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Murder in the Theme Park: Evangelical Animals and the End of  
the World

Kristin Dombek

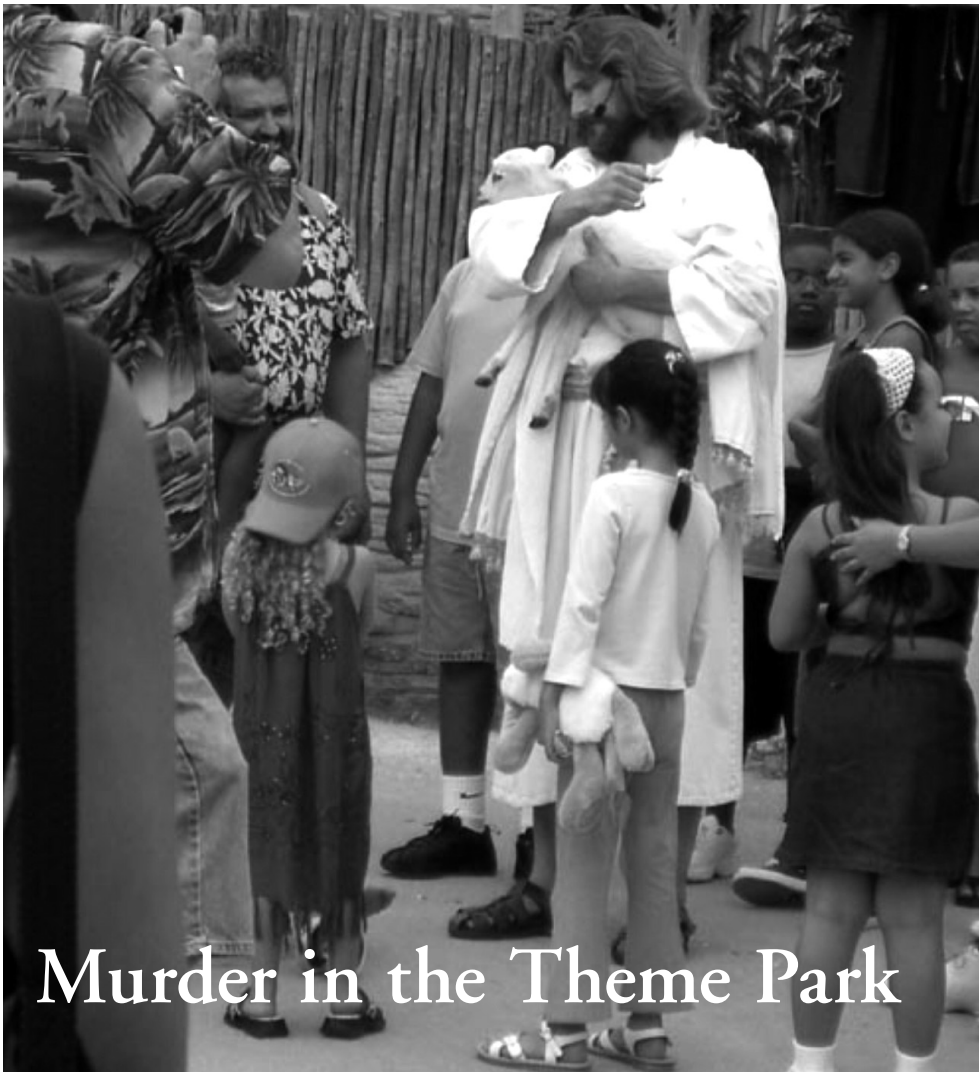
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# Murder in the Theme Park

## Evangelical Animals and the End of the World

*Kristin Dombek*

Just off a back road in Pennsylvania's Amish country, Sight and Sound Theatre stages a musical version of the end of time. The production, called *Daniel: A Dream, a Den, a Deliverer* (Eshelman 2003), is as spectacular as any Broadway musical. On elaborate sets depicting Jerusalem and Babylon, aided by state-of-the-art special effects, a company of 75 humans and 35 animals performs a history of the Israelites in the sixth century BCE, as recorded in the Old Testament book of Daniel. The stories are Sunday School favorites: After Babylonians sack Jerusalem and enslave the Jews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survive King

*Kristin Dombek is coauthor, with Scott Herndon, of Critical Passages (Teacher's College Press, 2004). She is completing her book, Shopping for the End of the World, and collaborating with Stephen Wangh to create The Testimony Project, a documentary theatre piece about conservative evangelicals and the culture wars. She writes about rhetoric, pedagogy, and performance in a range of contexts, including evangelicalism, popular culture, and the college writing classroom. She lives in Brooklyn and teaches in the Princeton Writing Program.*

Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace; God writes on the walls of the king's bedroom; the prophet Daniel interprets the writing and the king's dreams, and is himself thrown into a den of lions, which he survives; eventually, the Jews are released to return to Jerusalem. But in this production, these familiar stories about the past frame a particular vision of our future—a fundamentalist Christian apocalypse, rendered in the style of a blockbuster action film and staged as if Daniel himself imagined our future in this style thousands of years ago.<sup>1</sup>

In a cavern populated by 30 roaring animatronic lions, Daniel dreams of the last days. His vision is projected onto a 100-foot screen behind him and enacted on the 300-foot wrap-around stage and in the space above the 2,000 audience members. Daniel sees the rapture of Christians to heaven and the ensuing disasters on earth, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the Antichrist's rise to power. He watches World War III: images of a nuclear holocaust fill the screen, the towering shadows of soldiers with machine guns dance menacingly across the scrim, and giant model helicopters—rotors whirring—slice the air above the audience. Later, in the production's final tableau, this vision's utopic finale is layered over the return of the Jews from Babylon. As the liberated Israelites celebrate their return to Jerusalem, actors costumed to represent a host of nations and carrying flags march down the aisles to the stage. And then Jesus floats down from the flyspace on a white horse, joining the ancient Israelites and these international representatives of his future Christian utopia. As past and future meet in Jerusalem, Jesus and the ensemble perform a rousing rendition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic": "Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord / He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored / He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword / His truth is marching on"<sup>2</sup> (Howe 1862).

By the time *Daniel* reaches this triumphant chorus, members of the audience have watched nonhuman animals perform roles such as enslaved ox or cart-pulling donkey. They have shuddered, perhaps, at the beasts of the apocalypse: the galloping Babylonian steeds, those animatronic lions who provide the mise-en-scène for Daniel's visions of the end of the world, and the Beast himself, the Antichrist, that human so evil that he must be named an animal. And they have identified with another kind of animal, the cute one who survives catastrophe and its beasts: when Jerusalem is sacked at the end of Act I, a small white dog named Goliath, a corgi, sits alone in a spotlight, adorable, as the city burns behind him.

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1. "Fundamentalist," "evangelical," and "conservative Christian" have been used interchangeably in journalistic and academic commentaries on this religious culture, but in fact have quite distinct meanings to insiders and to church historians. At the risk of totalizing a diverse group, but for the sake of being able to say anything at all, I use "evangelical" here to refer to those Christians who refer to themselves as "born again," meaning that they have had a transformative experience in which they gave their lives over to Jesus Christ. Such Christians, even though they may not identify with the term "evangelical," tend to value evangelism in one form or another, believing that one mark of a Christian life is witnessing to others about their faith. "Conservative" evangelicals refers to those born-again Christians whose views lean toward the right of the U.S. political spectrum. I use "fundamentalism" to mean reading the Bible literally, applying to our present and future lives parts of the book that some Christians would interpret as metaphorical, poetic, or even historical, like the book of Daniel. By this definition, fundamentalism is practiced to differing degrees even among those who would not call themselves "fundamentalist," and the particular fundamentalist views on the end of the world, which are my focus here, inflect Christian culture as a whole.
  2. The words of the "Battle Hymn" echo the book of Revelation 11:15, which describes a rider on a white horse: "Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations [...] He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty." Within fundamentalist readings of Revelation, this image is understood to represent the second coming of Jesus Christ.

*Figure 1. (facing page) In The Ministry of Jesus, a performance at the Holy Land Experience, an actor playing Jesus holds a white lamb and beckons the children to come closer. Orlando, Florida, 2003. (Photo by Kristin Dombek)*

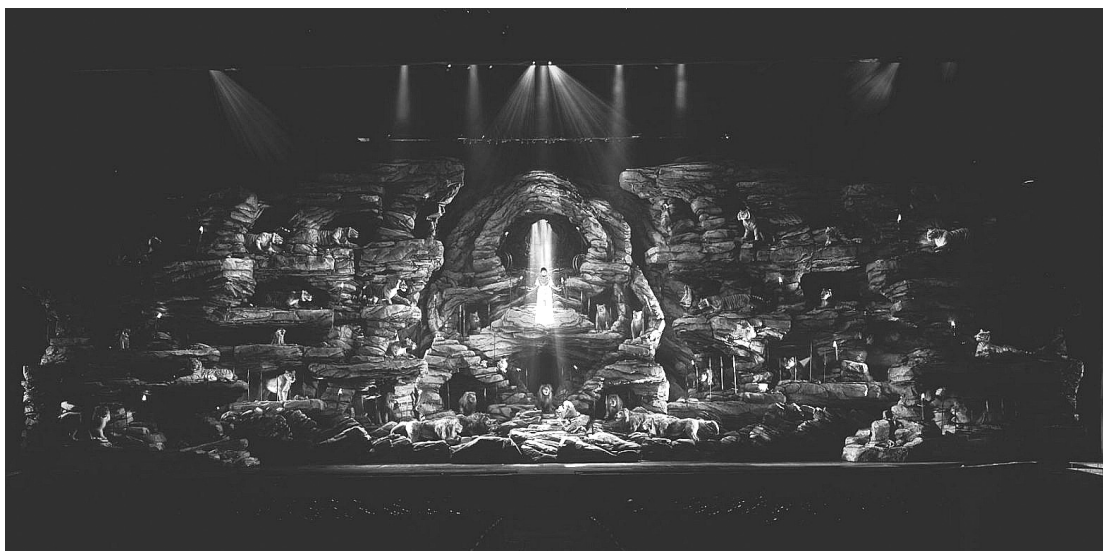


Figure 2. Daniel praying in a den of animatronic lions in the production of *Daniel* at Sight and Sound's Millennium Theatre in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 2005. (Photo courtesy of Sight and Sound Theatres)

We have entered the strange province of apocalyptic zooësis.<sup>3</sup> In the cavernous, potpourri-scented lobby of Sight and Sound's Millennium Theatre, the shops sell not only commemorative brochures, T-shirts, and CDs, but stuffed animals of every sort. Set in the walls of this lobby are nooks in which animatronic, half-sized lions slowly wag their heads, lit with a fiery red glow. Outside the theatre building, the millennial utopia is depicted by a sculpture of a lion lying down with a lamb. And in the theatre store, located in a nearby strip mall, there are nothing but animals: dozens of plush and stuffed species, as well as animal costumes for babies, taxidermy wall hangings, miniature porcelain figurines, marionettes, and so on. The store, with its curved wooden walls, is designed to feel like the interior of Noah's Ark, and its name, Noah's Landing, suggests that the ark has docked at the strip mall and shoppers can enter and purchase the only animals left on earth, the ones who survived that original apocalypse, the flood of Genesis.

Like the other Christian cultural productions I will discuss in this essay—a theme park called the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida, and the final book in the *Left Behind* series, *The Glorious Appearing: The End of Days* (2004)—Sight and Sound caters to the obsession of some Christians with the end of time, an obsession that both sectarian and secular entertainment industries consistently take to the bank. It is all too easy to rehearse familiar cries of alarm at the commercialism or, for that matter, the politics of these products of evangelical popular culture (thereby reinforcing “our” difference from those who create and consume them). It is more difficult to reckon with what the animals in these evangelical apocalypses inadvertently body forth: a deep logic of apocalyptic thinking that transcends the divide between religious and secular culture.

Apocalyptic beast, bloody victim, cute companion, innocent survivor, or savior: evangelical animals define the absolute difference between humans and animals, on the one hand, and serve as screens upon which the “human” can be projected, on the other—often doing one in service of the other. These representations sacrifice the animality of the animal—and the animal in the human—to create the fiction of a human-centered world, the fiction that humans do not live *in* the world like animals, that we are not *subject* to the world, and therefore not susceptible to cataclysm, to extinction, to apocalypse. Immune from the very disasters we so love to imagine, we are too easily absolved from responsibility for the world—an absolution that is a recipe for real catastrophe. By revealing the fatal humanism at the

3. The term “zooësis” is Una Chaudhuri's; see the Introduction to this issue and Chaudhuri (2002).

heart of Christian apocalypticism, the animals of evangelical performances and texts do much more than help us to critique evangelical culture and belief; they show us that the apocalypticism that is too often at the heart of secular humanism can be fatally religious.

## The Holy Land Experience

Another utopic Jerusalem, a material fiction—this time in Orlando, Florida. Two earth-toned compounds, fringed by palm trees, are visible from the Exit 78 ramp off I-4. One is a mall, the other is a simulation of ancient Jerusalem, and it is easy to end up at one when you mean to go to the other. But the simulation of Jerusalem, the Holy Land Experience (HLE), draws a particular kind of tourist to Disney’s town: HLE is a not-for-profit Christian ministry, founded and funded by Messianic Jews and Zionist Christians, whose official goal is to witness to non-Christians and get Christian visitors in touch with their “Jewish roots.”<sup>4</sup> Inside its high “stone” walls, visitors—most of whom are conservative Protestant Christians—find themselves in a geography that provides, according to HLE’s brochure, a performance of the Word: a “glimpse of what life was like during the time of Jesus Christ” (HLE 2003a). But unofficially, the theme park is about teaching Christians to love Israel and to fetishize Jerusalem itself, and thus invites them into the Messianic worship movement and Christian Zionism. In turn, this is an invitation to apocalypse; the organization that founded HLE, Zion’s Hope, and its magazine, *Zion’s Fire*, make it clear that the educational effort of HLE is to promote a belief in the particular end-times script defined by dispensational premillennialism; loving and supporting Israel is crucial to this script, because only when Israel is occupied entirely by Jews can the Antichrist rise, and only then—after seven years of plagues, wars, and natural disasters—can Jesus return.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3. The “stone” walls of the city gate, an example of the architecture at the Holy Land Experience designed to give visitors a “glimpse of what life was like during the time of Jesus Christ.” Orlando, Florida, 2003. (Photo by Kristin Dombek)

4. I use the term “Messianic Jews” in the way it is used inside the movement, to denote Jews who have converted to Christianity (rather than non-Christian Jews who are focused on Messianic expectations).
5. Dispensational premillennialists believe that while the Old Testament prophecy clock was stopped when Jesus came to earth and the Church Age began, it will start up again once Jews occupy the entirety of Israel. When that happens, Christians will be raptured to heaven; an Antichrist will rise to rule the world; and after seven years of wars and plagues, Jesus will return to establish a thousand-year Christian utopia, which he will rule from Jerusalem. Unlike *Daniel* and the *Left Behind* book series, which follow this more mainstream view, the dispensationalist view promoted by the Holy Land Experience and the publication *Zion’s Fire* is of a mid-Tribulation rapture: Christians must endure the first half of the Tribulation before they are taken up to heaven by God. Several articles in *Zion’s Fire* have argued that to imagine the church will escape the suffering of the first half of the Tribulation is wishful thinking.

Of course, the Jerusalem that would cultivate such fetishism must be selectively constructed. Rather than attempting to recreate the layout of the ancient city, the park creates a collage of the sites most sacred to Christians, alongside educational showcases of Biblical culture. Tourists can visit Calvary, the tallest of its three crosses draped in a bloody sheet, and below it, the Garden Tomb, empty, with the stone rolled away. They can visit a replica of the tabernacle that the Hebrews carried throughout their wanderings in the wilderness, and the Qumran Dead Sea Caves. In the annex of the Shofar Auditorium, where Messianic performers give concerts, they can study a scale model of the ancient city in 66 CE. In the Scriptorium, they can view religious artifacts in rooms depicting ancient Babylon and Egypt, a Byzantine church in Constantinople, 15th- and 16th-century Germany, 14th- and 17th-century England, and the deck of the Mayflower. These travels through space and history are guided throughout the park by performers and performances that educate and entertain: safari-suited guides give informational talks on the Temple steps and beside the model of Jerusalem; Broadway-style musical performances gloss Biblical stories at the foot of Golgotha; high priests mime sacrificial rituals in the Wilderness Temple; and Jesus himself, wearing a headset, preaches a condensed version of the Sermon on the Mount outside the Qumran Dead Sea Caves.

In this surreal landscape, sheep, goats, and doves perform authenticity, and because of their constant presence, the Holy Land Experience feels as much like a zoo as it does a theme park. The gift shop is just inside the front gate, as it is at a zoo, and it is filled with stuffed animals. There are real animals behind bars in the Dromedary Depot, cute ones for the children to pet. And the landscaping is designed to simulate a real place, an unfamiliar place. The plants are unfamiliar; they are from Israel. Their scents are foreign, and in the Florida humidity, these scents mingle with the scents of the animals, and in this way, too, it is like a zoo. Here, however, the animals are explicitly designated as sacrificial. The lambs and goats in the corral are not only white but spotless, “without blemish,” and therefore appropriate for sacrifice according to Old Testament law (Leviticus 22:17–25). Their whiteness strains the logic of their performance in the park. They are there to be cute, for the children to pet, for the gaze of the tourists, and for the cameras in all the parents’ hands, but they are white like the “lamb of God” in popular Christian iconography, that favorite symbol of Jesus whose sacrifice “takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The ubiquitous doves—in the laps of the “authentically dressed Bible characters,” circling the temple’s turrets, appearing magically in Jesus’ hands—are also white (HLE 2003a). None of these animals will actually be

killed before the tourists’ eyes, but the sacrificial ritual will be mimed and referenced often in the informational talks given throughout the park. These animals are safe, but the guides who give the talks are dressed in safari outfits, as if we are on a hunt.

Through its efforts to immerse visitors in “Bible times” and its use of real animals to give the simulacrum the luster of authenticity, HLE brings tourists closer than church ever did to the material reality of ritual killing. But everywhere, too, that reality is distanced through



*Figure 4. Goats in the Dromedary Depot, an attraction at the Holy Land Experience until early 2006. Orlando, Florida, 2003. (Photo by Kristin Dombek)*

the display of the adorable white lamb who escapes the sacrificial system, just as the cute corgi escapes the burning of Jerusalem in *Daniel*, and just as the stuffed animals at Noah's Landing survive the flood. During a performance a stone's throw away from Golgotha, Jesus takes a white lamb into his arms and beckons the children to come to him, while cameras whir and beep. The lamb stands for the messiah, who was sacrificed, and at the same time for believers—"we who like sheep have gone astray," as Isaiah 53:6 puts it—who will not have to be sacrificed, since the messiah was.

HLE's ambivalent staging of sacrifice is exemplified in the Wilderness Tabernacle performance. According to an article in *Zion's Fire*, the Wilderness Tabernacle performance provides its audiences with a "stunning and vivid glimpse of the holiness of God and the sacrificial system required to reconcile sinful man with that holiness" (Ettinger 2004:13). But the performance conceals that sacrificial system even as it reveals it. Audience members enter the dimly lit tabernacle auditorium and are seated on graduated benches facing one long side of the large tabernacle tent, which is draped in animal skins. They are told that they cannot take pictures of the performance, that even if they do attempt to take pictures, no image will remain when the pictures are developed. This is because in the performance, the action will take place inside the tabernacle, backlit so that the audience can watch it from the outside, through the cloth wall of the tent. Audience members will glimpse the Holy of Holies, the back room of the tabernacle where high priests performed a sacrifice once a year to atone for the sins of the Israelites. They will see God himself descend in his yearly visit to sit on the golden mercy seat atop the ark of the covenant. But they will see these things through a cloth, darkly.

The Wilderness Tabernacle is a simulation of the portable temple that God commanded the Israelites to build while they crossed the desert on their way to the Promised Land of Canaan, so that they could perform the sacrificial rites he required, even while they were homeless. God laid out detailed instructions for the construction of the tabernacle, and elaborate rules to govern the sacrificial rites that should be conducted inside it. Evangelical Christians tend to be vaguely familiar with these rules, which are written in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Like the temple, the tabernacle is refigured in Christian doctrine as a symbol of Christ himself, since it foreshadows his sacrifice to end all sacrifices. For the evangelical guest at HLE, then, this performance brings a familiar part of the Word to life and illustrates the sacrificial role of Jesus. But the staging of the rituals themselves, in order to enact "authentic" Judaism, inadvertently juxtaposes that familiar temple of the imagination with the uncomfortable materiality of having animal sacrifice nearly performed before their eyes.

An actor portraying Aaron (Moses' brother and the high priest during the wilderness years) enters and begins miming the actions of preparing a sacrifice: he puts logs on the fire, waves smoke up to heaven from the altar, and prepares the animals—invisible, represented only by a bleating sound effect—for sacrifice. After miming the sacrifices, Aaron conducts rituals in the Tabernacle of the Congregation, and—as if it is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—finally enters the Holy of Holies where no one but the high priest could ever go, and he only once a year. Backlighting reveals the golden mercy seat, with its two cherubim, wings spread toward heaven. He mimes sprinkling the mercy seat with the blood of the sacrificed animals, and then smoke and flashing lights appear, representing God's yearly visit to sit on the mercy seat, once the sins of the Israelites had been cleansed by sacrifice.

In the King James Version of Leviticus 16, where these rituals are prescribed, the text describes the purpose of the Yom Kippur sacrifices in this way: "For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the Lord" (Leviticus 16:30). The New International Version, too, translates this



Figure 5. *In Behold the Lamb, a passion performance at the Holy Land Experience, a burdened and bleeding Jesus and a Roman soldier make their way to Golgotha. Orlando, Florida, 2004. (Photo by Danielle Durchslag)*

verse from the Hebrew using the words “atonement” and “cleanse,” just as the Yom Kippur liturgy typically does—clearly indicating that the sacrifices should be understood as *removing* sin.<sup>6</sup> But the voice-over describes this sacrificial ritual as a “covering over” of the Israelites’ sins. It is an important difference. At HLE, the words “atonement” and “cleanse” are never used to describe the effect of ancient Jewish sacrifice; instead, the phrase “covering over” is repeatedly employed, here in the Wilderness Tabernacle performance and every time sacrifice is discussed, to distinguish these sacrifices from that of Jesus, who takes our sins away. To secure this difference, the Levite narrator muses at the end of the show: “Could it be that our blessed sacrificial system is a rehearsal? Could it be that it’s only meant to prepare God’s

people for a final, ultimate sacrifice that will take away the need to cover over sins?” (HLE 2003b). In answer, an image of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus is projected, providing the performance’s final image.

In this way, the Wilderness Tabernacle performance does its own “covering over.” With one hand, the performance reveals the continuity between ancient Jewish sacrificial rituals and the logic of Christ’s atonement, but with the other, it seeks to conceal this continuity. In its script and in its *mise-en-scène*, then, the Wilderness Tabernacle performance enacts the problematic relation to sacrifice implicit in HLE’s staging of Judeo-Christian authenticity. It reveals through the mime, but covers over by leaving out the animal; reveals through the backlit performance, but covers over with the walls of the tent; reveals by showing us what sacrifice looks like, but conceals by disallowing any photographic record. In a sort of sacrificial striptease, the performance dances around the similarity between the ritual killing of an actual animal, which audience members would never stand for, and the crucifixion on which salvation depends.

In HLE’s *Via Dolorosa Passion Drama*, the “sacrifice” is staged in bloody detail. An actor playing Jesus walks to Calvary as Roman centurions whip him; he is crucified and dies while performers sing popular contemporary Christian songs about the Passion. Why can HLE put the human body to be broken at the center of its performance of the sacrifice of Jesus,

6. In the New International Version of the Bible, the verse is translated almost identically to the King James Version, and so too in the United Synagogue of America’s *High Holiday Prayer Book*, where it reads, “For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins shall you be clean before the Lord” (Silverman 1951:453).



but only gesture mimetically toward the killing of animals, and then only behind a veil? Or, put another way: Why are we able to sentimentalize the sacrifice of humans, while our sentimentalizing of animals excludes them from participation in such performances? In current mainstream Western culture, of course, the ritual sacrifice of animals is taboo (and, in an inversion of the sacrificial logic of “primitive” cultures, considered violent), while killing animals for eating is commonplace (and not commonly considered violent); in performance, though, the two look uncomfortably similar. If the Tabernacle performance employed real animals, it would put meat-eating audience members in a double bind as they reacted in horror to a slaughter that looks uncomfortably similar to the killing of animals that provides their daily meals—inadvertently suggesting that those everyday slaughters *mean* something. Christian audience members might attribute their horror at animal sacrifice—or a performance of it that employed actual animals—to their deeply held belief that Jesus sacrificed himself to end such practices. But might not such a performance draw too much attention to the violence of the substitutionary logic of the crucifixion itself? Might it not actualize too close a similarity between what a Christian would never do to animals, but does do—albeit imaginatively—to Jesus, and perhaps even elicit horror not only at the violence represented, but at the desire to imagine that doing such violence to a human animal, or even to God, is what takes sins away? By absenting its animals and veiling its sacrifices, HLE avoids this risk.

Secular humanists, on the other hand, might attribute their horror at animal sacrifice to enlightened ethics, as if what is wrong about such rituals is that the animal, unlike the Son of God, is not able to rationally choose to participate in a ceremony that makes meaning of his or her death; nonhuman animals cannot perform self-sacrifice—that cornerstone of post-Christian ethics that happens to be modeled on Jesus himself. Perhaps. But we have gone far enough down this road that we must dare to ask if the opposite might not be true; perhaps what our horror at animal sacrifice reveals is precisely our involvement in deep and predominantly unconscious ritual practices through which we do violence on the unwilling (humans and animals alike) in order to construct our crucial fictions—the social, the rational, the human.

### Girard on Sacrifice

For René Girard, sacrifice arises to deal with a fear of endless reciprocal violence. In *Violence and the Sacred* ([1972] 1979) and throughout his other writings, Girard argues that violence always threatens to undo humans because of the way we become our “selves.” In an attempt to achieve “being”—a term which for Girard simply means “something [I] lack and which some other person seems to possess”—we imitate others ([1972] 1979:146). Ashamed that we haven’t come up with our “selves” on our own, we attempt to cover over this imitation. But because we imitate even the other’s desires, imagining the objects she wants confer “being”

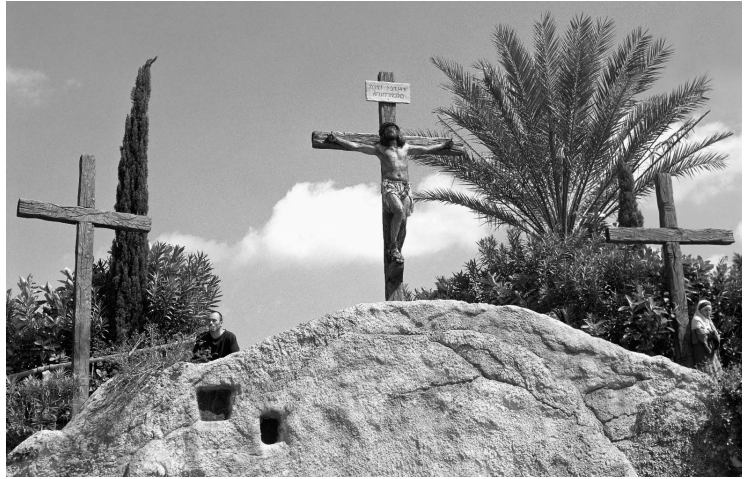


Figure 6. *The crucifixion of Jesus as staged in Behold the Lamb at the Holy Land Experience. Orlando, Florida, 2004. (Photo by Danielle Durchslag)*

on her, our desires inevitably converge on the same object; rivalry develops because our bluff has been called; distinctions between us and our mimetic rival threaten to break down, exposing our lack of being. Only violence can secure our difference and end the rivalry, but violence is always reciprocated, and the vengeance cycle threatens us with the ultimate breakdown of distinctions—with apocalypse. When the being of a whole group is threatened in this way, and because violence must always find an object, a surrogate victim is named as the guilty party to unite the community against this threat; the ritual victim then represents that surrogate victim and is killed in a ritual murder—an act of unanimous violence often attributed to some god's need for such a sacrifice. The repetition of this ritual conjures mythologies of the divine, who comes to embody the violence feared (God is endless, eternal, extralinguistic, extrasymbolic) and the unanimity achieved (God is all-knowing, all-judging).

Through performance, then, sacrifice constitutes reality: it defers violence through substitution, creates identity and unity through expulsion, and all the while covers over what it is doing—sacrificers project their own need for sacrifice on to God, imagining that God demands this ritual, while it is the ritual that creates the idea of God in the first place to cover over human violence and the lack that generates it. As Girard puts it, “Sacrificial substitution implies a degree of misunderstanding. Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the displacement upon which the rite is based” ([1972] 1979:5). In other words, we may be involved in sacrificial rituals without knowing it; in our current culture, in which explicit sacrifice is taboo (except when effectively mythologized as “self-sacrifice,” as in the case of soldiers during times of war), the most harmful sacrificial rituals we participate in might be the ones of which we are least aware. Because “justice” demands capital punishment, for example, or “freedom” demands killing the citizens of other countries, or “safety” demands keeping the poor in ghettos, we don't *believe*, at least consciously, that these actions are sacrifices that maintain *our* group identities and absorb *our own* violence. But their function is remarkably similar to the “primitive” sacrifices, explicitly framed as such, which we deplore.

Girard's description of the selection of the sacrificial victim provides an important insight into the logic of such unconscious ritual violence:

In order for a species or category of living creature, human or animal, to appear suitable for sacrifice, it must bear a sharp resemblance to the *human* categories excluded from the ranks of the “sacrificeable,” while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion. ([1972] 1979:12)

The sacrificial victim must seem similar enough to those who are sacrificing it that it can be substituted for them, but different enough that killing the victim does not disrupt the community. While Girard comes to this realization through his description of the selection of preexisting victims, I would extend his thinking to suppose that sometimes, when a community needs a sacrificial victim—needs social glue and a violent ritual to secure it—it creates this dynamic of similarity and difference in order to unconsciously construct a victim. HLE's uncomfortable dance around animals, real and represented, begs the question: Might not we “sacrifice” animals, through our representations of them, and perhaps by eating and wearing them, because we unconsciously believe the category of “human” needs or even demands we do so—even as that category is constituted by these ordinary rites themselves?

## Of Cuteness and Violence

But we love animals. And in fact, to avoid such troubling revelations, HLE frames the performances of “real” animals through a rhetoric of the “cute” that can be found not only here, but down the street at Disney World and throughout evangelical and secular popular culture. The cute animals of consumer culture do the crucial work of constructing and maintaining difference between the animals we love and the animals we eat, or wear, or on which we

test our products. But as we've seen, HLE uses adorable white lambs and goats to distract tourists from the material reality of sacrifice, and from the similarity of the logic of the crucifixion to the logic of animal sacrifice. This shell game suggests that the cute animal might exist precisely in order to cover over—and even cleanse us from—the many ways in which we put real animals to use, both symbolically and materially. In this way, HLE inadvertently suggests that representation of animal cuteness and violence against animals might be intimately intertwined, and that representations of cute animals might be, in themselves, sacrificial.

At first glance, the cute animal seems a long way from a sacrifice; it is the animal most like a child, the domestic animal, our offspring, the very one we would never kill. But HLE's representational logic reveals a dialectic between cuteness and violence. The Christmas card that Holy Land sent to its mailing list of customers and supporters in 2003 embodies this dialectic, deconstructing the system of representation that structures the park's animal performances. The photograph on the front of the card depicts, on a background of straw, an infant's hand clutching a bloody stake, of the sort often used in cinematic portrayals of the crucifixion. The chiasmic message reads, "Jesus came to pay a debt He didn't owe...because we owed a debt we couldn't pay." An explanation of the image inside the card's cover reads as follows: "The photograph on the front of this card is a powerful reminder of the purpose for which Jesus came. Resting within the warm innocent hand of the Babe in the manger is the cold, piercing nail of the Cross [...]" On the flip side of a flyer advertising the card, sent in a separate mailing, is an advertisement for the "all new Friendly Kritters" 2004 calendar, promoted as "cheerful," "creative," "colorful," and "Biblical." The ad copy claims the calendar will help "you and your children" to learn "Bible verses which are illustrated in a fresh, new way with the artist's cadre of cute characters." Tom Allen's sketches of smiling, wide-eyed, chubby chipmunks and skunks are captioned with feel-good verses; in one illustration, with the tag line "By love serve one another—Galatians 5:13," one chipmunk straddles the spout of a watering can, clutching a blueberry, and another, with apparent effort but with a smile on his face, helps him to rinse the blueberry by tipping the can.

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By love serve one another.  
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Figure 7. The violence performed on animals through sacrificial practice is camouflaged by appealing representations of their cuteness in evangelical media. Promotional flyer from Zion's Hope, parent company of the Holy Land experience from 2001 to 2005. (Photo by Kristin Dombek)

The first image deconstructs the second by wrapping the infant's cute fingers around the sacrificial implement. In turn, the adorable chipmunk is rendered as a human infant, innocent and precious—seemingly a wholly different kind of animal from the ones we might eat in a meal. But if Girard is right, cuteness—as one kind of anthropomorphism—is precisely what puts the animal in a sacrificial position: to the extent that the nonhuman animal is forcibly rendered more human, included momentarily in the community, it can function elsewhere as a sacrificial victim. The distinction between the animal we eat and the animal we cuddle, then, is merely a symptom of sacrificial mischief, as such carefully arbitrary distinctions often are; and cuteness, since it serves to forcibly elide the violence we inflict on *other* animals, belongs to the category of myths that serve to distract us from sacrifice's real mechanisms.

The place most likely to be filled to excess with figurines of infantilized pigs, as my teenage years in the Midwest taught me, is a house on a hog farm. The actor playing Jesus must walk around HLE carrying an adorable white lamb because its invisible version is being killed several times a day in the Wilderness Tabernacle, and because Jesus is being killed each time we sin. But it's not just all this real and imagined violence that should concern us, here; troubling, too, is the fragility of an architecture of the "human" that depends on such maneuvers. For when we use cuteness to transform an animal into a screen onto which human fantasies about humans can be projected, that animal has been—to follow Jacques Derrida—at the same time named and consumed. Although it is often images and not the Word that do this naming, the cute animal in general seems to be an example of what Derrida has called "carnophallogocentrism" (2002), explained by Cary Wolfe as that homology between naming and eating in which the Word ensures "the transcendence of the human" by enabling the "killing off and disavowal of the animal, the bodily, the materially heterogeneous, the contingent—in short, *difference*" (2003:66). Here, in a double move, the animality of the animal is disavowed precisely to secure the non-animality of the human. And so the cute animal is doubly sacrificial: the sacrificiability of its substitution for humans has been covered over.

The identity of the cute animal and the sacrificed one both structures and threatens to undo HLE's film of the history of the world, titled *The Seed of Promise* (2001). The film begins with the sacking of Jerusalem in 80 CE. As the Roman army approaches the temple, slaughtering Jews as they go, the priests inside the temple prepare to sacrifice a white lamb. With increasing rapidity, the film cuts between shots of soldiers breaking through the temple gates with a battering ram, the priests tying the lamb and raising their knives, and Jesus' wrists being nailed to the cross. At the scene's climax, the soldiers break through the door to find a group of crazed-looking priests with knives in the air, the cross is erected—and we see the cute little white lamb go free, running through the chaos of Jerusalem and looking behind him at the temple where he nearly met his death.

After framing its forthcoming history of the world through this collapsing of the sacrifice of Jesus with the persecution of Jews, and positing the adorable lamb as witness to and survivor of these events, the film cuts to the beginning of time, to creation. God, depicted as a little ball of light, flies over the waters, and then land emerges, along with vegetation, animals, and a naked Adam and Eve. After the Temptation and the Fall, the film takes us on a brief tour of the Bible's stories of sacrifice: first, Mount Moriah, where Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is halted at the last minute; then the crucifixion—a scene violent enough that parents are cautioned to leave their children outside. After a brief postresurrection scene of Jesus meeting with his disciples, it is time for the end of the world. We see heaven: dozens of people with beatific looks on their faces are walking through a mist toward Christ. Jesus greets his "flock," touching them as they cry and smile up at him. The film ends with a shot of the crest of a grassy hill, over which bounds the little white lamb, who gazes into the camera.

The film brings together the logic of the Wilderness Tabernacle performance and the HLE Christmas card. Through the cute lamb, the film secures the crucial difference between Jesus and an animal—ironically, by anthropomorphizing the animal. The cute animal is as much a sacrificial victim as the imaginary animals in the Wilderness Tabernacle

performance, for the lamb here is subordinated completely to its cultural meaning. And that sacrifice of the real animal itself to the idea of the animal is the cultural ritual that helps render invisible the actual sacrificial position of the real animals that humans literally and symbolically consume. But by leaving us with the adorable animal as survivor of sacrifice, cataclysm, and apocalypse—as a witness to the sacrificial history of the world, but a witness untouched by the violence—*The Seed of Promise* returns us to an aspect of evangelical zooësis that seems to contradict the logic not only of sacrifice, but of carno-phallogocentrism. If sacrifices—both symbolic and carnivorous—serve to construct the category of the human and of our transcendence by differentiating us from animals, why should we want to identify with the animal as a survivor of not only our sacrificial practices, but of cataclysm and the end of the world? We should think here of our beloved animal survivors in the secular realm, as well—not only the heroes of *Charlotte's Web* and *Babe*, who escape slaughter, but *The Black Stallion*, who survives disaster.

Because of their cuteness, the little lamb, Sight and Sound's corgi, and the stuffed animals at Noah's Landing can cover for the guilt we've incurred on our violent way to establishing the human subject. But these evangelical animals do more than that. Identified with the cute animal, we can live outside history, outside sacrifice, even outside extinction. By displaying the cute animal in front of images of apocalypse and after the end of the world, HLE and Sight and Sound inadvertently demonstrate that the anthropomorphism and infantilization of animals do serious and crucial symbolic work. To valorize the image of the animal that is most our own, that carries the most residue of our naming, to imagine that the animal we have most narcissistically named is the one who not only excuses our own violence toward real animals but also survives ultimate violence and the end of time: this is to desire the transcendence of our own construction of reality, to fetishize the process of commodity fetishism itself, to love too well the apocalypse, to love the story most clearly motivated by human desire as if there were a God who has told it and we are merely caught up in it.

By paying close attention to these uncomfortable evangelical dances around sacrifice, then, we can see a subtle layer of the sacrificial relation: it is not only human/animal difference that is secured through real and symbolic animal sacrifice, but sameness. At least in Christian sacrificial typologies, the identification with the sacrificial victim—upon which the efficacy of the substitution depends—continues on beyond the sacrifice, in excess of the ritual itself. But it is not the animality of the animal with which humans identify, but its position, as victim and survivor, in our own sacrificial systems. And perhaps this is one of the reasons sacrifice always fails (as Girard laments) to stop the cycle of violence: by identifying with our victims, we can imagine ourselves beyond responsibility, beyond ethics, beyond violence.

## Cleaning up Jerusalem

To put the zooësis of HLE and *Daniel* in context, and to further elucidate the ways in which apocalyptic patterns and the symbolic sacrifice of animals are bound up in one another, I turn now to the final scenes of the *Left Behind* series, whose volumes were among the best-selling books on the planet during the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century. The series describes the last days of the world as we know it, presenting itself as a fictionalized account of actual events that will be recorded in “tomorrow's newspaper” by way of the Bible. First, the books in a nutshell: In their version of the apocalyptic script, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have depicted a group of nonbelievers who, after God takes all Christians to heaven in the Rapture, convert to Christianity (having realized what has happened thanks to a videotape left behind by believers) and form a group of action heroes who fight the forces of evil during the seven-year period of tribulation before Jesus returns to establish his millennial kingdom. The 12 books (joined over the past year by three prequels) narrate the adventures of this group of cosmopolitan, savvy Christians—the Tribulation Force—as they fight the Antichrist and convert as many people as possible before Jesus returns for the battle of Armageddon.

These books, though ostensibly about the future, implicitly provide Christians with a guidebook to living in a world dominated by global capitalism. LaHaye's and Jenkins's message, to oversimplify it a bit, is that so long as you are fulfilling your role in an apocalyptic script, so long as you are a martyr, a "living sacrifice," you can do whatever you need to do to accomplish God's goals. As I've argued elsewhere (Dombek 2005), this is more about accommodating consumer capitalism and globalization than it is about encouraging radical political action or violence; there are no suicide bombers in *Left Behind*. In this way, LaHaye and Jenkins have substantially retrofitted the Biblical definition of "self-sacrifice."

When the apostle Paul exhorted Christians to make their lives "living sacrifices" in the New Testament book of Romans, he was addressing the problem of determining God's will:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. *Then you will be able to* test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2, italics added)

The logic of *Left Behind* borrows from Paul's, but inverts it at the same time: *if* you are a living sacrifice, you can know God's will, and knowing it releases you from the pattern of this world—even if your life *appears* to fit that pattern exactly.

On the surface, the members of the Tribulation Force seem to be literal living sacrifices; in the course of their adventures, they consistently suffer injuries, so that by the end of the series, the main members are all scarred and even disfigured. One Trib Force member and countless other Christians are imprisoned in concentration camps and killed by the Antichrist's guillotine for refusing to have his "mark" (a microchip) implanted in their foreheads or hands. But in exchange for their willingness to be living sacrifices, Trib Force members get to be a particular kind of person (and quite new kind of hero, for Christian fiction): They are cosmopolitan and technologically savvy; they don't hesitate to drop hundreds of thousands of dollars (money they've earned by working undercover for the Antichrist, of all things—i.e., the devil's money) on new vehicles, computers, technology, and weapons; they frequently charter planes to fly around the world; they lie; they cross-dress; they shoot to kill—they do anything that needs to be done to fulfill their role in the battle of the ages. They do suffer, but they also have a lot of fun. As cosmopolitan citizens of a new globalized world, their roles are rendered glamorous and of epic importance by Satan's control through his handyman, the Antichrist, of the geography and economy of the globe.

Eventually, the books arrive at the same symbolic space as *Daniel*, and the space that HLE attempts to materialize: a utopic Jerusalem that is without war; the original, authentic, ancient Jerusalem that is entirely Christian. Because of its narrative form, the *Left Behind* series fleshes out in great detail the apocalyptic violence that is only alluded to in that celebratory performance of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" in *Daniel*. In *The Glorious Appearing*, the 12th book in the series, this is how the world ends: All the armies of the world have gathered to fight the Christians. But the non-Christian troops don't stand a chance in hell, for Armageddon will be not so much a battle as a supernatural slaughter. Jesus appears in the sky, floating on a white horse, with seven stars around his head—precisely as Revelation says he will. He speaks only the Word—a mix of verse quotes and paraphrases, patched together from all over the Bible—and when he speaks it, the soldiers of the Antichrist explode, their blood boiling and spilling out across the ground in Palestine until there is a river of blood "several miles wide and now some five feet deep" (LaHaye and Jenkins 2004:258). The "battle" moves to Jerusalem, where Jesus slays thousands more non-Christians, until their corpses fill the city's streets.

Once all who are not Christians have been killed, God shakes the Earth, landscaping it in preparation for the millennial kingdom. The earthquake is global, in literal fulfillment of

the book of Isaiah (40:3–5). The planet is razed; there are only plains and rolling hills. And then, as the earth continues to rumble and shift, “the whole city of Jerusalem r[ises] above the ground some three hundred feet and now st[ands] as an exalted jewel above all the surrounding land that ha[s] been flattened by the global earthquake” (Lattaye and Jenkins 2004:287). This last earthquake in Jerusalem also performs a “macabre cleanup operation” (292). As the Trib Force members follow Jesus into the Old City in their Hummer, they realize that the city has been made new; crevices have opened up and the corpses of unbelievers, together with all residue of Armageddon, have been shaken into them. The members of the Trib Force, the millions of Jewish converts, and the other Christians in Palestine move into houses and apartments that have been left empty by nonbelievers and scrubbed clean by this earthquake. Jerusalem is finally clean and Christian (292–93).

So what is it like, the kingdom of God on earth? We catch only a glimpse of it in *Glorious Appearing*—the first day of the thousand years of Christ’s reign on earth. But that glimpse reveals much. This day is characterized by the discovery of a permanent reversal of Babel—everyone understands everyone else’s languages—and by a really good meal. The new age, in fact, is represented by breakdown of hierarchies among the surviving human animals, but one secured by a solidified domination over nonhuman animals.

Before I describe the meal that depicts this relation, however, I must back up a bit. The *Left Behind* series has only one scene depicting animal sacrifice, and the depiction is damning. The Antichrist’s performance of the abomination of desolation, staged in book nine of the series, *Desecration* (LaHaye and Jenkins 2002), involves slaughtering a “gigantic” pig in the Holy of Holies of the newly reconstructed temple. After riding the pig through Jerusalem in a parody of Jesus’ triumphal entry, the Antichrist takes it into the temple and slashes its throat, then engages it in a wrestling match, which makes a bloody mess of the room. Finally, he attempts to butcher the pig, but fails, finding “neither himself nor the blade equal to the task” (2002:163). “Pity!” he exclaims; “I wanted roast pork!” thus conflating the sacrifice with slaughter for the sake of eating (163). Like the sacrifice in general, the novel represents this conflation as an abomination.

In direct contrast to this difficult and blasphemous slaughter, the utopian butchering depicted in the series’ final pages is easy, relatively clean, and divinely ordained. After the final judgment, when the “sheep” (Christians) have been divided from the “goats” (nonbelievers who’ve survived the massacre and are sent by Jesus directly to hell through chasms that open in the ground), Trib Force members pile into their Hummer to go to one member’s house in the Old City. Along the way, they notice something strange: “All the animals were docile. Sheep, dogs, wolves, critters of all types roamed everywhere. Shops had already reopened and butchers were working in the open air. Trucks delivered fresh fruits and vegetables from nearby groves” (LaHaye and Jenkins 2004:335).

They see a butcher who is a friend, wielding a cleaver and spattered in blood, and pull over to ask him what’s going on. The butcher explains that “fattened animals, ready for slaughter and butchering, [are milling] about the place as if volunteering! Cows, sheep! Imagine! I found my tools and got to work immediately. What do you need?” (336). As they place an order for beef and lamb, the Trib Force members notice that “from miles around, the sheep and cows kept coming. Men were already building pens” (337). The butcher refuses payment and the Trib Force members take their meat to a house that seems to have been scrubbed clean by the apocalypse. There they sit down for the “tastiest meal [they have] ever enjoyed,” marveling that now they will be able to eat “like this all the time without gaining weight” (341).

In the millennial kingdom, then, no longer do humans have to hunt, for all animals are docile and turn themselves over for killing whenever humans need food. Now that the Beast is gone, humans will no longer need to be martyrs; the only skin to be cut, the only bodies slaughtered and on display, will be those of nonhuman animals. In *Left Behind*’s utopia, the distinction between human and nonhuman animals is thus eternally secured, and there will

be no end of animals for consumption, and no end to what's left of humankind. Evidently, the Trib Force's martyrdom has secured them the opportunity to live in a world in which their consumption is not merely without consequences and guilt-free, but facilitated by "nature" itself. Animals travel miles as emissaries from this nature, as if to say to those sitting down to the final feast, "We are here to die for you." After all that has happened in the *Left Behind* series, it comes down to this: the apocalyptic showdown with the Beast who is perhaps too much like us would end, ideally, in a world where beasts exist only as feasts.

Though it masquerades as communitarian utopianism, *The Glorious Appearing's* last supper betrays the sacrifice of animals that is at the heart of apocalyptic thinking. Apocalypticism stages its fear of the massive death of humans precisely in the service of supporting this perverse fantasy at its core, in which humans—at least some humans—are exempt from the apocalypse. Inadvertently, then, the series' end shows us why we cannot unlearn apocalyptic thinking without paying attention to what Derrida called its "whole zoo-ology" (2002:381). In the end, it is our dependence on our difference from nonhuman animals that allows us to think apocalyptically without figuring our own extinction as a real possibility. But it is a difference we earn by identifying with some animals we love, as if the violence they survive is not our own. Without that difference, we would have to accept being subject to "nature," to cataclysm, to the cataclysmic results of our imaginative and material use of animals. Instead, we unconsciously conduct sacrifices that allow us to go free, to imagine ourselves as outside history, beyond violence, like the cute animals with whom we identify. The alternative is nothing short of revolutionary: If we abandon those practices that violently bolster the metaphysical opposition between "human" and "animal," if we abandon ourselves to our real position as subject to the world and all its inhabitants, consumption of animals—whether actual or representational—will no longer work as a sacrifice, and the apocalyptic pattern will lose its hold.

A humanist conception of responsibility, by placing humankind in the center of our universe, encourages the apocalyptic pattern, since it is dependant on the disavowal of potential extinction, a possibility that, were we conscious of it, would connect us to nonhuman animals and our shared environment. And so it is that by reading closely these Christian texts and performances, we come full circle to the same enemy that conservative Christians have positioned themselves against during the 20th century and now the 21st: humanism. The impulse for such positioning came in part from a recognition of the bankruptcy of a vision that left humans alone in a world in which all else was simply not human, and therefore not meaningful. Rightly, fundamentalists wanted us to realize that we are not gods of this world. But the *Left Behind* series—as the clear fulfillment of this tradition—posits the most deeply humanist vision of all: the utopic feast, after God reaches down and cleans up all that humans have done. This final image shows us just how secular conservative Christianity can be: for Christians to enjoy all the consumer pleasures that secular humanism has allowed citizens of capitalism, but escape responsibility for the violence upon which global capitalism depends, God must be demoted to garbage man. But this image should give secular consumers pause as well—for when we act out the script of apocalyptic consumerism, we inadvertently create the same God.

At the Holy Land Experience today, you will find the gift shop filled with stuffed animals, *The Seed of Promise's* white lamb bounding over the hill after the end of the world, and absent animals, represented by recorded bleating, sacrificed in the Wilderness Temple performance. Safari-suited guides, standing in the scale model of ancient Jerusalem, will explain the sacrificial calendar of the ancient Jews. But there are no longer sheep or goats or even doves; they left early in 2006, because of a change of management—the new managers being concerned, according to HLE's public relations representative, with "liability issues" (Davies 2006). Because the plants are strange, it may still feel a bit like a zoo, but intentionally or not, by removing the animals, the park's new managers have perhaps made it easier for Christian



visitors to keep separate in their minds the ritual sacrifice of a divine human, upon which their salvation depends, from the ritual sacrifice of animals, in which they would never participate. Even so, from the “farms where they receive good care” to which HLE’s animals were sent (Davies 2006), and from their ubiquitous images in HLE’s material culture, these evangelical animals teach, if we will listen, not only of the violence at the center of Christianity, but about the religiosity of the zooësis upon which secular humanism depends.

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