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Article

Revenge Is a Genre Best Served Old: Apocalypse in Christian Right Literature and Politics

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Abstract: Apocalypse is a phenomenology of disorder that entails a range of religious affects and experiences largely outside normative expectations of benevolent religion. Vindication, judgment, revenge, resentment, righteous hatred of one's enemies, the wish for their imminent destruction, theological certainty, the triumphant display of right authority, right judgement, and just punishment—these are the primary affects. As a literary genre and a worldview, apocalypse characterizes both the most famous example of evangelical fiction—the Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins—and the U.S. Christian Right's politics. This article's methodological contribution is to return us to the beginnings of apocalypse in Biblical and parabiblical literature to better understand the questions of theodicy that Left Behind renews in unexpected ways. Conservative white Christians use apocalypse to articulate their experience as God's chosen but persecuted people in a diversely populated cosmos, wherein their political foes are the enemies of God. However strange the supersessionist appropriation, apocalypse shapes their understanding of why God lets them suffer so—and may also signal an underlying fear about the power and attention of their deity.

Keywords: apocalypse; Christian Right; Left Behind; Bible; monotheism; polytheism; theodicy; evangelical; fundamentalism; suffering; religious violence; power; evil

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1. Introduction

When Jesus rides into battle on his white horse during the battle of Armageddon in the final novel of the Left Behind series, the body count grows dramatically. "200 million demonic horsemen" had already invaded earth and "wiped out a third of the remaining population" (*Glorious* 177; see Chapman 2013, p. 191). But when Jesus rides against opposing forces near Jerusalem at the end of days, he gives some speeches that have particularly gruesome effects. Merely describing who he is—"I am the Alpha and the Omega [. . .] the First and the Last"—causes a speech act massacre of hundreds of thousands, "their bodies ripped open, blood pooling in great masses" (204), the armies "dropped dead, torn to pieces" (205). One character explains that Revelation's description of Jesus—"From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations" (Rev. 19.15)—is "symbolic" for "the Word of God", which is "sharp and powerful enough to slay the enemy, literally tearing them asunder" (*Glorious* 192). Thus "hundreds of thousands" (206) are slain by Jesus' speeches, the punishment of unbelievers in "the overwhelming perfection of the moment" (207) as one Christian observer witnesses among the "splayed and filleted bodies" (208). For almost a hundred pages in *Glorious Appearing*, Jesus flies through the air giving speeches that explode human bodies, "as if the very words of the Lord had superheated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin" (225). "Tens of thousands" of enemy soldiers fall to their knees and "writhed as they were invisibly sliced asunder. Their innards and entrails gushed to the desert floor [. . .] their blood pooling and rising in the unforgiving brightness of the glory of Christ" (226), and later, still more "tens of thousands at a time [were] screaming in terror and pain and dying in the open air" as "Their blood poured from them in great waves, combining to make a river"

(249) that goes on for "Mile after mile after mile", a "river of blood several miles wide and now some five feet deep" (258).

The narrative is enthusiastic for the justice and destruction Jesus wreaks, reveling in the gruesome annihilation of bodies torn apart by the Word of God. The body count of billions of humans slain by divine beings dwarfs all other human catastrophes and wars combined, reflecting what can only be called a bloodthirsty desire for justice and vengeance against one's enemies on the part of the series' two Christian Right authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Having sold 80 million copies, and with 20% of the U.S. population having read at least one of the novels by 2006 (Chapman 2013, p. 4), Left Behind—its 12 part series, its sequel, its three prequels, its 40 adolescent novellas, its films and video game spinoffs—is studied closely by social scientists and historians as a window into the End Times theology and politics of the Christian Right, the politically muscular movement that propelled George W. Bush and then Donald Trump into the office of the presidency (see, e.g., Frykholm 2004; Gribben 2007; Guest 2012; Harding 2001; Shuck 2005; Vox 2017). With some notable exceptions (Chapman 2013; Hungerford 2010; Mleynek 2005), literary studies generally shies away from Left Behind and other fundamentalist fiction (Douglas 2020a, "Introduction"). Given its subject as a contemporary fictionalization of the End Times depicted in the book of Revelation, most approaches to the series emphasize the eschatology of its apocalyptic vision. While it is impossible to summarize this large body of multi-disciplinary research on Left Behind, a recurrent focus of interest is the role its eschatology plays for fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist readers, even as it reflects views about gender (Hungerford 2010) or Jews (Mleynek 2005; Freedman 2008) or reading practices (Chapman 2013) generally characteristic of a Christian Right audience.

Recently, Hurley and Sinykin (2018) have argued for "a revaluation of apocalypse in its many aspects: as an aesthetic, a form, a genre, a practice, a structure of feeling, and an orientation" in their introduction to a special issue of *ASAP/Journal* dedicated to apocalypse (p. 453). While their introduction and the issue itself generally emphasize the valence of apocalypse for contemporary crisis, the structure of feeling for what it means to be in the last days, I want to follow their invitation to think more broadly about a phenomenology of apocalypse as a historical genre that continues to organize and articulate affect, particularly for conservative white American Christians geared for existential combat. As Hurley and Sinykin (2021) note in their conversation and in their special issue introduction, apocalypse is actively shaping Christian Right visions of violence and revenge, culminating for now in the "armed Christian white supremacists on the US Capitol on January 6" in a coordinated attempt to overturn the results of the presidential election (Hurley and Sinykin 2021).[1]

As the scholarship reviewed above attests, even approaches to Left Behind emphasizing its End Times vision recognize the series' role in constructing communities and beliefs, in organizing affect and structuring feeling, in representing in-group/out-group dynamics and subordinating some groups (Jews, women) while demonizing others (pro-choice feminists, unbelievers). This article's methodological contribution is to draw on critical Bible scholarship to return us to the beginnings of apocalypse in Biblical and parabiblical literature so that we can better understand some of the phenomenological qualities the Left Behind series is renewing in unexpected ways. Historical apocalypse is a genre of justice and revenge, and while it is characterized by "eschatological fictions, fictions of the End" (Kermode 2000, p. 35), its emphasis was not eschatological in its beginnings. Rather, and as we shall see, apocalypse's beginnings lay in theodicy. Theodicy is the theological problem of "how a supposedly benevolent deity could allow injustice to flourish on earth," given that the "existence of a just and merciful deity should, it seems, preclude evil and suffering, at least horrendous evil and innocent suffering. Belief in God thus requires a convincing explanation for the problem of evil" (Crenshaw 2005, pp. 14–15).[2] Apocalypse was just such an explanation for evil in the world and for the suffering of God's people, even as he seemed to remain mute and unresponsive. Apocalypse emerged in opposition to empire, as a genre that provided hope to the oppressed in a hopeless situation. That it now organizes the affective stance of a powerful demographic group—conservative white

U.S. Christians—who believe themselves to be God's chosen but persecuted people is a striking reversal.

To schematically anticipate my argument, apocalypse emerged in two stages among Judeans in the face of empire. In the third century BCE, apocalypse proliferated divine beings in the cosmos as a way of answering abstract questions about the origins of evil and wickedness in a world dominated by powerful empires. Later persecutions by the Seleucid Empire focused these abstract questions of theodicy into a vision of God's cosmic foes, who sponsored the empire enacting state terror against the Judeans. Reaching back to a more ancient Israelite polytheism, apocalypse imagined new stories, characters and plots to explain the inexplicable absence of God, as well as Judeans' fear at his silence in the face of their suffering. Bible scholarship helps us see the new narrative agents that early apocalypses made possible, and thus the advantages in storytelling that became available. As a fictionalized modern-day retelling of the New Testament book of Revelation (and other biblical texts), Left Behind is obviously an apocalypse concerned with the End Times. But the authors' close engagement with Revelation has led critics to understand the New Testament book as *the* paradigmatic apocalypse, heightening its eschatology and obscuring its other generic conventions of extreme moral dualism, the promise of heaven and hell, the proliferation of divine beings, and, paradoxically, its promise of imminent salvation. Critics like Sinykin, following Kermode, are certainly correct to see apocalypse's "sense of an ending" as the critical narrative quality that it has in common with all storytelling. This article attends instead to other narrative aspects of apocalypse, as illuminated by other parabiblical apocalypses and by critical Bible scholarship—ones that return us to apocalypse's beginnings as/in theodicy. I argue that apocalypse is a phenomenology of disorder that shapes Christian Right politics and affect today. It is not so much an imminent expectation of the Lord's return that is the critical quality here, though the anticipation of vindication remains important. Other apocalypses suggest that just as important as the "sense of an ending" are storytelling features that try to make sense of the continued suffering of God's people through plot as delay and the proliferation of cosmic enemies of God. Theodicy, as Job and *Paradise Lost* reflect, is a theological problem with a storytelling solution, a question of narrative agents, plots, characters and speeches—a dynamic of narrative unveiling reflected in Left Behind's inspiration, the Revelation according to St. John. If much literary and cultural production today can be understood as post-apocalyptic (and hence anti-apocalyptic), the popularity of Left Behind returns us to the "*longue durée*" of a "different archive" (Dimock 2008, p. 4): apocalypse itself, and the beginnings of the genre 2300 years ago as an explanation of Israelite cosmology and the beginnings of evil.

2. Apocalypse Now

The first book of the Left Behind series opens with the Rapture, the evangelical doctrine that before the cataclysmic End Times and the rise of the Antichrist, God will pluck up and out of everyday life genuine born-again Christians who have a personal relationship with Jesus. Based on Paul's line that "we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thes. 4.17), its modern doctrine characterizes the "premillennial dispensationalism" of evangelical theology. Humanity is in the final period of time (or "dispensation") before the eschatological return of Christ, which will inaugurate his 1000 year earthly reign (the millennium in "premillennial"). Jesus's return will be preceded by the snatching up of true believers before the rise of the Antichrist and seven years of tribulation, after which Jesus returns to defeat his worldly and demonic foes in final battle. The first novel, also titled *Left Behind*, begins with the disappearance of real Christians from planes, cars, houses, places of business and worship, leaving behind nonbelievers and cultural Christians who perhaps attended church or were baptized but who did not have a personal, prayerful relationship with Jesus himself, accepting him into their hearts in recognition that he had died for their sins. The series follows these characters as they piece together what has happened, become born again Christians, experience the seven-year tribulation and the Antichrist's rule, and form a "Tribulation Force" to contest his rule.

Two such characters are Rayford, an airline pilot, and his daughter Chloe, a college student, occasional churchgoers, but left behind by the disappearance of their wife/mother and son/brother who were true Christians. The novel carefully traces how they overcome their skepticism and learn to read the Bible as fundamentalist Christians do, for "information" about the "timeline" of the End Times. The novels function as an instruction manual for salvation; the authors several times record the prayers characters make as they accept the "transaction" (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995, pp. 205, 220) of Jesus' salvific sacrifice, carefully explaining evangelical precepts about prayer, conversion, Bible study, and witnessing (see, e.g., 200–1) so that unsaved readers can properly convert while reading the novels. As Chapman demonstrates, the series solves the problem of how to give characters agency during the unfolding of predetermined events by making reading and proper understanding of Biblical "prophecy" a treasured, empowering activity. They are led by Bible "experts" (313) trained by left behind books and DVDs explaining the tribulations that are to occur and how to recognize the Antichrist, the new charismatic Secretary-General of the United Nations (born in Transylvania!) whose project is to establish a "one world religion and [. . .] one world government" (418), persecute Christians, and eventually make war on Israel. It is this Antichrist's millions of soldiers whose bodies are exploded by the words of a returned Jesus in the final novel as Christians witness appreciatively.

The Left Behind series thus sets itself the task of imagining in fiction what it would be like to live through the events envisioned by John of Patmos in the book of Revelation. Understanding the qualities of that book's genre, apocalypse, is crucial for comprehending what is the most popular corpus of religiously interested literature in the contemporary period. As with all other human communities, evangelical beliefs are circulated through storytelling. Left Behind is thus a window into evangelical belief and Christian Right politics. However, Left Behind's storytelling practices exist in continuity with our most ancient concerns: the existence of evil and suffering, the purported justice of the god(s), where we go when we die, and whether we can expect reward or punishment there. The ancients tried to solve these problems of theodicy through stories, with all their characters, plots, dialogues, and fantastic settings. As then, so now.

John of Patmos faced just such questions as he pondered the persecution of Jesus' followers by the Roman Empire in the last half of the first century CE. Other New Testament books, such as Acts or some of the letters of Paul (e.g., Romans), take pains to emphasize the compatibility of being a Jesus-follower and a citizen of the Empire, as Paul was. Paul argues carefully in Romans 13 that God authorizes governments and laws, which need to be obeyed.[3] However, something else was happening in John of Patmos's time, the "persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the Roman authorities" (Shoemaker 2018, p. 30), citizenship status no longer being a guarantee of protection or due process for Jewish or Gentile Jesus-followers. Saturated with allusions to the Hebrew Bible, John wrote about God's coming punishment of Rome, which he symbolically named Babylon, resonant with the history of both Babylon's defeat of Judah in 586 BCE but also God's destruction of the Babylonian Empire through Persia's Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE. Full of rage at the unjust persecution of Jesus' followers by Rome, John penned a fantasy of violent retribution, when a returned Jesus himself would exact punishment on his mundane enemies, and on the cosmic beings behind them.

The genre of apocalypse was forged in the fires of empire, as resistance to empire.[4] Revelation is its New Testament instantiation, but an earlier example is the Hebrew Bible's book of Daniel, the last half of which was written in the context of and against the oppression of Judeans by the Seleucid Empire. Apocalypse as a genre appears to have emerged in two stages. The early stage in the third century BCE is evinced by parabiblical texts like the *Book of Watchers* and the *Astronomical Book*, in which Enoch, who was among the seventh generation of humans and who seems to have not died but simply "walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him" (Gen 5.24), records a trip to the heavenly realm. These texts are early examples of Jewish scribes systematically responding to Mesopotamian and Greek knowledge, detailing angelology, cosmology, and other bodies of learning (see Reed 2020, pp. 120–70), and ascribing their priority to Enoch. Bible scholars consider these early parabiblical writings to be apocalypses because they entail hidden knowledge of the heavenly realm and its many divine beings, in which a scribe records his visions, aided by a heavenly interpreter. *Watchers* was "an alternative theodicy" (Portier-Young 2011, p. 287) insofar as it addressed the question of the origin of evil, elaborating on the extremely elliptical account in Genesis 6 of how the "sons of God" took human women for wives and birthed a race of giants.[5] In *Watchers* these became corrupted angels who for the first time "gain names, classes, motives, and inner lives" (Reed 2020, p. 5), and to whom *Watchers* ascribes the origins of ill-advised human crafts such as metalworking and cosmetics.

The second stage of the development of apocalypse occurs in Seleucid-era "historical" apocalypses such as the book of Daniel and the parabiblical *Apocalypse of Weeks* and *Animal Apocalypse*, also ascribed to Enoch. Here, abstract cosmological questions about the beginnings of evil became focused on the intense suffering of God's people under the rule of the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes. As we shall see, Antiochus forbade circumcision and seems to have placed a statue of Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple, which the author of Daniel calls an "abomination that desolates" (Dan 9.27 and 12.11). Like the pre-Seleucid apocalypses, Daniel proliferates divine beings as part of its account of evil and suffering, now sharpened by the "theological crisis" (Portier-Young 2011, p. 68) under Antiochus. Such proliferation is an important aspect of the genre still in play in the later Revelation, and, as we shall see, the Left Behind series. In Daniel, the angel Gabriel is "prevented" from coming to the prophet to explain the events to come because the "Prince of Persia"—a "national god" (Shoemaker 2018, p. 20)—stops him until the angel Michael aids him. In Daniel's vision, supernatural beings are named and appear to control specific territories, and Gentile kingdoms are "rebellious monsters that could only be destroyed" (Collins 2016, p. 123); they are likewise behind Judea's mundane oppressors (pp. 136–37). Daniel also sees a vision of "one like a son of man" (Dan 7.13) to whom God gives sovereign rule in this Judean Second Temple "Two Powers in Heaven" theology (Boyarin 2004, p. 145).

Apocalypse was thus a package of theological innovations that helped answer the problem of evil in general and of Judean suffering in particular by telling stories of named divine beings engaged in specific plots and struggles against others, agents who have motivations, attributes, dialogues, and backgrounds of their own. Apocalypse proliferated divine beings in its account of evil, distributing responsibility by attributing to them the power behind Judea's mundane enemies; God was to intervene imminently in a cosmic battle in which he would defeat his supernatural and mundane enemies; apocalypse likewise imagined a life after death involving possible reward or punishment.[6] The gospel writers' attribution to Jesus of the "son of man" picks up on Daniel's apocalyptic cue, identifying Jesus with the second power in heaven. It is this Jesus who will shortly defeat the Beast of the Roman Empire, Revelation assures us. Jesus' followers are to remain faithful, for God's intervention is imminent, though some further trials and tribulations are to come.

As the primary source text for the Left Behind series, this apocalyptic story brings with it the genre's history of rage at imperial oppression, the promise of retributive violence, and the hopeful expectation of an afterlife for those still undergoing terrible events and for those who have already been martyred. It likewise brings with it the knowledge that one's political opponents, such as the Secretary General and people willing to work with him in the international order, are the enemies of God. Apocalypse entails a Manichean binary, an extreme moral dualism, and a righteous anger at the persecution and trauma experienced by one's group, with the expectation of deliverance and divine revenge. Apocalypse solves the problem of evil by telling stories, and the Left Behind series is a sequence of such tales.

Thus, faithful followers of God in the series experience all kinds of terrible events, losses, and deaths under the seven-year tribulation of the Antichrist, from wars to plagues, earthquakes, and other disasters. For instance, Rayford's daughter Chloe eventually marries Buck, a skeptical, hard-nosed journalist who comes round to the gospel. But Chloe is ultimately guillotined and Buck (with others) dies in battle, both martyred in the course of the series (Chapman 2013, p. 198), leaving behind their orphaned son. Similarly, Bruce Barnes, a fake-Christian pastor until he discovers the left behind DVDs and books by Raptured Christians, is eventually poisoned by the Antichrist (Chapman 2013, p. 188). As other characters are introduced in the series they also are murdered, imprisoned, tortured, or suffer trials imposed by the one world government and its stifling religious system, which tries to compel their assent. Some Christians are beheaded, one new convert diabolically bursts into flames, and others are forced to take the "mark of the beast" (Chapman 2013, pp. 194, 193). Adopting thriller conventions—infiltration, tech-savvy espionage, subterfuge, kidnapping, assassination—the Left Behind series recounts the trials of those who actively struggle against the Antichrist's plans, picking up on a latent possibility in the apocalyptic imagination of violent resistance to oppression rather than passive waiting.[7] Inspired by an earlier evangelical novel the authors credit—Frank Peretti's (1986) *This Present Darkness*—the Left Behind series became the most canonical example of this shift in evangelical agency that it represented, as "the passivity of early Rapture novels and Rapture films where believers were taken up to heaven and everyone else damned was transformed during this same twenty-five-year period (1980–2005) to depictions of believers actively combating the Antichrist, even after the Rapture" (Frykholm 2014, p. 454).[8]

3. Storytelling

Seeing theodicy as a theological problem with a storytelling solution helps us understand how the introduction of other supernatural characters allows for the creation of dramatic conflict and contests of will, and the staging of theological dialogism. This solution is ancient: the book of Job introduced other characters, who had different ideas from Job about the reasons for his suffering, but also a divine being called 'the satan', an adversarial officer of the heavenly court whose machinations and manipulation of God propel the circumstances of Job's suffering. Apocalypse repopulated monotheism's sparse divine realm with new characters—not only, in Daniel, the new son of man and Gabriel and Michael, but also divine antagonists like the "Prince of Persia" who seemed to be behind Judean woes. By the first century CE, apocalyptic thinking imagined that God had a powerful cosmic enemy; Job's 'the satan' had become Satan, "the apotheosis of evil" (Wray and Mobley 2005, p. 148) tempting Jesus in the wilderness (Matt 4). In Revelation, symmetry seems to powerfully call forth other divine beings: if Satan is God's mirrored enemy, now Jesus also has an opposite in the Antichrist. Even Jesus' harbinger, John the Baptist, has his counterpart in a "false prophet" (16.13) who leads the nations astray.

The Left Behind series extends this storytelling dramatically. At the end of *Glorious Appearing*, after Jesus vanquishes his foes, all these divine beings reappear. Jesus sentences Carpathia, the Antichrist, and Fortunato, the false prophet, to be tortured for 1000 years in a lake of fire. Gabriel is there to announce the proceedings, quoting Revelation, as Michael is sent to retrieve and then physically subdue "the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan" (316). Jesus judges Satan, "lay[ing] at your feet all the suffering of mankind" (320) "as the god of this evil world" (321). Michael and Satan wrestle among the crowd gathered to witness the judgment, until Michael carries Satan into the abyss, "the bottomless pit", where he is to remain for 1000 years, and returns to hand Jesus the key (329). But the proliferation of divine beings extends further. Jesus had earlier judged "Ashtaroth, Baal, and Cankerworm, the three froglike demonic creatures who had been sent out to deceive the nations, persuading them to gather together in Megiddo to fight the Son of God" (303–4; see Rev 16.13–14). Like *Paradise Lost*, *Glorious Appearing* takes advantage of divine proliferation in the service of its storytelling strategy "to justify the ways of God to [hu]man[s]" by reimagining the pagan gods as demons, fallen angels who deceived human societies for millennia.

The Left Behind series thus reprises the narrative solution of another apocalypse-fueled theodicy, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In this regard, Abraham Stoll argues that Milton and other mid-seventeenth century Christian poets were addressing the problem that the "verisimilitude" of strict monotheism would be "boring" (Stoll 2009, p. 56).[9] He continues,

> *This midcentury grapping over the presence of gods in poetry is an important chapter in the seventeenth century debate over monotheistic narrative. It outlines the tension between monotheism and narrative, a tension at the heart of Milton's late poetry: while monotheism pushes toward complete aniconism, the demands of narrative for interesting story–or any story at all–pull away from that extreme position. Such contradictory impulses mark monotheistic narrative especially in its relationship to polytheism. (57)*

Thus, in Book One of *Paradise Lost*, the rebellious angels, newly cast out of heaven and discovering their new home of hell, are introduced by the various names they would come to have as pagan gods: Dagon, Chemosh, Baal, Moloch, Belial, and Astarte. Among them are androgynous "Spirits" who had "had general Names/Of Baalim and Ashtaroth, those male,/These Feminine" (1.421–23). In *Glorious Appearing*, these appear as the former pretend-gods Baal and Ashtaroth, rebel angels destroyed by Jesus in judgment.

But Baal was also a god in ancient Israel's pantheon of deities, a god shared with other Northwest Semitic peoples, as may have been Ashtaroth.[10] Critical Bible scholars now believe that ancient Israelites worshipped a pantheon of deities before theological innovators—especially the redactors of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History in the Hebrew Bible—winnowed that pantheon down to a single deity in a "Yahweh-alone" movement. Ancient Israel largely shared with the "Canaanites" a pantheon that has become clearer to us since the 1929 discovery of clay tablets in the ancient buried city of Ugarit that detail these gods' stories. There was aged El, the high god of the pantheon, and his consort Asherah, "the Mother of the Gods" (Coogan and Smith 2012, p. 129). Second in status to El was Baal, Ugarit's patron god of war and fertility, victorious over the deity Yam (Sea) but defeated by Mot, the god of death. Baal's sister Anat, an adolescent warrior goddess, destroys Mot in revenge:

> with a sword she split him;
> with a sieve she winnowed him;
> with a fire she burned him;
> with millstones she ground him;
> in the fields she sowed him. (Coogan and Smith 2012, p. 148)

Yahweh was likely another storm god introduced from southern Edom through trade into the highlands and eventually incorporated into the Israelite pantheon (Smith 2002, pp. 32–33), absorbing characteristics from Baal. El and Yahweh were once distinct gods, as biblical traces attest in Deut 32.8–9, where "Elyon" distributes the different nations to "the divine sons", granting Yahweh the Israelites, and Ps 82, where El presides over a divine council in which one member, Yahweh, threatens the rest of the pantheon with mortality (Smith 2001, p. 157). Other passages take pains to suture together what were once distinct gods, as in Exodus 6:2–3, where God says to Moses, "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai], but by my name 'The Lord' [that is, YHWH] I did not make myself known to them". The ancient Israelites were polytheists, as were all their neighbors.

Polytheism had advantages in narratively solving the theological problem of theodicy across the ancient Near East, as evinced by Homer, and by the crisis felt by "Mesopotamia's theologians" in Assyria and Babylon as they developed a "near monotheism": "With all other divinities, including demonic ones, effectively eliminated from having any power or function, logically it became necessary to attribute responsibility for evil, as well as for good, to Marduk (alternatively, Ashur), the universal lord" (Batto 2013, pp. 227, 225). While "the various ways by which ancient Israel reconstituted the diversity of its deities into a single God" (Smith 2004, p. 151) appears to have taken centuries, this consolidation into "monotheism"—in architecture if not in demographics (Fredriksen 2018a, p. 200)—can be plausibly understood to be a theological innovation in response to the troubling defeat of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and then Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Rather than understand Israel's patron deity as being defeated by stronger deities of rival nations such as Ashur or Marduk/Bel, Israelite theologians reimagined ancient Near East godhood as the divine beings who served under their supreme creator God who controlled history and its empires—"conceptual changes" in response to "the fall of the northern and southern kingdoms" (Smith 2004, p. 86). This God disciplined his chosen people and eventually rescued them with his anointed one, Cyrus the Great, pagan emperor of Persia who defeated Babylon and permitted the Judeans to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

However, this monotheism could not adequately explain national misfortune that could not be interpreted as divine discipline for Judean disobedience (Ehrman 2008, pp. 202–8), as with the state terror employed by Antiochus. Judean theologians, responding to this historical crisis of God's silence and inactivity in the face of national undeserved persecution, mapped out a new theological vision. Using pre-Seleucid cosmological musings about the beginnings of corrupted angels developed in *Watchers* and *Astronomical*, they now attributed Judean misfortunes to lesser divine antagonists, effectively repopulating the cosmos. We can thus understand the contraction of the Israelite pantheon into (architectural) monotheism and then its re-expansion into a de-facto apocalyptic polytheism as theological innovations in response to historical traumas of national suffering. They told new stories about why God's chosen people were inexplicably suffering under foreign domination.

This apocalyptic polytheism set the stage for the Christian Trinity. As Daniel Boyarin notes of the appearance of the "son of man" in Daniel, "The two-thrones apocalypse in Daniel calls up a very ancient strand in Israel's religion, one in which, it would seem, the 'El-like sky god of justice and the younger rider on the clouds, storm god of war, have not really been merged as they are for most of the Bible" (Boyarin 2012, p. 46). This is a "fragment", says Boyarin, "of what is perhaps the most ancient of religious visions of Israel that we can find", a "fragment of ancient lore" (44). The ancient imagery here recalls that "'El was the general Canaanite high divinity while YHVH was the Ba'al-like divinity of a small group of southern Canaanites, the Hebrews, with 'El a very distant absence for these Hebrews. When the groups merged and emerged as Israel, YHVH, the Israelite version of Ba'al, became assimilated to 'El as the high God and their attributes largely merged into one doubled God, with 'El receiving his warlike stormgod characteristics from YHVH" (49). Additionally, these "two divinities, in the course of time, would end up being the first two persons of the Trinity" (40). That is, when Yahweh entered the pantheon, he absorbed characteristics from the storm god Baal—perhaps the imagery associated with his overcoming of the chaotic waters of creation (see Smith 2002, pp. 85–87), or the qualities of the storm deity as in Psalm 29 (Day 2002, pp. 95–98). As Smith describes this transformation of ancient Israel's pantheon, "Collective memory—or the lack of it (in other words, collective amnesia)—helped Israel to forget about its own polytheistic past, and in turn served to induce a collective amnesia about the other gods, namely, that many of these had been Israel's in the first place" (Smith 2004, p. 5). Cultural amnesia about primordial polytheism allowed textual traces of it to survive, residual imagery and vocational niches that became available to apocalyptic Jews and then Jesus followers in the centuries to come.

In Revelation and the Left Behind series, then, this residual/emergent apocalyptic de-facto polytheism allows for a dramatic turn-around of events, in which the suffering of God's chosen people is suddenly and swiftly reversed when God's anointed warrior defeats God's cosmic enemy, the satisfying resolution to troubling historical experience and theological stress. Historical apocalypses, we remember, attempted to solve the theological problem posed by particular national theodicies: namely, why God's people were suffering as they attempted to follow his will, oppressed by the Seleucid and then Roman Empires. However, apocalypse, especially for early Jesus-followers, entailed eschatological imminence: the expectation, as Jesus says in the final words of Revelation, "I am coming soon."[11]

Yet “as the years stretched on” (Fredriksen 2018b, p. 106), the imminent eschatology that solved a historically particular theological problem became postponed, and postponed repeatedly; Jesus kept not returning.[12] Evangelical novels such as those in the Left Behind series solve this problem by partaking in a fundamentalist hermeneutics that flattens the Biblical text, removing it from its many contexts of historical composition and authorial intention. This mode of “decoding interpretation” (Collins 2012, p. 89) complements the patchwork collage approach of premillennial dispensationalist theology, wherein signs of the End are crafted through selective citations of not just Revelation, but also Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the gospels, and various Pauline (such as 1 Thes) and pseudo-Pauline (such as Ephesians) epistles. LaHaye and Jenkins’s eschatology sees the book of Revelation as containing coded information about events to take place nineteen or twenty centuries after it was written. In this reading, the author of Revelation is not (primarily) speaking in symbolic terms of the reach of the Roman Empire and its persecution of first century Jesus followers. Rather, as the *Left Behind* authors put it, “Bible prophecy is history written in advance” (219). That the Bible’s many historical layers can always be about current events is likewise behind some evangelical apprehension that President Trump is a ‘type’ of Cyrus the Great, the pagan ruler who saves God’s people (now that God’s people are evangelical Christians) from the rule of an oppressive empire.[13] Ultimately, this mode of flattened reading solves the problem of imminence that the invocation of apocalyptic theology might entail because it misunderstands writings responding to particular historical circumstances, making them into coded information about events dozens of centuries in the future. And so generations of white evangelicals appear to have believed, and to continue to believe, that Jesus will return within their lifetimes.[14]

4. Genre

Apocalypse provides many of the same storytelling advantages for theodicy today as it did two millennia ago, as was suggested when President Trump’s evangelical adviser Paula White condemned the “demonic networks” behind his political opposition and impeachment.[15] But apocalypse’s importance today must be understood above all for the way its genre shapes affect for contemporary conservative white Christians. Genre entails not just recognizable patterns of literary conventions. It can also operate to “fashion our sociality” (Frow 2015, p. 166) by structuring a sensibility, a lens through which to see the world, a set of expectations. As Carolyn Miller articulates in her “phenomenologically informed understanding of genre as social action” (Bawarshi and Reiff 2010, p. 73): “what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have [. . .]. We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potential for failure and success in acting together. As a recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality” (Miller 1994, p. 32). Although written in the context of Rhetorical Genre Studies, Miller’s point may be no less true of literary genres such as apocalypse. If “Genre shapes perception” (Astell and Monta 2014, p. 101), recognizing the conventions of a gothic novel or a romance prepares readers for what is to come, but it also trains readers to interpret the fictional world—and perhaps the real world—in certain ways. Genre can inculcate a way of meeting the world, what to expect there and how to react because “genres participate in the construction of the situations to which they respond” (Bawarshi and Reiff 2010, p. 69).

Without essentializing the genre of apocalypse, as Mikhail Bakhtin did with the novel (Frow 2015, p. 146), we can see that for Judeans and Jesus-followers, apocalypse functioned as “situated cognition” (Bawarshi and Reiff 2010, p. 80) in just such a way. Apocalypse made sense of current experience and prepared its hearers for what was to come. It continues these functions in the Left Behind series, which interprets the world but also trains its readers to experience the world in apocalyptic fashion. If “how we determine a situation is based not so much on our direct perception of the situation but more so on our ability to define it by way of the available typifications, which then shape our perceptions of how, why, and when to act" (Bawarshi and Reiff 2010, p. 68), the Christian Right's dominant genre today is not so much the good news of the gospel as it is apocalypse. "Genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world" and "create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility" (Frow 2015, p. 2). Daniel, Revelation and the Left Behind series are crucial literary nodes in a wider network of white evangelical alternative information that trains believers in a phenomenology of apocalypse. In *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Wai-Chee Dimock (2008) argues that the study of American literature needs "a scale enlargement along the temporal axis that also enlarges its spatial compass" (4), noting in particular that genres, like world religions, are among the human phenomena requiring a planetary analysis. In this frame of "deep time", she notes that the epic and the novel are genres that "stretch from antiquity to modernity [. . .] durable threads that bind together the world" (78). I would like to suggest that the genre of apocalypse is a world-binding religious genre in just such terms, now ascendant as the dominant worldview of Christian Right literature, politics and affect. Its plots, characters, and conflicts supply the narrative answers to the theological problem of theodicy facing conservative white Christians in America, shaping their experience of persecution and oppression: why God permits them to suffer so.

Apocalypse is not axiomatically anti-empire. A different tradition of apocalypse evolved in the late ancient Near East about a "last emperor" (Shoemaker 2018, p. 36) who would emerge in the end times to restore empire and hand it over to God—an "imperial eschatology" (63) that Shoemaker shows was shared across Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and emergent Islam. Though shades of this imagination aptly characterize the evangelical desire to reclaim the Christian nation, it is partially overshadowed by a more pessimistic anti-imperial experience of persecution within—paradoxically—the strongest neoliberal empire in human history. The sense that their political foes are the enemies of God, supported by demonic networks; the extreme moral dualism; the expectation of imminent vindication; the experience of persecution and oppression by a larger secular/pagan 'empire'; the expectation of future retribution or reward: all the attributes of the apocalyptic imagination characterize the politics of the Christian Right. Conservative white Christians since the 1950s have been compelled to share political and cultural power in the U.S., a curtailment of privilege and decentering that they have experienced as oppression. In an extraordinary process of maladapted endurance through centuries and across continents, the genre that once gave hope to the powerless has been adopted by the most politically and culturally powerful demographic in the country.

5. Antiochus

It bears recalling the conditions of "state terror" that led to the beginnings of historical apocalypse when Antiochus aimed to crush the Judean spirit of resistance to his empire following a brief revolt (Portier-Young 2011, p. 136). To do so, his forces employed "massacre, abduction, home invasion, and plunder of the temple" (142). His forces massacred as many as 40,000, including "old and young, men and women, children and babies" (143), and sold "a large segment of the [remaining] population into slavery" (147). He plundered the "temple furniture and decorations, implements of sacrificial worship, and votive offerings" (150). In one prominent display of "political violence" (161) on the Sabbath intended to "undermine trust in divine providence" (164), Antiochus's military commander "staged a military parade which he gruesomely transformed into a massacre of its spectators" (160), setting fire to parts of the city and tearing down houses and walls (160). Assaulting Judean identity, Antiochus forbade "traditional sacrifices", "sabbath observance, infant circumcision, [and] possession of scrolls of the law" (193), and forced Judeans to eat pork (210). Punishment was an act of state terror that sent a message beyond its victims: mothers who circumcised their sons "were put to death (1:60), with babies hung from their necks [or breasts]", as were their families (194). Antiochus also "compelled Judeans to participate in a festival honoring the god Dionysus" (200) and rededicated the Jerusalem temple to "Zeus Olympios", negating Yahweh's claim to the "sole divinity" with a particular relationship with Israel (203). Listing these horrors of Antiochan policy enables us to understand why the literary genre of apocalypse saw that "the empires that ruled over Judea had passed beyond the realm of the human, and humane, and beyond the limits of divinely ordained natural and social order, into the realm of the monstrous" (171).

Apocalypse's response to historical trauma illuminates how wildly inappropriate is its currency as a governing vision of Christian Right experience in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America. Pro-segregation conservative white Christians were compelled to share political power after the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965).[16] Conservative white Christians were compelled in court to give up preferential treatment in public schools wherein their Bibles were read, their prayers were publicly announced, their account of creationism taught, and their children protected from the supposed dangers of miscegenation that integrated schools posed.[17] In a society that was adopting a procedural secularism in the service of religious pluralism, conservative white Christians were not being forced to have abortions, or marry someone of a different race, or of the same sex, but they lost their privilege of preventing other people from having abortions or marrying someone of a different race or of the same sex. Conservative white Christians were not forced to take drugs, read pornography, listen to rock music, or dress immodestly as the decades wore on, but they feared losing their children to these temptations and they lost their cultural power to compel the conduct of other people who had different views. "Generations of evangelicals learned to be afraid of communists, feminists, liberals, secular humanists, 'the homosexuals', the United Nations, the government, Muslims, and immigrants", and their sense of fear and embattlement has translated into a decades-long "religious war" and "cultural war", as Pat Buchanan announced at the Republican National Convention in 1992, to reassert white Christian masculinity (Du Mez 2020, pp. 13, 139). Conservative white Christians have experienced a loss of privilege, and this compelled sharing of power as apocalypse—as a persecution echoing the state terror practiced by Antiochus against the Judeans, of slaughter, abduction, enslavement, homes and cities razed, and sacred property defiled and stolen.[18]

Describing the conditions for apocalypse's beginnings makes clear how strange its currency is. But it also helps explain the radicalization of the Republican Party into an anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, authoritarian expression of white Christian supremacy, as has been prominently on display during the Trump presidency and its conclusion in the Capitol insurrection.[19] They are "a traditionally high-status or dominant group (white Christian males in particular) who perceived a certain degree of threat to their status by some minority group (e.g., racial minorities, immigrants, Muslims, feminists, the LGBTQ community, secular elites)" (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. 60), and who are now struggling for the restoration of lost political and cultural power. While John Collins explains that "People embrace apocalyptic fantasies not only because of political oppression, but because they feel culturally marginalized and feel that their cherished beliefs are not respected or accepted in public discourse" (Collins 2012, p. 95), it appears that a loss of dominance—not oppression and marginalization—can also trigger apocalyptic affect. Engaged in "a war for the soul of our nation" and "a battle between good and evil", as evangelical leader Robert Jeffress put it (qtd. in Posner 2020, p. 260), they fight to return to the center of American life and meaning. In some sense, the Left Behind series imagines events similar to Maccabees and Daniel right around the corner, when the Antichrist imposes one world religion, takes away their religious freedoms and violently persecutes believers. Carpathia, after all, rises to power in Romania by extra-constitutional means (*Left* pp. 275–76) and strong-arms his way to Secretary-General of the U.N. (pp. 417, 355), maneuvers probably aided, it turns out, by hypnosis (pp. 461–62). Both rises to power are enabled by democratic votes (pp. 276, 417), but democracy does not confer legitimacy on Carpathia in the eyes of the Christian characters, authors, or readers, who understand the larger supernatural forces behind democratic processes, and how the demonic manipulates the democratic.[20] The Left Behind series "interpellates a paranoid reader" (Chapman 2013, p. 43) to see pluralism and procedural secularism as the birth pangs of the last days, part of a "nefarious plot to steal away the rights of conservative Christians" (Posner 2020, p. 240), conflating future oppression under the Antichrist with contemporary policies that decenter or deprivilege them. Antichrist abolishing Christianity tomorrow is anticipated by secularists making them bake a cake for gay husbands today. This has helped give rise to the "inverted golden rule" among conservative white Christians: they do unto their opponents that which they imagine their opponents will do to them.[21]

As Whitehead and Perry (2020) describe this "Christian nationalism" motivating most white evangelicals—but also many conservative white mainline Protestants and white Catholics—it is "ultimately about privilege" (153) defended from changes "toward equality for groups that have historically lacked access to the levers of power—women, sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities" (154). If losing the Civil War was a "theodicy" for Southern white Christians struggling "to square the ideas of providential power and white Christians as God's chosen people with military defeat" (Jones 2020, p. 89), conservative white Christians today have experienced the loss of power to make religious choices for other people as a parallel theodicy, a curtailment of their own "religious freedom" as oppression and persecution. Apocalypse, baked into their religious tradition from its beginnings, provides a lens through which they interpret the experienced disorder, their feeling that God as they understand Him could not be behind these events. It provides logic for God's total control, and the otherwise inexplicable disempowerment of his people in a disordered, evil world. The storytelling advantages include not just a largely populated but invisible cosmic realm—the "demonic networks" behind the double impeachment of their anointed one—but also plot as delay, suffering made meaningful, the redemption of the time of suffering during tribulations, and the agency they might wield to wrest control of God's kingdom back from his enemies.[22]

6. Conclusions

The silence and inactivity of God do not often emerge as theological problems until the experience of suffering or evil triggers the agonizing questions of theodicy (Douglas 2022). I contend that the dramatic political and social changes that compelled conservative white Christians to share power in the United States have been experienced as communal suffering in need of explanation. These changes decentered God's chosen people in God's own favorite, chosen nation, triggering a phenomenology of disorder that found a ready if inappropriate genre from its own Christian beginnings in apocalypse. While the renewal of the genre of apocalypse in the Left Behind series is not the cause of conservative white Christians' extreme moral dualism, it trains them to experience the relative empowerment of other groups as part of a story about their suffering during God's momentary absence. Apocalypse entails a range of religious affects and experiences largely outside normative expectations of benevolent religion. Vindication, judgment, revenge, resentment, righteous hatred of one's enemies, the wish for their imminent destruction, theological certainty, the triumphant display of right authority, right judgement, and just punishment—these are the primary affects.

While I have emphasized these aspects of resentment and vengeance in apocalypse's structure of feeling, I want to conclude by recognizing an even more basic affect at its root. The vehemence with which Christian Right politics, like Left Behind, has embraced apocalypse may suggest an undercurrent of fear about the silence and inactivity of God—the occasion for the beginnings of historical apocalypses in Biblical and parabiblical literature. Judeans wrote the earliest apocalypses in response to and in the context of Ancient Near East polytheism. Mapping the other divine beings' names, identities, geographies and vocations, and theologically subordinating them to Israel's one God, they may have wondered if they misapprehended the cosmos, whether these other (national) gods were powerful and not subordinated at all. Assertions of monotheistic power in these circumstances might betray underlying anxieties, especially while they continued to be persecuted by a state terror that prevented them from properly serving their deity. Lingering fear may be one of the literary qualities of the genre of apocalypse: a story asserting the ultimate superiority of one's god, told in the face of that god's inactivity, even as evidence accumulates for his rivals' real power.

Perhaps such a lingering fear unintentionally manifests in *Glorious Appearing* when Jesus judges the other divine beings, demonstrating his true power and authority, especially over Baal. Jesus, we recall, has ridden through the sky among the clouds, slaying his enemies. He sits in judgment on Baal, whom the Ugaritic poetry described as the "Rider on the Clouds" (Coogan and Smith 2012, p. 115), "Baal the Conqueror" (119). In the Ugaritic cycle, Baal, the storm god who is also a warrior god, had proved master over the sea, but was slain by Death, yet then rose again, a resurrection occasioned by the dying of Death itself. And so Jesus' judgment of Baal at the end of *Glorious Appearing* wonderfully resonates with this unrecognized history as he condemns his precursor and antecedent, unaware of the ancient continuity between them. Baal had been the national god of Ugarit beneath the headship of the high god El, we remember, and when Yahweh was introduced into the ancient Israelite pantheon from southern regions, he borrowed imagery from Baal: "Yahweh as rider of the clouds is itself adapted from the older Canaanite storm imagery of the theophanies of Baal" (Collins 2016, p. 127). Absorbing Baal's qualities and eventually replacing him as the junior deity beneath El, Yahweh later merged with El himself, freeing up this junior niche, a place for a second power in heaven. Daniel's "son of man" arrives on clouds, echoing the theophanies of Baal and Yahweh, the niche opened up for Jesus' performance in good storm-warrior god fashion in Revelation, and then in *Glorious Appearing*. Dimock argues that genres and religions bind cultures across centuries and continents; perhaps literary characters such as the gods do too. The great god Baal is still with us 3500 years later. Subordinated to God the Father in *Glorious Appearing*, Jesus wreaks vengeance on the unbelievers who persecuted his people, reflecting the "warrior Christ" championed by white evangelical masculinity (Du Mez 2020, pp. 3, 165), even as the imagery strangely returns him to what may be his earliest instantiation as Baal, god of storms and war.

In the first volume of the Left Behind series, bewildered by the Rapture he does not yet understand, Rayford opens his wife's Bible and reads Jesus' final words in Revelation: "Yes, I am coming quickly" (124), a line modern translations such as the NRSV render more accurately as "I am coming soon" (Rev 22:20; Douglas 2019, pp. 30–31). After almost twenty centuries of not coming soon, in *Left Behind* Jesus does not come quickly either, taking a leisurely 12 volumes to return. Nonetheless, the delay is the occasion for apocalypse's theodicy. Historical apocalypses such as Daniel attempted to stave off the despair threatening Judeans under Antiochan terror, or the option of bowing to assimilationist Hellenism. The national deity continues to stay away, deaf to the cries of his people—the Judeans of 2200 years ago, and the supersessionist conservative white Christians today. Perhaps there is an undercurrent of despair in the anti-democratic authoritarian strain of the U.S. Christian Right, one we cannot comprehend by imagining that religion is naturally benevolent unless twisted by outside forces. The destruction, rage, alternate epistemological propaganda ecosystems, misogyny, racism, and intolerance to which we bear witness in the early twenty-first century may reflect a transfigured fear in addition to a loss of power.

Today, signs of fear about God's inattention to their imagined suffering abound in fundamentalist fiction and in its popularity with its audiences. Fundamentalist fictions are full of suffering: the coming of the Antichrist and his one-world religion, an all-American town besieged by demons, a child abducted, abused and murdered, a young woman forced into prostitution, a pregnancy from a sexual assault, a fiancé killed on the frontier, doubt and death in the Civil War, and so on.[23] Such fictions "encouraged readers to oppose pluralism [because it] is imagined as the cause of cultural upheaval, and readers are asked again and again to imagine how upsetting difference is" (Silliman 2021, pp. 213–14). But they are also fantasies depicting God's miraculous actions, speech and presence in ways that are not felt in everyday life. The valence of apocalypse in these circumstances of perceived communal persecution makes awkward sense, as a genre that promised a rescue that never came, that kept never occurring. In the meantime, the continuing power of apocalypse shapes our historical crisis of revanchist white Christian nationalism, and is reflected in the stories conservative white Christians tell themselves of their own persecution at the hands of the enemies of God.

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Notes

[1] As their respective books suggest, apocalypse can figure as crisis—neoliberalism's "long downturn" in the last five decades for (Sinykin 2020, p. 1) and for everyday life in the shadow of the "nuclear-military-industrial complex" for (Hurley 2020, p. 4)—without necessarily envisioning an end to crisis. Their books examine the continued deployment of apocalypse from below, by Indigenous and African American writers, a more traditional use posed against "the lived experience of futurelessness" that refuses apocalypse's typical eschatological finality (Hurley and Sinykin 2021). They ask, "How is it that apocalypse can equally serve subaltern thinkers and artists seeking to imagine liberation and the white evangelical Christians in the U.S. who use Biblical eschatology to justify ongoing, violent colonialism?" (Hurley and Sinykin 2018, p. 454). I try to answer this paradox in this article.

[2] As (James Crenshaw 2005) makes clear, defending the justice and goodness of the deity (or deities) in the face of human suffering and/or evil entails not just questions about the moral character of the gods, but also their number. On theodicy see also (Ehrman 2008; Smith 2004; Douglas 2020b).

[3] This dominant view of Acts and other New Testament books has several complexities and dissents. For instance, (Shelly Matthews 2013) explains Acts' currying of favor with empire thusly: "Acts deflects the charge that Christians are superstitious and seditious onto Jews who do not confess Jesus as messiah, a strategy wielded both as an assertion of Christain innocence and to create a clear distinction between Luke's group and non-believing Jews. Acts' message concerning the latter is that these non-believing Jews are just as violent and socially degenerate as the most negative Roman perceptions made them out to be" (64; see also (Yoder 2014, p. 257)). On another note, Joshua Yoder explains that Luke's ambivalent poryrayal in Acts of the Roman governor Gallio "illustrates the potential for Roman authorities and Roman courts to work sensibly and justly, but also exemplifies a less savory aspect of Roman rule: it can be arrogant and domineering, and it does not always bring the peace and protection it promises" (277). Rubén Muñoz-Larrondo similarly sees Acts's message that "Jewish Christians who hold Roman citizenship, like Paul and others, are law-abiding citizens" as undercut by postcolonial "categories of hybridity, mimicry, mockery and alterity" in "a hidden transcript of resistence" to Roman authority (231). On the way in which Romans 13's attitude toward empire might be read as "Neither subordinationist nor antagonistic but both" see (Mukuka 2012, p. 109): "a pre-meditated, contextual, African, postcolonial, contrapuntal and interstitial reading of the text is bound to bring up a liberative and emancipative re-reading of the text while acknowledging it to be colonially inflected" (132).

[4] For this classic view, see (Collins 2016; Portier-Young 2011); for a counterpoint, see (Shoemaker 2018).

[5] But see (Reed 2020, p. 212) for a counterview that *Watchers* is not quite concerned with theodicy questions as voiced in the twentieth century.

[6] But see (Ehrman 2020) for a counter-view about the afterlife, that some apocalyptic prophets (like Jesus) and texts did not imagine eternal torture.

[7] Other parabiblical apocalypses such as 1 Enoch's *Animal Apocalypse* and *Jubilees*, for instance, imagine active military resistance to Empire. See (Portier-Young 2011, pp. 346–81; Collins 2016, pp. 93, 96).

[8] This activism is reflected in LaHaye's political involvment in co-founding the Moral Majority in 1979 with Jerry Falwell (Chapman 2013, p. 16) and donation of money to the Institute for Creation Research (Harding 2001; Douglas 2016, p. 129). As Kristen Du Mez (2020) writes of the tension between premillenial pessimism and postmillenial activism, "LaHaye's embrace of Reconstructionism demonstrates how theological contradictions could be smoothed over in practice. In adopting Reconstructionist teachings piecemeal, premillennialists patched over a long-standing division within conservative Protestantism" (94).

[9] Thus Milton wrote during the emergence of what Paula Fredriksen calls "modern monotheism": "Modern monotheism—belief that only one god exists—arose only with the disenchantment of the universe in the modem period. Modem science swept away a lot of cosmic clutter, reducing radically the number of divine personalities needed earlier to account for the way the world worked" (Fredriksen 2006, p. 243).

[10] On the possible presence of Ashtaroth/Astarte in ancient Israel, see (Smith 2004, pp. 54, 116; Dever 2005, p. 179).

[11] See (Bart Ehrman 2010, pp. 156–62, 262–66) for this sense of Jesus as an apocalyptic Jewish prophet who taught that the son of man was to imminently return "from heaven in judgment, and people needed to be ready for it by mending their ways and living as God wanted them to" (160). As (Ehrman 1999, p. 146) has argued elsewhere, when the historical Jesus uses the term son of man "he seems to be referring to someone other than himself".

[12] Fredriksen (2018b, p. 134) argues that early Jesus followers had to repeatedly "rationaliz[e] the delay of the Kingdom" as they "lived through the heightened expectations—and disorienting disappointments—of at least four anticipated Endtimes. The first

would have been Jesus' final Passover in Jerusalem circa 30 C.E., when the community accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem, and witnessed the crushing event of his crucifixion. The second would have been both marked and sustained by the resurrection appearances, which eventually tapered off and then, finally, ceased (circa 30–32 C.E.?). The third sprang up with the near-calamity caused by Caligula (39–40 C.E.). The fourth, visible in our second-generation source, Mark's gospel, awaited the End in the wake of the temple's destruction (post-70 C.E.). Luke's calm narrative [in Acts] smooths out these lived peaks of vivid expectation, the valleys of disorienting cognitive dissonance, and the various solutions offered by creative reaffirmation. Luke betrays little of these processes. He speaks, instead, of the founding of the Christian church" (184). As she puts it, "Belief that the world is imminently to end has been, paradoxically, one of the longest-lived convictions of Christian culture" (132).

[13] The trope of Trump as Cyrus is most associated with Lance Wallnau (2016); see (Burton 2018).

[14] A 2010 Pew survey revealed that 58% of white evangelicals believed that Jesus will return by 2050, compared with 27% of mainline Protestants and 32% of Catholics. https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/legacy-pdf/625.pdf, accessed on 18 October 2021. A 2020 poll by LifeWay Christian Resources of evangelical and historically black pastors indicated a similar 56% "expect Jesus to return in their lifetime" (https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/04/07/vast-majority-of-pastors-see-signs-of-end-times-in-current-events/, accessed on 18 October 2021).

[15] https://twitter.com/RightWingWatch/status/1171803697292238853?s=20. Like some other Christian Right supporters, White later attributed the President's impeachment to "demonic schemes" and "demonic stirrings and manipulations"—literally demonizing the President's political opposition: https://twitter.com/Paula_White/status/1207526347289038849?s=20, accessed on 18 October 2021.

[16] As (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) show, "The norms sustaining our political system rested, to a considerable degree, on racial exclusion. The stability of the period between the end of Reconstruction and the 1980s was rooted in an original sin: the Compromise of 1877 and its aftermath, which permitted the de-democratization of the South and the consolodation of Jim Crow. Racial exclusion contributed directly to the partisan civility and cooperation that came to characterize twentieth-century American politics" (143).

[17] See respectively *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968) and *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987), and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

[18] The research on conservative white Christian resentment and grievance is vast; see, among others, (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Posner 2020; Jones 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Du Mez 2020; Neiwert 2017; Kruse 2015; Wilentz 2008; Williams 2010; Harding 2001).

[19] See https://revealnews.org/article/how-the-christian-right-helped-foment-insurrection/, accessed on 18 October 2021.

[20] A Fall 2021 PRRI poll indicates that 18% of Americans believe that "The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation". This share will be much higher among Republican voters, but my argument is that apocalyptic extreme moral dualism is even more widespread than this QAnon-inflected belief in supernatural evil beings. See https://www.prri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/, accessed on 18 October 2021.

[21] Evangelicals are "the most likely" group to believe "that Christians are discriminated against", leading them to politically practice an "'inverted golden rule'—do unto others as you expect they will do to you". See https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/03/04/perceived-discrimination-toward-christians-is-highest-living-among-christians/, accessed on 18 October 2021.

[22] See (Chapman 2013, pp. 76–77) for how Left Behind's apocalypse invites believers to dehumanize unbelievers, who deserve the cruelty of God in the "the greatest show on earth" that Jesus puts on for their benefit as he annihilates bodies in *Glorious Appearing* (Chapman 2013, p. 70) and sentences them to eternal torture.

[23] These are the plots, respectively, of the *Left Behind* series, Frank Peretti's (1986) *This Present Darkness*, William Paul Young's *The Shack*, Francine Rivers's *Atonement Child* and *Redeeming Love*, Janette Oke's *Love Comes Softly*, and Lynn Austin's *Candle in the Darkness*.

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