

Apocalypse Now

by Aaron D. Wolf

“If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.”

—Mark 3:25



Stephen Ward Anderson

American evangelicals, according to former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “are the Israelis’ best friend in the whole world.” In return, they dubbed him “the Ronald Reagan of Israel.” That so many are still surprised by those statements indicates that, by and large, those happy to be called evangelicals or even fundamentalists have been largely ignored by most of the dominant American mass culture, though a few outside the fold who have stopped ignoring this “sleeping giant” have reaped tremendous rewards: election victories, foreign-policy directives, and undying political loyalty.

Republicans, driven by such key evangelical leaders as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, have, at least since the Reagan Revolution, made use of the “Christian Right” during election season, parroting such shibboleths as “pro-life” and “pro-family” to the soul-stirring delight of the world-weary faithful; those who are the most interested in being “best friends” with the evangelicals, however, are the Israeli political right, whose political objectives are the unlimited expansion of Israeli territories and the subjugation (if not deportation or even elimination) of the Palestinians. Neoconservatives in Washington and New York City, together with those evangelicals who have entered the realm of politics (from Robertson to James Dobson to Lindsey Graham) with a view to advancing the Christian Right’s agenda on a national level, demand that every evangelical’s chad be punched “Republican: Straight Ticket” for two reasons: The GOP is pro-life; the GOP is pro-Israel. (For faithful evangelicals, the argument that Israel, not the United States, is threatened by Saddam’s alleged “weapons of mass destruction” only makes the case for total war against Iraq stronger.)

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That Paul Wolfowitz or Bibi Netanyahu may merely be using the evangelicals’ faithful support to advance an agenda incompatible with the American interest or the principles of justice does not occur to faithful believers who love “Zion.” They are driven by a theology that is as ingenious as it is unbiblical. When they watch Bibi as he extends the hand of friendship, they look beyond him to the New Jerusalem, the coming Millennium. When the liberal media mocks their “rigid biblical literalism,” they cling to their Bibles: “All Israel shall be saved”; “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings”; “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved”; “as much as ye have done it unto the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” Every time they approach the voter’s booth, they know that they have but one choice: Support the candidate who supports God’s chosen people, or face divine judgment (“I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee”).

Christians familiar with the historic interpretations of the biblical prophecies concerning “Israel” (the Church) and the latter days may find it easy to dismiss the biblical claims of evangelical Zionists. The blame, however, for this eschatological aberration must be laid at the feet of the Main Lines and their clergy and scholars for failing, at a crucial moment in American Church history, to articulate the genuine, historic, Christian doctrine of Christ so beautifully and succinctly rendered in the Nicene Creed: “He shall come again in glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end”; and, again, “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

The fact that evangelical Christians can countenance a belief that the Judge of the Quick and the Dead could return to

the earth for a thousand-year reign only *after which* “all things will be put under his feet” is more a reflection of a deficient Christology and soteriology than a misguided interpretation of one or two proof-texts. Christians who understand that Christ’s matchless glory is expressed chiefly in that He “took on the form of a servant” and “humbled himself unto death, even the death of the cross” will never be able to accept the notion that He will one day rule from His Jerusalem headquarters as a mere dictator over a world in which all is not completely subject to Him. Nor is it fathomable that the Rider of the White Horse, Whose Name is Faithful and True, could appear in the clouds “with all the holy angels” and “ten-thousand of his saints,” without the consummation of all human history occurring immediately. Yet these positions (and many other theological *non sequiturs*) are part of the end-times dogma to which the evangelical world is so completely devoted—dispensational premillennialism.

Dispensationalists (all of them are “premillennial”) think themselves conservatives and biblical literalists, but the view they hold is less than 200 years old, and the hermeneutic they employ is, at best, selectively literal. (As they read the Bible, *Israel* always means “the Jews,” yet the seven-headed dragon of the Apocalypse has neither scales nor a tail but is made up of the nations of the “revived Roman Empire,” of late identified as the European Union.) Contrary to the dispensationalists’ “literalism,” the *sensus literalis*, which Martin Luther championed as the first principle of biblical hermeneutics, demands that the “letter” of Scripture be interpreted within the context of its genre: poetry as poetry, history as history, and apocalyptic literature as apocalyptic literature. Thus, those who would interpret the last book of the Bible have, as their guide, both the prophetic literature of the Old Testament (chiefly concerning Christ’s First Advent) and its fulfillment in the Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament.

The success of dispensationalism in America is proof that Jesus was right when He warned that kicking out a demon is dangerous if the Holy Ghost does not take his place: If the house remains vacant, the demon will return and bring seven of his friends with him. In the case of American evangelicalism, the demon was old-fashioned millenarianism (“postmillennialism”), the notion that God was using America to make the world better and better, thus inaugurating a secular “Kingdom of God” on the earth. This idea was first advanced in the New World by the Puritans, many of whom believed Boston to be the New Jerusalem. As the fires of the First and Second Great Awakenings raged in New England, many of the denominational barriers (Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Baptist) melted away and Yale’s New Divinity School—emphasizing revival and “heart religion” over any sort of confessional orthodoxy—took center stage. Despite their aversion to dogma, however, these believers retained the eschatology of the Puritans: The great “revivals,” they reasoned, were proof that the Holy Ghost was at work in America, bringing about the Millennium—the reign of Christianity over all the earth. Being a Presbyterian was not as important as being an *evangelical* (though many remained within their formal churches); and, chances are, you were “converted” quite apart from a church, in an open field where Charles Finney and his contemporary (early-19th-century) Christian musicians were holding their traveling meeting.

What, in the absence of parish life and doctrinal catechesis, would be the chief outward expression of this apocalyptic “heart

religion”? As the fires of revival spread from New England to the Upper Midwest in the urban centers built by Yankees, campaigns against alcohol and for female suffrage (too many men were drunks, and teetotaling women hoped to rock the vote) combined with abolitionism to produce a visible evangelical piety.

When Dixie seceded from the “sacred” Union, evangelicals knew what was at stake: The departure of the South would tear apart the Kingdom of God and uninaugurate the Millennium. While power-hungry Republicans pulled the strings in Washington, evangelicals rallied to the Union cause and beat down the traditionalist Southerners, who were less enamored of the world-vision of the New Age. Hymn writer Philip Bliss, inspired by General Sherman’s determined admonition to General Corse to “hold the fort” at Allatoona Pass, penned the following evangelical standard, which conflated the Union’s mission with Christ’s *parousia*: “Hold the fort, for I am coming / Jesus signals still. / Wave the answer back to Heaven, / ‘By thy grace we will.’”

By 1865, however, it seemed to many that the Millennium had been lost. The sheer carnage of over half a million dead gave second thoughts to those eager to believe that America was the harbinger of the Kingdom. As Yankee chaplain Dwight Lyman Moody would confess, many men had simply lost their heart religion on the battlefield. In addition, the Main Lines (having made themselves easy targets) were being penetrated by an imported Schleirmachian liberalism, which argued that heart religion need not have an historic resurrected Christ at its foundation. Perplexed, D.L. Moody took up the mantle of Finney, hired Ira Sankey to be his soul-stirring musician, and hit the sawdust trail. When he did, however, the notion of America-as-God’s-Kingdom was left behind.

American Christianity was soon divided into two camps: the liberals and the fundamentalists. The liberals retained the idea of American exceptionalism—recast as manifest destiny and the Social Gospel—but jettisoned everything fundamentally Christian. The evangelicals, conversely, retained the “fundamentals” but jettisoned the millenarianism of their forebears in favor of an eschatological vision that expected things to get worse and worse, not progressively better. Dispensationalism, first brought ashore by John Nelson Darby (of the Irish dissenting group known as the Plymouth Brethren) during the 1860’s, had enjoyed a small following among Adventists and maverick evangelicals before the Civil War. When the tide turned, however, dispensationalism became very attractive, and evangelical eschatology was reconstructed to reflect the “growing apostasy” in worldwide Christianity.

Unaware that they had imbibed the same sort of Baconian rationalism and historicism that their liberal opponents had, the dispensationalists were convinced that a commonsense reading of the Bible would reveal that God had divided all of human history into seven dispensations. In each of these, God would test mankind, man (save for a remnant of true believers) would fail, and a great disaster would follow. The sixth dispensation (“Law”) had ended with the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, after which Jesus began the dispensation of “Grace” (the seventh), also called the Church Age. During the Church Age (sprawling across the last two millennia), men would be saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and, at the end of this age, these Christians would be caught up into Heaven in a “secret rapture” and escape the disastrous “Tribulation” to follow. And, contrary to the Social Gospel of the liberals, no amount of so-

cial engineering would change the degenerative course of history: "When they say peace and safety, then cometh sudden destruction."

The "Great Reversal," as it came to be known, meant that evangelicals increasingly withdrew from the sinking ship of mainstream American culture. It was pointless to hope for any lasting cultural renewal at the end of the Church Age. In fact, the signs of the times pointed to widespread degeneracy: Darwinism, liberal theology in the old universities, the failure of Prohibition, effeminacy (prohibitionist preacher Billy Sunday, the original Promise Keeper, championed "manliness" and decried wire-rimmed glasses), and illegitimacy. During the early 20th century, evangelicals began to hole up in their own denominations and schools and hold mass meetings to promote "the fundamentals" and dispensationalism. No one could attend such a spectacle as the International Prophecy Conference and walk away unconvinced that all who take the Bible seriously must agree with dispensationalism.

If not to American culture, where, then, would evangelical believers look to find visible signs that the end draweth nigh? The answer, first conceived by Darby in the absence of all earthly hope, was Israel and the Jews. God, having chosen the Jews to be His own—an ethnic group, not the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who could be raised up, if necessary, "out of stones"—would not abandon His people, despite their error. Thus, the dispensationalists taught that the Age of Law was not really completed during the first century A.D. but merely postponed. After the Church Age, circumscribed by the "great parentheses" of Providence, the Jews were to return to center stage in the divine drama and accept the Christ Whom they had rejected. With the Christians raptured and the Holy Ghost no longer restraining the forces of evil ("he who now letteth will let until he be taken out of the way"), a political leader (the Antichrist) would arise who would, over the course of seven years (the Tribulation) first broker a peace with the Jews, then turn on them and pursue them to destroy them, culminating in the Battle of Armageddon. Then, just as all hope for Israel seems lost, the Jews will "look up, for their redemption draweth nigh," as Jesus and the raptured believers return to destroy all their enemies. Here endeth the Tribulation and beginneth the dispensationalists' Millennium, during which Jesus shall reign over all the earth from Jerusalem and the raptured believers (in glorified, supernatural bodies) will share in His dominion, each according to his reward. This thousand-year reign will then close with (another) judgment, at which the Devil and all unbelievers will be consigned to Hell.

At the time when Darby, Rueben A. Torrey, C.I. Scofield (of the dispensationalist "Scofield Reference Bible"), and W.E. Blackstone were winning mass converts to dispensationalism, there was no nation of Israel. Hence, Blackstone, a resident of Oak Park, Illinois, and a friend of D.L. Moody, began holding "Christian Zionist" conferences in Chicago during the 1890's. His book, *Jesus Is Coming*, was a bestseller, and, in 1891, Blackstone drafted a petition demanding the creation of an Israeli state in Palestine, which was subsequently signed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court; the speaker of the House, the mayors of Chicago, New York, and Boston; and such prominent figures as Cyrus McCormick, John D. Rockefeller, and J.P. Morgan. Blackstone, in 1918, was hailed "the father of Zionism," and, in 1956, the Israeli government named a forest after him.

After the Balfour Declaration (1917) and the demise of Ottoman rule in Palestine, the dispensationalists were all the more convinced that they had been right all along. Even the Nazi murder of so many Jews during the latter part of World War II was, ironically, seen by the dispensationalists as the work of God, preparing the way for the worldwide acceptance of an Israeli state in Palestine. Fundamentalist preacher Harry Rimmer said that, "by driving the preserved people back into the preserved land, Hitler, who does not believe the Bible . . . is helping to fulfill [it]."

In 1948, all doubt among evangelicals was eliminated, as Israel had, once again, entered her historic territory. Then, Jesus' words in Mark 13 rang true in the minds of the evangelical faithful:

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When her branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near: So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it is nigh, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done.

In the midst of a hostile culture in which Bible-believers were mocked and marginalized, one thing was certain: The fig tree (Israel) had budded; therefore, the rapture was near. Evangelist Louis Talbot called the establishment of Israel "the greatest event, from a prophetic standpoint, that has taken place within the last one hundred years, perhaps even since 70 A.D. [sic], when Jerusalem was destroyed." Since 1948, dispensationalist leaders have praised every subsequent military action of the Israelis, no matter what it was or how it was conducted. After the Six-Day War of 1967, *Christianity Today* proclaimed that current events give "a student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible."

The single-greatest-selling book of the 1970's was dispensationalist Hal Lindsey's end-times novel *The Late Great Planet Earth*, in which the European Common Market was first fingered as the realm of the coming Antichrist. (The threat of Russia (Gog) and Moscow (Magog) was also factored in, and "fire and brimstone" was code for nuclear detonation.) Evangelical filmmakers at Mark IV Pictures began to produce end-times movies for evangelicals about the rapture, the Jews, and the Antichrist, with such titles as *A Thief in the Night*, *A Distant Thunder*, and *Image of the Beast*. These films were circulated among Christian youth groups and prophecy conferences, urging viewers to turn to Christ or miss the rapture. (Larry Norman, a pioneer of the genre that came to be known as "contemporary Christian music," penned the theme song for *Thief*: "I Wish We'd All Been Ready.")

Beginning with the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, Washington had supported Israel with aid and weapons, in an effort to counter the Soviets' influence on the Arab states of the Middle East, which, it was argued, could lead to the spread of communism throughout the region and the cutting off of the oil supply from Arab states. Washington's support for Israel had its political side as well, since it pleased Jewish voters in America. And, as more and more evangelicals began to be drawn into the fringes of the dominant American culture during the 50's and 60's, politicians took note of another voting constituency: Christian Zionists. Richard Nixon, under the influence of Henry Kissinger, agreed to support Israel for geopolitical reasons, though it only meant that the Israelis "would be even more im-

possible to deal with than before.” At the same time, he concurred, in the presence of dispensationalist evangelist Billy Graham, that, while neither of them particularly liked Jews, support for Israel was essential. He nodded along while Graham lamented (in the recently disclosed 1972 Oval Office meeting) that “all—I mean, not all the Jews, but a lot of the Jews are great friends of mine, they swarm around me and are friendly to me because they know that I’m friendly with Israel. But they don’t know how I really feel about what they are doing to this country.”

A growing number of Republicans began to see the need for a presidential candidate who could translate the evangelicals’ earnest theological commitment to Israel into an electoral victory. Ronald Reagan had said in 1971 that, “In the 38th chapter of Ezekiel, it says that the land of Israel will come under attack by the armies of the ungodly nations, and it says that Libya will be among them. Do you understand the significance of that? Libya has now gone communist, and that’s a sign that the day of Armageddon isn’t far off.” Bolstered by popular dispensationalist televangelists—Falwell, Robertson, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, all of whom had led pilgrimages to Israel—Reagan was able to bring the evangelicals into the Republican Party for good while securing his victories in 1980 and 1984. In the process, American evangelicals were able to add the old Puritan commitment to American exceptionalism to their apocalyptic theology. The United States, upholding her godly heritage, would be the protector of God’s chosen people, while the Soviets and the nations of Europe conspired against them, bringing the world to the brink of the rapture.

Since then, dispensationalist fervor has only increased. In 1993, popular evangelical author Timothy LaHaye, along with Christian fiction writer Jerry B. Jenkins, published a new rap-

ture novel, *Left Behind*, which topped the *New York Times*’ best-seller list. Since then, there have been nine more novels, with the 11th, *Armageddon*, scheduled to be released on April 8. Over 42 million of these books have been sold; two film versions, starring evangelical Hollywood actors, have been made, and a third is currently in production.

Evangelicals are now fully enmeshed in Republican politics, and—no matter how many times the GOP lets them down when it comes to abortion, homosexual rights, or cloning—they will always return to the party that most visibly and vocally supports Israel. In October 2002, Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition held its Christian Solidarity Rally For Israel in front of the White House, and, in addition to the mayor of Jerusalem, many Republican politicians came to deliver five-minute speeches. The schedule included numerous senators and congressmen: Dick Armey, J.C. Watts, Strom Thurmond, Jesse Helms, Tom DeLay, James Inhofe, Lindsey Graham, Ernest Istook, Roy Blunt, Bob Goodlatte, Sam Brownback, Orrin Hatch, Robert Aderholt, Dave Weldon, Henry Brown, and Walter Jones.

Not all Republican politicians are cynical manipulators of the evangelicals’ love for Israel. Lindsey Graham, himself an ardent dispensationalist, declared at the October 2002 rally, “There are people in the world today who want to destroy Israel. Those people will be my enemy forever. Those people who want to bring about peace—come join us.” Graham, along with his dispensational brethren, knows that Israel is part of God’s plan and is, therefore, indestructible, a delusion that is highly dangerous, considering Israel’s geopolitical situation. Thus, he called on the United States to “send a signal that’s undeniable, unquestionable to all the forces of evil that you will not destroy the state of Israel. If that is your goal, you will lose.”

Dispensationalist House Majority Leader Tom Delay shares Graham’s belief: “I’ve been to Masada. I’ve toured Judea and Samaria. I’ve walked the streets of Jerusalem, and I’ve stood on the Golan Heights. . . . And you know what? I didn’t see any occupied territory. . . . What I saw was Israel!” In other words, since God has given the land of Israel to the Jews, there can be no Palestinian state. The Palestinians simply do not have any claim to the land on which they have lived for 2,000 years. And anyone who disagrees will suffer the wrath of God.

Divided loyalties such as these are nothing but a recipe for disaster in the realm of foreign policy. “Best friends” Benjamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon do not have the American interest at heart: Instead, they (rightly) have their own. Then again, the Republicans, by and large, do not have the dispensationalists’ best interests at heart, either. They have their own geopolitical goals, which, thanks to the overwhelming influence of the neo-conservatives, happen to coincide on the surface with the evangelicals’. These sincere Christians will never be awakened from this eschatological nightmare by politics. They must be led back to the path of orthodoxy by Christians immersed in the traditions of the Church, which teach that the next event on “God’s calendar” is the Judgment, for which we all must be prepared. On this, the Fathers, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, and Calvin agreed. But are there enough Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Catholics left who are sufficiently familiar with this rich heritage to explain it, lovingly and patiently, to their brethren? Or, in Jesus’ words, “When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on the earth?”

44th Street (circa 1983)

by Lawrence Dugan

Just two blocks from trash-can parties
Are the Algonquin and Sardi’s,
And so the thread-bare elbow rubs
Those from the Harvard and Yale clubs,
And whether you look up or down
Depends upon your class of frown . . .
You ignore neon lights that flash
Near the young moron selling hash,
Who takes your measure and grins,
So sure he knows the hand that spins
The world around each day; each breath
Pulls his spirit closer to death.
He bottles up his soul at night,
And counts silver by its dying light.