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HAL LINDSEY'S PROPHETIC PUZZLE: FACT OR FICTION?

Dispensing with dispensationalism



TIM MITOMA

Hal Lindsey is about as popular as prophets get. Predicting is his game, and selling books (by the millions) his fame. If all his profitable prophecies are true, Christ should be here around 1988. Which means that right now we're in the middle of the "Great Snatch."

But before we work ourselves into an eschatological sweat, let's ask a basic and reasonable question: Is Hal Lindsey's "prophetic jigsaw puzzle" (as he likes to call it) really true? Let's take a look at it—and at the evidence.¹

Dispensationalism

Lindsey belongs to the prophetic school of interpretation known as dispensationalism, which divides history into dispensations, or segments of time, in which God has worked with humanity in different ways. An estimated 200 Bible institutes teach this concept.²

Dispensationalists see modern Israel as the center of end-time prophecy. Establishment of Israel on May 14, 1948, started the prophetic countdown to Armageddon and the Second Advent, they believe. Credit for popularizing this view goes to Lindsey. His book *The Late Great Planet Earth* has sold more than 20 million copies in 30 foreign editions.

BY SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

Scholarly studies generally ignore authors such as Lindsey. As a result, millions of people have been misled. The key pieces of Lindsey's prophetic puzzle have not fallen into place.

The Parable of the Fig Tree

Lindsey starts his end-time prophetic scenario with 1948, the year the modern State of Israel began. He points to Christ's words "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates" (Matt. 24:32, 33).*

This parable contains, according to Lindsey, an important clue in calculating the approximate date of Christ's return. He finds this clue in the fig tree putting forth its first leaves. For Lindsey this represents the restoration of national Israel, which occurred "on 14 May 1948" "when the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again."³ According to Lindsey, Christ referred to this event to "indicate that He was 'at the door,' ready to return."⁴ Christ then said, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place" (verse 34).

Lindsey writes " 'This generation' means . . . the generation which sees Israel (the fig tree of verse 32) back in the land of Palestine—this is the chief sign—and sees all the other signs of Matthew 24 being fulfilled."⁵ Since "a generation in the Bible is something like forty years," Lindsey predicted that "within about forty years of 1948 all the events leading to and including Christ's return could take place."⁶

This means by 1988 all the prophecies pointing to Christ's return must be fulfilled. Lindsey expresses the same conviction in his book *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (1981). Since we are already halfway through the 1980s, we might ask if the key pieces of his prophetic jigsaw puzzle have begun to fall into place.

Lindsey predicted three major events would occur during "the terminal generation" that began in 1948: the

rapture, the tribulation, and the return of Christ. The rapture, according to dispensational interpretation of such passages as 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, means Christ's secret and invisible coming partway to the earth to resurrect the sleeping saints and transform living believers. This secret rapture, which Lindsey calls the "Great Snatch" is supposed to happen seven years before the visible and glorious return of Christ. The seven-year period comes from the seventieth week of Daniel 9:27 and from adding together the "forty-two months" and the "1260 days" of Revelation 11:2, 3.

We reject this belief because the description of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 suggests the very opposite of a secret, invisible coming.

Dispensationalists view the secret rapture as imminent because its main preconditions, namely, the reestablishment of the State of Israel and the repossession of ancient Jerusalem, have already taken place.⁷

Date of the Rapture

Lindsey not only portrays the "Great Snatch" but predicts its approximate time. He has set Christ's visible return for about 1988. Since the secret rapture, according to the dispensationalists, must take place seven years before Christ's return, it should already have taken place around 1981. But it didn't.

If Lindsey has been proved wrong on the time of the rapture, he may be equally mistaken regarding the tribulation events to occur during the 1980s, since the latter are dictated by the former. In fact, time has already revealed his mistakes in several seven-year countdown predictions. The 1980s has resulted not in the countdown to Armageddon, but rather in a countdown to Lindsey's prophetic vagaries.

The secret rapture, which according to Lindsey's prophetic jigsaw puzzle should have occurred about five years ago, sets the stage for the "seven-year countdown" (Dan. 9:27; Rev. 12:2, 3) to Armageddon and Christ's visible return. The most incredible events of human history are

to take place during this time period.

Immediately after the rapture a Roman dictator, the Antichrist, or as Lindsey prefers to call him, "The Future Fuehrer," will rise to power out of the ten-nation confederacy of the European Common Market (Dan. 7:23, 24; Rev. 13). He will sign a treaty with Israel enabling the Israelis to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple in three and a half years and to reinstitute its sacrificial services (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15, 16).

This temple and its services will hardly be inaugurated when the Roman antichrist will break his covenant with the Jews, go to the temple, claim to be God, and disrupt the sacrificial services—the abomination of desolation predicted by Daniel (Dan. 9:27; cf. Matt. 24:15, 16). This event marks the beginning of the last three and a half years of antichrist's cruel reign, which, Lindsey writes, "will make the regimes of Hitler, Mao, and Stalin look like Girl Scouts weaving a daisy chain by comparison."⁸

Immediately after this temple profanation by the Roman antichrist, an Arab-African confederacy, headed by Egypt (the king of the south of Daniel 11:40a) will launch an invasion of Israel. Russia and her allies (the king of the north of Daniel 11:40b and Ezekiel 38) will counterattack by sweeping over the Arab countries as well as the State of Israel. This invasion of the Middle East will be of short duration, because Ezekiel (38:18-22; 39:3-5) supposedly predicts that the Roman antichrist will mobilize a vast army of soldiers from the Roman confederacy (Common Market countries) and from Red China, which will utterly destroy the Russian army in Israel.⁹

Annihilation of the Arab-African armies and Russian forces leaves only "the combined forces of the Western civilization under the leadership of the Roman Dictator and the vast hordes of the Orient probably united under the Red Chinese,"¹⁰ in a final battle for world control at "Armageddon," on the plain of Jezreel, in lower Galilee between the Mediterranean and the Jordan (Rev. 16:13, 14, 16). At the climactic moment of this battle,

The key pieces of Lindsey's puzzle have not fallen into place.

Christ will return with His church to destroy the ungodly and set up His millennial kingdom, which He will rule from Jerusalem.

How can Lindsey and a host of dispensationalists construct from biblical prophecies such an imaginative scenario? Since Lindsey predicts that the 1980s introduces a countdown to Armageddon, are his predictions being fulfilled in this decade?

Dispensationalist interpretation of Bible prophecy is based on two principles: a consistent literalism and a distinction between Israel and the church. On the basis of the first principle, Old Testament prophecies regarding the restoration of Israel, rebuilding the Temple, and reinstitution of animal sacrifices must be fulfilled literally for the Jewish nation in Palestine during the "terminal generation" that began in 1948, and especially during the last seven-year countdown. On the basis of the second principle, many Old Testament prophecies regarding the Jews that have not yet been fulfilled must be fulfilled at the end of time through a literal Israel.

But consistent literalism fails to interpret adequately biblical prophecy because it ignores the progressive nature of God's revelation, disregards the Messianic and expanding fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and contradicts itself through an inconsistent interpretation.

While the New Testament sometimes speaks of Jews in distinction from Gentiles, it never teaches that God has in mind a separate future for Israel apart from the church. The New Testament sees the future of Israel not in terms of a millennial political kingdom in Palestine but as an everlasting blessedness with the redeemed of all ages in a restored new earth.

As to whether the tribulation events of the seven-year countdown are being fulfilled in the 1980s, no sign of their fulfillment is yet in sight. The secret rapture failed to occur by 1981. Nor have we witnessed the rise of a Roman antichrist out of the ten nations of the European Common Market. And the chance of his arising seems extremely remote for the following reasons:

Fragile Economic Community. The European Common Market is not a strong political federation comparable to the 50 American states. A fragile economic community, its governing body does not dictate the internal political affairs of the ten nations it represents. It appears inconceivable that a political-religious dictator could arise out of a community that is fighting for its very survival.

Political Fragmentation. Anyone familiar with the political fragmentation in most of the ten nations belonging to the European Common Market can see that a political dictator could never succeed, without bloody resistance, in dominating these nations.

American Challenge. How could a Roman dictator dominate ten European nations without being challenged by the United States or Russia? Lindsey discounts an American challenge to the Roman antichrist because "according to the prophetic outlook the United States will cease being the leader of the West and will probably become in some way a part of the new European sphere of power. . . . It is certain that the leadership of the West must shift to Rome, in its revived form, and if the United States is still around at the time, it will not be the power it now is,"¹¹ on the basis of the Lord's statement "I will send fire . . . upon those who dwell securely in the coastlands (Eze. 39:6, Amplified).†

Developments during the past 15 years have proved this prediction totally mistaken. Not only has the United States strengthened its position of leadership in the West, but there are no indications this leadership has begun to shift toward a revived Rome. Thus another key piece of Lindsey's prophetic jigsaw puzzle has failed to fall into place.

European Secularism. How could today's Europeans, predominantly secular and humanistic (less than 10 percent attend church), suddenly become worshipers of a Roman dictator who claims divinity? It seems unlikely when papal directives are largely ignored by the majority of European Catholics. [In Italy, for example, in spite of papal threats against those who would vote in favor of divorce and abortion, Catholics voted overwhelmingly in favor of both practices.]

We must conclude that not only has Lindsey's Roman antichrist failed to appear as predicted, but he hardly could arise in the present political and religious climate of western Europe. This means that another vital piece of Lindsey's prophetic puzzle fails to fall into place. □

To be concluded

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REFERENCES

¹ This article represents a brief summary of chapter 15 ("Mistaken Signs of the Advent Hope") in my new book *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness*, released in September 1985. The reader is referred to this study for a more exhaustive analysis of the subject.

² For an analysis of interpretation, see Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1983).

³ Hal Lindsey with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1970), p. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵ W. Ward Gasque, "Future Fact? Future Fiction?" *Christianity Today*, April 15, 1977, p. 40.

⁶ Lindsey, p. 54.

⁷ Lindsey writes: "With the Jewish nation reborn in the land of Palestine, ancient Jerusalem once again under total Jewish control for the first time in 2600 years, and talk of rebuilding the great Temple, the most important prophetic sign of Jesus Christ's soon coming is before us" (*Planet Earth*, p. 57).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-161.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 96.

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