

Teaching Passion: Christians and Fundamentalism
(Isaiah 55:1-13; Job 38:1-18)

First, a caveat. Do you know the best definition of the Yiddish word, “chutzpah?” A boy is on trial for murdering his parents, and he begs the judge for mercy because he is an orphan. That’s chutzpah! Noticing my title for today, you might ask, “What’s a nice Jewish girl like you, doing preaching about Christianity and fundamentalism from the pulpit of a church? Isn’t that chutzpah? Well, yes, but here’s my caveat—the Talmud says, “One who teaches in the name of the person who spoke it causes the Messiah to come. One who neglects to teach in the name of the person who spoke it causes the Messiah to tarry.” (Talmud Megilah) So, lest I cause the Messiah to tarry, I’m going to speak in the name of Christian writers and teachers whose understanding of Christianity and fundamentalism has shaped mine. In doing so, I hope you’ll forgive me my chutzpah, and perhaps reflecting on these issues will bring us all—Jews and Christians—closer to redemption.

As of Monday, the Rapture Index, the Dow Jones of Millennialism, was up a point to 156, only 3 points away from this year’s high. The Rapture Index charts how close we are to the destruction of the world. It’s no surprise that the numbers are climbing—between multiple wars in the Middle East, terrorist attacks, the threat of Iran being a nuclear power, the brutal heat, uncontrolled forest fires, and earthquakes, the future looks pretty bleak. In moments of utter pessimism, even the most resilient of us ask, “Is the world coming to an end?” While many of us might allow this thought only

for a fleeting instant, those tracking the Rapture Index, “the prophetic speedometer of end-time”¹, as it says on its website, believe that the world as we know it is literally coming to an end, and that, furthermore, the end was predicted at the Beginning.

I’m sure that you are familiar with the book and video series called “Left Behind”. It is a contemporary reworking of the apocalyptic vision presented in the Book of Revelation. The Left Behind books describe an end-of-days scenario in which true Christian believers will be “raptured” or taken to heaven, while unbelievers will be left behind to endure years of tribulation and global chaos. Belief in “the Rapture” has captured the imagination of millions of American Christians. The books have sold more than 60 million copies since 1995 and launched a virtual industry—films, video games, children’s books, t-shirts and music. Among the unlikely followers of this belief are our neighbors, a motorcycle group in Santa Cruz known as “Rapture Ready Bikers”.

The theologians and sociologists who study the “Left Behind” culture tell us that in this time of heightened communal fear, people seek the reassurance of “end of days” literature and sermons. Those who feel threatened by the twin specters of uncontrollable external forces and domestic moral collapse, hold tenaciously to apocalyptic visions. The promise of “The Rapture” explains a series of traumatic events, while it provides hope for a better, otherworldly future for believers. Ministers preaching “the Rapture” claim that while they fear that they are often helpless to save people here, they can save their souls for the world to come.

Do you know where this fascination with the Rapture came from? There's no entry for it in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, a 4 volume Cliff Notes to all things Biblical. This is not surprising because the word "rapture" is not found in the Bible, not even in the Book of Revelation, the source for most apocalyptic thinking. Nonetheless, many who otherwise regard themselves as biblical literalists assert that Christ will come back to earth in two phases. First, he will return surreptitiously to rapture believers away to safety, and then later he will return in a visible advent to dispense his wrath on the world's nations.

Dave MacPherson investigated the origin of the Rapture and he asserts that the doctrine was born in the United Kingdom in 1830 amidst the beginnings of what we now call Pentecostalism. The power of the Holy Spirit was said to have rested on a young Scottish woman, Margaret MacDonald, while she was seriously ill. She described her experience as one that "mingle[d] prophecy and vision", explaining that from her vision she learned that Christ would appear in two stages at the second coming, not one. First, he would come in glory to them that look for him, and then again in a final stage in which every eye would see him. Word of Margaret MacDonald's vision was enthusiastically proclaimed in praise and prayer meetings in several towns in western Scotland. This prompted the leader of the Plymouth Brethren movement, John Nelson Darby, to make a trip to the area. MacPherson claims that Darby visited Margaret MacDonald in her home, accepted this idea of a two-stage coming and then found scriptural arguments in support of it, leading him to be called, "the father of modern dispensationalism".ⁱⁱ The Left Behind books have popularized, and dramatized the Rapture still further, describing in

Technicolor detail the tribulations which await unbelievers. The Rapture was a fantasy of revenge: the elect imagined themselves gazing down upon the sufferings of those who had jeered at their beliefs, and now, too late, recognized their errors.ⁱⁱⁱ

One stage or two? Gory fantasy or prophetic warning? Why does it matter to a rabbi what fundamentalist Christians believe? Isn't this an in-house discussion? I care, and I believe others should care too, because those views have left the sanctuary of the church and entered the precincts of the polling place, the school board, and the courthouse. I care because the public policy implications of those convictions impact the political and cultural climate of our country, indeed, of our world. According to a Time/CNN poll^{iv}, a **majority** of Americans—59%--believe that the prophecies of Revelation will come true. If the world is coming to an end anyway, if the Rapture Index is going sky high, why advocate for public policies to improve the future? As environmentalist Glen Scherer writes, “Why care about the earth when the droughts, floods, famines and pestilence brought about by ecological collapse are signs of the apocalypse foretold in the Bible? Why care about global climate change when you and yours will be rescued in the Rapture?”^v

Let's back up a bit. How did we get to this mix of theologically acclaimed pessimism and its role in public policy? What is fundamentalism, anyway? What is the apocalyptic vision that fuels this fatalism?

Even though we use the word to describe extreme views in several religious traditions, fundamentalism is a Christian term. In her book, The Battle For God, former nun and theologian Karen Armstrong describes its debut. In 1909, emeritus Harvard professor Charles Eliot predicted the formation of a new religion, which would have only one commandment: the love of God, expressed in the practical service of others. There would be no churches and no scriptures: no theology of sin, no need for worship. God's presence would be so obvious and overwhelming that there would be no need for liturgy. Christians would not have a monopoly on truth, since the ideas of scientists, secularists and those who belong to a different faith would be just as valid. Incensed and fearful at Eliot's prediction, the Presbyterians of Princeton proclaimed the fundamental dogmas that all true Christians must accept. These were:

- The inerrancy of the Scripture
- The Virgin Birth of Christ
- Christ's atonement for humanity's sins on the cross
- Bodily resurrection
- Objective reality of miracles

Soon after, the last of the five dogmas—the objective reality of miracles--was replaced by a belief in pre-millennialism, also known as dispensationalism or the Rapture.

Between 1910 and 1915, two oil millionaires financed the publication and dissemination of twelve pamphlets entitled, "The Fundamentals". Three million copies

of the series were sent to every Christian pastor, professor and theology student in America.^{vi}

The battle for God reached a fevered pitch a few years later, when the fundamentalists tried to expel liberals from Protestant denominations. In the words of one adherent, a fundamentalist was one “who was ready to regain territory which had been lost to Anti-Christ and to do battle royal for the fundamentals of the faith.”^{vii} Although the fundamentals were doctrinal in their inception, those who the fundamentalist identified as the enemy held liberal social views. Thus, the fundamentals came to be identified with the response of traditionalists to contemporary social trends. In other words, along with these particular creeds, came the fundamentalists’ belief that social forces threaten the survival of traditional values and beliefs, and that only their interpretation of Christianity could halt the degeneration of society, and that religion must triumph over secularism.^{viii} This describes many of the clashes of the twentieth century between liberals and fundamentalists that inform the battle-lines today.

Ideas found in the Book of Revelation-- such as “apocalypse” and “Armageddon”-- have been introduced into political discourse in our time. President Ronald Reagan famously invited the Rev. Jerry Falwell speak to the National Security Council, where Falwell spoke of the impending Battle of Armageddon--a nuclear exchange between nations wherein the Christians of the world would know the rapture and be saved.^{ix} The National Security Council. Today, Armageddon is invoked to

describe the wars in the Middle East and underlie much of the conservative Christian support for Israel. For many, the prophecies of the Book of Revelation appear to explain and even justify or determine public policies.

I know I am in very good company when I say that I don't claim to understand the Book of Revelation—indeed, scholar Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza writes with understatement, “The variety of proposals and solutions that continue to be offered by scholarly research on Revelation substantiates the judgment that few primitive Christian writings have received so much attention and yet have remained so elusive.”^x In short, none of us understands Revelation.

The last place I would have expected to be offered a window into the Book of Revelation was this summer while touring the ancient Theatre of Epidauros in Greece. We had just been treated to a demonstration of the exquisitely sensitive acoustics of the amphitheatre, when my undergraduate advisor, the Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Bowman leaned on his cane and in his soft voice began to speak.

He told us that “while there is much confusion about the structure and meaning of the Book of Revelation, its author was familiar with Greek tragedy, and he intentionally composed The Book of Revelation in the form of an ancient Greek play. It has a prologue, an epilogue, and seven acts, and each act has seven scenes. In order to convey a message discreetly, but powerfully, he author made use of theatre, of high drama,

employing stage props and symbolism. The Book of Revelation is about the church in the Roman province of Galatia suffering persecution under Nero, the Roman Emperor. The author is in exile on the Island of Patmos just off shore from the seven churches for whom he is writing. The intention of the writer is to put steel in the backbone of a church suffering bitter persecution under the Nero. Because of the persecution, much of the play is written in code at many points and makes use of the visionary imagery of high drama. Understanding the book,” he said, “requires that we pay attention to its form, style, and diction as well as its historical setting and content.”

I had never heard the idea that the Book of Revelation is a play. So I asked Doug whether this was written anywhere and he said that it was-- in a book called The Drama of the Book of Revelation written by a guy named Bowman. “You?” I asked? “No, my father.” My teacher’s father, the Rev. Dr. John Wick Bowman, was a missionary, minister and New Testament Professor.

But Rev. Bowman the younger went beyond the structure of the book to explore its meaning. He shared with us his outrage at the misunderstanding and misuse that characterizes the contemporary reading of Revelation. “It represents the height of ignorance to push the time and figures and events of the Book of Revelation into this or any other century,” he said. “The time, figures and events are contemporaneous with the author. Not only does the speculative interpretation misread the document, but it also deprives all readers of the real message contained in the book. That message is that the Spirit-filled church—even a church suffering persecution during the...first century...will

nevertheless get the gospel message to a needy humanity. The desire of the author is to place the church's dire extremity in the context of the world's equally great need, on the one hand, while affirming God's redemptive purpose on the other. In other words, alongside the church's suffering is placed the suffering and need of all humankind, and the cosmic drama depicted by the book tells the persecuted church that *it, the church, will be the agent* for the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose and task given to Christianity..."

As we were absorbing this, one of my travel-mates asked, "But what about the infamous Battle of Armageddon? If the book is not a prophecy for the future, how are we to understand Armageddon?" "This is not a battle of bombs and guns," Rev. Bowman responded. "It is a battle of ideologies and words. It is a battle between truth and falsehood." His voice rising, he added, "*Thus, it is high time for Christians to appreciate that the Battle of Armageddon depicted in the book is **already in progress**. It has been going on since Jesus first loosed his message before the world. It will end when that message gets through to a needy world.*"

Passionately, he continued, "To say that nuclear war or environmental destruction or social injustice should not concern us because 'the world will soon end with the Battle of Armageddon' reinforces the ideology against which the Book of Revelation contends-- The Book of Revelation tells its first century audience and all subsequent audiences, (including this contemporary one that so misuses it), that the church has a task charged with ethical responsibility, a cosmic perspective that can cope with suffering, and a will

empowered by the Spirit of God on high. The real meaning of the Book of Revelation is to motivate Christians to respond. It says: “Get to it Christians! Get to work! You ask, ‘who is the agent of God’s work on earth?’ Go home and look in the mirror! There is your answer!”^{xi}

Although he spoke softly at the ancient stones of Epidaurus, known for their careful listening, Rev. Bowman’s clarion call for justice echoed in my ears. To understand the Book of Revelation not as the end-time pessimism of tribulation and apocalypse, not as war and destruction, but as a cry to reduce suffering was a new and powerful idea. That it asks Christians to take up the ethical task of protecting the world, rather than abandoning it-- while counting days until the Rapture-- is a call to a very different kind of passion than the one fundamentalists teach. This interpretation of the book is indeed a revelation, a call for compassion, for community, for engagement, for involvement. This revelation is one of activity and agency, of hope for the future rather than presiding over its demise. This revelation counts on each of us to bring a future of possibility into being. When we go home and look in the mirror, let us be met by the image of a person who has the strength, the commitment, and the generosity to reach out to those who are suffering. Let us recognize that fear often leads to isolation and brittleness, closed minds and cold hearts. Let our compassion bridge the chasm of that fear, knowing that our fragile world can be protected only by the efforts of those to whom God entrusted it. May we not turn our back on this sacred task. May we draw from our traditions compassion, backbone and hope. Chazak, chazak v’nitchazek. Be strong, be strong, and you will be strengthened. Amen

ⁱ <http://raptureready.com/rap2.html>

ⁱⁱ Ernest L. Martin, Associates for Scriptural Knowledge, askelm.com/doctrine/d760201.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Karen Armstrong, The Battle for God, p. 139

^{iv} June 23, 2002 <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101020401/story.4.html>

^v Glenn Scherer, *Grist on-line environmental journal*, quoted in Bill Moyers, "A Shiver down the Spine: Political Ideology Fused with End-Days Theology Threatens the Earth," *Reform Judaism*, Summer, 2005

^{vi} Karen Armstrong, The Battle for God, p. 170

^{vii} Curtis Lee Laws in Armstrong, p. 174

^{viii} Roger Stump, *Boundaries of Faith: Geographical Perspectives on Fundamentalism*, p. 6, 7

^{ix} Douglas C. Bowman, *Theology from the High Hill of Old Age*, Book 2, p. 13

^x *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, "The Book of Revelation", Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, p. 744

^{xi} Douglas C. Bowman, *Theology from the High Hill of Old Age*, Book 2, p. 13-17; John Wick Bowman, "Revelation, Book of" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, volume 3, p.58-71