

Analysis: Not all evangelicals are seeking Armageddon

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(RNS) — If you haven't noticed, American evangelicals have a fascination with the end of the world.

The president's recent promise to move the American embassy to Jerusalem sparked numerous headlines and proclamations tied to evangelicals saying that the end is near. This interest in the end is not new.

"A Thief in the Night," a 1970s-era thriller about the end of the world, begins with a ticking clock and a warning about the second coming of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark: "Keep a sharp lookout! For you do not know when I will come, at evening, at midnight, early dawn or late daybreak. Don't let me find you sleeping!"

Made by the executive producer of "The Blob," the film has been seen by more than 300 million people, according to Christianity Today. Shown at churches, colleges and youth group meetings, it was part of the evangelical world's fascination with the end times for decades.

That same fascination drove sales of end-times books such as "The Late Great Planet Earth" and the "Left Behind" series and inspired songs like "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," recently featured on the hit television series "The Leftovers."

And the end times — or at least biblical prophecies about them — help explain why American evangelicals are so supportive of Israel.

Eighty percent of Americans with evangelical beliefs say the rebirth of Israel in 1948 fulfilled biblical prophecy and signaled that the end times

have grown closer, according to a new survey from Nashville, Tenn.-based LifeWay Research.

Most evangelicals think God has a long-term plan for Israel that sets it apart from the other nations of the world. So they have a soft spot for Israel, with some believing that if Israel prospers, so will they.

Sixty-seven percent have a positive view of Israel, while 66 percent support “the existence, security and prosperity” of that nation.

And they’re more likely to side with the government of Israel than with Palestinians. Sixty-nine percent believe the Jewish people have a historic right to the land of Israel. Only 19 percent say Palestinians have that same right.

But just because American evangelicals see a connection between biblical prophecy and Israel, that doesn’t mean they are cheerleading for the end of the world.

That’s been a concern after President Trump’s controversial announcement about moving the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Some critics of the proposed move — and of evangelical support for the decision — fear it will lead to unrest and violence. And they worry that’s exactly what evangelicals want — more chaos, in preparation for Armageddon, a final showdown between good and evil.

Those critics aren’t completely wrong. There are evangelicals who seem to be waiting with anticipation for Armageddon, hoping to hasten the rapture.

But not all evangelicals — or at least not all evangelical pastors — believe in “A Thief in the Night”-style rapture.

When LifeWay Research asked about the rapture in 2016, fewer than half (43 percent) of evangelical senior pastors said they believe the rapture will

set off a time of tribulation. Only 36 percent of Protestant pastors overall hold that view.

For many evangelicals, the focus on the end times is a longing for Jesus to return and usher in the Kingdom of God — a time when, as the Christmas hymn “O Holy Night” reminds us, “all oppression shall cease” and all suffering will be banished from the world.

They don’t want death and destruction. They want peace and an end to suffering — and believe Jesus will bring that about.

LifeWay Research’s most recent survey about evangelicals and Israel didn’t ask about Jerusalem or much about the end times.

But it did reveal that evangelical views about Israel are complicated — and leave room for Palestinians to thrive as well.

While two-thirds of evangelicals want Israel to thrive, only 24 percent support that nation no matter what it does. Just under half (42 percent) support Israel’s existence, security and prosperity but don’t feel obligated to support everything Israel does.

And they haven’t ruled out making peace with Palestinians. Only a third reject the idea of signing a treaty making room for a sovereign Palestinian state, while nearly half say they aren’t sure.

In fact, many evangelicals are concerned about the future of Palestinians. Fifty-nine percent say Christians should do more to care for Palestinians.

And rather than planning for the end of the world, evangelicals seem to want Israel to stick around for a while. They think God wants that as well.

For evangelicals, support of Israel seems rooted not at the end of the Bible — in the book of Revelation — but at the beginning. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, a man named Abraham is told to leave his home and

travel to a new country that God would give to him and to his descendants. Eighty percent of evangelicals say those promises are still valid.

Among evangelicals who support the modern state of Israel, two-thirds say one of their reasons is that God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people. A third of supporters say they stand behind Israel primarily because God gave that land to the Jewish people.

In a world where promises are easily cast aside by loved ones, employers, business associates and politicians, evangelicals believe God has consistently kept his promises —including God's promises to Israel.

In the end, evangelicals see Israel like family. Although they may disagree with some of its policies, they still want it to prosper.

But they don't hate Palestinians or hope the world will end in fire.

Instead, they pray for peace in the Holy Land. And like most of the world, they are not sure how to get there.

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