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Book Review: Three Views on the Rapture

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Three Views on the Rapture. Second Edition (with different contributors). Counterpoints/Bible and Theology. By Alan Hultberg (gen. ed.), Craig Blaising, and Douglas Moo. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010, 283 pp., $18.99, paper.

It is an enjoyable assignment for the present reviewer to evaluate this volume for two reasons: 1) I was privileged to review the first edition (*The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* [Zondervan, 1984]) for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*; and 2) I have had cordial relations with all three contributors at various points over the past 40 years—Blaising as a brilliant Th.M. classmate at Dallas Seminary; Hultgren as a gifted student when I began teaching at Talbot School of Theology—just after the initial prewrath Rapture books had been published; and Moo as the editor of the *Trinity Journal,* who graciously accepted one of my articles for publication.

Before proceeding to the review proper, Zondervan, and particularly series editor Stan Gundry, should be commended for choosing to publish a second edition in the Counterpoints series on the Rapture. It was obvious that much had changed in regard to this subject over the ensuing quarter century. This book clearly demonstrates that point. It is assumed that the idea for this second volume came from Hultgren, who serves as the book's general editor. If that is correct, he did well to recruit Blaising and Moo, both seasoned theological veterans and highly capable spokesmen for their viewpoints.

Comparing this volume to the first edition: Craig Blaising (Th.D., Dallas Seminary; Ph.D., Aberdeen), one of the fathers of Progressive Dispensationalism, champions the Pretribulation viewpoint, replacing Paul Feinberg; The Midtribulation view, represented by Gleason Archer in the previous edition, has been dropped in favor of the Prewrath view—which, to my knowledge, did not exist beyond the personal views of Robert Van Kampen in 1984—defended here by Alan Hultgren (Ph.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School); but there is some continuity with the first edition provided by Douglas Moo (Ph.D., St. Andrews), again arguing the Posttribulation perspective.

The same structure is used for this work as for the first edition (and for the sampling of the volumes in Zondervan's Counterpoints series I have seen, except for *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* gen. ed. C.M. Pate [1998]): 1) an introductory orientational essay; 2) the three views presented in turn, with each followed by responses from the other two contributors and a brief rejoinder to the two responses; and 3) concluding material. Given how much the thinking on this subject has advanced in the last 25 years, it is little short of amazing—and a tribute to the contributors and editors—that all of this was packed into 283 pages, only 15 pages more than the original volume!

The second edition of *The Rapture* has numerous strengths: 1) Hultberg's concise "Introduction" (pp. 11-24) not only shows how this volume picks up where its predecessor left off, but also explains why the Prewrath position has replaced the Midtribulation view, both in this book and, for the most part, in wider American evangelicalism; 2) All three positions are presented effectively—and irenically; however, 3) the insightful quality of the response critiques

and rejoinders is at least as high as the essays—reminding the thoughtful reader that a skilled thinker and communicator can be very persuasive, but the better test is how a position's presentation stands up to equally skilled critics; 4) It is edifying to note that, beyond the expected general cordiality, each of the contributors was humbly able to either openly admit—or at least infer—the relative weakness of some of their own argumentation or praise the stronger background of one of the others in a certain area of study; 5) Hultberg's one-page "Conclusion" (p. 275) is supplemented by an excellent chart, summarizing the book's biblical argumentation: "A Comparison of the Authors' Interpretations of Passages in the Debate" (pp. 276-82); 6) This volume is decidedly more exegetical than its forebear—and it must never be forgotten that a theological position is only as strong as its exegetical foundation; and 7) The presence of one entirely new viewpoint (i.e., Prewrath Rapture) in the debate, plus Blaising's fresh Progressive Dispensational perspective and Moo's tweaked Posttribulational view, make for relatively little of the "same old, same old" predictable ideas that dominated the almost always talking-past-each-other—and sometimes heated!—eschatology "discussions" of most of the twentieth century.

There are, in this reviewer's opinion, four weaknesses—or absences—worth noting here about *The Rapture,* all related to its treatment of the Book of Revelation: 1) Although the contributors come close to admitting it, none forcefully makes the obvious point—obvious, as soon as you think about it—that, if the strongest part of one's argument about the Rapture is not in the Book of Revelation—where all previous prophesies and didactic inferences will be fulfilled at the end of the age—your overall viewpoint is questionable, at best. In this case, Hultberg offers the most substantive discussion in relation to the Apocalypse, but even he has almost as many questions—or questionable surmises—as solid answers; 2) Though I remain a Pretribulationalist, and fairly close to a Progressive Dispensationalist on many counts, I have been sorely disappointed by the Progressives' previous virtual silence about the Rapture (and Revelation, in general) in print—with Marvin Pate's "muddy the waters" essay in *Four Views of the Book of Revelation* a disturbing exception—until Blaising's contribution here, which, though helpful in treating numerous biblical areas, barely scratches the surface in Revelation; 3) Though Moo helpfully brings up the predominant NT usage of *thlipsis* ("tribulation, affliction") as dealing with suffering in the Christian life here and now (e.g., John 16:33; Acts 14:22), no clear distinction is made by him, Blaising or Hultberg between where this predominant pre-end times usage stops in Revelation (e.g., 1:9; 2:9, 10) and where the end-times use in 7:14 ("great tribulation") starts, particularly as it compares to Jesus' pre-end times usage in the Olivet Discourse (e.g., Matt. 24:9, 29) versus His use of "great tribulation" (24:21); and 4) The importance of clarifying exegetically the starting point of the end-times "tribulation period" in Revelation apparently did not occur to the contributors. In reality, though, it is critically important to the entire debate: *if* the unsealing sequence of the scroll in Revelation 6 delays the beginning of the "tribulation period" until the trumpets sequence in chapter 8 (i.e., because the scroll containing the end-times tribulation events is not open for viewing until all seven seals are

removed in 8:1), *then* 7:9-17—which both Hultberg and Moo see as a location for the Rapture—becomes Pretribulational.

In conclusion, this volume is highly recommended to anyone who would like to sample crisp presentations of recent well-written (i.e., clear and readable, yet "packing a wallop" content-wise) evangelical scholarship championing what are currently the three most viable positions on the Rapture. It certainly could be required reading in theology courses covering Eschatology at least in institutions holding a Premillennial viewpoint.

In this reviewer's mind, in spite of the fact that each contributor scored points in their essays and "counter-punched" well in their responses and rejoinders, there is no clear "winner" in regard to this book. However, what that means practically is that, as far as things clearly have come since the first edition of *The Rapture,* there is still much thinking, research and writing that needs to be done on the subject.

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