



*Apocalyptic Jesus
in Cold War Literature:
Hal Lindsey and Jerry Falwell's Construction*

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The 1970s and 80s was a transitional time in American culture. The Cold War held strong in both decades, with the détente relieving some apocalyptic anxieties in the seventies, while it picked up again in the eighties with Reagan's presidency. Over the course of the two decades, thousands of active protesters called for nuclear disarmament. The turn of the decade in 1970 saw a continuation of countercultural movements among the

nation's youth, while Civil Rights movements forged on in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968. In 1973, Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* granted women the right to an abortion based on the constitutional right to privacy. Concurrently, second-wave feminists published and spoke out on issues of women's freedom to choose and freedom from patriarchy. The Stonewall riots broke out in 1969, fueling an already-present gay rights movement. During the same time, but in another part of the world, the 1967 Six-Day War afforded Israel land rights to the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights. This seemingly unrelated set of events gives insight into the motivational factors of prophesy belief, resurging in the 1970s, and only increasing in the 1980s and beyond.

Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970)¹ marks a turning-point in the genre of prophesy lit. His pop-culture version of dispensationalism reflects not only the widespread anxieties and expectations of the time,

but also spurred a series of literary and theatrical works that would influence popular conceptions of the end-times. In a similar genre, but without nearly the same kind of pop-culture appeal, is Jerry Falwell's *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ* (1983).² Falwell's piece illustrates well the continuing cold-war anxieties and fears of counterculture during the Reagan era, while it gives insight into the conservative Christian political movements that would only gain clout in the following years. Both Falwell and Lindsey fed from the collective anxieties of the times to draw people to Jesus. Their version of Jesus assuages fears revolving around the nuclear bomb and dramatic social and political change, while he punishes those unbelievers and the wicked, thus providing a framework for action in a time of moral relativism. This paper examines the version of Jesus that appears in this dispensationalist literature during the 1970s and 80s, while considering how social and political factors helped form this version. At its creation in the nineteenth century, dispensationalism

spread as a compelling end-times story that drew people to Jesus; this theology worked in an equally powerful way in the 1970s and 80s, as it offered an idea of Jesus as the only answer to the political unrest and social change of the time.

Finding a Cold War Jesus

This project draws from scholarly examinations of dispensationalism in the US,³ while it seeks to flesh out the version of Jesus that is created in late-twentieth-century apocalypticism. Even a cursory glance at academic publications on dispensationalism, the rapture, Armageddon, or end-times in general, reveals that Jesus is just not given much attention. Ironically, while these aforementioned topics deal explicitly with the second coming of Christ, he plays an almost silent role, at least according to the attention that many scholars pay him. Indeed, at the beginning of this project, a few efforts at finding significant listings of Jesus in chapter titles or even index headings proved futile,

while the Antichrist and Satan both enjoyed a much more generous treatment. Of course, the Antichrist and Satan emerge graphically into the dispensationalist story, while Jesus is vaguer, yet still powerful. Much of the current scholarship on dispensationalism and other prophetic belief in the US gives the Antichrist such primacy because this figure fits so compellingly into international politics, as is discussed in the following sections. But while this sort of focus causes Jesus to be relatively shortchanged in the scholarly publications, the primary sources often place Jesus prominently in their imaginings of the end-times. Both Hal Lindsey and Jerry Falwell use the figure of Jesus as the foundation for their expositions on the end-times. They accomplish this through no small amount of intellectual labor to show exactly how Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament, while his prophetic words as recorded in the Gospels are enacted in exactitude today. All of this points toward the future, while ancient prophecy collides with current world events in the culmination

of the current dispensation and the beginning of the next. While Jesus doesn't exactly appear graphically in much of the apocalyptic lit of the seventies and eighties, an examination of Lindsey and Falwell's work reveals a theology with Jesus at the crux of dispensationalism's evangelizing project.

First, though, this next section offers a brief overview of the roots of dispensationalism that will elucidate the social utility of this kind of thinking. Rather than provide an in-depth discussion on the intricate theological constructions of dispensationalism, this section will look at the historical conditions of its roots and subsequent implementation. Certain parallels emerge when observing the socio-political conditions at the time of the original biblical prophecy writers, those during the formation of dispensationalism in the nineteenth century, and those in its popular resurgence in the 1970s and eighties. In all three eras, end-times prophecy challenged social and political conditions that threatened believers; it offered judgment and grave

consequences to those who were deemed evil, despotic, and immoral. The messiah emerges here as a judge and an enforcer of morality, while he protects those who are 'true believers.'

Following this historical examination is a discussion of the social and political factors of the 1970s and 80s that helped to form an apocalyptic, cold war version of Jesus. Not coincidentally, the dispensational version of the end-times gained popularity just as conservative Christian groups were gaining considerable political clout in the US. Both textual manifestations and concerted political efforts formed in reaction to social conditions at the time, including countercultural trends, gay and women's rights movements, political instability occurring on an international stage, and Vietnam War and nuclear arms protest. This apocalyptic messiah ran in stark contrast to the social justice Jesus that was held up by Civil Rights activists and the "hippie Jesus" that was displayed popularly in films such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Godspell* (1973). However,

significantly, Hal Lindsey employed the youth language of the day in order to make his message palatable to the 1970s counterculture. Likewise, influential dispensational preachers like Chuck Smith actively sought out “the hippies” in Orange County, California, catering his mission to the language and lifestyle of these uninitiated.⁴ Obviously, there is not just one version of a dispensationalist Jesus in the late-twentieth century.

For this reason, this project attempts to narrow down one version of a conservative 1970s and 80s Jesus, with this last section tying in historical considerations with a discussion of Lindsey’s version in *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and Falwell’s construction in *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*. While the two authors write in distinct decades, both react to similar social and political conditions, placing a very similar messiah at the center of this end-times story. Falwell and Lindsey’s version reveals the Jesus that would become the subtle but powerful driving force for conservative Christians in the Reagan era and into

the twenty-first century. This version is relevant for its implications for international and domestic politics. Of course, their end-times story draws explicitly from the nineteenth-century formulations, as will be discussed next.

Formations of Dispensationalism

When Jesus came the first time it was not to judge the world, but to save it. He came as the Lamb of God who gave His life to take away the sin of the world. The one thing that God has established for man to do is to believe in His Son as savior. When Jesus returns the second time it will be as a lion to judge those who rejected the free gift of salvation from sin. Man will have completely demonstrated his worthiness of judgment.⁵

These are Hal Lindsey’s striking words at the end of *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Without always directly claiming it, Lindsey worked from the constructions of dispensationalism, which were formed almost a century and a half before he wrote his best-selling book. While Lindsey’s version of Jesus was formed by

social and political factors of his time, it was also directly informed by the dispensationalist story. Premillennial dispensationalism finds its roots in the intellectual labor of the Plymouth Brethren in nineteenth-century Ireland. Their most influential member, John Nelson Darby, is largely responsible for the creation and dissemination of the unique story of dispensationalism throughout Britain and the United States.⁶ Darby was originally an ordained member of the Anglican Church of Ireland, but left because of objections to its hierocratic structure and connections to the British crown.⁷ Like the original prophesy writers, Darby's work was in reaction to what he saw as oppressive ruling structures. Likewise, the resurgence of prophesy literature in the latter-half of the twentieth century was largely in reaction to what was seen as the despotic powers of communism. In these eras, the messiah that emerged cared for and protected those who truly believed, while he returned with vengeance and punished unbelievers.

The basic concept that was developed by Darby and

the Plymouth Brethren was that God had divided time into seven eras or dispensations, and that the present one would culminate in the second coming of Jesus at the end of seven years of Tribulation. Each dispensation was characterized by a different means to salvation. While the past and future dispensations are revealed through prophesy in the Bible, the present epoch—the Church Age—is not explicitly described.⁸ Thus, there was the need to cobble together the words of Jesus in the Gospels and prophesy in the Old Testament in order to create a comprehensive vision of what will occur at the end of the present age.

Dispensationalism includes the notion of a pre-tribulation rapture, what Timothy Weber identifies as its “most distinctive doctrine.”⁹ It is distinct from other premillennialist doctrine, which purported that Christ's second coming and the rapture would occur at the end of the tribulation. In a way, the pre-tribulation rapture is an especially powerful evangelization tool, as it emphasizes the need to accept Jesus *now* rather

than risk going through the seven years of hell on earth during the tribulation. Those who have not accepted Jesus as personal lord and savior would have to not only suffer the reign of the Antichrist during the Tribulation, but would have to endure the loss of loved ones who had gone to Christ. The idea of the secret or sudden rapture, as popularized by Darby, comes from Jesus' admonition in Matthew 24:40-41 to remain vigilant and watchful for the end, for "one will be taken and one will be left."¹⁰ Darby and those who followed him extracted this passage to illustrate the sheer suddenness and seeming arbitrariness of the rapture, while emphasizing that those who truly believe will be spared all of the suffering of the Tribulation. Jerry Falwell, for example, used this idea to express the urgent call to Christ, and to assure believers that they would not experience "even a minute of suffering."¹¹ The image of the privileged position of the raptured believer, protected by a powerful Christ, worked as a potent evangelizing tool.

In fact, according to the dispensationalist story, the

raptured saints have the special privilege of joining Jesus in defeating the Antichrist and his legions, as they will appear in the clouds with him at the end of the Tribulation.¹² They will not only observe the Antichrist's defeat, but also they will witness Jesus' judgment of those who had not previously been raptured.¹³ The seven years of hell will end with this Battle of Armageddon between the good forces lead by Christ and the Antichrist and his legion. Ultimately, the forces of evil will be cast into a fiery lake, while Satan will be bound and cast into a bottomless pit, only to arise again at the end of Jesus' thousand-year reign.¹⁴ Naturally, Jesus will again defeat Satan, and then the last judgment of all the living and the dead will commence, until the seventh dispensation (Millennium) will end. After the judgments, the good and the evil will be relegated to their proper place, and, as Weber puts it, "time shall be no more."¹⁵

Certainly, this end-times story is not unique to dispensationalism. Historian Paul Boyer chronicles the appearances of end-times material in the Old

Testament and the Gospels. He discusses three biblical apocalypses that are mostly widely invoked in late-twentieth century US culture: Ezekiel and Daniel offer prophesy that would figure prominently into Cold War apocalypticism in America, while the Revelation to John explicitly enters Jesus into the apocalyptic story, ending with the plaint, "Come, Lord Jesus!"¹⁶ Boyer points out the difficult socio-political contexts that the authors of all three texts had to endure: Ezekiel and Daniel both wrote during times when Jews weathered endless persecution at the hands of tyrannical rulers who sought to eradicate Judaism, while John received his revelation when the early Christians suffered at the hands of Roman despots. All three books are a reaction to social and political upheaval and are also a call for redemption from this suffering. These texts would be crucial to late-twentieth-century imaginings of the apocalypse, when, for many believers, fears about potential worldwide eradication through the nuclear bomb could be quelled by the idea of Christ's return,

and international politics would become intelligible through Old and New Testament prophecies.

Boyer names Ezekiel "the first cold warrior,"¹⁷ citing this Old Testament book as central to current political manifestations of end-times theology. Indeed, sections of Ezekiel, most notably 38:1-6, describe the "northern parts" from whence "a great company and a mighty army" will come. The lands of Gog and Magog that the author describes would figure prominently in twentieth-century interpretations of biblical prophesy in terms of world events. During the Cold War era, the Soviet Union was frequently interpreted as 'the land from the north,' representing Ezekiel's Magog, with Gog as any nation or people that aligns with Magog. Gog was frequently interpreted as Iran, or any conglomeration of "Pan-Arab forces."¹⁸ Lindsey, following several biblical scholars, interpreted Gog as the central leader or driving force of Magog.¹⁹ Gog and Magog would attack Israel from the north, but Israel would be protected by God. This type of thinking

emerged explicitly in the foreign policy opinions of President Reagan and his cabinet. In fact, years before his presidency in 1971, Reagan is quoted as invoking Ezekiel at a political event in Sacramento: "...It can't be long now. Ezekiel says that fire and brimstone will be rained upon the enemies of God's people. That must mean that they'll be destroyed by nuclear weapons."²⁰ Likewise, dispensationalist authors and preachers like Lindsey and Falwell, not to mention Pat Robertson and Jack Van Impe, believed that Russia would play a special role in the beginning of the end-times as a fulfillment of ancient biblical prophesy. This only fed into the already-present anti-communist sentiment that aligned Christian and "secular" conservatives of the 1960s on.²¹

Beyond Old Testament descriptions, New Testament books, including select Gospels, the Revelation to John, as well as parts of Thessalonians and Corinthians, brought Jesus explicitly into the end-times vision. Jesus' eschatological discussions with the disciples as recorded in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, and Luke 21, describe the

destruction of the Temple, "wars and rumors of wars,"²² natural disasters, punishment to unbelievers, extreme sinfulness, false messiahs, and terrible suffering, all of which constitute the time of great Tribulation. This will end suddenly with the appearance of the "Son of Man" in the clouds,²³ which harkens back to Daniel's prophetic visions.²⁴ All three Gospels then mention the parable of the fig tree wherein Jesus describes the tender branch of the fig tree signifying that summer is near.²⁵ The disciples are then instructed that when they see these aforementioned signs, including the destruction of the Temple and the great Tribulation, they should know that the end is near.

This metaphor has been central for dispensationalists in their imaginings of the role of Israel in the end-times. According to this thinking, Israel is the fig tree, and it has "put forth leaves" when the Jews have returned to the holy land. This parallel seemed to "bear fruit" with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. This was a major windfall for dispensationalists, as it suggested

the imminence of the end. Likewise, the Six-Day War in 1967, which secured certain crucial land rights for Israel, led many dispensationalists to believe that the time was near. Significantly, Hal Lindsey began his series of lectures on the end-times at UCLA just one year later. Here he articulates this line of thinking about Israel: “When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on May 14, 1948, the ‘fig tree’ put forth its first leaves.”²⁶

Well before Lindsey, John Darby had interpreted the role of Israel according to the Olivet Discourse (the parable of the fig tree in the three synoptic Gospels) and Old Testament predictions. The Jews would return to the holy land, then during the Tribulation they would be attacked from the “kingdoms of the north,” while the Antichrist would provide a counter-attack.²⁷ God would protect the Jewish state, but his protection of these “chosen people” was not indefinite. George Marsden explains that dispensationalists

acknowledged the original Abrahamic Covenant,²⁸ wherein God promised to make Abraham the father of this nation, “through which the rest of the world will be blessed.”²⁹ In Darby’s understanding, the Jews were fortunate in this story because the Abrahamic Covenant still stood, allowing these people to remain protected by God’s graces. This “protection,” however, was not without an expiration date. It was Darby’s interpretation that God had two distinct plans for the people of the earth (Israel) and the blessed people (the soon-to-be raptured church).³⁰ Marsden asserts that it was essential to dispensationalist understanding that God made this distinction between his original chosen people and those who would surely be protected as they had accepted Christ.³¹ After enduring the hardship of the Tribulation, the Jews would have to accept Jesus, or they would be dealt the same fate as other unbelievers. At its nineteenth century inception and in the twentieth century manifestations, dispensationalist sentiment about Jews was ambivalent at best. Jews

were to be protected, and Israel was to be supported, but the ultimate fate of God's original chosen hinged upon their acceptance of Jesus.³² Dispensationalists rested assured of their protection through Jesus' rapture of the church.

This idea of Christians' special role in the eyes of God and in terms of the second coming of Jesus fit well into historic conceptions of America as God's chosen nation. Before Darby's formulations, but in a similar prophetic vein, Cotton Mather helped to promulgate a feeling of "apocalyptic expectation" in America. He believed that America would play a special role, and that Jesus' reign on earth would bring "economic justice, social harmony, and the downfall of dishonest merchants and politicians."³³ Indeed, New England would be the "capital" of the millennial kingdom of Christ.³⁴ Of course, Darby rejected any idea of Israel being anywhere but the original holy land. However, there seems to be some alignment between the dispensationalist conception of Christians as God's favored people and

similar sentiments about America as the chosen land. Jerry Falwell makes this connection explicitly without denying the original holy land as Israel. He suggests that the US is chosen and favored by God because of its support of Israel and Americans' treatment of "the Jew."³⁵ He also asserted that the US has the ability and clout to evangelize to the world, thus ensuring its special role in building the raptured church.

Darby brought dispensationalism to the United States in 1859 after having spread the message on horseback throughout Britain. Two of Darby's prominent followers in the US were William Blackstone and James Brookes. Blackstone wrote the very popular *Jesus Is Coming* (1878), which was subsequently reissued in the early twentieth century. Brookes wrote the influential *Maranatha: or, The Lord Cometh* (1870), and helped to organize a number of prophesy conferences in the late nineteenth century.³⁶ Several notable revivalists and evangelicals were also attracted to dispensationalism, including Dwight Moody, for

whom Chicago's Moody Bible institute, which still promotes dispensationalist thought, was named. Cyrus Scofield (1843-1921) was profoundly influenced by Darby. He included dispensationalist ideas in his *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), which would become a main source for this theology world-wide until the present day. Interestingly, the *Reference Bible* was reprinted the year of the Six-Day War in 1967, and it would sell upwards of ten million copies by 1990.³⁷ Also, Lewis Sperry Chafer, inspired by this theology, published widely on dispensationalism, and went on to form the Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924, which remains a major dispensationalist stronghold. Significantly, Hal Lindsey attended Dallas in the years before he assembled the lectures that would become *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

The publication of Scofield's *Reference Bible* coincided with the solidification of "fundamentalism" as a self-appellation for conservative Christians in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It was from

1910-1915 that R.A. Torrey edited a series of booklets defining correct adherence and interpretation of the Bible, called *The Fundamentals*. The self-appellation "fundamentalist" originated with Northern Baptist editor Curtis Lee Laws, who named his group of biblical literalists during an intra-denominational skirmish.³⁸ In the aforementioned examples, this type of self-identification was necessary to demark those "true" believers who affirmed the virgin birth, the actuality of Jesus' miracles, his death and resurrection, and his imminent second coming. Nancy Ammerman suggests that an easy distinction between fundamentalists and evangelicals at the time was the former's adherence to premillennial dispensationalism as the true story about the Second Coming of Christ. She explains that they draw these beliefs from the footnotes in Scofield's *Bible*, which provides "a common source of knowledge for Fundamentalists around the country."³⁹ While evangelicals and even liberal Christians would affirm that there would be a

“second coming,” the imminent return of Christ was even more prominent in fundamentalist worldview.⁴⁰ Of course, one cannot equate fundamentalism with dispensationalism, as Amy Frykholm points out.⁴¹ Many prominent fundamentalists, including those at Princeton Theological Seminary, rejected dispensational notions.⁴² However, many non-academic fundamentalists at the time and into the twentieth century embraced this particular story of the second coming of Jesus, as it provided a sharp contrast to “liberal” interpretations of the bible.

These sorts of distinctions were not only in reaction to growing liberal interpretations of the time, but also “secular humanism” in the form of academic interpretations of the bible, as well as general scientific advances. Indeed, premillennial dispensationalists rejected scientific and philosophical thought that suggested human progress. Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory and Enlightenment thought, for example, were viewed as false, precisely because both

purported an improvement in the human condition, rather than a declension.⁴³ That the world was ending was a certainty; theories suggesting otherwise were simply wrong, as well as theologically unsound.

The Jesus that fundamentalists held up at this time, was, in Richard Fox’s words, a “religious proclamation and a cultural password.”⁴⁴ Fox goes so far as to identify fundamentalists’ invocation of Jesus as a “talisman” that could “ward off” secular humanism.⁴⁵ In fact, the dispensationalist and fundamentalist version of Jesus was powerful precisely because these adherents firmly believed that theirs was the real and true version, and that he would one day exact punishment against these detractors. This Jesus was described in great detail in the Bible; thus, only close literal interpretation could bring one to Christ. This sort of mindset emerged in reaction to scientific and theological confrontations to firm Bible-believers in the early twentieth century. Likewise, the 1970s and eighties would be a time of social conflict and unrest, and the “true” version of Jesus would have

to be articulated and defended. This next section looks at some of the social and political factors that led to the formation of a premillennial, cold war Jesus that was communicated by Lindsey and Falwell.

Social and Political Factors Inform an Apocalyptic Jesus

We don't have to march out on the streets with the peaceniks and the freezeniks, who are in a suicidal effort to force our country into some unilateral disarmament that would place us at something less than parity in our ability to protect us against the hammer and the sickle, Marxists, Leninists, who are set out to conquer the world. May we pray for peace, but not let anyone make us capitulate to these powers.⁴⁶

Jerry Falwell's reaction to the historic nuclear freeze rally of June 12, 1982 illustrates well the multivocality of dispensationalist responses to social and political conditions of the latter half of the twentieth century. A nuclear disarmament rally, in New York City of all places, was of course objectionable to Falwell. He exhibits here an anti-communist paranoia that had

fueled conservative movements, religious and non-religious, since the beginning of the Cold War in the late 1940s. Obviously though, it is not just the threat of the hammer and the sickle that motivates Falwell into action; it is those "peaceniks," 750,000 of them, filling Central Park in a mass demonstration that would only signify weakness to the great Russian Bear.⁴⁷

Falwell's response to these compelling social and political threats, like the reaction of others of his time, is fascinating in its intricacy and multiple implications. His motivations are partly political and partly evangelistic. His evangelizing work was focused on bringing people to Christ through his mass-media projects like the *Old Time Gospel Hour* television program, and publications such as *Listen, America!* (1980)⁴⁸ and the "prophesy packet" that is examined here, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*. Through his evangelism, Falwell was ostensibly preaching that the end is coming, but not to worry, if you accept Jesus, you will be saved. His political message was somewhat

different. While he preached acceptance and almost resignation to an imminent end, he actively engaged in politics, supporting politicians like Ronald Reagan, who would once again fuel the Cold War in the early eighties with his strong-arm approach to the Soviet Union. As one can gather from the above quote, Falwell was against the “freezeniks” gathering in protest, which signified not just his objection to their view on nuclear armament. He was objecting to the *types* of people who would gather in such an alarmingly large disarmament demonstration. In his prophesy packet audiotape, Falwell laments in a single breath those “peaceniks” and “freezeniks” along with all of the other objectionable characters in America from the 1960s on: feminists, the homosexuals, the astrology-readers, the hippies, the acid-rock bands, etc.⁴⁹ Without his explicitly stating it, one can see that Falwell, at least through his rhetorical construct, aligns the communist threats with the counterculture threats. These forces are linked in their godlessness and immorality: the godless communist threat,

and the immorality of countercultural movements. This is why he had to assert an image of Jesus firmly embedded in the Bible, one who will return and care for those who live and believe correctly, and one who will punish those who do not.

One decade earlier, Hal Lindsey posited an analogous version of Jesus that formed in opposition to similar political circumstances. Only Lindsey attempted through his language and literary style to appeal directly to those uninitiated involved in countercultural movements. He wrote his very popular *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) during the so-called nuclear thaw, or *détente* (around 1969 until the late seventies), with the publication of the book following the beginning of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks between the United States and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, his book is fraught with references to the looming nuclear threat, as he draws out a specific story for the end-times that is situated in the socio-political conditions of the late 1960s and early 70s. Working from preexisting communist

paranoia in the US, Lindsey constructs an intricate story of the battle of Armageddon as commencing when Russia (Magog) and allied “Pan-Arab forces” (including Iran, Ethiopia, and Libya) will attack Israel.⁵⁰ Following the classic dispensationalist narrative, this “attack from the north” will spur the second coming of Jesus, who will appear in the clouds with all of his raptured saints, ready to defeat the Antichrist and the forces of Satan.⁵¹

Lindsey suggests that the “clouds” that Daniel and the synoptic Gospels referred to were actually the robes that the saints would be clothed in: “The clouds then would be all of the church age believers, you and I, returning in immortal glorified bodies, having been previously caught up to meet Christ in the air in the ‘ultimate trip,’ prior to the seven years of Tribulation on earth, and the resurrected saints of the Old Testament.”⁵² His mention of the “ultimate trip” refers to the eleventh chapter of the book, wherein he describes the rapture, when the “impossible” will happen: Jesus will come to take away all of his believers to experience “eternal life,” which

will “surpass the greatest pleasures we have known on earth.”⁵³ Here he employs rhetorical strategies and concepts that would appeal to counterculture youth of the day—instead of an acid trip, this would be “the ultimate trip,” which will bring one to the “greatest pleasures.” He anticipates readers’ disbelief by summoning up other unbelievable events, like man’s first walk on the moon.⁵⁴ This reward to the believer, to be whisked away by Jesus to experience a pleasurable eternity, was surely compelling to many readers during the 1970s. Without too much hard evidence indicating its actual psychological impact on youths of the day, the book’s sustained place on the *New York Times* bestseller list throughout the seventies might suggest its influence.⁵⁵

Lindsey, however, did not just attempt to cajole his readers into accepting his story and ultimately welcoming Christ into their hearts. However subtly, he also attempted to denigrate certain elements of counterculture that might distract these potential believers from Jesus. In two early chapters he points

out the shortcomings of astrology, while he makes a strong case for prophesy belief. Later in the book, he draws on Genesis to suggest that the Tower of Babel was actually a center for astrology, which God eventually destroyed.⁵⁶ Falwell makes a similar case, asserting more forcefully that “God hated the Tower of Babel, just as he hates astrology!”⁵⁷ Lindsey more gently argues that astrology is simply not the proper approach. Though he also slips in a sly political argument here: as God punished Babylonians for Nimrod’s aspirations to form one language and government for the whole world, so would God disapprove of a one-world government today.⁵⁸ This sort of admonition is connected to a general conservative suspicion of the United Nations at the time. He writes, “God’s plan for the world until the Prince of Peace returns is not an international one-world government, but nationalism. This is the one way the world can keep from falling under a dictator who could virtually destroy mankind.”⁵⁹ Like Falwell, Lindsey points out the “signs of the times” that would

suggest the imminence of the second coming. But also like Falwell, he undergirds his message with some conservative political admonitions, which, in this case, involve a subtle jab at the United Nations.

However, Lindsey’s main task with the *Late Great Planet Earth* appears to be evangelical. He uses the dispensationalist story of the second coming of Jesus to draw in youths who might find comfort in a strict set of morals and a detailed and intricate story by which to shape one’s behavior. Not insignificantly, Lindsey’s material for this book came from a series of lectures he delivered at the student union at UCLA in the spring of 1968.⁶⁰ Timothy Weber is careful to point out that Lindsey spoke from “the same stage on which Timothy Leary had promoted the use of LSD and Angela Davis had preached Marxist revolution.”⁶¹ Like the original proponents of dispensationalism in the US, Lindsey used charts and other visual aids to draw a clear picture of just what the end-times would look like. His main message, also like that of other dispensationalist

speakers and preachers, was evangelical: “Do you want to be left behind when Jesus comes?”⁶² Weber claims that these talks resulted in “scores of college students” committing to Christ. This was not without outside influence, of course: these young people were dealing with undeniable fears revolving around the Vietnam War, the hovering specter of nuclear war, and countercultural movements that had left many young people “searching.” Indeed, west and east coast hippie movements as embodied by the 1967 Summer of Love in San Francisco and Woodstock in 1969 surely left many young people “burnt-out” and looking for consequences to actions in a time of moral relativism. Jesus as he appears in the dispensationalist story no doubt offers clear ramifications for disbelief and appealing rewards for belief.

Lindsey spends almost an entire chapter describing just how Jesus’ “credentials”⁶³ qualify him for the role of messiah and judge. He explores the same Old and New Testament passages that were discussed in the

previous section of this paper, to “prove” through the coherency of biblical prophesy and colluding evidence of international politics of the day that Jesus would surely return.⁶⁴ He suggests that “two completely different portraits” were drawn of Jesus by Old Testament prophets: one as the “Suffering Messiah” and the other as “the Reigning Messiah.”⁶⁵ In his first appearance on earth, Jesus suffered, was sacrificed for our sins, and resurrected. In his second appearance, naturally, Jesus will be the triumphant “Reigning Messiah,” who will return as “a lion to judge those who rejected the free gift of salvation from sin.”⁶⁶ This image of the vengeful, punishing Jesus was certainly effective as a way to establish the stakes for unbelief. This image, along with the idea of the secret and sudden rapture of the church, provided very compelling reasons to accept Jesus *now*. Certain world events, such as the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Six-Day War of 1967, and the ever-present threat of nuclear war, only increased the urgency to accept Christ.

Instead of speaking *to* counterculture populations of the US, Jerry Falwell very forcefully spoke *against* these people. Of course, Falwell was surely influenced by the decade of popular prophetic literature that Lindsey instigated with the success of *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey's success spurred a whole new "non-fiction" genre of religious literature, which was no longer confined to the religious bookstore. One could find titles like *Destined for the Throne* (Paul Billheimer, 1975) and *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis* (John F. Walvoord, 1974) mass-produced in paperback.⁶⁷ Films like *The Omen* (1976) and the James Bond film *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) brought the apocalyptic genre into "secular" entertainment.⁶⁸

In a more explicitly dispensationalist vein, Falwell's own *Fundamentalist Journal* published articles on the end-times in the wake of Hal Lindsey's successes.⁶⁹ Falwell himself was part of the Southern Baptist convention, which has been historically influenced by dispensationalist ideas on the second coming of

Jesus. While Southern Baptist churches had long been non-creedal and independent of hierarchic governing structures, in 1979 fundamentalists took control of the denomination and made biblical literalism the litmus test for correct belief.⁷⁰ Falwell aligned his biblical literalism with a conservative perspective on international politics and domestic social issues, articulating the sorts of ideas one encounters in *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*. For scholars who believed that fundamentalists just don't engage in "the secular world," Falwell is a prime counterexample. Of course, as Lisa McGirr shows in her *Suburban Warriors* (2001), since at least the early 1960s with Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign, conservative Christians had actively engaged in politics.⁷¹ Both McGirr's case study of 1960s Orange County conservative activism and Falwell's rhetoric indicate two main motivating factors for mobilization despite traditionalist religion: the communist threat and the rising counterculture.

Falwell seems to conflate the threats of worldwide communist domination with the growing moral decline of America in the form of feminism, gay rights, the hippies and their drugs, astrology, the popularity of eastern religions, and the Grateful Dead and the Beatles, among others.⁷² These were issues to noisily protest and condemn in a political arena, but they were also signs of the imminent end-times. Along with communism and American immorality in the list of end-times signifiers were signs like the ecumenical movement, computerization, and the UN. These three latter indicators pointed toward the unification of world systems, which according to scriptural evidence, would suggest the beginning of the rise of the Antichrist.⁷³ Unlike past dispensationalists, Falwell did not attempt to identify the potential Antichrist, but as recently as 1999, he endured harsh criticism for proposing that the Deceiver would be Jewish.⁷⁴

Falwell's discussion of the "signs" is basically fatalistic: the end is imminent, one cannot and should

not pin down a date (for Jesus clearly admonishes against this⁷⁵), but one should rest assured that Jesus will protect the believer against "even a minute" of suffering through his pre-Tribulation rapture.⁷⁶ Then again, Falwell did not rest in this fatalism. He rails against "the hammer and the sickle" that threaten to "enslave our children through worldwide communist domination."⁷⁷ Aside from his rhetoric in this cultural artifact, Falwell's actions at this time show that he was not content to merely wait for the end. Falwell worked tirelessly in Reagan's first presidential campaign, and in the wake of his success, boasted that the sheer clout of his newly-formed Moral Majority had helped to propel this president into office.⁷⁸

Indeed, according to Falwell it is the sheer power and clout of the powerful "majority" of Christians that will ensure God's favor toward America when the end-times begin. After his litany of signs of America's fall to immorality, Falwell boasts of the redeeming qualities of this great nation: "I believe that those 1600 Christian

radio stations in this country and sixty-five Christian television stations and those 20,000 Christian day schools, 110,000 fundamentalist churches are all playing a major role in bringing this nation back to God, for which I praise the Lord.”⁷⁹ According to Falwell, the US has the special privilege and power to “evangelize the world,” which will surely secure our fate as a “protected nation.”⁸⁰ Further, our government’s kind treatment of the state of Israel and “the Jew” will ensure our special status, for “God deals with nations in relation to how they deal with Israel.”⁸¹

This theme of the US as a favored nation, with special duties in God’s plan, fits well into the dispensationalist story of the “chosen” believer, who will be raptured to heaven by Jesus himself. Like Lindsey, Falwell expends significant intellectual labor to show exactly how Jesus fulfills ancient prophesy and how his words through the Gospels (particularly the Olivete Discourse) “prove” his imminent second coming. In this way, Falwell’s Jesus is very situated in the Bible. Even the cover of the prophesy

packet shows a large Greek-lettered alpha and omega, rather than a picture of Jesus, or a graphic scene of the battle of Armageddon. This Jesus is conceptualized in the words of the Bible. At the same time, this Jesus is animated and enlivened through the dispensationalist narrative. According to Falwell, he will return to defeat and “bind Satan for 1,000 years so that He may reign and rule with a rod of iron.”⁸² During the Millennium, the raptured believers will have “special responsibilities, special roles,” while peace and harmony will replace the war and conflict of the Tribulation period.⁸³ Unbelievers, of course, will enjoy neither the “special roles” nor the “peace and harmony” that Jesus’ second coming will bring. They will be crushed beneath God’s thumb when he returns to “unleash His wrath and judgment upon unbelievers.”⁸⁴ Clearly, Falwell sets the stakes for accepting Christ.

Falwell’s evangelizing mission with this publication is not limited to his admonitions and warnings against unbelief through the dispensationalist story. In the two

audiotapes, he periodically invites listeners to accept “Lord Jesus into your heart,” and he promises that being a believing Christian means that one will enjoy “at least 1,000 years of peace on this earth with your Lord Jesus.”⁸⁵ At the end of the prophesy packet booklet, he describes in detail what heaven will be and what hell will involve, and invites readers to make the right choice and “receive the Lord Jesus Christ into your life,”⁸⁶ even including a blank form for new believers to fill out and mail to him in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Falwell mentions the possibility of nuclear war and uses this threat to underscore the need to immediately accept Jesus. But at the same time, he uses dispensationalist theology to show that nuclear war could not possibly completely destroy the planet, because God needs it for at least another 1,007 years (the seven years of Tribulation and the thousand-year reign of Christ).⁸⁷ For this reason, there is no reason to become just another one of those activists demonstrating in Central Park, making America look

weak and divided to the communist forces. Instead, one’s political involvement should revolve around restoring and maintaining America’s morality to ensure its status as a beacon to a world that may soon find itself embroiled in the seven worst years of human history.

Conclusions

Lindsey and Falwell both rendered an image of Jesus as a powerful protector and vengeful judge. This image of Jesus contrasted with the social justice Jesus that was held up in Civil Rights rhetoric and the “hippie Jesus” that one could encounter in Catholic folk masses and popular films like *Godspell*. In fact, their dispensationalist version of Jesus was a reaction to these more liberal interpretations. Their idea of Christ-as-punisher was effective for many people during the 1970s and 80s. This image of Christ, as punisher to the wicked and the sinful, surely resonated with people who were looking for parameters for belief in a time of social upheaval. While countercultural movements

called for “free love,” freedom to choose, and freedom from war, dispensationalist authors told their readers to relax, accept the fate of the world, and most of all, accept Jesus. Underlying this fatalistic attitude, as one can see from the example of Falwell and more subtly in Lindsey’s work, was a directive to align with the correct, conservative political forces. The basic thinking here was that God is on the side of the US while he is against the evil forces of the communist Soviet Union, so one should ensure God’s favor by choosing the correct political side. Falwell especially communicated such a polarized vision.

There were profound effects in the US from this biblically-situated dispensationalist Jesus who would return to protect and judge. Lindsey’s rendering spurred a whole genre of apocalyptic lit that would continue on to the present day, most popularly with the *Left Behind* series. Falwell’s publication was vastly less popular, but it exemplifies an underlying dispensationalist influence in his mass-media evangelizing project. One need only

consider Reagan’s cabinet in the early 1980s to see the influences of such end-times theology. Reagan’s Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, did not expect many more generations to live before “the Lord comes,” while his Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, brought his dispensationalist convictions into his foreign policy approaches to the Soviet Union.⁸⁸ Reagan himself was influenced by dispensationalist literature like Lindsey’s, and voiced these views when discussing foreign policy toward the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union.⁸⁹

While the original prophesy authors and John Darby’s Brethren constructed their vision of the end-times amid very real oppression by powerful political forces, the Cold War era authors did not encounter with immediate suffering. Both Lindsey and Falwell enjoyed privileged lives. However, both authors recognized the efficacy of the genre of prophesy writing for those living in unsettling times. This was an effective evangelizing story that would bring people to Jesus, as it assigned

grave and imminent consequences to unbelief. This version of Jesus was an effective symbol, or “talisman,” as Fox puts it, against the threats of a changing culture and frightening international politics.

Notes

- ¹ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Michigan: Zondervan, 1970.
- ² Jerry Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, Published by the Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1983. Includes audiotapes and a booklet.
- ³ Drawing mainly from historians, including George Marsden, Timothy Weber, and Paul Boyer
- ⁴ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 244.
- ⁵ Lindsey 174
- ⁶ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 87.
- ⁷ Boyer 87

- ⁸ Boyer 88
- ⁹ Timothy Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend*, (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004) 23.
- ¹⁰ Matt. 24:40
- ¹¹ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotape 1 side 2.
- ¹² Weber 25
- ¹³ Weber 25
- ¹⁴ Weber 25
- ¹⁵ Weber is drawing from Rev. 10:6
- ¹⁶ Rev. 22:20
- ¹⁷ Boyer 152
- ¹⁸ Lindsey 158
- ¹⁹ Lindsey 63
- ²⁰ Qtd in Boyer 142
- ²¹ See Lisa McGirr's discussion of this phenomenon in her *Suburban Warriors* (2001)
- ²² Dan. 9:26; Mark 13:7
- ²³ Matt. 24:31; Mark 13:24; Luke 21:27
- ²⁴ Dan. 7:13-14
- ²⁵ Matt. 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-31; Luke 21:29-33
- ²⁶ Qtd in Weber 190
- ²⁷ George Marsden, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Michigan: Academie Books, 1983) 107.
- ²⁸ Gen. 12:2-3
- ²⁹ Marsden 18
- ³⁰ Marsden 17
- ³¹ Marsden 17
- ³² Boyer 183
- ³³ Boyer 69
- ³⁴ Boyer 70
- ³⁵ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotape 2, side 1.
- ³⁶ Boyer 91
- ³⁷ Boyer 98
- ³⁸ George Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990) 182.
- ³⁹ Nancy Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 5.
- ⁴⁰ Ammerman 5
- ⁴¹ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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- ⁴² Frykholm 18
⁴³ Boyer 96
⁴⁴ Richard Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2004) 331.
⁴⁵ Fox 331
⁴⁶ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 1 side 1.
⁴⁷ This is how Falwell frequently refers to the Soviet Union. He even provides an illustration of the Bear attacking the Israeli flag on page 21.
⁴⁸ Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1980).
⁴⁹ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 2, side 2
⁵⁰ Lindsey 71
⁵¹ Lindsey 173
⁵² Lindsey 173
⁵³ Lindsey 137-138
⁵⁴ Lindsey 136
⁵⁵ Boyer 5
⁵⁶ Lindsey 117
⁵⁷ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 2, side 2
⁵⁸ Lindsey 118
⁵⁹ Lindsey 118
⁶⁰ Weber 188
⁶¹ Weber 188
⁶² Weber 189
⁶³ Lindsey 35
⁶⁴ Lindsey 28-42
⁶⁵ Lindsey 29
⁶⁶ Lindsey 174
⁶⁷ Boyer 6
⁶⁸ Boyer 8
⁶⁹ Boyer 7
⁷⁰ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 17.
⁷¹ McGirr chapter 3
⁷² Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 2, side 2
⁷³ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 2, side 2
⁷⁴ <http://www.christiancourier.com/penpoints/antichrist.htm>
⁷⁵ Matt. 24:32
⁷⁶ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 1, side 1
⁷⁷ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 1, side 1
⁷⁸ Harding 80

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- ⁷⁹ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 1, side 2
⁸⁰ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 1, side 2
⁸¹ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 2, side 1
⁸² Falwell *Prophecy Packet Booklet* 8
⁸³ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 2, side 2
⁸⁴ Falwell *Prophecy Packet Booklet* 14
⁸⁵ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 1, side 1
⁸⁶ Falwell *Prophecy Packet Booklet* 41
⁸⁷ Falwell, *Nuclear War and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*, audiotope 1, side 1
⁸⁸ Boyer 141
⁸⁹ Weber 202-203

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