



Left Behind? The Facts Behind the Fiction

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Since the cataclysmic events of 9/11, interest in biblical prophecy and end-of-world events has exploded, as people search for ways to cope with and understand previously unforeseen disasters. A corresponding fascination with the popular fundamentalist Christian fictional “Left Behind” series has increased, as readers have pored over its fifteen volumes, riveted by descriptions of the rapture and the Antichrist. Although the Left Behind series is fiction, many individuals believe it to be an accurate portrayal of biblical prophecy. In this volume, the author confronts the Left Behind series’ claims head-on and offers alternative historical interpretations.

Flesher, a professor of the Old Testament at American Baptist Seminary of the West and a faculty member of the Graduate Theological Union, begins by explaining many of the terms found in eschatology, the study of last things. By examining history and using charts, the author defines the Left Behind series’ view as “premillennial dispensationalist,” which can be summarized as follows: Jesus will return to earth at the end of a seven-year tribulation in order to create a kingdom over which he will rule for one thousand years; Jesus will gather the faithful who will be raptured to heaven; and most scriptural promises will be fulfilled in the future.

Flesher counters the literal approach of the Left Behind series by recognizing many ingredients that are necessary in interpreting a particular passage of the Bible, such as its language, its time and place, its time span, its type of literature, and its audience. From this contextual approach, Flesher distinguishes between prophetic and apocalyptic biblical writings and examines the books of Daniel and Revelation, upon which the Left Behind series heavily relies.

Flesher also criticizes the Left Behind series’ method of interweaving various Bible verses that are snatched from their larger historical contexts in order to create its unique “premillennial dispensationalist” approach. For example, certain events must happen in a particular order in the Left Behind series: “the apostasy of the church; the blooming in the desert, which leads to a sneak attack from the north; the building of a third temple; the rebuilding of Babylon; the rapture of true believers; and the signing of the treaty.” Flesher maintains that in order to construct this scenario, the Left Behind series assembles twenty-one unrelated passages found in twelve different biblical books, eight from the New Testament and four from the Old Testament.

For those unfamiliar with the Left Behind series, Flesher provides helpful summaries, tables, and character descriptions intermittently throughout her analysis. She similarly references specific biblical passages, although sometimes a bit repetitively. A thought-provoking critique of a popular series, Flesher’s work will undoubtedly encourage discussion.

BETH HEMKE SHAPIRO (October 5, 2006)

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