

RAPTURE RHETORIC: PROPHETIC EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE *LEFT BEHIND*

SUBCULTURE

A Thesis

by

KRISTIN DAWN HILL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2007

Major Subject: Communication

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Rapture Rhetoric: Prophetic Epistemology of the *Left Behind* Subculture. (August 2007)

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This thesis provides a rhetorical analysis of prophetic texts, non-fiction premillennialist dispensational studies, the fictional series, *Left Behind* and interviews with series' readers. This thesis argues that prophetic rhetoric constitutes an epistemological position whereby Rapture believers create knowledge, cast knowledge as good or evil and finally act as gatekeepers to determine what can and should be known. Rapture subculture is composed of both a hard core and a set of narrative believers, those who have acquired the nomenclature, but perhaps not the dogmatic belief in a Rapture, Tribulation, Armageddon, and Millennium schema. The process of turning narrative believers into hard core believers relies on the use of a range of *topoi*, appeals to authority, evil and time.

Rapture rhetoric, aimed at bolstering the beliefs of the hard core and cultivating the beliefs of those still undecided, relies on the process of transfer to gain acceptance for one claim based on acceptance of another and then relies on narrative plasticity to enlarge the basis for those accepted claims. These arguments are exchanged for stories in the fictional *Left Behind* series, whereby the characters, institutions and knowledge of the end-times becomes encapsulated in an easy-to-read and simple-to-relate tale that codes knowledge as either good knowledge revealed from God or evil knowledge

acquired through human understanding. These narratives and arguments both get used among prophetic believers to explain their lives and their world, internally and externally to the prophetic subculture, in order to convince more narrative believers of the truth of their claims. Prophetic communities develop knowledge products, cultural entailments and cultural manifestations of prophetic belief to serve as symbols of the end-times narrative.

Rapture subculture, based on prophetic beliefs, is not monolithic; however, this thesis is able to draw some broad generalizations about the prophetic community and the rhetoric they use to explain their claims within their ranks and to the outside world.

DEDICATION

To my husband, David, my daughter Amelia, for indulging and challenging me
simultaneously.

To my mother, without whom I would have had no subject for this thesis.
And to Gwendolyn, who I await with anticipation, and whose impending arrival
has lent this project and its writer drive and focus

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Thank you to my friends, professors and advisors in the Department of Communication, with undying gratitude due to Mary Haman and Danya Day, who have done their best to make sure I completed this thesis before my children graduated from high school, and that I enjoyed my life to the fullest outside of my studies. I also have to thank my colleagues at Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, who read early drafts, listened carefully to my arguments and sent me articles of interest. My debt of gratitude to all the interview participants cannot be overstated; they are the heart of this project.

Finally, thank you to David, for being patient with me, Mia for teaching me to be a mom and making me laugh every day, Brooke for helping me out so I could write and to my mom, for teaching me to research, to search the Scriptures and prayerfully seek God's will.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION – RAPTURE RHETORIC

A few weeks ago, a question appeared on a Pentecostal Christian Families Message Board that caught my attention. The poll asked, “Do you all think that it is a good idea to have more babies during these End Times?”¹ This question, from a sincere poster, brought a variety of replies from self-identified fundamentalists. Most said “Yes,” they would bring more children into the world; Christians should “be fruitful and multiply;” they would be bringing more children into “God’s kingdom.” They did all express some concern over the state of the world, claiming that these “terrible times” were the same as the “end times.” While most of the women posting replies did advocate bearing subsequent children, they justified their answer and their belief in a literal reading of the Bible at the same time. One poster, Sweetpeama, took a historical approach:

To answer I say that yes, it is ok if a couple wants to have more children to do so, even though these are the end times. I personally believe that the church that is living will be raptured pre-tribulation.

Another thing to consider is we know not the day or the hour of the coming of the son of man, and while it does say in scripture that when the fig tree bears fruit again (some say this refers to Israel returning to the land) this generation shall not pass away -ok so are we looking at a life span of someone born in 1948- 80 years which would put it 2028- or are we looking at a period of a generation being 120 years (based on Genesis

This thesis follows the style of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

¹ Mika145 asked “Do you think it is a good idea to have more babies in these End Times?” on the Pentecostal Christian Families Board, hosted by Baby Center, August 1, 2006, available at <http://boards.babycenter.com/n/pfx/forum.aspx?nav=messages&tsn=1&tid=204&webtag=bcus1379815>.

where the Lord says that mans days shall be numbered at 120 years (that number puts it out to 2068) and it still being a generation not passing away. (All it takes is one person even making it to that age)

Another interesting thing to remember is that in the late 14th century during the plague of the Black Death, many people thought that it was the end times, even to the point of selling possessions, not paying debts, etc. Well, we are here 6.5 centuries later.²

Sweetpeama recognizes the long wait Christians have endured, and while cautiously optimistic for the future “Rapture” events, she does not set a date. She uses references to Israel’s statehood and a “generation,” a popular landmark on the time-line of Rapture believers, asserted by many pre-millennial apocalyptic prophets and dispensationalist scholars. Those who believe in Christ’s imminent return are genuinely invested in the answers to the type of poll question mika145 posts; they constantly have to navigate the world, planning for tomorrow while expecting to spend tomorrow with their Lord. I am familiar with the type of speculation, hope, and concern present in the question and subsequent answers from my upbringing in a Pentecostal home. There, I both feared and longed for the Rapture, just as the women corresponding on the Pentecostal Christian Families Board. In moving away from a strict, literal interpretation of the Bible, in carving out an academic Christian position for me and in trying to negotiate my present beliefs with the sermons I hear when I visit my family, I have grappled with question like: Can we know anything about the End Times? Why is there such fascination with the timeline of the end of the world? How does prophecy work?

² Sweetpeama’s Response to poll question, August 1, 2006. Available at <http://boards.babycenter.com/n/pfx/forum.aspx?nav=messages&tsn=1&tid=204&webtag=bcus1379815>

How do Biblical literalists successfully argue for their worldview and end-of-the-worldview? What are the implications of accepting a literal interpretation of the Bible guided by a prophecy “scholar?”³ In this master’s thesis, I will pull together resources from Christian writers and rhetorical scholars to determine the answers to those questions and more.

In taking an historical approach to apocalyptic belief among Protestant Christians, it is necessary to reflect on the genealogy of apocalyptic belief among Christians, and to locate the birth of pre-millennial dispensationalist eschatology along that time-continuum. Christian believers have awaited the return of Christ since the time of his resurrection and ascension. Acts 1:11 records that an angel of the Lord appeared to the apostles and asked them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him as you saw him go into heaven.”⁴ The apostles were confounded by the sudden ascension into heaven and were looking for his quick return. They often greeted one another with the word “Maranatha” meaning “the Lord comes,” or “Come, O Lord” because they longed to be with their friend, teacher and savior once again. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also lists this word and its close counter-part “anathema” to the

³ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003), iv. In the preface to his book, *Heaven Below*, Wacker conducts a study of Pentecostals, a community with which he was familiar from his youth. I follow the same axiological path he takes, as I want to remain as impartial as possible, but recognize both positive and negative biases to the prophetic belief system.

⁴ Acts 1:11, Acts from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Version, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

“expected damnation of non-believers.”⁵ Some contemporary believers look for the Lord’s return to wreak vengeance on wrongdoers and unbelievers alike.⁶ The *Left Behind* series, co-written by Timothy LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, chronicles the end-times struggles of those who have been left behind, after Christ secretly returns for his Church (rapture) and allows the rest of the world to undergo tortuous trials. In the final book of this twelve-book series, Christ returns to earth to judge those left behind and eternally punish those who have not believed.⁷ The view of the end times, or eschatology, presented by LaHaye and Jenkins is not just a late-twentieth century construct. History is laden with similar end-times prophesy, most of them ultimately disappointing, but none as popular and widespread as those of the *Left Behind* series’ creators.

Over the last two thousand years, hundreds of millennial movements have sprung up throughout the world. “Millennial,” refers to the thousand year reign of Christ, as Lord of heaven and Earth. Millennial movements are characterized as being amillennial, viewing the thousand-year reign of Christ as symbolic, rather than literal,⁸ postmillennial,

⁵ “Maranatha” and “anathema.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Available October 3, 2006 at www.oed.com.

⁶ Randall Flagg, Review of *Are We Living in the End Times?* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins on Amazon.com, March 23, 2003, available October 1, 2006 at http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/0842300988/ref=cm_rev_next/002-1449068-6505611?ie=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=283155&s=books&customer-reviews.start=31, an example of a reviewer who looks forward to the tribulation, “I’m very anxious to watch sinners burn and their flesh boil.”

⁷ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2005).

⁸ Glossary, In Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde, eds. *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 201. Forbes and Kilde also discuss an

of the primarily early American belief that the thousand year reign of Christ would conclude with Christ's return to earth or premillennial, the belief that Christ would return to a world in deterioration, at which time he would conquer all evil forces and begin his millennial reign.⁹ Monsignor Ronald Knox, in his book, *Enthusiasm*, noted ten specific dates between 1260 and 1834 in which a group or groups of people earnestly expected the Parousia (what has become known as the Second Coming); Eugen Weber noted that any "diligent researcher could easily add ten hundred more."¹⁰ Bishop Gregory of Tours forecasted the end between 799 and 806, but after an earthquake and plague that killed Pope Pelagius II, his successor, Pope Gregory I, moved the date up, closer to 600 than 800.¹¹

People became more millennial-minded in the year 1000, due to the emphasis on the thousand-year time frame. As Weber notes, humans have always agonized over, been interested in and concerned about *fin de siècles*.¹² Mircea Eliade credits the emphasis western society has placed on a particular mythical time. When mythical time intersects with the temporal, or calendar year, one can expect to see an increase in

alternative definition of amillennialism, as the "understand[ing] the millennium to be currently in effect, others see it as a metaphor for spiritual perfection attainable through Christ."

⁹ Glossary, Forbes and Kilde, 205.

¹⁰ Monsignor Ronald Knox, cited in Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: prophecies, cults and millennial beliefs throughout the ages*. (London: Hutchinson, 1999), 58.

¹¹ Weber, 48.

¹² Weber, 2-26.

mythologizing.¹³ For instance, some post-millennialists that looked for the Second Coming after the thousand years reign of Christ,” living in the year that marked the thousandth year since the birth of Christ, expected the imminent Parousia.¹⁴

In the mid-nineteenth century, followers of William Miller were treated to his Bible calculations. They believed he had devised an accurate system of predicting the second coming of Christ based on the Biblical texts Daniel, Ezekiel and the book of Revelation, also known as John’s Apocalypse. In anticipation, Millerites, as they were called, sold all their possessions, left their homes and gathered their families together to prepare for the coming of the Lord. The date Miller’s theory foretold, October 22, 1844, however, came and went, and Miller’s disciples were still quite alive.¹⁵ Miller assured his followers that no one could be sure of the exact date, but most Millerites lost the hope of Christ’s return, in what came to be known as The Great Disappointment.

Rapture theology, however, received a push from a young girl, a schismatic preacher and an enterprising embezzler. Mary McDonald, a Scottish religious reformer, claimed to have a vision to Christ appearing in the clouds, to take away his Church

¹³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1957), 77-78. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). Paul Ricouer, *The Symbolism of Evil*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 5.

¹⁴ Bernard McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Church Reform,” in Bernard McGinn, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, Vol. 2*. (New York: Continuum, 1998), 74. Although Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century and John of Lieden in the sixteenth century contributed significantly to millennial thought, I do not discuss them here. For a full time-line of the evolution of millennialism, see McGinn and Weber.

¹⁵ Stephen O’Leary, “Millerism as a Rhetorical Movement,” in *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

before impending doom, and “catch up” his children in the air.¹⁶ While Cotton Mather had suggested that some would be taken and others left a century before, the idea had not been widely circulated until Mary Macdonald’s vision caught the ear of a Plymouth Brethren minister, John Nelson Darby.¹⁷ Darby, a Church of Ireland defector who later became the principal leader of the Plymouth Brethren, shaped the young girl’s vision into a comprehensive eschatology. He suggested that the history of the world (and its future) could be divided into epochs, or dispensations.¹⁸ He proposed that the current dispensation was the Church Age, and would conclude with the Rapture of God’s faithful.¹⁹ Darby took his preaching across the Atlantic on several occasions, thus exposing the new country in the midst of growing pains to an escapist ideology, promising to deliver them from woe.²⁰ While Darby and William Miller preached in America around the same time, there is evidence to suggest that Darby’s teachings became more popular and wide-spread during and after the horror of Civil War.²¹ In the decades prior to World War I, a series of events unfolded that brought pre-millennial dispensationalism to the fore. The capstone of these events was the publication of the

¹⁶ Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde eds., *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times: exploring the Left Behind Series*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 51. In other accounts, her name is given as Margaret.

¹⁷ Op. Cit, 53.

¹⁸ Robert Glenn Howard, “Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity in Online Apocalyptic Discourse After September 11, 2001,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 5(1): 32.

¹⁹ Forbes and Kilde, 53.

²⁰ Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism*. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005), 94-95.

²¹ Op. Cit, 95.

Scofield Reference Bible in 1909, published by no less a prestigious institution than the Oxford University Press.²² Cyrus I. Scofield is a polarizing figure in conservative Christianity. He was jailed for embezzlement, deserted his wife and two children, facts his detractors cannot overlook, and trivialities his admirers fail to acknowledge.²³ Regardless of the state of his moral character, Scofield sold millions of copies of his Bible, in which through the extensive use of footnotes, charts and maps melded to the King James Version of the Bible, he was able to make pre-millennial dispensational theology appear self-evident, as if included with the original text.²⁴ The seamlessness of the text infused it with the appearance of authority, a key factor in its high sales, currently in its third edition, and boasting tens of millions sold.²⁵ Out of these three separate, but related periods of fundamentalist eschatological evolution, modern writers were able to cull a list of end times events into a rough time-line of the rapture, tribulation and second coming. Figuring into this time-line current events, lends a sense of credibility to the structure devised by Darby, published by Scofield and magnified by Hal Lindsey.²⁶

In the 1970s, Hal Lindsey published *The Late Great Planet Earth*, to much acclaim in the Christian community. He felt the creation of an Israeli nation and return

²² Cyrus I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909, 1917, 1967).

²³ Witherington, 95.

²⁴ Ibid. See also, Crawford Gribben, "Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition." *Literature and Theology*, 18, no 1 (March 2004): 81.

²⁵ Michael Ennis, "Apocalypse Now," *Texas Monthly* 32, no 7 (July 2004): 52.

²⁶ Tom Thatcher, "Empty Metaphors and Apocalyptic Rhetoric," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66 no 3: 549-570.

of the children of Israel to God's Promised Land, was the final prerequisite for the return of Christ. Lindsey joined other premillennial dispensationalists in expecting a secret return of Christ for his most ardent believers, the Rapture, followed by seven years of great trial and hardship, the Tribulation, followed by the battle of Armageddon and final judgment.²⁷ Lindsey expected the Rapture within "a generation" of the institution of Israel in 1948, roughly 1988, according to Lindsey's argument, an assertion Sweetpeama mentions in her justification on the Pentecostal Christian Families Board for continuing to procreate.²⁸ Many Christians were again disappointed when the 1990s failed to bring the Rapture, and premillennial dispensationalists noted that we could not know the "day or hour" of Christ's return, but that we could follow the signs. The new breed of Christian eschatological prophets reflects the current backlash against specific end-times speculation.

A graduate of Bob Jones University, Timothy LaHaye worked diligently in the Moral Majority movement and served on their Board of Directors. In the 1980s, while fundamentalist Christians awaited the Rapture as Lindsey described it, Tim LaHaye began working on a story of the rapture, a fictionalized account for popular audiences. Although LaHaye had written non-fiction and prophesy books, he searched for a fiction writer with whom he could collaborate, and in 1994, he teamed up with Jerry B. Jenkins, a former sportswriter and biographer who had worked with Billy Graham on his

²⁷ Hal Lindsey, with Carole C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970).

²⁸ Sweetpeama's Response to poll question, August 1, 2006. Available at <http://boards.babycenter.com/n/pfx/forum.aspx?nav=messages&tsn=1&tid=204&webtag=bcus1379815>

autobiography, *Just As I Am*.²⁹ Together the two wrote *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* and Tyndale House, a small Christian publishing firm, published the book in 1995. The book sparked a series which has sold more than sixty million copies to date.³⁰

Overwhelming popularity of the books and similar evangelical Christian films, books and magazines, has drawn the attention of the academic community. Anthropologists, sociologists, literature scholars, psychologists, technological forecasters, higher education professionals and theologians have begun to take note of dispensational apocalyptic of late.³¹ Popular writers have weighed in recently in magazines and non-academic journals. As one *New York Magazine* article puts it, "Apocalypse is *Hot*."³² Often, but by no means exclusively, these studies ascribe sinister motives to Rapture believers, or seem "scared" of fundamentalist ideology.³³ Generally, these studies are unsympathetic to the people in the fundamentalist movement, at times

²⁹ "Jerry's biography," JerryJenkins.com. Available October 18, 2005 at <http://www.jerryjenkins.com/bio.html>.

³⁰ Jeanne Halgren Kilde and Bruce David Forbes, "Introduction," *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series*. (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

³¹ These studies include, Peter Yoonsuk Paik, "Smart Bombs, Serial Killings and the Rapture: The Vanishing Bodies of Imperial Apocalypticism," *Postmodern Culture*, 14 (1): 2003, Robert Glenn Howard, "Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity in Online Apocalyptic Discourse after September 11, 2001," *Journal of Media and Religion* 5, no 1 (2003): 25-47, Crawford Gribben, "Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition," *Literature and Theology* 18, no 1 (2004): 77-94, Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding, "Bad Endings: American Apocalypse," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 285-310, and Paul S. Boyer., "John Darby meets Saddam Hussein: Foreign Policy and Bible Prophecy," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49, no. 23 (2/14/2003): B12.

³² Kurt Andersen, "The End of the World as they Know It," *New York Magazine*, available September 27, 2006.

³³ D.H. Hart, "Those Scary Fundamentalists!" *Contemporary Psychology*, 40 no. 10 (1995): 997-998, Book Review of Charles B. Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

explicitly stating that the fundamentalist Christian constructs of person or place exist solely in fundamentally depraved minds. Others have been more charitable to their research subjects, or avoided the question of belief altogether, by looking only at strategy on the part of the rhetor, rather than psychology of the believer. Several scholars have taken up the rhetorical study of Christian eschatology, most notably Barry Brummett,³⁴ Stephen O'Leary³⁵ and Tom Thatcher.³⁶ Amy Johnson Frykholm's dissertation, and subsequent book, *Rapture Culture*, provide me with a model for my inquiry, one that effectively combines critical appraisal of the text and an ethnographic understanding of the people who use it.³⁷ My research endeavor varies significantly from the majority of academic inquiry into the pre-millennial dispensationalist apocalypse. Pre-millennial dispensational rhetoric functions as a particular epistemological position in which "End Time" prophecy, events past, present and future, are constituted as knowledge. The questions asked in this thesis will center on how prophesy about a Rapture, Tribulation, Armageddon, Second Coming sequence, creates not only its own knowledge set, but necessitates a way of compiling and adding to that knowledge set.

There are six specific research questions I address:

³⁴ Barry Brummett, "Premillennial Apocalyptic as a Rhetorical Genre," *Critical Questions: invention, creativity and the criticism of discourse and media*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

³⁵ Stephen O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*.

³⁶ Thatcher, 549-570.

³⁷ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Reading the Rapture: Christian Fiction and the Social Structures of Belief*. Dissertation for Duke University, 2001. Available through ProQuest, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=726030961&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=13&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1157134519&clientId=2945&cfc=1>, October 2, 2006. See also Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004a.

Research Question #1: What is the a priori knowledge upon which pre-millennial dispensationalist prophecy is based? What are its contingent claims?

Research Question #2: How do LaHaye and Jenkins rhetorically construct an epistemological schema from this a priori knowledge?

Research Question #3: What are the rhetorical implications of dichotomizing knowledge?

Research Question #4: How does the *Left Behind* fiction series rhetorically construct the future?

Research Question #5: How do readers interact with the text of the *Left Behind* series to make sense of their everyday lives?

Research Question #6: What are the rhetorical implications of the cultural artifacts created by and through premillennial dispensationalism?

In the first chapter, I argue that premillennial dispensational prophetic belief, as characterized by Timothy LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, is a claim based upon a priori knowledge, which they cultivate rhetorically to widen their scope of influence over the prophetic beliefs of their readers. I accomplished this by examining the nonfiction work of LaHaye, *Rapture Under Attack*³⁸ and *Are We Living in the End Times?*³⁹ I examined the structures of authority that operate within the prophetic community, limiting the types of inquiry possible and prefiguring or shaping the knowledge created within the closed rhetorical system. Believers process knowledge through the lens of dispensational

³⁸ Tim LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1998).

³⁹ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?: Current Events Foretold in Scripture . . . And what they mean*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999).

authority, engaging in a wide variety of rhetorical strategies including transfer from the authority of Holy Scripture to the human agents preaching hellfire and brimstone and narrative plasticity, allowing for infinite variations on the end-times themes.

The second chapter consists of a close-textual rhetorical analysis of the *Left Behind* series, with emphasis placed on the first book in the series. I undertake this study by focusing on the *topos* of evil, one of the triumvirate of loci Stephen O’Leary uses and suggests accounts for the majority of appeals within apocalyptic rhetoric. I expand a juxtaposition posited by Susan Armstrong in her book *Battle for God* that Christian apocalyptics exchange the logos of reasoned argument for a spiritual mythos and discuss the implications of that mythos posing as logos.

The third chapter focuses on popular manifestations of these appeals, and cultural usage of prophetic epistemology outside of the texts. I conducted 15 in-depth interviews with series’ readers. I recruited participants through snowball sampling, a process by which I locate several series readers, and they, in turn, lead me to more readers. I selected a multi-cultural, multi-perspective sample from those contacts to interview. The participants in my study ranged in age from 18-65, both males and females. The purpose of the third chapter is to determine how participants interact with the text of apocalyptic fiction and how they incorporate (or choose not to incorporate) these texts into their everyday lives. Each participant will be asked a series of open-ended questions, with follow-up questions for clarification. Their answers will be grouped categorically and analyzed for elements of the prophetic epistemology. This chapter will discuss how knowledge is disseminated in the community of believers, reinforcing the

epistemological position and filtering out dissenting information, in turn rejecting knowledge created outside the prophetic epistemology unless it can be reconfigured to the processes at work within the position.

I would like to discuss some of the labels and terms I chose to use throughout the thesis. I refer to those theologians and Bible scholars that espouse these set of beliefs as premillennial dispensationalists, or dispensational premillennialists, as they perpetuate their end-times schema based on the teachings of Darby related to the dispensations in which God deals with his people. In order to describe believers, I most often refer to them as simply “prophecy believers,” members of the “prophetic community,” “Rapturists,” “Rapture-believers” and other terms that relate specifically to the end-times expectations. I do, however, interview and talk about several that self-identify as fundamentalist, Pentecostal, evangelical, separately and/or simultaneously.

Fundamentalist, at one time, had a negative connotation, and is currently in the process of adopting that connotation again, as Islamic fundamentalism pervades the public consciousness. However, during the time at which most of my interview participants came to the faith, fundamentalists, those who believe in reading the Bible literally as the inerrant word of God and who are actively involved in proselytizing to others, were encouraged to embrace the term and, as one of my friends put it, “Put the ‘fun’ in ‘fundamentalist’.” I also use the term Evangelical, broadly. According to Shuck, evangelicals are conservative Protestants, who hold the Bible as a “guiding authority” but not necessarily inerrant, belief in the necessity of a conversion experience (being

born-again) and in witnessing, or telling others about the Gospel.⁴⁰ Most fundamentalists identify as evangelical, as do charismatics (Pentecostals, Assembly of God, and Church of God). While fundamentalists sometimes look askance at charismatics for their reliance upon gifts of the Spirit and glossalalia, and vice versa, the external pressures of evangelicals are smoothing many difference between the traditions.

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine the psychological status, relative intelligence or socio-economic group most likely to believe in the Rapture; I am simply interested in how the concept is shaped rhetorically and how it might, through popular fiction and knowledge products, change the way rationalists and faithful dispensationalists engage in public debate. Each constituent group operates under their own biases, acknowledging and probing those biases and the rhetorical strategies that reinforce them, helps to establish a complementary learning process for rationalists and Rapturists. If prophecy, specifically pre-millennial dispensationalist prophecy, is a “way of knowing,”⁴¹ limits, expands or defines what can be known, and places strict rules on how to communicate the known to the uninformed, it may have a significant effect on rhetorical models in the United States. This study proposes to explore the implications of a prophetic epistemology, investigating what such a development might mean for the future of rhetorical theory and analysis.

⁴⁰ Glenn Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), xi.

⁴¹ Stewart and Harding, 286.

CHAPTER II

EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK – RHETORICAL PARTING

In his most recent article, Jürgen Habermas details the problems associated with the encroachment of religious arguments into reasoned, modernist, enlightened areas of public debate. He cites a question posed by Garry Wills, that asks, “Can a people that believe more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an enlightened nation?” Wills remarks sadly on the lack of “respect for evidence” in religious arguments that hold sway in the public sphere.⁴² What Wills laments is the replacement of secular reasoning with fundamental dogmatism that seems at odds with modernity. Evangelical Christians, however, believe that human reason is inherently fallible, the product of fallen creatures in an imperfect world. True knowledge, they feel, is derived from direct experience with the divine through the sacred text.⁴³ The need to justify the convictions that emerge from a personal relationship with the divine is “radically reduced by the formation of a discourse community that shares the belief that final knowledge of God’s divine plan cannot be known for sure in the mundane world.”⁴⁴ Habermas take both of these positions into account and addresses the problem as a breakdown between epistemological processes. He states, “Secular and religious citizens

⁴² Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14 no 1 (2006): 1-25.

⁴³ Robert Glen Howard, “Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity in Online Apocalyptic Discourse After September 11, 2001.” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 5(1), 25-47: 2006, pp. 43-44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 44.

can only fulfill the normative expectations of the liberal role of citizens if they likewise fulfill certain cognitive conditions and ascribe to the respective opposite the corresponding epistemic attitudes.”⁴⁵ He goes on to say that the need exists for humanists and religionists alike to recognize their biases toward or against rigid rationalism. This thesis is an attempt to create a complementary learning process, as suggested by Habermas, for religious citizens and the liberal state. I will show the “epistemic attitudes” of Christian prophetic believers, conduct a review of the internal and external cohesion of these attitudes and encourage religionists to approach their beliefs reflexively with regard to civic participation and interaction with those outside their faith.

At this point, it becomes necessary to define epistemology, in order to establish a common point of reference. “The systematic and detailed study of knowledge, its criteria of acquisition and its limits and modes of justification is known as epistemology.”⁴⁶ I apply this term a bit more liberally, to include the rhetorical practice of epistemology, communicatively constituting the parameters of knowledge, with or without making it the focus of a detailed study. Stewart and Harding have called prophetic apocalyptic leanings, a “mode of attention, mode of knowing.”⁴⁷ If indeed, prophecy is a way of generating knowledge, of determining what can be known and limiting or enabling claims to knowledge accumulation, then prophecy constitutes an eschatological

⁴⁵ Habermas, 4.

⁴⁶ Vincent F. Hendricks, *Mainstream and Formal Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁴⁷ Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding, “Bad Endings: American Apocalypses, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 286.

epistemology. In this thesis, I am engaged in the epistemological study of that position, determining the intricacies of Christian apocalyptic knowledge and rhetorical claims.

As have others, Plato, in his dialogue, *Theaetetus*, asks, “What is knowledge?” In the dialogue, Socrates entertains the idea that knowledge is the combination of a strongly held belief and the ability to justify that same belief.⁴⁸ Others contend, as Protagoras does, that knowledge lies only within one’s realm of experience or perception of that experience.⁴⁹ For our purposes, we will use the Justified True Belief criteria, which, though ultimately denied by Plato and questioned by Gettier, is still the most valid point for assessing the nature of knowledge.⁵⁰ Justified True Belief (JTB), states that if the subject can defend the belief in question against skeptical challenges, it is considered knowledge.⁵¹ Edmund Gettier questioned this belief by inventing scenarios in which Justified True Belief would not be considered “knowledge.” Gettier’s article, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” has sparked a flurry of epistemological inquiry in the second half of the 20th century that has sought to determine what criteria must be added to justification and truth to establish knowledge.⁵² No definitive criteria list exists to date. The major problem arises from the skeptical sector. Skeptics maintain that there are as many compelling arguments against any proposition as there is to support it, proving

⁴⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*. Ref.

⁴⁹ *Theaetetus*. Ref.

⁵⁰ Ralph Baergen, *Historical Dictionary of Epistemology*, Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006.

⁵¹ Baergen, 116.

⁵² Baergen, xlvi.

that we can never truly know anything. The possibility for error, they insist, makes knowledge acquisition nearly impossible.⁵³

In essence, epistemology is a method and a vehicle for combating skepticism. Scenarios, propositions, allegories and metaphors, indeed, all types of linguistic devices, have been utilized in the battle for meaning. More than the use of epistemology as a method of inquiry, the rhetorical use of epistemology is pitted against skeptical claims in each age and situation. The type of knowledge believed least vulnerable to skeptical claims is *a priori*.⁵⁴ *A priori* is a phrase, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “used to characterize reasoning or arguing from causes to effects, from abstract notions to their conditions or consequences, from propositions or assumed axioms (and not from experience); deductive.”⁵⁵ As Kant points out, it may require the subject’s experience to understand *a priori* knowledge, but the experience is subsequent to knowledge and not *vice versa*.⁵⁶ *A Priori* does not mean that a claim is necessary, merely that there is a non-empirical route to its justifiability.⁵⁷ I argue that premillennial dispensational prophetic belief, as characterized by Timothy LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, is a claim based upon *a priori* knowledge, which they cultivate rhetorically to widen their scope of influence over the prophetic beliefs of their readers. In order to

⁵³ Hendricks, 10-11.

⁵⁴ Baergen, 1.

⁵⁵ “*A Priori*,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Volume 1. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

⁵⁶ Paul Boghossian and Christopher Peacocke, Eds., *New Essays on the A Priori*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 3

bolster my argument, I will look closely at the phenomenon of social epistemology. I will discover the ways in which social factors expand or limit the growth of knowledge. I will test the “standards of evidence, the role of authority, power structures and the designation of expert status”⁵⁸ among the premillennial dispensationalist community and determine how LaHaye and Jenkins rhetorically construct them and their claims in order to build on the a priori religious knowledge of their audience.

In this chapter, I will address two related research questions:

Research Question #1: What is the a priori knowledge upon which pre-millennial dispensationalist prophecy is based? What are its contingent claims?

Research Question #2: How do LaHaye and Jenkins rhetorically construct an epistemological schema from this a priori knowledge?

In order to answer these questions, I will rely primarily on two non-fiction works of Tim LaHaye, one of them co-authored with Jerry B. Jenkins. *Are We Living in the End Times?* is dedicated: “To the millions of readers of the Left Behind series, with the prayer that this book will help them gain a clearer understanding of end-time Bible prophecy.”⁵⁹ This book was written primarily as a non-fiction study guide companion to the multi-million volume-selling *Left Behind* series. It is also reflective of the same writing process as the fiction series, featuring the prophetic emphasis and rigid chronology of Tim LaHaye and the writing style indicative of Jerry B. Jenkins’ previous work. This book is loosely organized, not around the chronology of end-times events

⁵⁸ Baergen, 204.

⁵⁹ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, Dedication Page.

(although there is a section of the book arranged chronologically), but by Context, Events and Personalities they believed those Raptured and Left Behind are going to encounter.

The second of the two non-fiction works I analyze in this chapter is *Rapture [Under Attack]*.⁶⁰ This book purports to be a refutation of arguments from inside and outside the pre-millennial dispensationalist view against the Rapture of God's church. In contrast to *Are We Living in the End Times?*, *Rapture [Under Attack]* is dedicated to the members of the Pre-Trib Research Center, men whose research and scholarship LaHaye uses to attack the claims of their opponents. In this book, LaHaye makes his case against claims that the Rapture will occur mid-tribulation or post-tribulation or that there will be no Rapture or Second Coming by referring to those divergent beliefs as, "MacPherson's Vendetta," "A Case Study in Slander" and "The Most Absurd Charge of All."⁶¹ Chapter titles like these leave little doubt about the lack of consideration LaHaye has afforded to alternate interpretations of Biblical eschatology. From these two non-fiction works, I will be able to state the a priori knowledge base LaHaye and Jenkins assume and detail the steps they take in order to transfer the necessary ideological conclusions of that knowledge into a closed rhetorical system, unable to interact fully with other rhetorical systems. It is also worth noting that while secular rhetorical systems appear "open," they are closed to the justification methods employed by adherents of the prophetic epistemology.

⁶⁰ Tim LaHaye, *Rapture [Under Attack]: Will You Escape the Tribulation?* (Sisters, OR.: Multnomah Publishers, 1998).

⁶¹ LaHaye, 119-158.

Pre-Millennial dispensationalist prophecy is based on two a priori knowledge claims. The second of these claims is contingent to the first, but cannot be said to be a posteriori, nor is it a justification for the former. The first claim is that God exists. LaHaye and Jenkins imply this knowledge, and consider it a universal common to their readers. Instead of justifying their belief in God, they simply state, “God must have wanted His followers to learn Bible Prophecy, because He dedicated almost 30 percent of His Scriptures to it” in the first sentence of their co-authored book.⁶² The statement underscores several presumptions under which LaHaye and Jenkins operate. First, there is the implicit acceptance of God’s existence, second, that God is male, thirdly, God has inspired or written the Bible (used interchangeably throughout the text with Scriptures), and fourth that God makes contact with “His followers” through those Scriptures. This statement moves from the a priori acknowledgment of God’s existence to the contingent second a priori claim, that God is the author and creator of the universe.

One of the characters in *Left Behind*, Reverend Vernon Billings, iterates the authorship of God, when he says, “Prophecy is history written in advance.”⁶³ LaHaye and Jenkins, although they do not state it explicitly in their non-fiction works that I review here, accept that definition of prophecy. They write, “The second coming of Jesus Christ, and the many lesser events leading up to it and following it, is what prophecy is primarily about. It is doubtless the greatest story of the future to be found anywhere. No religion, no culture, and no literature offer such a sublime concept of

⁶² LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 3.

⁶³ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 103.

future events that lead into an even better eternity.”⁶⁴ Despite the tinge of film trailer lexicon, this statement sums up the pre-millennial dispensationalist view of prophecy, a fantastic story, written to show believers the future. As such, it is important the story of creation, salvation and destruction be understood by its adherents and its detractors

LaHaye and Jenkins, begin their co-authored non-fiction with a lesson in prophecy of the pre-tribulation pre-millennial dispensationalist variety: they call it Prophecy 101.⁶⁵ They claim that there is only one method of discerning prophecy, to read the Bible literally. The authors truncate and cite Dr. David L. Cooper’s Golden Rule of Interpretation: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.”⁶⁶ By quoting Cooper’s Golden Rule, LaHaye and Jenkins’ prophecy primer expresses the major premise of premillennial dispensationalism, namely, that the Bible is authoritative, Holy Spirit-inspired and inerrant.⁶⁷ The argument they pose, that the Bible should be read literally whenever possible, comes directly from the claim that it is inerrant. LaHaye and Jenkins can not imagine a subjective interpretation that finds meaning in each verse of Scripture. Instead

⁶⁴ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 8.

⁶⁵ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* 3-28.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶⁷ LaHaye, *Rapture*, 22.

of telling a story that has the basic three parts, a beginning, middle and an end, they tell a story about *the* beginning, *the* middle and *the* end.⁶⁸

In addition to reading the Bible literally whenever possible, LaHaye and Jenkins set another requirement for accurately decoding the Scriptures. It is imperative, LaHaye and Jenkins insist, that while reading the Bible literally, any interpreter must also note the separation of the church from Israel, else their interpretation will fail.⁶⁹ A literal interpretation without the important distinction will not accurately predict the future, leading the reader to believe that they will suffer through the Tribulation, though they accept Christ. LaHaye believes that this failing in interpretation accounts for many mistaken scenarios within the pre-Wrath Rapture and post-Tribulation theories.⁷⁰ This claim makes no pretense to a priori knowledge, nor does it appear to be a claim contingent on the a priori statements already addressed. Rather, this is a claim that must be inferred from the conclusion, working backward from the Rapture belief. Accepting a cognitive split between the people of God and the church of God completes the narrative LaHaye and Jenkins have already accepted, namely that God chose Israel, but Israel turned its back on Christ, God's son, causing God to "prune" the Israelites from the promised tree, and graft the Gentile church in its place. While LaHaye, Jenkins and other Protestants claim that Israel can once again find favor with God in the End Times, when they accept that the Messiah is Jesus Christ, they believe that only 144,000 Jews will

⁶⁸ Borchardt, 2.

⁶⁹ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 44.

⁷⁰ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 211.

become professing Christians.⁷¹ Christian prophecy writers like LaHaye and Jenkins seek to focus the interpretive lens on decoding the Bible, not only must the word of God be read as God's word, inherently inerrant, but any serious Biblical scholar must also apply rules of interpretation, like knowing what should be taken literally and what symbolically and how to separate out various groups and terms to produce a "correct" historical and futurist narrative.

Biblical inerrancy that necessitates a literal reading of the Scriptures creates meaning and a cogent narrative that encompasses all of the Protestant Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Tom Thatcher posited that even a literal reading of the Bible creates an "empty metaphor," wherein the Scriptural text becomes a vehicle that enhances the tenor of an unknown thing or construct. The Scripture is a semantic triangle, or series of semantic triangles in which the words are "signs," which readers equate, through experience, to some thought. Those thoughts are then transferred to the "thing," the actual object.⁷² In a metaphor, one semantic triangle is grafted onto another. The thoughts associated with one object and transferred to the thoughts of the other, replacing one's feelings about the first object (tenor) with those of the comparative object (vehicle). In Thatcher's model, apocalyptic sections of the Bible become multiple vehicles, acting on an unknown tenor. The metaphor is "empty," because the reader must fill in the missing construct.⁷³ Filling that construct is a "process of becoming a present

⁷¹ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 304.

⁷² Tom Thatcher, "Empty metaphors and Apocalyptic Rhetoric." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 66, no 3: 549 – 570.

⁷³ Thatcher, 553.

participant in an ongoing salvation history.”⁷⁴ The function of an empty metaphor, then, is much the same as the function of the enthymeme. Authors and orators reasonably expect the audience members to place themselves into the argument by filling in a premise or conclusion.⁷⁵ Readers must find some anchor in order to indulge in sense-making. Reading the Bible literally, provides the reader with such an anchor.

“Compelled to fill this void or surrender the metaphor to meaninglessness . . . [readers] must create a stabilizing intertext. The empty apocalyptic metaphor invites the reader to textualize some aspect of history or of her own world or experience and make this information the referent that stabilizes the play of the psychological contexts.”⁷⁶

Participation in the construction of the argument has the ability to solidify the argument as valid in the readers mind. When a missing construct is supplied, it appears that knowledge comes from within, reinforcing the a priori sense of knowledge initiation, that knowledge precedes our perception of that knowledge. Suddenly, when LaHaye and Jenkins, or other prophetic writers supply history and interpretation, readers can connect internal a priori knowledge with contemporary events to create meaning. When “History has a meaning . . . no event lies outside a predetermined pattern of development, guided by a cosmic purpose.”⁷⁷ Each reader/believer can state with certainty that they are part of God’s divine plan, and have more reason to believe, by virtue of chronology, than any other generation before that they will experience the

⁷⁴ Thatcher, 550.

⁷⁵ Thatcher, 553.

⁷⁶ Thatcher, 554.

⁷⁷ Brummett, “Premillennial Apocalyptic as a Rhetorical Genre,” 289.

Rapture, and not the sting of death. Therefore, any hardship or setback they encounter must have a master purpose in history. Empty apocalyptic metaphors enable structure, meaning and a narrative by which a believer in any age can understand their life and times.

Interpreting the chronology of the Bible is essential to the premillennial apocalyptic for making judgments, large or small. The authors cite St. Peter's prophecy, that they believe outlines that chronology clearly, ". . . that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water, but which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, reserved for fire until the Day of Judgment and perdition of ungodly men."⁷⁸ According to the interpreters, Peter sets up five major events in human history – creation, the fall of man in the garden, the flood, the birth/death of Christ and the second coming of Christ (as yet unfulfilled). LaHaye and Jenkins accept this chronology as "superb logic" and a "developed line of reasoning too deep for some of the best-educated minds of our day."⁷⁹ The implication is, of course, that the authors possess discernment above any to which the intellectual elite can pretend. LaHaye and Jenkins reason that if a man accepts the reality of the Flood, he is "pressed to accept the likelihood of Christ's second coming."⁸⁰ The force of history is

⁷⁸ 2 Peter 3:4-7 as cited by LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 348.

⁷⁹ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* 349.

⁸⁰ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* 349.

what propels the empty metaphor; the metaphor must be reconciled in each historical period, allowing readers to participate in the promise at the cusp of eternity.

The empty metaphor has another effect, that of producing narrative plasticity. Robert Glenn Howard has developed the idea of narrative plasticity to describe the ability of online Christian apocalyptic discourse to be both open and closed. He calls it a “self-sealing narrative reasoning that precludes the generation of new ideas. Christian apocalyptic reasoning is based in a shared valuation of a narrative that is closed to significant change while being held open to an infinite variety of minor revisions.”⁸¹ That plasticity is what allows LaHaye and Jenkins to write a series of non-fiction treatises; the “core interpretive system” remains in tact, but events of the day can be plugged into the empty metaphors in order to create or sustain their meaning. Apocalyptic rhetoric offers “control over meaninglessness,” wherein believers and prophetic harbingers can accept hardship and strife, because it confirms their worldview and because it speaks to an imminent utopian eternity.⁸² For believers, misinterpretation or mischaracterization of current or historical events does not effect the end-times schema, the “larger narrative structure of the End Times [and] core values that support it,” do not change.⁸³

⁸¹ Robert Glenn Howard, “Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity in Online Apocalyptic Discourse After September 11, 2001.” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 5(1), 25-47: 2006, pp. 26.

⁸² Barry Brummett, Premillennial Apocalyptic in *Critical Questions: Invention and the criticism of discourse and media*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994, 293.

⁸³ Howard, 32.

LaHaye and Jenkins support narrative plasticity, by clinging to a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. They believe it is a matter of decoding the messages that lay nestled within the Scriptures. At the same time, it allows the authors to be both wrong, and right. For instance, they might say that the inception of Israel's nationhood begins the "generation" that will see the return of Christ. A generation could be calculated as 40 years. If Christ does not return within a 40-year period of the establishment of Israel as a nation, the event is not recalibrated, but the measurement of a "generation" is recalculated as 80-years. LaHaye and Jenkins mention, when discussing the length of a generation that "Actually, the term generation can mean 20, 40, 80 or 100 years."⁸⁴ If the 100-year mark passes without incident, the "generation" could be recalculated, or, the application of the term, "this generation will not pass away" to mean, at least one person born before the creation of the Israeli nation will still be living when Christ returns to fulfill the prophecy.⁸⁵ Pushed further, LaHaye and Jenkins extend the definition of "generation" to include the possibility that "even one person who comprehended the significant events of 1948" could qualify as being of the generation that would see Christ's return.⁸⁶ Narrative plasticity ensconces Biblical proof-texting and gives it safe haven. Proof-text involves a reader finding a text (in or out of context) to support her strongly-held belief.⁸⁷ Prophecy scholars also engage in proof-texting, juxtaposing

⁸⁴ Arnold Fructembaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah* (Tustin, CA.: Ariel Press, 1982), in LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 60.

⁸⁵ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 59-61.

⁸⁶ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 63.

⁸⁷ Forbes and Kilde, eds., 44.

present-day examples with “prophetic” texts in order to make an argument. I will provide a few illustrations from *Are We Living in the End Times?* LaHaye and Jenkins begin a passage from 2 Timothy 3:1-7 which lists the properties of a society in moral decline. The authors enumerate those qualities, addressing each one individually and providing a current example.

1. **Selfishness** – LaHaye and Jenkins attribute a 51% divorce rate in the United States to this vice. They do so, however, without any citation of statistics.
2. **Disobedience to Parents** – They cite “one police officer,” who told them that child-and-youth murders are on the rise faster than any other type of crime. Again, no direct quote or reference is given for this interview, or statistics to back the police officer’s testimony.
3. **Without natural affection** – They tell the story of an unwed mother who killed her infant by abandoning the child in a garbage can and then returned to her high school prom. No names or dates accompany this story, making this urban legend difficult, if not impossible to authenticate.
4. **Despisers** – LaHaye and Jenkins decry the “whole subculture of intellectuals who have rejected God and His wisdom.” These “hateful” people also “demand that the rest of the nation do the same.”
5. **High-Minded** – They define “high-minded” as arrogant or self-centered. They cite Jane Fonda as an example in her campaign to encourage condom use. They believe she is “on a crusade to see that all young people have access to condoms, even though condoms have not proven safe either to

avoid pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.” The scientific flaws in this statement are nothing to those who believe that condoms are not able to protect against the sin of pregnancy outside of marriage or sexually transmitted diseases.

6. **No Power with God** – In a bizarre example, LaHaye and Jenkins blame the country’s legalization of abortion with the possible bankruptcy of the social security system. They feel it is time for the country to come back to God and stop innocent killing.⁸⁸

Most likely, these qualities can be extracted from any age of human life; engaged thus; plasticity in the prophetic narrative has the ability to extend the explanatory power of the premillennial schema for years to come.

The inalienable claims of Biblical inerrancy stem from the heavy emphasis placed on authority within the prophecy-believing community. Stephan O’Leary in his ground-breaking rhetorical analysis of apocalyptic address, posited that premillennial apocalyptic rhetoric operates as a function of appeals to time, evil and authority. Topos, as O’Leary uses it, regards authority as a place in the psyche for invention of arguments.⁸⁹ Authority as such, constrains the possibility of the rhetorical uses of any given appeal. Only appeals that conform to the socially constructed role of authority within the community of believers is accepted.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* 334-341.

⁸⁹ Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A theory of millennial rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 21

⁹⁰ Ibid

Authority is constructed within the prophecy-believing community on multiple levels, authority of God, of godly men, of Biblical prophecy scholars and of the God-inspired Scriptures is rarely, if ever, questioned from within the community of believers. Prophecy scholars engage in a rhetorical strategy Barry Brummett calls, “apocalyptic transfer.” This strategy “borrows authority” in order to interpret contemporary signs in two ways: the first of these ways is to read the signs in such a way as to show one’s own interpretation of the event as analogous to the biblical textual authorities and secondly to increase one’s one interpretive reputation by “appearing to possess great powers of discernment and prescience not vouchsafed to the ordinary Bible reader.”⁹¹ When prophecy scholars act as living Rosetta Stones, they inherit authority from the Scriptures they decode, but must appear to be subservient to both author and text. Hal Lindsey, a forerunner of LaHaye and Jenkins, states the role of the prophetic interpreter was to “stand aside and let the prophets speak. The readers are giving the freedom to accept or reject my conclusions.”⁹² Likewise, LaHaye and Jenkins regard their ideological fervor as letting God speak through them, “We make no apology that we who hold to biblical doctrine and values are dogmatic – but not in our own wisdom or authority. We are convinced that obeying the principles of God is good for individuals, society and the nations of the world. Wherever God’s principles have been followed, they have elevated individuals and society. Wherever they are ignored, they have created cultural and moral

⁹¹ Barry Brummett, “Using Apocalyptic discourse to exploit audience commitments through “transfer,” *The Southern Communication Journal* 54 (Fall, 1988), 65.

⁹² Hal Lindsey and C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 6 in Howard, 32.

depravity.”⁹³ That said, believers seem content to allow others to disbelieve, because it reinforces the scriptures. As Marilyn Agee, noted prophecy writer, explained on her website, “They could know how it will end, but they don’t read it, don’t believe it, or don’t understand it. I think of Daniel 12:10, ‘the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand.’”⁹⁴ Skepticism from outside the community is viewed internally as fulfilling Scriptural prophecy; therefore, the skeptical claims need not be answered fully, merely catalogued as examples of prophecy fulfillment.

Those who critique prophecy scholars or pastors from within the community, however, are labeled as scoffers, false prophets, false teachers and the like.⁹⁵ O’Leary notes that apocalyptic rhetors often employ this type of attack on opposing claims, “deny[ing] the credentials of all authorities who disagree with [their] central apocalyptic claim, and transform their disagreement into further support for the claim by interpreting it as itself as sign of the End.”⁹⁶ LaHaye and Jenkins claim that this sort of “deception” by non-believers is indicative of the end time schema to come. They ask, “Yet who can deny that everywhere we look today, we find deception growing stronger and more prevalent? Hardly a week goes by that someone doesn’t write to us in an attempt to convince us of some new teaching that either is unrelated to Scripture or twists Scripture

⁹³ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living In the End Times?*, 340.

⁹⁴ Marilyn Agee’s 12/18/2001 post on Bible Prophecy Corner, cited in Howard, 41.

⁹⁵ O’Leary, 170.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

our of its original meaning?”⁹⁷ The very act of suggesting an interpretation other than that proposed by LaHaye and Jenkins, is another indication that the end times are at hand. Alternatives to the Rapture Theory are labeled as “vicious distortion of facts,” “revivals of old and discredited theories,” “so bizarre I am amazed anyone accepts them” and “easily dismissed.”⁹⁸ They are so easily dismissed in the authoritarian sub-culture of prophecy belief, perhaps, that while LaHaye promises to give “historical, scriptural and logical reasons” against them, he rarely engages the theories, and instead attacks the authority and knowledge of his detractors.⁹⁹

LaHaye and Jenkins tread difficult rhetorical waters. What would be considered an informal fallacy outside the community of believers is rarely questioned inside this community. LaHaye often utilizes *argumentum ad verecundiam* in various incarnations. He appeals to authorities without the proper citations, or refers to “experts” who are not experts on the matter at hand. He cites “prophecy preachers” as authorities on theological issues. The distinction is almost non-existent in prophecy circles, in which many ministers, LaHaye included, are awarded honorary doctoral degrees from Bible colleges or self-styled seminaries. When opposing a Pre-Wrath Rapture, as outlined by Marvin Rosenthal, LaHaye cites Dr. James Combs, editor of the *Baptist Bible Tribune*, Dave Hunt, a popular author, Theodore Ertle, writer for the Baptist Bulletin and two professors, Dr. Paul Karleen, a linguistic scholar, specializing in Greek, and Dr. Gerald

⁹⁷ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* 33.

⁹⁸ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*. 21.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 22.

Stanton, a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary. Outside of their niche communities, these “experts” would hardly seem qualified to be considered scholarly sources of information on eschatology, with the possible exception of Dr. Stanton. These men do form a considerable presence in the Pre-Trib Research Center, founded by Tim LaHaye and Dr. Tommy Ice. Lahaye and Jenkins afford “expert status” to those outside the Pre-Trib Research Center, though these scholars are rarely named, much less cited. They are accepted as experts within the realm of LaHaye’s book, and for many prophecy-following groups who host these men as revered speakers for church events and fundraising projects.

In yet another turn of the device, LaHaye crafts his argument into a personal attack on his opponents by claiming that said opponent lacks respect for his God-given authority, or berates those opponents’ arguments, even if they are on no shakier ground than LaHaye’s. He identifies “shabby scholarship” as one reason people might attack the pre-millennial dispensationalist position – citing his disbelief at quoting “fraudulent information from unknown sources as though it were fact.” As we have noted before, citing from unknown sources is also a tactic in which LaHaye engages to affect a quick strike on his opponents. In answer to the theory put forth by Marvin Rosenthal in his book, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, LaHaye states that Rosenthal, “formulates the most confusing interpretation of end-time events ever put together; a concept that no one except this author would come to on his own—unless he just wanted to be different. It certainly does not represent the prophetic sequence of end-time events from a literal reading of Scripture. . . . Because the author failed to have his manuscript evaluated by

other biblical literalists with a better grasp of Greek, Hebrew and prophecy before he rushed into print, it may well serve as an instrument of confusion, robbing some of the Blessed Hope.”¹⁰⁰ In similar fashion, LaHaye dispenses with Dave MacPherson, who openly questioned popular Rapture belief in his series of 1970s newspaper articles. MacPherson identified the origins of Rapture belief as being coined by Mary Macdonald and propagated by John Nelson Darby.¹⁰¹ LaHaye quickly dismisses any future attack on Darby by parenthetically referring to the dispensational publicist as “a godly, insightful Bible teacher.”¹⁰² Besides his brief attack on MacPherson as self-serving and engaging in a personal vendetta against the Pre-Trib movement, LaHaye lets his colleagues at the Pre-Trib Research Center speak for him. The next twenty pages are significant quotes from articles and books written in response and review to MacPherson’s claims. LaHaye feels the “experts” speak for themselves. MacPherson is not included among the community of scholars because he does not conform to or accept the authority of the Pre-Tribulational Prophetic Community. LaHaye concludes with an enigmatic argumentative strategy, which once again underscores the authority of LaHaye’s circle of experts, Scripture and prophetic interpretation.

These researchers, we many conclude, have fully explained the facts of the case. John Nelson Darby gained his views primarily from his study of the word of God, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the influence of emerging pre-Millennial biblical literalists, who were moving from the historical school of interpreting prophecy to the Futurist

¹⁰⁰ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 101-102.

¹⁰¹ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 119.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

position. But even if he didn't, that doesn't change anything. The pre-Trib position is supported by Scripture. Surely that is enough!¹⁰³

Authority acts as a rhetorical bulldozer, pushing through claims with the aid of manufactured ethos. Ethos is built by Bible College degrees, publication *auctoritas*, service to the premillennial dispensational community and outright naming and claiming of authoritarian capital. Again, it behooves us to use Brummett's idea of transfer. Brummett proposed that in the process of transfer, "discourse begins with religious components but progresses through a series of increasingly secular replacements for those components." Transfer is a rhetorical device that moves the audience from depot A, acceptance of the Bible as God-inspired, literal and inerrant to depot B, believing that God's word necessitates a nuclear holocaust in the near future. The path of transfer statements in apocalyptic discourse, uses a brand of dispensationalist scholarship, in order to "borrow the prestige of biblical sources" and "learned references to the Bible" and "lend it to secular sources or to their own work."¹⁰⁴

LaHaye and Jenkins practice a version of that scholarship, using biblical, extra-biblical and secular sources to lend their own work credibility. Prophetic interpreters bolster their scholarship by impugning previous research conducted on dispensationalist icons and piecing together a revisionist history from more contemporary attempts by Biblical literalists to portray their theological heroes in a heavenly light. LaHaye spends an entire chapter in *Rapture: Under Attack* reclaiming the godly character of John

¹⁰³ Ibid, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Brummett, "Using Apocalyptic Discourse," 63.

Nelson Darby from the stench of “regurgitation of old discredited attacks.”¹⁰⁵ One of these “old” attacks surmises that Darby got his ideas from a Jesuit priest named Lacunza, who wrote about a return of Christ for his elect. That claim does little damage to the pre-Tribulation Rapture position from the standpoint of an impartial observer, but it does minimize the contribution pre-Tribulation Rapturists normally ascribe to John Nelson Darby. While LaHaye credits Lacunza as the “brilliant and devoted servant of Jesus Christ, whose basic purpose was to glorify Him and cause men to prepare for His soon coming,” he refuses to acknowledge the opinion of Lacunza scholars, like John Bray, as anything more than a “bitter regurgitation of century-old assault” on dispensationalism. He similarly dismisses the assertion that Darby “lifted” his ideas about the end from a young Margaret MacDonald, but without any justification or indication about why that would be detrimental to the prophetic community. LaHaye concludes his reassessment of Darby by proclaiming, “It is safe for us to conclude that Darby did not receive his view of the Lord’s return from any of the sources attributed to him by his detractors. Modern researchers have found nothing to prove otherwise . . . Be assured that this biblically-based view of end time events is trustworthy and deserving of your continued confidence.”¹⁰⁶ Darby’s contribution to the pre-Tribulation pre-millennial belief now secure, LaHaye is free to use Darby as a litmus test for knowledge about the end-times, and as a springboard for his research.

¹⁰⁵ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 170.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 170.

While attributing the popularization of a pre-Tribulation Rapture to Darby, LaHaye cannot give Darby credit for inventing either the Rapture, Pre-Trib Rapture, dispensationalism separation of Israel and the Church, else he negates his argument that the Pre-Tribulation Rapture has been taught since the ascension of Christ. Cyrus Scofield gets a similar treatment. LaHaye resurrects Scofield's image from the miry clay, as it were, by pointing out the reference work was printed by the prestigious Oxford University Press, using secular regard for the press and transferring that goodwill to the book printed.¹⁰⁷ While arguing for Scofield's and Darby's unique positions in the upper echelons of prophetic teaching, merely as popularizers and preachers of the dispensationalist schema, he also extends their credibility within the community to himself through analogy:

In a sense, I followed his precedent with the centuries-old four-temperament theory which I have been privileged to popularize in this country. I didn't invent it, but I borrowed it from thinking men before me, added two concepts – temperament blends and the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen a person's inherited temperament weaknesses – and popularized it by writing and speaking the subject.¹⁰⁸

LaHaye promotes Darby's role as a synthesizer of truth while promoting his other, unrelated writings on personality temperament, including *Spirit-Controlled Temperament* and *Understanding You Man: The Male Temperament*, which take the four humors of old and transforms them into advice on everything from business to the

¹⁰⁷ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 143. LaHaye downplays the instrumental nature of the Scofield Reference Bible when he writes that it is “essentially a King James Version which has been interpreted and augmented by the addition of footnote commentaries. . .”

¹⁰⁸ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 160.

bedroom. LaHaye find success in extending his credibility through transfer from prophetic sources, but is equally successful at pseudo-transfer.

Pseudo- transfer looks very much like the transfer process outlined by Brummett, which we have already discussed, except that instead of transferring allegiance from holy text to political proposition, pseudo-transfer moves adherents from accepting the interpreter to accepting all his/her interpretations, with decreasing evidentiary support. As a short case study of pseudo-transfer from LaHaye and Jenkins, we will investigate the extensive use and referencing of charts throughout both non-fiction books. LaHaye claims he has used charts for decades in his conferences and preaching, “To make difficult concepts easy to understand,” and that “charts are a basic ingredient of my six other books on prophecy. Throughout this book we will resort to using them for clarity.”¹⁰⁹ However, far from using those simply to illustrate their points, charts become arguments and evidence. In *Are We Living in the End Times?*, the capstone of a lengthy discussion of the nature of man that questions whether humans are essentially good or evil, whether their environment or the devil is to blame for human faults and inferences into the final rebellion of creation against its creator is a single chart, titled “The History of Man and God’s Plan for the Future.”

¹⁰⁹ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 12.

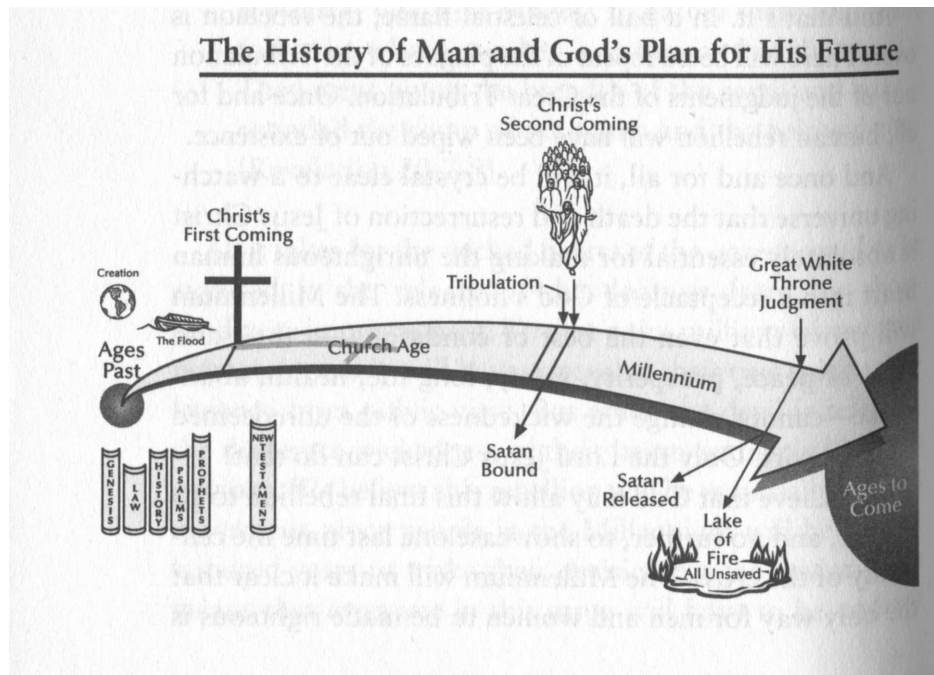


Figure 2.1 The History of Man and God's Plan for His Future¹¹⁰

The chart does not illustrate an argument from the chapter, it argues for LaHaye and Jenkins' timeline of the end. The use of charts also justifies other claims made by LaHaye in *Rapture: Under Attack*. LaHaye spends a good deal of time investigating the differences between the Rapture and the Glorious Appearing, stating that Christ will come for his church and then will come again publicly for the general public. He then publishes a chart, showing a similar timeline to the one that appears in *Are We Living in the End Times?*, except that this chart displays the Rapture, the Tribulation and the Glorious Appearing following the Tribulation most prominently. The chart is not attributed to any other author and appears in the same style as other LaHaye charts, so it

¹¹⁰ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times*, 246.

can be presumed that he created the chart. In the text opposite the chart, LaHaye states that by “Examining their locations [Rapture and the Glorious Appearing] on the chart, we are forced to conclude that they do not describe the same events.”¹¹¹ LaHaye use an appeal to the authority of the chart that he has created to convince non-believers and prophecy converts of his position on the two-part return of Christ. Charts throughout these two non-fiction works act as pseudo-transfer objects, taking on the authority of biblical text as an almost divine revelation to the authors. LaHaye uses pseudo-transfer to connect his prophetic ethos back to the arguments involved in creating that very ethos. In other words, readers believe in LaHaye, so they accept his arguments and charts they feel establishes LaHaye as the foremost prophecy scholar.

The rhetorical conventions discussed in this chapter are not revolutionary, but outside of the prophecy community, the scholarship of Tim LaHaye and his partner, Jerry Jenkins would draw ridicule from non-believers. The rational process of the empirical world does not accept conjecture, being led by God, arguments from authority (unless highly qualified in that field) and non-reproducible results as evidence. Likewise, believers cannot accept the rational-world processes of the secular/empirical world, as they deny the authority of God to speak directly to the hearts of those who earnestly seek after him, instilling in them an a priori knowledge of the creation of the world and authorship of the Holy Scriptures. Tim LaHaye is able to parley his considerable ethos within the prophecy-believing community by pitting his interpretation of the Bible and history against secular humanism and human institutions. These

¹¹¹ LaHaye, *Rapture: Under Attack*, 38.

“flawed” institutions cannot possibly comprehend the vastness of God, nor his plan for the end of time. By understanding the internal logic of the prophecy, and the totality of its authority over the constitution and growth of knowledge, those outside the realm of pre-millennial dispensational eschatology can engage in a complementary learning process, discovering why “reasoning” with conservative fundamentalists and fundamental evangelicals, who rely more heavily on community authority and narrative fidelity to make decisions than lab results or statistics requires a shift in perspective. It is likewise an indispensable requirement that prophecy adherents examine their epistemological position and modes of evaluating evidence reflexively, in order to participate in decision-making within their larger, human community.

CHAPTER III

KNOWLEDGE THAT PASSETH ALL UNDERSTANDING

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.¹¹²

Above, the quote from Romans indicates how Paul understands knowledge about our world, how it is given, what it reveals, how we receive it and what we should do with it. He clearly states several axioms about knowledge, that we know only the things God allows us to know, that we know the things we know because God reveals them to us, that we imbibe that information and are somehow awakened to it, perceive it or detect it through created things and that if we choose to seek other knowledge, or presume to find it in another location, God will make our worldly knowledge useless. Jonathan Rauch, a writer and columnist for *Atlantic Monthly*, calls Paul a fundamentalist (after citing the above passage from Romans), and proceeds on an investigation into the epistemology of fundamentalism. He claims there are some basic attributes of fundamentalists that are shared across the religious divide by secular fundamentalists, Islamic fundamentalists, and Christian fundamentalist and fundamental atheists. He says

¹¹² Romans 1:18-21, Revised Standard Version.

that there is a “fundamentalist temperament” that seeks certainty instead of errors, has no interest in checking its truths to make sure they are, in fact, the truth, ostracizing those who do not agree with its orthodoxy, clinging to a belief despite all evidence to the contrary and a firm commitment to the idea that the absence of evidence only proves the point.¹¹³ Rauch insists that we are all fundamentalist in some respect, holding dogmatically to a belief that big business is evil, or that the Middle East will never be at peace, or that global warming is cyclical and not a product of our over-reliance on energy and harmful emissions. We all hold staunchly to something, questioning the ethics or mental capacity of those who would defy us on our fundamentalist point. It is therefore imperative that the fundamentalist position receive special attention, in order to produce a solid basis on which to build an argument, a place established on even a small amount of shared meaning.

Rauch cites John Locke’s excerpt on fundamentalism as an example of how dogmatic principles work, “They see the light infused into their understandings, and cannot be mistaken; it is clear and visible there, like the light of bright sunshine shows itself, and needs no other proof but its own evidence: they feel the hand of God moving them within, and the impulses of the Spirit cannot be mistaken in what they feel.”¹¹⁴ When the fundamental believer is moved by the Spirit (or the argument, or the revelation, or struck by the Truth), they must spread that knowledge to others. They accomplish this through narrative – telling the story that brought them to their place of

¹¹³ Jonathan Rauch, *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995: 89-110.

¹¹⁴ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book 4, chapter 19, section 8, In Rauch, 93-94.

belief, or the vision of the future than gives credence to their hopes or fears. In this chapter, we explore the fundamental narrative underlying premillennial dispensationalist apocalyptic as it relates to the creation and/or accrual of knowledge and address two research questions:

Research Question #3: What are the rhetorical implications of dichotomizing knowledge?

Research Question #4: How does the *Left Behind* fiction series rhetorically construct the future?

The epistemological process favored by prophecy believers as evidenced in apocalyptic fiction replaces *logos* (arguments) with *mythos* (stories) that center on the *topoi* of evil. Reliance on such *topoi* in narrative fiction leads the reader to epistemological conclusions that knowledge, depending on the source is either good or evil, intimating that innocuous facades may hide sinister interiors.

Contrasting epistemologies, as in those represented by the secular humanist and the premillennial dispensationalist usually lead the questioners to competing truths. We generally associate an empirical endeavor with the former and divine revelation with the latter to reveal those truths. If we are seeking to uncover within the realm of human communication, means of arriving at some truth, we are chiefly concerned with *logos* (arguments) and *mythos* (stories). Within an epistemology, “*mythos* and *logos* are complimentary ways of arriving at truth.”¹¹⁵ *Mythos*, according to Karen Armstrong, is “primarily concerned with what was timeless and constant,” “concerned not with

¹¹⁵ Karen Armstrong, *Battle for God*. New York: Knopf, 2000, xivi.

practical matters, but with meaning.”¹¹⁶ As we discussed in the first chapter, the meaning couched in prophecy encourages each person to take the end times lessons and apply it to their lives, fitting in current events or the general moral tenor of their times to add personal significance to ancient Biblical passages. Armstrong records that the most important function of myth was to provide context to the audience’s everyday life, it was, she insists, “not meant to be taken literally,” or meant as the basis for pragmatic policy, but was, instead, a pre-modern form of group psychology, regulating action, offering explanation for unexplained phenomena and propounding virtues held by the community.¹¹⁷ Trouble begins with an attempt to turn the mythos of faith into logos.¹¹⁸ When humans attempt to make their faith wholly rational, they emphasize the virtues of reason and plain sense.¹¹⁹ Frykholm seconds that assessment, stating that prophecy readers do not make the same “plain sense” connections between the Scriptures without benefit of the carefully constructed narrative provided by Bible Scholars.¹²⁰ Fictionalizing the narrative clarifies the timeline and reifies the heroes and villains. LaHaye and Jenkins do just that in their non-fiction works, making use of charts and illustrations to give the appearance of rational argument, rather than employing a more widely accepted logos. Walter Fisher notes that we do not “think in logos alone,” but

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Armstrong, xv.

¹¹⁸ Armstrong, xvi.

¹¹⁹ Armstrong, 373.

¹²⁰ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004a), 116.

daily indulge in thinking mythically through narrative.¹²¹ The reading of signs about which the Biblical writers prophesied is not always shown by “rational demonstration but by vivid dramatization.”¹²² To that end, LaHaye and Jenkins produce a lurid tale of death, destruction and incomparable evil to compliment their non-fiction works of prophecy interpretation. The *Left Behind* Series of books chronicles the lives of those God chose not to call home in the Rapture, but would subject to the ultimate trial by fire to cull from among the masses the good from the evil. Stephan O’Leary investigates the topos of evil as a problem to be resolved, reconciling an omniscient, Omni benevolent divine being with the human experience of evil, suffering, pain and human frailty.¹²³ O’Leary contends the philosopher cannot find resolution in formal logic, but a mythic eschatological narrative is capable of rhetorically providing for evil, through free will and a good God that allows his creations the use of free will, while promising a positive outcome for those who choose wisely.¹²⁴ This chapter illustrates how the use of appeals to evil addressed in apocalyptic fiction cultivates a bifurcated view of knowledge unique to the premillennial dispensationalist epistemology.

In order to advance the necessity of reading prophetic fiction as categorizing all knowledge in terms of good or evil, I will offer a brief overview of the *Left Behind* series, its major plot elements, characters and narrative style. *Left Behind*, the first novel

¹²¹ Walter Fisher in Howard, 30.

¹²² Brummett, “Premillennial Apocalyptic as a Rhetorical Genre,” 291.

¹²³ Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 35.

¹²⁴ O’Leary, 43.

in the 12-part series, opens in the moments just before a cataclysmic event that whisks away more than one billion men, women and children worldwide. LaHaye, Jenkins and their readers share the knowledge that this event is the Rapture, but the forsaken characters in the novel must discover that fact through Bible reading, In-Case-Of-Rapture video testimonials or signs of wonder from the Wailing Wall. The story follows four characters left behind, for diverse but familiar reasons. Rayford Steele represents the archetypal male in rapture fiction, as a man who lets his wife act as the spiritual compass in the home/family, only to discover that his wife's acceptance of the truth was not enough to save him.¹²⁵ The writers describe him as a successful airline pilot, smart, worldly and implicitly sexual. Frykholm notes that he is first identified with his "fully loaded 747," a descriptive phrase evocative of both his status as a pilot and his virility.¹²⁶ While Rayford's wife and young son, Raymie are taken in the Rapture, he retains some semblance of home with his Stanford-educated daughter, Chloe. Chloe acts as the Tribulation model of Christian American womanhood after her conversion; the message the reader cannot escape from is that, had Chloe been this pillar of domestic serenity and deference to a husband before the Rapture, she would have eluded the Tribulation altogether.¹²⁷ Cameron "Buck" Williams witnessed God saving Israel from a full-scale nuclear attack by a combination of Russian and Ethiopian forces several short months before the Rapture. Williams, a newspaper reporter for the *Global Weekly*, was left

¹²⁵ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004a), 30-31.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 31.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 33.

behind because his pride kept him from accepting the miracle he saw in Israel as a warning of God to clean up his act before it was too late. Finally, Hattie Durham, a flight attendant on Rayford's route and previous partner in a near-miss flirtation that might have escalated into an affair, represents the bad woman, both stupidly unaware of her own childishness and pawn of the Anti-Christ. As an iconic figure, she functions as the Whore of Babylon, mentioned in Revelation and her fictionalized role, as the mouthpiece of vapid feminism. Her sister is an abortionist, whom Hattie feels for, when all unborn fetuses are raptured; her sister's livelihood is instantly demolished.¹²⁸ While other characters enter the picture, either joining forces with the Anti-Christ or opposing him, these four individuals act as a *Left Behind* reduction of all the souls not Raptured because of their pride, education, liberal social values and sexuality. As we investigate other plot developments, we will add to the growing list of characteristics those left behind share.

The novels are written at a clipping pace, not just in tone, but in mass. Jerry Jenkins told *Christianity Today*'s Sean Fowlds that he can write a book in the *Left Behind* series in as little as twenty-one days.¹²⁹ Jenkins writing ethic creates quick action, matter-of-fact declaratives and prose devoid of excessive detail. The plot follows the carefully orchestrated end-times Time Line set forth in the Scofield Reference Bible, updated to include modern technology, historic references and the central role LaHaye and Jenkins foresee the United Nations (an organization unknown to Cyrus Scofield)

¹²⁸ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 266-267.

¹²⁹ Sean Fowlds, "Life After '*Left Behind*.'" *Christianity Today* July/August 2004. Available January 31, 2007 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/tc/2004/004/4.64.html>

would play in the world's final events. One might term Jenkins writing style as "apocalyptic minimalist" because of his brief descriptions and sparse elaboration. Jenkins describes few "set dressings" and even fewer physical attributes of the major and minor characters. Nicolae Carpathia, whom the reader comes to recognize as the Anti-Christ, is labeled twice as akin to a "young Robert Redford"¹³⁰ and elsewhere as having blonde hair and blue eyes. We know he is 6'1" or 6'2". Other than those details, his looks and demeanor are left up to the imagination of the audience, allowing the reader to supply their own vision of evil into the mold of Robert Redford at will. Whether accident or no, LaHaye and Jenkins repeatedly associate their Anti-Christ with liberal policies, personalities and passions, from environmental clean-up, to well-known actors, actresses and personalities that champion such causes (like Robert Redford), to the passion we will delve into throughout this chapter, that of the pursuit of knowledge. The mythos presented by LaHaye and Jenkins specifies a type of knowledge as Godly and lumps the rest together as evil by casting creatures, ideas, characteristics, pursuits, media, challenges and questions as one or the other.

Specialized knowledge of Truth, self-knowledge leading to knowledge of God, intimate knowledge of the divine as opposed to superficial knowledge of created things is also qualities associated with the ancient pursuit of *gnosis*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *gnosis* is "a special knowledge of spiritual mysteries."¹³¹ Peter Paik, in an article for *Postmodern Culture*, enumerates the Gnostic qualities of premillennial

¹³⁰ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, pages 114 and 232.

¹³¹ *OED*, 2nd Edition, Volume 6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 615.

dispensationalism. He claims that the individual-centered preoccupation with salvation and separation from worldly knowledge and institutions makes American Evangelicals more Gnostic than Christian.¹³² Gnostic salvation, he claims, acts as a liberator, “awakening human beings to the divine spark hidden deep within the soul.”¹³³ With that freedom is knowledge that believers were before Creation, thus unsullied by the harsh taint of the world. In fact, Paik argues, that LaHaye and Jenkins, as exemplars of the Gnostic contingent within Evangelical Christianity, like Charles Finney before them, appear to deny the orthodox Christian principle of Original Sin. In the novels, all children under the age of accountability (LaHaye and Jenkins estimate this at age 10), are Raptured.¹³⁴ These children do not suffer in their inherited sin, but are whisked away to heaven with all real, true Christians. A disassociation from original sin reinforces the separation of the created from creation. The created are inherently good, existing as spirits before the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, while the created world is inherently evil,¹³⁵ brushed with the broad strokes of sin. An evil false God, the demiurge, warps the minds of individuals to believe that what they perceive is reality, while the Truth lies hidden, waiting to be discovered by those faithful and able to discern the Truth. Rayford Steele echoes the Gnostic view of worldly control when he claims, “We

¹³² Peter Yoonsuk Paik, Smart Bombs, Serial Killing and the Rapture: The Vanishing Bodies of Imperial Apocalypticism. *Postmodern Culture*: 14, no 1 (2003), available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v014/14.1paik.html September 1, 2006.

¹³³ Paik, 18.

¹³⁴ Paik, 20.

¹³⁵ Paik, 19.

live in a fallen world. God left control of it pretty much to Satan.”¹³⁶ Satan, Anti-Christ and the False Prophet form a counterbalance to the Holy Trinity, masking the Truth with lies and posing the ultimate challenge for LaHaye and Jenkins’ Gnostic heroes. Brummett cites LaHaye as saying, “There are two types of people in the world: Christians and unbelievers.”¹³⁷ Dispensationalists see their goal as “rescuing unbelievers from sin and keeping themselves unspotted from the world,” and to “separate from institutions of ungodliness.”¹³⁸ They have been saved by grace, which “destroyed nature” and thus able to impart the specialized knowledge that leads to the path of righteousness.¹³⁹ Brummett views the bifurcation of created and creation as entailing a bi-polar drama. Brummett further states, that “Apocalyptic transfers the biblical form of sinners vs. saints, the damned vs. the saved, to the depiction of one’s own community as radically opposed to other groups which are utterly Satanic.”¹⁴⁰ These bi-polar narratives or dramas cast the world into two camps, one good, pure and saved, the other evil, dirty and damned.

The challenge for a prophecy-believing dispensationalist is to discover a fool-proof way of distinguishing good from evil. Things are not always as they appear to be, and LaHaye and Jenkins readily provide a narrative template that illustrates the means of recognizing individuals and institutions as good or evil. There are several related

¹³⁶ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, 229.

¹³⁷ Tim LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Living Books, 1981), 25 in Brummett, 68.

¹³⁸ Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994): 119.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 136.

¹⁴⁰ Brummett, 68.

epistemological questions inherent in a comprehensive method to detecting evil: Are humans inherently good or evil? How can we know which is the case? Is evil internal or external to the individual? How can we recognize evil, whether internal or external? Is knowledge of evil internal or external? LaHaye and Jenkins make these questions a matter of spiritual life or death. By situating their drama in Tribulation, in which the safety-net of the Rapture has already past, every decision now revolves around heaven and hell. LaHaye and Jenkins portray the Tribulation as a second chance for those who did not come around to their way of worshipping before the Rapture, but, it also serves as a dividing line, casting each personal choice as one for evil (choosing to follow the easy path in league with the Anti-Christ) or one for good (joining the Tribulation Force and accepting persecution and possible martyrdom). If their characters and readers cannot distinguish good from evil, or knowledge as good or evil, they are in danger of losing their soul.

The authors clearly answer the question, Are humans inherently good or evil? by claiming that humans are inherently good, as we discussed in the earlier section on Gnostic tendencies of the LaHaye gospels. Children are without original sin, meaning that all people are born free from sin, but subject to acting on sinful temptations. They do find that not accepting Christ after the age of accountability is a sin, even if those people are never taught the word of God and presented with the choice of following Jesus Christ. In 2003, the Barna Group, a Christian counterpart to the Gallup Poll, conducted a study in which they found that a person's "moral foundations are generally in place by the time they reach age nine" and "the majority of Americans make a lasting

determination about the personal significance of Christ's death and resurrection by age 12."¹⁴¹ These studies are circulated to Christian churches throughout the United States, establishing a timeline for action, very closely related to LaHaye and Jenkins "age of accountability" before which children are not responsible for making their own "decision for Christ." Humans can become evil, however, by making incorrect choices, led by worldly knowledge and powerful deceptive forces. Thus the adult human, beyond the age of accountability, is the exact opposite, inherently sinful, and guided by their sinful nature to join with other sinful humans to form sinful organizations. They focus their attention to salvation on the individual, rather than the institution, in a grassroots effort to breakdown the structures of sinful organizations.¹⁴² LaHaye, Jenkins, and the characters they create, attempt to reach those misguided by the appearances of this world and the institutions that hold and wish to maintain power by disseminating their Gnostic knowledge of "what lies ahead."¹⁴³ The overarching fear of evil institutions, lead LaHaye and Jenkins to question the sincerity and Godliness of the United Nations, college and universities, Red Cross and other aid organizations, and any churches and religious groups that promote ecumenical cooperation, because they believe these groups are watering down religious distinctions, factions and quarrels, paving the way for the Antichrist and his followers to take over during the Tribulation. While the human is born

¹⁴¹ "Research Shows that Spiritual Maturity Process Should Start at a Young Age," The Barna Update, November 17, 2003. Available online at www.barna.org March 30, 2007.

¹⁴² Glenn Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: the Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 71.

¹⁴³ Shuck, 70.

innocent, clean from the stain of sin, once the mind and soul are sufficiently developed to accept Christ, that decision must be made by each individual, else they commit sin and fall short of the glory of God, joining together with other non-believers in theologically and spiritually suspect organizations.

Given that humans are inherently good, or at least born inherently good, from where does evil come? Is evil internal or external to the individual? LaHaye and Jenkins, indeed, all prophecy believers, craft their end-times narrative to reflect their belief that evil is both internal and external. Premillennial dispensationalists cast evil as external to the believer, and personify that evil in the being known as Antichrist. Bernard McGinn writes that in our society, it is difficult to imagine a completely evil human being, with no redeeming values. The Antichrist legend, McGinn asserts is “based on the conviction that total evil can be realized in an individual human and even in a human collectivity.”¹⁴⁴ Ultimately, McGinn says, the Anti-Christ tradition in Christianity vacillates along an external-internal polarity, at times taking the form of an external threat, that attacks the believers from without and at alternate times taking the form of a covert internal threat, or an evil that emanates from the believer’s own heart.¹⁴⁵ As we shall see, LaHaye and Jenkins, in the *Left Behind* series clearly combine the two ends of this polarity, to describe the external threat, the physical, nearly omnipresent Anti-Christ, Nicolae Carpathia and the internal threat, that posed not by the characters’ hearts, but by their minds.

¹⁴⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*. (San Francisco, CA.: Harper Collins, 1994), 3.

¹⁴⁵ McGinn, 4.

The *Left Behind* books depict external evil forces as easily recognizable, and contrast those characteristics with the more difficult to discern internal evil threats. As the epitome of evil, the Anti-Christ quickly reveals his dastardly plan, but to the astute (read: prophecy believer) reader, Nicolae Carpathia emerges as the Anti-Christ from the moment LaHaye and Jenkins introduce his character. The marks of the Anti-Christ, and as an extension, of true evil are varied, and undoubtedly surprising to non-believers. LaHaye and Jenkins portray evil personified as the “consummate politician,”¹⁴⁶ an articulate man who “spoke in nine languages, the six languages of the UN and the three of his home country,”¹⁴⁷ whose “jewelry is understated, his jaw and nose were Roman and strong, his piercing blue eyes set deep under thick brows.”¹⁴⁸ Beyond this, his goals were categorized as a pacifist,¹⁴⁹ progressive,¹⁵⁰ charismatic,¹⁵¹ and egalitarian¹⁵² which ensured that our Anti-Christ would be swept to prominence and power as the UN Secretary General after just having been elected President of Romania.¹⁵³ Shuck calls LaHaye and Jenkins portrayal of Anti-Christ a “time-honored” formula within dispensationalism. Nicolae Carpathia “fits the usual criteria: he is young, handsome,

¹⁴⁶ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 233.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 241.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 270.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 271.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 291.

¹⁵² Ibid, 335.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 114.

articulate, bright, witty, unusually conscientious, and driven to forge world peace; and, most important, he possesses a charisma that makes him much more appealing than the sum of his already formidable traits. Moreover, he traces his lineage to Italy, the heartland of the ancient Roman Empire . . . He is a counterfeit, albeit a convincing one.”¹⁵⁴ In fact, a news report gives Carpathia’s age, 33, the age his mirror image, Christ attained before his death.¹⁵⁵ In the novel, a Bible study group meeting at the New Hope Village Church, debate whether or not Carpathia might fit the biblical profile of the Anti-Christ. Bruce wonders aloud, “If I’m reading it right, the Antichrist will soon come to power, promising peace and trying to unite the world.”¹⁵⁶ The group members wonder aloud about Carpathia’s fit with the end-times profile. They are also able to tick off the Anti-Christ’s probable move to establish one world currency and one world religion as traits of Carpathia’s unity movement.¹⁵⁷ Chloe, in defending Carpathia early on, voices her unchurched opinion in terms that would send giant flashing warning signs to readers, “He looks like a breath of fresh air to me. If he starts trying to weasel his way into power, I might be suspicious, but a pacifist, content to be president of a small country? His only influence is his wisdom and his only power is his sincerity and humility.”¹⁵⁸ The wisdom she saw in the once and future Anti-Christ would alarm dispensationalist readers versed in biblical prophecy, because Chloe implies his wisdom

¹⁵⁴ Shuck, 98.

¹⁵⁵ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, 113.

¹⁵⁶ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, 310.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

is worldly wisdom, something she admired until her sudden conversion. Carpathia's intention to destroy ninety percent of the world's nuclear weapons raises eyebrows among the newly saved, as Jerry Fallwell made the argument that "because God allowed for the creation of nuclear weapons- and the so aptly correlate with biblical descriptions of destruction – they must have been part of his divine plan."¹⁵⁹ Any attempt to limit or roll back their production would appear futile at the very least and possibly Satanic at worst. Non-premillennialist, non-prophecy believing rational human beings would not likely identify these characteristics as markers of ultimate evil, but in the end-times schema propounded by LaHaye, Jenkins and their millions of readers, these markers are symptoms of the grand cosmic deception headed by the Anti-Christ, and of which they have secret knowledge.

In the world of *Left Behind*, characters are saved individually,¹⁶⁰ but can be damned collectively. Human institutions, they imply, are suspect by virtue of the ability of evil humans consolidate their power and use it against individual members. Such a fear of super-organizations belies an Americanized view of premillennial apocalypticism. Rampant individualism, whereby characters are saved by their own heroic efforts, to accept Christ, casts suspicion on older, less rugged forms of salvation.¹⁶¹ Organizational narratives within the *Left Behind* series underline the paranoia prophecy believers feel for power-consolidation and organizations that

¹⁵⁹ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, "How Did *Left Behind*'s Particular Vision of the End Times Develop? A Historical Look at Millenarian Thought," in Forbes and Kilde, eds., 65.

¹⁶⁰ Brummett, "Premillennial Apocalyptic as a Rhetorical Genre," 295.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Revelation might possibly foretell. LaHaye and Jenkins link Carpathia to the United Nations, implying guilt by association to make their view of the organization clear. Carpathia shows a wealth of knowledge about the United Nations in his first address there, mesmerizing the audience by recalling facts, dates, names, charters and committee make-up that Buck noted “He displayed such an intimate knowledge of the United Nations that it was as if he had invented and developed the organization himself.”¹⁶² Carpathia hides evil with a peaceful veneer, and, by virtue of their close relationship, the United Nations, as a body, practically created by Satan’s emissary, also polishes its peacekeeping charter while paving the way for world domination. Those lost in sin, without the benefit of a Bible prophecy scholar’s expertise; fail to recognize the connection between the U.N and the ten-horned beast with seven heads mentioned in Revelation 13:1-3.¹⁶³ Prior to the publication of the *Left Behind* books, most Bible scholars of the premillennial persuasion, like Hal Lindsey, associated the ten-horned beast with the European Common Market, the EU or NATO. LaHaye and Jenkins make no mention of the EU or ECM, indicating that they may have moved on to the U.N. Security Council as the best with seven heads (five permanent members of the security council plus the Anti-Christ and False Prophet) and ten horns (ten temporary members of the Security Council). As international organizations grow and change, so too, do the interpretations within which these faulty human institutions feature prominently in end-

¹⁶² LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, 241-247.

¹⁶³ For a discussion on the ten-horned beast as it relates to the, the European Common Market, NATO and other multi-nation cooperatives, see O’Leary, 159, Shuck, 102, Forbes and Kilde, 64.

times speculation. As we noted in chapter one, narrative plasticity allows prophets to derive numerical significance many times over from the same data set.

Knowledge of evil is external to the individual believer, as well, though hidden to the sinner. Confusion during the Tribulation as to who plays on which side, prompts the need, by both Anti-Christ and God's righteous army for physical markers to discern the good from the evil. Pre-millennialists who ascribe to a literal reading of Revelation, look for the Anti-Christ to institute a permanent mark, whereby he can recognize his minions and single them out for protection, while destroying those who choose to eschew the Mark of the Beast.¹⁶⁴ In the eighth book in the *Left Behind* series, LaHaye and Jenkins introduce the Anti-Christ's mark. Centers are set up around the world, beginning in the prisons, whereby citizens can get easy access to the evil mark. Next to the mark stations, the Anti-Christ erects guillotines, for those not willing to comply.¹⁶⁵ The Mark allows its bearers to buy, sell, trade, move about the world and interact with the One World Government situated in New Babylon. Christian converts are forced underground, driven deeper into hiding, unable to move about freely once mark-takers are given the directive to shoot non-marked persons on sight.¹⁶⁶ While the mark of the beast represents an

¹⁶⁴ Revelation 13:16-18 "And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand, or on their forehead, and he provides that no one should be able to buy or sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the best, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty six." (NASV)

¹⁶⁵ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B Jenkins, *The Mark: The Beast Rules the World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2000b), 358.

¹⁶⁶ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *The Indwelling: The Best Takes Possession* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2000a), 284-286.

anxiety among the prophecy believing community about consumer culture,¹⁶⁷ being forced to operate within a world based on conspicuous consumption, and not of that world the Mark also represents the unmistakable nature of evil, that a believer will “know” evil just by looking at it, while many without the specialized knowledge of premillennial dispensationalism will mistakenly or selfishly take evil upon or into their bodies, and be doomed forever. In dispensational imagination and the *Left Behind* narratives in particular, the Mark is irreversible. Taking the “mark of the beast, means eternal damnation.”¹⁶⁸ Again, we can see what a powerful rhetorical choice LaHaye and Jenkins make by setting their drama on the cusp of eternity, every decision means eternal life or damnation. To make it easier to follow the characters throughout the book, and identify them to one another, the Christians receive a mark as well. This mark, however, appears only to other believers, so they could recognize one another, and provide aid.¹⁶⁹ To make sure the readers understand the archetypal characters in the *Left Behind* morality play, LaHaye and Jenkins provide a list of Friends (the saved), Enemies (the damned) and those in spiritual limbo, *The Undecided* before the preface in each book, starting with book six in the series. The physical appearance, either explicit or in secret

¹⁶⁷ Amy Johnson Frykholm, “What Social and Political Messages Appear in the *Left Behind* books? A Literary Discussion of Millennial Fiction,” p 187 In Forbes and Kilde, eds. *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004b).

¹⁶⁸ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004a), 34.

¹⁶⁹ Glenn Shuck notes the oddity of the Mark of the Believer, in that the mark is a holograph, whereas the Mark of the Beast is a physical two-dimensional mark. Holograph indicates the absence of reality, but merely a fuzzy projection of the truth. Shuck takes this to mean that the reality of becoming a Christian in the Tribulation is less permanent and most susceptible to mischaracterization than in taking sides with Anti-Christ – endnotes in Shuck, 241, 24n.

within the *Left Behind* books underscores the external knowledge of evil and identifies an internal (to the community of believers) knowledge of good.

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins do not suggest that evil does not exist on the other end of the external-internal polarity, however. Rather, they carefully construct an end-times reality in which internal evil threatens the Tribulation Force daily, in two forms. Hattie Durham, the flight attendant character, represents one form of internal threat to the Tribulation Force. While the small band of believers takes Hattie in, she constantly thwarts their efforts to protect her, giving away their location and endangering their operation, as one of the “undecided.” Getting too close to an undecided poses an extreme risk to believers, but it’s a risk those believers must take in order to help save the not-yet-doomed. Hattie falls in love with the Anti-Christ, marries him and has his child, a still-born babe horribly disfigured.¹⁷⁰ She receives external, palpable punishment for her internal spinelessness and the threat she poses (but never fully realizes) to the believers. Logic derived from worldly knowledge encompasses the other form of internal evil that threatens the protagonists. Their own backgrounds in academia, business, journalism and politics form a latent rational-world paradigm within them that threatens to break free and once again restrain the heroes of the *Left Behind* novels.

Left Behind’s authors depict knowledge acquired by worldly means and used for liberal purposes as evil. We can follow this thread of epistemology throughout the first *Left Behind* book, by looking at the internal through processes and general

¹⁷⁰ Amy Johnson Frykholm, “Reading the Rapture: Christian Fiction and the Social Structures of Religious Belief.” PhD dissertation, Duke University, 2001, 72-77.

characteristics of those left behind after the Rapture of God's chosen few and the stated virtues of those God chose to take. After the Rapture, Captain Steele commits to a mission, "a quest for truth . . . He hoped against all hope that there was another chance at truth and knowledge out there somewhere. The only problem was that the ones who knew were gone." We can instantly identify those left behind as having a false knowledge, and those taken as having found the Truth. Rayford Steele's wife, Irene, disappeared in the Rapture. As Rayford ponders the fundamental differences between his faith and his wife's, he recalls her saying "I only believe what it says in the Bible."¹⁷¹ Readers can cast this statement in two different ways, as self-effacing, denying possessing any great knowledge beyond what is available to any other literate human being, or as anti-intellectual. In response to his wife's pronouncement, Rayford had smugly thought to himself that "he was brighter – yes- more intelligent. He believed in rules, systems, laws, patterns, things you could see and feel and hear and touch."¹⁷² Elsewhere, the authors describe Rayford as "organized, analytical,"¹⁷³ and "logical and planning."¹⁷⁴ Elsewhere, his daughter misses the Rapture because she's a "supposed to be an intellectual" with "critical friends to answer to."¹⁷⁵ Buck fails to convert pre-Rapture and nearly misses his chance to join the Tribulation force because he was "Ivy-

¹⁷¹ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 5.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 393.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 422.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 402.

League educated,” and because he had “long ago compartmentalized this most basic of human needs [spirituality] and had rendered it a nonissue. What did it say about him, what despicable kind of subhuman creature had he become, that even stark evidence . . . of a miracle – had not thawed his spirit’s receptiveness to God?”¹⁷⁶ In describing those left behind, LaHaye and Jenkins essentially describe liberal thinkers and secular humanists, as “antagonistic and close-minded.”¹⁷⁷ In doing so, LaHaye and Jenkins create, somewhat prematurely, their “I Told You So” moment, by pointing, Dante-like, to those suffering the trials of the Tribulation and labeling them with the same markers as their enemies on earth. If they are accused of anti-intellectualism, intolerance and stubbornness, they foist those negative characteristics on the actors their narrative leaves behind. In order to find salvation, and rid their bodies and minds of that internal evil worldly knowledge, the characters must be “intellectually honest with themselves.”¹⁷⁸ They must accept that which “defied all logic.”¹⁷⁹ Rayford, Buck and Chloe each make the choice to revert to a paleoacademic view of the world, meaning and history and in doing so, ensure their salvation. God fills in their deficiencies of Godly knowledge by instructing them via Vernon Billing’s In-Case-Of –Rapture videotape and empowering them with the right words to say to those still lost in their intellect. Once he accepted the truth of Christ, Rayford worried that he could no longer articulate in a calm and rational

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 395.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 382.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 394, 396.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 395.

manner, but “God enabled him to be lucid.”¹⁸⁰ In other words, Rayford traded his reasoning and logos for God’s, which enabled him to give his salvation narrative to Chloe, Hattie and Buck, not by drawing a chart or explaining the scientific necessity of following Christ, but through the story of his faith journey.

Scientists, philosophers, liberal college and university professors, media moguls, ecumenicists, economists, Mainline Protestant ministers and Catholic priests, college students at secular schools, environmentalists, peaceniks and politicians all find themselves left behind, disproportionately to their number in society in the *Left Behind* series. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins craft a morality play at the cusp of eternity, effectively situating their narrative using the locus of the irreparable,¹⁸¹ in which second chances disappear and each decision determines whether the character will live for good or for evil. The knowledge that leads to those eternal life and damnation choices becomes an increasingly hot commodity as the Tribulation wears on. LaHaye and Jenkins cast knowledge as good knowledge, leading to salvation, or evil knowledge, leading to death. Knowledge revealed from God, the incontrovertible Truth, escapes the masses of unconverted, while sheltered and cultivated by the Tribulation Force. Humans cannot create knowledge within themselves, but seeking worldly (evil) knowledge belies an internal threat to the discovery of God’s Truth. Tribulation saints in the *Left Behind* novels have an orthodox view of belief, a “take it or leave it” approach that requires adherents to deflect attention away from inconsistencies in their own epistemology by

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 398.

¹⁸¹ Chaim Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric*, translated by William Kluback (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 30.

locating evil among other, more practical ones.¹⁸² LaHaye and Jenkins accomplish such a deflection among prophecy believers because they show liberal principles and human knowledge, the basis for rational thought and policy, as evil tools of Satan and his Anti-Christ. The elements discussed in this chapter highlight the problem Mark Noll discovers in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, that because of these bi-polar dramas that filter knowledge between the good wheat and the evil chaff, prophecy-believing individuals lack intellectual curiosity, curiosity which might lead to a “profound knowledge of the divinely created world in which these beliefs were applied.”¹⁸³ As analysis of the first *Left Behind* novels shows, the created world does not interest Rapture believers; they seek gnosis of God’s Kingdom in heaven and look for their heavenly escape from the earthly territory devolving into chaos. If we are able to recognize our fundamental biases, and what those biases allow us to create, expand or exclude from the range of knowledge, we may well be on our way to instituting a dialogue between logos and mythos.

¹⁸² Shuck, 136-137.

¹⁸³ Noll, 137.

CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL MANIFESTATIONS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS OF DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

Growing up as a member of an Assembly of God church, heavily involved in my youth group, Bible Quiz team, praise and worship team and various other church functions, I had little reason or time to question the tenets of my faith or the political, social and theological entailments of the beliefs the Assembly of God church espoused. Sermons that featured end of the world discourse appeared on the church schedule with regularity, usually figured in at least one night of any revival and formed the basis for small talk in our Bible study, Sunday School and youth group chats. While I knew that the whole world did not think as I did about the end times, I had no reason to doubt that unbelievers just had not “accepted Christ” and “opened their hearts” yet, but that with prayer and witnessing, they would come to the same conclusion to which I had been led, that Christ would return to catch up his beloved and subject the rest of the world to unendurable woes.

Then I had a conversion experience. One night on our family vacation, I awoke with a start. Confused and disoriented, I tried to adjust to the low light in our family RV and turned to find that my sister, who had gone to bed next to me, was gone. Across the small room, I could not discern the forms of my mother and father. I groped in the darkness for my sister, but had a sinking, pitiful, agonizing feeling in my stomach that I had missed the Rapture. I panicked, worried that my faithfulness at church and attention to my studies had all been in vain because I must not have prayed diligently enough, and

recited the faith formula with enough vigor or gone to church with the right heart. Of course, in a matter of moments, I found my sister snuggled at the foot of the bed, my dad began snoring again and I realized I was not alone, but for a brief time, I knew what it was like to be Left Behind. I decided I would not live my life in fear of being left, I would discover why this interpretation had such a powerful hold for me, that I could do everything “right” and still fear for my eternal soul. That led me to start asking questions, of my family, my church friends, my pastor and the *Left Behind* books. This thesis is a result of that research endeavor. Frykholm stated, correctly, that there are very few tangible markers of salvation in the Protestant context, evangelical and fundamentalist congregations are full of those who have professed with their mouths, and are assumed to have believed in their hearts that Jesus is Lord, but there is little test of that inward truth. Rapture eschatology and the rapture narrative, “play a crucial role” as the “moment of the rapture is the final proof.”¹⁸⁴ In lieu of the Rapture, the conviction of the reality of the Rapture works as a powerful internal corrective within the dispensational community. Just as before my “conversion experience,” I ascribed only the best motives to those who were not in perfect agreement with me, I do not intend to smear prophetic believers here. I am heavily steeped in the prophetic community, through family, friends, acquaintances and colleagues and seek only to understand the ways in which the Bible, Left Behind and readers intersect in and through rhetoric, to determine what can be known, how knowledge is developed, and what are the cultural

¹⁸⁴ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004a), 147.

knowledge products of premillennial belief. In this chapter, I will discuss the social epistemology of premillennial dispensationalism and the knowledge products produced by a belief in the soon-coming return of Jesus Christ.

To guide my analysis, I posed two research questions this chapter will answer”

Research Question #5: How do readers interact with the text of the *Left Behind* series to make sense of their everyday lives?

Research Question #6: What are the rhetorical implications of the cultural artifacts created by and through premillennial dispensationalism?

The *Left Behind* books in particular and conservative Christian eschatology in general constitutes an epistemological basis for the growth of a Rapture subculture, as I have discussed in previous chapters. Readers, in turn, internalize the end-times schema, locating themselves at the apex of history, in order to externalize their message to non-believers. The subculture, in an effort to expand their reach and hold on society, as bearers of the Gospel, make extended use of appeals to time in their discourse and replacing secular cultural products with cultural manifestations of Rapture belief. As we shall see, however, the emphasis placed on a literal reading of the Scriptural text, and personal interpretation of that text, undermines the social epistemological homogeneity of the Rapture subculture. The social structures, confused history, changing political involvement and strong denominational disagreements within the prophecy-believing community leaves room for an infinite variety of personal proof-texting, and might

account for the difficulty in assessing the public opinion and policy preferences of those within the Rapture subculture.

I designed a research project to combine in-depth interviews and Prophecy sermons to discover the ways in which the theology of *Left Behind* gets disseminated to a wide audience. I conducted fifteen interviews, lasting between twenty minutes to two hours with *Left Behind* series readers. Each interviewee had read at least one book in the series. I asked a series of open-ended questions and followed up with additional questions for clarifying answers that were unclear or incomplete. Interview subjects were identified through snowball sampling – I knew readers of the series through courses at Texas A&M University and in my parents’ church in Houston, Texas. Those interview subjects introduced me to other willing study participants, and they, in turn led to others. All interview participants were between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five at the time of interview. I interviewed a disproportionate number of women, but readers of the series are themselves disproportionately women.¹⁸⁵ Though I interviewed men and women who did not ascribe to the end-times events as laid out in the *Left Behind* series, most answered the question, Do you believe the events portrayed in the book are likely to come true in some way?, with an affirmative answer. Questions centered on readership of the series, how many books in the series they had read, what characters and character traits they appreciated or with which they identified, etc. Other questions revolved around the social, political and religious beliefs and practices of the interview participants. I created transcripts from the interviews, changed the names of participants

¹⁸⁵ David Gates, “Religion: The Pop Prophets,” *Newsweek* May 24, 2004 available at www.msnbc.com/id/4988269/site/newsweek/ last accessed May 21, 2007.

and began to look for significant overlap between the interview subjects. Most interviewees had read at least four books in the series. Several had read all twelve books in the original series, and one had read all twelve books and the three prequels to the *Left Behind* series. Only one participant had read fewer than three, but had seen both of the *Left Behind* films and watched a prophecy series on television featuring LaHaye and Jenkins.

In addition to the interviews, the pastor of the church in Houston, where my interview search began, graciously donated his sermon notes from a recent prophecy series he preached. While the notes are not complete, and the personal stories the pastor usually interjects into them are denoted merely by keywords, the sermons function as a secondary mediated step between the prophecy scholarship of LaHaye and Jenkins and the intra- and inter-personal rhetorical strategies employed by prophecy believers and series readers to garner support for a premillennial dispensationalist reading of the Bible. Esther, one of the interview participants, attended the prophecy sermon series a few short weeks before giving her interview with me. Her answers mirror the language of *Left Behind* and the pastor's notes more closely than any others, sometimes using the exact wording from the notes or from LaHaye and Jenkins' text to justify her belief in the Rapture.

Dispensational premillennialist preoccupation with the end of time does not present a mystery. Stephen O'Leary calls *topoi*, the "basic categories of human practical

reasoning.”¹⁸⁶ Humans think in the topos of time. If we know that something had a genesis, we naturally and logically look for its end. Our human stories are usually linear, whose endings are entailed by their beginnings. Even cyclical tales or imagining the eternal return of living things necessitates an end, in order for rebirth.¹⁸⁷ We recognize, in locating our identity that we are mortal, and must one day die. This recognition leads us, understandably to hypothesize about the end, our end and the end of the world. Human beings, in order to imagine a pivotal role for themselves and the times in which they live, are quick to locate their existence close to the end of history.¹⁸⁸ Rapture belief is able to embrace and accept the world’s end, while denying the mortality of the believer. In a Dantesque fantasy, premillennial dispensationalist believers can imagine the utter destruction of their worldly enemies, those that chided, despised or ridiculed them, while simultaneously concocting a way into heaven that saves them from the sting of death. However, the fantasy creation lies mostly with the prophetic scholars, and not with the Rapture-believing population. Rapture-believers, on the whole, are generous, forgiving, and tolerant in their personal dealings and while they believe homosexuality, abortion, prostitution and alcohol consumption are sins, they tend to adopt a “hate the sin, love the sinner approach” and pray for those who choose those actions that they might find the love and forgiveness of God before the end comes.

¹⁸⁶ Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22.

¹⁸⁷ O’Leary 28-29.

¹⁸⁸ O’Leary, 46.

Boyer, Frykholm, Shuck, Balmer, Strozier and Noll have all discussed the myriad ways in which dispensational premillennialist, fundamentalist, evangelicals and charismatics form an American subculture, as distinct as any distinguished by race, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation. As Harding notes, however, the “Rapture Culture” is not a monolithic entity.¹⁸⁹ The Christians that compose the community of prophecy believers, largely fundamentalist, Pentecostals, charismatics and conservative evangelicals, numbered between twenty to thirty million Americans in the 1980s. In 2002, *Time* magazine cited a recent *Time/CNN* poll conducted that showed 39 percent believed the Bible was word of God and should be taken literally and 59 percent of Americans “believe that the events depicted in Revelation will come to pass,”¹⁹⁰ indicating what Harding found, that Americans, even those not of the conservative evangelical variety, have a “narrative belief” in the events associated with the Rapture.¹⁹¹ In other words, somewhere between actual belief in a literal history and future of the world and a purely literary reading of the Bible, lies a nexus of belief in which the reading given by LaHaye and Jenkins and other Rapturists seems plausible, likely or possible. That narrative belief functions as gravitational pull on those who are between belief and unbelief, an active unconscious move toward the principles, policies

¹⁸⁹ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 232.

¹⁹⁰ Nancy Gibbs, “Apocalypse Now,” *Time* June 23, 2002, available at www.time.com/time/covers/1101020701/story.html Last accessed May 21, 2007. Rapture believers are certainly aware of this poll. In the sermon notes by Michael Allard, this poll and corresponding article by Gibbs form the crux of an argument, which Allard claims proves the end is nigh, because knowledge about the end is increasing. Sermon notes, “Signs of the Times!” Michael Allard, Sunday, August 21, 2005, AM service.

¹⁹¹ Harding, 58.

and polemic of Rapture belief or the practices, processes and prescriptions of secularism.¹⁹²

People of most Christian denominations, all races, ethnicities, classes, education levels and intellectual ability reside in the limbo of narrative belief, many of whom are more easily swayed by prophetic readings to believe that the biblical book of Revelation contains some sort of code to future events. Since September 11, Nancy Gibbs remarked in *Time*, “People from cooler corners of Christianity have begun asking questions about what the Bible has to say about how the world ends.”¹⁹³ Renewed interest in the end of the world after September 11, 2001 meant a larger share of narrative believers, searching for meaning in an uncertain time, if only passively. The *Left Behind* books provides putty for their gap in Biblical understanding, as a means for decoding a post-September 11 America. Steven Prothero, chairman of the religious studies department at Boston University conducted a two-year study of undergraduate students in which the students rated poorly on a Biblical literacy test, wherein they indicated that Moses had a conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul led the Israelite children away from Egypt and, he claimed, according to more scientific studies, nearly one in ten people on a thought Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife.¹⁹⁴ George Gallup once concluded that

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Gibbs.

¹⁹⁴ Neither Prothero nor any discernable source links to the scientific study which found 10% to 12% of Americans believed Joan of Arc married Noah. *Harper’s* originally reported the poll, without giving a specific date or attribution as to when it was conducted. Steven Prothero, “We live in the land of biblical idiots,” *Los Angeles Times* March 14, 2007, available at www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-prothero14mar14,0,538507.story?coll=la-op-ed.html last accessed May 21, 2007.

the United States is a “nation of biblical illiterates.”¹⁹⁵ A 1979 study of jeremiadic rhetoric cited a popular study that showed that “fifty percent of the American public reported they could not remember ever having read a book.”¹⁹⁶ Given the strong inclination for meaning and the lack of concrete knowledge about the Bible or the world at large, it is not difficult to imagine how narrative belief can fill the empty explanatory space with knowledge products like the *Left Behind* books, or how popular opinion on Biblical matters might be swayed by those who possess knowledge of the characters, themes and text of Scripture.

Stephen O’Leary investigates the empty explanatory space premillennial Christian apocalyptic fills by examining the rhetorical strategy of Hal Lindsey in *The Late Great Planet Earth*. He notices the mutable, pliable appeals to time Lindsey offers, in order to inject the discourse with a sense of urgency, and still maintain distance from failed previous attempts to pinpoint the day or hour of Christ’s return. In chapter I, I discussed the similar strategy LaHaye and Jenkins used to deflect criticism of their “generational” reading of current events. They similarly locate contemporary history toward the end of the cosmic day, with the clock hands inching ever closer to the “midnight hour.”¹⁹⁷ Nancy Gibbs article in *Time* magazine introduced the secular world to Todd Strandberg, webmaster at raptureready.com and “inventory of the Rapture

¹⁹⁵ Prothero, *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁹⁶ William L. Burke, “Notes on a Rhetoric of Lamentation,” *Central States Speech Journal* 30 (Summer 1979), 109. Again, Burke cites “reliable statistics” reported in *Harper’s*. The original citation from *Harper’s* could not be located.

¹⁹⁷ Timothy LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Find reference for the clock)

Index, which he calls a ‘Dow Jones Industrial Average of End Time activity.’”¹⁹⁸ The Rapture Index tracks what are believed to be end-time phenomena and applies its dispensational brand of economic calculation that predicts how close the Rapture might be. Since September 11, 2001, the index has read, “Fasten Your Seatbelts.”¹⁹⁹ Pastor Allard lists record sales of pornography, illegal drugs, alcohol consumption, shoplifting and abortion as signs that our nation is in decline, and nearing its natural end.²⁰⁰ Prophecy believers similarly read current events as signs of the end. One interviewee, Samantha, states, “I can look at the Bible and know we are nearing those times that are talked about in the *Left Behind* series. I see all these prophecies and Bible passages that are playing out before our eyes.”²⁰¹ Many interviewees parroted LaHaye and Jenkins sentiment that “no prophecy is left unfulfilled except for the return of Christ [in the rapture].”²⁰² Non-believing interview participants noted as frequently as believers that unrest in the Middle East, threat of nuclear war and a growing disrespect between humans led them to worry about the future, placing them among the narrative believers who are quick to read those signs as potential indicators of the end, because they have been exposed to the narrative arguments in the *Left Behind* books.

¹⁹⁸ Nancy Gibbs, “Apocalypse Now.”

¹⁹⁹ Rapture Index, www.raptureready.com.

²⁰⁰ Mike Allard, “Signs of the Times!” Michael Allard, Sunday, August 21, 2005, AM service.

²⁰¹ Interview with Samantha, September 6, 2006.

²⁰² This quote or a paraphrase of it showed up in interviews with Samantha, September 6, 2006, Esther, November 30, 2005, Jenna, December 5, 2005 and Deborah, December 7, 2005.

As discussed earlier, even the community of believers have dissenting opinions within their midst. While Esther claimed the *Left Behind* books made her “more aware of the proximity of eternity,”²⁰³ it convinced Rachel that we are probably still about 200 years away from the return of Christ.²⁰⁴ Craig and Eleanor felt the series gave those on the cusp of “accepting Christ”²⁰⁵ a false sense of hope, saying that the Rapture fictions glorified a second chance in a sort of “cheap grace.”²⁰⁶ They felt that the judgment of God would be final, that the Tribulation, if there would be one, would be so agonizing and painful that hardly anyone would turn to God. In contrast, Charlene, Samantha and Holly all felt it was important to provide those who would be left behind after the Rapture with a timeline, detailing the judgments of God, in hopes of bringing them to Christ during the Tribulation and making them realize “the truth” before it is “too late.”²⁰⁷ Several interview participants noted that the series was obviously fiction, but qualified that they were “fiction based on fact,”²⁰⁸ raising the level of *Left Behind*'s explanatory power from an imaginative construct to a “realistic”²⁰⁹ portrait of what will befall those who miss the Rapture of the saints. Charlene felt that the popularity of the

²⁰³ Interview with Esther, November 30, 2005.

²⁰⁴ Interview with Rachel, November 30, 2005.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Craig, November 30, 2005.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Eleanor, December 2, 2005.

²⁰⁷ Interviews with Charlene, September 8, 2006, Samantha, September 6, 2006 and Holly, September 17, 2006.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Samantha, September 6, 2006, Anna, December 6, 2005, Charlene, September 6, 2006.

²⁰⁹ Interview with Esther, November 30, 2005.

books fell short of their potential, because they “left me wishing and hoping more people would read this series that don’t believe because maybe they would become more interested in comparing the series to the facts of the Bible.”²¹⁰ Holly claimed that the “books have kind of prejudiced me in favor of their viewpoint, but I am still working on developing a Biblically based opinion. The books of prophecy, as I said previously, are difficult books.” Mark agreed, saying that he did not have any knowledge of premillennial belief before reading the books, though he now felt that he could understand where premillennialist came by their opinion. LaHaye and Jenkins, with every one of the 65 million books sold (and growing all the time), are widening their circle of acceptance by reaching out to narrative believers, hoping to plant a seed that will become belief in the threshold readers’ minds.

Some of those prophecies believers and narrative believers read into Bible passages include a general increase in knowledge, the recognition of Israel as a nation, proliferation of nuclear weapons, advancement in technological achievement and unrest in the Holy Land. Knowledge about Biblical truths appear as increase in overall knowledge, for instance, Esther noted that there were “more people doing research on Biblical archaeology and the Bible, they are getting deeper into their studies. There are more theologians now than ever before.”²¹¹ Several of the interviewees I talked to located fulfillment of the prophecy indicating an increase in knowledge in their own knowledge boost on matters related to Biblical prophecy. Their own study of the Bible

²¹⁰ Interview with Charlene, September 6, 2006.

²¹¹ Interview with Esther, November 30, 2005.

and prophecy series study guides led them to make a personal connection of the prophecy in Daniel 12:4 that knowledge shall increase before the end. As Samantha put it, the *Left Behind* books led to her increase in knowledge; “I would get out my Bible and follow along and I also took a lot of notes. By reading the books in encouraged me to study . . . As a result my knowledge has more than doubled since I read those books. I hope that doesn’t sound like I am bragging, I know my knowledge comes from God, though.”²¹² Not only believers ran to their Bibles to confirm or deny the prophetic acumen of LaHaye and Jenkins. Justin, Craig and Holly all cited a similar compulsion to follow along in their Bibles, with mixed results. Craig found that it strengthened his faith against a Rapture scenario, Justin found that after conscientious study, the soon-coming of Christ seemed feasible and he was at least preparing his life and his heart for that eventuality and Holly discovered a real passion for the lost and the surety that the end was at hand.²¹³ One of the twenty signs cited by Pastor Mike Allard in his sermon, “Signs of the Times” is “An increase in travel and knowledge.” Prophecy believers take particular note of our time and its label, The Information Age and conclude that an increase in information equals an increase in knowledge. As we have seen, any increases in knowledge have not increased knowledge of the Bible or religious imagery or history. Instead, as one interview participant, Charlene, any net gain in knowledge the world might achieve in these last days is fleeting and in vain. Her reading of II Timothy 3:7²¹⁴

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Interviews with Craig, November 30, 2005, Justin, December 3, 2005, Holly, September 17, 2006.

²¹⁴ II Timothy 3:7. Revised Standard Edition, Bible Oremus.org reads “who are always being instructed and can never arrive at knowledge of the truth.” LaHaye and Jenkins quote from this same passage, the

leads her to believe that “The terminal generation will always be learning but never able to come to the knowledge of truth,” reconciling her reading of the sign and the Scripture into a subtly anti-Intellectual axiom. Increases in knowledge are not the only warnings headed by avid and narrative believers alike. Several interviewees noted that we are the “generation” that will see the Rapture, based on their reading and understanding of prophecies concerning Israel.

Readers seeking to explain their reliance upon the recognition of Israel as a nation in terms of ecclesiastical proof, borrow often from the narrative approach LaHaye, Jenkins and other prophecy scholars use. For example, Charlene, explained it in a historical anecdote, “Then in 1948 the United Nations had announced that they had formally recognized the state of Israel. This was a very, very important prophetic message as that was one thing Jesus told his disciples to watch for, so that they would know that the end times were near. Jesus told the story, or parable, or the fig tree in Matthew 24:32 to 34²¹⁵ to answer the question. Jesus is talking about Israel and says this generation will not pass away till all these things take place. So, that is where I get the 1949 people give or take a year. In biblical prophecy Israel is often referred to as a fig tree. So, as soon as its twigs are tender and leaves come out, remember, this is Israel, then it should be clear that the end times are near. In other words, the generation that saw

one analyzed in chapter I of this thesis, in which Paul tells Timothy, in II Timothy 3:1 that “in the last days” this is what people will be like. Charlene has equated people in the last days to “terminal generation,” likely through the Biblical instruction of LaHaye and Jenkins.

²¹⁵ Matthew 24:32-34 reads, “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 gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” Revised Standard Edition Bible.

the rebirth of Israel in 1948 is the terminal generation. This brought the Jews back to the land, in fulfillment of Jeremiah 23: 7-8,²¹⁶ which says that God will be remembered as the Lord that restored Israel to their lands, not just removed them from slavery in Egypt. She then cryptically referred to Luke 21:24, which, in the revised standard version, reads: they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled,²¹⁷ and comes to the conclusion that this corresponds to another prophecy, “From AD 70 to 1967, Jesus said the Jews would be trampled on by the Gentiles.”²¹⁸ Charlene’s hard core belief in the Rapture and reliance upon the teachings of LaHaye, Jenkins, Lindsey and the like, brings her to shape her explanations into dates, times and stories that will appeal to those located in the realm of narrative belief. She draws no tangible connection between the passage in Luke and the dates of Jewish domination, but the Scripture provides the proof-text she needs to fill in the relevant information for unbelievers, that she then uses in her witnessing campaign with friends, family and neighbors. Skeptical readers might take Luke 21:24 and see nothing more but an Exodus exultation, remembering God for bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt, but to someone who believes that the “Word of God is inerrant and that the Scripture

²¹⁶ Interview with Charlene, September 7, 2006.

²¹⁷ Luke 21:24, Revised Standard Edition Bible.

²¹⁸ Interview with Charlene, September 7, 2006.

passages should be interpreted literally whenever possible;”²¹⁹ the word is precise and provides clues to the fast-approaching end of time.

In learning more about the prophetic subculture, I discovered there are two related and consequential derivatives of Rapture belief. I have dubbed them cultural manifestations and cultural entailments of apocalyptic schema. Cultural manifestations refers to knowledge products that grow out of Rapture belief, books, movies, mouse pads and videogames are all cultural manifestations of the Left Behind phenomenon and serve two purposes, to popularize the series further and to “stand” iconically for the knowledge prophecy believers have created, discovered or had revealed to them. Cultural entailments, on the other hand, are those beliefs which belief in the Rapture, Tribulation and Armageddon necessitate, or, the beliefs which conservative Christians have been conditioned to accept along with an end-times scenario. This includes, but is not limited to, voting for pro-Israel candidates, championing anti-abortion causes, Republican candidates in most cases and backing Christian initiatives, like prayer in schools, faith-based funding and banning stem-cell research. While prophecy believers hold mixed feelings about cultural manifestations, based mostly on the type of product and the age of the believer polled, reaction and adherence to cultural entailments affects the population of conservative Christians more uniformly. I will take a closer look at the cultural entailments, first, in order to gauge the effectiveness of the cultural manifestations at achieving their snapshot of knowledge on apocalyptic belief.

²¹⁹ Interview with Holly, September 20, 2006.

Novels are a way of knowing, according to Milan Kundera. “A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel’s only morality,” Kundera says.²²⁰ As previously discussed, prophetic understanding of the world from a premillennial dispensationalist point of view constitutes a Rapture epistemology, a way of knowing, limiting what can and should be known and defining the ways in which knowledge can grow. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ novels give rise to a previously unknown segment of existence in carving out a way for Christian prophecy believers to interact with their world, in what I term, cultural entailments of eschatological belief. Most *Left Behind* readers either expect the Rapture at any moment, or they are exposed enough to the narrative structure of the novels that the Rapture and Tribulation seem plausible.²²¹ Once comfortable in their own salvation, readers/believers can open up their concern to family, friends and acquaintances. Anna worried, in our interview, about her family. She expresses the wish to not have to think too much about the Rapture, because she is not sure her family would go to heaven the first time around.²²² The *Left Behind* subculture creates socially acceptable ways of dealing with non-Christians and justifies stereotypes of humanists, intellectuals, homosexuals, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, feminists and other slices of society. Several interviewees cited a distrust of “religion” in their dealings with the world. Holly directly stated, “I dislike religion. Religion is man’s attempt to reach God with rules; Jesus is

²²⁰ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 6.

²²¹ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004a), 46.

²²² Interview with Anna, December 2, 2005.

God's attempt to reach man through love. I would say that God has been far more successful in his endeavors that we have, and I come down on the side of faith rather than religion."²²³ Holly also felt, in the spirit of faith over organized religion, that her church would simply meld into the heavenly saints after the Rapture and no denominations would exist. Similarly, Charlene viewed heaven as a place without denominational factions, saying, "Denominations will not be found in heaven. I am Pentecostal here on earth, but in heaven, God will not care what my church was called, only that they taught his word and let the Holy Spirit free to reign in their churches and it was a Bible-believing church on fire for God. Do I believe some churches are the wrong ones? Yes, I do. Will you get to heaven through these churches? No, not according to the Bible."²²⁴ Given their suspicions about the real belief behind Protestant sentiment, their suspicions of churches and "religions" less like their free-worship Pentecostal church homes seem apt. Readers made comments that denigrated the Catholic Church, though they said nothing about Catholic parishioners,²²⁵ they panned Islamic extremists but not mainstream Muslim believers²²⁶ and were universally ambivalent toward Jews while they show support for Israel.²²⁷

²²³ Interview with Holly, September 20, 2006.

²²⁴ Interview with Charlene, September 7, 2006.

²²⁵ Interview with Shannon, December 1, 2005, in which she said her West Texas home was "more Christian and less Catholic – there are so many reasons we don't agree with them [Catholics], that's why we went to a Lutheran church and now a Baptist one," and Interview with Justin, December 3, 2005, "I'm a Christian, most of the friends I grew up with were Catholic." Both of these statements separate Christianity and Catholicism.

²²⁶ Interview with Samantha, September 7, 2006, she identified the "goal of Islam is world domination, to convert the whole world to Islam. The goal of Christianity is to win as many people to Christ as we can. In that sense, I guess the goal is similar, but the means by which we go about doing so are completely

As does LaHaye, series readers save their harshest criticism for academics, intellectuals and humanists. God, they contend, has been ejected from public life, the “name of God has been taken out of schools, and the increase in school violence and disrespect is a direct result.”²²⁸ Samantha wondered at the rate at which, “We are pushing God out of our schools, government buildings and labeling Christians as biased and uneducated because we [Christians] don’t go with the flow. The language and images are getting filthier on TV all the time, yet they tried to put a rating on Christian-based programming here awhile back because it might offend someone. Please, how pathetic.”²²⁹ Esther felt the “government as a whole is not interested in God’s plan for humanity.” One interview participant, Holly, describes herself as “a skeptic who came to saving faith the hard way. I really empathize with Chloe [an intellectual young person in the novels] with her realization that all her rationality, all her scientific worldview was nothing in the face of who the Lord really is. That’s not to say I’m not rational, but it was taken me a long time to realize that I can’t even begin to grasp the vastness of who God is.” She holds a doctorate from a prestigious university, won a Rhodes scholarship,

different. For example, I do not believe that by blowing myself up and a building full of people that don’t agree with my belief would get me to heaven – but I do believe that would send me straight to hell. Islam believes that gains them entrance to heaven immediately. Ours is a God of love, and there’s nothing loving in that act.” Samantha articulated as suspicion of Islam many interview participants express, as they juggle their belief in a benevolent God and one that visits destruction upon those who did not accept him prior to the Rapture.

²²⁷ While Jews are uniformly admired as “God’s chosen people,” but they seem more concerned with the fact that Israeli land is being divided up in the peace process, as Samantha states, “I think it angers God that the land he commanded to not be divided up, IS being divided up in the so-called name of peace,” September 7, 2006.

²²⁸ Interview with Rachel, November 30, 2005.

²²⁹ Interview with Samantha, September 7, 2006.

participates in MENSA and is “a sincere and heartfelt Christian. I don’t think intellect and passion, faith and reason are mutually exclusive; in fact, in the best of situations, they coexist.”²³⁰ She identifies with the intellectuals in the book, and contends they were not left behind because of their education level, but rather, “because they were unable to detach themselves from their logical understanding of the world long enough to really understand the message of God through Christ, I think. It’s often been said that the distance between heaven and hell is about 18 inches – the distance from a person’s head to their heart. You can understand all you want, intellectually about God, but until you really accept Jesus into your heart, repent for your sins and receive the forgiveness being offered, all the knowledge in the world is not going to save you.”²³¹ Readers of the series articulate to one another and to “unsaved” loved ones and friends that the type of knowledge one possesses makes all the difference in the world, that only knowledge that comes from God can create a remedy for sin.

Other political entailments of Rapture belief derive from the pervasive political commitments of the majority of voters within the Rapture subculture. While self-described fundamentalist (many of whom now eschew the moniker, but have become a strong base within the prophetic community) used to shy away from political involvement of any kind, the birth of the Moral Majority in the 1980s convinced them to vote, en masse, in order to take part in a “spiritual revolution.”²³² Overwhelmingly, these

²³⁰ Interview with Holly, September 20, 2006.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20.

voters stand by the Republican Party, though, many will vote differently in local races, depending on the issues. In my study, only three identified as liberal or moderate that tends to vote for Democratic candidates. Of those who agreed with the eschatology of the series, most agreed with Charlene, that they could not vote for “people who are against what God would have us do;” they are pro-life,²³³ against homosexual marriage,²³⁴ and stem cell research²³⁵ and most are in favor of increased military spending²³⁶ and the death penalty.²³⁷ Anna gave money to both Planned Parenthood and the Democratic Party and James acted as President of his University’s chapter of the Democratic Party, but for the most part, interview participants cited their unwillingness to engage in politics or a finite set of “deal breaker” issues on which they voted. Charlene said she looks carefully at the candidates to find out “who follows God’s laws. I will not vote for people who have voted for things I feel are against God. An example for me would be the Bill Clinton affair – that would be a no vote, not because of political party, but because he sinned against the law of God. Also, anyone who votes for abortion, I cannot support.”²³⁸ Samantha told me she does research on “Christian-based websites, such as American Family Association and Joyce Meyer,” to find out where the

²³³ Interviews with Charlene, Samantha, Holly, Esther, Kara, Eleanor, Craig.

²³⁴ Interview with Samantha.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Interviews with Mark, Craig, Justin, Esther and Anna.

²³⁷ Only two interview participants showed distaste for the death penalty, Eleanor and James (identifies as a liberal, marginal believer in Rapture theology).

²³⁸ Interview with Charlene, September 6, 2007.

candidates stand on “abortion, homosexual marriage and stem cell research.”²³⁹

Nowhere in the Bible, she supplied, “is gay marriage supported, or the homosexual lifestyle. I’m not sure how people who are homosexual claim to be Christians, do they just skip over those verses? I hope I do not sound judgmental, but I think the Bible is clear that it is just wrong. When I encounter these people, though, I don’t treat them any differently than I do anybody else. God did not put us here to judge people, but to love them.”²⁴⁰ Whatever differences they may have in personal conviction, the voting block remains strong. The absence of dissenting voices in favor of choice, homosexual union and against the death penalty in American conservative churches, can lead more liberal members from voicing their opinion to the contrary or changing their minds to follow the majority in the prophetic community.²⁴¹ Charlene, Samantha, Shannon, Mark, Craig, Jenna and Deborah all stated they viewed the United Nations with contempt, but had various reasons for doing so. The other participants rated the United Nations as marginally positive or marginally negative, though they admitted they had no real reason for their view one way or the other. Charlene would support United States withdraw from the United Nations, because she does not feel it is a “godly organization. These are people organizations that try to solve problems themselves instead of reaching out to God. In the end times, this sounds very much like the One World Order the false prophet

²³⁹ Interview with Samantha, September 7, 2006.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Interview with Anna. She stated that she did not disclose her support of Planned Parenthood or Allies, an on-campus group that provides counseling and support to GLBT students, to the people with whom she attended church, Bible study or Rapture-believers in her family. In a personal note, I have also kept my more liberal political views from members of mine and my parents’ church.

will run. If you'll remember from *Left Behind*, the U.N went to back up the One World Order, and you'll remember who the leader of the One World Order was, of course, the false prophet!" Charlene echoes the nomenclature of the novel, rather than that of the Bible in locating evil in a human institution, rather than in the hearts of men. She readily adopts the narrative explanation from *Left Behind* to describe why she suspects and fears a peacekeeping organization. The political and cultural entailments of *Left Behind*'s Rapture Culture energize the voters, giving them a vocabulary to express their fears and hopes with other Christians as it allows them to make a difference without witnessing, they can vote their conscience, even if they do not speak it.

Paul Boyer, in a survey of apocalyptic belief, noted that the ultimate marriage of prophetic culture with the "world" culminates in rapture fictions of the 1990s. He shows how these fictions develop a "chameleon-like ability to mirror the cultural moment."²⁴² They must, in order to fulfill their eternal destiny, come as close to the world as they can, in order to draw readers from among the unconverted, yet remain distinct, to disavow any taint of sin. So, while LaHaye and Jenkins correctly depict technological advances, gadgetry and minutiae of international travel, they paint any sexual encounter with broad strokes and exchange dialect for word choice when presenting a less-than-desirable character, which might, in actuality, resort to foul language. In doing so, the mirror LaHaye and Jenkins hold up to the contemporary culture acts as both a reflection and deflection of the secular society. Rachel notes that in order to reach the secular

²⁴² Paul Boyer, "666 and All That: Prophetic belief in America from the Puritans to the Present," in Loren Johns, ed. *Apocalypticism and Millennialism: Shaping a Believers church Eschatology for the Twenty-First Century* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1999), 253.

market, one needs something unique, new, eye-catching, something that entices them to get involved and be engaged, and then speaks to their spirit life.²⁴³ LaHaye and Jenkins, often push the envelope of innovation in order to garner a greater audience for their Rapture argument. While readers appreciate the effort at reaching the lost, they often show concerns about the methods LaHaye, Jenkins and their product developers show in bringing the knowledge of the truth to narrative believers, fearing that they might turn off potential converts. In addition to the twelve books in the *Left Behind* series, LaHaye and Jenkins have penned three prequels and nearly 40 books in their *Left Behind: The Kids* series. Only one interview participant had purchased the children's series. She bought the series for her oldest grandson and thought they made the perfect gift. "Kids are told everyday to read books in school," she told me, "What better book for a child to read considering how many are in their series. The best deal of all is that it's not full of things God doesn't approve of. And, the younger kids learn about God and what is in store for them, then hopefully they will follow what God says in the Bible and it will help keep kids from getting into trouble."²⁴⁴ While her ringing endorsement sent chills up my spine, given my left behind camping experience, she seemed to wish more children would read the *Left Behind: The Kids* series instead of their school books. However, this wish stems from a concern over the value and ideas present in the literature assigned to school-aged children, rather than a real preference for the superior writing or intellectual stimulation of *Left Behind: The Kids*. Other readers were more

²⁴³ Interview with Rachel, November 30, 2005.

²⁴⁴ Interview with Charlene, September 6, 2006.

ambivalent toward the children's books, saying "*Left Behind: The Kids* is okay, but only under parental supervision."²⁴⁵ Books written by LaHaye and Jenkins are sold with the branding image the authors began with *Left Behind*, as are books that correspond and bolster the original series and the specific brand of Rapture theology LaHaye and Jenkins teach. On their website, leftbehind.com, LaHaye and Jenkins tout companion books, the Military series, written by Mel Odom, and the Political series, by Neesa Hart and authorized study guides. These companion series seek to strengthen the relationship between the cultural entailments of *Left Behind* readers to their buying power as a segment of the population.

In order to extend their grasp over media boundaries, LaHaye and Jenkins have allowed their books to be re-made into graphic novels, screen savers, and a highly controversial video game. Series readers are invited to download *Mobile Prophecies* to their cell phones with the handsome endorsement, "The *Left Behind* series doesn't end when you close the book. Now you can access the prophecies that speak the truth – wherever you go, whenever you need it." *Mobile Prophecies* also has a feature allowing customers to save and share their favorite entries, to "Connect with *Left Behind* and keep the message real."²⁴⁶ Charlene felt that Christian books, TV, study guides and the *Left Behind* books all relate to a Bible passage that "the end will not come until God's word has been spread throughout the world," and asks, "What better way than through books

²⁴⁵ Interview with Holly, September 20, 2006.

²⁴⁶ "Left Behind Mobile Prophecies: The truth is in your hands." Available from Airborne Entertainment at <http://web-I.airborne-e.com/www.pktbo.com/website/leftbehind/> last accessed May 22, 2007.

and T.V.?”²⁴⁷ Indeed, what better way? LaHaye and Jenkins are beginning to spread the word through first-person shooter video games.

Left Behind: Eternal Forces was launched to appeal to the 63 million who have purchased a *Left Behind* novel, to those who are not put off by the violence of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, and those who want to introduce the series and the Rapture genre to their children.²⁴⁸ A review of the game on James Dobson’s Focus on the Family’s “Plugged-In” site, said *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* was “the kind of game that Mom and Dad can actually play with Junior – and use to raise some interesting questions along the way.”²⁴⁹ Dereck Wong, vice president of sales at Left Behind Games, stated in an interview with *Christian Retailing* that they had three goals for *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, “to entertain, to make people think about God and to make people talk about God.”²⁵⁰ People are certainly talking about the game and what the violence in the game means in terms of salvation and the dispensational image. *Eternal Forces*, according to Left Behind Games, received an endorsement from the Anti-Defamation League, *Wired Magazine* and *ArsTechnica.com*, a PC gaming site. The “endorsement” by the Anti-Defamation merely addresses the major concern of their constituents, namely, “Conversion to Christianity in the game is not depicted as forcible

²⁴⁷ Interview with Charlene, September 7, 2006.

²⁴⁸ JewsonFirst.org, “Christians seek recall of *Left Behind* video game,” December 5, 2006, available at www.jewsonfirst.org.06dprint/left_behind_video_print.html.

²⁴⁹ Plugged-In, “Left Behind Now and End-Times Game,” Plugged-In On-Line available at www.pluggedinonline.com/thisweekonly/a0002989.cfm last accessed May 29, 2007.

²⁵⁰ Richard Bartholomew, “Jerry Jenkins: Left Behind Game ‘Not more violent than the Old Testament,’” Bartholomew’s Notes on Religion, available at www.blogs.salon.com citing a Christian retailing report from July 2006 International Christian Retail Show in Denver.

in nature and violence is not rewarded in the game.”²⁵¹ Arstechnica.com notes that the game (sold for \$39.99) comes packaged with the first book in the series, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*. Reviewer Ben Kuchera tried reading the book first to gain perspective on the game, but, “I [Kuchera] put it down in disgust after the first fifty pages. The writing is just horrible. The fact that 65 million hojillion people bought these books and enjoyed them scares the hell out of me. When you start longing for the florid prose of a dime-store romance novel, you know that, stylistically, what you’re holding in your hands is pretty bad. There is a huge market for it, though, and the concept of the people left behind post-Rapture fighting the forces of evil is quite compelling. The idea of putting the concept into a game is a strong one, and there’s a lot you can do with the premise.”²⁵² In the game, the scenario mirrors that of *Left Behind*, those who did not disappear in the Rapture must battle it out physically and spiritually in a major American city for their lives and the souls of others who have been left behind. The enemy is the forces of Nicolae Carpathia, the Global Community Peacekeepers, who try to lull those who remain into a spiritual slumber with promises of a peaceful world. The Tribulation Force (the first person shooter), must first try to convert through training musicians, prayer warriors, pastors and Sunday School teachers and sending them out into the fray. Should that fail to garner the “neutrals” to the good side, and the demonic forces convert them, the real-time strategy game (RTS) becomes more perilous, and “there are points at

²⁵¹ Troy Lyndon, “A Statement from Left Behind Games Inc.,” available at www.leftbehindgames.com/pages/controversy.htm last accessed May 29, 2007.

²⁵² Ben Kuchera, “When the roll is called up yonder,” Arstechnica.com available at <http://arstechnica.com/reviews/games/leftbehind.ars> last accessed May 29, 2007.

which a gun battle is necessary to avoid a massacre.”²⁵³ The game, Jenkins insists, “Is no more violent than the old testament.”²⁵⁴ Gore is largely unseen; when an enemy is killed, they fall down and fade into the sidewalk. The image the game projects of the disposable nature of eschatological enemies frightens many prophecy believers. They worry that such an apparent attitude makes them look intolerant, or worse. Holly commented that she found the video game “disgusting” and asked “Did you know that you can actually switch over to the dark side and fight on the side of the Antichrist? That aspect [of their marketing] I’m not fond of.”²⁵⁵ While a great demand exists in Christian bookstores for this product, game designers have increased the marketable value by embedding Christian music from popular Christian artists into the game and directing players to a “buy it” button to iTunes from the play screen.²⁵⁶ According to reviewer Richard Bartholomew, the game also adds some sticky spyware to the player computer that the purchaser cannot remove.²⁵⁷ A list of cultural manifestations of *Left Behind* eschatology is exhaustive, reaching nearly every market sector in the United States.²⁵⁸ *Left Behind* board games, calendars, graphic novels, audio tapes, iLumina – a software package capable of indexing the entire *Left Behind* series, providing a prophecy teaching series

²⁵³ Plugged-In

²⁵⁴ Bartholomew.

²⁵⁵ Interview with Holly, September 20, 2006.

²⁵⁶ Bartholomew.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Unauthorized *Left Behind* merchandise pervades, as well. Fan fiction and slash fan fiction based on *Left Behind*, parodies of *Left Behind*, like *Right Behind*, written by a Harvard English student, are all available for free download and purchase.

by Tim LaHaye, a Bible Atlas, a master historical timeline that links to Bible passages that illuminate that portion of human history;²⁵⁹ all available for purchase through the *Left Behind* website, linking the knowledge products created as a result of Rapture theology in an amazing feat of branding. In order to branch out into areas of close connection with the cultural entailments of Rapture belief, Tyndale House also sponsored as Nascar driver to race with the “unlucky logo *Left Behind*” on the hood.²⁶⁰ All products are marketed as quick, entertaining access to the Truth, to stand in for the thousands of Scriptures, hundreds of which LaHaye, Jenkins and their predecessors distilled into an end-time scenario. As a group, these products are meant to invade the market, standing in for lengthy theological discussions, short-cutting the thought processes and message processing that might occur in a sermon or seminary discussion. As a knowledge product, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* functions to mirror both the future LaHaye and Jenkins envision post-Rapture, but also the present, portraying rock musicians, activists and non-Christian doctors as “evil forces.”²⁶¹

In this chapter, we have identified a prophetic Rapture subculture, and discussed the similarities members of that subculture share. However, I have also identified areas of dissent among Rapture believers and general readers of the *Left Behind* series. I argue that the reliance placed by Bible scholars upon a literal and personal reading of the Bible, accounts for the broad range of interpretation seen among series readers. Readers

²⁵⁹ iLumina software. Available at <http://www.leftbehind.com/channelproducts.asp?channelID=170> last accessed May 29, 2007.

²⁶⁰ David Gates, “Religion, The Pop Prophets,” *Newsweek* Society available on www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4988269/site/newsweek/ last accessed May 21, 2007.

²⁶¹ JewsonFirst.com, op cit.

apply the method of personal study to the *Left Behind* books, and take away from the experience those elements that are familiar and/or plausible to them. With amazing regularity, however, cultural entailments of prophecy belief sprout up in the community of believers, however, I believe it may have more to do with interpersonal discussions within prophetic communities than in reading the books or study guides. It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the interpersonal discourse of the Rapture subculture. I did find overlap, however, in the books, charts and graphs and interviews, the sermons Pastor Allard preached in his “prophecy series” and the answers members of his congregation gave to interview questions. Many issues brought up by LaHaye and Jenkins in their non-fiction work and in the *Left Behind* series, appeared in interview conversations without my prompting, however, and those areas of overlap point the way of the direction Rapture culture is taking. The knowledge products, commodities of the knowledge produced through Rapture belief, appear as icons of the narrative epistemology dispensational premillennialists create, they act as snapshots from the novels, pictures of the end-times horror to befall those unwilling to convert and stand as glimpses into the future. The market for cultural manifestations of Rapture belief is ever-growing, as new and inventive ways of distilling and disseminating the conservative Christian lifestyle come to the fore, a blurry reflection of contemporary American consumer culture.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION – A FINAL NOTE ON FINAL THINGS

Rationalists are ready to see Rapture believers as historians and sociologists throughout the last century have, as poor, paranoid, uneducated, anti-intellectual, shiftless people without political or social clout, who have given up on this life and dream of vengeance in the life to come.²⁶² If that portrayal were accurate, I could understand why a large number of highly motivated voters fitting that description, or any combination of the above, would give rationalists pause. However, in this thesis, I have repeatedly shown that the rational bias toward rationalism creates a void in understanding narrative epistemology and the validity of its contingent claims. Premillennial dispensationalist and the prophecy believers that follow the news searching for signs of impending apocalypse are operating under a knowledge system foreign to most academics. While the rhetorical strategies prophecy scholars employ seem quasi-logical, within the prophetic community, they work.

Despite growing in size, the Rapture subculture remains quite homogeneous in its end-times anticipation. Many within the subculture disagree about political and social entailments of the *Left Behind* eschatology, but most members of heavily prophetic churches, non-denominational fundamentalist churches, Southern Baptist, Free Will Baptist, Assembly of God, United Pentecostal Church, Bible churches, many

²⁶² Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 283.

Presbyterian and a growing number of low-Methodist churches believe in the degeneration of our world, the decay of morals and principles upon which America was based and the soon-coming return of Christ to Rapture his church and inflict judgment upon the nations and people left behind.²⁶³ While they eagerly anticipate this return, they do not actively desire the destruction of their fellow humans, rather, most prophecy believers desperately want to reach out to the “lost” before the Rapture, so they too might be “saved.”²⁶⁴ While they wait for the blessed hope of Christ’s return and the promise of eternal sunshine, Rapturists must live in a world far removed from hymns and angels. As Shuck so eloquently put it, “Though their fictional musings often address questions of space, prophecy-believing evangelicals remain hesitant to leave the world behind,” while earthbound, heaven-seeking Christians must make the best of their sojourn.²⁶⁵

Jürgen Moltmann once observed that churches often face crises of identity. They might try to get involved within their community, but that involvement is typically local and varied, and while socially relevant, they have no larger identity left. A current hit song on the Christian music airways takes up this call to social relevance:

But if we are the Body
 Why aren't His arms reaching
 Why aren't His hands healing
 Why aren't His words teaching

²⁶³ Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12.

²⁶⁴ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004a), 154.

²⁶⁵ Glenn Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 3.

And if we are the Body
 Why aren't His feet going
 Why is His love not showing them there is a way
 There is a way²⁶⁶

However, those who rigidly assert their identity in “dogmatic formulas, rites or peculiar codes of morality” become “irrelevant and unbelievable.”²⁶⁷ In order to become culturally relevant and still maintain an identity, today’s conservative Christian scholar resorts to branding, to perform the service of transforming lives through commodification of the Gospel and mass production. Their ideas, charts, software, arguments, teachings are all manufactured into smart, two-tone tomes emblazoned with “from the best-selling book series, *Left Behind*” or “the authorized study guide to the *Left Behind* series” or “from the creators of the best-selling *Left Behind* books.” Innovative Christian teachings must pass through a best-fit test with the theology of a fictional series before appearing on Christian bookstore shelves, ensuring a dearth of competing information for those seeking out the Truth. Messages skew more toward self-help salvation through an individual literal reading of the Bible than through the communal salvation of mainstream Christian churches.

Dispensational Christians of today are less likely to deprive themselves of the things of this world than premillennialists in ages past. Instead, they create a subculture in which the physical elements of the world are transformed into mirror images made for

²⁶⁶ Casting Crowns, “If We are the Body,” *Casting Crowns* lyrics, Reunion Records, 2003.

²⁶⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), 7 in J. Michael Utzinger, *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and the Development of Evangelical Ecclesiology, 1887-1937* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006), 29.

the glory of God. Christian movies, TV, books, clothing, jewelry and video games set Rapturists apart while appearing remarkably similar to the items popular with secular masses. The remnant has never looked more like the whole. Not only to the commodities of Premillennialism reflect the secular culture, the methods by which dispensationalists persuade and argue for their position becomes increasingly complex and technical. In that they attempt quasi-logical arguments, make use of charts, graphs and scientific “expertise” to make their claims, they mirror the rationalism of academic inquiry. In their strict adherence to the authority of their leaders, their fundamental, literalist reading of the Bible and a “personal relationship with God” to foster the revelation of knowledge, they maintain a preference for pre-modern modes of inquiry over modern ones.²⁶⁸ Methods of rhetorical analysis, from neo-Aristotelian to critical fail to accurately capture the nuances of premillennial dispensational rhetoric as a whole. I feel that by exploring prophetic epistemology as one would scientific or economic epistemology gives a clearer picture of the strata of rhetoric within the prophetic community.

In this thesis, I have advocated a complementary learning process, through which religionists might recognize the social epistemic biases they bring with them into public debate and diversify their strategy when dealing with non-dispensational political actors. Likewise, I encourage rationalists to adapt to the 65 million members of their audience who rely upon an alternate epistemological code in the public sphere. Their attitudes and presuppositions must be engaged in order to bring about any measure of cooperation in a dramatically polarized society.

²⁶⁸ Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 160.

Throughout this research project, I have treated the opinions of those who maintain these beliefs dearly with respect, though I hold the prophecy “scholars” who promulgate such teachings to a higher form of criticism. Their teachings are produced for public consumption and to that end, deserve more scrutiny than the musings of the lady on the pew next to me last Sunday. I have delved into the structures of authority by which Bible scholars maintain their “expert” status in the prophetic community, determining how evidence is tested in prophetic circles and who decides what is, and is not, of God. I discovered that premillennial dispensationalism is a complex religious evolution based on the simplest of *a priori* claims that have been expanded and expounded to fantastic ends. Prophetic ethos provides much of the evidence for premillennial claims to Truth, ensuring that it is only with difficulty that any prophetic claims can be falsified. Dispensational experts use transfer and narrative plasticity to enlarge the rhetorical area they hold over an inerrant but malleable text.

Similarly, I located the *mythos* of spiritual certainty Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins substitute for *logos* in the *Left Behind* series. Situating their narrative at the end of time, in a cosmic battle between good and evil, LaHaye and Jenkins shade every decision, every piece of knowledge as one or the other. Knowledge and evil are both depicted as external forces, one revealed from heaven, the other attacking the pure from outside. However, knowledge is also the root of a deeper problem for the characters in the *Left Behind* novels; worldly, rational knowledge corrupts absolutely. Believers must set aside intellectual achievement and adopt counter-logical Truths in order to be saved. Likewise, human organizations that might provide a vehicle for world domination are

suspected of cultivating human concerns over godly ones, eradication of poverty, hunger and inequality instead of promoting Israel at all costs, demonizing population control and placing a moratorium on stem-cell research.

Finally, I examined the popular beliefs of series readers. Their anxiety over time, time to reach their fellow man, time to “get right with God,” and time yet to live before they become the generation that sees the return of Christ, comes to the fore in interviews. Rapid changes in the global climate increase anxiety about the end and consequentially add to the popularity of theories that offer concrete vision of the future, whether that vision is utopian or dystopian. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, sales of the *Left Behind* books increased sixty percent, between September 2001 and January 2002, 32 million books sold and another 18 million dollars generated by the sale of related products, comic books, children’s books, board games and more.²⁶⁹ While apocalyptic helps hard-core believers “makes sense of strangeness in their lives,”²⁷⁰ they are no stranger for desiring that sense-making function of literature than anyone who has read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or *Walden* with a similar goal.

I undertook a study of the cultural entailments of prophecy belief, those contingent, often necessary political and social commitments prophecy believers must make in order to fit *in* with the theology of their peers, given the short amount of time they feel is left to them. These issues, though by no means uniform across the premillennial dispensationalist community, form the basis of Rapturist political

²⁶⁹ Crawford Gribben, “Rapture Fictions and the Changing Evangelical Condition,” *Literature and Theology* 18 no 1 (March 2004), 78.

²⁷⁰ Barry Brummett, “Using Apocalyptic Discourse to Exploit Audience Commitments Through Transfer,” *The Southern Communication Journal* 54 (Fall, 1988), 59.

involvement. I also investigated the cultural manifestations of premillennial belief, testing the symbolic value of the *Left Behind: The Kids* series and the *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* video game for capturing the essence of premillennial dispensationalist for a popular audience. Consumer culture in America is powerful enough to overcome the boundaries that previously existed between fundamentalists and secularists. The use conservative Christians then make of that consumer culture promise to saturate secular America with Rapture messages, making narrative believers of millions more, potentially.

Throughout this thesis, I have searched for more than academic answers. I have tried to use a study of Rapture narratives to make sense of my continuing relationship with premillennial dispensationalism, its apocalyptic schema, authority figures, literature, people and cultural manifestations. While I understand the structure of belief and the ways in which my subconscious beliefs have been rhetorically constructed, I still admit that rhetorical circle is a powerful influence on my life. I sometimes worry that I am one of the “scoffers” and “false prophets,” “ever learning, but never coming to knowledge of the Truth.” The totality of dispensational premillennial belief, constituting a self-sustaining epistemological position rhetorically reinforced through every outlet of the culture threatens to retain some measure of power over me for many years to come.

Such rhetoric also works powerfully on Rapture believers, though they willingly create, propagate and seek out rhetoric that supports their end-times belief. While every Rapture-believer I know refuses to set a day or time for the Lord’s return, they expect that event soon and are honor-bound to tell as many people the good news before it is

too late. Shy believers openly welcome cultural manifestations to ease their witnessing efforts and make their message palatable to secular audiences they hope to convert. With conversion comes peace, a knowledge that no matter how bad the world gets (and it will continue to get worse), no matter what evil may befall (and evil attacks saints more often than sinners), no matter what cultural and political persecution that may come, good wins out. Knowledge, revealed from God, sustained through constant Scriptural study, purified in the crucible of prophetic authority and passed on to others through a retelling of the salvation narrative is constitutive, restorative and most of all reactive to the changing social landscape.

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