

*The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*

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The year was 1999. The *Left Behind* series had been in circulation since 1995 and was starting to gain prominence—especially being aided by the heightening Y2K anxiety—and members of my congregation were asking questions. In response, I embarked upon a six-week Bible study of the book of Revelation during Lent, trying to highlight its message and vision of hope rather than fuel the fear generated by rapture paranoia. I wish I would have had this book by Barbara Rossing then, both for its critique of dispensationalist theology as well as its passion to present an alternative story that is faithful to Revelation’s message of hope.

Though Y2K turned out to be a non-event, it seems as if the only ones who really have been left behind are those who have not jumped on the rapture theology bandwagon. My 1999 edition of *Left Behind* proclaims “Over 1,500,000 Sold in Series.” With the release of the twelfth volume in that series this year, over forty million have now been sold, not to mention the movies and all the related merchandise sales. Lutheran church leaders in general may prefer to ignore or snicker about the whole *Left Behind* phenomenon, but its cultural prevalence probably means that there are plenty of Lutherans reading the books and being influenced by it. As Rossing wants to make clear, however, the problem is not just that Rapture theology is bad theology. It is wrong, and it has shown itself to be disastrous for Middle East politics and dangerous for its environmental implications.

An opening critique of “The Destructive Racket of Rapture” lays out two basic problems Rossing has with Rapture proponents. First, God is about loving the world and not about ultimately destroying it. Second, that the Bible and Revelation do not encourage an individualistic, escapist ethic. Rossing then provides a good background and critical analysis to an understanding of the Rapture, starting with John Darby in the 19th century and on through the *Scofield Reference Bible*, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, and others.

Subsequent chapters discuss the frightening implications of Rapture theology for political policy in the Middle East (President’s Bush’s recent endorsement of Sharon’s plan is consistent with the dispensationalist view of Israel’s possessing of the land); the true function of “Prophecy and Apocalypse” to warn and make real rather than predict; the paradoxical, non-violence of “Lamb Power” standing over against mighty Rome’s worship of victory; a paralleling of the Exodus event and Revelation and how the “Woes!” really function as “Alases!”; and how Jesus’ victory through suffering has been hijacked by a voyeuristic addiction to wrath and war.

In the closing chapters Rossing presents what she believes is the most effective way of counteracting the Rapture theology agenda: presenting a compelling alternative story that rightly draws on Revelation’s themes of God’s love for the world and its vision of hope. She talks about God’s vision for renewing the world in terms of a “Rapture in Reverse” and provides an

engaging tour of the New Jerusalem. She continues with “The Journey Outward,” including the “Mystical Journey of Worship,” and concludes with a description of the true “Apocalyptic Hope” as a life-transforming journey.

The book concludes with an Epilogue debunking dispensationalist interpretations of key passages in the Bible. This section is valuable, but a glossary of terms and key characters would have been a helpful appendix to the book.

*The Rapture Exposed* is fairly easy reading, and Rossing provides illuminating quotes or references from a wide range of popular, political, and theological sources. Some of the chapters feel more like independent essays that repeat earlier comments, but the frequent new insights make it worthwhile. For example—and I am thinking of how I as a pastor would have liked to provide some examples of how to read Revelation correctly to an inquiring parishoner—it is quite valuable to note Rossing’s paralleling of Revelation’s prophetic aspect with the prophetic role of Jonah, the force of the apocalyptic visions with Dickens’ *The Christmas Carol*, or the function of the worship interludes with Allan Boesak’s experiences in apartheid South Africa. Most importantly and more urgently, I believe this book provides a great service in highlighting the political and ecological disasters that are the logical outcomes of a Rapture theology. Rossing’s excerpts from the *Left Behind* series clearly illustrate the dangers inherent in such a world view and theological perspective.

This book review would likely be more interesting if I did not agree so thoroughly with Rossing’s critique of dispensationalism and her hope-filled reading of Revelation. In the end, however, I do not know how successful her book will be in changing any minds. She writes, “To make sense, [dispensationalist’s] biblical chronology must combine bits and pieces of the Bible written many centuries apart and under very different circumstances into one overarching narrative.” (p. 41) Given a particular view of scripture and inspiration, I suspect that many dispensationalists would embrace such a statement rather than be challenged by it.

Ultimately, this book will probably be most valuable to those people who have experienced some unease with the whole *Left Behind* phenomenon and the dispensationalist agenda but have been unable to define exactly why. It provides a detailed and thorough critique and, more significantly, provides an appealing alternative reading of Revelation that affirms God’s healing love that comes into our world and provides for the community of believers a hope that will not be left behind.