

Patrons, Prayers, and Persecution: How *This Present Darkness* Appropriates Ancient Apocalyptic Traditions to Comfort White Evangelical Americans

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Abstract: This essay argues that Frank Peretti’s Evangelical novel, *This Present Darkness* (1986), appropriates ancient apocalyptic conventions from the Book of Daniel, a text written to comfort a violently persecuted Jewish readership. This appropriation functions to comfort a white Evangelical American audience, a demographic eager to imagine their own oppression in the face of diminishing privilege at the end of the twentieth century. Drawing on critical Bible scholarship, this essay describes four continuities between *This Present Darkness* and the Book of Daniel: the alternative cosmology, patron deities, determinism, and praxes of resistance. This work analyzes the fabricated persecution of Evangelicals that drives their attempt to reassert white Christian supremacy today.

Scholarship on Frank Peretti’s Evangelical bestseller, *This Present Darkness* (1986), explains how the novel encapsulates the ideology of the New Christian Right in its portrayal of secular enemies united in a demonic conspiracy, as well as how the cosmology that the novel presents has been embraced by many Christians (Connolly 60, 64; Gardella and McDannell 330; Howard 194). However, there is little scholarship on the continuity of *This Present Darkness* with ancient apocalyptic texts. Literature and religion scholar Christopher Douglas argues that “the beginnings of apocalypse in Biblical and parabiblical literature” can aid in understanding “the phenomenological qualities the [Evangelical] *Left Behind* series is renewing” (2). Drawing

on Douglas's methodology of understanding contemporary apocalyptic texts through ancient generic predecessors, this essay will argue that *This Present Darkness* comforts Evangelicals in the face of diminishing Christian hegemony towards the end of the twentieth century by appropriating motifs from the Book of Daniel that were originally intended to comfort a persecuted Judean audience. Critical Bible scholarship will serve as a reference point to illustrate how *This Present Darkness* employs four apocalyptic conventions from the Book of Daniel, including the alternative cosmology, patron deities, determinism, and praxes of resistance, in order to comfort an Evangelical readership experiencing a cultural crisis.

The Book of Daniel was written in the context of the Seleucid Empire's violent persecution of Jews living in Judea in the second century BCE (Portier-Young, "Daniel" 806). In 167 BCE, King Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the Seleucid Empire "outlawed the practice and confession of Jewish religion and instituted new religious practices" in an attempt to "assert the empire as sole power, reality, and ground of being" (Portier-Young, "Jewish Apocalyptic" 150). Anthea Portier-Young argues that the Book of Daniel functioned to comfort the persecuted Jewish community by offering an alternative cosmology that assured readers of the legitimacy of their God and identity by denying the "ultimacy of imperial power" (151, 150). Daniel has a divinely-inspired dream in which empires are depicted as monstrous beasts that will only rule for a short time before God destroys them, thereby undermining the purported ideological and religious supremacy of the Seleucid Empire (Portier-Young, "Daniel" 814; Dan. 7.3–8). This revelation of an alternative cosmology in which enemies are unveiled as spiritually monstrous is also portrayed within *This Present Darkness*.

This Present Darkness was published in the context of a "late twentieth century [American cultural] revolution that swept away many values and laws derived from the Bible" (Gardella and McDannell 332). The practices of "premarital sex, cohabitation, and abortion" became

normalized in “law and public discourse” throughout the 1960s and 1970s, which was followed by a rise in religious pluralism and New Age spiritualism throughout the 1980s and 1990s (332). Some Evangelical Christians perceived this loss of power through the secularization of American laws and culture as marginalization or oppression (332). *This Present Darkness* employs the apocalyptic convention of the alternative cosmology to comfort an Evangelical audience experiencing this loss of privilege. For example, the novel depicts non-Christian faiths as a means for demons to manipulate people. Juleen Langstrat, the antagonist of the novel, believes she is convening with “the ascended Masters, the Spirit Guides from higher planes” through the “lotus position of Eastern meditation,” in actuality, she is communicating with a demonic “filthy black nightmare of a creature” (Peretti 293, 293, 294). This equivalence between non-Christian faith practices with demonic influences exists as a response to an increasing societal interest in “Eastern religions, yoga, and other forms of meditations” (Gardella and McDannell 332). Peretti’s depictions of New Age religion functioned to comfort Evangelicals: it asserted that their continuing loss of cultural hegemony to religious pluralism was not benign, but rather an insidious plot. Similar to how the Book of Daniel portrays a cosmology in which Seleucid oppressors are monstrous in order to affirm the righteousness of its Jewish audience, *This Present Darkness* portrays a cosmology in which New Age faiths are demonic in order to affirm the legitimacy of Evangelical beliefs during the erosion of Christian cultural dominance. Furthermore, the novel also reveals that Oliver Young, a liberal pastor who “endorses religious tolerance,” belongs to the demonic conspiracy (Peretti 17, 321). Similarly, when protagonist Marshall Hogan’s daughter embraces ecumenical beliefs at college, a demon “[stands] behind [her], stroking her red hair and speaking sweet words of comfort to her mind” (157). These portrayals of Christian tolerance and ecumenicalism as demonic further affirm the righteousness of fundamentalist Christians in the face of religious pluralism: the novel unveils an alternative

cosmology in which Evangelicals are lauded by angels in the spiritual realm, while those who follow any other faith are unknowingly backed by demons (6, 157).

Another apocalyptic motif in the Book of Daniel are patron deities, which are supernatural beings that sponsor national communities. John Collins explains that the Book of Daniel suggests to its audience that “behind the human conflicts of the Hellenistic age there is an ongoing battle in heaven between Michael, the patron angel of [Judea] and the [supernatural] ‘princes’ that sponsor Persia and Greece” (108). Judean readers of the Book Daniel would be reassured by the revelation that they were not resisting Seleucid persecution alone, but angelic entities were advocating for them in the spiritual realm. The angel Gabriel informing Daniel that “Michael, [Judea’s] prince” is contending against “these Princes [of Persia and Greece]” on his behalf functioned to comfort ancient Jewish readers suffering under the Seleucid Empire in the corporeal realm (Dan. 10.21). Furthermore, the Princes of Persia and Greece seem to be enemies of God, as evident in their attempt to impede Gabriel on his divine quest to respond to Daniel’s prayers, and in their sponsorship of empires that oppress the God-worshipping Judeans (Dan. 10.13, 10.20). This notion would have provided Judean readers assurance about their Jewish identity: Seleucid assimilationist edicts and practices are worth resisting, because the Seleucid Empire is sponsored by the enemies of God.

This Present Darkness appropriates this ancient motif of patron deities to comfort Evangelicals and affirm their feelings of righteousness. The novel begins with fundamentalist pastor Hank Busche praying in his church while two angels have a conversation behind him: “‘He’s going to get hurt, you know that,’ one says; the other replies, ‘And so will we’” (Peretti 6). Evangelical readers of *This Present Darkness* could glean comfort from the notion that angels are advocating for and suffering alongside Christians in turmoil. The angels “[ministering] peace” to Hank when he feels forlorn, causing “his many tears ... to subside,” and their feelings of severe pain when they see Marshall, who

is getting attacked by demons provide comfort through the concept that unseen angelic warriors are sympathizing with the hardships of Christians (7, 72). Like how the Book of Daniel assuages Judean feelings of helplessness under the oppression of a powerful empire by suggesting that patron deities are advocating for them; the vision of angels aiding Christians in *This Present Darkness* functioned to soothe fundamentalists who were losing cultural dominance in the late twentieth century. Furthermore, the motif of patron deities ascribes supreme importance to Evangelical identity by magnifying their struggles to a cosmic scale. The Ashton Community Church's vote on whether to keep fundamentalist Hank or replace him with a more liberal pastor becomes a paramount concern of both angels and demons, with both sides trying to influence the vote in their favour (133). Gardella and McDannell suggest that these portrayals of "the cosmos [centering] on [white] Christian families nestled in small-town America" function to affirm a sense of importance for Evangelical readers—thereby comforting them in the context of diminishing cultural supremacy (334). Lastly, the novel's depiction of patron deities constructs mundane earthly affairs into Manichean struggles between the forces of good and evil. For instance, Ba-al Rafar, the demonic patron deity of the novel's antagonists who is attempting to rule as the "prince of Ashton," once ruled as the "prince of Babylon" in "ancient times" (Peretti 52). Therefore, New Age religion and liberal Christianity are sponsored by the same demonic being that sponsored Babylon, an epitome of wickedness in the Evangelical imagination ("Babylon"). Like how the Book of Daniel affirms Jewish identity by revealing that the Seleucid Empire is not simply a human polity but sponsored by the enemies of God, *This Present Darkness* affirms the righteousness of Evangelical identity by demonstrating that religious plurality is a heinous scheme orchestrated by demonic patrons.

Another motif the Book of Daniel employs to comfort its Judean readership is determinism. In the apocalyptic genre, determinism is the notion that God

preordained the course of history at the beginning of time (Popovic 258). Rabbi Wayne Allen explains that the emergence of determinism in ancient Judaism was a response to the theodicy of suffering: some Second Temple biblical writers proposed that God is an omnipotent being whose ultimate intent is to deliver justice, but since only he has “full knowledge and can see the complete picture” of the universe, he is gradually implementing justice through a mysterious plan that “is beyond human comprehension” (44, 45). Before God’s plan can be fully executed, some good people will suffer and some wicked people will prevail, but the eschatological event at the fixed end of history will rectify this injustice. This is the solution that the writers of the Book of Daniel apply to the theodicy of pious Judeans being persecuted by the Seleucid Empire: God, as the omnipotent ruler of the universe, allows a series of oppressive empires sponsored by his cosmic enemies to prevail for reasons that are not explainable by human logic. Since God is also benevolent, he must be unfolding some plan in which the righteous will ultimately be vindicated and oppressors punished (49). For instance, Daniel’s prophetic dream reveals that the four monstrous beasts, symbolic of empire, will reign supreme for an ephemeral period. Ultimately, however, God—depicted as “enthroned as supreme ruler in the divine council”—will kill the beasts and strip their power, thereby liberating the Judeans at the fixed end of history (Seow 233; Dan. 7.3–18). In Daniel’s prophecy, God’s absolute rule from the heavenly court and his plan to vindicate the Judeans are affirmed. In all, the text assured Judean readers that their unjust condition under Seleucid rule was part of God’s plan and was necessary to achieve the destruction of the wicked and the vindication of the righteous.

This Present Darkness similarly employs determinism to comfort Evangelical readers. For example, both Hank and Marshall are sent to Ashton as part of God’s plan to defeat the demonic conspiracy. The angels discuss how they orchestrated Marshall’s move to Ashton because God wants him to “[wake] up” to the conspiracy (Peretti

55). Similarly, Hank is mysteriously voted in as minister of the Ashton Community Church, despite the fact that the parishioners—who “went to such great lengths to get rid of the [fundamentalist minister] they had” before—had intended on voting in “some guy who had a wide and liberal enough philosophy to suit them” that was “all picked out and ready to move in,” implying divine interference in Hank’s move to Ashton (85). Furthermore, Edith Duster, the “wise old matron of the church,” assures Hank that “[his] being [in Ashton] is *not* a mistake” because God is “forcing a revival upon the church” (145). After God arranges Hank and Marshall’s move to Ashton, two angels on a divine “appointment” compel journalist Bernice Krueger to take a photo behind “one particular booth” at the Ashton Summer Festival, causing her to discover a clandestine meeting of the demonic Universal Consciousness Society (2). Immediately after, Bernice is suspiciously detained by the chief of police on false charges, which leads her and Marshall to investigate and uncover the demonic conspiracy in Ashton (18). Therefore, *This Present Darkness* has a deterministic plot: everything is put into motion by God and his divine intermediaries. Like how the Book of Daniel reassures its audience that God is in control, the novel’s depiction of God implementing a plan for an Evangelical victory functions to comfort fundamentalist Christian readers. Furthermore, the angels reiterate throughout the novel that “Hogan as well as Busche *must* fall” and suffer for God’s plan to come to fruition (269, 375, 383). Like how the Judeans in the Book of Daniel must suffer at the hands of the Seleucid empire, the protagonists of *This Present Darkness* must also undergo suffering in order for God’s plan to defeat the enemies of the New Christian Right to be executed. Hank realizes this when he and Marshall have both been jailed for investigating the demonic conspiracy: he exclaims “This is of God! Our being here is no accident. Our enemies meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. He’s brought the two of us together just so we could meet, just so we could put the whole thing together!” (409). This revelation that incredible suffering and persecution has been a part of God’s plan provides hope

for an Evangelical readership. It suggests that enemies may be allowed to prevail for a time while Evangelicals undergo persecution, but this persecution is all a part of his plan to vindicate true Christians and restore Christian hegemony in the United States. As Hank says, “I have a very strong feeling that [the Lord] got us into this, and that He also has a plan to get us out” (420).

Portier-Young argues that ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature often functioned to offer persecuted audiences praxes of resistance against imperial oppression (Portier-Young, “Jewish Apocalyptic” 160). In the Book of Daniel, the prescribed praxis is nonviolent resistance: Judeans should remain faithful to Jewish religious practices instead of assimilating to Seleucid culture and religion, even if that means undergoing martyrdom (151). For example, “the wise among the people” who instruct others about Jewish practices “shall fall by sword and flame, and suffer captivity and plunder,” but they will awaken “to everlasting life” during the resurrection, as opposed to those who forsake Jewish practices, who will awaken to “shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 11.33, 11.33, 12.2). Furthermore, Portier-Young suggests that the heroes of ancient apocalyptic narrative “model further forms of resistance for the audience to emulate” (Portier-Young, “Jewish Apocalyptic” 146). The heroic Daniel exhibits “faithfulness to Jewish religious practices” through prayer, penance, and confession, which encourages the Judean audience to do the same (151).

Like the Book of Daniel, *This Present Darkness* offers praxes to its readers: prayer and proselytization. The novel suggests that prayer is the primary weakness of demons. This is evident when Ba-al Rafar asks if his fellow demon Lucius is afraid of prayer and he replies, “Yes of course, more than anything” (Peretti 64). In a deviation from its generally deterministic cosmology, the novel suggests that angels need “prayer cover” in order to win battles against demons (199). God sets the plan in motion by sending Marshall and Hank to Ashton, but it is up to devout Christians to become “praying saints” in order for the plan to be fully

executed (230). By prescribing a praxis of prayer, Peretti provides Evangelical readers with a comforting sense of agency during their continuing loss of cultural hegemony: *This Present Darkness* assures its audience of the efficacy of prayer in defeating their enemies (401). Furthermore, like how Daniel is a hero that demonstrates forms of resistance for Judean audiences to imitate, Hank similarly models how a heroic Christian can combat the enemies of the New Christian Right: he “walks the streets of Ashton interceding for it” constantly, and doesn’t “turn [his] back on what [he believes] the Word of God teaches” despite vehement demands to preach a more liberal theology (50, 129). In addition to prayer, the novel prescribes proselytization to its audience. Edith tells Hank that “we need to get other people praying. That’s what the angels keep telling me,” which suggests to readers that proselytization is a means of restoring Christian hegemony (147). Hank, stirred by the way his parishioners are “deluded” by the want for a more liberal theology, informs them that “there may be times when [they’ll] feel [his] shepherd’s crook around [their necks] ... to help [them] move in the right direction, to protect [them], to heal [them]” (128, 129). This portrayal of the novel’s hero as corrective of those who stray to non-fundamentalist theology functions to encourage Evangelical readers to adopt the praxis of proselytization.

The Book of Daniel employs the apocalyptic motifs of the alternative cosmology, patron deities, determinism, and praxes of resistance to comfort persecuted Judeans by affirming their Jewish identity and encouraging them to reject imperial assimilation. Peretti’s *This Present Darkness* is a gross misappropriation of these ancient apocalyptic motifs—a novel written to comfort white Evangelical Americans by instilling them with the perception that they are entitled to political and cultural supremacy, and that any attempt to compel them to share their power is persecution. Understanding this Evangelical apocalyptic worldview is more important than ever, as contemporary American Evangelicals continue to appropriate ancient apocalyptic motifs in appeals for the reassertion of white

Christian supremacy under President Donald Trump. In between speaking in tongues on 4 November, 2020, televangelist Paula White-Cain exclaimed that “angels [were] being dispatched” to assist in securing the reelection of Donald Trump for the sake of Evangelicals—thereby drawing on the tradition of patron deities (Right Wing Watch). On 2 November, 2024, Evangelical social media personality Gabe Poirot posted a video on Instagram claiming that “a demonic creature ... manifest[ed] at one of [then-Presidential candidate] Kamala Harris’s rallies, exposing the truth behind who she really is”—unveiling the alternative cosmology to his fifty-four thousand followers (Poirot). Considering apocalyptic Evangelical media through the context of ancient generic predecessors like the Book of Daniel can aid in understanding one’s worldview and imagined experience of spiritual persecution that currently drives white Evangelical Christians to reassert their hegemony in the United States today.

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