



# ISRAEL, THE BIBLE AND THE WORLD'S FUTURE

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As the recent war in Lebanon was unfolding, BBC news noted the arrival of 3400 Christians in Washington for the specific purpose of lobbying the US government to support the state of Israel. The effort was planned long before the conflict between Israel and Lebanon erupted and formed part of the first annual summit of Christians United for Israel. Yet Pastor John Hagee, the main organizer of the summit, a kind of 'end-times prophecy specialist', told BBC news that lobbyists would be urging the US government "not to restrain Israel in any way in the pursuit of Hamas and Hezbollah".<sup>1</sup> BBC news cited research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which found in 2005 that evangelical Christians were more likely to support Israel than any other religious group in America besides Jews. With evangelicals representing a quarter of America's population, the Pew survey found that two in three believe that the establishment of the state of Israel is a fulfilment of Biblical prophecy.

What is at the core of this most potent political friendship? How did American evangelicals become Israel's best friend?

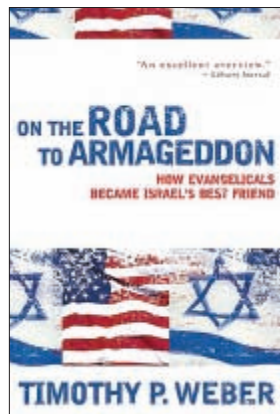
These and other questions are explored in Timothy Weber's book, *On the Road to Armageddon*. The title of the book promises drama—and drama it delivers. The depth of Weber's historical research, his patient and detailed explanation of complex ideas and relationships and his mastery of the topic lend this book stunning force. It is made even more significant by its

relevance to the present international situation touching upon the vital theme of the relationship between American Christians and foreign policy.

*On the Road to Armageddon* is a history of an idea: more particularly, an idea concerning the course of human history in the light of biblical prophecy, an idea about the "end times," an eschatology.

American evangelicals over the last

130 years have gradually adopted a very particular vision of the end times called Premillennialist Dispensationalism. Barely a marginal fringe view in the nineteenth century, this mode of reading the Bible, and of reading the 'signs of the times', has become positively mainstream and culturally dominant throughout



**On the Road to Armageddon:  
How Evangelicals Became  
Israel's Best Friend**  
Timothy P Weber  
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evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity in the United States over the last fifty years. Although not always recognized, it underpins and motivates much of the political energy of the so-called New Christian Right, especially in its steadfast support for the state of Israel.

Let no-one think for a moment that this is a question of arcane and irrelevant doctrinal quibbling. Ideas are powerful; this one especially so.

Premillennialist Dispensationalism sees the near future as being governed by an already revealed plotline. Taking biblical prophecies to represent geopolitical national realities, American Dispensationalists have the attention

of their hearts, television sets and wallets firmly fixed on the Israel and the Middle East. A rough outline of the predicted story is:

1) A restoration of Israel (taken to be the modern State of Israel's occupation of the land originally promised to Abraham);  
2) a "rapture" (or calling up) of all Christians to heaven prior to the great "tribulation" of the world forecast in the book of Revelation;

3) A "holy war" convergence of Russia and the Arab States on Israel (seen to be the prophetic "armies of the North"), culminating in a battle at the actual valley of Armageddon in Israel. Hence "battle of Armageddon";

4) The intervention of "the antichrist", seen to be from the United Nations or European Union, in order to restore peace to the situation. The antichrist posing as peacekeeper will actually betray Israel by demanding idolatrous worship;

5) At this point Christ, the Jewish messiah, will return with his saints to destroy Israel's foes and finally invoke belief from Israel resulting in their salvation;

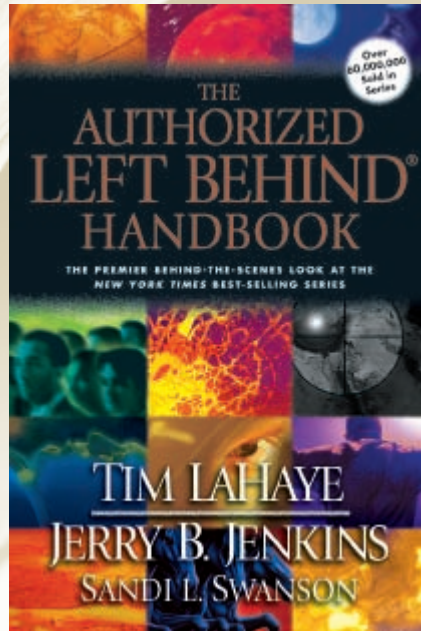
6) Following this victory, the Messiah will establish his reign on earth for 1000 years (the "millennium"), centring his kingdom on restored temple worship in Jerusalem. Crucially, this is seen to require the restoration of a third temple on the site of the original, and the restoration of the animal-sacrifice system of purification.

The fact that Christ is said to return prior to his 1000 year reign gives this theological structure the name "*pre-millennialism*". The term "Dispensationalism" refers to the

method of interpreting scripture that gets you to premillennialism. Essentially, Dispensationalism divides the Bible into “dispensations” or episodes in which God is seen to have different ways of dealing with his people. Israel and the church are said to belong to two distinct dispensations. This necessitates a “dividing” of the Scriptures in two (This is how the command in 2 Tim 2:15 to be “rightly dividing the word of truth” is rendered). The era of the church is thus not in the prophetic timetable, but is rather known as the “great parenthesis”. Biblical prophecies have merely been “on pause” between Christ’s first and second coming; the “play-button” will be pressed in the lead up to Christ’s return. Under the Dispensationalist division of scripture, the actors in the prophetic drama cannot be the church, but must be Israel and other nation-states.

The eschatology of fear propounded by Premillennialist Dispensationalists has found a secure home both within and beyond American churches. Weber demonstrates the currency and acceptance of these ideas. Since *The Late Great Planet Earth* penetrated the market of 1970s counter-cultural youth, Dispensationalism has grown to dominate fundamentalist, Pentecostal and evangelical Christian culture. Further, it has taken root in the more general soil of popular imagination in America. This is embodied by the phenomenal reception of the *Left Behind* series of novels (over 60 million copies sold) which fantasize and fictionalize scenarios based on the outline of events offered above. Religious broadcasting like that of John Hagee Ministries, or even that of Pat Robertson, reflect this theme. Perhaps more interestingly, Weber notes Time/CNN polls which show that the proportion of Americans who believe the events of the book of Revelation must be fulfilled, and since September 11 2001 are being fulfilled, far outstrips those who profess that the Bible is God’s word.

This is perhaps because millennialism has a long history in America, albeit with differing particularities. The crucial difference between previous versions of



millennialism and the current one, however, lies in the switch from post-millennialism to premillennialism. This means a switch from an optimistic and progressive view of history to a pessimistic regressive view of history. Whereas post-millennialism saw the world as getting progressively better on the way to ushering in the millennium *after* which Christ would return, the premillennialist mindset says history is on a sharp downhill slide. The state of the world will deteriorate until the point of collapse, at which point Christ will return and then establish his millennium of rule (thus returning “pre” not “post” millennium). The metanarrative has been reversed. To be sure, the idea of progressive history has suffered generally in Western culture since World War I, but few have articulated such a specific and consistent philosophy of decline and disaster.

Perhaps even more important than the particular view of history one might have, is what one chooses to *do* about it. Herein lays Weber’s thesis and the key to understanding the political alliance between American Christians and Israel. Weber frames his book on the metaphor of a basketball court. In the early days of the doctrine, Dispensationalists were like spectators sitting in the bleachers, merely observing and commenting on world events as they unfolded on the court below. Yet in the latter part of

the twentieth century, especially since Israel’s victory in the “six-day” 1967 war, Dispensationalists have “come down from the bleachers” onto the court and got involved with the game. As one organization’s website read “Why just read about prophecy, when you can be part of it?” Weber lightly notes that the leap from belief to participation is not a necessary one, even if one does hold to Dispensationalist views about the end times.

Yet it is a leap made with zeal by many Christians in America. It is expressed largely by uncritical and unwavering support of Zionism and the State of Israel. Weber’s extraordinary eighth and ninth chapters show the actual webs of people, money, lobbying and fraternizing that has forged the Evangelical-Israeli friendship. For example, in what Weber terms “tour bus diplomacy” the Israeli government systematically offered and sponsored tours of Israel for key leaders of the upcoming New Christian Right. Leader and founder of the political action group Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell has enjoyed an extraordinarily close relationship with Likud party leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu. Weber argues that as much as Americans have been proactive in forming this friendship, Israelis have also been deliberate and strategic in courting evangelical support. A quiet visit from an Israeli State Department official after the 1967 war identified Fundamentalist Christians as a possible ally for the Israeli cause. The previous support of liberal Protestants was flowing hot and cold in relation to Israeli foreign policy and military activity.

The continuation of the Evangelical-Israeli relationship has seen hundreds of thousands of evangelical “Holy Land tourists” visit Israel, as well as the formation of mass political rallies in Jerusalem and Washington, and more recently scores of pro-Israel support “leagues”, institutes and lobby groups set up. Such groups can be interfaith, but are often made up entirely of Christians. At the more extreme level

evangelical Christians and right-wing extremist Jews have at times even stood outside of the law in sharing efforts toward building a third temple on what is now a sacred Islamic site (e.g. drawing plans, examining site possibilities, even attempts at destroying the Dome of the Rock). Some recently have co-operated over the breeding of red heifers for the necessary sacrifice to purify the hoped-for restored nation of Israel. Further, avowed non-Christian Zionist extremists have been invited on the lecture circuit of American churches to share news of their efforts. Obviously at these moments the evangelization of Jews has become secondary to the need to support the political advancement of Israel.

If anything, Weber's book lets the story speak for itself and provoke its own reaction. Perhaps one lack in an otherwise masterful work is a systematic critique and analysis of Premillennialist Dispensationalism. The book's descriptive mode leaves the big questions to implication.

It is worth here reflecting on some of the issues that arise from the work. These are not Weber's thoughts, but are my reaction to what he describes, and the fraught he implicitly raises.

### The need for a biblical critique of Premillennialist Dispensationalism

The use of Scripture on which Premillennialist Dispensationalism rests is at the end of the day *sub-Christian*. In its love for seeing God's power at work, it ironically reduces the supremacy and finality of the work of God in

Christ. Key Christian beliefs are swept aside if not contradicted: Christ as the fulfilment of the biblical Old Covenant (Matthew); Christ as the new temple himself (John); Christ as the new High Priest in the heavenly realms (Hebrews); God's forging of one new man in Christ out of Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians); the hope of the inheritance of a new promised land, the new heavens and new earth (Romans 8). Premillennialist Dispensationalism is also extremely methodologically unsound, selectively blending literalism and analogy, and creating complicated interpretive knots in

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doing so. Pastorally, it would seem also that Premillennialist Dispensationalism results in a fascination with "prophecy" more than the central Biblical ideas of Christian hope and living.

### The 'if...then' equation and the ethics of prophecy

The relationship between ethics and eschatology is crucial. Even if one accepts a certain view of what will characterize the future (either through "prophecy" ministries of the Dispensationalists, or through general descriptions in scripture), does this imply an *ethical* acceptance or even a condoning of these things? If "there will be wars", should we join in because they are inevitable? If "the poor will always be with you", do we then ignore problems of social justice or giving? If on the basis of biblical prophecy one accepts the notion of a restored nation of Israel, does that allow for an uncritical acceptance, indeed zealous support, of any military or political means used to fulfil that promise? The predominance of Dispensationalism's destructive view of history highlights the need for evangelicals to articulate clearly an alternative: what is the Christian hope for the future, and, in clear terms, what does it mean now?

### Broader questions regarding Christianity and foreign politics

I will merely suggest here some possible contours for a Christian discussion of these issues.

- **Oppose "immanentism" on the part of nation-states**

A long line of American Presidents including the present one have heralded America's obvious and exceptional calling in the world. For American nationalism, history has an apparent and observable meaning. Secular meta-narratives, like Marxism or liberal progressivism, share

the same sense that history has an obvious meaning. This broad tendency, I believe, is best named *immanentism*: the idea that God, or a transcendent force acts *in*, and thus is immanent to, the historical process. Whether secular or religiously inspired, immanentism allows the nation to be seen as the actualisation of an ideal in history. At the heart of American "Manifest Destiny" rhetoric in the nineteenth century or the ongoing "Redeemer Nation" theme in American foreign policy is the idea of the transcendent (God, Science, or Nature) working, acting *immanently*, in history.

In the context of chaos in Europe in the 1930s, American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote of the political results of this pattern of thinking

There is consequently a religious overtone in all political loyalties; that is, conditioned, relative and partial human institutions tend to make unconditioned claims upon the lives of individuals and to secure the acceptance of such claims. What the modern totalitarian state is doing in this direction is merely an accentuation of what has been an element of political life since the very beginning.

For Niebuhr, a "prophetic" Christianity does accept a qualified reverence toward



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centres of power, where the order is tolerably just. But, dialectically, it also “requires an unrelenting critical attitude toward all government”; it “speaks a word of judgement against every ruler and every nation.” A decade later, even though he was an anticommunist American himself, he warned against treating Democracy as a universal “object of devotion” because,

It tempts us to identify the final meaning of life with a virtue which we possess, and thus to give a false and idolatrous religious note to the conflict between democracy and communism

Niebuhr’s insight bears much relevance for today. Through demonstrating huge support for the Bush administration American evangelicals became (consciously or not) enmeshed with neo-conservative foreign policy.

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‘Neocon’ foreign policy is a peculiar mix of realism (in its use of force) and the belief that democracy and ‘liberty’ are universally applicable values. Combining American patriotism and renewed hawkish militarism with the belief that America’s role is to spread universal values has resulted in an American attempt at what Francis Fukuyama termed “benevolent hegemony”. The political calculus of American “liberation” of Iraq was premised on the notion that the world would eventually recognize America’s exceptional role, its calling to bring freedom to the nations.

• **Reserve the right to discriminate on war and peace**

Even while recognizing the realities of force and power in state relations, the Christian presumption against war needs to be at all times considered if not retained. Certainly, pacifism on the part of Christians oughtn’t to be rubbished as irrelevant or non-Christian (even

Reinhold Niebuhr, the greatest twentieth century critic of pacifism acknowledged this point). Interestingly, political theologian William Cavanaugh argues that the issue for American Catholics is about *who* decides whether a war is just. With the Pope’s opposition to the US invasion of Iraq, many American Catholics argued that the Pope had no place in such a discussion. Cavanaugh argues that the church ought not just be quiet and let the nation-state determine the parameters of a just war. In fact, the nation-state must be relativised, and seen as it actually is: a historically novel provider of goods and services, (in Alasdair McIntyre’s terms) much like “a telephone company”.<sup>2</sup>

• **Recover a consciousness of the church’s global diasporic identity**

Perhaps the best way to relativise the claim of the nation-state is to replace it with something bigger. I have already argued that the theology of a transcendent God can act as an antidote to nationalism and immanentism. Perhaps also the global nature of the church, of our membership in the body of Christ ought to shape our approach to national boundaries. The nature of the Diaspora is such that our primary loyalty is not to a locality or nation on earth; we are a scattered people “seeking the city that is to come”. In the mean time, we can and should weep with who weep, and remember those brothers and sisters who are suffering as if we ourselves were suffering. Being more conscious of the needs and experiences of Christians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, and recognising that our primary loyalty is to the “household of faith”, would shift



Reinhold Niebuhr

our approach to international issues and shrink our sense of “national identity”.

• **Couple realism with sincere efforts toward internationalism**

In a strange quirk of history, American evangelicals have come to be one of the chief opponents of international co-operation, especially as embodied in the United Nations. Often referred to in the light of Babel, Pat Robertson and Tim La Haye’s *Left Behind* novels have gone further toward labelling the UN and EU as antichrist. The problem is that they sanctify the nation-state while they demonise efforts to provide a counter-balance to it. By contrast Christians of earlier decades have been amongst the most strident supporters of international co-operation. In the 1920s, the League of Nations was heralded by many in America as “the Kingdom of God on Earth”. We need to see the UN and other bodies neither as the Kingdom of God nor evil incarnate, but as a possibly helpful (albeit bumbling) counter to the growing tendency toward unilateralism and national hubris. ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 Richard Allen Greene, “Evangelical Christians plead for Israel”, *BBC News*, Washington, Wednesday, 19 July 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5193092.stm>
- 2 William T Cavanaugh, ‘Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is not the Keeper of the Common Good’, *Modern Theology* 20:2 April 2004, accessed at [www.jesuradicals.com/library/cavanaugh/telephone.pdf](http://www.jesuradicals.com/library/cavanaugh/telephone.pdf)

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