

# Left Behind and Getting Ahead

BY DAVID LYLE JEFFREY

The *Left Behind* series, even in its ambiguous title, preys upon our worries about whether we really are saved and about being “behind” the general culture, “out of touch” with standards of fashion. The success of this kind of fictionalized Christianity should make us fear that the appetites of the church have become too much like the appetites of the world.

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There’s no time to change your mind.  
The Son has come, and you’ve been left behind.  
(Larry Norman, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” 1969)

**I**f commercial success is a reliable measure of God’s blessing, or if it faithfully authenticates a prophetic proclamation, then the millions upon millions of sales for the multi-volume *Left Behind* series are none too many for their enthusiastic readers. Five of the nine volumes already released (*Apollyon*; *Assassins*; *The Indwelling*; *The Mark*; and *Desecration*) stand at or near the top of best-seller lists from the *New York Times* to *Publisher’s Weekly*, making this, the publisher is happy to say, “the fastest selling fiction series ever.” It might even seem that the joint efforts of prophecy scholar and pastor Tim LaHaye and his amanuensis Jerry B. Jenkins have risen to such unprecedented heights of success that the galaxy of great world literature (most of which, of course, sold rather poorly in their author’s lifetimes) has been forever altered. Despite their 60 to 600 year head start, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, and Tolkien had better look to their laurels.

Can the market ever be wrong? Certainly not when it comes to what will make money. That is why we say that the customer is always right. And “right” for selling the Jenkins and LaHaye series implies providing certitude in matters of compelling interest to almost everyone. “The Future is Clear,” reads the publisher’s headline advertisement. These novels are to be understood by us as more than mere fiction; they are presented as a futurology of biblically warranted authority. Who could resist the guarantee of a failsafe crystal ball, especially when the markets are wobbly, the culture was undecided, and the world a mess? Above all, who could resist such unimpeachable assurance that he or she will be exempt from the worst of the approaching divine judgments on a sinful world, yet able to have a preview of each catastrophe and, just possibly, a ring-side seat?

It is clear enough that Jenkins and LaHaye, like Hal Lindsey and many another of their ilk, are superb marketers. They study the trends, particularly in their target population, with precision and savvy. They know what sells. As various polls have made clear, North American evangelicals are interested above all in health, wealth, and the end of the world as we know it. What super-vitamins and investment letters do for us in respect of our insecurities about health and future prosperity, the many apocalypticists do for our sense of spiritual marginalization and resulting social insecurities. We Christians may be the object of derision and neglect by the moguls of political fashion now, but isn’t it great to know that it is we ourselves who will have the very last laugh?

One of the most brilliant strokes of market engineering and product design in the *Left Behind* series is the way in which, even in its ambiguous title, it preys upon the worries some evangelicals intermittently exhibit about whether they really are saved. Am I really a child of grace, or should I go

forward at the next altar call, maybe even get baptized again? As one of my neighbors (thrice baptized) is reported to have said, “You can’t be too clean.” But I wonder if the general title does not also prey subconsciously at least on our worry about being “behind” the general culture, “out of touch” with the standards of fashion. Are we using the right technology? Is our sound system state of the art? Do our pop idols have arrangements

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and backup vocals as good as theirs, etc.? As a typically frowzy and rumped professor I admit to arguably inexpert speculation here: My forbearing spouse has to frog-march me into the haberdashers once a year before I get picked up as vagrant. (Actually, I sort of like the free soup.) Nonetheless, “left behind” sounds a lot like a general domestic witticism of one of my daughters when she was the most “with-it” teen in her youth group and embarrassed to sit with her Dad in church.

Well, if there is anyone left among those reading this article who have yet to read even one of the Jenkins-LaHaye novels, please be assured that there is nothing frowzy to be embarrassed by in these books. You will soon discover that the characters lack for no advantage in name-brand fashion, and that they are way ahead of the game in high tech innovations and snappy hardware. Indeed, their success in foiling the Antichrist depends to some considerable degree on their superior mastery of technology hardly yet available to the general customer. Here too are exciting previews of what is to come—enough to gratify the weekend technolatriy of our video game tastes even as we are instructed in a historically peculiar theological view of the “last days.”

In the world of Jenkins and LaHaye, the once discrete categories of theology and technology are so tightly connected as to seem almost a new kind of hypostatic union. Altogether typically, the narrator re-introduces the hero on the first page of the latest volume, *Desecration*, in this way: “Engaged in the riskiest endeavor of his life, Rayford had cast his lot with God and the miracle of technology.” Crisis after crisis resolves through alternating divine prompts and Internet prompts. When the prophet speaks, he is miraculously heard simultaneously in English and in Hebrew, but he needs lots of fresh batteries to run his programs. Throughout the novels, technology dazzles: from the stage-setting *Left Behind* forward, there is a connection between God’s action in history and human mastery of electronic wizardry which is indispensable to the turbulent and page-turning plot.

While the technological element and high degree of consciousness about material culture has taken an unusual, perhaps even unique, turn in the *Left Behind* novels, their basic futurism and predictive character conforms, it should be acknowledged, to a problematic but venerable lineage. A brief overview of this genealogy is instructive.

While not much apocalyptic speculation appears in the writings left to us by the early church, writers such as Justin Martyr and St. Irenaeus were well aware that a wide range of interpretations of Revelation, some clearly contrary to others, had emerged among people who belonged equally to “the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians.” Still more creative predictive teaching about the apocalypse, such as that by the late second century heretic Montanus, soon began to appear. As it proliferated, this type of teaching became increasingly arbitrary and eclectic about biblical

exegesis. The desire to predict a firm date for Christ's return also began surprisingly early: Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 225), for example, confidently predicted that Christ would establish his kingdom in 496 A.D.

Cautions against this kind of pronouncement, even by some of the most authoritative voices in Christian history, have had little effect on enthusiasts. Even John Bunyan, for example, first and most luminous Baptist writer of spiritual fiction, openly lamented "the forwardness of some who have predicted the time of the downfall of the Antichrist, to the shame of them and their brethren," and feared that "the wrong that such by their boldness have done to the church of God" would prove irreparable (*Of Antichrist, and His Ruin* [1692]). As a lot, apocalypticists have not shared Bunyan's fear or sense of shame about the making of bold predictions.

Consequently, in the history of Christendom the expected date of Christ's Second Coming has proved to be a highly moveable feast. Just to list a few of the highlights: the Glorious Return was predicted for the years 1000, 1200, 1233, 1260, 1266, 1300, 1333, 1400, 1600, 1642, 1660, 1776, 1843, 1988, 1992, 2000, and so on, all with a high order of certainty and correlation to current events as well as a political identification of the Antichrist. The Roman emperors Nero (d. 68 A.D.) and Justinian (d. 565), Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily (d. 1250), Napoleon, Pope Boniface VIII, Martin Luther, Pope Leo II, Hitler, President Ronald Reagan, USSR President Michael Gorbachev, Saddam Hussein, and Pope John Paul II are only a few of those who have qualified for extensive treatments of their role as Antichrist, each possessed of all certitude and seriousness.

The Antichrist of Jenkins and LaHaye, one Nicolae Carpathia, "a mortal incendiary, flaunting his temporary power" (*Desecration*, p. 162), is an evidently fictitious but nonetheless quite contemporary figure. As former Secretary-General of the United Nations and self-appointed Potentate of the Global Community, Carpathia represents the European Union and World Government rather than any specific living individual. His sidekick, Leon Fortunato, once a liberal Protestant theologian and now Most High Reverend Father of Carpathianism, is a pompous, sycophantic, and mostly comical figure who comes in the end to possess real (though limited) demonic powers. When nonetheless afflicted with the plague of boils, he furiously scratches his backside in public whilst trying to make speeches upholding the civic religion of Antichrist. It must be acknowledged that this type of camp-humor also has its precedents in the history of apocalyptic literature—one thinks of the Beelzebubs of some medieval plays on the Last Judgment, of certain characters in Dante's *Inferno*, and of one "Hell" panel in a Bosch triptych painting, also about the Last Days. But the general attempt at contemporary literary realism in our authors' *Desecration* causes this sort of gesture to run more to bathos than to belly laugh. As with the toppling-over backwards of the cigar-smoking security officer of the Global Community, implausibly named Figueroa, such gestures toward

farce sit uneasily with the seriousness for which the authors are striving.

Just how serious are Jenkins and LaHaye about the theology they represent? Despite the fact that this “last days” fiction has proven to be precisely the correct market calculus for gaining the attention of socially and politically insular North American Christians, I am sure that the authors are earnest in their adherence to the historically eccentric biblical

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exegesis their novels seek to advance. In that, too, they are traditional. Likewise sincere was Joachim da Fiore (d. 1202), whose three-stage (past-present-future) apocalyptic historiography was later secularized (without its 1260 A.D. parousia) by Hegel and Marx. So too was Melchior Hoffman, whose prediction (in 1530) of an imminent literal millennial reign of Christ on earth

fired the imagination of the Anabaptists in Germany and ended with one of his followers proclaiming himself the “New Enoch” and Münster the New Jerusalem. The disciple, Jan Matthys (“Enoch”), taught that while the rest of the world would be destroyed, Anabaptists would survive in their “city of refuge.” After a short political triumph (and the introduction of polygamy) the Münster Anabaptists actually died like flies when the bishop’s forces, in a scene premonitory of the Branch Davidian fiasco, broke in and slaughtered them wholesale.

But we need not go quite so deeply into fringe sources for examples of misplaced theological seriousness. So also serious was John Bale, the Protestant playwright, in his elaboration of the seven ages of world history to be followed by a new heaven of renewed faith and a new earth of faith’s full application. John Foxe, author of the famous *Book of Martyrs* (1563), wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse in which the first six ages are successive millennia, followed by a seventh some time before 2000 A.D. Milton believed that England, not Jerusalem, would be the seat of Christ’s millennial empire, while the radical Puritan Gerrard Winstanley believed that the Puritan revolution of 1642 itself marked the beginning of the millennium. Later, with equal seriousness, Samuel Sherwood (*The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness* [1776]) asserted that the American Revolution had performed the same inaugural function. Cotton Mather believed that the millennial kingdom would come in America, not England. And who would doubt that William Miller, father of the Seventh-Day Adventists,

was serious when he wrote in 1838 his enormously popular *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843?*

Nor is it possible to claim that only the poor and uneducated have been susceptible of becoming serious adherents to futuristic theological speculation. The educated and privileged have also lined up—and by the millions. Thus, side by side on the historical shelf we find the accounts of Joanna Southcott, the Devonshire Milkmaid prophetess (1750-1814), and the *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* (1798) of Richard Brothers, the Royal Navy officer who founded the British Israelite movement, and who claimed direct descent from James the brother of the Lord. Brothers, though confined for a time as a dangerous lunatic and later sent to prison as a general menace, counted among his converts Richard Brassey Halhed, a reasonably eminent oriental scholar and Member of Parliament. Sir William Alexander, author of the colorful *Dooms-day, or the Great Day of the Lord's Judgment* (1637), was Earl of Stirling, Governor of Nova Scotia in 1621, and Secretary of State in Scotland in 1626. And what are we to make of the fact that the great physicist Sir Isaac Newton wrote a mind-bending commentary on Daniel (published 1733), which purported to show by numerical analysis a necessary date for the Second Coming? Likewise, Robert Hugh Benson's *The Lord of the World* (1907) and Vladimir Soloviev's "Short Story of the Antichrist" (1900, in which the Antichrist is an Anglican clergyman) are hardly the products of uneducated or underprivileged minds.

Charitably, we might go so far as to say of this long and variegated list of futurologists that some speculation, at some point, is likely to be right about some things. But they have all, equally, been wrong about the identity of the Antichrist and the date of the Second Coming, and to that extent have misled the faithful. Either that, or there are far more people who have already been left behind than Jenkins and LaHaye suspect.

What is most distinctive about the *Left Behind* novels is not, in the light of this history, their authors' apparent certainty that we are even now at the end of the world, nor their gnostic encoding of Scripture whereby only their own "secret knowledge" tells the full salvation story. (Those features are typical of the genre.) It is rather that, for all the interior sermonizing of their proto-evangelist Tsion ben-Judah, the Jewish convert, and the sliced-in dispensationalist Bible teaching he provides by encrypted code on the Web to a billion followers (as well as to you and me, gentle reader), the *Left Behind* novels are so spiritually shallow. In their focus on material culture and earthly conflict they become tepid in characterizing the depth and inwardness of spiritual life that ought to pertain among believers.

In earlier apocalyptic writings, hell and heaven often feature very largely indeed, as many more than Dante will bear witness. But these biblically described extremes of consequence have tended to invite a profound seriousness of interior reflection in traditional apocalyptic, as well as in the more careful contemporary Christian apocalyptic fiction of someone like

Michael O'Brien in *Father Elijah* (1996). What we might say of Jenkins and LaHaye's sci-fi fictionalized eschatology is that "they have entirely altered the point of view for determining what seriousness is" (to borrow a phrase from Kierkegaard). Alas, Jenkins and La Haye have plenty of current company in this shift of focus toward a spectator-driven, exteriorized newsmanship. All rational and naturalistic resistance notwithstanding, apocalypticism flourishes equally in the *National Enquirer*, in occultish lore, and among televangelical and populist preachers almost precisely to the degree that each invites a kind of morbid voyeurism about the here and now and superficial speculation about future calamities.

That too, I fear, is at least part of the appeal in dispensationalism itself, and it may be as much a cause as an effect of dispensationalism's preoccupation with calamity as well as its failure to distinguish between prophecy and apocalypticism. Dispensationalists typically describe their apocalyptic speculation, whether as exegesis or, as here, in fiction, as if it were "biblical prophecy." But in the Bible, the prophets usually see God working through history to establish his kingdom, and they are vehement in their denunciation of their fellow-citizens' idolatry of the material culture as well as of their appetite for sorcerer-like prognostication. Their primary purpose is to call a disobedient "elect" to contrition and repentance. As a consequence, the biblical prophets weren't so good at making a profit—at least not in the marketplace. They were rather, by virtue of their agreement to proclaim God's judgment on sin and injustice, in the market as in the court, career calamities almost to a person. Condemnation of sin and calls to repentance, biblically at least, have not been big sellers.

On the other hand, apocalypticism typically grows out of a conviction that most contemporary persons and institutions are irredeemably corrupt, fit only for destruction. It calls out for God's judgment upon the general culture, or perhaps vindication for its subculture. To this extent it expresses despair, and in some of the historical examples I have cited, a barely muted paranoia. But it is also inspired by unshakable faith that God will, in the end, put everything right for the virtuous few, the faithful remnant.

In classic dispensationalism, the virtuous remnant is two-fold. At the time of the Rapture true believers are exempted from the Great Tribulation; Christians are caught up into heaven. After the Rapture God fulfills his plan to redeem a faithful remnant among his chosen people Israel. In the new and more generous dispensationalism of LaHaye, all those left behind get a second chance. That's cool. In fact, the Gentiles saved after the Rapture become key players in the redemption of the Jews. This provides the rationale for their plot, and for some of the most entertaining interaction and theological speculation in the novels. It also effectively reduces the Second Coming to a kind of wake-up call to the unsaved.

Despite early marginalization, dispensationalism has won a growing popular following in the United States; in some evangelical and Pentecostal

churches it is now represented as the unequivocal literal sense of the biblical texts. While dispensationalism has limited support even in evangelical seminaries, its many “prophetic” apocalypticists provide, whether in preaching investment advice (e.g., “Investment Strategies for the End of Time”—i.e., “Buy Gold”) or producing popular fiction and film, many marketable commodities. It is not only dispensationalists, nor Christians only, who have made mogul millionaires out of the likes of Jenkins and LaHaye.

But such is today’s dominant idea of “successful ministry.” We hire market consultants for churches, we consult advertising agencies, we find out “what sells.” If you are one of those who doubts that in spiritual matters the market is the measure of all things, or worries that the scandal of the Gospel has been, through “the miracle of modern technology,” transformed into one more species of sensationalism, then you probably don’t want to invest in all nine volumes of the *Left Behind* series, the eighteen-volume *Left Behind for Kids*, or the instructional video, *Are You Left Behind? Left Behind: the Board Game*, now available on the Web for half price, is a possible party diversion for those who haven’t much of a grip on their weekend sanctification anyway, but even so I haven’t myself ordered it.

Further, if you are inclined to suspect that a culture which entertains itself with vicarious violence may become inured to the truly serious nature of violence, then you may well wonder if turning the high theological register of biblical revelation into harum-scarum entertainment doesn’t trivialize and thus enervate response in this area also. Most of all, if you are the sort of Christian who fears to challenge the admonition of Jesus,

that “about that day and hour, no one knows” (Matthew 24:36), or who thinks that a badly written scene in which the Antichrist, drunk with power and as stupid as the pig he straddles to slaughter in the Holy of Holies, wallowing in its blood and laughing, borders on intemperance and irreverence of a sort a Christian novelist should

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probably eschew, then you should pass on the most recent volume, *Desecration*, in particular. It seems to me that this title advertises accurately something more than its authors probably intended.

On the other hand, if you can relate to a frantic scene in which two men knock down demonic scorpion locusts with tennis racquets while one tries to effect a conversion in the other (*Apollyon*), or find plausible or heroic a character who, in the heat of evacuating Jewish converts from Jerusalem so



as to prevent their imminent slaughter is all the while thinking “he hadn’t had this much fun since he was a schoolkid and his pet snake found his sister’s room” (*Desecration*, p. 241), then perhaps these novels are just your cup of tea.

Not mine. This kind of thing makes me queasy. Sometimes it makes me weep. Sometimes, but not in the sense the authors intend, it causes me to tremble. If being in the fear of the Lord is not a foolish thing (Proverbs 1:7), if being afraid of sins of presumption (Psalm 19:12) is not just an introvert’s timidity, then we should fear that the appetites of the church apparently have become too much like the appetites of the world. And that there seems to be little enough appetite left for God’s holiness, for quiet self-effacement before a God whose Holy Word requires of us at the least a more careful constraint upon how we represent it with our own words.

In that matter, of course, we all come short of the glory of God. I need as much as anyone the constraint of faithful interpreters of Scripture across the ages, as well as now, in my own approach to even the most perspicuous of biblical texts. The Book of Revelation in particular is not, I would suggest, nearly so perspicuous a text as these novels make it seem. Like Irenaeus of old, I find widely divergent and mutually contradictory accounts, even among those who, like Jenkins and LaHaye, I regard as “true Christians.” But I am concerned that their account is one of the most contradictory to the preponderant sense of faithful interpreters down through the ages on many points. Worse, it seems to me that their work is actually contrary in its tone and spirit to the tone and spirit of Scripture, and that it runs the grave risk of putting words in the mouth of Scripture. By these novels, at least the ones I have read, I thus find myself in a manner quite opposite to John Wesley, with my heart grown strangely cool.

All around me I see that this kind of fictionalized Christianity sells like hotcakes. LaHaye, having dumped Jenkins to increase his take (there are, of course, lawsuits in the offing), has been offered an advance of \$45 million by a secular publishing house for four new novels. This is better business than your average love-offering. In the idiom of the marketplace, one has to agree that Jenkins and LaHaye, in an unprecedented way, are really “getting ahead.” But where are they leading us?

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