

THE IMPLICATIONS OF RAPTURE THEOLOGY UPON ECOLOGY

*This world is not my home I'm just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore*

- Albert E. Brumley

Introduction

There are differing views of the way ecology is affected by the belief many Christians hold that believers will be raptured out of the earth at the *parousia* of Christ, initiating his Second Coming. In this paper two polarities are reviewed, then compared and contrasted. After having reviewed the two books conclusions are drawn. John F. Haught is a process theologian who has been involved heavily in discussion panels and think tanks in attempts to care for the nurturing of the earth. He has written *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purposes* and believes Christianity is positioned uniquely to effect positive change. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are known for their New York Times best seller series, *Left Behind*, which has sold over 60 million copies. These books are fictional genre in the popular medium. However, they have made a scholarly attempt to pen their theology of prophecy with the book *Are We Living in the End Times?* The duo does not write to address ecology, per se, but there are indirect inferences throughout. They record, "This book you hold in your hands is primarily about God's wonderful plan for man's future events in relation to this earth prior to that age of peace."¹

Haught is a liberal theologian in the traditional meaning of the word. It is hard to ascertain just what he believes. He does not speak of faith in Christ, the resurrection, or of salvation by means of reconciliation with God. There are many theologians who would not be grouped with Hought ordinarily because they do have a high view of scripture and personal salvation. As such they would properly fall in the category of conservatives because of their theology. However,

¹ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publisher's, 1999), 10.

they would unite with Haught for the purposes of care of the earth. This group I refer to as Care Tenders in this paper, noting duly that it is a very broad group. Equally, there are within the rapture camp different subgroups which may be located anywhere along the gamut from Fundamentalists to Evangelical to Pentecostal. Tim LaHaye graduated from the ultra conservative Fundamentalists' Bob Jones University. He has leanings toward Dispensation, but is not typical as shall be shown. This also is a broadly generalized group. For simplicity I have referred to them as Rapture Believers throughout. This terminology is intended for ease of distinction only and intends to imply nothing of the particulars.

The View of Care Tenders as Espoused by John F. Haught

In the opening pages of his book Haught expresses a heartfelt concern, and his rationale for writing regarding ecology. His contention is the crisis of nature is a threat to our very existence and organized religion has done very little about it.² He suggests we're as unprepared for this crisis as Jesus' followers were for the crucifixion. But new life came out of that experience and will from this one too.³ Religion was not ready for the Enlightenment or the Holocaust either. The ecological threat must be faced with the tenacity those events elicited.⁴ He singles out Christianity in particular, ridiculing the Church for its lack of care.⁵ For Haught, the ecological system is filled with purpose. His title for the book is taken from his belief that nature is in itself a promise of "ultimate meaning and purpose."⁶

Since Haught believes that religions are the source of the crisis,⁷ he must take aim at the representatives of Christianity that are to blame. He sets his sights on Rapture Believers, the problem stems from the "sense that we do not really belong here in the cosmos or on the

² John F. Haught, *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purposes* (New York, Paulist Press, 1993), 1-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

earth.”⁸ This is where Haught places blame for the crisis. He coins the phrase “Cosmic Homelessness” along the lines of a doctor’s diagnosis. He attacks the words of a popular hymn in the tradition of hope for the rapture, originated in the revivalists camp meetings, “*This world is not our home.*”⁹ He then equates it with problems systemic in human nature, for instance Hinduism’s concept of *sannyasin*.¹⁰ He is opposed to any idea of “pilgrim” mentality.¹¹ For Haught the exile mentality leads to a heightened view of self. Thus, this unhealthy anthropocentrism is the reason why the earth has been so neglected.¹² It stems from humanity’s sense of entitlement that has been fueled by imbalanced religion, escapists Christians in particular. He quotes the words of Thomas Berry who believes “the Bible’s looking toward a future messianic age has set loose a drive toward progress and limitless development that is draining the earth of its natural resources at a calamitous rate.”¹³

Haught sincerely believes the demise of religion is the cause of the ecological crisis. He indicts Rapture Believers when he records, “Christian fundamentalists, for example, look forward to the final passing away of this world in an apocalyptic conflagration. For some kinds of religion, even the complete destruction of the natural order does not come as bad news.”¹⁴ He accuses Rapture Believers of having their values displaced when they “look upon this earth as nothing more than a ‘vale of soul-making’ whose purpose is to provide a place of trial and purification for the human spirit. In this vision care for nature is not very important.”¹⁵ He says, “There is no doubt that certain kinds of religious biases do sanction ecological disinterest.”¹⁶ This is housed in a diatribe of the radical believers who care nothing for the planet because it’s all going to burn anyway. He seems to broad brush stroke any religious individuals believing in

⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 41.

¹³ Ibid., 15-6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 69.

¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

the rapture into the “cosmic pessimism” camp.¹⁷ Rather than absolve religion entirely he proposes healing and restoring it to a proper place. This is in opposition to “deep ecologists” who see all religion as unmerited. He contends that right religion will be a major component in restoring the suffering earth.¹⁸

For him Christians have worked so hard to correct *the fall* that they have ignored the initial goodness of creation.¹⁹ This is really important to unlocking Haught’s view. He does not understand the cosmos to have been affected by the curse of sin. Here Haught stands in contradiction to Care Tender proponents, such as Richard Mouw who believes sin caused a shift such that attacks in the animal kingdom began one animal against the other.²⁰ Earthquakes, tidal waves, electrical storms, tornados – all have been around and spoken of since the earliest history of man. These phenomena occurring in nature were not precipitated by any senseless acts of humans. However, Haught reads Roman 8:32 to be an instructive to humans regarding their poor treatment of nature. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” He does not sympathize with the groaning earth because sin subjects it; rather, he criticizes humanity for subjecting nature to such mistreatment.²¹ He writes, “Our hoping carries with it the entire universe’s yearning for its future.”²² Giving voice to his perspective we read, “Is it conceivable that our local environmental concern is in some mysterious way the universe itself crying out for help?”²³

Haught is admittedly wrestling with the ideas of a biblical Hebraic model of Christianity because he doesn’t see the realistic possibility of the earth averting disaster.²⁴ Ironically, Care Tenders and Rapture Believers wrestle with the same issues in reverse. Haught’s answer is

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ Ibid., 88-9.

²⁰ Class notes, Christian Worldview & Contemporary Challenges, MDiv, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, October, 2006.

²¹ Haught, *Promise of Nature*, 95-6.

²² Ibid., 109.

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ Ibid., 101-2.

“Creation-centered” eschatology. It helps avoid the “embarrassment” of the biblical emphasis on a perfect world to come. Nature will fulfill its promise.²⁵ Haught wants a *transformation* of biblical religion. There are more conservative Care Tenders who wish he hadn’t said that. Haught argues for creation-centered eschatology. However, nowhere does he speak of a Christ-centered eschatology. Moreover, he doesn’t mention a Christ-centered belief in any respect. This is troubling at the very least. He observes, “If we believe that this earth is embedded in a meaningful rather than an ultimately pointless universe it cannot help but have a bearing on how we relate to it in our everyday lives.”²⁶

Haught sees rapture theology as man-centered and irresponsible. He cites, “excessive anthropocentrism and religious escapism.”²⁷ He thinks that Rapture Believers believe this nature is nothing more than a “launching pad” to catapult them into some incorporeal absolute.²⁸ Haught does not believe in a real eternity. He values a rich temporality. He believes in a real world, or nature, for as long as it lasts. The sun will burn out and become a red star in about six or so billion years. We all have life spans. We should embrace them and enjoy them. We should pass on the best nature possible to the next generations.²⁹ In the end nature, physical reality, is not made of “chunks of matter, but of moments of experience.”³⁰ He sides with progressive science. “Process theology is especially hospitable to the notion of evolution. Until theology takes evolution seriously it will not take ecology seriously either.”³¹ So, God is not omnipotent and omniscient, he is in process. This is an important point that Haught brings up, one that many evangelicals gloss over. There is a sense in which liberal scholarship requires being united with science and philosophy.

²⁵ Ibid., 105-6.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

²⁸ Ibid., 109.

²⁹ Ibid., 115.

³⁰ Ibid., 142.

³¹ Ibid., 32.

In a twist of irony Haught postulates what would happen if humanity disappeared from the planet. He contends within a few hundred years the civilizations would be forgotten and the animal life and ecological life would be restored. The earth would be balanced once again.³² It's not a crisis of nature so much as a crisis for humanity's existence. But there is another view in which a vast number of the planet will disappear from the planet. And to that view I now turn.

The View of Rapture Believers as Upheld by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins

Whereas Haught began his book by expressing concern about the Christians' lack of any serious attempt to rescue planet earth; LaHaye and Jenkins start theirs by expressing excitement at the prospects of Christ redeeming them from corruption. Of the rapture they write, "All Christians consider such a possibility an infinite improvement on this war-weary and sin-cursed world."³³ Sin changed everything. Nature is not a canvass that we continual paint over with our "cultural creations."³⁴ That we are creative does not mean we are Creator. There are purviews out of our hands.

LaHaye and Jenkins believe national Israel equates to the covenant people of Israel named in the Bible. That is to say there is no distinction. This is hotly debated. However, the notion that a remnant within national Israel (who have not embraced faith in Christ as Messiah and are left behind), who are the covenant people of YHWH, would be blessed exponentially in their corner of the world, while the surrounding nations are not so blessed, is plausible.

LaHaye and Jenkins quote the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. It is their contention that "the extraordinary blessing of God on the *physical* land of Israel" is a literal benefit for God's chosen people following the rapture.³⁵ They use this idea as a literary device in the *Left Behind* series. Isaiah 41:18-20 reads,

³² Ibid., 66.

³³ LaHaye and Jenkins, *End Times*, ix

³⁴ Haught, *Promise of Nature*, 34.

³⁵ LaHaye and Jenkins, *End Times*, 80.

I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together.

This text, along with Isaiah 43:19, is cited as a text showing God intends to single out his blessing on Israel. “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” Care Tenders could argue these verses are intended to bespeak the Eschaton. There are various opinions even within proponents of rapture theology. However, it may be noted, if it can be shown that these verses are intended to singularly bless Israel, as LaHaye and Jenkins contend, there would be no point of these blessings being issued in the Eschaton when *all* the earth is new anyway. Historically, there has been no time when Israel’s “parched ground” became “springs”. However, to their point, the stage may be being set. The Jewish National Fund has planted over 250 million trees in Israel over the last century. Ironically, this is an organization that was precipitated by a group of Christians concerned for the physical land of the Jews. The Christians and Jews working together, predating the reestablishment of the physical state of Israel, have made significant ecological change in the Mediterranean basin. The statement “I will set pines in the wasteland” is being fulfilled right now in Israel.

The intimation by LaHaye and Jenkins is an indicator that they do not envision a scorched earth that has been entirely depleted post-rapture. Though the entire planet is shaken by catastrophe during the Great Tribulation, the physical land of Israel is blessed. It is a foreshadowing of the creative beauty of God upon the new heaven and earth. In the same way that salvation was introduced to the world through Israel to all nations; the physical blessing of the land will apparently funnel through Israel to all nations as well. It is hard to imagine “during the Millennium ... a new Earth”³⁶ which is under the reign of Christ, that is not also pristine and voluptuous rivaling Eden.

³⁶ Ibid., 13.

To be certain LaHaye and Jenkins do picture a devastated earth, outside of Israel proper, before it is made new by the millennial reign of Christ in his Second Coming.

Vicious plagues sweep the earth, flaming meteorites poison a third of its water, warring armies kill millions, demonic beings torture the unredeemed, darkness swallows a third of the sun, and half the world's post-Rapture population dies horribly.³⁷

This is only the precursor as the Antichrist covenants with Israel for a peace treaty but then breaks it and unleashes the fury of God upon earth. LaHaye and Jenkins cite Jesus' words indicating the turmoil of those days on planet earth, "great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time" (Mat 24:21, 22).³⁸ The writers point out that each of the Seven Bowl Judgments of the Revelation are indictments upon the physical properties of the planet, but mixed with human suffering: loathsome soars identical to the boils experienced by the Egyptians before Israel's exodus; the sea turns to blood; the rivers turn to blood; the sun scorches men; there is deep darkness; the great Euphrates dries up; and the greatest earthquake in history occurs.³⁹

As do Care Tenders, LaHaye and Jenkins also recognize the divide between science and the Bible. Rather than trying to find commonality with science they call upon science to recognize its own *unscientific* approaches and acknowledge biblical creation.⁴⁰ Thus they are led to denounce theistic evolution. LaHaye and Jenkins believe God-guided evolution compromises the truth of the creation account.

Tim LaHaye outlines four primary earth-changing events, two in the physical realm, and two predominantly spiritual but with profound implications upon the physical: the creation; the flood; the cross; and the Second Coming of Christ.⁴¹ He does not hold to a strict dispensationalist ideology. Dispensational thought adheres to seven world epochs. LaHaye does not subscribe to the seven epochs but maintains there are four.

³⁷ Ibid., 193.

³⁸ Ibid., 194.

³⁹ Ibid., 206-219.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

Care Tenders are often critical of Rapture Believers claiming escapism. LaHaye and Jenkins claim the motivation for hoping in the rapture is not abandonment of earth, but longings fulfilled. “I go to prepare a place for you...*that* where I am you may be also” (John 14:2, 3). The emphasis is on relationship, being with the Lord. It is not so much a desire to abandon earth but to be with the Lord. This is God’s idea not humanity’s.⁴²

Observations

Care Tenders and Rapture Believers represent two separate ideologies. Both attempt to manage time, God’s most precious commodity. Time is an allotment. Care Tenders want to steward the earth started millions of years ago, in their view. They do not want to waste the components necessary for survival. They view the scriptures as informative and authoritative, strictly classified by genre. Haught observes, “In particular Christianity [has] the resources to contribute...to the resolution of our ecological predicament...but [an] adequate grounding of ecological concern requires the perspective of ‘eternity’.”⁴³ It is an incredulous statement since he does not believe in eternity in a real sense, as pointed out above. Six billions years has the impression of being overwhelmingly eternal, but is finite. There is a *telos* for Haught. Conversely, LaHaye and Jenkins believe in a real heaven and earth.

On the other hand Rapture Christians, who tend to be young earth components, do not interpret the Bible through such a lens. For them, the Bible is “living and active” (Heb 4:12), capably inerrant when rightly interpreted. As beautiful as planet earth is in all the glory of its nature, there is a better, sinless heaven and earth coming. Therefore, the more prudent investment is in terms of eternity and its impact upon humanity. Further, Rapture Believers argue that there has not been enough time to measure the data being quoted by ecologists of the effects on the planet. The decades of information are a mere blip on the view-screen of six

⁴¹ Ibid., 6-9.

⁴² Ibid., 10.

⁴³ Haught, *Promise of Nature*, 2.

thousand years. It is feared that *going green* is a political attempt to bring a more socialized control. Rapture Believers are very skeptical of liberal politicians who shrug morality and prefer governmental controls over the free market system. If as has been shown, the foundational tenants of Cartesian ideology have eroded with passage of time, who is to say the same will not happen with philosophical thought produced in a postmodern world? It could be that the greatest percentage of resources will be invested in rescuing the planet, and two hundred years from now Care Tenders may realize it didn't need saving anyway. It is upheld or released at God's discretion. One is struck with the notion that Haught believes we can kill the cosmos, which he equates to God's immanence, "the *eros* that arouses the world to evolutionary movement."⁴⁴ Can we really kill God?

What Rapture Believers contend is that the effects of sin's entrance into the world have left an indelible carbon footprint. The death certificate of planet earth was signed at the moment pride swelled in the Garden of Eden. The earth sways under the load of sin. It would be presumptuous to purport one's belief in the rapture is equated to escapist mentality; nor do Rapture Believers wish to litter the Lord's highway as they travel to glory. They would say it is simply the case that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Rapture Believers contend this is literal and not figurative or metaphoric. The rapture may not be explained away by deeming certain biblical literature as propositional, therefore truth-telling and principled; whereas narrative and historical must be strained so as to make present day application. Such needless bifurcation is deemed as sloppy exegesis in Pentecostal scholarship.

I understand Haught to be saying that while we did not create beauty, it is our responsibility to nurture the cosmic beauty.⁴⁵ This is admirable and I agree with him. God made the world to react to our treatment of it. It is part of our responsibility to tend the earth. "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it"

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33.

(Gen 2:15). What Haught calls Cosmic Homelessness is more accurately understood as ambassadorship. “We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20). Care Tenders have a good point that ambassadors need to be better representatives of God’s goodness when it comes to creation. But Haught is pantheistic, and I find departure from him here. To him, when nature suffers, God himself suffers.⁴⁶ He is arguing that God is actually included in nature. He would say God is bigger than nature, but also within nature.

Haught’s poor exegesis of Romans 8 must be called to account. The text is clear that “the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it” (Rom 8:20). Further it states, “The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). While it may be argued that Christians being irresponsible with care of the earth is sinful, and it is; it may also be observed that all believers are enjoined to prioritize their lifework in preservation of the most fruitful investment of time.

Rapture Believers are often portrayed as being unconcerned about the care of the earth. This is not the case. Though there may be some “bags-packed” believers who are ready to check out of the planet and be with God in heaven, they do not speak for the majority of good, honest conservative believers who are doing their best to tend the earth while following the dictates of a plan foreordained by God for which there is no turning back.

The notion that all Rapture Believers are dispensational in their bent needs correcting. Dispensationalists believe there are epochs of times ordered from the start of the world. Dispensationalism requires one to feel there are hard and fast lines drawn between the eras so that once they are crossed chronologically, the new epoch cannot inform or overlap the old in any way, and vice versa. One of the most profound implications of such distortion is the idea

⁴⁶ Ibid., 35.

that all verses speaking of Israel are now assumed by the church in the new era. Sound hermeneutical exegesis does not require it. There are branches of evangelicals, particularly within the Pentecostal ranks, who believe in treating the promises to Israel in scripture, as strictly related to God's chosen people. For instance, though LaHaye is supported by Dispensationalists from Dallas Seminary, he does not believe in seven epochs of dispensation.

LaHaye doesn't give appendices or indices in his books. His endnotes are scanty and do not cite scholarly works. He seems to reference much of his own writing or his own camp. One would expect better from a doctor. It is not the case that there are many reputable rapture scholars who speak to the issue of ecology. I recognize this as a real need. LaHaye and Jenkins, and other popular prophecy writers, seem to have a comfort level only with spiritual and entirely biblical matters without providing any space for thoughtful reflection upon ecological concerns in their theology.

Conclusion

The popular hymn quoted at the top of this essay became popular in camp meetings where Rapture Believers gathered in the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Haught has been critical of the hymn. The above refrain represents verse two. The *first* verse indicates its intent is to focus upon relationship with Christ. The hymn is not intended to imbue a lackadaisical attitude towards the earth here and now. *O Lord, you know I have no friend like you. If heaven's not my home then Lord what will I do? The angels beckon me from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore.* It doesn't speak of condoning physical damage to the earth, sloppy litter, or pollution. It is written in the vein of spiritual struggle akin to the slaves of the antebellum south singing songs of hope about wearing a robe and crown. It is the encouragement that it will be worth it all to live a godly life here and now. A close relationship with Jesus Christ is something Care Tenders and Rapture Believers can hope for equally.

Whether in a new post-rapture world, or in a rescued greener world, none of us can feel at home in *this* world anymore.

What is needed is dialogue between theologians closer in proximity than are Haught and LaHaye. There are devout evangelical Christians on the front battles in the work for ecology who would be appalled at any attachment with process theology. There are equally Christians who believe in the rapture who are not in accord with LaHaye and Jenkins. It is hoped that future discussions in circles of theology will better address the ethics of ecological Christian care and rapture theology.