A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: Beginning of the End

by John Hagee

Pastor John Hagee’s recent book *Beginning of the End* has hovered near the top of the religious bestseller list for several months. The reason for its success can largely be explained by the fact that he deals with a popular subject, endtime prophecy, in an interesting manner. The book is sort of a *Late Great Planet Earth* for the nineties.

In this 196-page book, Hagee draws on his extensive knowledge of modern-day Israel to argue that current events there are leading to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. He sets forth the thesis that the death of Yitzhak Rabin will move the nation of Israel toward a peace that will initiate the rise of the Antichrist and the Great Tribulation.

Well-known to millions of Christians because of his television ministry, Rev. Hagee (the book lists him as Dr., but he does not have an earned doctorate) is the pastor of one of America’s largest word-faith churches. He has been granted several awards from Jewish organizations for his outspoken advocacy for the nation of Israel and Jewish rights. His interest in Israel is no doubt related to the fact that he is also very interested in prophetic fulfillment and is a dispensationalist, believing in a pretribulational coming of Jesus Christ for His church.

Hagee states at the beginning his reasons for writing the book. He wants to help his readers understand how contemporary events fit into God’s timetable for the future regarding the entire world, Christians, and especially the nation of Israel. He affirms that Christ’s imminent return requires Christians to conform their personal lives to God’s standards, and that Christians should be expectant for Christ’s coming for them (pp. ix-x).

Hagee then identifies the three audiences that he has in mind for his book (x-xi), namely, Jews, Christians, and those who miss the Rapture. He desires that Jews recognize Jesus as the Messiah. He wants Christians to trust the Word of God more and be strengthened in light of Christ’s imminent coming. The third group to whom he writes are those who are left on the earth to endure the Tribulation after Christ has returned to take away His church. This choice of audience may seem puzzling to those who do not share Hagee’s pretribulationist views, so it may be helpful to explain this position.

Pretribulational premillennialism (an eschatological position associated with the theological school known as dispensationalism) argues that there will be a tribulation period in which many individuals will be saved, including large numbers of Jewish people, though they will not be part of the church, since Christ will have already come for His church before the Tribulation. (Information about Hagee from other sources reveals he seriously differs with the vast majority of dispensational teachers because he believes that Jewish people do not need to be saved, since they are under a different covenant.) Following the seven-year Tribulation, Christ will return to execute judgment on the enemies of God, afterwards setting up His kingdom on earth, which will last a millennium. Hagee hopes that his book will provide guidance for these people left behind — first, to bring them to salvation and, second, to give them hope.
The book begins like a novel, describing a young Jewish law student who is zealous for the nation of Israel. This young man takes the life of Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel (1-2). Hagee tells his story of meeting Rabin, describes the regard that people throughout the world have for Rabin, and recalls the assassination itself. At this point we learn why Rabin is so important to this book on biblical prophecy. Hagee asserts that the violent death of Rabin will trigger prophetic events leading to the rise of the Antichrist and the rapture of the church. In other words, the death of Rabin means the prophetic clock is ticking fast (8-10).

In the remainder of chapters 1-2 (1-31), Hagee seeks to help readers understand the current turmoil in the Middle East, especially as it involves Israel, and how it all relates to the matter of peace. He rightly points out the strategic importance of Israel’s possession of the Golan Heights to its defense against Syria. To date the Jewish people in Israel have been unwilling to surrender this plateau, which protects its northern border. This unwillingness has caused friction between Israel and Syria, and has been an impediment to the Middle East peace process. By seizing control of this parcel of land in the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel put an end to Syrian bombardment of Israelis in the valleys far below, which had taken many Israeli lives. Israel had previously called on the United Nations for help, but the war presented a timely opportunity to bring an end to the problem through military means.

Hagee prognosticates that Rabin’s death will cause Israel to move more toward peace and eventually even the surrender of the Golan Heights (11). Moreover, he projects that Israel’s and the world’s reaction to the death of Rabin will force this peace process to escalate (13-14, 28-30), and predicts that Rabin’s successor as Prime Minister will be Shimon Peres (8-9). For this he relied on poll results that indicated that Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu trailed Peres by 31 percent (8). Of course, Netanyahu did win the election. If Hagee could be so wrong about an event so close at hand, we may well question his more far-reaching predictions.

Hagee believes two primary factors will lead to the surrender of land and the promise of peace. One is the anticipated public reaction against violence in the wake of Rabin’s assassination. The other is the influx of younger Jews to Israel, who did not endure the hardships of Israel since 1948 and consequently are willing to trade land for peace. The division is even more pronounced between religiously conservative Jews, who hold sacred the land of Israel and are unwilling to give it up because of God’s promises to Abraham, and secular Israelis who simply want to enjoy their lives in the land of Israel, unbothered by the much larger Muslim population around them. The latter do not recognize the larger biblical context that explains the reasons for the struggle, while the former embrace teachings of Scripture about the land of Israel having been given to the Jews for all generations (15-19, 28-30).

At this juncture (19-28), Hagee provides biblical and historical information to furnish reasons for the struggles in the Middle East between Muslim and Jew. The religious Jews believe that they alone have title to the land of Israel, based on God’s promises to Abraham and the continuity of Jewish habitation for the past three thousand years (17-23). Many Muslims, on the other hand, have a rabid hatred for the Jews, and will not be satisfied until every last Jew is out of Israel (24-28). He explains the history of the promise to Israel and the historic reasons for the current rivalry. Understanding this history, Hagee believes, one can understand the current tensions and future developments between Israel and the Muslim world (28-31).

Chapters 3 and 4 set forth the standard premillennial interpretation of the Book of Daniel’s prophecy of the four kingdoms of the world that preceed the Messiah’s establishment of His earthly kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem. The statue in Daniel with the head of gold, arms of silver, thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay refers respectively to the kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the final kingdom that is destroyed by the coming of the earthly kingdom of Messiah (33-37). Hagee then correctly identifies the dream of four beasts as a parallel to the dream of the statue (38-41). He avoids specific identification of the kingdoms of Europe (37), which some prophecy teachers have not avoided, usually to their embarrassment.

In chapter 4, Hagee argues for the trustworthiness of biblical prophecy through two interesting and very helpful means. First, he presents a powerful comparison of Moses, God’s deliverer, with Jesus the Messiah, God’s deliverer. Second, he sets forth 61 prophecies that Jesus Christ fulfilled in His life. For someone to fulfill all these predictions without being the true Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament is beyond the realm of possibility.

Chapter 5 to the end of the book provides some of the most interesting material. Unfortunately, in this portion several questionable speculations are also presented. It is all too common for speakers and writers about prophecy to
associate current events and persons with statements from the Scripture that are less than clear or definite. Hagee falls into this trap, as he lists many signs that indicate the coming of Christ (85-100). He believes that we are able to discern the prophesied signs before the end of the age, giving us indication that the world as we now know it will soon end.

I do not disagree with the fact that various signs will occur before Jesus comes in judgment, but I believe it is less than certain that these signs need to occur prior to the Tribulation; there are no signs pointing to the rapture of the church. Nothing has hindered Christ from coming these past two thousand years. There is more than adequate time for all these signs, even the establishment of the nation of Israel and the return of the Jews, after the Rapture and the rise of Antichrist.

The last days leading to the end of the age began at the coming of Jesus Christ almost two thousand years ago. Christians at any period of time since then could speak of events similar to what one may observe today and declare the soon coming of Jesus Christ or the end of the age. For example, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment saw a great expanse of knowledge, as did the nineteenth century. If Christ tarries, the next 50 years will predictably experience an even greater explosion of knowledge. Similarly, plagues and earthquakes have occurred many times over the past several hundred years, even wiping out much of the earth’s population, but they did not immediately precede the end of the age. Every age has had sufficient signs to take seriously Jesus’ injunction to "keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matt. 24:42). Every age has had the same kinds of signs, other than the return of the Jewish people. This is the one event that had to transpire in God’s providence in preparation for the Tribulation period. But it is uncertain whether the Jews will remain in Israel or control Jerusalem.

Though I agree with most of what Hagee says concerning Tribulational events, his confusion of passages that concern the rapture of the church with passages that speak of the Tribulation and revelation of Christ mars chapters 6 and 7 (101-30). He quotes 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 right alongside Matthew 24, not recognizing they are speaking of different events. 1 Thessalonians 4 explains the nature of Jesus’ coming for His church and the translation of the church into His presence. On the other hand, Matthew 24 tells of events that transpire prior to the coming of the "Son of Man . . . with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30). The 1 Thessalonians 4 passage speaks of the church meeting Christ in the clouds in their resurrection bodies. The coming of Christ in Matthew (24:27) is a very visible coming in judgment, and we know from elsewhere in Scripture, to the earth.

I applaud Hagee for not trying to pinpoint the year or time when Christ will come for His people. The day and hour will be hidden, but those living during the Tribulation will have a fairly good idea when He will return in judgment for they will have a seven year time span to work within. In discussing Mark 13:32, he speaks of millions vanishing (104), which will not happen during the Tribulation.

In his confusion of these two events, Hagee speaks of signs of Christ’s imminent coming. If the Rapture could have actually occurred at any moment since the first century, there really can be no signs leading up to the event. If something must precede an event, the event cannot occur at any moment. He says on page 106 that the snatching away of Christians "could happen at any time." Hagee needs to revisit the Scriptures and work out a more logically and biblically satisfying sequence of events.

The remainder of the book consists of fairly standard presentations of a pretribulational view of last things, and here Hagee does well in not trying to pinpoint contemporary persons and events as the definite fulfillments of the biblical passages. In this section he provides a helpful chart which contrasts the Lord Jesus with the Antichrist (136).

Just a note on a few small matters. When reading page 107, I wondered if Hagee believes in a partial rapture view, for he writes, "If you want to go with Him, you need to be watching for Him. We need to be watching, praying, ever-ready for the appearance of Jesus Christ who gathers those who believe in Him.” This may be due to carelessness in writing, but it is important to state one’s theology carefully since people often follow an author’s teaching. He mentions on page 109 that warlocks and witches today can call fire down from heaven. Documentation would be helpful to prove this. He goes on to mention supernatural bloodless surgery, but this has already been exposed as trickery. On page 169 he matter-of-factly states that the Antichrist is Jewish but provides no evidence from Scripture that this is so.

*Beginning of the End* shows surprising restraint, avoiding extreme speculation and date-setting. Nonetheless, it does feed the fire of a popular but problematic style of newspaper eschatology that often distracts Christians from a more serious and profitable study of God’s Word. The biggest concern that this book raises for the body of Christ, however, is that it adds to the popularity of a man who in other places espouses such seriously errant views as

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positive confession, guaranteed prosperity, salvation for the Jews apart from faith in Christ, and utter condemnation for those who disagree with his dispensational view of the relationship between Israel and the church.

—Reviewed by H. Wayne House