

# END TIMES, THE BOOK OF REVELATION, and “Left Behind”

A series of recent best-selling novels, a video and now a film, seem to have taken on a life of their own for readers interested in dramatic depictions of end times. While these are fictional adventure stories, they often are touted as Christian and skillfully play on fear and anxiety about distorted scriptural notions of “true Christians” being “raptured” or snatched up from earth to join God in heaven. Readers are invited to believe in a distant God who will abandon and “leave behind” people who don’t quite measure up or who have not “made their decision for Christ.” Judgment and retribution are the recurring themes, appealing to conservative fundamentalist interpretations of end times.

While reviews of the books and the film/video have been critical, many people are reading and watching the stories as if they were theologically sound and scripturally relevant. A recent Fargo Forum “Faith” page included three articles about the novels and the film. Helping readers and viewers understand that this is adventure, speculation, and escape entertainment is important. When they are taken as theological statements or are perceived to be accurate biblical descriptions, they become authoritative in a way that may be destructive or harmful. But they also may provide a prime teaching moment for sharing credible biblical scholarship and sound Lutheran theology.

ELCA Pastor Nancy Curtis serves a congregation in Pennsylvania and tells of the fear the books have raised for her parishioners. She is teaching a course on the Book of Revelation in response to their questions and interest in the topic. She writes, “The Left Behind books are based on a fundamentalist, anti-Semitic, anti-ecumenical . . . and unbiblical theology, basing salvation on specific things one must confess out loud in a transaction with a Jesus whose attributes are never described and who never appears.” Curtis worries about literal and inaccurate interpretations which can instill fear of a wrathful and judgmental God.

New Testament teacher and Revelation scholar, Barbara Rossing, says: “While I disagree with such a fictitious portrayal, the book’s premise of fear of being alone or ‘left behind’ in the world touches a deep nerve . . . in the book of Revelation, as in the prologue of the gospel of John, God is not one who snatches us up from the earth, leaving some behind, but is a God who comes to earth to ‘dwell’ in our midst.” Rossing’s work addresses the vivid images and visions of Revelation in a fresh and grace-filled way.



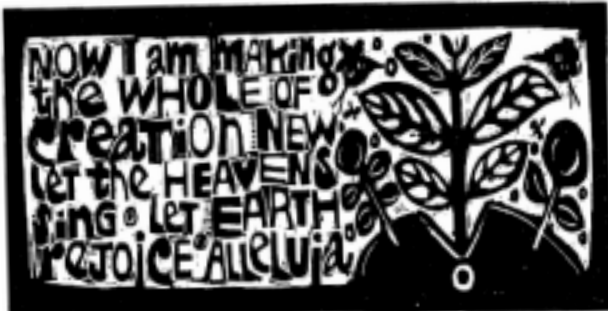
Because the Book of Revelation often has been thought to include dramatic interpretations of end times, now may be a good time to read, study, and teach this biblical book. The resources described below are meant to be helpful tools for addressing apocalyptic themes and texts – moving beyond “end times” anxiety and fear to the promise and hope that is the central theme of Revelation.

Julie K. Ageson,  
Director of the Resource Center

***“The end is not an event but a person.” -George Caird***

## A GOOD WAY TO BEGIN THE CONVERSATION...

- ✦ For those of you who preach, be sure to get a copy of the recently published **New Proclamation Commentary for Easter C**. It includes six studies on Revelation that offer theologically responsible approaches to the many Revelation texts coming up in Easter C.
- ✦ Read “No One is Left Behind” by Barbara Rossing in *Lutheran Woman Today*, December, 1999. Copies available.
- ✦ Read “The Trials of the Tribulation” by Michael Joseph Gross in *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 2000. Copies available.



- ✦ Craig Koester has two articles in “Word and World” that offer a helpful framework for looking at millennial issues and the book of Revelation. “On the Verge of the Millennium: A History of the Interpretation of Revelation” (Spring, 1995) and “The Distant Triumph Song: Music and the Book of Revelation” (Summer, 1992). We have copies.



Produced for laypersons by New Testament scholar, Bruce Metzger, **Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation** (VT 1628) offers solid commentary scholarship in both print and video resources. In easy to follow sessions, it gives users visual background to help make sense of the imagery in Revelation. Video sessions vary from 13-17 minutes and include eight sessions. A leader’s guide and Bruce Metzger’s book, **Breaking the Code**, are included.

- ✦ A very helpful video series called **Millennial Madness** (VT 1995) provides a thoughtful and measured backdrop for interest in prophecy and interpretation of apocalyptic literature. While not a resource about the book of Revelation, it offers sound background about misguided interpretations and our human fascination with end times, “last days.” Credible scholars and historians shape the conversation in very helpful ways.
- ✦ **Millennial Hope** is a five-session video series providing historical and theological insight into the apocalyptic longings which seem to recur and be prominent at various times in history. Presenter is Eric Gritsch who also authors the textbook, *Born Againism*.
- ✦ Several youth resources that may be helpful for all ages include: *Unmasking the End Times*, a five-session bible study that challenges youth to examine popular messages about the end times and invites them to claim a vision of the future that fills them with hope; *Put it to the Test: Making Sense of Today’s Religious Movements-Volume 1*, bible studies that includes sessions on “the end” and “signs of the times”; and *Believe it or Not: Making Sense of Today’s Religious Movements-Volume 2*.

“[The book of] Revelation can speak with surprising immediacy when our focus shifts from eschatology to theology. Instead of first asking what the book says about final events, we do well to listen to what it says about God.”  
-Craig Koester

## BOOKS

Pablo Richard's *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (B1905) provides a general introduction to the reading of Revelation and apocalyptic themes.

*Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (B1869) by Eugene Peterson. "Peterson's eloquent meditation on the Revelation of St. John engages the imagination and awakens the intellect to the vitality and relevance of the last words on scripture, Christ, church, worship, evil, prayer, witness, politics, judgment, salvation, and heaven."

*Joy in our Weakness-A Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation* (B1750) by Marva Dawn. "The Revelation was a message of hope, grace, and comfort to early Christians as they faced persecution. The message has not changed. The hope God offers is still sure; the grace God is pleased to give is still sufficient."

*When Time Shall Be No More* (B1906) by Paul Boyer. "Boyer traces the roots and branches of the strange complex of biblical exegesis and twisted journalism that he calls 'prophecy belief.'" This book describes a strange species of rabid predictions of the "wrath to come."

*Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel-the Coming Triumph of God* (B1388) by J. Christiaan Beker. "A distinctively apocalyptic mood—one of doom and helplessness—seems to mark contemporary life. Beker, who feels that this climate has been exploited all too long by religious propagandists, now addresses their distortions of the biblical point of view."

*Crisis and Catharsis: the Power of the Apocalypse* by Adela Yarbro Collins. "Includes a helpful discussion of conditions in the seven churches."

*Revelation: God and Satan in the Apocalypse* (B1867) by James Kallas. "Kallas analyzes the four most popular ways in which Christians have dealt with the Book of Revelation."

I AM HE  
WHO SEARCHES  
HEARTS AND MINDS  
AND I WILL REPAY  
EACH OF YOU  
ACCORDING TO  
YOUR DEEDS

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***"One of the things that becomes immediately evident [in Revelation] is that time is almost irrelevant."*** - Deanna Wildermuth

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## BIBLE STUDIES

"Revelation: A Book of Song" is an excellent bible study written by Pastor Deanna Wildermuth and three classmates as a senior project at Luther Seminary. Central are hymns and music based on texts from Revelation. These (and their sources) are included in an appendix. Eight sessions. Highly recommended. Copies available.

Kerygma's "The Book of Revelation: Visions for the Church in Crisis" brings scholarship and insight to this challenging book. "In context, its message to an early church facing crisis is clear, and its relevance for today is in its affirmation of victory and hope." Fourteen sessions. Leader's guide and resource book available for preview.

As part of the INSPIRE BIBLE STUDY SERIES, Augsburg Fortress offers "Revelation: Images of Hope" by Richard Jeske. It focuses on a deeper awareness of the challenges in Revelation and encourages a church living in a threatening environment. Six sessions. Participant book and leader's guide available for preview.

Also from Augsburg Fortress AND REPRODUCIBLE is "Volume 4-Books of the Bible -Galatians to Revelation." Simple to use, this straightforward study could be used at home as well **as in groups.**

*I have placed  
before you  
an open door  
that  
no one  
can shut*

## COMMENTARIES

Two commentaries highly recommended include the *Augsburg Commentary on Revelation* (B1871) by Gerhard Krodel and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (B1872) from Proclamation Commentaries. Both are written for lay people, students, and pastors.

George Caird's *Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* is out of print but available from libraries.

*New Proclamation Year C, 2001* edited by Marshall D. Johnson includes six studies on the Revelation texts for Easter C.

*Interpretation: Revelation* by M. Eugene Boring is a commentary used for a series in the Augsburg Bible Study Series titled, "Hope for the Future."



## FINALLY . . .

- ❖ Read, study, and teach the Book of Revelation as well as other Old Testament and New Testament apocalyptic literature
- ❖ Help interpret and make sense of ongoing interest in premillennialism
- ❖ Recognize the allure and fear that books and themes like those found in the "Left Behind" series elicit
- ❖ Preach from the Revelation texts during Easter C
- ❖ Make opportunities for group discussion and questions
- ❖ Share the resources listed here

## The Resource Center

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