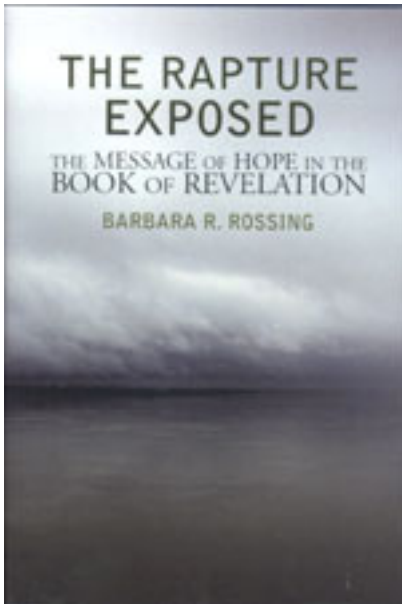


RBL 08/2005



Rossing, Barbara R.

The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation

Cambridge, Mass.: Westview, 2004. Pp. xii + 212.
Hardcover. \$24.00. ISBN 0813391563.

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Although the book of Revelation has garnered much attention from scholars in recent years, the gap between scholarly and popular treatments of this book still remains wide. One such attempt to bridge the hermeneutical gap is this recent book by Barbara Rossing. Rossing attempts to present a reading of the last book of the Christian Scriptures that is pitched at a more popular level and responds to popular questions but that takes into account and is informed by recent scholarship on Revelation. Much of Rossing's book is aimed at the popular and ubiquitous Left Behind series written by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. Despite the fact that Rossing's book claims to be about "The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation," only about half of the book is actually devoted to the book of Revelation; it is not until chapter 5 that the author actually engages the book of Revelation. The first four chapters critique the "end-time script" as articulated by the Left Behind series, which depends on a dispensationalist version of eschatology. Rossing calls into question this approach to the eschatology of the Bible both in its hermeneutical assumptions (a literal approach to Revelation and other prophetic literature as well as the tendency to construct elaborate time-lines) and its political consequences. Rossing demonstrates that the Left Behind series' approach to Revelation and prophetic literatures yields an absolutist rhetoric that has affected major political views and decisions (e.g., uncritical support of Israel; neglect of Palestinian Christians). At the same time, Rossing

attempts to reorient the reader to a more adequate understanding of Revelation in chapter 4, where she discusses the nature of apocalyptic literature and lays the methodological and hermeneutical framework for the rest of her work.

The rest of Rossing's book is devoted to a reading of Revelation that seeks to correct the misconceptions latent in a series such as the *Left Behind* books. Here Rossing argues that Revelation is not about prediction but was primarily meant to exhort Christians living in the Roman Empire to faithfulness by contrasting the oppressive power of Rome with the power of God to bring healing and to give life. Unlike the contention of the *Left Behind* approach, the script of Revelation is not to be read as doomsday and destruction of the world but of God's desire to heal the earth. However, Rossing is also aware of the difficulty created by the "violent imagery" in Revelation, with its visions of destruction and warfare. In chapters 6 and 7 she touches upon this vexing problem by following others who have seen in Revelation's violent language a subversion of violence itself. The key is the imagery of the slain Lamb. Power is redefined not in terms of oppressive power over (imperial Rome) but through what she calls "Lamb Power," which is emblematic of God's nonviolent love to change the world. "Evil is defeated not by overwhelming force or violence but by the Lamb's suffering love on the cross" (111). This colors the remaining chapters where she considers the exodus story as a model for Revelation, where she seems to see the plagues in Revelation as a means of converting the oppressors and liberating God's people. God's goal is to change the world. In chapter 10 Rossing suggests that in contrast to the *Left Behind* series, which envisions God rapturing his people out of the world just prior to its destruction, Revelation is about a "rapture in reverse"; that is, it is about God coming down to take up residence with us. By emphasizing the themes of renewal, love, and nonviolence, Rossing attempts to discredit the dispensational or *Left Behind* end-time script of Revelation, which emphasizes war and destruction. An epilogue further serves to debunk the end-time script of the approach of the *Left Behind* series to well-known eschatological passage (1 Thess 4:13–18; Matt 24:40–41; John 14:1–2).

Rossing's work is a helpful antidote to the extremes of approaches to Revelation like that found in the *Left Behind* series. In laying bare the interpretive and methodological assumptions of this work, she has helpfully reoriented the reader to the importance of the genre and historical setting of Revelation and how this impacts one's reading of the book. Rossing has also effectively and rightfully drawn attention to the political consequences (often volatile) of such a reading of Revelation. This is a book worth reading, especially for those who have been nurtured on the *Left Behind* approach to Revelation. At the same time, Rossing's work still raises some questions. First, Rossing paints dispensationalism with strokes that are much too broad. In recent years, dispensationalism has undergone significant changes and developments so that it is unfair to lump all dispensationalists in with Hal Lindsay, Tim LaHaye, and others of this ilk. Second, while Rossing critiques the

absolutist rhetoric of works such as the Left Behind series, she never wrestles extensively with the fact that much of this language owes its existence to the absolutist rhetoric of Revelation itself. Moreover, Rossing has rightly shown that Revelation subverts violent imagery with the imagery of the slain Lamb. However, the interpreter must still account for the fact that large segments of humanity apparently are destroyed under God's judgment in John's vision. It is not clear whether Rossing thinks that all humanity will ultimately be converted by God's love or whether some will perish with God's judgment (however that will take place). Finally, while Rossing is surely correct that Revelation is about exhortation to faithfulness, she is equally extreme in her own rhetoric in denying any predictive element to John's visions. Overall, Rossing's book is a good example of the rhetoric and politics of interpreting Revelation.