

Chapter 7

Jacob L. Goodson, “Left behind? The New Testament and American evangelical Christian support for war”

Introduction

This is a discussion guide for Jacob Goodson’s chapter in Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.) (2021). *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge.

Summary of Chapter

Jacob L. Goodson describes how a prominent subculture within American evangelical Christianity sees future violence and warfare as an important part of God’s plan for the world. Under the influence of Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, some American Christians understand future nuclear warfare to be predicted by the book of Revelation. The popular (fictional) *Left Behind* series by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye has also encouraged expectations of a coming time of “tribulation” that will look and feel “like World War III.” According to Goodson, a significant number of American evangelicals expect the end-times scenarios depicted in the *Left Behind* series to become reality, and consider those expectations to be grounded in the Bible. Some also expect the US government and US military to play a key role in end-times events, an expectation that Goodson suggests may shape attitudes toward current military action, especially in the Middle East.

Understanding the Argument

As you read Goodson’s chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand his argument.

1. Goodson describes the end-times expectations of a certain subset of American evangelical Christians. What sort of events do they expect, according to Goodson?
2. According to Goodson, how has interpretation of the Bible in some American evangelical circles been shaped by the popularity of the fictional *Left Behind* series and Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*?

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-2 above, take time to reflect on the following issues:

3. Goodson suggests that American Christian interpretation of the Bible is sometimes shaped by exposure to other literature, such as the *Left Behind* series.
 - a. Why might reading contemporary fiction influence someone's interpretation of scriptural texts?
 - b. What else do you think might shape how someone reads scriptural texts?
4. Does Goodson's chapter change your understanding of the role that the New Testament plays in Christian communities? If so, how?
5. Suppose your neighbor said to you, "The Old Testament is violent, but the New Testament is not." In light of Goodson's chapter, how would you respond?
6. Some scriptural texts predict future violence, while others record how violence was carried out in earlier historical contexts. How could one determine whether one of these types of texts is more likely to encourage present-day violence than the other?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- To learn more about the end-times expectations discussed in Goodson's essay, you could read a *Left Behind* book, or check out *The Late Great Planet Earth* or hallindsey.com.
- The book of Revelation is one of the most intriguing texts of the New Testament, and has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways over the centuries. To learn more, see, e.g.:
 - o Craig R. Koester (2001). *Revelation and the End of All Things*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 - o Craig R. Koester (ed.) (2020). *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Includes 30 chapters by different scholars, on a wide variety of topics.]