

AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF ESCAPISM:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE RAPTURE IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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INTRODUCTION

The view that millions of believers will suddenly vanish to meet the Lord in the air, prior to a seven-year period of hell on earth, has emerged as the pervasive conceptual framework in American eschatology. Commonly referred to as “pretribulationism,” this view has become increasingly mainstream and no longer occupies the fringe territory of theology. One needs only to consider the overwhelming popularity of the *Left Behind* novel series to see the impact and influence of this view on American Christianity.¹ A mere glance at the titles for the series indicates that much of the material has been adapted from the book of Revelation. This is understandable considering how much space is devoted to eschatology in the book of Revelation.

Moreover, those who hold a pretribulationist view are typically characterized by a passion for eschatology and a solid emphasis on watchfulness. They are usually dedicated students of prophecy and are known for drafting carefully scored diagrams, detailing the sequence of end times events as they see it. No one could deny that American pretribulationist theology is in full bloom, but is it biblical? More specifically, is this particular end times narrative the perspicuous and clear teaching of the book of Revelation?

This study will seek to show that the book of Revelation does not teach a pretribulationist rapture event. In order to do this, we will first show that the church does not go missing in Revelation chapters 4-18, and that a rapture cannot be placed before the beginning of the Great Tribulation (with a specific assessment of John’s experience in chapter 4). Lastly, the study will argue for the best possible interpretation of the promise given to the Philadelphian church in Revelation 3:10, in light of established hermeneutical methodology.

¹ Amy J. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, (Oxford: UK, 2004), 3. Frykholm documents this by the sales and the ensuing product mill that has generated from this wildly popular novel series in America.

AN OVERVIEW OF PRETRIBULATIONISM

When offering a critical evaluation of a particular viewpoint, it is important to stipulate what *is* and what is *not* being critiqued. Nearly all who have a stake in the debate can agree on the *fact* of Christ's future coming and the believer's assurance of eternity with him in the new creation. Also, most would agree that a commitment to a specific chronology is an intramural debate.

This study will grant the general view of a future period of incommensurable distress known as the seven year Tribulation, and the premillennial view that Christ will return to inaugurate his earthly rule for a thousand years.² What is being critiqued is whether Revelation shows that Christ's second coming will be separated into two distinct events: one to *evacuate* the church from earth to heaven prior to the commencement of the tribulation, and the other to *escort* the church from heaven to earth at the end of a tribulation. Norm Geisler sums this view up when he states, "Christ's coming *for* His saints will be *in the air* and before the Tribulation; after the Tribulation, Christ will come *with* his saints and to earth to reign for a thousand years."³

ESTABLISHING A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

It must be noted that the popularity of pretribulationism cannot be cited as evidence for it, and its abuses cannot be held against it. Instead, the theory must stand on its own exegetical two feet.⁴ This study will proceed under the generally held view that scripture *means* what it *meant*.⁵

² The concession for both tribulationism and pre-millennialism will be made in this paper in order to examine pretribulationism within its own framework.

³ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany Publishing House, 2005). 612

⁴ *Ibid.*, 413-457. Geisler presents an airtight defense of the literal/grammatical/historical method of interpretation and faithfully applies it to establish both a premillennial and a tribulationist viewpoint, but fails to consistently apply his principles regarding pretribulationism.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 47.

The craft of biblical interpretation, also known as hermeneutics, can establish with relative certainty the intended meaning of the author without appealing to the predilections, views, or mood of the interpreter. It is the goal of the interpreter to simply establish an adequate overlap point between what the author likely meant and what his audience likely heard (or read).

Unfortunately, most popular interpreters of eschatology fail here because they approach the text as they would *like it*, and not as we *have it*. Handling the text as it is means that we begin with a commitment to the methodological constraints of exegesis. Exegesis is the discipline of extracting the authors' original and singular⁶ intention from any given passage without subordinating that text to the worldview baggage of the modern reader.⁷ The process of exegesis necessarily involves conducting a structural, historical, contextual, semantical and grammatical analysis of a given text. Therefore, it is imperative that the interpreter engages the text with the conviction that scripture should not be *made* to teach what it never *meant* to teach.

Literal Vs. Allegorical Interpretation

When approaching the subject of eschatology, it is critical that we adopt the literal/grammatical/historical method of interpretation instead of the allegorical method, which is an attempt to spiritualize the meaning of the text.⁸ The Bible is not a book of metaphors and miracles with a story to tell. Instead, it is largely a historical narrative that contains metaphors

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Back Toward the Future*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 130-136. Kaiser, offers an extended section discrediting the allegorical method of allowing for a dual interpretation. He maintains that the NT writers did not appeal to midrash, peshet, or allegory, but rather they occupy a preferred status among interpreters. They were given an inspired perspective regarding the dual sense of OT passages. This method of interpretation is an apostolic prerogative that does not continue in perpetuity for later generations.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 31.

⁸ Norm Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 415. Geisler provides an excellent summary of the difference between the two schools of interpretation, and outlines the adverse implications of a commitment to allegory. This is not to say that the text cannot be used illustratively, but Geisler argues specifically against the allegorical method to establish the interpretation of a given text, regardless of the genre in which it is found.

and miracles.⁹ In order for the scriptures to mean anything they must be taken in their normal historical sense, and any alleged meaning must comport to the parameters of grammar and syntax.

However, we must be careful to distinguish between “literal” and “literalistic.” The literal approach allows that various figures of speech may well point to literal realities.¹⁰ The imagery of the New Testament offers invaluable points of comparison between our experience and the unknown. Jesus, for instance, used metaphors of scattering seed on various types of soil, hidden treasure in a field, or mustard seeds that become large trees, in order to communicate aspects of his very real Kingdom.

Thus, the language of analogy provides a critical nexus between our normal everyday experiences, and biblical truth that we see “in a mirror dimly.” Practicing the literal method means that we take plain and factual statements at face value and we do not try to squish them into a spiritualized or allegorical matrix. On the other hand, it means that we allow similitudes to lead us to their larger point instead of pressing them for literalistic detail.¹¹

Indeed, one cannot even determine genre or the nature of various rhetorical devices (including apocalypse) without a historical and literal reference point.¹² For example, knowing that churches aren’t really lamp stands can only be possible if one knows what a church literally is, and that a lamp stand can be *like* a church. In such a case, the symbol leads us to a literal referent, and the referent leads to a definite message that can be ascertained by the mind.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 81.

¹⁰ G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, (London, UK: Duckworth Publishers, 1980), 204-206. A common error among interpreters is to take biblical metaphors as merely ornamental language with illustrative properties without substantive referents. Caird states that “literal” and “metaphorical” describe types of language forms, and make no assertion of the truth or untruth of the referent to which they point.

¹¹ Gordon Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*. 232-242.

¹² Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 414-421.

Having briefly poured a critical hermeneutical foundation, the next step is to offer an analysis of the specific arguments from Revelation used to promote pretribulationism.

THE PRETRIBULATIONAL PREMISE: THE CHURCH GOES MISSING IN REVELATION

The word *church* (Gk. *ekklesia*) does not appear between Revelation chapters 6 – 18. Proponents of pretribulationism believe this strongly suggests that the church is not present on earth since those chapters describe the period known as the Great Tribulation (7:14). Norm Geisler states, “Nowhere during the entire Tribulation period (ch’s 6-18) is there a word about the church being on earth.”¹³ Herman Hoyt echoes this view when he writes, “The Seventieth week excludes any reference to the church, so far as earthly events are concerned.”¹⁴ Likewise Tim Lahaye remarks, “The Pre-Trib view explains why the church is not mentioned between chapters 4:13 and Revelation 18.”¹⁵ But does the mysterious absence of the *word* church imply a pretribulational rapture? This circumstantial case does not hold up once all of the relevant data is considered.

Synergy

First, the inferential case made by pretribulationists fails to take into account a *synergistic* view of all the related end-times events where the word *church* is missing. The proponents of the view fail to mention that the word *church* does not describe the believers in Heaven with Christ (19:8), the first resurrection and the Millennium (20:1-6), the New Creation and the New Jerusalem (21), and the believers participation in the River and Tree of Life (22:1-6). By their

¹³ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 612.

¹⁴ Herman Hoyt, *The End Times*, (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986), 137.

¹⁵ Tim Lahaye, *The Rapture*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2002), 138. John Walvoord holds the same view and is often quoted by Lahaye.

reasoning, the church will not participate in any of these events because the word *church* isn't reintroduced until Revelation 22:16.

Geisler mentions the 22:16 passage as if it were evidence that the church is back!¹⁶ However, contrary to his view, the passage actually states, "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony *for the churches*." This is a clear reference to the seven churches to whom the book was already addressed. Also, this occurrence of the word church is in the epilogue of the book, *after* the prophecy has closed.¹⁷ The circumstantial case based on the "missing church" during the tribulation (Ch's 6-17) collapses once this hermeneutical convention is fairly applied to all final consummation texts.

Additionally, the word *church* is not used in other New Testament contexts, which suggest or explicitly state a rapture event (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-57; Tit. 2:11-14).¹⁸ In other words, proponents of the view simply ignore the absence of the word *ekklesia* in eschatological passages where the church, known by other names (the bride, the faithful, his people, those found in the book of life, a kingdom, priests, and the saints) will participate. It is a misconception that the word church only goes missing in Ch's 4-18. The word is missing altogether from all other final consummation events (Ch's 18-22).

Saints

Secondly, in addition to ignoring a synergistic view of scripture, a pretribulational framework ignores the usage of the Greek term *hagioi* translated "saints," to refer to both earthly

¹⁶ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 612.

¹⁷ Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* in *The New International Commentary on The New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, rev. ed. 1997), 402. Mounce notes the many similarities between the prologues and epilogue. That Jesus was referring back to the seven churches in v. 16 seems inescapable.

¹⁸ Douglas Moo, "The Case For The Posttribulational Position," in *Three Views On The Rapture*, ed Stanley Gundry. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 136. Moo asserts that the absence of the term *εκκλησια* in these critical end-times passages is proof that the argument from silence is invalidated on that basis.

and heavenly believers (Rev. 5:8; 8:3,4; 11:18; 13:7-10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20-24; 19:8).

Geisler states, “There is a reference to the church during the Tribulation – in heaven.”¹⁹ He goes on to assert that this raptured church in heaven is called the “bride.”²⁰ However, the passage he is referring to (19:8) states that the bride will be clothed in fine linen, *which stands for the “righteous acts of the saints.”*

Moreover, the view fails to recognize that in addition to the term *church*, *saints* is used nearly 35 times in Acts and the Epistles to refer specifically to New Testament believers. The frequency and interchangeability of these terms in Paul’s letters is striking.²¹ This constitutes a normative usage of the word among the very churches Revelation was addressed to. As well, Paul personally planted at least one of the churches mentioned in Revelation 2 – 3. In his letter to them, Paul refers to the Ephesian Christians as “the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1).²²

It is hardly conceivable that the original recipients of this Revelation would not have interpreted the synonym *saints* to also refer to the *church*.²³ If it was John’s intention to pour new meaning into the word *saint*, then why is there no attempt to recast the expression given its

¹⁹ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 613.

²⁰ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 613. However this is first use of the term Bride. The overwhelming synonym for *ekklesia* is the word *hagioi*, or “saints” in the New Testament.

²¹ Paul writing to the Corinthians states, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. *To the church* of God in Corinth, together with *all the saints* throughout Achaia [emphasis mine].” (2 Cor. 1:1). Pretribulationists notoriously downplay the staggering amount of references where these terms are used interchangeably.

²² Cross referencing Paul’s use of the term “faithful” with John’s use in referring to both the church in chapters 1-3, and the saints in the tribulation – there seems to be little question that the Ephesian Christians would have interpreted this to refer to all believers. Also, Laodicea was in the region of Ephesus, and Paul instructed the Colossians to swap their letter with the one he sent to the Laodiceans, likely the Ephesian letter.

²³ Even so, it should be noted that the term *αγιοι* is broader than *εκκλησια*. Though the term “saints” can mean *more* than “church” (including OT saints), it certainly doesn’t mean *less*.

well-circulated meaning? One can imagine how this would seem impossibly confusing to a first century believer who had already received a letter from Paul calling them saints. Walvoord contends that the tribulation saints are a distinct group of people, and believes that *the entire case for pretribulationism hangs on this assertion*. He states, “Obviously if the word *church* includes saints of all ages and saints are mentioned in the tribulation time, it is futile to debate the questions of pretribulationism.”²⁴

To further demonstrate the impossibility of differentiating between tribulation saints and rapture saints, Geisler’s own definition of pretribulationism (previously cited) refers to the raptured believers as *saints* and not *church*. This is worthy of a second quote. Geisler states clearly, “Christ’s coming for His *saints* will be in the air and before the Tribulation; after the Tribulation, Christ will come with his *saints* and to earth to reign for a thousand years.”²⁵ This apparent gaffe illustrates how difficult it is even for pretribulationists themselves to segregate these two terms.

Geisler argues that the *saints* in the tribulation are converts of the sealed 144,000 Jews.²⁶ However this is an assumption that is brought to the texts he cites (7:1-14; 14:1-4). Chapters seven and fourteen make no assertion whatsoever that the tribulation saints are the converts of these alleged Jewish “evangelists.”²⁷

²⁴ John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959), 252.

²⁵ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Four*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany Publishing House, 2005), 612.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 614-615.

²⁷ Gundry, *The Church And The Tribulation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 81. Gundry states that there is no reason to see a causal relationship between the vision of the multitudes that follow the 144,000. In fact, it is the “angel” who is said to be flying around spreading the eternal gospel, not the sealed remnant. A more natural view of these passages is that the questions raised in seals five and six (6:9-17) are anticipatory to the ensuing visions. “How long Sovereign Lord?” is followed by the answer “a little longer,” and “judgment is certain.” When judgment comes, those who are judged cry out “who can stand?” and the answer is given: “those whom God has

Pre-tribulationism requires that a special meaning be poured into the word *saint* in chapters 5-18. However, the redefinition is not forthcoming. There is simply no warrant for the view that some are the “left behind” saints, and others are the “tribulation saints.” The believers mentioned in heaven are assumed to be the raptured church, yet the very passage that is in question calls them “saints,” which warrants the interpretation that these are dead or martyred saints.²⁸

Symbolism

Third, in addition to ignoring the *synergy* of scripture and the identity of the *saints*, the view also ignores the general change to *symbolic* language between the epistolary portion of the book (ch’s 1-3), and the apocalyptic portion. Fee states, “...the Revelation is a unique, finely blended combination of three distinct literary types: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter.”²⁹ There is little doubt that the symbolic nature of the Revelation becomes heightened after chapter four. Pretribulationist arguments proceed as if there is no difference whatsoever between the prologue, the letters to the churches, and the highly charged symbolic nature of apocalypse.³⁰

According to the pretribulationist approach, one could argue that Jesus is not in heaven because the word *Jesus* is absent in the heavenly scenes depicting the saints and the elders worshipping him. Instead it opts for the term *lamb*. Or one could also argue that the Anti-Christ is not on earth because the word “anti-christ” is not used in these chapters, instead it used the

sealed and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. See also Gordon Fee, *How To Read The Bible for All its Worth*, 241.

²⁸ N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2008), 165-174. Wright offers a glimpse into the typical medieval view of various kinds of saints and the unbiblical practice of developing hierarchies of saints. Pretribulationism seems to go a similar route in distinguishing between “tribulation” saints and the “rapture saints” who have preferred status with God.

²⁹ Gordon Fee, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, 232.

³⁰ Robert Gundry, *The Church And The Tribulation*, 79.

word *beast* or *false prophet*. Again, the word *rapture* or *catching away* is never mentioned in Revelation and the coming of Jesus is not referred to as the *parousia*.

Based on this switch from letter to overt apocalypse, one could easily argue that the church is strongly inferred in the Tribulation in Revelation 11:4. One of the Two Witnesses is referred to as the *lamp stand*.³¹ This image has already been explicitly identified as the church in chapters 1-3. Since the revelator offers no competing explanation of this symbol, it is natural to view the *lamp stand* present in 11:4 as a further disclosure of an already established motif.³²

The apocalyptic section of Revelation simply uses different terminology to voice apocalyptic and prophetic phenomena. It is therefore in keeping with this general shift in language that the *ekklesia* is replaced with *saint*, *his people*, and *the faithful* (et. al.), most of which are natural corollaries to the word *church* in the New Testament.

Conclusion: The apparent eviction of New Testament believers by pretribulationism from chapters 6-18 ignores scriptural *synergy*, the normative use of *saints*, and the general shift in language to heightened *symbolism*. If the church does not go missing in Revelation then we do not have even the possibility of a pretribulation rapture. No New Testament book devotes more real estate to the subject of eschatology and no book is more silent about a vanishing church during the tribulation, which is a fundamental lacuna for the view.

³¹ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing), 56. Beale notes that the prologue has already told us that the reader should anticipate symbols and signs (Rev. 1:1), and that σημαίω means to foretell or signify. Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 50. The other witness referred to in this passage is the “olive tree” which is most often a symbol of Israel.

³² Ibid., 56.

THE PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE IS MISSING IN REVELATION

Attempting to locate a definite pretribulational rapture in the book of Revelation is an exegetical Everest for those who have attempted to undertake it. Most reputable exegetes downplay their belief that John's visionary account (ch.4) is a "representative" encounter for the church, and make statements such as, "by itself, it could not establish the pretribulational rapture."³³

Most theologians are cautious regarding this and refuse to press the issue here. Though their view requires the church to be absent during the entire Tribulation (after chapter four), transforming John's visionary experience into a type of a future rapture of the church is problematic and precarious. If the interpreter capitulates to the temptation to press John's experience in this manner, he quickly finds himself un-enrolling from the literal/grammatical/historical school of interpretation and adopting an allegorical method. The hallmark of the allegorical method is pressing imagery for multiple points of comparison.³⁴ Forcing John's experience to be a type of a future rapture violates the historical and face-value claim of the experience.³⁵

Walvoord emphasizes the importance of avoiding the allegorical method regarding chapters 5-19. He states, "Approximately fifteen chapters of this book are used to describe this time of trouble... Only by following an allegorical or spiritualized interpretation of these

³³ Tim LaHaye, *The Rapture*, 84. Norm Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 612.

³⁴ C. K. Barrett, ed. *The New Testament Background: Writings from the Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*. Rev. ed. (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 320-349. Ancient apocalyptic writings were known for their cryptic and symbolic depiction of historical events. However, the call account of the earthly recipient rarely if ever symbolized anything at all.

³⁵ Gleason Archer, The Case For The Mid-Seventieth Week Position, in *Three Views On The Rapture*, Stanley Gundry ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 142. Since allegory requires multiple parallels, it is compelling that key points of comparison are absent.

tremendous events predicted can these great prophetic scriptures be robbed of their intended meaning.”³⁶

Therefore, if it is true that one is in danger of defrauding the most symbolic imagery of Revelation (Ch’s 5-19) through allegorical fancy, then how much more so for the straightforward claim that John was abruptly caught up in order to see and record these catastrophic events.

Walvoord agrees. Speaking of John’s vision he states, “There is no authority for connecting the rapture with this expression.”³⁷

Furthermore, even if one engages in wringing allegorical parallels out of John’s vision in Ch. 4, it is curious that John asserts that he was not translated *bodily*, rather he was “in the spirit” (4:2). Using (but not overusing) the analogy of scripture, Paul stated that he did not know if he was *in the body or in the spirit* when he was caught up (2 Cor. 12:2). Since the rapture is to be a bodily catching away, then it is curious that John’s experience was a spiritual one instead of a bodily one.³⁸ The absence of this critical parallel is very curious, and presents a significant challenge to the view.

The exegetical “elephant in the room” of course is why there is no rapture in Revelation, particularly before the tribulation begins. Again, the sheer “square footage” in Revelation devoted to spelling out the last-days events is breathtaking. It seems inconceivable that the book would not also offer so much as a cryptic passage describing such an important and encouraging event.

³⁶ Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 262.

³⁷ John F. Walvoord, “New Testament Words for the Lord’s Coming,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 101 (July-September 1944): 283-289.

³⁸ The NASB translates the phrase as does the NIV “in the Spirit” but also provides a footnote that it may also be rendered “in spirit.” The anarthorous use of the substantive can at times be translated with the article. *εν πνευματι* could refer to either John “in spirit” or “in the Spirit.” The KJV renders it without the article.

Douglas Moo states:

With the concentration on the events of the end found in Revelation, we would expect that here, if anywhere, we could find clear evidence for the relationship of the tribulation to the Rapture. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Many would argue, in fact, that the Rapture is never even mentioned in Revelation; all would agree that it is not described in direct temporal association with the Tribulation.³⁹

With all its symbolism, Revelation clearly spells out the successive plagues of tribulation, the rise and reign of the beast(s), the final judgment of mankind's cosmic antagonist – Satan, the conscious awareness of the deceased, the ultimate demise of the rebellious, and the glorious reversal of the fortunes of God's people (et. al.). Yet for all that is revealed, there is not a whiff of explanation about what presumably is the most important event in the churches near future.⁴⁰ Attempts to transpose a rapture to Revelation have proven heuristically unfruitful, and this seems not to bode well for the view.

THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA IS NOT AN ALLEGORY

Referring to the Philadelphian church in Revelation 3:10, Norm Geisler asserts, "God promised to keep the church from the 'hour of trial' (the Tribulation)."⁴¹ Likewise Lahaye remarks, "It must transcend the one little church of Asia, to which He wrote, for the church at Philadelphia has long been extinct, and the hour 'which shall come upon the world' has not yet come."⁴² This is the universal assertion of all pretribulational advocates. However, this approach to Revelation 3:10 represents an egregious and fundamental error in hermeneutics.

³⁹ Douglas Moo, *Three Views on the Rapture*, 196.

⁴⁰ Gundry, *The Church And The Tribulation*, 84.

⁴¹ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 615.

⁴² Lahaye, *The Rapture*, 49. This of course is begging the question. The issue in question is whether or not Philadelphia will be preserved from the influence and power of the hour, or whether they will escape it altogether.

Most of these commentators jump immediately to an application of escape theology, with little and in some cases *no consideration* whatsoever for the original recipients of the message. To them the original recipients are literary props in the distant past and only the preterists care about the past. Our job, in their view, is to talk about the future.

First the Past, Then the Future

Instead of framing the discussion as *past or future*, a far better hermeneutic is seeking to understand the *future through the past*. Walter Kaiser Jr. remarks, “But if the future bears certain analogies to the historic past and if God’s method of operation has a consistency and pattern to it, borrowing the past in order to help us conceptualize the future is a most logical way of proceeding.”⁴³

The interpreters goal when approaching the church in Philadelphia is not to vacuously allegorize them as a “type” of a future perfected church. Instead, our aim is to understand what the message *meant* to them so that we can understand what it *means* for us. The tendency of pretribulationists advocates to glance over the actual church and the intended meaning for them is unfortunate.

Whose Word?

Fee states, “As with all other genres, God’s Word to us is to be found first of all in His Word to them. But in contrast to other genres, the Prophets and the Revelation often speak about things that for them that were yet to be.”⁴⁴ What was a current and fresh reality for the Asian churches was extreme persecution by the pagan world. They faced constant pressure to annul

⁴³ Kaiser, *Back Toward the Future*, 51.

⁴⁴ Fee, *How to Read the Bible*, 242.

their ties with the fledgling Christian community. Philadelphia in particular was an epicenter of pagan worship and “housed temples to Artemis, Helios, Zeus, Dionysus, and Aphrodite.”⁴⁵

Additionally, the text makes it clear that the Philadelphian church was likely expelled from the synagogue by the Jews (3:9). The significance of this for the Philadelphian situation can hardly be overstated. Jews were among the only sect in Rome who enjoyed a state issued exemption from emperor worship. Worshiping Domitian’s image in his temple was required of each pagan citizen.⁴⁶ Failure to worship the emperor was considered treasonous behavior. Rome typically responded to any subversive religious movement with the iron hand of suppression.⁴⁷ Having been expelled from participation as a sub culture within the generally protected synagogue, the Philadelphian Christians would become open to the most extreme tribulation and persecution.

This is evidenced by a letter from Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan, and Trajan’s letter in response (113 AD).⁴⁸ Trajan instructed Pliny that the only way for Christians to avoid being put to death for their faith was for them to publicly abandon their belief and pledge their allegiance to the Caesar cult. The ensuing slaughter of the Philadelphian church (and many others) is a matter of history.⁴⁹

The Asian churches were already living in times of extreme persecution. They were oppressed under the iron fist of a worldwide ruler and were despised and looked upon with

⁴⁵ Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 773.

⁴⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Apostolic Church*, (New York, NY: Scribner), 1859. 400-437.

⁴⁷ Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 762. Also see comments regarding this in G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*. 9.

⁴⁸ *Pliny the Younger*, Epistles 10.96-97.

⁴⁹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 7.

contempt by their pagan neighbors. Jesus' message to the seven churches of Asia is to "overcome" through covenantal faithfulness (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7). Fee notes:

The fifth seal (6:9-11), which follows the devastation wrought by the four horsemen, reveals Christian martyrs, who have been slain because of the "word" and the "testimony" (exactly why John is in exile 1:9). In 7:14 the great multitude, who will never again suffer (7:16), has 'come out of the Great Tribulation.' Suffering and death are again linked to bearing the 'testimony of Jesus' in 12:11 and 17. And in chapter 13-20 the suffering and death are specifically attributed to the "beast" (13:7; 14:9-13; 16:5-6; 18:20, 24; 19:2)⁵⁰

Thus, the suffering, exile, persecution, death, tribulation and triumph of the believer are common motifs in Revelation *from cover to cover*. The book is written by an apostle who is suffering for his faith and written to churches who are suffering for their faith. It promises ultimate vindication for those who have remained faithful in spite of the fanatical oppression of their pagan and Jewish peers. This often-ignored context provides the historical landscape for the promise of chapter 3:10.

All Things Considered

It is clear that the Greek phrase, *τηρησω εκ της ωρας* (*tereso ek tes horas*)⁵¹(3:10) may mean to be removed from, or to be preserved from the influence.⁵² *tereso* may mean to "keep" or to "protect, preserve or watch over."⁵³ The word *ek* may mean "from" or "from out of the

⁵⁰ Fee, *How to Read the Bible*, 239.

⁵¹ Barbara Aland and Kurt Aland, *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev.ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 838.

⁵² James Moffatt, *The Expositors Greek Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 367-368.

⁵³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Rev. by Fredrick W. Danker, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 814-815.

midst.”⁵⁴ Likewise, the word *hora* is a metaphor that may refer to a final judgment (see other usages in Revelation) or a “period” of tribulation.⁵⁵

Commentators who choose a side in the debate tend to gravitate towards the definitions and the corresponding passages that affirm their interpretation and ignore or gloss over passages that would challenge their viewpoint. Norm Geisler cites Acts 15:29 as evidence that *ek* means “to stay away” from offensive practices.⁵⁶ Paul Feinberg quotes James 5:20 which states, “save the sinners soul from death.” The construction of *ek* here does not mean save from out of the midst, rather it means to save from entirely.⁵⁷

In contrast, Douglas Moo and Robert Gundry cite John 17:15 which uses the exact construction as it appears in the Revelation 3:10 passage.⁵⁸ *Tereso ek*, (keep from) is only found in these two passages. Moo, and Gundry argue that the context of John 17 is Jesus praying that the disciples would not be *taken out of* the world, but instead would be *kept from* the evil one in the world. Moo states, “believers are physically in the sphere of that which they are protected from.”⁵⁹ Clearly, they say, this means that we are not to circumvent the Great Tribulation either.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 234-236. There is little doubt from *BAGD* that the primary force for *ek* is from out of midst, though other secondary definitions may be possible.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 896. As used in Hom +, insc., pap., LXX, Philo, Joseph et. al. John 12:27 Jesus prays to be delivered from the “hour” that is before him. Not to be removed from it, but to be protected from the innate horrors of the event.

⁵⁶ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 615.

⁵⁷ Paul Feinberg, “The Case for the Pretribulational Rapture View,” *Three Views*, 66.

⁵⁸ Moo, *Three Views*, 197-198. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 67. Though Geisler and others have tried creative solutions to these passages, typically “creative” exegesis is only required when ones case is weak and needs massaging. It is more natural and unforced to simply allow for the fact that the word can be used in other contexts differently.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 198.

Both sides use *BAGD* and *LSJ*⁶⁰ and appeal to primary sources that demonstrate their respective cases. However many objective commentators agree that both are possible.⁶¹

It is also equally possible to express each side with much stronger language in the Greek. The writer could have used the preposition *apo* instead of *ek*, which would have settled the debate in Geisler's favor. John also could have used the word *dia*, which more overtly means "through." The possibility of both interpretations demonstrates that the *text itself cannot be the final arbiter of the issue*. Since both are valid interpretational possibilities we must look to what actually followed Christ's word to them in chapter 3:10. All that is left to settle this stale mate of citations is the immediate, cultural, and literary context of Revelation itself.

Since there is some degree of ambiguity in the 3:10 passage, several key facts help lead us to illumination on the issue. As previously mentioned, what is clear is that the church does not go missing in Revelation (6-18) and that there is no explicit or cryptic passage articulating a pretribulational rapture event. It is also clear that the Philadelphian church was entering a time of intense persecution because of their expulsion from the protected synagogue (which was a world wide phenomenon at the time). Lastly, it is unmistakable that Jesus did not physically remove the Philadelphian Christians from their immediate ensuing tribulation. Instead, the church existed beyond their immediate persecution.

CONCLUSION: HERE COMES THE PAST AGAIN

It seems that the normal and unforced interpretation of the Revelation 3:10 passage is that a future application of it will look something (though not necessarily identical) to its past occurrence. Norm Geisler makes an implicit admission to this method when he cites Antiochus

⁶⁰ Bauer, Arndt, Gringrich Danker; and Liddell, Scott and Jones.

⁶¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 103.

Epiphanes as a type or a forerunner to the Anti-Christ.⁶² On what would he base this assumption if he does not intuitively look to the past as an inference to the future? In order to arrive at an understanding of some of scripture's future predictions we must acknowledge both the temporal and the terminal aspects of them. Fee notes, "Our difficulties lie with that other phenomenon of prophecy, namely that the 'temporal' world is often so closely tied to the final eschatological realities...many pictures of 'temporal' judgment are interlaced with words or ideas that also imply the final end as a part of the picture. There seems to be no denying the reality of this."⁶³

It is clear that the church does not go missing in Revelation and there is no rapture prior to the tribulation in Revelation. However, one would expect shortly after Jesus telling the Philadelphian Christians they would fly away prior to the Tribulation, that there would be a clear or at least cryptic passage that delineated this event. This of course would be followed by an unambiguous exit of the church from the earth. This scenario is not forthcoming.

Moreover, the very passages that speak explicitly (1 Thess. 4:14-16) or implicitly (1 Cor. 15:21-57; 2 Thess. 2:1-2) of a catching away of the saints, like Revelation, are totally silent about a pretribulational sequence. 1 Thess. 4 makes no mention whatsoever of a tribulation following the rapture. 1 Cor. 15 and Phil. 3:20-21 don't refer to our translation as an upward rapture but rather a sudden and abrupt transformation. 2 Thess. 2:1-2 explicitly states that the coming of the Lord and our being gathered to him is the same event and is the grammatical antecedent to the "Day of the Lord," or "that Day."⁶⁴ It seems clear that a pre-tribulational

⁶² Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 646. Although he states, he doesn't quite fit the bill. This means he is a forerunner and not the fulfillment.

⁶³ Fee, *How to Read the Bible*. 243.

⁶⁴ F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 45, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 163. Bruce finds it difficult to believe that any commentator would attempt to separate the Day of the Lord and make it a different event than v. 1.

sequence must be imported to Revelation, not from the epistles or the gospels, but from the mind of the pretribulationist exegete.

The case for a pretribulationist event in Revelation rests on a patchwork of inferential ideas, none of which can withstand the scrutiny of rigorous hermeneutics. As it turns out, the pretribulationist's only hope is to interpret the Philadelphia church in a vacuum, excising it from its cultural, literary and immediate context. The result is a church that is devoid of its own historical personality and serves as nothing more than a historical prop allowing modern believers to extrapolate an ecclesiology of escapism.

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