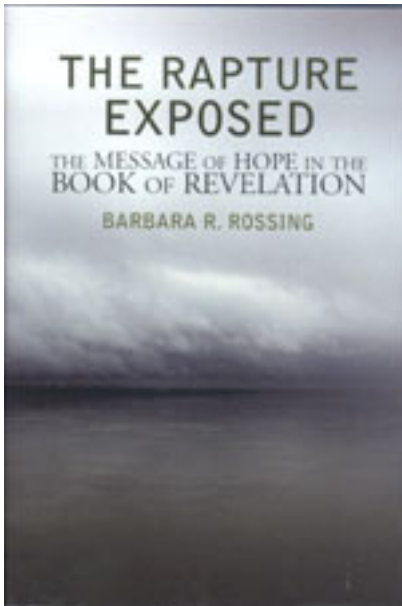


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Rossing, Barbara R.

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

Cambridge, Mass.: Westview, 2004. Pp. xii + 212.
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Each age produces a new wave of publications on the end times with different mutations of end-time scenarios. During the cold war era in the twentieth century, for example, Hal Lindsey wrote his best selling novel *The Late Great Planet Earth*, followed later by the massively popular *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Through many translations of these novels in other languages, movies made out of them, the entertainment industry that accompanied them (e.g., memorabilia such as car stickers) and websites, a teaching on the so-called rapture has penetrated the global discourse on the Bible in ways that sometimes seem to defy logic. It teaches that Jesus will snatch Christians off the earth before the emergence of an evil Antichrist that sets in motion a seven-year period of tribulation on earth during which the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem and after which Christ will return with a touch down on the Mount of Olives.

While some of the most influential journals in the mainstream secular press have been investigating this literature because of its marked influence on political life in places such as the United States, biblical scholarship remains almost oblivious to rapture thinking, as any quick search of indices to major commentaries and publications on Revelation and apocalypses will show. This not only contrasts with contemporary secular interest in the rapture discourse but also differs from earlier studies on the book of Revelation that

dialogued with similar movements. Such learned older commentaries of Bousset and Swete (cf. the 1906 editions), for example, extensively discussed popular attempts in their time to calculate the end.

Rossing's book thus is one of the few attempts to address this topic in terms of mainstream scholarship. That her book is well-timed and that the subject deserves more attention is clear from the consequences of the rapture discourse on Christianity that she spells out at the beginning of her discussion. The *Left Behind* novels have negative psychological consequences, creating terror among credulous Christians that they may be left behind when the rapture takes place and desensitizing Christians to the ugly face of violence. They also have serious political consequences for stability in the Middle East, where end-time events are expected to take place literally. It does not take much for religious fanatics to want to try to steer events so that their expectations of the end may come to fulfillment.

As Rossing first points out, the influence of the rapture texts is rather surprising, especially in the light of the fact that the rapture originated only in the nineteenth century with the writings of Darby (1830) on the two returns of Christ to the world and its popularizing in the *Scofield Reference Bible*. She then investigates the political implications of the rapture's war discourse for the Middle East situation by discussing its inexplicable support of policies that deprive Palestinians from their homeland and that fill the everyday life of a normal Palestinian with humiliation and endless harassment. Having noted some sad examples of this, Rossing is careful to underline that her observations should not be misunderstood as anti-Semitic, which is to her as unacceptable as is the use of violence through suicide attacks. Ironical, in fact, is that the rapturists are those who are actually anti-Semitic in their beliefs.

In her fourth chapter, Rossing then presents her own interpretation of the book of Revelation as a response to rapture readings. Revelation as an apocalypse comprises nonliteral visions of the future. She points out, for example, how inconsistently earthquakes are regarded as literal events by rapturists, while they do not read the symbol of the Lamb in the same way. Ultimately, then, it must be remembered that Revelation originated in a first-century setting as a message to oppressed believers about the end of unjust Roman rule and was not written as a master plan for developments in our time.

In her fifth chapter, Rossing interprets Revelation in terms of this time, delineating the fundamental contrast between the ever-present theology of Rome's military conquest and victory in every city of the empire, on the one hand, with, on the other hand, the portrayal of the victory of the Lamb of God who gives life and healing through his self-sacrifice.

This explains why Jesus is the main character in the book (ch. 6). His character is sometimes described in seemingly violent language, but the thrust of the book subverts violence. “Just like the Lamb, God’s people are called to conquer not by fighting but by remaining faithful, by testifying to God’s victory in self-giving love” (111). And, most important, in terms of her debate, it is this subversive power of Lamb theology that is completely lacking in rapture literature. With these valuable remarks, Rossing correctly criticizes rapture thinking but also questions the often repeated stereotype that Revelation is a book of considerable blood and terror. As evidence of her position on its nonviolent nature, she refers in chapter 7 to the shedding of the blood of the Lamb (not of people), the faithful witnessing task of the believers (rather than violent actions), and the sword from the mouth of the Lamb. Such a view fundamentally questions the war language of rapture thinking.

Picking up the exodus motif in the book, Rossing then (ch. 8) stresses that this motif calls the church to a just quest for liberation of the exploited from their oppressive structures. The power of nonviolent love changes the world rather than destroys it, as rapturists seem to imply when they turn the book into a vengeful war story (ch. 9). In this regard, rapture thinking provides a sad example of a deformed faith in Jesus. It fails to allow the resurrection to exert its power in this time and world. Rapturists thus make an untenable distinction between Jesus’ earthly life as Lamb who was crucified and the triumphalistic expectation of the return of Jesus as Lion (137).

In chapter 10 Rossing develops reflections on Revelation’s mystical meaning by focusing on the transformative power of the vision of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21–22 that integrates the future into the “already” of the faith experience. The world cannot be understood as hermeneutically sealed, ready to be abandoned by those who are raptured, but is broken open by the presence of God to become the proper home of the new people of God. In chapter 11 she reflects on the implications this has for our existence in this world here and now. Revelation accompanies the reader on an inward journey, but also on an outward journey into the present world.

The epilogue contains exegetical remarks about the three most quoted rapture texts in the New Testament: 1 Thess 4:13–18; Matt 24:40–41; and John 14:1–2. Rossing refers in this discussion to seminal exegetical comments from exegetes such as Wright (178) and Gundry (184) that reject arbitrary readings of rapture proponents.

Rossing’s book presents and articulates some recent scholarly insights in a popular format for both the nonspecialist in this field (and in Revelation studies) and ministers or laypeople. It is clearly written, though it tends toward repetition with contents that are

sometimes a bit woolly or preachy. But these negatives are outweighed by the usefulness of the book and the solid nature of the mainstream scholarship that informs it.

Although one realizes the limitations that are operative in any such publication, it is a question whether the topic of the rapture does not require some deeper hermeneutical reflection than is evident in this book. While the specific exegesis of the relevant texts on the rapture ideology that is offered here is helpful, a major problem is the hermeneutics that frame rapture exegesis. It is always problematic to use exegesis against exegesis without enough attention to the dynamics that steer exegetical work. The real or deeper issue at stake here is the fundamentalism that characterizes rapture exegesis, something that is only indirectly addressed in this work (e.g., in ch. 2). It is important to address the issue on this level, because much is at stake here. There is ultimately not that much difference between those who want to see the Middle East and the world at war in the name of Christianity (ch. 1) and fundamentalists within other religions who fly planes into the World Trade Center or plant bombs in the London tube in order to force the coming of the end and the entry into paradise. Both display an intolerant fervor in subjecting others to their destructive readings and actions, and both legitimize this by way of literalist readings of foundational texts. One would like, therefore, to see a more focused attempt to analyze the danger and the inconsistencies of fundamentalism that underpins exegesis within the rapture discourse.

This book makes much of research that teaches that Revelation is a first-century text about Roman exploitation. One can understand why Rossing promotes this as an argument against escapist rapture discourse and dispensationalist thinking. But while it is true that the political and economic perspectives on the book cannot be ignored, it is not possible to exhaust its meaning in terms of those perspectives. B. Malina and J. J. Pilch in their *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (2000:12) remark that “There are no clear, unambiguous, or direct references in the work to Rome or to Roman emperors. While this is the favorite historical reference for most modern scholars, there is really no proof for this tenuous hypothesis aside from gratuitous insistence.” Although this is a rather superficial and perhaps unfair statement, it confirms what has become clear to some degree in contemporary research through its conflicting interpretations of symbols in terms of a Roman context. Obviously Pilch and Malina’s remarks do not in any way invalidate the first-century reading of Revelation, but they do provide an interesting example of a further (astrological) perspective, and by implication, others that need to be taken seriously.

The basic thrust of the message of Revelation is in any case religious in nature rather than political. It is true that in terms of the book religion and politics should not be distinguished too facilely, but ultimately there *is* a difference. The struggle is not merely

against the politics of the Roman Empire but against evil structures of varying kinds that threaten believers in their faith. Revelation warns against idolatry, against the religious absolutism of the Roman Empire, but it also discusses such threatening issues as Jewish hostility against Christians and religious problems within the churches (e.g., the hubris of Laodicea mentioned in the seven letters). Revelation locates its readers within a *spiritual* journey that is taking place over many centuries and does so by using symbols that are taken from that long and rich tradition that reveal patterns of behavior by the evil opponents of God's people. Except for the great city of Babylon, sometimes too easily identified as Rome, there are, for example, the great cities of Jerusalem, Sodom, and Egypt (Rev 11:8–9) that are as powerful in their symbolic force and that cannot be identified with Rome. The almost “detached” and polyvalent symbols of the book defy too easy identification with one referent, while its synthesizing approach to history suggests that the author understood the need to develop patterns of insight for a long journey rather than specific referents for one particular audience. It is, therefore, problematic to reduce this multifaceted text to a mere attack on Rome, even though it is without doubt a major motif in the book.

Rossing's political reading otherwise also affects her eschatological reading of Revelation. It is clear that the expectation of the future indeed has nothing to do with making sums and counting numbers, as she carefully points out. But her remarks about apocalyptic hope to some extent tend to play down the eschatological perspective of Revelation by reinterpreting it too strongly as promoting a “homecoming to the world,” that is, a transformation of this world (e.g., 170–71, but cf. her affirmation of a future return of Christ on 4, 31–32). For her this means to “overturn all structures of war and injustice” (170) or to recognize the presence of the Lamb in everyday life (171).

Once again Revelation is more complex in meaning than is suggested by this reading. Any reading of Revelation needs to take seriously the strong climactic progression, presented in spiral form, toward a future turning point when the present world will be radically replaced by a new world. The new creation is not simply purified of its evil (Rev.20:11!), but evil itself will be destroyed, as Richard Bauckham has argued so perceptively in his *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). We can debate the nature and value of this eschatological perspective, but it is not to be underestimated or its essential place in the book underplayed. This futurist perspective is theologically decisive because it confirms a notion like transcendence that is firmly part of apocalyptic thinking and that is introduced so strongly in this book in, for example, the throne vision. In Revelation God is the one who is Lord of creation, of history, and the one who will bring about the new creation. In the course of the book, this special understanding of God has as its complement the witnesses whose identity as those who resisted evil and are awaiting the end consists in their prayerful worship of God.

They are reminded of the faithfulness of God that requires from them trust and patience (Rev 6:11), not calculating endless schemes of rapture events.

All these perspectives illustrate the multidimensional religious nature of the text and argue against what some may experience as a reductionist reading by Rossing. These perspectives can and should also be accounted for in the debate about rapture thinking that her book has developed so meaningfully.