

Book Review—THE RAPTURE EXPOSED

Colleagues,

[Update: Last week's fleece, put out for the Manipur Mission, after 7 years worth of ThTh postings, shows 12 drops of dew so far, totalling \$3500. For the 12 of you "dew-ers" we are thankful. Only \$66.5K more to go.] This week's ThTh posting is a book review by the Rev. Dr. William G. Moorhead, Senior Pastor, Pacific Hills Lutheran Church, Omaha, Nebraska.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation,
by Barbara R. Rossing. Boulder CO: Westview Press. 2004.

Hardcover, 212 pages. US\$24.

Barbara R. Rossing is ordained clergy in the ELCA, an associate professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and a former chaplain at Harvard Divinity School. She earned her doctorate at Harvard University Divinity School and her Masters of Divinity degree at Yale University Divinity School. Rossing and her book have been featured on CBS' 60 Minutes II in a segment titled, "The Greatest Story Ever Sold."

This book has been out about a year, but I first learned of it

when Ed and Marie Schroeder were our house guests in early April, 2005. One thing leads to another, so here is my review. The book is well done and worth reading (with a group even), but not without a few flaws.

Call me naive, not to mention amillennialist, but without Rossing's book (and a little web surfing), I would have had no idea just how much rapture theology dominates mainstream conservative American religious thought. If you visit www.raptureletter.com, for example, you can arrange to have a letter e-mailed to your family and friends (at least those who did not change their e-mail address or who did not get raptured themselves), explaining your absence, and the absence of millions of others, after the rapture. I will bet they will have the basic fact figured out, though, by the time they get the e-mail. There is also a Rapture Index on the web, a kind of Dow Jones of end times activity (www.raptureready.com). And you have probably seen the bumper sticker at one time or another: In case of Rapture, this car will be driverless.

It does not take Rossing long to get to her point. "The rapture is a racket" (p.1). "This theology is not biblical" (p.2). Rapture theology, a distortion of the Christian faith, uses very selective literalism in its (mis) use of Scripture. It is escapist interpretation and the very opposite of the message of Revelation, which the Church must reclaim from future-fabricating fundamentalists. It is destructive for theology, ethics, and the politics of the Middle East, the latter especially since the formation of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948 (she identifies one kind of disastrous political consequence as "Christian Zionism" and claims that such requires war rather than peace plans). It is the Bible (I would say the Gospel) that gets left behind. OK, Barbara, tell us what you really think! (And, dear reader, do not expect rapture groupies to be convinced. To them, Rossing and her kind

are exactly the kind of dark side, obstructionist theological folk who will be left behind, as Hal Lindsey once suggested in an interview.

Rossing first traces the history of fabricated rapture/dispensationalist/premillennialist theology (seven dispensations and the double return of Christ that sandwich a seven-year period of tribulation; the first return is the rapture; the second begins Christ's 1000-year reign from Jerusalem). She begins about 1830 with British evangelical cleric John Nelson Darby, who founded the Plymouth Brethren, noting rapture theology's major popularization through the Scofield Reference Bible (1909), and its dispensations and script for the future based on the 70 weeks of Daniel 9:27-29, and concludes with the writings of Hal Lindsey (*The Late Great Planet Earth*, 1970) and Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, co-authors of the mega-popular *Left Behind* series – 12 books, well over 60 million copies – of the last ten years. (Jenkins' *SOON* trilogy is similar in perspective.) Rossing's overview of this history over the past 170 years is excellent, tying several contributing factors into a coherent, basic whole, even if the theology itself is a pastiche of Bible texts ripped out of context and improperly exegeted.

Rossing also commendably contrasts the biblical picture (mostly from Revelation, with which Rossing must be most familiar through her teaching) of a God who, rather than snatching people from the earth before he destroys it, comes to live with us on the earth through the incarnated, resurrected, conquering Jesus/Lamb. The Bible's picture is of a "...God who is raptured down...a Rapture in reverse..." (p. 147). The incarnate, dwelling-with-us Lamb is the real Good News in the book of Revelation, not the violent doomsday end-times scenario envisioned by rapturists. Other good news in her book is her excellent exegesis of such rapturist passages as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

(in this text the Latin *raptio*. “caught up,” is the root word for rapture) [Ed. my Latin dictionary for *raptio* = a carrying off, an abduction], John 14:1-2, and Matthew 24:39-42. (She opened my eyes here. I was well aware of the Matthew citation, but had never really connected the other two to the rapture. I guess I haven’t read enough rapturist thought to really know.)

Very ably contrasted in another major section of Rossing’s book is the Roman worship of victory (Victoria, Nike) and Revelation’s insistence on the different kind of conquering effected by the Lamb. She describes how Left Behind ideology has hijacked Jesus’ victory of the cross, turning it into the voyeurism that enjoys wrath and war. Rossing also takes us again on a tour of the New Jerusalem. It is in these sections that Rossing does her best work with John’s apocalypse.

Rossing needed a tougher manuscript editor. It is somewhat repetitious in places. But at least the repetition is of her good points, so I will give her and her editor credit for not wanting us to lose sight of her themes. And I am glad that no instance of “Revelations” crept surreptitiously into the manuscript. Also, I would have been greatly helped by a glossary of both terms and persons, as well as an annotated bibliography for further reading. Along with these minor flaws, there are many happy surprises at every turn in this study. Rossing’s critique of the “rapture racket” is thorough, readable, and detailed.

I do not think there has ever been a pastor who has not had a few votes for the book of Revelation when we ask, “OK, folks, which book of the Bible do we want to study next?” If it happens to you (and it will if you ask that question), have Rossing’s book handy. Since I have begun a tradition in recent years in my parish of studying a particular book or other theologically-connected piece with my Boards of Elders and

Directors, this book is going to the top of the waiting list. If you do not mind my playing with some rapture themes here, I think I will not be waiting too long. And I am not going to be left behind.

[File this last item under what? Weird? Strange? After reading this book, and while writing this review, I had occasion to thumb through a recent edition of the Scofield Reference Bible. What caught my eye was one name on the editorial committee: W. G. Moorehead!! Different spelling of last name and no relation to this writer!]