

# Extraterrestrial Biblical Hermeneutics and the Making of Heaven's Gate

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**ABSTRACT:** The new religious movement popularly called Heaven's Gate emerged in the mid-1970s. This article argues that its two co-founders, Marshall Herff Applewhite (1932–1997) and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1928–1985), employed what I call *extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics* in constructing the theological worldview of Heaven's Gate. This hermeneutics developed out of the New Age movement and its broader interest in ufology, extraterrestrial life, and alien visitation, and postulates a series of close encounters and alien visitations. Borrowing from its New Age and ufological origins, the hermeneutics assumes an extraterrestrial interest in assisting human beings to self-develop, as well as a technological materialism antithetical to supernaturalist readings of the Bible. As I argue here, this extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics led Applewhite and Nettles to read the Bible as supporting a message of alien visitation, self-transformation, and ultimately extraterrestrial technological rapture.

“**T**he message was vaguely Biblical and unspecific.”<sup>1</sup> So declared a curious spiritual seeker who encountered the founders of Heaven's Gate on 14 September 1975, at a public meeting in Waldport, Oregon. The meeting represented one of the first public successes of the movement eventually called Heaven's Gate, attracting two hundred fifty people and convincing twenty of them to join. The group itself would look back at the Waldport meeting as one of its most important points of origin, though scholars have noted earlier meetings and foundational points.

The spiritual seeker's assessment reveals an important truth about the inchoate new religious movement. It was, he declared, “vaguely Biblical.”

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In fact, those who joined the movement and learned more found not only more specificity, but a message that was firmly biblical, albeit interpreted through the particular lenses of the group's founders and leaders. Heaven's Gate was fundamentally a biblical movement, but one that filtered explicitly Protestant texts, traditions, and positions through a particular set of assumptions and approaches. Those assumptions and approaches adopted by the leaders and members of Heaven's Gate are what I call an *extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics*. Using this hermeneutical approach, Heaven's Gate reassessed and reinterpreted Christian text and history. Because most of the scholarship on the religious worldview of Heaven's Gate—rather than its sociological dynamics—has tended to focus on the end of the movement and the material that the group published in its 1997 anthology (*How and When Heaven's Gate May Be Entered*) and website, this article considers a lacuna in Heaven's Gate research, namely the theological formation of the group during the mid-1970s.<sup>2</sup> Because the theology of Heaven's Gate continued to change over time, not all of the features that the group's founders developed during the 1970s remained when the movement ended in 1997. However, these features served central roles during the group's formative years.

Key to this approach is the concept of hermeneutics, an idea derived from biblical and textual studies. Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting texts (usually sacred texts), and as scholars use the term, individuals or groups use hermeneutics as sets of guiding positions to read, interpret, and analyze such sacred texts. Today, even within the realm of biblical hermeneutics, one finds historicist hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics, existential hermeneutics, and hermeneutics associated with a variety of religious perspectives, such as Jewish hermeneutics or evangelical Christian hermeneutics. Each method highlights certain questions and deploys different lenses in its interpretation of the texts. For example, readers employing feminist hermeneutics forefront issues of gender, whereas Jewish hermeneuticists look at how a text relates to the Midrashic and Talmudic traditions. Hermeneutics guide a reader to focus on specific parts of texts, find particular themes within those texts, and provide a framework for understanding the meaning of the texts. Importantly, hermeneuticists all read the same texts, but come to radically different conclusions. That Christian theologians reading the same Bible support varying positions on the death penalty, war, gender equality, and the means of salvation all indicate the power of hermeneutics in shaping the meaning of texts.<sup>3</sup>

Heaven's Gate employed an extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics, reading the Christian Bible—and I do mean the Christian Bible, containing the Old and New Testament as canonized and translated by Christians—through a fundamental set of assumptions: that life exists on other planets, that such alien life has interacted with Earthlings in the past and will in the future, and that biblical evidence points to such

relationships. As I contend below, this hermeneutics draws upon a reservoir of New Age religious thought. However, the hermeneutics utilized by Heaven's Gate is also biblical, highlighting the Bible and placing it at the center of its analysis. Unlike many UFO religions, Heaven's Gate never strayed far from the Bible. The founders and members of Heaven's Gate utilized the Bible to explain their beliefs, attract members, defend their religious positions, and ultimately to rationalize leaving their earthly bodies behind.

I am not the first scholar to use the concept of hermeneutics to study UFO groups, though this article—along with the others in this special issue of *Nova Religio*—does so in greater detail than other studies. John A. Saliba, in his assessment of the intersection between ufology and religion, published as “Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena,” explicitly referred to what he called “the use of the UFO theory as a hermeneutical principle of biblical interpretation.”<sup>4</sup> Saliba even directly considers Heaven's Gate, known at the time as Human Individual Metamorphosis, contending that the movement represented a form of Christian appropriation of the mythology of UFO contact. The group was, Saliba argues, a Christian UFO cult whose “message can be interpreted as an attempt to relate some basic Christian beliefs with current human conditions and problems and to present the Christian message in the language of the contemporary myth of flying saucers.”<sup>5</sup> Saliba is correct to see Heaven's Gate as a Christian group, yet I want to move beyond recognizing their clear Christian origin, and consider how their UFO hermeneutics actually shaped their rather unique theological perspective of Christianity. The concept of extraterrestrial hermeneutics is helpful because it reveals how and why the members and leaders of Heaven's Gate read the Christian Bible as they did.

### **EXTRATERRESTRIAL BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS, THE NEW AGE, AND UFOLOGY**

The extraterrestrial hermeneutics of Heaven's Gate developed out of the New Age movement, and its broader interest in ufology, extraterrestrial life, and alien visitation. Widely diffuse and diverse, scholars have had a difficult time categorizing and defining the New Age movement. J. Gordon Melton, James R. Lewis, and Sarah M. Pike concur that personal transformation marks one of the few characteristics around which the many variants of the New Age converge, yet disagree on how to define the movement itself.<sup>6</sup> Developing that commonality, Pike characterizes the New Age movement as “committed to the transformation of both self and society through a host of practices that include channeling, visualization, astrology, meditation, and alternative healing methods.”<sup>7</sup> One of the problems in defining the New Age is its “spiritual eclecticism,” as Pike puts it.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, Lewis has rightly

characterized the New Age movement as an amorphous decentralized collective, focused primarily on healing and self-improvement, but encompassing a variety of methods and foci. Like Pike's description of the varieties of New Age commitments, Lewis applies a Wittgensteinian family relationship model in describing the New Age genre, a technique recommended by Eileen Barker for the study of the New Age.<sup>9</sup> Under this model a member of the family need not possess all of the possible attributes, but is nonetheless part of the wider category. Lewis offers several traits as central to the New Age family, "emphasis on healing; a desire to be 'modern' and use scientific language; eclecticism and syncretism; a monistic and impersonal ontology; optimism, success orientation, and a tendency to evolutionary views; emphasis on psychic powers."<sup>10</sup> This family-resemblance approach helps to define the limits of the New Age, since New Age movements often vary widely. Adopting this approach to the New Age helps indicate why Heaven's Gate existed at the boundary of Christianity and the New Age. Though a biblical movement, Heaven's Gate included many of these characteristics because its extraterrestrial hermeneutics derived from the New Age movement.

Multiple scholars have commented on the place of ufological interests in the New Age movement and the manner in which new UFO religions have absorbed New Age principles. Wouter Hanegraaff traces the origin of what he calls the "UFO-cults" to Theosophy, particularly the Theosophical system developed by Alice Bailey (1880–1949) that he argues served as a foundation for the broader New Age. Hanegraaff considers UFO religions and the wider New Age so integrated that he even proposes calling the early UFO religions of the 1950s "a kind of proto-New Age movement."<sup>11</sup> Christopher Partridge has made a similar argument, proposing that UFO religions belong entirely within the Theosophy-New Age tradition, drawing not only from Theosophy's tradition of interest in UFOs and extraterrestrial contact, but the notion of the Ascended Masters who dispense spiritual knowledge from a distant unreachable plain.<sup>12</sup> The nature of the Masters varies between Theosophical traditions and groups, and ranges from living human masters communicating through psychic means, to Venusians, to non-corporeal beings. Owing to their particular Theosophical lineage, UFO religions tend to focus on the Ascended Masters as exclusively extraterrestrial beings.<sup>13</sup> Still, Hanegraaf and Partridge are correct to note the indebtedness of UFO religiosity to its predecessors, the New Age and Theosophical movements.

Owing to this New Age heritage, the extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics features many of the same characteristics as its parent-tradition. Most notably, the hallmark of the New Age carries over into the hermeneutics: the goal of individual human self-improvement and transformation. Hence, the users of such a hermeneutics stress not only the existence of alien life, but its willingness to enter into a relationship

with humanity, and interest in helping at least some portion of humanity develop itself. In the parlance of ufology, a group employing an extraterrestrial hermeneutics postulates a series of close encounters, alien visitations, psychic or technological communication, and alien abductions. All of these engagements hint at a broader purpose, that of assisting at least some human beings to self-develop. Since Heaven's Gate assumed an extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics (rather than Islamic or Vaishnava hermeneutics, for example), the movement looked to the Bible, and particularly the Bible as understood by Protestant Christians, as a record of such contact.<sup>14</sup>

Yet those who employ an extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics assume a second characteristic as well, what I call "materialism," following the philosophical distinction between materialism, dualism, and other ontologies. Here materialism does not mean a lusting after material goods or wealth, but a desire to explain religious concepts using purely material means. More broadly, a materialist belief system treats all knowledge and knowable things as comprised of physical, tangible matter, as described by the sciences of physics, chemistry, and related fields. Brenda Denzler has explained this phenomenon as a wider hallmark of ufology in her study of UFO contactees and ufologists. Denzler explained that "God-talk [among the contactees] was often conducted using the rhetoric of science rather than religion and sought to touch base not with the verities of revealed Truth, but with the verities of empirically derived truth."<sup>15</sup> Partridge makes a similar argument, calling this phenomenon "physicalism."<sup>16</sup> While Heaven's Gate, as a new religious movement, did not always embrace pure materialism as a philosopher would use the term, its hermeneutics assumed this foundation. Consequently, the movement read the Bible as describing the empirical, tangible, and technological, rather than the spiritual or ethereal.

In this regard, Heaven's Gate followed a pattern within UFO subculture of considering the Bible from materialistic grounds. The international best-selling works of Erich von Däniken (b. 1935), specifically *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) and *Gods from Outer Space* (1970), directly preceded the development of Heaven's Gate, and foreshadowed many of their positions. Von Däniken proposed that the sacred texts of the world's ancient religions, including both Old and New Testaments, describe alien visitation, utilizing language appropriate to their own time and place. Space ships became chariots and clouds, since the biblical authors could only understand extraterrestrial technology with reference to nature or primitive vehicles. Now gifted with modern understandings, von Däniken and the many proponents of what has come to be called ancient astronaut theory find evidence of such visitations throughout the ancient world.<sup>17</sup> Anne Cross and Pia Andersson have found wide evidence of the spread of ancient astronaut theory throughout the ufology subculture, both among religious and secular proponents of alien

visitation.<sup>18</sup> As an explicitly biblical approach, the extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics of Heaven's Gate builds upon ancient astronaut theory, with its materialistic interpretive model, but adds to it a tendency to understand references to supernatural beings and events—e.g. angels, healings, prophetic callings—as either extraterrestrials themselves, or their technological dealings with humanity.

### **HEAVEN'S GATE: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Marshall Herff Applewhite (1932–1997) and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1928–1985) founded the movement that eventually became known as Heaven's Gate in the mid-1970s. A native of Houston, Nettles was a registered nurse, mother of four children, and partner in a failing marriage. Though raised a Baptist, a junior high school classmate of Nettles described her as not particularly religious, attending church “just because the gang [of friends and family] did.”<sup>19</sup> She had dropped out of Christian circles by the time she became an adult. In the years immediately preceding her first meeting with Applewhite in 1972, she wrote occasional newspaper columns on astrology and spoke of receiving assistance in her astrology from spiritual beings. She belonged to the Houston branch of the Theosophical Society in America and expressed an interest in the writings of Helena P. Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical movement.<sup>20</sup> The secondary scholarship on Nettles shows her as inhabiting a New Age subculture of disincarnated spirits, Ascended Masters, telepathic powers, and hidden and revealed gnosis. As sociologist Robert W. Balch, who studied and traveled with the group in its early years, wrote, “Bonnie was deeply committed to metaphysics as a way of life. Hers was a magical reality of signs, omens, spirits, ascended masters, and higher levels of reality.”<sup>21</sup> Though Balch does not specify Nettles' initial views of alien life, most likely Nettles' background in the New Age provided the source for the interest in ufology and extraterrestrial visitation that later characterized Heaven's Gate.

Known as Herff to his friends, Heaven's Gate co-founder Marshall Herff Applewhite possessed a more conventionally Christian background. A Texan by birth, his father served as a popular Presbyterian preacher, having founded and led several churches in the state. The younger Applewhite was bisexual, but experienced significant guilt and confusion over his sexuality and inability to maintain longstanding romantic relationships.<sup>22</sup> After college he enrolled at Virginia's Union Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian divinity school, but left after two years to study music.<sup>23</sup> He earned a Masters degree in music and voice from the University of Colorado, though remained within the orbit of religiously oriented vocations. Applewhite directed the chorus at Houston's St. Mark's Episcopal Church and the fine arts program at Houston's University of St. Thomas, a nominally Catholic college, but

seemed not to identify strongly with any particular denomination in his adult life.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, his early exposure to the Bible, his Presbyterian seminary training, and his continued involvement in Christian religious life all reveal the likely reason for the Bible's strong position within Heaven's Gate.

Nettles and Applewhite met in 1972, in Houston, and soon developed an intense spiritual partnership, surely influenced by Nettles' impending divorce and recent trauma in Applewhite's romantic relationships. Shortly after their initial meeting, Applewhite and Nettles came to understand one another as destined to teach about religious and spiritual topics. To this end, they founded a small religious enterprise, called the Christian Arts Center, in borrowed space from a local church. The two hoped to use the Christian Arts Center to teach "classes in metaphysics, theosophy, [and] astrology."<sup>25</sup> Balch added that they also intended to offer courses in mysticism, healing, comparative religion, and the performing arts, and hoped to broadly "promote the study of music, arts, and religion."<sup>26</sup> The pair's grand vision failed to achieve success, and the Christian Arts Center closed after encountering financial instability and animosity from the local Christian community. Applewhite and Nettles' second venture, Know Place, reproduced the same vision and entrepreneurial pattern, though with a more explicitly Theosophical or occult angle than their earlier attempt. The Know Place also failed to achieve financial success, and the two closed it in January 1973.<sup>27</sup>

A three-year period of wandering and religious formulation ensued from 1973 to 1975, during which Nettles and Applewhite traveled throughout the United States and ruminated on what religious message they hoped to bring to the world. During this errand into the wilderness the two leaders fleshed out the specifics of their message, but by no later than 5 June 1974 (a year and a half after their journey began) they had settled on the fundamentals. Max Pavesic, a Boise State University anthropology professor, and Johnny Lister, a Boise-area psychic, each reported that on that day the two arrived unannounced at their offices, introduced themselves as Bonnie and Herff, and asked them to "drop everything and leave with them." Lister indicated that the two individuals revealed that "they would be crucified" so as to prove their mission as legitimate. They made the same claims to Pavesic, and also added "their idea of attaining to the highest level of evolution . . . a metaphysical state where the mind is evolved out of the body into infinity." Neither Pavesic nor Lister accepted the offer, and the two travelers departed.<sup>28</sup>

Nettles and Applewhite had better luck on the West Coast, and over the next two years they assembled a small group of followers, ultimately peaking at around two hundred individuals.<sup>29</sup> As described by its two early investigators, sociologists Robert W. Balch and David Taylor,

Heaven's Gate (as I will somewhat anachronistically call it)<sup>30</sup> grew slowly during these years, and then sharply contracted as its leaders exerted stronger control. By the 1980s, the movement was quite small, having lost at least half of its members. In 1985, Bonnie Lu Nettles died of liver cancer, a momentous shift in the group's leadership that catapulted Applewhite to the role of sole leader. Following Nettle's death, Applewhite directed several intensive proselytizing efforts in 1988, 1993, and 1996, which led to slight numerical growth, resulting in a membership of approximately forty people in 1997, when the mass suicides ended the movement.<sup>31</sup> No active members of the movement remain.

### **CHRISTOLOGY, SELF-TRANSFORMATION, & RESURRECTION**

The leaders and members of Heaven's Gate utilized an extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics throughout its history, but the specific way in which they read the sacred text changed over the years. Nevertheless, the central feature of Applewhite and Nettles' hermeneutical approach lasted throughout their group's history, i.e. their reading of the Bible as a record of extraterrestrial contact with human civilization for the purposes of aiding human personal self-transformation. Based on this reading of the Bible, the possibility of individual salvation and bodily assumption into heaven provided the heart of Applewhite and Nettles' teachings, and the form that self-transformation took within their movement. In order for potential followers to join them in this "trip," as they called it, they needed to leave their human attachments behind them and dedicate themselves exclusively to overcoming the human condition. Those dedicated to the message of Nettles and Applewhite, who rechristened themselves "the Two," would rise into the heavens and achieve eternal salvation. This process, the Two declared, was entirely materialistic, requiring a metamorphosis of the biological and chemical makeup of the human body, and resulting in a transformation into an ideal extraterrestrial creature. The Two believed that extraterrestrials visited Earth in order to teach this process. Based on their reading of the Bible, they saw evidence of both past visitations as well as a promise of an imminent future visit, and understood themselves as fulfilling an eschatological role in this dawning visitation.

Like all biblical hermeneuticists, the Two focused on specific aspects of the texts that they found most germane to their religious interests. Analogous to how other hermeneutical approaches lead readers to particular passages and texts, the founders and leaders of Heaven's Gate concentrated on the sections of the Bible that they read as particularly pertinent to their own religious needs. One cannot know whether the two leaders came to their theological conclusions first, and then sought out evidence in the text to support them, or possibly if they followed

their hermeneutical lens and searched the text for a theological answer to the question of extraterrestrial visitation. However, since the movement adopted an extraterrestrial hermeneutics, it naturally highlighted sections of the text that its members believed demonstrated alien visitation and contact, and the means by which human beings could self-develop. Like most Christians, the founders of Heaven's Gate placed Christ (the concept) at the center of their religious understanding, and in keeping with their hermeneutics, read Jesus (the person) as the prototypical extraterrestrial visitor. They also focused on the teachings of Jesus that they believed would lead a person towards self-transformation. Finally, since the two founders understood themselves as engaged in the culmination of a multi-planetary drama of human salvation, they focused on textual elements related to the Endtime and eschatology.

On 31 May 1974 Nettles and Applewhite gave to one of their first followers the Bible that they had carried with them and studied during their formulation of the movement's theology. A King James Version (KJV) Red-Letter Bible, the physical text indicates the group's Protestant biblical origins. Though by 1974 many Protestants utilized other translations, most notably the Revised Standard Version, the KJV remained the translation of conservative American Protestants. The Red-Letter edition, so called because such editions print the words of Jesus in red ink, holds particular value among American Protestants, since it highlights what many consider the essential core of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus. As Athalya Brenner and Jan W. van Henten have noted in their scholarship of the reception of Bible translation, the particular Bible translation utilized by a group or individual marks their overall religious identity.<sup>32</sup> In this regard, the Heaven's Gate founders' choice of the Red-Letter King James Version reveals their initial indebtedness to a biblically-based conservative American Protestantism. In her own examination of Heaven's Gate, Rosamond Rodman also noted that Applewhite and Nettles' choice of a KJV Bible clearly identifies them as influenced by Protestant traditionalism, even as they embarked on exploring the text from the perspective of extraterrestrial hermeneutics.<sup>33</sup>

Applewhite and Nettles marked twenty-six discrete passages in their Bible, spread over four books: Matthew, Luke, Galatians, and Revelation.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, these four books all fall within the New Testament, indicating that the Two focused on what they perceived to be the salvific drama associated with Christ's incarnation. Specifically, most of their notations fall within the Gospel of Luke, which scholars identify as the gospel most emphasizing Jesus as both biographic exemplar and savior of the world.<sup>35</sup> The Two's markings included underlines, drawn asterisks, and occasionally written words. Their notations fell into three broad categories: (1) the nature of Jesus as Christ, specifically the incarnation; (2) the need to forsake worldly attachments; and

(3) eschatological predictions of judgment, persecution, and resurrection. These marked passages, when considered in the context of the three written statements that the two founders of Heaven's Gate wrote a year later in 1975, demonstrate the manner in which the Two sought to construct an entire theology predicated on their reading of the Bible through an extraterrestrial hermeneutics.

As a fundamentally Protestant biblical group, Heaven's Gate naturally featured a Christology, a set of positions on the nature of Christ's incarnation. Several of the Two's markings in their Bible directly treat the nature of Christ, though they did underline six separate passages in Luke that speak to the question. Notably, they marked material related to Jesus's overcoming of temptation (Luke 4:12–14 KJV), prayer life (Luke 6:12), and miracles (Luke 8:33, 8:54–55). That the two founders identified these passages indicates their interest in what Christ did on Earth, however they framed these by marking two other passages. The first, a statement by Zacharias the father of John the Baptist, declared, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began" (Luke 1:67–70). This passage presents several major themes: that the Lord has visited "his people," that God speaks through prophets, and that God provided a savior. While these themes are unremarkable for most Christians, within the context of an extraterrestrial hermeneutics, they explain the underlying theology of Heaven's Gate. Based on a reading of the three statements they subsequently authored, Applewhite and Nettles treated any reference to God in a materialistic fashion, reckoning that what the Bible calls God is actually a highly-developed extraterrestrial worshipped by humans as a deity. Here they followed the contours of the broader extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics. Assuming that interpretive framework, the Two took Zacharias' statement that the Lord "hath visited" Israel literally, as evidence that the extraterrestrial being worshipped by the Israelites literally visited his people, making the Bible in fact a record of alien visitation. Regarding Christ specifically, Nettles and Applewhite followed the traditional Protestant approach of understanding the New Testament as centered on the life and teachings of Jesus, who offered not only moral teachings, but also the means of entering heaven. For Heaven's Gate, of course, "heaven" equals "the heavens," and represented physical space beyond the atmosphere of the planet. The Two's final notation regarding Christ's nature appears in Luke 9:28–34, the section of the text traditionally called the Transfiguration, since in these passages Christ's visage becomes "white and glistening [i.e., glistening]." Importantly, during this episode, God the Father speaks from overhead in a cloud, recognizing Jesus as his son. Though Nettles and Applewhite made no effort to notate the nature of this

cloud in the actual text of their Bible, they would return to it in their written statements a year later.

Nettles and Applewhite wrote three statements, the first in April 1975 and the other two at some point in the following two months, distributing them by mail to potential converts as well as spiritual centers. The statements provided a more thorough consideration of the group's theology, predicated on their reading of the Bible through their extraterrestrial hermeneutics. Drawing on their understanding of the Bible, the statements detailed Jesus as an extraterrestrial being from a more highly-evolved sector of space, what Nettles and Applewhite called "the next evolutionary kingdom," or elsewhere the "Next Level."<sup>36</sup> Later Heaven's Gate material offered additional details on what the Two meant by this concept. This kingdom or level represented what most other Christian readers of the Bible would call Heaven. It was the place from which Jesus came before his incarnation, and to where he returned. Entrance into that kingdom represented the goal of the group, and Nettles and Applewhite offered teachings designed to assist people to enter it. Thus far, Christian readers of such statements would readily recognize the Two's kingdom as familiar. However, in keeping with their extraterrestrial hermeneutics, Nettles and Applewhite made it quite clear that the kingdom was not in fact a misty ethereal realm or spiritual plane of existence, but literally another world. Its inhabitants possessed physical bodies that featured both chemical and biological makeups, although such bodies transcended the biological limitations of earthly life, such as sustenance, sexual reproduction, and death.<sup>37</sup> Again, one can see how the Two's hermeneutical approach led them to offer a materialistic interpretation of what most interpreters in the Protestant tradition generally understand to mean heaven or the heavens.

In the first statement, titled "Human Individual Metamorphosis," Nettles and Applewhite paid particular attention to the nature of Christ's incarnation, following the notations of their KJV Bible. In keeping with a central tenet of their extraterrestrial hermeneutics, the Two stressed not only the heavenly origin of Jesus, but also his physicality. Before incarnating on Earth, Jesus possessed a material body, and his awakening represented a metamorphic (rather than spiritual) process:

Approx. 2,000 years ago an individual of that next kingdom forfeited his body of that kingdom and entered a human female's womb, thereby incarnating as the one history refers to as Jesus of Nazareth. He awakened to this fact gradually through the same metamorphic process. [...] Jesus' "Christing" or christening was completed at His transfiguration (metamorphic completion) and He remained in the "larva" environment, with other humans, only for some 40 days to show that His teachings had been accomplished.<sup>38</sup>

In this statement, Nettles and Applewhite laid out a basic theology of incarnation as read through their extraterrestrial hermeneutics, drawing on the passages that they had identified earlier, notably the Transfiguration. In keeping with their broader insistence on materialism, the Two identified Jesus as possessing a physical extraterrestrial body before incarnating, and implied that he either returned to this body or transformed his human body after his mission on Earth. He accomplished this, the Two explained, through use of a UFO, "Jesus left them in a cloud of light (what humans refer to as UFOs)."<sup>39</sup> In addition to cementing the Two within the UFO subculture and identifying their hermeneutical approach as an extraterrestrial biblical one, their explanation of the cloud of light—a glossing of verses from Luke and Acts (Luke 24:51, Acts 1:9) and possibly Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:4–28)—as a UFO indicates the Two's desire to both interpret the biblical text as indicating the evidence of past visitations by UFOs and also explain the miracles of the Bible in strikingly materialistic means. Both of these desires derive from their specific hermeneutical approach.

Yet the Two not only commented on the nature of Christ, they focused most intently on the words that he said, particularly his message about worldly attachments. Jesus' apparent dismissal of the value of earthly family has provided fruitful material for Christian hermeneuticists for centuries, with interpreters seeking support in the words of Jesus for positions ranging from asceticism to clerical celibacy to modern American evangelical Christian family values. For Applewhite and Nettles, Jesus preached a clear message of denying worldly attachments, which for them included family, wealth, property, and even their good names. Applewhite and Nettles underlined fourteen passages in their Red-Letter Bible that either directly or indirectly supported this position, ranging from the rather clear direction of Jesus in Matthew 10:37 ("He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me") to the parables of Luke 8:14 ("[those who] fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection"). Perhaps in keeping with their own experience of having been rejected in painful sexual and romantic relationships, shunned by former friends and family, sullied by criminal complaints related to credit card fraud, and facing the possibility of widespread rejection of their new religious ideology, Nettles and Applewhite also fixated on passages indicating that worthy disciples would experience rejection (Luke 4:24), hatred (Luke 6:22), and slander (Luke 7:33–34).

Despite the overall negativity of such positions, which implied that those who followed Applewhite and Nettles would similarly face scorn and approbation, the Two understood their message as fundamentally positive, in that it offered a chance to become like Jesus, to develop a

new extraterrestrial body and transcend earthly life. In the three statements that the Two wrote, the Heaven's Gate founders made it clear that their own teachings paralleled those of Jesus. Jesus came to teach that humans could overcome their natural condition and enter the next kingdom, as did the Two. The means were identical: one must overcome human attachments. Expanding from the biblical passages that the Two underlined, the three statements made the inchoate new religion's position clear. Only those who transcended worldliness could metamorphose into an ideal extraterrestrial being and enter the physical heavens. Christ served as the model for this process. The extraterrestrial that was to become Jesus, they explained, put aside a body in the heavens, took a body on Earth, then awoke to his mission through the "same metamorphic process" that the Two insisted anyone might undergo. As they declared in their first statement, "[t]hose who can believe this process and *do* it will be 'lifted up' individually and 'saved' from death—literally."<sup>40</sup>

In other sources, especially the interviews they granted to two UFO researchers in 1976, the Two would explicitly link their own experiences of incarnating and awakening to that of Christ, further strengthening their identification with Christ, and implying that they similarly had set aside biological bodies in the heavens so as to incarnate on Earth and assist its inhabitants to evolve to a higher consciousness. In keeping with the focus on self-development that the extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics inherited from the New Age, Nettles and Applewhite argued that any human being could one day achieve the same level of perfection that Jesus had, and transform themselves into ideal extraterrestrial beings that would live in the material, physical, heavens.<sup>41</sup> Notably, by the end of Heaven's Gate, Applewhite identified himself as Jesus Christ himself, incarnated on Earth for one final opportunity to teach.

Nettles and Applewhite's third statement, a two-page long document titled "The Only Significant Resurrection," attempted, in the words of its authors, to "present a concept factually and bypass the usual hidden and symbolic implications of the words used."<sup>42</sup> In other words, it sought to offer a materialistic reading of the concept of resurrection, applying a central component of their hermeneutics to the biblical statements on resurrection. The Two had marked three passages in their King James Bible that related to the concept of resurrection, particularly resurrection's connection to the Endtime. The first of these, Matthew 22:30, made explicit the connection between resurrection and the Two's identification of the extraterrestrial life as devoid of worldly attachments. In that passage, Jesus indicates that "in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven." Since the Two's hermeneutical approach identified "heaven" as the literal heavens and its "angels" as extraterrestrial beings, this passage allowed the Two to argue that the extraterrestrial life would feature

a genderless (or at least, sexless) life. Such an identification of heavenly life as devoid of biological needs of sex, food, and sleep, would emerge as central to the thought of Heaven's Gate's founders. The Two's other two notations indicated a link between resurrection and eschatology, notably Luke 9:21–30, that connects the resurrection of Christ on the third day to the promise that “some who are alive will not taste of death,” and Revelation 11:10–11, which describes the two witnesses of God as tormented, murdered, and then resurrected. This Revelation passage would also become central in the thought of the group's founders, who identified themselves with the two witnesses.

Although the Two predicated their belief in resurrection on the biblical text, their hermeneutical assumptions led them to reject what they understood to be the normative Protestant supernaturalistic reading of resurrection, which required both the mediation of a savior as well as the death of the individual. The Two also dismissed Theosophical or occult perspectives, which required esoteric knowledge not easily acquired. As they wrote,

To some, “resurrection” means that great event in “judgment time” when souls who have lived the “good life,” or who have “accepted Christ as their personal savior,” will “rise from the grave” to “ascend into Heaven.” To others, it signifies the time when their “spirit” rises into [the] “Heavens” after their bodies have been put “to rest.” For a few, it is the occasion when a “light body” is acquired after much meditation. For still others, resurrection is the time when the decomposing body is recycling “life” at the beginning stages.<sup>43</sup>

The Two flatly rejected such occult and supernaturalist approaches, since they violated the centrality of the Bible and their materialistic reading of it. Rather, they insisted that resurrection required neither the study of abstract “symbology [n]or the ‘wisdom’ of the ‘hidden mysteries,’” offsetting the suspect words within quotes. Instead, they offered what they considered true resurrection, a chemical and biological transformation into an extraterrestrial and ensuing “membership in the next evolutionary kingdom, the actual kingdom of heaven, or space.”<sup>44</sup>

Unlike the way they viewed Christian or occult beliefs about resurrection, the former of which relied on “some savior” to achieve “some heaven” (in the words of the first statement), and the latter of which relied upon “hidden mysteries,” the Two declared that their “Human Individual Metamorphosis” approach, as they called it, offered salvation predicated on “chemical conversion” into a living Next Level being. Should a person accept the overcoming process that the Two offered, they insisted that it would result in automatic conversion into an eternal perfected being. “The painful and long-suffering experience of overcoming fear and desperation, which every seeker undegoes [sic], actually converts the cells of his body, chemically and biologically, into a new

body. Upon the completion of his conversion experience that new body will have overcome decay and death.”<sup>45</sup> Physical and material transformation, rather than spiritual or supernatural salvation, provided the key to the Two’s schema of resurrection, a fact that the Two trumpeted in all of their early materials.

## **ESCHATOLOGY AND PREMILLENNIAL DISPENSATIONALISM**

Applewhite and Nettles’ extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics became particularly evident in their treatment of eschatology (ideas about the Endtime) and especially their reading of the New Testament biblical text, the book of Revelation. Specifically, their approach led them to interpret a Christian eschatological understanding known as Dispensationalism, and its key component, the Rapture, by means of their hermeneutical lens, envisioning it in its extraterrestrial and materialistic form. This reinterpretation of a particular form of apocalyptic thought eventually contributed to the mass suicides that ended the existence of Heaven’s Gate, but in the early days of the Two’s work together, it served as a hinge for much of their thinking. What I call Applewhite and Nettles’ “technological Dispensationalism” derived from their reading of a section of Revelation and other biblical texts.

Throughout the first several years of the history of Heaven’s Gate, the Two preached their message on what they dubbed “the demonstration.” The Two declared that at some point in the near future, an unknown party would assassinate them. After outsiders verified them as dead, the Two would repair their bodies, metamorphose themselves into extraterrestrials, and depart the Earth aboard a UFO, thereby “demonstrating” the truth of their message to their followers and the wider world. The “Human Individual Metamorphosis” statement explained,

There are two individuals here now who have also come from that next kingdom, incarnate[d] as humans, awakened, and will soon demonstrate the same proof of overcoming death. They are “sent” from that kingdom by the “Father” to bear the same truth that was Jesus’. This is like a repeat performance, except this time by two (a man and a woman) to restate the truth Jesus bore, restore its accurate meaning, and again show that any individual who seeks that kingdom will find it through the same process. This “re-statement” or demonstration will happen within months. The two who are the “actors” in this “theatre” are in the meantime doing all they can to relate this truth as accurately as possible so that when their bodies recover from their “dead” state (resurrection) and they leave (UFO’s) [sic] those left behind will have clearly understood the formula.<sup>46</sup>

Though the subsequent two statements did not explicate the demonstration nearly as much as the first did, all of them mentioned it. The

second statement alluded to a forthcoming “illustration” and described the Two as “illustrators,” and the third invoked the theatrical metaphor of the first statement in describing the event as a “death and resurrection scene” to “demonstrate” the nature of real resurrection.<sup>47</sup> Other sources provided more details. The “What’s Up?” mailing in July 1975, for example, provided details on the time frame of the resurrection, clarifying that “the ability to heal a diagnosed dead body and walk away some 3–1/2 days later [. . .] is one of the characteristics of a member of that next kingdom.”<sup>48</sup> Applewhite and Nettles apparently did not stress the demonstration at some of their earliest public meetings—a limited Waldport transcript does not mention it, nor do the first newspaper articles on the movement—but they discussed the demonstration in each of the interviews they granted, to Hayden Hewes in July 1974, Brad Steiger in January 1976, and James Phelan later that same month.<sup>49</sup> Several of the Two’s earliest followers who granted interviews also mentioned the demonstration.<sup>50</sup>

The demonstration that the Two espoused in fact represented an interpretation of an Endtime prophecy from the New Testament’s book of Revelation through the lens of their specific hermeneutical method, a fact that the Two hinted at with their reference to a three and a half day time period to repair their bodies. When interviewer Brad Steiger asked Applewhite and Nettles if they patterned themselves on “the experience and death of Christ,” whom Christian tradition also records as lying for three days before resurrection, they responded by alluding instead to “the passage in Revelation” that predicted them.<sup>51</sup> Steiger did not push them on this matter, perhaps because as a secular ufologist he was unfamiliar with Revelation. Phelan, who interviewed Applewhite and Nettles shortly after Steiger, failed to provide a direct quotation, but summarized that the Two “base[d] this prediction on the claim that they [were] not ordinary visitors from outer space but heavenly messengers whose appearance was foretold in the New Testament’s Book of Revelation.”<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere, the Two provided a specific reference. One man whom Applewhite and Nettles encountered recalled that they told him, “We have a message for you. You are to meditate. Read Revelation 11 and meditate.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, a member of the movement wrote on a postcard to her family in September 1975, “Mama. Am doing beautifully. Truly feel I am on the path I’ve searched for. Thank God. Please don’t worry. Have faith. I am completely taken care of while I am learning my Father’s will always in all ways. P.S. Read Revelation Chapter 11 in the New Testament.”<sup>54</sup>

The Revelation passage to which Nettles, Applewhite, and their follower alluded describes two witnesses prophesying during the final days, only to meet popular scorn, assassination, and subsequent resurrection. The King James version of the New Testament declares, in a chapter marked in their Red-Letter Bible,

[An angel said:] And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy [...] And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city. [...] And after three days and an half the spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; [...] And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud (Revelation 11:3–12).

The Two read this Revelation text through the eyes of their extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics, and owing to the basis of that approach, Applewhite and Nettles emphasized its materialistic nature, its ability to transform the individual, and of course its extraterrestrial nature. The Two insisted that the special case of the resurrection of the two witnesses represented a demonstration of the metamorphic possibilities of the human body, an option they held open for others as well. In keeping with their hermeneutical approach, they recast the Revelation prophecy in material and ufological terms, insisting that the Bible's description of resurrection and the ascension to heaven "in a cloud" represented a coded or symbolic description of a totally material process, and in fact represented a next-level spacecraft. "This demonstration is to clarify what Christ's mission was 2,000 years ago. Man could not understand then, but can *now* at this time," Applewhite handwrote onto one of the Two's mailings.<sup>55</sup> The Two's reliance on the book of Revelation provides a crucial hint to unpack the Two's wider message. Specifically, Applewhite and Nettles filtered a variety of Protestant Christian millennialist ideas known as Dispensationalism through their interpretive assumptions.

Dispensationalism emerged in the nineteenth century, and by the 1970s had become a feature of many conservative American evangelical Protestant communities.<sup>56</sup> Dispensationalists rejected the (postmillennial) ideal of human progress so prevalent in nineteenth-century American and European culture, and rather assumed a relatively constant decline of human civilization. Historian George Marsden explains the Dispensationalist position, "Christ's kingdom, far from being realized in this age or in the natural development of humanity, lay wholly in the future, was totally supernatural in origin, and discontinuous with the history of this era."<sup>57</sup> Scholars also sometimes refer to Dispensationalism as a type of premillennialism, since a prophesied one thousand years of peace (millennium) follows Christ's return. For Dispensationalists, when the end comes, it will be sudden, in accordance with a strict reading of the book of Revelation, and utterly unstoppable.

C. I. Scofield (1843–1921), who systematized the theology through his publication of a reference Bible, identified seven dispensations: innocence (Eden); conscience (antediluvian); human government (postdiluvian); promise (Old Testament patriarchs); law (Mosaic);

grace (the current age of the Church); and kingdom (the future dispensation of Christ's heaven-on-Earth). The sixth dispensation ends with what Scofield called the "rapture of the true church," during which living Christians rise into the air, meet Christ, and ascend into heaven.<sup>58</sup> Applewhite and Nettles borrowed several aspects of the Dispensational system, but in typical Protestant fashion, read the system through their own examination of the Bible. Hence, the Two's hermeneutics strongly shaped the resulting eschatological perspective of the group.

The Two's most clear codification of their Dispensational system occurred in a statement that they prepared for Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger's book, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary* (1976), a portion of which the book's publisher printed in the final text as "A Statement Prepared by The Two." In this statement, Applewhite and Nettles described the world as passing through seven historical dispensations—using the term in its technical sense—five of them in the past, one current, and one in the future. Paralleling the standard Protestant Dispensational system, which they might have read in a Scofield Reference Bible or possibly some other source, the Two named the five past dispensations Adam, Enoch, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, three of which (Adam/innocence/Edenic, Enoch/conscience/antediluvian, Moses/law/Mosaic) precisely match the Scofield system of Dispensationalism. Like other Dispensationalists, they identified the current dispensation as the sixth, declaring that "[t]he sixth major help period for Earth's human garden is *now*."<sup>59</sup> Finally, they invoked the standard Dispensationalist understandings of the Endtime, explaining that the seventh dispensation would end with "what the Christian church refers to as the second coming, the 'rapture,' and the completion of the final prophecies in John's Book of Revelation."<sup>60</sup> Thus far, the Two's presentation of Dispensationalist premillennialism closely followed the standard form found in many evangelical Christian churches.

Unlike most Christians following the Scofield Dispensational system however, Applewhite and Nettles interpreted their Dispensationalism through the lens of their extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics, seeking to synthesize the Dispensational system with their broader theological worldview. Extrapolating from the Dispensationalist assumption that God relates to humanity in different ways during each dispensation, Applewhite and Nettles explained that during particular eras, kingdom-level spacecrafts emitted a powerful burst of energy that washed over the Earth. Ever attuned to the materialism that characterized their hermeneutical approach, the Two maintained that while "you might not be able to see the actual physical manifestation of energy," it nevertheless existed, and shined on the planet like a shaft of light.<sup>61</sup> When this extraterrestrial energy touched the Earth, it created an "energy field" conducive to human development. Employing another materialistic metaphor, and one that invoked the extraterrestrial as well, the Two explained that "[t]hat energy source might be more clearly understood

if you picture a searchlight that is circling the far distant heavens without interference from other bodies in the heavens, clearly shining on this planet as it did approximately two thousand years ago in its last orbiting.”<sup>62</sup> Like a physical spotlight, planets and other astronomical objects might obstruct the Next Level energy, resulting in only periodic eras during which the light reached the Earth. This reinterpretation of Dispensationalism, itself an interpretation of the biblical text, applies the fundamental assumptions of extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics to the Endtime scenario.

Much of Christian Dispensationalist thought focuses on the idea of the Rapture of the faithful, the event during which Dispensationalists believe living Christians and the martyred dead rise into the air, meet Christ, and ascend into heaven. Hal Lindsay’s *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), a Dispensationalist bestseller popular when Applewhite and Nettles first formulated their ideas, climaxed with a description of the Rapture, as well as incorporated the concept into much of the overall work.<sup>63</sup> (It is even possible that Applewhite and Nettles read Lindsay’s book, one of the decade’s bestsellers, given their admission of reading a variety of religious, spiritual, and scientific literatures, however there is no direct evidence of influence. It is also possible that since Texas, specifically Dallas, served as the center of Dispensationalism, it percolated into their thought through less direct means.<sup>64</sup>) Applewhite and Nettles accepted the idea of the Rapture, but transformed the traditional view into a technological and material event. Rather than meeting Christ midair, their followers would aerially rendezvous with UFOs, one of which would hold the extraterrestrial whom humans remember as Jesus of Nazareth. “The one who was Jesus will come in at close range (as soon as those who have chosen to change over do it) and receive the elect in his company,” they explained in their 1976 published statement.<sup>65</sup> The UFOs, now bearing the human beings who had overcome their humanity through Applewhite and Nettles’ process, would ascend into the literal heavens, forever leaving behind the Earth. In using the specifically religious term, “the elect,” Applewhite and Nettles revealed the underlying religious content of their message, which used the vocabulary of their hermeneutics: UFOs, biology, and space, but with the concepts of Christian Dispensationalism: resurrection, prophecy, and Rapture.

That the UFO rendezvous represented a technological reimagining of the Rapture explains why the Two so adamantly insisted that the UFOs would not land, but would meet the successful candidates for the Next Level in midair. During the Waldport meeting, Applewhite and Nettles stressed that although Jesus awaited successful candidates for the Next Level in a UFO, “He will not come down to this environment and show you His bruises and His glowing white robe. But he is present at close range, even now.”<sup>66</sup> Attendees of the meeting might have interpreted that remark as an indication that the only evidence

that Applewhite and Nettles promised was their demonstration and not the presence of Christ, and the Two certainly did stress that point as well. Yet their response to one of Brad Steiger's questions clarified the importance the Two placed on the aerial rendezvous itself, that is, the technological enactment of the Rapture. "Will other people be able to see the spaceship land and see the followers get on board?" asked Steiger. The Two responded, "[t]he spacecraft will not land. Individuals will be lifted up to the spacecraft if they have overcome. That is why if you go on this trip you have to overcome everything. If you have not overcome, you will not be lifted up."<sup>67</sup> Other sources repeated this important claim that the UFO would not land, and that the elect would rise into the air to meet Christ and craft midair.<sup>68</sup> The best explanation for the Two's defense of this proposition is their desire to portray the impending departure of their followers on the UFO as a materialistic form of the Rapture, as read through an extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics.

## CONCLUSION

My contention that the founders of Heaven's Gate utilized an extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics helps resolve a debate within the scholarship on the movement. Most previous treatments of the group have viewed Heaven's Gate as a fundamentally New Age movement that adopted some Christian elements. The first scholars to study Heaven's Gate, Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, have adopted this position. Without using the term New Age itself, their "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult" details what the authors called the social world of the "metaphysical seeker." Using some of the same characteristics that later scholars ascribed to the New Age, Balch and Taylor argued that the early converts to Heaven's Gate defined themselves as on a perennial quest for truth, and shared a worldview that emphasized personal growth alongside beliefs such as reincarnation, psychic power, UFOs, and lost continents.<sup>69</sup> Balch explicitly argues for a New Age origin and identity of the movement in his later articles, such as his 1998 "The Evolution of a New Age Cult: From Total Overcomers Anonymous to Death at Heaven's Gate."<sup>70</sup> James R. Lewis has similarly argued for Heaven's Gate as a New Age religion in his essay "Legitimizing Suicide: Heaven's Gate and New Age Ideology."<sup>71</sup> Balch, Taylor, and Lewis are all correct in the sense that Heaven's Gate drew from a population of New Age spiritual seekers, focused on a New Age-style pursuit of spiritual awareness and evolution, and its belief system included a variety of New Age concepts.

At the same time, a minority perspective within the academy contends differently, that Heaven's Gate was fundamentally a Christian new religion. Christopher Partridge has championed this position, arguing

in his essay “The Eschatology of Heaven’s Gate” that Heaven’s Gate “is heavily derivative of Christian theology in several important respects.”<sup>72</sup> In that essay Partridge contends that the eschatological beliefs of Heaven’s Gate depended on a particular Protestant outlook, that of premillennial Dispensationalism. I have made the same contention in my article, “Scaling Heaven’s Gate: Individualism and Salvation in a New Religious Movement,” and like Partridge, I argue that Heaven’s Gate employed not only Dispensationalism, but a Protestant perspective on predestination as well.<sup>73</sup> Partridge and my earlier article also contend that the theology of Heaven’s Gate depended on the Protestant worldview, and that its eschatology in particular emerged from Protestant Christianity.

Both schools of thought are correct, but incomplete. Heaven’s Gate was neither exclusively New Age, nor exclusively Christian. Rather, the movement combined both influences. Catherine Wessinger comes closest to my understanding of this movement when she writes that “[t]he message of the Two was a literalist interpretation of the Bible . . . as well as Theosophical doctrines. They combined Christian and some Theosophical doctrines with belief in UFOs, extraterrestrials, and space aliens.”<sup>74</sup> Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics explains how the group was able to do so in constructing and maintaining its worldview. Drawing on the Christian heritage of its founders, members, and broader American culture, Heaven’s Gate looked to the Bible for inspiration. In fact, nearly every central theological belief of Heaven’s Gate derived from its members’ understanding of the Christian New Testament. However, they filtered the Bible through a very specific set of assumptions and approaches, namely their extraterrestrial hermeneutics. Like all hermeneutics, Heaven’s Gate’s led the group to focus on particular books and verses within the Bible, and to read them in specific manners. Because the extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics drew from so many New Age antecedents, the resulting worldview, while biblical, bore the hallmarks of the New Age as well. Neither exclusively Christian nor exclusively New Age, Heaven’s Gate featured elements of both because of its particular hermeneutical method.

Heaven’s Gate’s extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics also helps explain the reason for the mass suicides, and the group’s ultimate demise. Applewhite’s attachment to Dispensationalist thought required him to insist on the elect rising into the air to begin their new extraterrestrial existence. His hermeneutical approach led him to read that event as culminating in boarding a UFO, and subsequently departing for the heavens. But the UFO could not land, as this would violate what he considered the clear biblical mandate that the elect would meet Christ mid-air. As far back as their Waldport meeting, which first put the movement into the national spotlight, Nettles and Applewhite had made this position clear and non-negotiable. Because their hermeneutics was not

only extraterrestrial but also biblical, Applewhite and the members of Heaven's Gate in 1997 could not merely substitute a new perspective for what they believed their sacred text clearly stated. Consequently, they could not wait for the UFO to land. By shedding their human bodies, what the members of the group had come to call mere "containers," Marshall Herff Applewhite and the thirty-eight members of Heaven's Gate in Rancho Santa Fe, California, made the ultimate commitment to the hermeneutical approach that had so long guided them.

## ENDNOTES

*The author wishes to thank Paul Brian Thomas, Rebecca Moore, Catherine Wessinger, and Joel E. Tishken for their feedback and comments on this article. Any remaining omissions of course remain my own.*

<sup>1</sup> "20 Missing in Oregon after Talking of a Higher Life," *New York Times*, 7 October 1975, 71.

<sup>2</sup> All of the published scholarship on Heaven's Gate prior to the 1997 suicides focuses mostly on sociological issues. Of the articles, essays, and book chapters published after 1997, most focus on the end-period of the movement. For a review of scholarship on Heaven's Gate, see Benjamin E. Zeller, "Heaven's Gate: A Literature Review and Bibliographic Essay," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 1 no. 1 (2009), available at <<http://www.academicpublishing.org/ASRR-1-1/02-HeavensGate.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> For more on hermeneutics, see Van A. Harvey, "Hermeneutics," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6, 2nd edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 3930–3936. For the background and history of various approaches of biblical hermeneutics, see Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> John A. Saliba, "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Saliba, "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," 31.

<sup>6</sup> For Lewis' position, see James R. Lewis, "Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement," in *Perspectives on the New Age*, eds. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 6–9. For Melton, see J. Gordon Melton, Jerome Clark, and Aidan A. Kelly, eds., *New Age Encyclopedia: A Guide to the Beliefs, Concepts, Terms, People, and Organizations That Make up the New Global Movement toward Spiritual Development, Health and Healing, Higher Consciousness, and Related Subjects* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), xiii–xiv. For Pike, see Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1989), 189.

<sup>10</sup> James R. Lewis, "Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement," 7. Note that Lewis garners his list of characteristics from a wider set of traits of new religious movements as presented by Robert S. Ellwood and Harry B. Partin, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 14–16.

<sup>11</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 95–96.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Partridge, "Understanding UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities," in *UFO Religion*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2003), 7–17.

<sup>13</sup> For additional details on the manner in which the Ascended Masters of the Theosophical tradition became identified with space aliens, see Partridge, "Understanding UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities," 9–10.

<sup>14</sup> There exist other extraterrestrial hermeneutics that are not biblical. Mikael Rothstein has published a useful survey of such approaches, Mikael Rothstein, "UFO Beliefs as Syncretistic Components," in *UFO Religion*, ed. Christopher Partridge, 256–73.

<sup>15</sup> Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 106–07.

<sup>16</sup> Partridge, "Understanding UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities," 21.

<sup>17</sup> Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods?* (New York: Putnam, 1968), 42–55.

<sup>18</sup> Pia Andersson, "Ancient Alien Brothers, Ancient Terrestrial Remains: Archeology or Religion?" in *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, ed. Diana Tumminia (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 264–74; Anne Cross, "A Confederacy of Fact and Fiction: Science and the Sacred in UFO Research," in *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, ed. Diana Tumminia (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 249–63.

<sup>19</sup> "Boisean Remembers Knowing Bonnie Lu, 'UFO Recruiter,'" *Idaho Statesman*, 2 November 1975, 12D. For more on Nettles' Christian upbringing, see Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, "Salvation in a UFO," *Psychology Today* 10, no. 5 (1976): 66, and James S. Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World," *New York Times*, 29 February 1976, 62.

<sup>20</sup> Biographical information on Nettles is scant. These details come from the secondary literature, especially that of Robert Balch. See Robert W. Balch, "Bo and Peep: A Case Study of the Origins of Messianic Leadership," in *Millennialism and Charisma*, ed. Roy Wallis (Belfast: The Queen's University, 1982), 28. For more on Nettles' involvement in the Theosophical Society in America, see Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 232, n. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Balch, "Bo and Peep," 34.

<sup>22</sup> Balch, "Bo and Peep," 30–32.

<sup>23</sup> At the time, Virginia's Union Theological Seminary (not to be confused with New York City's seminary of the same name) was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS), the southern branch of American

Presbyterian. In 1983, the PCUS merged with the United Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (UPCUSA) to form the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA), the largest national Presbyterian denomination.

<sup>24</sup> This biographical sketch is based on secondary materials, especially Balch, "Bo and Peep," 29. See also the sidebar "Bo and Peep" in Balch and Taylor, "Salvation in a UFO," 66. Readers interested in a more lengthy description and analysis of Nettles' and Applewhite's history should also see Robert W. Balch, "Waiting for the Ships: Disillusionment and the Revitalization of Faith in Bo and Peep's UFO Cult," in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 141–42, and Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World."

<sup>25</sup> "Bo and Peep Interview with Brad Steiger, 7 January 1976," in *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 82–83.

<sup>26</sup> Balch, "Bo and Peep," 35.

<sup>27</sup> See Balch, "Bo and Peep," 36–37. Some early sources indicate that Applewhite ran the Know Place and Nettles the Christian Arts Center, implying that they existed in parallel, but other sources show that they ran both operations in serial. Victoria Hodgetts, "UFO Cult Mystery Turns Evil," *Village Voice*, 1 December 1975, 12; Lynn Simross, "Invitation to an Unearthly Kingdom," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 October 1975, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ellipses in the original. Betty Penson, "During the Summer of 1974 UFO Couple Visited Boise Men," *Idaho Statesman*, 26 October 1975, 1–2. Applewhite and Nettles may certainly have reached their religious conclusions earlier. They told Phelan that they made "their first public announcement" to an Episcopal Church in Spokane, Washington, and subsequently to a Baptist preacher in Oklahoma. However, they provided no dates for those events. Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World," 63.

<sup>29</sup> Robert W. Balch, "'When the Light Goes out, Darkness Comes': A Study of Defection from a Totalistic Cult," in *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers*, ed. Rodney Stark (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1985), 23.

<sup>30</sup> The group used a variety of names during its history, including the UFO Cult, UFO People, Human Individual Metamorphosis, and Total Overcomers Anonymous. Similarly, the group's leaders used a variety of names during their tenure, notably Bo (Applewhite) and Peep (Nettles), and later Do (Applewhite) and Ti (Nettles). For ease of readership, I refer to the group as Heaven's Gate and its founders using their birth names or the religious title "the Two," which they employed throughout the group's history.

<sup>31</sup> Thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate ended their terrestrial existence in March 1997, at the community's rented mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, California. Two other members ended their lives in subsequent months, Wayne Cooke (1943–1997) and Chuck Humphrey (1943–1998).

<sup>32</sup> Athalya Brenner and Jan W. van Henten, eds., *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 1–7.

<sup>33</sup> Rosamond Rodman, "Heaven's Gate: Religious Otherworldliness American Style," in *The Bible and the American Myth: A Symposium on the Bible and Constructions*

*of Meaning*, ed. Vincent K. Wimbush (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1999), 157–73.

<sup>34</sup> I received a photocopy of the pertinent pages of this Bible from Robert W. Balch. I am extremely grateful to him for sharing the text with me, and for his general willingness to share his thoughts and knowledge of the movement with myself and others.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the scholarly treatment of Luke, see the summary included in Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 96–114.

<sup>36</sup> These terms are very common in Heaven’s Gate rhetoric. For the earliest use of “next evolutionary kingdom,” see Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #1: Human Individual Metamorphosis,” (1975) American Religions Collection, ARC Mss 1, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara. The two used the term “Next Level” later, and it predominates the material produced by Applewhite after Nettles’s passing. See Heaven’s Gate, “’88 Update,” in *How and When “Heaven’s Gate” (the Door to the Physical Kingdom Level above Human) May Be Entered*, edited by Heaven’s Gate (Mill Springs, N.C.: Wild Flower Press, 1997), sec. 3, 1–19.

<sup>37</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #1: Human Individual Metamorphosis.”

<sup>38</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #1: Human Individual Metamorphosis.”

<sup>39</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #1: Human Individual Metamorphosis.”

<sup>40</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #1: Human Individual Metamorphosis.”

<sup>41</sup> See “Bo and Peep Interview with Brad Steiger, 7 January 1976,” 81–83.

<sup>42</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #3: The Only Significant Resurrection,” (1975) American Religions Collection, ARC Mss 1, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara.

<sup>43</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #3: The Only Significant Resurrection.”

<sup>44</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #3: The Only Significant Resurrection.”

<sup>45</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #3: The Only Significant Resurrection.”

<sup>46</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #1: Human Individual Metamorphosis.”

<sup>47</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #2: Clarification: Human Kingdom—Visible and Invisible,” (1975) American Religions Collection, ARC Mss 1, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara; Human Individual Metamorphosis, “Statement #3: The Only Significant Resurrection.”

<sup>48</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, “What’s Up?,” (1975) American Religions Collection, ARC Mss 1, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara.

<sup>49</sup> For the earliest accounts of the Two's meetings, see "20 Missing in Oregon after Talking of a Higher Life.," Paul McGrath, "UFO 'Lost Sheep' Tell Cult Secrets," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 October 1975; Eve Muss, "No Disease Promised," *Oregon Journal*, 9 October 1975; George Williamson, "'It Was a Sham': Why One Convert Left the UFO Cult," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 October 1975. The *Oregon Journal* published an edited version of the transcript of the Waldport meeting, which also did not mention the demonstration, see Eve Muss, "'Grave Not Path to Heaven,' Disciples Told," *Oregon Journal*, 10 October 1975, n.p. (Photocopy of article available in American Religions Collection, ARC Mss 1, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara.) Nearly all the publications after 18 October 1975 mention the Two's belief in their impending demonstration, e.g. "Cults: Out of This World," *TIME*, 20 October 1975; James R. Gaines, "Cults: Bo-Peep's Flock," *Newsweek*, 20 October 1975; Austin Scott, "Music Teacher, Nurse Led Search for 'Higher Life,'" *Washington Post*, 18 October 1975; Simross, "Invitation to an Unearthly Kingdom." For the Two's discussion of the demonstration in their interviews, see Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 70; Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World," 58.

<sup>50</sup> See McGrath, "UFO 'Lost Sheep' Tell Cult Secrets," 26; Williamson, "'It Was a Sham': Why One Convert Left the UFO Cult," 2.

<sup>51</sup> Hewes and Steiger, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, 96. For the New Testament's treatment of the three days preceding the resurrection, see Matthew 27:57–28:7, Mark 15:40–16:8, Luke 23:50–24:5, and John 19:38–20:18.

<sup>52</sup> Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World," 58.

<sup>53</sup> This episode is retold in Hewes and Steiger, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, 18.

<sup>54</sup> As cited in Hewes and Steiger, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Human Individual Metamorphosis, "What's Up?"

<sup>56</sup> For the historical development of Dispensationalism, including an institutional and cultural history of its spread through nineteenth-century evangelicalism, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). For more on the twentieth-century, see A. G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

<sup>57</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 51.

<sup>58</sup> See C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 1349, n. 1 (commenting on Revelation 19:19); p. 1269, n. 1 (on 1 Thessalonians 4:17); and p. 1228, n. 1 (on 1 Corinthians 15:52).

<sup>59</sup> Descriptions of the first through fifth dispensations appear in "A Statement Prepared by the Two," appendix in *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger, 164–168. I cite the discussion of the sixth dispensation, "A Statement Prepared by the Two," 168.

<sup>60</sup> "A Statement Prepared by the Two," 169.

<sup>61</sup> "A Statement Prepared by the Two," 159.

<sup>62</sup> "A Statement Prepared by the Two," 159.

<sup>63</sup> I refer to chapter 11 of the text, "The Ultimate Trip." Hal Lindsay, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970). For comparison purposes, consider also the more recent dispensationalist fiction series *Left Behind*, the

first of which was published shortly before the Heaven's Gate suicides in 1997, which not only assumes the concept of the Rapture but also begins with a depiction of it. Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995).

<sup>64</sup> For a treatment of how Applewhite and Nettles might have encountered premillennial Dispensationalism, see Benjamin E. Zeller, "Scaling Heaven's Gate: Individualism and Salvation in a New Religious Movement," *Nova Religio* 10, no. 2 (2006), 81.

<sup>65</sup> "What Is Happening in the Heavens at this Time!" appendix in Hewes and Steiger, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, 169.

<sup>66</sup> Muss, "'Grave Not Path to Heaven,' Disciples Told," n. p., n.d.

<sup>67</sup> "Bo and Peep Interview with Brad Steiger, 7 January 1976," 129.

<sup>68</sup> In addition to the already cited statement in the Hewes and Steiger book, see the first statement's closing paragraph, "Those who can believe this process and do it will be 'lifted up' individually and 'saved' from death—literally." Human Individual Metamorphosis, "Statement #1: Human Individual Metamorphosis," 1.

<sup>69</sup> Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult," *American Behavioral Scientist* 20, no. 6 (1977): 839–60.

<sup>70</sup> Robert W. Balch, "The Evolution of a New Age Cult: From Total Overcomers Anonymous to Death at Heaven's Gate," in *Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis*, ed. William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 1–26.

<sup>71</sup> James R. Lewis, "Legitimizing Suicide: Heaven's Gate and New Age Ideology," in *UFO Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2003), 104–27.

<sup>72</sup> Christopher Partridge, "The Eschatology of Heaven's Gate," in *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context*, ed. Kenneth G. C. Newport and Crawford Gibbens (Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>73</sup> Zeller, "Scaling Heaven's Gate."

<sup>74</sup> Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 233.