and of the visible Return of Christ to occur seven years later, from his interpretation of the parable of the "fig tree" found in Matthew 24:32-34, where Jesus says: "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gate. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place."

Lindsey applied the budding of the fig tree to the restoration of national Israel which occurred on May 14, 1948. From that date he counted 40 years, the alleged duration of "this generation" mentioned by Christ in Matthew 24:34, and he came up with the approximate date of 1988 for the visible coming of Christ, and 1981 for the secret "Great Snatch" which is supposed to take place seven years before.¹

Like the authors of *Left Behind*, Lindsey captured the attention of millions of people by dramatizing the alleged sudden disappearance of millions of believers. He wrote: "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!"² Such dramatic descriptions have proven to be fiction, because no one disappeared in 1981 or since then. The only thing I have seen are bumper stickers with read: "IF THE DRIVER DISAPPEARS GRAB THE WHEEL." No one has had to grab any wheel, because no driver has yet disappeared.

In an interview reported in *Christianity Today* on April 1977, Ward Gasque asked Lindsey, "But what if you're wrong?" Lindsey replied: "Well, there's just a split second's difference between a hero and a bum. I didn't ask to be a hero, but I guess I have become one in the Christian community. So I accept it. But if I'm wrong about this, I guess I'll become a bum."³

By shrugging his shoulders and saying, "Sorry, I was a bum!" Lindsey hardly reflects a genuine pastoral concern for the millions whom he has misled by his books. This issue is addressed in my book *Hal Lindsey's Prophetic Jigsaw Puzzle: Five Predictions that Failed!* Excerpts of the book were published in an article format in several magazines. The article, highlighting the book, won the award by the *Associated Church Press*, for the category of "Best Featured Article" for the year 1986. The citation of merit reads: "Dr. Bacchiocchi has done us all a favor by holding such prophets as Hal Lindsey to scholarly account. With the skill of a brain surgeon, he bebunks Lindsey's widely believed predictions . . ." This timely book on *Hal Lindsey's Prophetic Jigsaw Puzzle* has just been reprinted. We will gladly mail a copy to anyone interested. Just call us at (616) 471-2915.

New Attempts to Sensationalize the Rapture

The debunking of Lindsey's predictions has hardly stopped new attempts to use Bible prophecies as a crystal ball to make sensational and fictitious dramatizations of end-time events. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are a fitting example of this trend. To their credit, they have been wiser than Lindsey by not setting a date for the Rapture and by labeling their books and film as "Christian fiction." By characterizing their production as "fiction," they can let their imagination run wild, without facing the fear of biblical accountability. Unfortunately, their books and movie may prove to be more deceptive and damaging to the Christian faith than Lindsey's books and movie, because *they present their fiction as if it were biblical truth*. Mixing some truth with errors, is the tested strategy of the Evil One for deceiving the masses.

The mixing of truth with error is evident in the opening statements of *Left Behind: The Movie*: “The great biblical epic of REVELATION.” The name “REVELATION” is embossed in bold letters. Then the statement is made: “Revelation, the book has been opened.” These opening statements and the frequent references to Scripture can easily deceive millions of uninformed Christians into believing that the movie and the books, are an accurate dramatization of the endtime events portrayed in the book of Revelation. For people who are biblically uninformed, the fiction of *Left Behind* becomes a fact. They fail to recognize that what is *left behind* is not a mass of unbelievers to suffer the final tribulation, but a whole body of biblical truths.

The *Left Behind* saga opens with the sudden vanishing of millions of Christians into thin air at the start of Revelation’s “great tribulation.” Surprisingly, the authors ignore that in Revelation the countless multitude of believers of every nation, tribe, and people, are not removed from the earth before the final tribulation, but “they come out of the great tribulation” (Rev 7:14). In Revelation believers are protected during the tribulation, not removed from it. Christ comes not to snatch away the church, and leave behind Jews and unconverted people to suffer during seven years of great Tribulation, but to bring finality to human history. “It is done!” announces the seventh angel (Rev 16:17).

The return of Christ is repeatedly associated with the cataclysmic events that terminates the present human history: “And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found” (Rev 16:20). To those who are left behind, Jesus does not say, “You can have a second chance if you repent during the tribulation, but “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for Satan and his angels” (Matt 25:41).

Contrary to the teaching of *Left Behind*, nowhere the Bible suggests that many unbelieving Jews and Gentiles will be given a second chance and be converted during the final tribulation. On the contrary, Revelation repeatedly affirms that those who experience the final plagues “did not repent of their deeds” (Rev 16:11; 16:9).

The notion of a second chance given to those who are left behind at Christ’s coming is totally foreign to Scripture. Salvation is offered in Scripture to every human being only during this present life prior to Christ’s Return. Christ comes “not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:28). His coming results in the reward of eternal life to the saved and the punishment of eternal destruction to the unsaved. Those who have been left behind will experience, not a second chance, but what Scripture calls “the second death” of eternal annihilation in the lake of fire (Rev 20:14).

In spite of the compelling biblical witness to a single Return of Christ that terminates human history, *Left Behind* splits Christ’s Return in two phases, the first to rapture away the believers, and the second—seven years later—to save the “tribulations converts” and establish the Davidic kingdom out of Jerusalem. During the Tribulation, the mass of mankind is supposed to experience the nightmare of a world gone mad. The website of *Left Behind* declares: “In one chaotic moment, millions of people around the world suddenly disappear leaving their clothes, wedding rings, eye glasses and shoes in crumpled piles. Mass confusion hits while vehicles suddenly unmanned veer out of control, fires erupt and hysteria breaks out as the living stare in disbelief and fear at the empty places where their loved ones were just seconds before. This is the rapture that God has planned as the first sign to begin the unraveling of the end of time.”

Much of the movie is a dramatization of the anguish caused by the sudden disappearance of loved ones. For example, an elderly lady suddenly discovers that her beloved husband who was seating next to her on a plane, has disappeared leaving his clothes on the seat. The flight attendant searches for the man in vain in the bathroom. A young mother on the same flight cries desperately when she discovered that her two children have disappeared.

The cruel pain caused by the sudden disappearance of children is a recurrent feature of the movie. It is evident that the authors of the movie are more interested to manipulate emotions in order to promote the fiction of the secret Rapture, than to reveal God's righteous character. Why would God snatch away children from their parents? If the children deserve to be raptured to heaven, it is most likely because of their godly parents. So, why would God leave their parents behind heartbroken to suffer through the Tribulation? Only irrational, unscrupulous, and insensitive people could have written such a fictitious script! Frankly, I have no respect people who dare to defame God's character in order to promote their agenda.

Throughout the movie, there are heartrending sketches of people agonizing over the disappearance of their loved ones: wife, husband, children, relatives, friends. The cruel pain caused by such disappearances, coupled with the chaos of a society gone berserk, is supposed to cause some people to turn to God in repentance. This is the fundamental premise of *Left Behind*, namely, that the Tribulation gives a second chance to Jews and the mass unbelieving people who have been left behind. This teaching, as noted earlier, is totally foreign to Scripture.

The Secret Rapture and the Return of Christ

The dramatic description of the sudden vanishing of million of Christians portrayed in *Left Behind* is based on the popular belief of the *secret rapture* of the Church, mentioned earlier. According to this popular belief, which is held in common by most evangelical churches today, Christ's Second Coming will occur in two distinct phases. The first phase is known as the "*secret rapture*" of the Church and can happen at any moment. At this time Christ comes down only partway to the earth to resurrect the sleeping saints and to transform and glorify living believers. Both groups are then raptured, that is, snatched away secretly, suddenly, and invisibly, to meet the descending Lord in the air. This body of believers, called the "Church," will then go up to heaven to celebrate with Christ for seven years the marriage feast of the Lamb.

The secret rapture of the Church to heaven is supposed to mark the beginning of the so-called *Great Tribulation* which is to last seven years. During this period, according to *Left Behind*, mankind will be divided in three major groups. One group, known as the "Tribulation Force," consists of those who accept Christ during the tribulation. A second group are the enemies of Christ, who are spearheaded by Nicolae Carpathia, who plays the role of the Antichrist. A third group are the fence-straddlers, who are not committed either to Christ or Carpathia.

During the seven years of the Great Tribulation, much of the action swirls around the conflict among these three groups. The conflict terminates at the end of the seven-year period, when the second phase of Christ's Coming occurs. This is generally called the *Return* or the *Revelation*, when Christ comes in glory *with* the saints all the way down to the earth to destroy His enemies in the Battle or Armageddon, and to set up His throne in Jerusalem. This event is supposed to usher in Christ's millennial reign on this earth. The saints allegedly go back to heaven while Christ stays on this earth for the next thousand years to rule over mortal people.

For many sincere and misled Christians, the secret, "any moment" rapture of the church is a most important and imminent Endtime sign. It is important because it is supposed to remove the church from the earth prior to the final Tribulation and to signal the countdown to the last seven years of earth's history which will culminate with the visible Return of Christ. It is imminent because its main preconditions, namely the reestablishment of the State of Israel and the repossession of ancient Jerusalem, have already taken place.

Four Reasons for Rejecting the Secret Rapture

A careful study of the Biblical texts relevant to the Return of Christ suggests at least *four major reasons* for rejecting the two-stages view of the Second Coming of Christ, popularized by *Left Behind*.

The Vocabulary of the Second Advent. The first reason for rejecting a pretribulation secret rapture is the fact that the vocabulary of the Second Advent offers no support for such a view. None of the three Greek terms used in the New Testament to describe the Return of Christ, namely, *parousia*—coming, *apokalypsis*—revelation, and *epiphaneia*—appearing, ever suggest a pretribulation secret rapture as the object of the Blessed Hope.

Pretribulationists claim that the word *parousia* is used by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 to describe the secret rapture. But in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 Paul uses the same word to describe “the coming of our Lord Jesus with *all his saint*”—a description, according to pretribulationists, of the second phase of Christ’s Return. Again in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 Paul employs the term *parousia* to refer to the Coming of Christ which will cause the destruction of the antichrist—an event which, according to pretribulationists, is supposed to happen at the second phase of Christ’s Coming.

Similarly the words *apokalypsis* and *epiphaneia* are used to describe both what pretribulationists call the rapture (1 Cor 1:7; 1 Tim 6:14) and what they call the Return or second phase of Christ’s Coming (2 Thess 1:7-8, 2:8). Thus the vocabulary of the Blessed Hope provides no basis whatever for a two-phases distinction of Christ’s Return, since its terms are used interchangeably to describe the same single event. More important still is the fact that each of the three terms is clearly used to describe the *posttribulation* Return of Christ which is viewed as the object of the believer’s hope.

The *parousia*, for example, is indisputably posttribulation in Matthew 24:27, 38, 39 and in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. The same is true of the *apokalypsis* in 2 Thessalonians 1:7 and of *epiphaneia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. Therefore, the vocabulary of the Blessed Hope excludes the possibility of a secret Coming of Christ to rapture the Church, followed after seven years of tribulation by a visible, glorious Coming to establish the millennial Jewish Kingdom. The terms used clearly point to a single, indivisible, posttribulation Advent of Christ to bring salvation to believers and retribution to unbelievers.

No Secret Rapture of the Church. A second reason for rejecting a pretribulation secret rapture of the Church is the fact that there is no trace in the New Testament of a secret, invisible, instantaneous rapture of the Church. The most notorious description of the Second Advent, which is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, suggests the very opposite when it speaks of the Lord descending “from heaven with a *cry* of command, with the archangel’s *call*, and with the *sound of the trumpet of God*.” “The dead in Christ will rise” and together with the living saints they will be “caught up” (raptured) to meet the Lord in the air.

The “cry,” the “call,” “the trumpet,” and the great gathering of living and resurrected saints hardly suggest a secret, invisible and instantaneous event. On the contrary, as has often been pointed out, this is perhaps ***the noisiest passage in the Bible***. The reference to “a loud trumpet call” and “the trumpet [which] will sound” in the parallel passages of Matthew 24:31 and 1 Corinthians 15:52 corroborates the visibility and public nature of the Second Advent. No trace of a secret rapture can be found in any of these passages.

No Removal of the Church from the Great Tribulation. A third reason for rejecting the notion of a pretribulational secret rapture, is the fact that the Church is protected, not removed from the final tribulation. In His Olivet discourse Jesus spoke of the “great tribulation” that will immediately precede His coming and He promised that “for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matt 24:21-22, 29). To argue that “the elect” are only Jewish believers and not members of the Church means to ignore that Christ was addressing His apostles who represent not only national Israel but the Church at large. This is confirmed by the fact that both Mark and Luke report the same discourse for the Gentile church (Mark 13; Luke 21).

Noteworthy also is the striking similarity between Christ’s description of the translation of the Church in Matthew 24:30-31 and that of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Both passages mention the descent of the Lord, the sounding of the trumpet, the accompanying angels and the gathering of God’s people. Such similarities suggest that both passages describe the same event. Yet in Matthew the translation of the Church is explicitly placed “after the tribulation” (Matt 24:29) at the time of Christ’s Coming “with power and great glory” (vv. 29-30). The parallelism between the two passages clearly indicates that the rapture of the Church does not precede but, on the contrary, follows the great tribulation.

Christ never promised His Church a pretribulation removal out of this world. Rather He promised protection in the midst of tribulation. In His petition to His Father He said: “I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Similarly to the Church in Philadelphia, Christ promises: “I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth” (Rev 3:10). If the Church was absent from this earth during the hour of testing, there would be no necessity of divine protection.

In Revelation John describes in great detail tribulational events, yet he never mentions or suggests a pretribulational secret Coming of Christ to rapture the Church away. On the contrary, John explicitly mentions a countless multitude of believers who will pass through the great tribulation: “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14). It is evident that the victorious tribulation believers, are not only Jews, because they come “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev 7:9). This phrase occurs repeatedly in Revelation to designate not exclusively the Jews but inclusively every member of the human family (Rev 5:9; 10:11; 13:7; 14:6). The Lamb, for example, is praised by the 24 Elders for having ransomed men “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). Obviously, Christ has ransomed not only Jews but people of every race.

The Church in Revelation will suffer persecution by satanic powers during the final tribulation, but she will not suffer divine wrath. The divine wrath, which is portrayed by the seven apocalyptic plagues, is poured out not indiscriminately upon all, but selectively (like in ancient Egypt) upon those who “bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image” (Rev 16:2; cf. 14:9-10).

As the ancient Israelites enjoyed God’s protection during the ten plagues (Ex 11:7), so God’s people will be protected when His divine wrath will fall upon the wicked. This divine protection is represented in Revelation by an angel sealing the servants of God on their foreheads (Rev 7:3) so that they may be spared when God’s wrath falls upon the impenitent (Rev 9:4). Ultimately God’s people will be rescued by the glorious Return of Christ (Rev 16:15; 19:11-21). Thus Revelation portrays not a pretribulational rapture of the Church but a posttribulational Return of Christ.

No Pretribulation Rapture in Paul. A fourth reason for rejecting the secret rapture is the fact that it is negated by Paul's admonitions in 2 Thessalonians. In the first chapter the Apostle explains that believers will be granted "rest" from the tribulation of this present age "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God . . ." (1:7-8). In other words, believers will experience deliverance from the sufferings of this age, not through a pretribulation secret rapture but at the posttribulation revelation of Christ.

In the second chapter Paul refutes the prevailing misconception that the day of the Lord had come, by citing two major events that must occur before the Coming of the Lord: the endtime apostasy and the appearance of the Antichrist ("the man of lawlessness" —2 Thes 2:3) who will persecute God's people.

Had Paul believed in a secret pretribulation rapture as a necessary antecedent of the Coming of the Lord, he would have capitalized on such belief to prove to the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord could not possibly have come, since their rapture out of this world had not yet taken place. Paul's omission of this vital argument strongly suggests that Paul did not believe in a pretribulation rapture of the Church.

This conclusion is also supported by Paul's mention of the appearance of the antichrist (2 Thess 2:3-11)—an indisputably tribulation event which believers will see before the Coming of the Lord. If Paul expected the Church to be removed from this world before the tribulation caused by the appearance of the antichrist, he could hardly have taught that believers would see such an event before the Coming of the Lord. What interest would the Thessalonians have in the appearance of the antichrist along with the tribulation accompanying him, if they were to be snatched away from this earth before these events took place? Thus by both his omission and his affirmation, Paul negates the view of a pretribulation rapture of the Church.

The Origin and Expansion of Pretribulationism

Readers and viewers of *Left Behind*, may be surprised to learn that the belief that the church will be raptured suddenly and secretly, leaving behind the mass of humanity to suffer the final Tribulation, has been unknown during much of Christian history. Its origin is relatively recent, being traced back to the 1830s. Recently, Dave MacPherson has presented evidence suggesting that the seed ideas of this theory were first put forward by a Scottish young woman, Margaret MacDonald. In the early part of 1830 she had a vision in which she saw some Christians removed from this earth before the fiery trial and the appearance of the Antichrist. In all fairness it must be said that this vision refers only to a partial Rapture and does not posit a full seven years of tribulation between the secret Rapture and the Return of Christ.

MacPherson argues that Margaret's vision influenced J. N. Darby, the Plymouth Brethren leader who visited her in her home. While this is possible, the sources MacPherson presents hardly justify his charge that "Darby borrowed from her, modified her views, and then popularized them under his own name without giving her credit . . . Darby, then, did his part to draw attention away from the *real* origin of his special teaching."⁵

The charge of plagiarism—expressed in the very title of MacPherson's book *The Incredible Cover-Up*—is in my view exaggerated. First, Margaret MacDonald's views are far from clear. Second, there was at that time a widespread interest in prophecy, as indicated by the numerous prophetic conferences held at that time. These could have facilitated the rise of pretribulationism in different minds. The fact remains, however, that John N. Darby became the most influential expositor and promulgator of the pretribulation rapture and of dispensationalism.

The two beliefs are closely connected and mutually dependant. The pretribulation rapture is predicated by the belief that redemptive history is divided in different *dispensations* or segment of times, in each of which God has worked with humanity in a different way. The last two are known as the *Jewish Dispensation* and the *Christian Dispensation*. Dispensationalists believe that the rapture of the Church must take place before God can reactivate His dealing with the Jews. This belief will be examined shortly. Through his six visits to America and the extensive literature campaign of the Brethren, pretribulationism and dispensationalism spread rapidly.

The period of the maximum expansion and predominance of pretribulationism was the first half of the twentieth century. Men like Arno C. Gaebelein, C. I. Scofield, James M. Gray at the Moody Bible Institute, Reuben A. Torrey at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Harry A. Ironside at the Moody Memorial Church, and Lewis Sperry Chafer at the Evangelical Theological College (now Dallas Theological Seminary) have played a major role in popularizing the pretribulation rapture.⁶ The single most important factor was the wide circulation of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909 and revised in 1917, which inculcated this teaching among the masses as the only correct Biblical view.

Today the stronghold of dispensationalist thinking is the Dallas Theological Seminary. Its president, John F. Walvoord, has developed dispensational theology in half-a-dozen books. The most systematic and apologetic treatment of dispensationalism is the *Systematic Theology* in 8 volumes by Lewis Sperry Chafer.

Dispensationalism is taught in principle at the Chicago Moody Bible Institute and at an estimated two hundred Bible institutes in the United States. Its official magazine is *Bibliotheca Sacra* which was inherited by Dallas Theological Seminary in 1934. Other magazines such as *Christianity Today* supports some of the dispensational views of the End. Popular authors such as Hal Lindsey, J. Dwight Pentecost, Salem Kirban, Dwight Wilson, John F. Walvoord, and Thomas S. McCall, through their writings and motion pictures, have influenced millions of persons to accept all, or at least part, of the above-mentioned Endtime scenario.

Resurgence of Posttribulationism. Since 1950 more and more evangelical scholars have been abandoning pretribulationism and returning to historic belief that the church will go through the great tribulation, at the end of which Christ will come to resurrect the sleeping saints and save the living believers. This belief is known as posttribulationism.

Credit for the resurgence of posttribulationism must be given first of all to the influence of George E. Ladd, who served for many years as New Testament Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. Some of his important books on this subject are *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (1952), *The Blessed Hope* (1956) and *The Last Things* (1978). His respected scholarship coupled with his commitment to evangelicalism have caused many evangelical scholars to rethink their pretribulation views.

The influence of Ladd can be seen in the following significant studies produced by scholars who have embraced posttribulationism and have written in its defense: *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (1959) by Alva J. McClain, president of Grace Theological Seminary at Winona Lake, Indiana; *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (1962) by J. Barton Payne, Old Testament Professor at Trinity Evangelical College; and *The Church and the Tribulation* (1973) by Robert H. Gundry, Professor of Religious Studies at Westmont College, California.

Studies such as these have influenced numerous scholars within traditionally pretribulationist institutions to return to historic posttribulationism. The Evangelical Free Church of America, for example, a past defender of the pretribulation Rapture, allowed professors from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School to challenge pretribulationism at their annual ministerial conference in January 1981. The challenges and the responses—published in 1984 as a symposium entitled *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulationist*—offer what is perhaps the most scholarly debate on the issues related to the Rapture.

It would thus seem that among evangelical scholars more and more are changing from pretribulationism to posttribulationism. For example, according to a poll taken by Dave MacPherson, of the forty-four contributing editors of *Christianity Today*, “only two or three . . . are still persistently pushing pretribulationism.”⁷ This trend among biblical scholars to abandon the belief in the pretribulation Rapture, is not necessarily reflected in the Evangelical churches they represent. Most Evangelical churches still believe in the secret Rapture and this explains the popularity of *Left Behind*.

The Problem of Abandoning False Teachings. One wonders, why are most Evangelical Churches still holding to the belief in a pretribulation secret Rapture, when their leading scholars have abandoned such belief for lack of biblical support? The reason is simple. Scholars can afford to change their views without compromising their integrity, because they are accountable only to themselves. By contrast, well-established churches are accountable to their membership at large. For them to dare to change their beliefs structure can be tantamount to denominational suicide.

I was made forcefully aware of this fact while researching for my book *Immortality or Resurrection?* To my surprise I came across the writings of a host of Protestant and Catholic scholars who in recent years have abandoned the belief in the immortality of the soul. Instead, they have accepted the biblical wholistic view of human nature, where the soul functions as the animating principle of the body, and not as a separate component. The rejection of the belief in the immortality of the soul by numerous scholars, has not affected the churches they represent. Why? Simply because it would be too costly.

Imagine, for example, what would happen to the Roman Catholic Church, if she was to reject the belief in the immortality of the soul, as done by some of her scholars. Immediately she would be forced to abandon a host of doctrines such as Purgatory, the eternal torment of Hell, the intercession of the saints, the veneration of Mary, indulgences, etc. Such a move would cause the collapse of the doctrinal scaffolding of the Catholic Church. To prevent such a collapse, it is imperative for the Catholic Church to hold on to traditional beliefs, which are not only unbiblical, but also detrimental to the spiritual growth of her members.

The concern for the stability of church organizations explains why the belief in the secret Rapture is still popular among Evangelical Churches, though it has been proven to be unbiblical. The Christian mandate, however, is to search and proclaim biblical truths, not to preserve traditional teachings which have been found to be biblically wanting.

A Mistaken Assumption. Even a cursory reading of pretribulation literature suffices to understand that the belief in the secret rapture rests much more on mistaken assumptions than on Biblical teaching. The leading assumption is that God has a different plan for the Church than for Israel. Consequently, it is assumed that the Church must be removed from the earth before God can begin dealing with the Jews by causing some of them to be converted through the experience of the Great Tribulation.

Charles Ryrie, a leading pretribulationist, explicitly acknowledges that “The distinction between Israel and the Church leads to the belief that the Church will be taken from the earth before the beginning of the tribulation (which in one major sense concerns Israel).”⁸ On a similar vein, John F. Walvoord, former Chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary and a leading champion of the secret rapture, writes: “The rapture question is determined more by ecclesiology than by eschatology,”⁹ that is to say, more by one’s understanding of the relation between the Church and Israel than by Biblical teachings regarding the End.

Those who believe that there is a fundamental and permanent distinction between Israel and the Church, are known as “dispensationalists.” As noted earlier, the name derives from the belief that redemptive history is divided into different dispensations. The two most important dispensation are the *Jewish dispensation* during which God offered salvation through obedience to the law, and the *Christian dispensation* in which God grants salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The notion of two people with two plans of salvation and two destinies is totally foreign to Scripture and to reason.

It is irrational to imagine that first God would offer salvation to the Jews on the basis of works of obedience, and, then, after discovering that works do not work, He would decide to grant it by grace through faith to the Christians. This teaching makes God guilty of short-sightedness and inconsistency, to say the least. The biblical truth is that salvation has always been a divine gift of grace. Yet, dispensationalists ignore this fundamental truth. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer, a leading dispensational theologian, writes: “Throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives, which is Christianity.”¹⁰

Hate for the Jews. What many sincere Christians ignore is that dispensationalism and pretribulationism are inspired more by hate for the Jews than by love for Jesus Christ. To justify the historic hate for the Jews, some Christian leaders have concocted the appalling teaching that the church must be removed from the earth before God can pour out His final wrath upon the Jews and the unconverted during the endtime Tribulation. One wonders, have not the Jews already gone through enough tribulations, first at the hands of Roman emperors and then of Christian leaders? Why would God want to punish the Jews again during the Great Tribulation? Are they really worse than any other ethnic people? How can we expect informed Jews to accept Christ as their Messiah, when they learn that the Christian Messiah will pour out His wrath upon them during the endtime Tribulation and will treat any saved Jews as second-class citizens for all eternity?

In his compelling study *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Houghton Mifflin, 616 pages, 2000), James Carroll documents how the Christian intolerance toward the Jews has been historically influenced by Augustine. In the year 425, shortly after the Christians slaughtered the Jews of Alexandria in the first recorded pogrom, this influential church leader wrote: “Do not slay them.” The Jews were to be allowed to survive, but never to thrive. Why? Because their misery is supposed to be the proper punishment for their refusal to accept Christ and the claims of the church.

It is embarrassing to think that the deep and ever-fresh reservoir of Christian hatred for the Jews, has influenced not only the attempted extermination of the Jews by Catholic inquisitors like Torquemada and by dictators like Hitler, but also the development of a “Christian” theology of contempt for the Jews. Such a theology is reflected in the change from Sabbath to Sunday and from Passover to Easter-Sunday, in order, as Constantine puts it in his Nicene conciliar letter (A. D. 325), “to have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd . . . and to avoid all participation in the perjured conduct of the Jews.”¹¹ These issues are discussed at great length in my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*. The same theological contempt for the Jews is manifested in the popular *Left Behind* deception which assumes that God will rapture the church in order to pour out His wrath in an unprecedented scale especially on the Jews during the final

tribulation. The opening scenes of *Left Behind* focus on the plight of the Jews and Palestine during the Tribulation.

Two People with Two Destinies. This theology of contempt toward the Jews determines the dispensational interpretation of Biblical prophecies. A clear distinction is maintained between what the Bible predicts regarding Israel and what it predicts about the Church. What the Scripture says about Israel, it is claimed, cannot be applied to the Church and vice versa.

The reason for the radical distinction between Israel and the Church, as stated unambiguously by Charles Ryrie, is that “the Church is not fulfilling in any sense the promises to Israel . . . The Church age is not seen in God’s program for Israel. It is an intercalation.”¹² In other words, God views Israel and the Church as *two distinct peoples* for whom He has *two distinct purposes*. His purpose for the Church excels that for Israel.

Applied to the future, this dispensational construct assumes that the Christian Church is not the continuation of God’s Old Testament people, but an “interruption” or an “intercalation” that began at Pentecost and will terminate when Christ comes to take believers out of this world to heaven through a sudden, secret, and invisible Rapture. The secret rapture will mark the end of the dispensation of the Church and the beginning of the restoration of the Old Testament dispensation of Israel. This restoration will involve, among other things, the return of the Jews to their homeland, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the establishment of a millennial kingdom upon this earth which will be primarily Jewish.

To be able to maintain the distinction between the Church and the Jews, dispensationalists split the Second Advent into two phases: first, an invisible Coming to secretly rapture the Church, and second, a visible Coming seven years later to destroy the wicked and to establish the millennial Jewish Kingdom. There are two fundamental problems with this scenario. First, it is based on the mistaken interpretation of several biblical passages, especially Daniel 9:24-27. Second, it rests on the mistaken assumption that there is a radical distinction between God’s plan for Israel and that for the Church. Let us briefly examine these two problems.

Mistaken Interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27

To support the notion of two people with two destinies, dispensationalists appeal to several prophetic passages. The first and foremost of these is the seventy-week prophecy found in Daniel 9:24-27. Dispensationalists dissect the one prophecy contained in this passage into two distinct prophecies. The first, consists of 69 weeks of years which reach to the death of the Messiah and marks the termination of the Jewish dispensation on the day of Pentecost. The second consists of the seventieth week, which is separated by an intercalation of almost twenty centuries from the 69 weeks. This is supposed to be the dispensation of the Church which began at Pentecost and terminates at the Rapture. The Rapture ushers in the seventieth week, that is, the last seven years of the great Tribulation, during which major events are to take place: conversion of many Jews and unbelievers, the rise of the Antichrist, the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, and the battle of Armageddon.

This antichrist is supposed to be a Roman dictator who will rise out of the European Common Market. He will make a covenant with the Jews “for one week,” that is, for the seven years of the seventieth week. This covenant is supposed to enable the Jews to rebuild their temple and to reinstitute their ancient sacrificial services. In the midst of this seven-year period (“half of the week”), however, the Roman antichrist will allegedly break the covenant; he “shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease,” and will take “his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess 2:4). By these acts he will bring about “the abominations” mentioned by Daniel (9:27) and referred to by Christ (“desolating sacrilege”—Matt 24:15-16).

Unwarranted Time-Gap. This fanciful interpretation suffers from three major flaws. **First, it breaks the unity of Daniel's seventy-week prophecy** by introducing a time gap of almost twenty centuries between the sixty-nine weeks and seventieth week. Nowhere does Gabriel imply a gap among the three periods constituting the seventy weeks: seven weeks, sixty-two weeks, and one week. These three time units are presented as a continuous, consecutive and unbreakable unity as indicated by the fact that they are first given in verse 24 as one basic period of "seventy weeks."

Repetition with Elaboration. The second weakness is the failure to recognize the Hebrew stylistic pattern of "repetition with elaboration" in Daniel 9:24-27.¹³ Recent studies have shown that the verbal correspondence existing between verses 26 and 27 makes the latter verse an elaboration of the former. The pattern of **Messiah versus Destroyer** found in verse 26 is repeated as **Messiah versus Desolator** in verse 27. The latter verse, however, adds significant information. The Messiah who in verse 26 is simply "cut off," in verse 27 "shall make a strong covenant with many for one week; and for half of the week he shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease."¹⁴ Both of these acts were fulfilled by Christ when He confirmed God's covenant by instituting the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:28) and when He brought to an end the validity of the sacrificial system through the rending asunder of the curtain of the temple at the time of His death (Matt 27:51; cf. Heb 10:9).

The desolator, who in verse 26 destroys the city and the temple, comes in verse 27 "upon the wing of abominations" to make "desolate." By this language is described the complete destruction of the temple by the Roman General Titus in A. D. 70. Thus the Hebrew parallelism between verses 26 and 27 suggests that the Desolator of verse 27 is not an Endtime Roman dictator who will arise out of the European Common Market and destroy the tribulation temple, but rather, he is the same Roman General Titus alluded to in verse 26 who did destroy Jerusalem and its temple in A. D. 70.

Unfortunately, dispensationalists have divided one prophecy into two, thereby transforming a past Roman Prince who destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple into a future antichrist who is supposed to desecrate and destroy a literal temple that at present does not even exist. More important still, by this division dispensationalists make Christ into an antichrist, by attributing the work of Christ in terminating the sacrificial system at His death, to an endtime Antichrist who is to stop the sacrificial system at the Jerusalem Temple—a Temple that the Jews are supposed to build during the tribulation.

Christ's Interpretation of Daniel 9:27. The third weakness of the dispensationalist interpretation of Daniel 9:27 is its disregard for Jesus' application of Daniel's desolating abomination to His own immediate future. Christ's prediction regarding "the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel" (Matt 24:15) is clearly paraphrased by Luke as "Jerusalem surrounded by armies" (Luke 21:20). This paraphrase was made by Luke, as most scholars recognize, because he was writing for Greek readers who would not understand the meaning of the Jewish expression "the desolating sacrilege" used by Christ.

Although Christ's prediction could have a secondary application to the appearance of an Endtime antichrist, its primary reference is clearly to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army. Furthermore, while Christ predicted the destruction of the temple at great length, He never hinted at its rebuilding before or after His Second Advent.

The above considerations suffice to show that the prophecies of Daniel 9:24-27 and Matthew 24:15-16 offer no support to the notion of two people with two destinies. The attempt to differentiate between the Jewish dispensation and the Christian dispensation, by detaching the seventieth week of Daniel 9:27 from the previous sixty nine, results in the perversion of Christ's atoning sacrifice "which caused sacrifice and offering to cease" (Dan 9:27) when he died on the Cross (Matt 27:51), into the destructive activity of an alleged endtime Antichrist who is supposed to terminate the Jewish sacrificial system at a future Jerusalem Temple, which at present does not exist.

Further Evaluation of the “Two Peoples” View

The arbitrary interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27 largely stems from the desire to give prophetic support to the notion of two peoples with two destinies. Such notion is foreign to Daniel’s prophecy and is negated by the teachings of New Testament, which views the Church, not as a temporary “intercalation,” but as the continuation of the true Israel or God. To verify the latter, let us briefly look at some significant statements of Christ, Peter, and Paul.

Christ’s Gathering of the True Israel. By calling and ordaining twelve disciples as His apostles, Christ manifested His intent to gather the messianic remnant of the twelve tribes of Israel into a new organism, called the Church (Matt 16:18-19). The latter is not an independent organism designed to replace Israel *temporarily*, but rather is a fold that gathers both “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6; cf. 15:24; Acts 1:8) and the lost sheep of the Gentile world.

Referring to Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the gathering of Gentiles, Christ announced: “I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be **one flock, one shepherd**” (John 10:16; cf. Is 56:6-8). As the messianic Shepherd, Christ came to gather the remnant of Israel and of the Gentiles, not into two separate flocks, but into one flock.

When commending the faith of the Roman centurion, Jesus said: “I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness? (Matt 8:11-12). It is noteworthy that Christ did not promise the Kingdom of God to a future generation of Jews, as some dispensationalists maintain,¹⁵ but to believers of all nations, “from east and west.”

A Present Reality. The messianic Kingdom promised in the Old Testament is seen by Christ not as a future realization involving the territorial and political restoration of Israel, but as a present reality which has dawned through His victorious ministry over sin, Satan, and death. “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons,” Christ said, “then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt 12:28). Christ’s kingdom is composed, not of two separate peoples, Israel and the Church, but of one people, the “New Israel,” consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles.

To His disciples Jesus said: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give *you* the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). Note that the promised messianic Kingdom is given not to a future generation of Jews, but to the “little flock” of the true Israel, consisting of all those who accept and follow the Messiah Jesus (Matt 11:29; 13:38; 8:11-12). F. F. Bruce aptly comments: “Jesus’ calling of disciples around Himself to form the ‘little flock’ who were to receive the kingdom (Luke 12:32; cf. Dan 7:22, 27) marks Him out as the founder of the New Israel.”¹⁶

The prophets speak of Israel as God’s flock or sheep (Is 40:11; Jer 31:10; Ezek 34:12-14). Christ, by calling His disciples the “little flock” to whom God was giving the Kingdom, is unmistakably identifying His disciples as the true remnant of Israel. Moreover, by commissioning His apostles to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), Christ revealed that the prophetic mission of national Israel (Is 49:6; 60:3) was being fulfilled by His messianic flock, the Church, which consists of disciples from all nations. Israel continues to exist not apart from, but as part of, the Church.

Peter’s Description of the New Israel. Peter, like Christ, saw the Church as the fulfillment of the promises made to ancient Israel. On the day of Pentecost Peter declared that Joel’s prophecy regarding the messianic restoration of Israel (Joel 2:28-32) was being fulfilled through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church (Acts 2:16-21).

For Peter, the Church is not an unpredicted entity in the Old Testament, nor a temporary interruption of God's plan for Israel; but it is rather the realization of the eschatological remnant of Israel. If the beginning of the Church is seen by Peter as the fulfillment of a prophecy regarding Israel, we have reason to believe that the closing events of the Church may also represent the fulfillment of certain Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel.

The Church is the New Israel. It is noteworthy that Peter applies to the Church those Old Testament titles which designate Israel: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people" (1 Pet 2:9-10).

This description of the Church is a composite of three Old Testament passages (Ex 19:6; Is 43:20-21; Hos 1:6, 9; 2:1) which characterize God's people. Peter draws together the sweep of the Old Testament view of Israel and proclaims its fulfillment in the church. In the plainest words, then, Peter shows that the "chosen race" is no longer exclusively ethnic Jews, but both Jewish and Gentile believers. The Church is the new Israel that fulfills the promises made to Old Testament Israel.

Paul's view of "the Israel of God." Like Christ and Peter, Paul also viewed the Church as the true Israel. Speaking to the Jews gathered in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia, Paul said: "We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus" (Acts 13:32-33).

In this speech Paul explains that God's promises to the fathers have been fulfilled in Christ's resurrection. This fulfillment results not in the establishment of a Jewish kingdom during the millennium, but rather in "forgiveness of sins" granted through Christ to "everyone that believes" (Acts 13:38-39). The promises made to Israel are therefore fulfilled in the New Testament Church, not through political restoration of ethnic Jews but through a spiritual redemption of all believers.

In his epistle to the Galatians Paul uses the phrase "the Israel of God" inclusive of both Jews and Gentiles: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God" (Gal 6:15-16, NIV). Some dispensationalists maintain that the phrase "the Israel of God" refers exclusively to believing Jews. They translate the Greek word *kai* as "and," meaning "in addition to." Thus "the Israel of God" refers exclusively to Christian Jews which Paul allegedly distinguishes from the church as a whole because they had forsaken legalism to follow the rule of Christ.¹⁷

Unity of Jews and Gentiles. The problem with this interpretation is that it ignores both the immediate context and larger theological emphasis of Galatians. The immediate context speaks of "all who follow this rule" and this must include believing Jews and believing Gentiles because it is said that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything. Thus "the Israel of God" is a further description of both groups "who follow this rule." The larger context emphasizes the unity that both Jews and Gentiles share in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:28-29).

In the light of the immediate and larger context, "the Israel of God" cannot be a distinct group of believing Jews, separated from believing Gentiles. To argue for such a distinction means to destroy the very unity Paul endeavors to establish. Rather the phrase "Israel of God" was used by Paul in an explanatory way to further qualify "all who follow this rule," namely, believing Jews and Gentiles.

Paul's Integration of Gentiles into Israel. Paul teaches repeatedly the integration of Gentiles into Israel as heirs of God's promises. In Ephesians Paul clearly explains that the Gentiles who at one time were "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Eph 2:12), are not "no longer strangers and sojourners, but . . . fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19).

This integration of Gentiles into "the commonwealth of Israel" and into "the covenants of promise" has taken place through Jesus Christ Who has made both Jews and Gentiles "*one* new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in *one* body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (Eph 2:15-16).

The thought of a separate purpose for believing Jews in the present age or in a future millennium is here totally excluded by Paul. In fact, such a thought would destroy the very oneness of Jews and Gentiles which Christ has realized. Paul explains to the Ephesians that it was by revelation that God made known to him this "mystery" of how "through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs *together* with Israel, members *together* of one body, and sharers *together* in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph 3:5-6, NIV). Three times Paul stresses here that Gentiles share *together* with Israel in the covenant promise. Any theological system that divides what God has joined together is working against the divine purpose.

Paul's Imagery of the Olive Tree. In Romans 9-11 Paul describes the integration of Gentiles into Israel by using the effective imagery of engrafting wild olive branches (Gentiles) into the one olive tree of the Israel of God (Rom 11:17-24). Note that for Paul the salvation of the Gentiles results not in the shooting forth of a new olive tree, but rather in the engrafting of Gentiles into the same olive tree.

The tree of Israel is not uprooted because of unbelief, but rather is pruned, that is, restructured through the engrafting of the Gentile branches. The Church lives from the root and trunk of the Old Testament Israel (Rom 11:17-18). By means of this expressive imagery Paul describes the unity and continuity that exists in God's redemptive plan for Israel and the Church.

Interrelation Between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalists appeal to Romans 11:25-26 to argue for a future conversion and blessedness of the nation of Israel, independently from the Church. The passage reads: "I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:25-26). Dispensationalists explain this passage as teaching a large-scale conversion of the nation of Israel after the ingathering of the fulness of the Gentiles is complete, just before or at the time of Christ's Return.

This interpretation ignores four important observations. First, the phrase "all Israel will be saved" can hardly refer only to the last generation of Jews, since the latter would be only a fraction of all the Jews who ever lived. Second, the text is not discussing the temporal succession, but rather the manner in which Israel will be saved. It does not say "and *then* [after the ingathering of the Gentiles] all Israel will be saved." Rather it says: "And so [in this way, as the Israelites are moved to jealousy by the salvation of the Gentiles] all Israel will be saved." Third, the Jews are being saved by being regrafted into the same olive tree in which the Gentiles are grafted. Thus the salvation of the Jews occurs not independently from, but together with, that of the Gentiles.

Lastly, if the gathering of the full number of the Gentiles takes place throughout history, there is reason to believe that the same is true of the gathering of the fullness of the Jews. In fact, in v. 31 (NIV) Paul specifically says that the Jews “have *now* become disobedient in order that they too may *now* receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you.” These observations clearly indicate that Paul is here presenting not an order of successive dispensations but a promise of dynamic interrelation between the salvation of Israel and that of the Church.

The mistaken assumption of two peoples with two destinies, is largely derived from a theology of contempt toward the Jews, rather than biblical teachings. The New Testament often speaks of Jews in distinction from Gentiles, it never teaches or implies that God has in mind a separate future for Israel in distinction to that planned for the Church. There is an existing unity between Israel and the Church. In the New Jerusalem are inscribed both the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and the names of the twelve apostles, the former on the twelve gates and the latter on the twelve foundations (Rev 21:12, 14). The Church and Israel thus share together not only in the same present salvation but also in the same ultimate glorification and restoration. The future of Israel is seen in the New Testament, not in terms of a millennial political kingdom in Palestine, but rather in terms of everlasting blessedness shared together with the redeemed of all ages in a restored new earth.

Conclusion. In the light of the foregoing considerations we conclude that the popular teaching promoted by *Left Behind* of a sudden vanishing away into thin air of million of Christians, leaving behind a mass of unbelieving Jews and unconverted people, is a deceptive fiction and not a biblical truth. The popularity of this deception can be ascribed to the false promise that believers will be spared the suffering of the final tribulation.

At a time when people seek to avoid pain by ingesting all sorts of painkillers, it is not surprising that many are willing to swallow also the deception of a pretribulation Rapture—a teaching that promises people exemption from the suffering of the final tribulation. Such an appealing teaching, however, is not only devoid of any biblical support, but also promotes four major false teachings which are detrimental to the Christian faith.

First, *Left Behind* destroys the unity and finality of Christ’s Second Coming, which is presented in Scripture as a single event occurring after the Great Tribulation. At that time the sleeping saints will be resurrected, the living saints will be transformed, believers of all the ages will be united with the Lord, and those who are left behind “shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess 1:9).

Second, *Left Behind* incriminates God’s character by portraying Him as a discriminatory Being who gives preferential treatment to the Church by removing her from the earth, before unleashing the final tribulation on the Jews and the unconverted, as a means to lead some of them to repentance. The God of biblical revelation has one plan of salvation and one destiny for all of mankind.

Third, *Left Behind* posits the conversion of many unbelievers during the tribulation—a teaching which is foreign to the Bible. Repeatedly Revelation affirms that those who experience the final plagues “did not repent of their deeds” (Rev 16:11; 16:9). There will be no second chance for those who are left behind at Christ’s coming, because the purifying fire of His presence will consume all sinners and vestiges of sin: “The heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up” (2 Pet 3:10).

Our Christian Hope rests not on the fiction of believers suddenly vanishing away into thin air before the final tribulation, but on Christ's promise to protect His people when His divine wrath will fall upon the wicked. As the ancient Israelites enjoyed God's protection during the ten plagues (Ex 11:7), so God's people will be protected in the final crisis. We have nothing to fear for the future, if we have sealed our commitment to the Lord and the truths He has revealed us. We can look forward with confidence to the glorious day when Christ shall come to gather the redeemed from every nation, kindred, tongue and people and to create "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet 3:13).

ENDNOTES

1. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, 1970), p. 54. In the preface to the book Lindsey writes: "Many people will be shocked by what will happen in the very near future. The decade of the 1980s could very well be the last decade of history as we know it" (p. 1).
2. *Ibid.*, p.136.
3. W. Ward Gasque, "Future Fact? Future Fiction?" *Christianity Today* 21(April 15, 1977), p. 40.
4. The vision is reported in Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, Oregon, 1980), pp. 49-50; also by Hal Lindsey, *The Rapture: Truth or Consequences* (New York, 1983), pp. 169-172.
5. Dave MacPherson (note 4), p. 85.
6. For a brief but informative survey of the development of pretribulationism, see Richard R. Reiter, "A History of the Development of the Rapture Position," *The Rapture. Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational*, symposium (Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 24-34.
7. Dave MacPherson (note 4), p. 125.
8. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 159.
9. John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids, 1957), p. 50.
10. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas, 1936), p. 107.
11. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3,18-19, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2 edition, vol. 1, pp. 524-525.
12. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, New Jersey, 1966), p. 136.
13. See J. B. Payne, "The Goal of Daniel's Seventy Weeks," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June, 1978), p. 109.
14. For an analysis of the inverted parallelism (chiasm) of Daniel 9:24-27, see J. Doukhan, "The Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9: An Exegetical Study," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (Spring, 1979), pp. 1-22; W. H. Shea, "Poetic Relations of Time Periods in Daniel 9:25," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (Spring, 1980), pp. 59-63.
15. See J. Dwight Pentecost (n. 24), pp. 91, 465. George Eldon Ladd rightly labels this view "a forced interpretation" (*A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, 1974], p. 200).
16. F. F. Bruce in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 558.
17. See, for example, John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 170. Charles C. Ryrie writes: "Paul had strongly attacked with Jewish legalists; therefore it would be natural for him to remember with a special blessing those Jews who had forsaken this legalism and followed Christ and the rule of the new creation" (*Dispensationalism Today* [Chicago, 1965], pp. 139-140).

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