

End of days: NBC's 'Revelations'

by [Sarah Morice Brubaker](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

Theology geeks with whom I've discussed the NBC miniseries *Revelations* are usually indignant that it does not engage in a scholarly, historically aware study of the book of Revelation.

Inasmuch as network executives' engaging in a serious study of scripture might itself be a sign of the apocalypse, I'd like to make a more modest suggestion: the producers should have read any dating guide published in the past ten years and paid particular attention to the sections on not trying too hard or seeming too desperate. That might help them impress that market segment they are trying so obviously to woo: the Left Behind-reading, ictus-decal-sporting, pro-life, pro-death-penalty, scripture-quoting, creationism-believing, red-state-living "moral values" voters. Or to put it in current political shorthand: Christians.

It's not that *Revelations* isn't entertaining. It features a Harvard astrophysicist, Richard Massey (Bill Pullman), and a globe-trotting nun, Josepha Montafiore (Natascha McElhone), who realize that world events are predicted in the book of Revelation. Massey, grieving the loss of his daughter to Satanists, is a religious skeptic, but his encounter with the evidence—and Sister Josepha's repeated urging—force him to conclude that they are about to witness the end of days . . . *unless!* ("Unless?" asks anyone who has ever read the book of Revelation.) Unless they can find a way to forestall it. Sister Josepha explains: "I believe the Bible has left a blank, to be filled in by man."

This blank involves protecting the infant Christ from a cabal of Satanists whose own lord is going to come to earth any day now. For reasons known only to the writers, both Christ and the Antichrist have returned at the end of days as infants.

Massey's scientific knowledge is supposed to add something to this endeavor, although some of the things he says cause one to suspect he got his doctorate by correspondence. At one point he suggests that they test the Christ Child's DNA to see if he is indeed the result of a virgin birth; if there is no human father, he should be a genetic clone of the mother. The fact that the child's maleness would strongly

suggest that he is no clone of the mother seems to have escaped the scientist.

No matter. The show is brain candy. It is well shot, and it maintains a level of creepiness that is nearly as effective as *Twin Peaks* or even *The X-Files*.

Almost as palpable as the creepiness is the show's earnest appeal to the *Left Behind* /*DaVinci Code*/*Passion of the Christ* set. Of course, that's not a monolithic market segment. And therein lies the problem. The show's market researchers seem to have learned just enough about these subgroups to pander to each in turn without taking any convictions very seriously. If your subgroup is defined by something as high-stakes as beliefs about salvation—rather than by a preference for Pepsi over Coke—you may not be satisfied by the show's occasional reference to the things you find important.

So we meet holy and faithful nuns who rescue a brain-dead girl from the clutches of doctors hell-bent on harvesting her organs. ("Huzzah!" say the traditionalist Catholics). But then we find out that the nuns are in conflict with the Vatican, because the nuns claim that Christ has returned and no longer needs the pope to be his vicar on earth. ("Oh well, we always knew the Vatican was a bunch of power-hungry posers," sigh the fundamentalists. "But . . . but that's the throne of Peter!" stammer the traditionalist Catholics.)

Just in case any liberals happen to be channel-surfing, there's even a nod given to tolerance, in a scene in which Sister Josepha bemoans all of the evil done in the name of religion.

Of course, the makers of *Revelations* are not the only ones trying to get Christians into the metaphorical sack by telling them whatever they might want to hear without taking it seriously. Politicians who play that game are prudent enough to be theologically vague. *Revelations*, however, covers explicitly theological ground without adopting any particular theological stance. It is an open question—a blank to be filled in by viewers—whether this approach will pay off.