

Armageddon Now!

The Premillenarian Response
to Russia and Israel Since 1917

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The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf

A mischievous lad, who was set to mind some sheep, used, in jest, to cry "Wolf! Wolf?" When the people at work in the neighboring fields came running to the spot he would laugh at them for their pains. One day the wolf came in reality, and the boy this time called "Wolf! Wolf!" in earnest; but the men, having been so often deceived, disregarded his cries, and the sheep were left at the mercy of the wolf.

—Aesop

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Publisher's Preface

by Gary North

*This work on the whole will be more a tool in the hands of **antipremillenarians** than a **help** to **premillenarians**, but **premillenarians** willing to be **self-critical** will **find** his presentation is at least **partially** justified. Students of prophecy will do well to study **this** volume carefully for its **comprehensive** view of **premillennial** interpretation over the **last** sixty years and to learn from it many important lessons applicable to interpretation today.*

—John F. Walvoord, 1980¹

Dr. **Walvoord's** prediction that Dwight Wilson's *Armageddon Now!* would become a tool for **anti-premillenarians** is perhaps the most accurate prediction he made during his long career. It was an easy prediction to make. That a postmillennial publisher has now republished Dr. Wilson's book is no more remarkable than the fact that a mainly **amillennial** publishing **firm**, Baker Book House, published it in the first place. The manuscript was seen as a hot potato by dispensational publishing houses back in the mid-1970's. The book still is.

Unfortunately for his disciples but fortunately for his bank account, Dr. **Walvoord** did not take seriously the "many **im-**

1. J. F. Walvoord, "Review of *Armageddon Now!*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April/June 1980), pp. 177-78.

portant lessons applicable to interpretation today” that Dr. Wilson had offered in 1977. In late 1990, **Walvoord** revised his 1974 book, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, and it sold over a million and a half copies — a million by February, 1991.² It did so by rejecting Dr. Wilson’s warning: do not use sensational interpretations of Bible prophecy in order to sell books. If you do, you will look like a charlatan in retrospect, and you will also injure the reputation of Christ and His Church. But the lure of sensationalism was apparently too great. The latest dispensational feeding frenzy for prophecy books was in full force as the United States moved toward war in the Middle East in January, 1991. It was at that point that **Walvoord** publicly rejected his earlier belief in the “any-moment Rapture” doctrine. This was proof that he had abandoned traditional scholarly dispensationalism and had adopted the **pop-dispensationalism** of Hal Lindsey, Dave Hunt, and Constance **Cumbey**—what I like to call *dispensationalism*. (His colleagues at Dallas Theological Seminary remained, as always, discreetly silent. They know exactly how their bread is buttered: by donations from laymen who thoroughly enjoy an occasional feeding frenzy.)

The leaders of American **dispensationalism** have not resisted the lure of huge book royalties and a few moments in the public spotlight which the doctrine of “today’s ticking **clock** of prophecy” offers to them. In an interview in the national newspaper, *USA Today* (Jan. 19, 1991), three days after the U.S. attacked Iraq, a theologically well-informed reporter asked Dr. Walvoord: “So the prophetic clock is ticking?” **Walvoord** answered **emphatically**, “**Yes.**” He had begun the interview with this assertion: “Bible prophecy is being fulfilled every day.” This was an about-face of astounding proportions on his part. He threw out a lifetime of scholarship for a moment of fame. He sold his theological birthright for a pot of message-a sensational message that sells newspapers and paperback books. **He** sold out orthodox **dispensationalism** in general and what little remains of orthodox dispensationalism at Dallas Theological Seminary.³

2. *Time* (Feb. 11, 1991).

3. The revised curriculum at Dallas, introduced in the fall of 1991, indicates how little of that tradition remains.

Dispensationalism's Clock of Prophecy

The doctrine of the clock of prophecy is central to dispensational theology. But what no paperback dispensationalist **prophecy** book of the *This Time, Armageddon Really Is Near!* variety ever discusses is that orthodox **dispensationalism** officially **affirms** a non-ticking clock in this, the so-called Church Age. If the clock of Old Testament prophecy begins ticking again in the Church Age (**pre-Rapture**), then there is **judicial continuity** between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church. Specific judgments of God in history, announced by the prophets of Israel, would be fulfilled in the era of the Church. Such a view of **fulfilled** prophecy undermines the theology of **dispensationalism**, which stresses the Church as a "Great Parenthesis" which was neither known nor prophesied about in the Old Testament. The New Testament Church (**pre-Rapture**) supposedly has no connection whatsoever with the dispensation of the Mosaic law. Therefore, if the prophecies of the Old Testament apply to the Church in any sense rather than exclusively to national Israel, the entire dispensational system collapses.

C. I. **Scofield** understood this clearly. Dispensationally speaking, there can be no biblically prophesied event in between the founding of the Church and the Rapture. **Citing Matthew 4:17b**, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at **hand**," **Scofield wrote**: "At hand' is never a positive affirmation that the person or thing said to be 'at hand' will immediately appear, but only that no known or **predicted** event must intervene."⁴ Therefore, the Rapture can take place **at any moment**. But if this is true, then its corollary is also necessarily true: the Rapture cannot be said to be **imminent for our generation**. It may be, but it may not be. An orthodox dispensationalist cannot legitimately say when it will be, one way or the other. The Rapture cannot legitimately be said to be **almost inevitable** tomorrow, next month, or next year. Edgar **Whisenant's** 88 reasons for the Rapture in September, 1988, were wrong-all 88 of **them**.⁵ So

4. **Scofield Reference Bible** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 998, note 3.

5. Edgar C. **Whisenant**, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. It was also published as *The Rosh Hash Ana 1988 and 88 Reasons Why (1988)*. The name is pronounced "WHIZnant."

were his (revised) 89 reasons for 1989.⁶ (As **Stayskill** put in a cartoon, how many reasons will they offer for the Rapture in the year 2000?)

Walvoord's Warning in 1979

It was this traditional dispensational doctrine of *no intervening prophesied events* that John **Walvoord** emphatically taught his students in the 1970's.⁷ In **Walvoord's** academic book, *The Rapture Question* (1979), he openly rejected the "ticking today" interpretation of Bible prophecy, and for a very good theological reason: it denies the traditional dispensational doctrine of the any-moment Rapture. If any prophecies are being fulfilled today, he wrote, this would mean that there are events in the Church Age that must come true prior to the Rapture. Therefore, the Rapture could not come at any moment prior to the fulfillment of these prophecies. Such a view of "signs being fulfilled in our day" denies the doctrine of the any-moment Rapture.

Walvoord saw clearly in 1979 that the doctrine of intermediate prophetic events leads to **mid-tribulationism** or **post-tribulationism**, or even worse, to postmillennialism. In a subsection, "No Intervening Events," in a chapter called "The Imminency of the Rapture," **Walvoord** wrote: "The hope of the return of Christ to take the saints to heaven is presented in John 14 as an imminent hope. There is no teaching of any intervening event. The prospect of being taken to heaven at the coming of Christ is not qualified by description of any signs or prerequisite **events**."⁸ This is the heart of the formal theology of **pre-tribulationial**, premillennial dispensationalism.

Nevertheless, there is a major problem with the doctrine of the any-moment Rapture: it reduces sales of books that promote the idea that Bible prophecy is being fulfilled today. These "hot news" paperback prophecy books sell well, some-

6. A 1989 Associated Press story reported on **Whisenant's** revised predictions. **The Rapture** was due in September, 1989. He published *The Final Shout: Rapture Report- 1989*. "**The time is short,**" he said. "Everything points to it. All the evidence has piled up." *Tyler Morning Telegraph* (Aug. 25, 1989). **Something** had surely piled up, but it was not evidence.

7. I was told this by a DTS graduate, Rev. Ray R. Sutton.

8. John F. **Walvoord**, *The Rapture Question*, revised and **enlarged** edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1979), p. 73.

times very well. No dispensational author who writes one of these popular books—and these days, most of the movement's leaders write them—is ever willing to devote the Introduction or the first chapter of his book to a theological discussion of why the events of his day cannot possibly be fulfillments of Bible prophecy if the orthodox dispensational **eschatology** is correct. Such a discussion would kill the excitement of the reader in hearing “the latest word” about fulfilled prophecy. Unexciting Bible prophecy books do not become best-sellers.

Oswald T. Allis, a postmillennial critic of dispensationalism, commented in 1945 on this schizophrenic aspect of dispensational authors: “One of the clearest indications that **Dispensationalists** do not believe that the rapture is really ‘without a sign, without a time note, and unrelated to other prophetic events’ [he cited Scofield, *What Do the Prophets Say?*, p. 97] is the fact that they cannot write a book on prophecy without devoting a considerable amount of space to ‘signs’ that this event must be very near at hand. . . . This is of course quite incompatible with their any moment **doctrine**.”⁹ In late 1990 and early 1991, a huge increase in the sales of “ticking clock” dispensational prophecy books once again proved him correct on this **point**.¹⁰

A Publishing Coup in the First Half of 1991

In 1974, the year following the beginning of the oil crisis, Dr. **Walvoord** wrote one of these paperback **potboilers**, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*. Eventually, it went out of print. In late 1990, it was resurrected from the **dead**.¹¹ The headlines about the imminent war in Kuwait were too powerful a temptation. They offered him a unique opportunity to revive his career at age 80. Since the first version of the book had

9. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), pp. 174, 175.

10. Scott **Baradell**, “Prophets of Door” We’re a leg up on **Armageddon**,” *Dallas Times Herald* (Sept. 8, 1990); Edwin McDowell, “World Is Shaken, and Some Booksellers Rejoice,” *New York Times* (Oct. 22, 1990); “Prophecy Books Become Big Sellers,” *Christianity Today* (March 11, 1991); Nancy **Kruh**, “The End,” *Dallas Morning News* (Feb. 17, 1991).

11. I like to think of this as Dr. **Walvoord's** “Lazarus” book. Paraphrasing Martha’s comment to Jesus: “But after 15 years in the tomb, it stinketh!”

not cost him his academic reputation within dispensational circles (he had none outside these circles), there seemed to be no reason not to try to **cash** in again. Feeding frenzies must be fed, after **all**. Apparently, publishing highly specific interpretations of Bible prophecy-interpretations that **are** disproved within a year or two, and possibly six months — has something important to do with spreading the gospel. So, Dr. **Walvoerd** allowed Zondervan to republish this revised 1974 potboiler, and it has sold (as of late August, 1991) 1,676,886 **copies**.¹² But the theological cost of this publishing **coup was high: Walvoerd's** explicit abandonment of the “any moment Rapture” doctrine of traditional dispensational **eschatology**. This is the man who had taught systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1952 until 1986, and who had served as president of the **seminary** for most of this period.

To complete Walvoerd's move to dispensationalism, his publisher announced his latest book, **Major Bible Prophecies: 37 Crucial Prophecies That Affect You Today**, in August, 1991. The timing, as we shall see, was perfect . . . for non-dispensational critics. The publisher, Zondervan, sent out a flyer in August mentioning the book, assuring bookstore managers that it was “**being** released this month.” I have a dated copy of this flyer in my **files**. But as of the final week of August, a week after the failed **coup** in the Soviet Union, its release date had been postponed until September.

This delay is very interesting. First, if the book mentions the **coup**, then we will know that an emergency rewrite took place— what we might call “severe damage control.” Only the discovery of a major error—an error that seriously endangers a publisher's reputation—is sufficient to persuade a large publisher to allow the author to revise a typeset book's page proofs, if such a revision causes the book to miss its scheduled date of publication. If the **coup** is mentioned, it would then be most interesting to examine the “inevitable fulfillments” that were cut from the original manuscript. Second, if the book speaks as though Russia were still a threat to Israel, then we will know

12. Press Release, “Kudos,” Zondervan Publishing House (August, 1991). This figure may not include returned copies which ought to be quite high, given what happened in the USSR in August.

that there are fewer than 37 "crucial prophecies that affect us today." Third, if the book says nothing about Russia, then we will know that the dispensensational tradition of linking Russia with the coming Great Tribulation is now kaput in the eyes of "Dr. Dispensationalism." Dwight Wilson's book will then reign triumphant. But I strongly doubt that Dr. Wilson's book will be cited by Dr. **Walvoord**.

If John **Walvoord**, who at age 80 is the last of the old-line dispensational theologians, could not resist the siren call of **sensationalism** in his own "last days," then what **dispensationalist** can? As Dr. Wilson proves, not many dispensational authors have resisted it since 1917. Dispensationalists have been visibly addicted to sensationalism. It is an addiction that is not easily broken. The "highs" that sensationalism briefly provides during any Middle Eastern crisis are just too alluring. Gary DeMar identifies **this** devastating addiction as "last days **madness**."¹³ The desperate addicts never remember their last round of withdrawal pain, when their confident prophecies once again failed to come true. Dr. Wilson's book is an attempt to remind them of those many failed prophecies. It offers them an example of academic integrity, as well as a helping hand psychologically. Addicts of prophecy sensationalism need both.

A Soviet Coup in the Second Half of 1991

In early 1991, Walvoord told the world that the biblical clock of prophecy is ticking. He was wrong. It was not the clock of prophecy that he heard ticking; it was a time bomb for popular dispensationalism. It exploded on August 21, 1991: the defeat of the Communist **coup** in the Soviet Union, unquestionably the most startling three-day geopolitical reversal of the twentieth century.

When it began on August 19, geopolitical affairs still looked as though **dispensensational** prophecy books could conceivably be salvaged. But when this **coup** failed, it ended any immediate or even intermediate threat to the state of Israel from Russia. The Soviet Union is now disintegrating. The republics are declaring their independence daily, one by one. During the **coup**,

13. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, Tennessee Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).

the KGB and the Red Army's military masters could not even control downtown Moscow, let alone invade the state of Israel. Today, whatever military resources the Soviet Union has at its disposal must be reserved for a possible civil war. Unless the state of Israel should, for some suicidal reason, attack the Soviet Union, there is not going to be a Russian-Israeli war.

The failed *coup* placed a tombstone on top of a huge pile of utterly inaccurate prophecies made by the leaders of popular dispensationalism, a pile of errors that had been growing since 1917. (Actually, long before: John Cumming's book, *The End: Or, The Proximate Signs of the Close of This Dispensation*, published in 1855, is evidence. Lecture 7 was: "The Russian and Northern Confederacy.") This tombstone's inscription reads: "Died of a Self-Inflicted Wound: Sensationalism." While a dispensational theologian today might conceivably be able to speculate about a Russian invasion of the state of Israel a century from now, or a millennium from now, the fact remains that the basis of the popularity of paperback dispensational books on prophecy (there have been no hardbacks) has always been the doctrine of the imminent Rapture. The Rapture is just around the corner, the faithful have been told, because Russia is building up its military machine, and the state of Israel is simply sitting there. Defenseless. Waiting to be surrounded by Russia.

Today, Russia is being surrounded: by seceding republics. What possible incentive does a military confrontation with the state of Israel offer anti-Communist Russian leaders today, now that expansionist Soviet Communism is deader than a doornail? Even if a military autocracy takes over in what is now the Soviet Union, or in Russia, what threat would this pose to the state of Israel? What would be the incentive for a military junta to engage in a distant military confrontation with Israel and the United States? What would be the pay-off? The Soviets in 1990 and 1991 used Jewish emigration to the state of Israel as a pressure-release valve. Why would any military junta want to close off this valve? Why would a junta want to create Jewish resentment within Russia and worldwide opposition against Russia?

Seven years before Russia surrounds the state of, Israel, dispensational laymen have been publicly assured for over seven decades, the Rapture will pull all Christians out of their **miserable**

ble, culturally impotent, present condition—the wretched of the earth. They will meet Jesus in the sky. But if Russia is not in a position to invade the state of Israel, then the Rapture cannot be imminent. In short: **no imminent Russian invasion, no imminent Rapture**. Put another way, to the extent that a **dispensationalist** is longing for the Rapture, he is longing for Russia to invade the state of Israel. He longs for the beginning of the Great Tribulation of Israel in which, according to Walvoord, two-thirds of the nation of Israel's population will **perish**.¹⁴ Why? Because this dispensationally inevitable holocaust will follow the Rapture by seven years, and he longs for the Rapture. An imminent Rapture, if it is sufficiently imminent, means that he will not have to die, even though millions of Jews will. But now this “blessed hope” is gone for our generation; the invasion by Russia has been postponed indefinitely. This means that *the Rapture has been postponed indefinitely*.

A “New, Improved” Invader?

This, I believe, is a logical, theological, but utterly unacceptable conclusion for most dispensationalists. It is too hard a pill for them to swallow. They will either identify a new potential invader of the state of Israel or else abandon **dispensationalism** completely. If most of the movement's leaders take the former course, as is likely, they will have to act very fast. They must quickly locate a potential invader that can and will bring a gigantic army of millions of men against tiny Israel. They will also have to agree with each other if they are to maintain their contention that Bible prophecies about the Great Tribulation and Armageddon are: (1) future, (2) literal, and (3) clear.

Will it be Iraq? After what the United States did to Iraq? **This** seems improbable. Then who? What nation is large enough, mobile enough, and determined enough to invade the state of Israel? Arab nations, perhaps, but do they constitute the long-predicted unified army of invasion? Arabs? Unified? Will they launch a massive attack without meeting nuclear resistance from the Israelis? Without the resistance of the industrialized West? Does anyone seriously believe that the combined

14. John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, [1962] 1988), p. 108.