

The Cultural Adaptation of Apocalyptic Imagery: A Case Study¹

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The full head of hair and the moustache are still there, though flecked with grey. The sideburns have disappeared and the sixties' sports shirt with the rolled-up sleeves has given way to the coat and tie of an elder statesman. The 'father of modern-day Bible prophecy,' as the blurb on one of Hal Lindsey's most recent books anoints him, is now 70 years old. For almost 30 years Lindsey has held his position as the guru of popular premillennial dispensationalism.

This article will compare the apocalyptic themes of Hal Lindsey's 1970 best-seller, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (hereafter *LGPE*) with his recent 1997 work, *Apocalypse Code* (hereafter *AC*). The purpose of the comparison is to demonstrate the resiliency and adaptability of apocalypticism in face of changing cultural situations. The article will also demonstrate ways in which Lindsey intertwines culture and theology to produce an eschatological system that, ostensibly, is rigid and inflexible, but in fact turns out to be capable of almost endless mutations.

The notion that apocalypticism is a malleable category with the potential for almost unlimited modifications is a commonly held belief among recent investigators of apocalyptic movements.² This paper, however, will test the thesis of resiliency and adaptability by analyzing two works of one single writer, Hal Lindsey, works separated by a period of almost thirty years.

Though both of Lindsey's books are clearly rooted in premillennial dispensationalism, an eschatological system briefly explained below, the lapse of almost thirty years between these two works makes for a number of fascinating contrasts. I will mention two upfront so as to illustrate the thesis.

First, since the cultural background of the 1970 book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, is the political and social upheavals of the 1960s, the opening chapter establishes a point of contact with the reader by capitalizing on the optimism and hope of that era through the wide-

spread interest in 'futurists' like Edgar Cayce and Jeane Dixon.

By the publication of *Apocalypse Code* in 1997, on the other hand, for Lindsey Western culture is spent and corrupt. His opening chapter has none of the optimism of the earlier book's first chapter. Rather, *Apocalypse Code* appeals to the sense of frustration and fear that pervades the 1990s, centring on apocalyptic threats like ecological disasters, asteroids and meteors, AIDS, and 'killer microbes'.

Second, in neither book are technological advances seen as evidence of cultural progress. Rather, they are consistently interpreted as pre-determined cogs in the prophetic wheel that inexorably grinds toward the end. But as technology advances, apocalyptic terror increases, and Lindsey's interpretation of the apocalyptic symbols shifts. For example, the 'mark of the beast' inscribed on followers of the antichrist in Lindsey's 1970 book is a tattoo; by 1997 it's a computer chip. In the 1970 book the looming revolution in electronic communications is foreboding; by 1997 it's conspiratorial in its role in hastening a one-world government.

Premillennial Dispensationalism as a System of Eschatology

Crucial to premillennial dispensationalism as a system of eschatology are three matters: First, history is divided into time frames or dispensations. Each dispensation represents a specific form of revelation given by God to humanity, with a corresponding covenant delineating God's expectations of humans and God's judgments when humans inevitably fail. For example, the classic divisions of C.I. Scofield in the Scofield Reference Bible are typical, though not universal, for dispensationalists. Scofield delineates seven dispensations between creation and the millennium.

The second characteristic of dispensationalism is its insistence that Scripture be interpreted literally, though, ironically, it's the symbolic and typological interpretation of the Bible that fosters the adaptability found in Hal Lindsey's eschatology.

A final feature of dispensationalism grows out of the second point about the literal interpretation of the Bible. Since Scripture is to be interpreted literally, all of the promises God made to Israel in the Bible are to be fulfilled literally. Thus, when Christ returns he will set up a literal kingdom in a literal Jerusalem and rule from a literal throne. Dispensationalism rejects any theories of supersessionism that would suggest that the church succeeded the Jews as the 'new Israel.' This is why the establishing of the nation of Israel in 1948 was such a momentous event for dispensationalists. For most dispensationalists, this is the one single event that started the ticking of the prophetic clock.

Therefore, most dispensationalists are pro-Israel, though not necessarily pro-Jewish. That is, most dispensationalists do not see Judaism as a legitimate and parallel manifestation of God's will. Rather, the restored nation of Israel is more of a staging ground for impending eschatological events.³

More popularly, premillennial dispensationalism is known for such eschatological features as the secret rapture of the church, a seven year tribulation period, the battle of Armageddon, the rise of the antichrist, the mark of the beast, the mass conversion of Jews to Christianity in the endtimes, the return of Christ, the establishing of the millennial kingdom, the defeat of Satan, and the last judgment with rewards in heaven and punishments in hell.

The origins of dispensationalism are found in the early nineteenth century in the eschatology of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), an Irish cleric in the Church of England, who broke with Anglicanism in 1827 and came to America. Darby became a popular speaker in the Bible conference movement, a sort of chautauqua dedicated to disseminating to lay people the latest eschatological discoveries. With the backdrop of revivalism and millenarian fervor prevalent in the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States, Darby and other itinerant preachers found eager audiences for the dispensational system.

Along with Darby, two other early proponents of dispensationalism were influential. C.I. Scofield (1843–1921), who, with the publication of his Scofield Reference Bible in 1909, did more than any single person (until Hal Lindsey) to propagate dispensationalism, and Clarence Larkin (1850–1924), an engineer turned Baptist minister, whose hand-drawn charts with their stunning detail were widely disseminated in books and in wall-sized reproductions.

Today, the theological centre of dispensationalism is Dallas Theological Seminary, an outgrowth of Scofield's Correspondence Bible School, which Scofield ran from his Dallas pastorate. Academic leaders of dispensationalism today include retired Dallas Seminary president John Walvoord and retired Dallas Seminary theology professor Charles Ryrie. Popularizers of dispensationalism are legion, but examples include T.V. preacher Jack Van Impe, fiction writer Tim LaHaye, whose book *Apollyon*, part of the 'Left Behind' series, in March 1999 became the first fiction book on the religion best-seller list to land on the New York Times best-seller list, and, of course, Hal Lindsey.

Hal Lindsey was born in 1930. He was working on a Mississippi

River tugboat when he converted to Christianity. In 1956 he began to study biblical prophecy, attended Dallas Theological Seminary from 1958–1962, then worked for a parachurch evangelical organization, Campus Crusade for Christ, from 1962–1972. Since the publication of *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970, Lindsey has written other best-sellers and has become the ‘dean’ of endtime prophets worldwide.

A Tale of Two Books

Though *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *Apocalypse Code* are both clearly rooted in premillennial dispensationalism, in many ways they are two different kinds of books. Consider, for example, Lindsey’s sources for documenting the trends of popular culture in the two books. In the opening chapter of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey’s sources for cultural trends are mostly news magazines like *Time* and newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times*. In the opening chapter of *Apocalypse Code*, on the other hand, Lindsey cites Hollywood movies like ‘Twister,’ ‘Dante’s Peake,’ ‘Asteroid,’ and others, and they are cited not so much as the fictional accounts that they are, but almost as documentaries of the decline of western civilization.

Apocalypse Code is more geared to an uneducated reader than *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Not that anyone would mistake *The Late Great Planet Earth* as an intellectual *tour de force*, but in this earlier book Lindsey clearly was attempting to appeal to the university students of the 1960s. For example, each chapter in *The Late Great Planet Earth* begins with a quote from a prominent figure in history. There is none of this in *Apocalypse Code*. In fact, *Apocalypse Code*, unlike *The Late Great Planet Earth*, has no footnotes or endnotes.

Whereas *The Late Great Planet Earth* is clearly written for an audience not necessarily familiar with Christianity (in one chapter Lindsey explains to the reader who Jesus was), *Apocalypse Code* seems to assume that much of its audience will already be Christian. For example, *Apocalypse Code* has a subject and biblical verses index, something not included in *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

One of the reasons that Lindsey has managed to survive as an apocalypticist for some thirty years is his ability to write with a dramatic style that draws readers in. His subtitles are catchy, and he is editorially clever in his use of bold type and white space. He also knows how to hedge his bets. He often qualifies his predictions with words like ‘may,’ ‘could,’ or ‘it’s possible.’

For example, the closest Lindsey ever came to predicting a date for the end was in *The Late Great Planet Earth* when he suggested

that the return of the Jews to the land in 1948 would be the start of *the* generation in which all of the eschatological signs would take place. But notice the masterful use of qualifiers in this explanation of what constitutes a generation:

‘A generation in the Bible is *something like* forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then *within 40 years or so* of 1948, all things *could* take place’ (LGPE, p. 54, italics mine).

Another strategy used in both books is to invite readers into the dispensational worldview by commending them for being a part of the few who are alert to the signs of the time. Lindsey markets himself as an insider, privy to special revelation and exegetical insight. He is fond of citing vague, unnamed sources, suggesting he has special access to information. For example, to prove a point about Ezekiel’s use of the phrase ‘latter days,’ Lindsey quotes a Dr. Kac (no first name) whom he describes as ‘a Jewish medical doctor and noted Bible scholar’ (LGPE, p. 51). Vague citations such as ‘it was reported to me. . .’ (LGPE, p. 174) or ‘according to western intelligence sources. . .’ (AC, p. 163) are typical of both books.

Thus, Lindsey becomes the gnostic guide who is able to make sense of it all. He concludes *Apocalypse Code* with the observation that such issues as euthanasia, cloning, famines, volcanoes and UFO sightings might appear to many to be ‘a collection of unrelated news,’ but to him ‘it all ties together’ (AC, 298–99).

Apocalypticism, Adaptation, and Hermeneutics

Probably the most pronounced feature of premillennial dispensationalism is its literal interpretation of Scripture. In both books, Lindsey consistently scorns those who interpret ‘allegorically.’ In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey equates nonliteral interpretation with ‘explaining away’ a passage. In *Apocalypse Code*, allegorical interpretation, we are told, can lead one ‘down the primrose path either to liberal theology or to some other form of heresy’ (AC, p. 263–64). In both books, non-literal interpretation is said to be an affront to God. For example, if Christ does not reign on earth literally for 1,000 years, this means, according to Lindsey, that God is a liar and does not keep his promises (LGPE, p. 176, AC, 261).

Yet while Lindsey scorns those who interpret apocalyptic passages in ways other than literal, symbolic and imaginative interpretation is the centre piece of his 1997 book. Lindsey’s choice of the title *Apocalypse Code* is no accident. Lindsey is riding the wave of the highly publicized and popular book *The Bible Code* by Michael Drosnin. Drosnin’s book, utilizing equidistant letter sequences of the

Hebrew text of the Torah, claims that details of both ancient and modern history were encoded in the Torah and can be decoded by computer today.

One does not have to read very far in *Apocalypse Code* to see that Lindsey uses the word 'code' in an entirely different way. When Lindsey uses the word 'code,' he is not referring to hidden messages that can ostensibly be deciphered by utilizing equidistant letter sequences. Rather, Lindsey means that prophecies in the Bible were 'encoded' so that they 'could be fully understood only when their fulfilment drew near' (AC, p. 37). More specifically, John's vision on Patmos as recorded in the Book of Revelation was 'an experience of *time travel* to the beginning of the 21st century' (AC, 31).

Utilizing Revelation's statement that John wrote down what he 'saw' and 'heard' (Rev. 1:10, 11, 19; 4:1), Lindsey believes that John was 'physically transported 2000 years into the future' (AC, 67) and was actually seeing and hearing things in the twenty-first century, but describing them in first century language. These encoded prophecies can be deciphered by matching things like 'today's vast arsenal of technical marvels' with John's first century description (AC, 37). This is what Lindsey means by the 'apocalypse code.'

For example, John saw and heard such things as jets, attack helicopters, tanks, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles with Multiple Independently Targeted Reentry Vehicles (ICBMs that are MIRVed), biological and chemical weapons, aircraft carriers, nuclear subs, laser weapons, space stations, and satellites (AC, 36).

Take as an illustration Revelation 9:7–10, a passage that describes locusts preparing for battle. Lindsey characterizes this passage as one filled with 'strange encoded symbols' (AC, 41–43). In Lindsey's detailed decoding of the verses, these locusts turn out to be helicopters, and what John actually saw and heard is the helmeted pilots, the thumping noise of the main rotor blades, and six barrel cannons suspended from the nose of the helicopter. John describes all of this, however, as a locust.

'It is my belief,' Lindsey concludes, 'that current events and technology can give us insights into the amazing Book of the Apocalypse that couldn't have been discerned in other generations. This is the encoding that had to be unlocked by discerning the symbols which describe weapons and phenomena in the light of current science and technology. This is the code that most effectively kept prophecy concealed until the time of the end. I am convinced that time is now!' (AC, 43).

Lindsey finds the confirmation for this hermeneutic in selected

verses which he himself translates. Each verse Lindsey personally translates is followed by his initials HL. The translations are imaginative and creative. For example, when Daniel is told to shut up the words and seal the scroll (12:4), Lindsey brackets the words 'shut up' with the word 'encode.' Therefore, 'if the prophecies are shut up and sealed,' he concludes, 'it must be by encoding the message. . .' (AC, 39) Lindsey suggests that the context will indicate when a term is being used symbolically, but that such discernment is available only to 'Spirit-led students of the Bible' (AC, 39).

In the interval of almost thirty years between the two books, an interesting shift takes place in Lindsey's own understanding of his role as mediator of this insider information. In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey is adamant that there are no prophets receiving revelations from God today (LGPE, 89) . But in *Apocalypse Code*, he credits his hermeneutical insight about the code to personal revelations from God (AC, 30–40), claiming that the Spirit of God has given him special insight (AC, 37).

Apocalyptic Disasters and God's Enemies

One of the main areas in which we see adaptation to a changing culture is in the nature of the impending apocalyptic disasters and the identification of the enemies of God. Though both books are filled with eschatological upheavals and disasters, the later book is clearly much more pessimistic about the future of humanity.

In *Apocalypse Code*, the list of enemies has been tweaked from Lindsey's earlier book. The evil USSR in 1970 is now Russia in 1997, that 'dangerous rogue military power'; In 1997, 'Islamic nations,' rather than the more nebulous 'Arab nations' are to be carefully watched; and not only is China to be feared as in 1970, but in 1997 'Asian technology' in general is targeted. Lindsey cryptically warns that the 'Moscow-Tehran' alliance is one of the 'most prophetically significant developments in the world today' (AC, 82).

Especially prominent in the earlier book is the identification of the enemies of God with biblical scholars and religious leaders. Not only is the meaning of biblical prophecy available only to Lindsey and like-minded interpreters, it is decidedly unavailable to biblical scholars and religious leaders. In fact, Lindsey not only disdains biblical scholars and religious leaders as impediments to the truth about the impending endtime scenario, but, in some cases, declares them to be participants in and agents of the very evil yet to come.

For example, a recurring phrase used by Lindsey to describe those who hold views contrary to his is 'so-called Biblical scholars.' (LGPE,

p. 25) . These are 'liberal professors' (*LGPE*, p. 91) who do such things as assign a late date for the writing of the book of Daniel or accept multiple authorship of the book of Isaiah. 'No self-respecting scholar,' we are told, 'could accept post-millennialism today' (*LGPE*, 176).

Lindsey's distrust of religious institutions and leadership is virulent. For example, believers must investigate the Bible for themselves because they can't depend on their religious leaders (*LGPE*, 41) . Those who ridicule prophecy are merely 'posing as religious leaders' (*LGPE*, 67).

Lindsey identifies the apostate church of the end-time with the ecumenical movement as expressed through the World Council of Churches. Ecumenism leads to doctrinal dilution. The one-world religious system will bring all 'false religions' together. The World Council of Churches and other ecumenists (dubbed 'ecumaniacs' by Lindsey, *LGPE*, 183) are pawns in the hands of Satan who wishes to use religion to blind the minds of humanity (*LGPE*, 132) . Through this system the antichrist will take over the world (*LGPE*, 122).

But, by 1997, God's enemies for Lindsey have shifted from biblical scholars and religious leaders to those who foster a one-world government through the efforts of the United Nations and the European Union (*AC*, 103) . The various components of the one-world government conspiracy are myriad and point to the disenfranchisement Lindsey feels with modern culture, but a couple of examples will make the point.

In 1997 President Bill Clinton designated millions of acres of national parkland in Utah as wilderness area. For Lindsey, this is a 'blueprint for global environmental dictatorship' that operates from the premise that human beings are a cancer on the planet. According to Lindsey, Clinton's actions are only a piece of a larger programme fostered by the United Nations to control the government of the United States (*AC*, 104).

Or take another example. The worldwide computer banking system that is coming will 'permit one man to control the entire population of the world' (*AC*, 107). Personal identification numbers (PIN) used for ATM machines are precursors to this. For Lindsey, the one-world government represents an overthrowing of God's plan for the nations. For a nation to give up its sovereignty is to commit spiritual adultery (*AC*, 201).

How has Lindsey's interpretation of impending apocalyptic disasters changed? Writing in the context of the cold war in 1970, Lindsey's predicted apocalyptic disasters centred around

thermonuclear war, and the USSR and China were the major threats.

By 1997, however, nuclear war is no longer the main threat. Lindsey chronicles a lengthy laundry list of impending disasters, including, 'global warming, rising sea levels, weather pattern changes, monster storms, increasing numbers of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, plagues, super strains of old diseases, the demise of 'miracles' (*sic*), drugs, tornados, famines, floods, killer heat waves, killer cold waves, and the like. . .' (AC, 25).

Apocalypse Code is explicit and imaginative in detailing apocalyptic disasters. For example, in explaining the passage in Revelation where the Lamb opens the third seal in heaven and releases famine and plagues on the earth, Lindsey launches into a commentary on food shortages, which, for him, are proof of our 'inability or unwillingness to heed the time-proven biblical principles such as crop rotation every seven years' (AC, 84). When the third seal also unleashes plagues on the earth, in a not-too-veiled reference to AIDS, Lindsey notes that in the book of Numbers, Moses 'contained diseases by killing every potential carrier,' and that 'God always deals harshly with plagues, especially those linked with sin' (AC, 89).

Another disaster linked with issues of the 1990s is unleashed with the opening of the fourth seal. A horse with a rider named death is released, and the rider has the power to kill one fourth of the earth by the beasts of the earth. The prediction of death by the 'beasts of the earth' launches Lindsey into speculations about mountain lions in California, bears in Montana, wolves in India, and rampaging elephants in Africa. No longer are the enemies godless communists but rather 'misguided environmentalists' who won't let people hunt bears in Montana or mountain lions in California (AC, 91). For Lindsey, this prophecy of 'death by beasts' will literally come true: eventually, he warns, even our domestic pets might turn on us for food or revenge (AC, 94)!

Lindsey apparently sees no inconsistency in calling for environmental protection of the land with crop rotation while, at the same time, deriding protection of animal species. In one of the many howlers in both books, Lindsey waxes rhapsodic about the millennial kingdom when animals will live in peace, but then describes the bounty that will be available for humans as a 'chicken in every pot'! The lion may lie with the lamb, but apparently the peaceable kingdom doesn't extend to chickens!

By the end of both books, most of the dispensational system has come into play and the apocalyptic system, with all of its complexities, has been 'decoded' by Lindsey. And complex the end is. In Lindsey's

millennium there will be two resurrections with four phases, five types of judgment, and three books from which all unbelievers are judged. In a bizarre intermingling of time and eternity, Lindsey believes that those Christians raptured and then brought back with Jesus at the second coming will live in a satellite city that hovers above the earthly city of Jerusalem.

Moreover, these raptured and returned saints now have spiritual bodies and can walk through walls and disappear and reappear at will, can visit relatives on earth, and can 'come down to have a midnight snack' or 'catch a movie' on earth (*AC*, 258–59). And thus *Apocalypse Code* ends exactly where *The Late Great Planet Earth* ended: with an evangelistic call for conversion in order to avoid the impending apocalyptic terrors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has sought to demonstrate that in the hands of a seasoned dispensationalist such as Hal Lindsey, apocalyptic imagery is resilient, lending itself to adaptability according to the political and social concerns of the day. The backdrop of the optimism engendered from the 1960s led Lindsey to write one kind of book, while the fears and uncertainties of the late 1990s led him to write a different kind of book. Though the overall dispensational system remains intact in both books, each work captures something of the mood of the times by filtering the events of the day through the grid of apocalypticism.

- 1 This article is a revision of a paper delivered in March, 1999, in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A. at the joint meeting of the Midwest Region of the American Academy of Religion and the Central States Region of the Society of Biblical Literature.
- 2 See, for example, Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992; Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997; and Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996.
- 3 See Stephen R. Haynes, 'Hal Lindsey, "The Road to Holocaust": a Review Essay,' *Fides et Historia* 24 (Fall 1993): 111–120.