

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture

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Mention the word *rapture* these days and you will most likely get one of two responses. Some will have no clue what you are talking about. The word is a religious, theological term, and it is unfamiliar because, in an era of increasing secularism, theological knowledge and its technical vocabulary have greatly diminished in public discourse. Even the nontechnical sense of the word *rapture*, meaning something like an ecstatic joy, a meaning that derives from the technical, theological use, has all but disappeared from common usage.

On the other hand, for many the word *rapture* is a key term whose very mention brings to mind a whole set of eschatological notions, ideas, terms, and images that have to do with the rescue of God's people from troubling times coming upon the earth. A person may not know much of the technical theological vocabulary for this eschatology. But if they are familiar with these ideas at all, they most likely do know the word *rapture*, and many of those who do know it will also know the word "tribulation," which speaks of the troubling times that form the context of the Lord's coming. In fact, in popular evangelical discourse, the ideas of rapture and tribulation are so closely associated that they are like two sides of a coin—the one always goes with the other.

The position being argued in this essay—that of pretribulationism—is a particular way of understanding the relationship of the rapture to the tribulation, a way that is quite popular in contemporary evangelical thought. Pretribulationism is the view that the rapture, the "catching up" of resurrected and translated believers to meet the coming Christ in the air and be with him forever, precedes the tribulation, the time of trouble and judgment. At the climax of the tribulation, Christ will visibly descend to the earth with his saints to begin his millennial reign. In this view, the rapture is *pretribulation* because it takes place *before* the *tribulation*.

Most likely, people did not think much about the relationship of the rapture to the tribulation prior to the popularization of pretribulationism. The reason for this is that through much of the history of Christian thought, the second coming of Christ has been treated as if it is a singular event. At the appointed time, Christ will suddenly descend to earth in visible form. After that the final judgment will take place and then the commencement of eternal destinies. In fact, through much of the history of the church, these eschatological events of the second coming tended to be thought of as the transition

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

between time and eternity, a transition that would take place suddenly and definitely as time came to an end.

This simple view of eschatology was challenged by modern premillennialism, which proposed a more complex understanding of end-time events. Premillennialism predicted a one-thousand-year reign of Christ on earth between the second coming and the eternal state. Such a reign divided both the eschatological judgment and the resurrection of the dead into phases separated in time. Furthermore, modern premillennialism brought a renewed interest in the “tribulational” conditions of the second coming. Whereas medieval theology had equated the tribulation either with the early history or the long, ongoing history of the church, modern premillennialism became a forum for the consideration and testing of a futurist view of the tribulation, seeing it as a future time of trouble that would lead to and be the context for the second coming of Christ.

Working out the interpretation of biblical eschatology into a temporal sequence involving a future tribulation and a future millennium has consistently been affirmed by premillennialists as proper to a historical, grammatical, literary reading of the biblical text. But it raises a number of problems that were glossed over by earlier medieval hermeneutics. In the working out of these problems, aiming at a consistent interpretation, some premillennialists in the early nineteenth century proposed the interpretation of the pretribulational rapture.

In what follows, I will present what I believe to be the argument for pretribulationism. This argument is an interpretation of the relationship of the rapture to the day of the Lord as presented by the apostle Paul in his letters to the Thessalonians, understood in the greater canonical context of the teaching of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. Before concluding, we will also consider implications from the book of Revelation and the way in which pretribulationism harmonizes some aspects of premillennialism. At the end, I will comment on the relationship of pretribulationism to dispensational thought.

## THE RAPTURE AND THE DAY OF THE LORD

We begin with the text that most clearly designates the rapture, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. In the first chapter of this letter, Paul describes the Thessalonian Christians as waiting for the Lord to come from heaven and deliver them from the wrath to come (1:10). Apprehension had apparently arisen concerning believers who die before his coming. They will not be lost, Paul assures his readers; when the Lord comes, he will raise them from the dead. How that will happen is described in 4:16: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

After resurrecting the dead in Christ, the Lord will then “snatch up” living believers together with them to meet him “on the clouds,” and “in the air.” After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (4:17). The Greek verb *harpagēsometha*, translated “caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, is more vividly rendered “snatched up” (NET note), correctly indicating a sudden, forceful removal of the whole lot of resurrected and living believers up to the presence of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> This is the same verb that is used in Acts 8:39 to describe how the Spirit of the Lord “snatched away” (NET; Gk., *hērpasen*) Philip after the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.<sup>2</sup> In the Vulgate, *harpagēsometha* is translated *rapiemur*, from *rapio*, and it is from that word that the English word *rapture* is derived. Accordingly, 1 Thessalonians 4:17 would be correctly rendered “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be *raptured* together with them.”

The immediate purpose of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is to meet the Lord in the air. The phrase “to meet the Lord,” *eis apantēsin tou kyriou*, as many have pointed out, was used of a welcoming delegation coming out of a city to receive and accompany an arriving dignitary.<sup>3</sup> The assembling of the saints around the coming Lord surely carries this connotation, but with certain differences. First, it is not actually a delegation that meets him but the whole company of saints, those previously dead now resurrected and those alive at his coming. Second, they do not “go out” to meet him at their own discretion, but they are “snatched up” by the Lord, who has descended apparently for this very purpose of rapturing them. Third, the text says nothing about their accompanying him on the completion of his descent; rather, Paul concludes his description of the event with the assembly in heaven, encouraged by the fact that “we will always be with the Lord” (NET).<sup>4</sup> In other words, while the notions of greeting and

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<sup>1</sup> BAGD, s.v. *harpazō*: “snatch, seize, i.e., take suddenly and vehemently, or take away ... (2b) in such a way that no resistance is offered” (109).

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<sup>2</sup> Other uses of *harpazō* to describe being caught up into heaven can be found in 2 Cor. 12:2, 4, and Rev. 12:5.

<sup>3</sup> Many have argued this point. For a recent discussion of the metaphor, see Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 226–28.

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<sup>4</sup> Wanamaker believes that a return to the earth is not in the teaching of this text. “Apart from the possible connotation that *apantēsin* might have for a return to earth, the rest of the imagery (the clouds and being caught up to the Lord) are indicative of an assumption to heaven of the people who belong to Christ. That Paul adds his own definitive statement concerning the significance of this meeting in the clause *kai houtōs pantote sun kuriō esometha* (‘and thus we will always be with the Lord’) suggests that both dead and living Christians will return to heaven with the Lord, not only to enjoy continuous fellowship with him, but also, in terms of 1:10, to be saved from the coming wrath of God” (Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to*

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

accompanying an arriving dignitary are not absent from the image being conveyed here, there is another image at work complicating and dominating the overall picture. This other image is that of a rescue. The Lord rescues dead saints from death (this is further developed in 1 Corinthians 15), and with them he snatches up living saints, who were described in 1:10 as waiting for him to come from heaven and deliver them from the wrath to come.<sup>5</sup> He raptures them to deliver them from a coming wrath. Once the wrath is completed, we may assume on the basis of the other image that the whole assembly would then accompany him in the completion of his expected return.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul turns to the matter of how believers should live in light of the coming “day of the Lord.” The day of the Lord is a well-known theme in the Old Testament Prophets indicating a climactic outpouring of divine wrath. Israel was warned about a coming day of the Lord that manifested itself in the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 BC.<sup>6</sup> The Babylonian invasion and destruction of the southern kingdom involving eventually the siege and overthrow of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586 BC were prophesied as a day of the Lord.<sup>7</sup> However, many prophecies spoke of the later destructions that would come upon these invaders and other nations complicit with them as being days of the Lord, God visiting his wrath upon them for their wickedness and hostility toward the people of God.<sup>8</sup> Some of these prophecies contain predictions that are global in scope.<sup>9</sup> They resonate with yet another group of day of the Lord prophecies that are mostly postexilic and foresee a yet future day of judgment coming against the whole world for its evil and sin.<sup>10</sup>

These days of the Lord are similar in description, with literary features that are oftentimes repeated. They are days of darkness, dread, and gloom. The earth and the heavens are shaken. People are gripped in terror as destruction and death come upon them. They are days of battle and slaughter—a sacrifice to appease the wrath of God. The repetition of such elements among the days of the Lord forms a literary type, and this type carries forward into the predictions of an ultimate day in which God’s wrath is yet to be poured out. That day will be a time in which the Lord once again gathers the nations into war,

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*the Thessalonians*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 175). Bruce also expresses his reservations on an immediate return in F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (Nashville: Nelson, 1982), 103.

<sup>5</sup> We do not need to develop here the idea of the transformation, or translation, that will be granted to the living at the point of the rapture. For this, one can turn to 1 Cor. 15:50–57; Phil. 3:20–21; and 2 Cor. 5:4–5. The first two texts have marked similarities to 1 Thess. 1:10 and 4:15–16, both being set at the time of the Lord’s coming, and together with the last express the joyful hope of being changed into immortality.

<sup>6</sup> See Hos. 1:4–5; Amos 2:13–16; 3:14; 5:18, 20; 8:1–9:10.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Isa. 22:1–14; Ezek. 7:1–27; Zeph. 1:1–3:8.

<sup>8</sup> See Isa. 13:1–22; 34:1–17; Jer. 46:1–12; Ezek. 30:1–19; Obad. 1–21; Nah. 1:1–3:19.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Isa. 13:11.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Isa. 2:12–21; 24:1–23; Joel 2:30–3:16; Zech. 12:1–13:9; 14:1–15; Mal. 3:1–4; 4:1–6.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

but it will be the Lord who will fight against them. Fear and terror will seize them, the earth will be shaken, the heavens will be darkened, and death will overtake them. The proud and arrogant will be humbled, the wicked will be consumed, and both idols and idolaters will be destroyed. But the Lord will be a refuge for his people. He will save them, sanctify them, and bring them into the rich blessings of his kingdom. The Old Testament in fact ends on just this note, with Malachi's prophecy of the coming day of the Lord, which will bring judgment to the wicked and deliverance to the righteous (Mal 4:1–6).

The New Testament picks up this theme with both John the Baptist and Jesus addressing the coming judgment and the salvation that God will provide.<sup>11</sup> Although the Gospels do not per se use the phrase “day of the Lord,” the expression reappears in the Epistles, often altered to reflect the New Testament understanding that Jesus is the Lord who comes on that day to execute divine judgment and deliver the righteous.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, Paul references the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5 after talking about the coming of the Lord to rapture the saints who have been waiting for him to deliver them from the coming wrath. The day of the Lord is the broader eschatological event that connects these themes. And it is in consideration of both of these themes that Paul proceeds to make his parenetic point.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord will arrive suddenly and unexpectedly, coming “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2). The point of the metaphor was made by Jesus, who, after using it, said, “If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into” (Matt. 24:43). Just as one has no idea when a thief will come, so one does not know when the day of the Lord will begin. Its sudden arrival will surprise people (5:4), who will have no clue from conditions that prevailed before its onset. In fact, those conditions will be exactly opposite that of the day of the Lord itself (“peace and safety” versus “sudden destruction,” 5:3).

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., John the Baptist's message in Matt. 3:7–12 (Luke 3:7–17).

<sup>12</sup> So, e.g., 1 Cor. 1:7–8 speaks of the Corinthians waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, “who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in *the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (ESV, emphasis added). In 2 Tim. 4:8, Paul speaks of “the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (ESV; cf. also 4:1, which speaks of the appearing of Christ Jesus “who is to judge the living and the dead” [ESV]). Second Peter also thematically connects questions about the coming of Jesus to the coming of “the day of the Lord” (3:10) or “day of God” (3:12), just as Paul connects questions about the coming of the day of the Lord to the theme of “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” in 2 Thess. 2:1–2.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Paul's next point is that although the day of the Lord will arrive suddenly, the effect of its arrival will be completely different for those who belong to Christ and those who do not. Paul makes this point by a careful distinction between second and third person plural pronouns: "While *people* are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on *them* suddenly ... and *they* will not escape. But *you*, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise *you* like a thief" (1 Thess. 5:3–4, emphasis added). The verb *katalabē* ("overtake"; see NET) conveys the idea of seizure with hostile intent.<sup>13</sup> Paul's point is that the onset of the day is the onset of destruction on "them," as if they were seized by an enemy intent on doing them harm. But its sudden arrival will not bring destruction on "you," for "they" belong to the darkness, but "you" belong to the light (5:5). Paul follows this immediately with his parenetic point that those who belong to the light should live in the light, that is, in the day with "daytime" not "nighttime" behavior. But, for our purposes here, it is important to note that he comes back around to the point of the different effect the arrival of the day of the Lord will have on those who belong to Christ. "For," he says, in 5:9–10, "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him" (ESV). The day of the Lord is a day of divine wrath. The destruction of the day of the Lord that suddenly comes upon "them" (5:3) is none other than the "wrath to come" (1:10 ESV). However, those who are waiting for the Lord expect to be delivered from this wrath (1:10; cf. Rom. 5:9, which has in mind the day of wrath [Rom 2:5]). They belong to the day and have the "hope of salvation" (5:8), a salvation that will be given to them "through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9).

What is this salvation that is given to believers at the beginning of the day of the Lord in contrast to the wrath that comes upon unbelievers? The answer is made clear by the phrase "so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him" (ESV). This takes us back to 4:14–17 where Christ descends from heaven and snatches up to himself all who belong to him, raising those who are dead and gathering those who are alive together with them, the phrase "so that ... we might live with him" paralleling "so we will always be with the Lord" (ESV) and the conclusion, "Therefore encourage one another," being an exact restatement of the conclusion of 4:18. In other words, Christ will save those who belong to him by means of the rapture.<sup>14</sup> Those who don't belong to him

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<sup>13</sup> BAGD, s.v. *katalambanō*, 412–13.

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<sup>14</sup> Green notes that the terminology in 1 Thess. 5:10 connects with 4:15–17 and, on this basis, connects the salvation in 5:9 to the rapture in 4:16–17: "This final salvation is now described in v. 10 as living *together*

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

will be overtaken, seized by the destruction and wrath of that day. The two concepts, being snatched up by the Lord on the one hand and being seized by the destruction of that day on the other, form a conceptual parallel of initiatory experiences reinforcing the understanding that the day of the Lord is a decisive divine act of deliverance and judgment from its outset.

The day of the Lord comes, then, suddenly. Those who belong to Christ know that it is coming, but they do not know when. Those who do not belong to Christ not only do not know when it is coming; they are not even aware that it is in fact coming. But when it begins—that is the important point, its onset, its beginning—a separation occurs in the experience of all people. For those who belong to Christ, that sudden beginning of the day of the Lord is the sudden rapture, with resurrection (for those who sleep) or translation (for those who are awake) to meet the descended Lord on the clouds and in the air, delivered thereby from the ensuing wrath of the day of the Lord. For those who do not belong to Christ, the sudden onset of that day is the experience of being suddenly seized by wrath and judgment.

## THE DAY OF THE LORD AND THE TRIBULATION

So far, what we have seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:10 is a pre—or inaugural day of the Lord's rapture. But is this the same thing as a pretribulation rapture? Should we understand the day of the Lord here to be coextensive with or identical to the seventieth week of Daniel, which pretribulationists understand by the term *tribulation*?

### *The Seventieth Week of Daniel*

The book of Daniel gives a set of narratives mostly in relation to Daniel himself regarding his service to Babylonian and Persian kings. A key feature is the set of dreams or visions in which God reveals to Daniel a sequence of empires that will be brought to an end by the establishment of the kingdom of God. These dreams or visions have parallel features that indicate a common projected sequence even though some visions may only focus on aspects of it.<sup>15</sup> Most important, these visions describe by means of typology and

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*with him.* As in 4:16–17, the theology of v. 10 has to do with the resurrection of the dead and the catching away of the living and the dead 'to be with the Lord forever' " (Green, *Thessalonians*, 244). See also Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 188–89. For the argument that "awake" and "sleep" refer to life and death rather than moral alertness or lack thereof (as in 5:5–7), see the arguments of Wanamaker, 188–89, and Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 114–15.

<sup>15</sup> Collins notes the parallelism of the visions even though he denies that they have any eschatological bearing beyond the second century BC: "All the visions are concerned with essentially the same events—the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes. The final revelation [Dan. 10–12] is the most detailed but in no way supersedes those that go before it. Rather, the different visions look at the same events

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

prediction a future time of wrath in which a powerful king along with his kingdom will be destroyed by God and in whose place God will establish his own kingdom forever.<sup>16</sup>

The structure of this future time of wrath, or time of the end, *'et qēts*, is a projected pattern that is typed from the sequence of kingdoms given in the visions of Daniel 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10–12. Daniel 7 juxtaposes a vision of God's throne room and the coming of one like a Son of Man on the clouds with a vision of an arrogant, wicked world ruler associated with the last of the sequential kingdoms. The latter is destroyed by divine decree, and kingdom authority is given to the Son of Man and the saints of the Most High. Daniel 9 presents a vision of "seventy sevens" decreed for Jerusalem and the people of Israel, sixty-nine of which span the time from a decree to rebuild the city to the cutting off of the Messiah. The last seven extends from a covenant made by a coming prince to "the decreed end." However, in the middle of the seven, the same one perpetrates an abomination in the temple, causing the sacrifices to cease. The character type presented here is the same as that given in Daniel 7 and in Daniel 8 (although notably, the character type is projected from different points in the kingdom sequence in those visions; Daniel 9 is parallel to Daniel 7 in the kingdom sequence, whereas Daniel 8 parallels Daniel 10–12). Stopping the sacrifices in Daniel 9:27 is a repeat feature from Daniel 8. The half-seven links with "time, times and half a time" of Daniel 7:25, while "the decreed end" links all the visions together.

In Daniel 10–12, Daniel receives the final vision that repeats the pattern once more, adding several features in the process. From our standpoint in later history, it is quite clear that the first half of this vision was fulfilled by military conflicts in the Hellenistic period, between Seleucid and Ptolemaic kings. Especially prominent in the vision is a character who was undoubtedly Antiochus Epiphanes (as was also the case in the first part of the vision in Daniel 8). A lengthy character description is given along with

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from different angles. Taken together they provide a more fully rounded picture than any one of them alone." John J. Collins, *Daniel: With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, FOTL 20 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 32–33, cf. 103. See also the discussion on the parallels between the visions in Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 21 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978), 59–63, 161–62; Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 177–79, 206, 222–24, 264; and the extended discussion in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, A Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. J. Martin and M. G. Easton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866–91), 9:654–79.

<sup>16</sup> On the wrath as an extended time, see Collins, *Daniel: With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, 95; and John J. Collins, *Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 338–39: "In the present context, the 'wrath' is not just a day of reckoning but a period of history.... The most immediate parallel to v. 19 is found below at v. 23, which refers to the latter time of the gentile kingdoms 'when their sins are complete.' ... The 'wrath' has become a quasi-technical term for the tribulation caused by these kingdoms, especially in its latter phase." On the eschatological, as opposed to historical, bearing of the phrase "time of the end" (*'et qēts*), see Wood's comments in *Daniel*, 222–24, 303–6; and Keil and Delitzsch, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 699–702.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

comments on how he would come to power and conduct his campaigns. Attention is also brought to bear on his act of desecrating the temple—the perpetration of an abomination of desolation that caused the sacrifices to cease. However, in Daniel 11:36 another description of character is given that appears to be typed from that just given for Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>17</sup> It is this verse (11:36) that Paul quotes in 2 Thessalonians 3 as referring to the Man of Lawlessness who is yet to come.

9

After the typological shift from near future to far future, we are once again told that this pertains to “the time of the end,” and that it persists “until the indignation is accomplished” (Dan. 11:36, 40; 12:4, 9, 13 ESV). Note that the whole basic pattern is repeated in the shift from type to antitype. We are told once again about an abomination that makes desolate, that caused the regular sacrifices to cease, and of a time period of 1,290 days (roughly equivalent to three and a half years) extending from that point (12:11), which seems to be the same as “time, times and half a time” just a few verses earlier (12:7). New features include the involvement of Michael (12:1), “a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time” (12:1 ESV), a deliverance of the elect of Daniel’s people, and a resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous dead (12:1–3).

The picture of the “time of the end” in Daniel is built up and reinforced by repetition and overlapping elements placed into a common structure that has an identifiable chronology and basic narrative sequence. Generally, it is the time of the end, the time of wrath (8:17, 19; 11:36, 40; 12:7, 9). Specifically, it is “one seven”—a seven-year period, with special attention on the time from the middle of this seven-year period to the end (9:27), a duration also specified as “time, times and half a time” (7:25; 12:7), 1,290 days (12:11), and “later in the time of wrath” (8:19). A powerful political figure will appear on the earth, inaugurating the seven-year time of the end with a covenant made with “many.” However, he attains (or seizes) greater power in the second half of this time (7:24–25), which begins with an abomination that desolates the temple and causes the regular sacrifice to cease (9:27; 12:11) and ushers in a time of great stress (great tribulation) not seen before (12:1). By action of this one, it will be a time of warfare, blasphemy, deception, and persecution of the saints (7:8, 11, 20–22, 24–25; 8:9–14, 23–25; 9:27; 11:20–35, 36–45)

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<sup>17</sup> Collins notes that vv. 36–37 do not continue in chronological sequence but recapitulate the king’s behavior during persecution (Collins, *Daniel*, Hermeneia, 386). However, this literary feature is best interpreted not as a recapitulation but as a typological projection, as in 8:19–26. A recapitulation would be unnecessary and awkward stylistically. In addition, in spite of the similarities in description (necessary for the type) there are differences between this description and what is known of Antiochus that signal the type-antitype distinction. See Keil and Delitzsch, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 802–3, and Wood, *Daniel*, 304–5.

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# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

until he and his kingdom are destroyed by God (2:34–35; 7:9–11, 26; 8:25; 9:27; 11:45). The people of God will be delivered (12:1, 7), and God will then set up a kingdom over the whole earth (2:35, 44), which will be specifically given to “one like a son of man,” whom Daniel saw “coming with the clouds of heaven” (7:13–14). Apparently through him the kingdom is also given to “the saints of the Most High” (7:22, 27).

## *The Olivet Discourse*

The integration of Daniel’s time of the end with the coming day of the Lord takes place in the teaching of Jesus and is carried on in the letters of Paul and in the book of Revelation. In the teaching of Jesus, the integration is most clearly seen in the Olivet Discourse presented in Matthew 24:1–51; Mark 13:1–37; and Luke 21:5–36 (cf. Luke 17:22–37). Consequently, we turn now to examine this discourse. We will follow primarily Matthew’s account, making reference to Mark and Luke for a fuller canonical picture.<sup>18</sup>

The Synoptics present this discourse in response to questions posed by Jesus’ disciples—questions that were provoked in their minds by his prophecy that the temple in Jerusalem would be completely destroyed (Matt. 24:1–2: “Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down”; cf. Mark 13:1–2; Luke 21:5–6). Matthew, in fact, juxtaposes this prophecy with Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, in which he also prophesied, “Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38). The questions posed by the disciples are:

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<sup>18</sup> The approach followed here is canonical, harmonizing the synoptic contributions even though making primary reference to Matthew. The reason for the primarily Matthean focus is because Matthew gives the longest version of the Olivet Discourse. Matthew also renders the disciples’ second question more explicit in relation to the parousia. Most of the more recent structural studies relating the division of the Olivet Discourse to the disciples’ questions have come from treatments of Matthew’s account. It may be easier to see this in Matthew because the longer version provides more material for the second major division, making the contrast with the first major division more apparent. The reticence to harmonize the synoptic accounts seems at least in part to be tied to assumptions that the differences are to be accounted for referentially—for example, that the Lukan account deals exclusively with the near future destruction of AD 70, whereas Matthew or Mark may deal with the church age or with the future parousia. As will be seen, the patterned typological interpretation of the Olivet Discourse advocated here allows for the first-century referents in Jesus’ narrated sequence while forming a typed pattern that has eschatological bearing. This also helps to explain why the Lukan account, for example, seen by many as focusing especially on the events of AD 70, nevertheless has clear day of the Lord eschatological features. The typological approach taken here allows us to recognize the common features of the synoptic accounts and draw them together into a canonical synthesis.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

“Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3)	“Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” (Mark 13:4)	“Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” (Luke 21:7)
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Much of the hermeneutical discussion regarding these questions and the discourse that follows tends to fall in one of three main camps: those who see the discourse as thoroughly eschatological, those who see it as thoroughly historical (this is the preterist view, seeing the discourse as wholly focused on the events of AD 70), and those who see it as somehow dealing with both historical and eschatological matters. We cannot review the different positions here.<sup>19</sup> For the purpose of this discussion, I will advocate the third position—that both historical and eschatological matters are in view. Clearly, the disciples had in mind Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple then standing when they asked, “When will these things happen?” And they certainly included within their intent the glorious coming of Jesus and his kingdom, as we can see by Matthew’s specification of the second question. However, different views prevail among those who would agree that both historical and eschatological events are in view.

Some believe that Jesus’ answer first sets forth conditions that will prevail throughout the church age, conditions that should not be interpreted as end-time events. This view holds that this portion of the discourse describes conditions that form the setting of the mission of the church, given the Lord’s statement that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).<sup>20</sup> Surely, persecutions as well as general disasters have been the experience of the world and of the church since the days of the apostles. This view would then argue

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<sup>19</sup> For surveys of the various approaches, see D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:488–95; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, ICC, 3 vols. (London: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:328–33; Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33b (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 685. Also see the helpful overview given by David L. Turner, “The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1–41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments,” *GTJ* 10 (1989): 3–27.

<sup>20</sup> The completion of the worldwide evangelistic task has been defined by many in the modern era as making a verbal witness present to every language group. This goal is consistent with the mandate of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). However, to see it as a condition for the return of the Lord essentially nullifies the unknown any-moment quality of the parousia, for it effectively ties the timing of the parousia to the modern accomplishment of these goals.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

that the discourse goes on to speak of the future coming of Christ as a separate event that will take place suddenly and catastrophically after the mission of the church is finished.<sup>21</sup>

A number of recent studies focusing on the structural relationship of the disciples' two questions to the discourse proper have argued that the Olivet Discourse concerns two events: the destruction that was about to take place in AD 70 and the parousia of the end times. The general disasters and persecutions, it is said, are particularly descriptive of first-century conditions. Even the mission of the gospel to the whole world described in 24:14, it is claimed, was completed prior to AD 70. In short, this view argues that in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus proceeds to distinguish the two events of the temple destruction and his coming. The first part of the discourse, Matthew 24:4–35, speaks to the destruction of AD 70. The second section, Matthew 24:36–25:46, speaks to the parousia.<sup>22</sup>

Both of these views have much to contribute to the understanding of the Olivet Discourse; however, both appear to be deficient in crucial points. The second view above fails to do justice not just to the coming of Christ described in 24:29–31, but to the way that the coming is a preoccupation throughout the first section of the discourse.<sup>23</sup> It ignores the many eschatological features of this section in its attempt to emphasize the applicability of the language to the first-century situation.<sup>24</sup>

The first view above renders the discourse somewhat confused by an apparent rambling sequence that starts with a specific agenda to discuss the temple's destruction, begins instead with general remarks about the church age, abruptly returns to the intended agenda with the abomination of desolation, and then rockets forward to the topic of the parousia. The "great distress" that follows the abomination of desolation is turned into

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<sup>21</sup> For examples of this approach among recent commentaries, see the works by Carson and Davies and Allison noted above. Also see Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 353–64.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 889–967. This work repeats and updates France's previously published views on this subject. Also see David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 234–45; Alistair Wilson, *When Will These Things Happen? A Study of Jesus as Judge in Matthew 21–25* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2004), 109–74, 224–47; and Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 2000), 167–222.

<sup>23</sup> It is the Lord himself who raises the topic of his coming in the setting of the discourse—see Matt. 23:38–39. The warnings against those who claim to come in his name keep the topic at the forefront (24:4, 11, 23, 26) as well as his description of the manner of his coming in 24:27. The disciples pair the parousia and the end in their question (24:3), and Jesus speaks of the end coming in 24:14, invoking the connection. In all of these ways, the coming persists as a featured topic throughout the first part of the discourse.

<sup>24</sup> This is seen especially in the citations and allusions to Daniel through this section. See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:332. The Daniel structure and day of the Lord features of this part of the Olivet Discourse will be developed in what follows.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the long history of the church and “immediately after” the distress of those days is rendered meaningless, a vague reference to some time in the future.<sup>25</sup>

Both of these approaches fail to observe the literary and thematic connections between the Olivet Discourse and the two Old Testament eschatological events of the day of the Lord and Daniel’s time of the end. Recent studies on the structure of the Olivet Discourse in relation to the disciples’ questions are helpful but fall short because of an apparent assumption that remarks concerning the temple destruction have nothing to do with the parousia. In many of these studies, the transition in the discourse is not just from the question of the sign to the question of when (or vice versa), but a transition of topic or event from the AD 70 near-future event to the parousia far-future event.<sup>26</sup>

The problem here is a failure to appreciate fully the Lord’s remark in 24:36 that he himself did not know the day or the hour. Aside from the interesting christological question that this raises, the point has to be fully appreciated that at the time this discourse was given, Jesus, by his own admission, does not know whether the AD 70 destruction and the parousia will be one and the same or two different events. He certainly knew that the temple and the city would be destroyed in that generation. He himself is the prophet who predicts it. He of course knew that a temple desecration and an embattled Jerusalem are both features of Old Testament end-time predictions, that is, features of the day of the Lord and Daniel’s time of the end. In fact, it is the contention of this essay that he himself deliberately invokes these patterns in his narrative sequence. However, his warning that the time of the parousia is *unknown*, even to himself, must have cautioned the disciples that the *foreknown* impending destruction of that temple and city in that generation might not be the parousia itself.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the parables illustrating the uncertainty of the parousia

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<sup>25</sup> Hagner writes: “It is very difficult to believe that the words ‘immediately after the tribulation of those days’ refer only to something general in the indeterminate future. Rather than something vague, the words seem to require a specific antecedent (note the definite article *tēn* and the demonstrative pronoun *ekēinōn*). The only specific item in the preceding context that could correspond to ‘the suffering of those days’ is the desecration of the temple referred to in v. 15” (Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 712). Hagner believes, however, that Matthew got confused at this point and misunderstood the Lord’s teaching on imminency, but his literary grammatical observation on Matt. 24:29 stands nevertheless. The additional point that needs to be added is the typology being set up by the Lord in relation to the uncertainty about the parousia (24:36). If the Father chooses to delay, then that temple desolation projects as a type to a future temple desolation that fulfills the grammatical literary pattern proposed here.

<sup>26</sup> See n. 21 above.

<sup>27</sup> The unknown time of the parousia is emphasized again in Acts 1:6–7 where Jesus responds to the disciples’ question as to whether their current time would be the time of the restoration of the kingdom. He tells them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (ESV). As in Matthew 24:36, the time determination is attributed to the Father. Peter makes reference to this after the ascension in his second Jerusalem sermon, when he says that Christ must remain in heaven

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

contain hints that it might be delayed longer than anyone thinks (Matt. 24:48, 50; 25:19). Nevertheless, it still remained possible at the time of the discourse that the impending judgment on Jerusalem could have been the parousia.

The point of this study is that in the first part of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:4–35), Jesus gives a pattern that includes the sign of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. This pattern has as its structure Daniel's time of the end, and it carries the descriptive features of the day of the Lord. It is, in fact, this integrated day of the Lord, time of the end pattern that constitutes the contribution of the Olivet Discourse to the development of biblical eschatology. This whole pattern is the parousia. However, just as was the case in the Old Testament, it is possible for a type of the eschatological day of the Lord to appear in history in advance of the antitype. Jesus alerts his disciples to this possibility in the parable of the fig tree when he distinguishes between "all these things" of the pattern up to the sign of the Son of Man ("when you see *all these things*, you know that he is near"; 24:33 NIV alternate reading, emphasis added) and the sign itself, and then tells them that "all these things" (understood now as all the things up to the sign of the Son of Man) will come upon that generation. If it had been the day chosen by the Father, the sign of the Son of Man would have followed the distress of those days and the entire sequence would have been the eschatological day of the Lord, the parousia of the Son of Man. But the possibility existed for a type/antitype division, with the type fulfilling the prophesied destruction of that temple and the city of that time, and in keeping with the purpose of a type, foreshadowing the greater fulfillment of the parousia yet to come—a greater fulfillment, that is, of the entire pattern, not just a part.<sup>28</sup>

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"until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3:21 ESV).

NIV New International Version

<sup>28</sup> As has already been noted, this explains why there are first-century features in the pattern. What is being said here is similar to the observations of G. B. Caird on the language of biblical eschatology. See G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 243–71. He writes: "The prophets looked to the future with bifocal vision. With their near sight they foresaw imminent historical events which would be brought about by familiar human causes; for example, disaster was near for Babylon because Yahweh was stirring up the Medes against them (Isa. 13:17). With their long sight they saw the day of the Lord; and it was in the nature of the prophetic experience that they were able to adjust their focus so as to impose the one image on the other and produce a synthetic picture" (258). This "prophetic camera technique," as Caird labels it (259), is what we see in Old Testament day of the Lord prophecies, in Daniel's visions of coming desolation, and in the Olivet Discourse—near future and far future event descriptions superimposed upon each other in synthetic fashion. When the near future event comes to pass, the same language that references it connects it typologically to the far future referent. In the case of the Olivet Discourse, the narrative structure which is itself a synthesis of the prophetic patterns—the day of the Lord and Daniel's time of the end—references both the AD 70 destruction and the future parousia with language that may be wholly applicable to one, wholly applicable to another, or

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

We now turn to the two questions. The first question expresses an overall concern: When will these things be? The second question expresses a more specific concern with respect to “these things,” asking, as Mark tells us, about the sign indicating when all these things will be accomplished. Matthew renders this as a question about the sign of “your coming and of the end of the age.” Putting the synoptic accounts together, it is clear that the second question has to do with the sign that all predicted eschatological events would be completed, including the parousia and the end of the age.

The discourse itself divides structurally into two parts, with the structural change occurring at Matthew 24:36 (Mark 13:32).<sup>29</sup> The first part, in Matthew 24:4–35 (Mark 13:5–31; Luke 21:8–33), presents a movement, a narrative sequence that has a beginning (*archē*, 24:8) and an end (*telos*, 24:6, 13, 14). The movement is marked by the repetitive use of “then” (*tote*) and culminates in the appearing of the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. The narrative sequence ends with this sign, and the discourse immediately moves to a teaching point in 24:32–35, which functions as a conclusion or postscript. This is the parable of the fig tree: “When you see all these things, you know that he is near” (NIV alternate reading). Here we find the prediction that the generation at that time would see “all these things” in the pattern that came near to the point of his appearing.

The second part of the discourse begins in Matthew 24:36. The mood and content abruptly changes.<sup>30</sup> The point of this portion of the discourse, made over and over with various illustrations, is that no one knows the day or the hour. This continues until

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equally applicable to both at the same time, and is appreciated in its dual reference by what Caird calls “the paratactical Hebrew mind” (267).

<sup>29</sup> The structural change at this point, dividing the Olivet Discourse into two parts, is observed by many, including France, Davies and Allison, Blomberg, Garland, Wilson, and Gibbs in n. 22 above. Hagner sees the second division beginning with 24:37 (Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 717–19.). The corresponding material in Luke is much briefer but is separated from the rest by Marshall and Bock and an “application.” See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 781–82; and Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1658, 1693. Of the recent commentators on Mark, Evans notes T. W. Manson’s division of the Markan version of the Olivet Discourse into two parts with the hinge at 13:32 and believes it has merit but does not give it the significance observed by the Matthean commentators (Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, WBC 34b [Nashville: Nelson, 2001], 340). See T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus: Studies of Its Form and Content* (1931; repr. London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 262. Of course, France draws the point of a structural division at 13:32 in his commentary on Mark. See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 541–43. France cites P. Carrington as one who earlier observed this structural division. See P. Carrington, *According to Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), 293–94, 298.

NIV New International Version

<sup>30</sup> The contrast in mood and content is commented on at length by Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia*, 170–74.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Matthew 25:31–46, where the judgment of the sheep and goats functions as the conclusion to this section.

The suggestion of many that the two parts of the discourse be related to the two questions seems reasonable.<sup>31</sup> However, there is not agreement as to whether the questions neatly divide between the two sections of the discourse and, if they do, which questions go with which part.<sup>32</sup> The proposal given here is that the question about the sign goes with the part of the discourse that focuses on the sign—the sign of the Son of Man. The question *when* is a more general question and is related to that part of the discourse having to do with the complex event as a whole. Thus the questions relate to the discourse chiastically: Jesus answers the questions (a) when will these things happen and (b) what will be the sign in reverse order, addressing first (b) the sign of his coming and of the end of the age—that is, the sign when *all* eschatological events will be completed, and then addressing (a) the overall question of when.

## *What Will Be the Sign?*

I wish to make two primary observations regarding Jesus' narrative in response to the disciples' question concerning "the sign." One is that the narrative has basically the same structure and many of the major features of Daniel's "time of the end." The second observation is that the entire narrative sequence is presented, by means of intertextual descriptive references, as the day of the Lord.

First, the fact that the sequence carries the structure of Daniel's time of the end is not difficult to see. The discourse begins with a future destruction of the temple as a primary concern. Whereas many day of the Lord prophecies speak of Jerusalem, Daniel explicitly focuses on the temple and its future desolation and destruction. Both Matthew and Mark refer to a desecration of the temple with Daniel's phrase "the abomination of desolation,"

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<sup>31</sup> Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 235: "The key to the structure of this discourse is the disciples' double question in 24:3." See also Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia*, 174; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 353; France, *Matthew*, 899.

<sup>32</sup> Hagner, for example, thinks that Jesus does not answer the first question, so that the whole discourse is directed to the second question (Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 688). Nolland connects the word "sign" in the second question to the use in 24:30, but he is not clear on the structural nature of these questions. See John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 983. Many follow France in relating the first question to the first part of the discourse and the second question to the second part of the discourse. However, the guiding principle seems to be the desire to divide the discourse into near-future and far-future prophecies. Since the first question entails the destruction of the temple then standing and the first part of the discourse includes first-century events, they are thereby related. However, this ignores the connection between the second question and the first part of the Olivet Discourse by means of the word *sign* as well as the way the second part of the Olivet Discourse provides a clear answer to the first question, *when* (answer: no one knows).



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

while in Matthew, Jesus cites Daniel explicitly by name. The abomination of desolation is placed climactically in the middle of his narrative sequence similarly to the way it functions in Daniel's "time of the end." Jesus then quotes from Daniel 12:1 and speaks of "great tribulation" (24:21 ESV) occurring from the time of the abomination of desolation to the end. Daniel 12:7, 11 marks the time from the abomination of desolation to the end as "time, times, and half a time" or 1,290 days. This is the same structure as that in Daniel 9:26–27 where the abomination of desolation is set up in the middle of a seven-year period—the middle, that is, of Daniel's seventieth week.<sup>33</sup>

In conjunction with this, we should note that this part of the discourse in both Matthew and Mark is (from the beginning of the narrative sequence to the appearing of the sign of the Son of Man) structured by means of an *inclusio*—a warning about false christs. This warning appears both at the beginning and at the end of the narrative sequence just before the sign of the Son of Man. Matthew, however, repeats the warning a third time midway between the two ends of the *inclusio*, emphasizing the point that the predominant concern throughout this whole time (even more perhaps than famine, war, and persecution) is false christs. Although Mark omits this middle reference to false christs, he does use the masculine participle *hestēkota* with the neuter abomination of desolation (in contrast to Matthew, who maintains proper subject-verb agreement), indicating that the desecration is linked to the presence of the perpetrator himself in the temple.<sup>34</sup> The abomination of desolation functions as a climax, a turning point, not just in the experience of trouble per se, but in the danger represented by a false christ.

Except for the absence of temporal markers (such as one seven; time, times, half a time; 1,290 days), the structure is precisely that of Daniel's seventieth week—the appearance of Antichrist (several false christs) with the attending phenomena of war and persecution, the turning point of the abomination of desolation perpetrated by a "false christ," which takes the whole tenor of the times to high stress and which anticipates the destruction of this one at the conclusion of the typed pattern.

The conclusion to the narrative is the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven. Jesus quotes Daniel 7:13 with the change from "one like a son of man" to "Son of Man." This is the sign in contrast to the deception offered by false christs, the sign of his coming

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<sup>33</sup> On allusions to Daniel in the Olivet Discourse, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:332.

<sup>34</sup> Hengel gives an extended discussion of the personification of the abomination in Mark 13:14, demonstrating that the event "has not taken place." His linkage of the verse to 2 Thess. 2:3–4 is convincing. See Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 16–20. Evans provides an overview of attempts to identify the personal reference and also concludes, "The prophecy itself has not been fulfilled" (Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 320 [see the extended discussion in 317–20]).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

and of the end of the age, the sign that all these things will be completed. The sign of the Son of Man occurs at the end of the typed pattern, at the point where in Daniel the arrogant world ruler is destroyed and the kingdom is given to the Son of Man and the saints of the Most High.

Having observed the Danielic structure of the narrative portion of the Olivet Discourse, the second observation I wish to make about this portion of the discourse is that the whole complex of events that constitutes this narrative sequence is presented in the “day of the Lord” description. The conclusion I will draw from this is that the whole complex of events, including its Danielic narrative movement, is thereby meant to be taken as the day of the Lord.

Jesus begins the discourse with reference to what is sometimes called “messianic woes.”<sup>35</sup> Matthew and Mark list these as war, famine, and earthquakes, features that are common elements in day of the Lord descriptions.<sup>36</sup> The Lukan account adds to these features the phenomena of pestilences, terrors, and great signs from heaven. The “great signs from heaven” are repeated at the end of the discourse as “signs in the sun, moon and stars” (21:11, 25).<sup>37</sup> The terror in this early part is also repeated at the end by the description of “people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world” (21:26 ESV). The literary repetition of these elements draws them together thematically, but the statement after the first set of descriptions that “the end will not be at once” (21:9 ESV; Matthew [24:6] and Mark [13:7] have “the end is not yet” [ESV]) allows for the eschatological narrative structure, inserted between these descriptive elements, to unfold.<sup>38</sup> That narrative structure thus takes place in the setting of these conditions—conditions that are typical features of the day of the Lord.

Most interesting is Jesus’ description of these early phenomena (Matt. 24:5–7; Mark 13:6–8) as “the beginning of birth pains” (Gk., *archēōdinōn*).<sup>39</sup> While the metaphor of labor is

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<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Carson, “Matthew,” 498.

<sup>36</sup> “Much of the language of these verses again reflects standard apocalyptic imagery” (Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 691).

<sup>37</sup> The parallel between these descriptions is noted by Bock, *Luke*, 2:1668. Both Marshall and Bock note that these descriptions are common in Old Testament prophecy (Marshall, *Luke*, 765; Bock, *Luke*, 2:1667). Marshall, however, asserts that “such phenomena are *not* apocalyptic signs of the end” (766). Bock also states that “the chaos itself is not, however, a sign of the end” (2:1668). However, this seems to reflect different ways of understanding the “end,” as Bock sees the events connected in an extended sequence.

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<sup>38</sup> On Luke 21:9 indicating an extended eschatological event, see Bock, *Luke*, 2:1666.

<sup>39</sup> The problem in interpretation is how to relate “the beginning of birth pains” to “the end is not yet.” Hagner notes correctly that the point being made is that there will be “an extended period of travail”

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

used in various biblical texts to describe divine judgment, the *onset* of labor is particularly used in Isaiah 13:8 to describe the coming of the day of the Lord. Features from the Isaiah 13 prophecy of the day of the Lord reappear at the end of the narrative just before Jesus speaks of the sign of the Son of Man. Quoting from Isaiah 13:10, Jesus says, “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky” (Matt. 24:29). Between these references to Isaiah 13:8 and 13:10 unfolds the eschatological narrative with its Danielic structure.

Other day of the Lord descriptions that are woven into the narrative structure include the siege of Jerusalem by armies and ensuing battle (Luke 21:20, 24).<sup>40</sup> This picks up the

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(Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 691). This is consistent with the imagery of labor and with the integration of Daniel’s time of the end structure. However, Blomberg seems to take “the end is not yet” as dismissive, as if Jesus is saying that none of these things has anything to do with “the end.” That leads him to suggest that Jesus might be warning his disciples against “false labor” or suggesting to them that the beginning of labor is something indeterminate (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 354). Contra Blomberg, Jesus is not warning against these phenomena as “false signs” (353) but against false christs. The sign of his coming will appear only at the end of a pattern he is outlining as the “time of the end,” namely, after the great distress that follows the abomination of desolation. His only point at this part of the discourse is that the appearance of these cosmic phenomena per se are not to be taken as validation for the claims of a false christ—claims that the Christ has already appeared. Many, like Blomberg, have argued that Jesus is here predicting the interadvent age, and some have correlated the reference to birth pains to Paul’s use of the labor metaphor in Rom. 8:22–23 (see, e.g., Carson, “Matthew,” 498). However, it is not by any means clear that the meaning is the same in both places. Romans 8 speaks of the creation in travail anticipating immortality. In the Olivet Discourse, as in Isa. 13:8, the labor travail is the beginning of the day of wrath. We may reason that these are related theologically, but that does not mean the image has the same literary use in both places. Undoubtedly, at least one purpose in such a linkage is to validate an interpretation of the Olivet Discourse in which the first part equals the long interadvent age (see also Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:331, 340–41). Even though many of these phenomena are seen in the interadvent age, just as some of these phenomena have characterized postfall human conditions generally, this does not preclude a special formation and concentration of the phenomena in a future day of the Lord. The general occurrence of earthquakes, anxiety, and military battles in Old Testament times did not preclude the occurrence of a day of the Lord with these very features. Neither do the occurrence of these things in the interadvent age preclude a yet future day of the Lord.

<sup>40</sup> Bock argues that the language in Luke, as opposed to Matthew and Mark, definitively speaks of the “fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 rather than the end,” but he believes that Luke views the near future destruction as “a preview, but with less intensity, of what the end will be like ... a typological picture of what the consummation will be like—except that at the consummation, the nation Israel will be rescued as the O.T. promised” (Bock, *Luke*, 2:1675–76; see also his summary on 1696). The typological function of the discourse is the same point that is being argued in this essay. However, I would emphasize more strongly the Old Testament day of the Lord as a thematic context for the battle imagery. As for the structured parallel of Luke 21:20 with Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14, Desmond Ford has provided a helpful suggestion that the abomination of desolation may be best thought of as a complex event that results in the temple desecration. This would connect Luke’s reference to armies to the abomination mentioned by the other Synoptics. See Desmond Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), 163.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

general reference to war in the early part of the discourse (Luke 21:9–10) and focuses it on Jerusalem, just as in many day of the Lord prophecies.<sup>41</sup> The proverbial statement about bodies and vultures (Matt. 24:28, cf. Luke 17:37) is in keeping with the battlefield imagery. The feature of increased darkness referenced in Isaiah 13:10 reappears in Matthew 24:22 and Mark 13:20 as the shortening of days. Darkness is a feature of many day of the Lord predictions and goes together with the shaking of the heavens and the onset of battle. Luke's reference to the coming of wrath (Luke 21:23) is likewise consistent with the theme. Finally, the trumpet call associated with the coming Son of Man appears to be taken from Joel 2, which also conveys the imagery of the shaking and darkening of the heavens and the coming of battle. Significantly, it is the Lord who comes and issues his call in Joel; it is he before whom the trumpet is blown. By clothing the Danielic Son of Man imagery with this day of the Lord imagery from Joel and Isaiah, a further point about the identity of the Son of Man is achieved.

The point being made here is that there is a deliberate intertextual weaving of day of the Lord imagery into Daniel's time of the end structure. This is not just a feature at the end of the Olivet Discourse; it appears throughout the discourse with a heavy occurrence of the imagery at the beginning and the end. Day of the Lord imagery lends itself to this, because typically day of the Lord prophecies are filled with descriptive terminology. Day of the Lord predictions do not usually present a sequential structure except perhaps the structural sequence of a siege and battle. The one other exception to this is the labor metaphor that appears in Isaiah 13 and at the beginning of the Olivet Discourse. Labor consists of a sequence of contractions and pains that culminates in a birth—an appearance of someone previously hidden now openly revealed. The imagery of the beginning of labor pains at the beginning of the discourse connects to the appearance of the Son of Man at the end of the sequence, giving a coherence to the whole structure that operates in tandem with Daniel's time of the end structure. In the teaching of Jesus, the typologies of the day of the Lord and Daniel's time of the end have been integrated.

Concluding this first part of the Olivet Discourse is the parable of the fig tree. All the events of the narrative sequence indicate that he is near, just as buds on a tree indicate that summer is near.<sup>42</sup> But the sign of his coming is none of these things in and of

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<sup>41</sup> Wright has drawn attention to the connection between the day of the Lord battle imagery and the setting of the discourse on the Mount of Olives, arguing for an intended allusion to Zechariah 14 (N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 344–45). He goes on to observe numerous day of the Lord and Danielic parallels but argues for a preterist interpretation. He seems to be misled by the assumption (by the main tradition of amillennialism and the “consistent eschatology” of Albert Schweitzer) that the parousia brings about the end of time. Since the discourse doesn't speak of the end of time, in his view it doesn't speak of the parousia (339–68).

<sup>42</sup> A popular interpretation of the fig tree parable is that the fig tree is a metaphor for the nation Israel and that the blossoming of the fig tree is the reappearance of Israel as a nation on the world scene (which took

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

themselves—the sign of his coming is the sign of the Son of Man in the sky. This distinction allows for the possibility that the entire pattern up to this point may be fulfilled as a type, a type which in fact did befall that generation to which Jesus and his disciples belonged.

## *When Will These Things Be?*

Having spoken to the unfolding pattern of the time of the end / day of the Lord—a pattern of events that constitutes the parousia when it includes the sign of the Son of Man—Jesus, beginning in Matthew 24:36 [Mark 13:32; Luke 21:34], addresses the more general question, the disciples' first question, as to when these things will be. The lesson of the fig tree was that "when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates" (24:33 ESV). But the question remains, when will all these things be—the whole pattern, including his appearing? The shift in topic is noted in Matthew and Mark by the structural marker "But concerning" (*peri de*), the temporal reference, "that day or that hour," and the didactic point, "no one knows" (*oudeis oiden*; Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32 ESV).<sup>43</sup> Mark follows this introductory comment with a more general reference to "the time," saying, "you do not know (*ouk oidate*) when the time will come" (*pote ho kairos estin*; v. 33). The phrasing is almost an exact parallel to the phrasing of the disciples' first question in 13:4, "when will these things be ...?" (*pote tauta estai*; ESV).<sup>44</sup> Luke presents the temporal reference at this point in the discourse as simply "that day" which is coming. Most commentators are agreed that "that day or that hour" is not a reference to the temporal positioning of the coming of the Son of Man within the event sequence of the time of the end presented in the earlier portion of the discourse. It is not a reinterpretation of what has just been given in 24:33–34.<sup>45</sup> Rather, "that day or that hour" looks at the day of the Lord itself—in a singular, comprehensive way.<sup>46</sup> And this fits with Mark's more general reference to "that time" (13:33) or Luke's "that day" (21:34).

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place in 1948). The indication that this is not the Lord's intent in these words comes by considering the parallel passage in Luke 21:29, where he says, "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees" (ESV). The addition of "and all the trees" indicates that this is not a metaphor about Israel. It is a botanical metaphor about the interconnection and movement of the day of the Lord pattern.

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<sup>43</sup> The significance of *peri de* for the "hinge" at this part of the discourse is developed by Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia*, 172. See also France's *Mark*, 541, and his *Matthew*, 936.

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<sup>44</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 716.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, *When Will These Things Happen?* 224–26.

<sup>46</sup> So Wilson, *ibid.*, 224–25: "It is clear that reference is being made to the 'Day of the Lord.'" Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:378: "'That day' is the Old Testament's 'Day of the Lord,' which in the New

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Unlike the pattern that unfolds within the day of the Lord (in which the Son of Man's coming on the clouds follows the distress caused by the abomination of desolation), the day of the Lord itself—as a comprehensive whole—will set into history without warning, without signs by which one can approximate its coming. “No one knows,” the Lord says, “but only the Father”—recalling Zechariah's comment that the day of the Lord is “a unique day, which is known to the Lord” (14:7 ESV; Zechariah is referring in context to “a day [that] is coming for the Lord,” 14:1).<sup>47</sup>

Note also that the coming of “that day,” “the time,” or “that day or hour,” is further referenced in Matthew as “the coming of the Son of Man” (*hē parousia tou huiou tou anthrōpou*) (24:37, 39), with follow-up references to “your Lord is coming” (24:42 ESV), “the Son of Man is coming” (24:44 ESV), and “when the Son of Man comes” (25:31 ESV), as well as illustrations from parables to a master of servants coming (“when he comes,” 24:46 ESV; “will come on a day,” 24:50; or “came,” 25:19 ESV) or a bridegroom coming (“the bridegroom came,” 25:10 ESV). Mark, in this portion of the discourse, speaks of the Son of Man coming only by parabolic reference (13:34–37), and Luke speaks only of the coming of “that day” (21:34). References to the coming of the Son of Man are not inconsistent with the point that this part of the discourse focuses on the coming of the day of the Lord as an entire event. The day of the Lord was understood to be “the day of his coming” (Mal. 3:2). On the day of the Lord, the Lord will rise “to terrify the earth” whose inhabitants will flee “from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty” (Isa. 2:19, 21 ESV). The coming of the day of the Lord is the coming of “the Lord and the weapons of his indignation” (Isa. 13:5–6 ESV). The prevailing imagery is that of a military campaign dispensing destruction and death until the campaign is finished (see in addition to the aforementioned references Joel 2:1, 11; Mic. 1:3–4; 2:4; Nah. 1:2–8; Hab. 3:2–15; Zech. 14:3, 5, 12–14). The point is that the entire day of the Lord is a coming of the Lord in judgment. All of its destructive elements—for however long their duration or however extensive their reach—are poured out by the God who has “come” enacting this judgment. This is true whether or not the Lord makes an “appearance” in

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Testament is the *parousia*; and ‘that hour’ is a further specification that is effectively synonymous.” Cf. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 365; and France, *Matthew*, 939.

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<sup>47</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 716.

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## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

or at the end of the day. The historical “days of the Lord” did not involve a theophany even though they were “days” on which the Lord came in judgment. The theophany at the end of the day of the Lord in Zechariah 14 climaxes an extended event in which he has come in judgment—the point being that the coming does not just take place at the end of an extended disaster which is merely its prelude. Following the imagery of a military campaign, the entire campaign, whether the devastation of the countryside or the siege and battle for the city—however long these last—is due to the coming of a general and his army who are perpetrating it. His coming is not merely his triumphal entry into the defeated city at the end of the campaign. His coming is the whole destructive event that completes itself when the city is defeated and he then makes his entry into it.

Accordingly, what is being said here is that the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 24:36–25:46 is entirely the same thing as the coming of the day of the Lord itself. The Son of Man will visibly appear at the climax of this day, but the whole day is the day of his coming.

The imagery of labor and birth, used in the first part of the Olivet Discourse, is particularly suitable for this notion of an *extended* coming. The day of the Lord sequence sets in to human experience as the onset of labor, and it is characterized as a coming of God (cf. Isa. 13:5–8). Here, in the Olivet Discourse, the labor process culminates in the visible appearing of the Son of Man. Accordingly, what is being said here is that in this second part of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus is making reference to the day of the Lord as a whole—as an entire complex event. The day of the Lord is the day of his coming, and consequently, the reference to the day of the Lord and to the coming of the Son of Man amount to the same thing. When Jesus refers to the parousia of the Son of Man in Matthew 24:37, 39, he is not simply and merely referring to the appearing of the Son of Man in the sky as in 24:30. Rather, he is referring to the entire travail of his coming that culminates in his appearing.

With this in mind, we can understand why in the Olivet Discourse Jesus speaks on the one hand of signs and on the other of no signs. He speaks of “his coming” or the coming of “that day” as a surprise, occurring suddenly without any preceding signs. Yet he speaks of the sign of his appearing on the clouds of heaven as taking place after the abomination of desolation, which itself occurs in a context of false christs, wars, and earthly and heavenly disturbances—all day of the Lord or time of the end features. All the signs are in the day of the Lord. They are signs leading up to his appearance at the end of this coming. The day of the Lord taken as a whole—the day of his coming in judgment and which culminates in his appearance—sets in to history without warning, without signs. Once the day of the Lord begins, a pattern of events ensues that renders

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

his appearing near—near because the beginning of the day of the Lord is the beginning of his coming, and once his coming in judgment begins, his appearing is near in accordance with the well-known pattern that has been revealed about that coming.

So, to conclude our observations on the Olivet Discourse: Jesus does speak of destructive events coming upon Jerusalem and especially the temple, a prophecy that his disciples link to his prophecies about his coming as the Son of Man to execute judgment and establish his kingdom. In answer to their question about the sign for all these things, he gives an eschatological pattern formed by integrating the labor imagery and descriptive features of the prophetic day of the Lord with Daniel's time of the end. That patterned judgment would fall upon that generation at least up to the sign of his appearing. The sign of his coming, the sign of the end, the sign that all the eschatological events are being fulfilled would occur *within this kind of pattern* after a time of distress caused by an abomination of desolation in the temple. But whether the events of AD 70 would be the complete pattern including the sign of the Son of Man—in other words, whether the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem in that generation would be the eschatological day of the Lord in which the Son of Man comes—was unknown. Whether we would have a type-antitype division or a complete singular fulfillment was unknown. And if we did have a type application of the pattern in advance of the complete fulfillment (and we did), then the time between the type and the antitype is unknown. The whole complex will set in unexpectedly into history. Undoubtedly, it was the Lord's intent to say that the pattern of those events would begin without prior signs in the experience of that generation—the appearance of false christs, cosmic and terrestrial disturbances, and persecution leading up to a siege of the city (Luke) and desolation of the temple (Matthew and Mark). But looking at it after AD 70, one could see that it was not the will of the Father that *that* judgment pattern be the coming of the Son of Man. Consequently, the pattern projects into the future to be repeated in full in the Son of Man's coming, in his execution of judgment, and in his bringing to final fulfillment the eschatological kingdom of God. And, when it comes—when he comes—it will begin suddenly and unexpectedly in the experience of people on the earth.

With respect to the argument for pretribulationism, we can say that the Olivet Discourse presents an enhanced notion of the day of the Lord—enhanced by the integration of Daniel's time of the end structure. This Danielic enhanced day of the Lord is what pretribulationists call the tribulation, and it is to this that Paul refers in 1 Thessalonians 5 when he speaks of the coming of the day of the Lord.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## PAULINE PRETRIBULATIONISM

We return now to 1 Thessalonians 5, where Paul asserts a deliverance of believers from God's wrath at the onset of the day of the Lord—a deliverance which in context is the rapture. The question is, is this the same thing as a pretribulation rapture? The point to be made here is that it is. And this can be seen by the way Paul's understanding of the day of the Lord and its coming is dependent on Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse.

The dependence of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5 on the Olivet Discourse is widely recognized due to the many verbal and thematic connections between these texts in a composition that is clearly referencing a received tradition.<sup>48</sup> The Thessalonians already knew something about the coming of the day of the Lord. Paul reminds them of what they know by means of key illustrations and summary teachings that derive from the Olivet Discourse, all except one of which come from the second part of the Olivet Discourse, the part that looks at the eschatological pattern as a whole and answers the disciples' first question: "When will these things be?" The day of the Lord will come "like a thief in the night" (5:2; cf. Matt. 24:43), as a "surprise" (5:4; cf. Matt. 24:43–44, 50), as "sudden destruction," "while people are saying, 'There is "peace and security" ' " (5:3; cf. Matt. 24:37–41, 50–51; Mark 13:36; Luke 17:26–37; 21:34) in light of which they are admonished to "keep awake" and "be sober" (5:6, 8; cf. Matt. 24:42, 44; 25:13; Mark 13:33, 35, 37; Luke 21:34, 36). Although Jesus in the Olivet Discourse did not use the term "day of the Lord," we have already seen that it is clear that in this second part of the Olivet Discourse it is in fact the coming day of the Lord that he has in mind. And we have seen that this day of the Lord is the eschatological pattern that he presents in the first part of the Olivet Discourse, a pattern that begins and ends with day of the Lord descriptive features taken from the Old Testament prophets. Paul, by quoting from the second part of the Olivet Discourse, indicates that he is deriving his understanding of the coming day of the Lord from that given by Jesus.<sup>49</sup> This is the day of the Lord integrated with Daniel's time of the end structure given in the first part of the Olivet Discourse. By connecting his term, "day of the Lord," to that taught by Jesus, Paul evidently intends the same integrated event—that is, the day of the Lord structured as the seventieth week of Daniel.

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<sup>48</sup> See David Wenham, *The Rediscovery of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1984), 176–80, 295–96. See also, Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:385; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 367; France, *Matthew*, 942; Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 108–9; and Robert Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," in *Ephesians—Philemon*, EBC, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:282–83.

<sup>49</sup> Green, speaking about the thief metaphor, writes, "This assertion finds its roots in the teaching of Jesus about his coming (Matt. 24:43–44; Luke 12:39–40) and was then incorporated into the instruction given to the church about the end (2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15)" (Green, *Thessalonians*, 232). Wanamaker writes, "Paul has used the traditional eschatological and apocalyptic images, perhaps all of them already part of the Jesus tradition, for his own parenetic ends" (*Thessalonians*, 180).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Even more significantly, if there was any doubt about a connection in Paul's mind between the day of the Lord spoken of by Jesus in the second half of the Olivet Discourse and that integrated pattern in the first half of the Olivet Discourse, Paul puts that doubt to rest by reaching back into that first part of the Olivet Discourse and retrieving the metaphor that characterizes the beginning of the pattern—the metaphor of the beginning of labor (5:3; cf. Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8)—to further elaborate the sudden onset of the day which is the theme of the second part of the Olivet Discourse. Thus Paul himself connects both parts of the Olivet Discourse—the whole pattern of part 1 is the event spoken of in part 2—and indicates that the proper theme of both is the day of the Lord.

To say it again, Jesus has integrated Daniel's time of the end, seventieth week structure with the prophetic concept of the day of the Lord. It is to this that Paul refers in 1 Thessalonians 5 when he speaks of the day of the Lord. Furthermore, Paul focuses on the coming, the onset, the beginning of the day of the Lord by drawing upon Jesus' own teaching about the onset of the day as a whole in the second part of the Olivet Discourse and by referencing the beginning of the day of the Lord with Jesus' own description of that beginning in the first part of the Olivet Discourse. In other words, Paul is speaking of the seven-year tribulation—the seventieth week of Daniel—when he speaks of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5. And he is speaking of the onset, the beginning of this tribulation as coming suddenly, without warning, like a thief, at which time those who belong to Christ will be raptured to be forever with the Lord while destruction overtakes the rest.

The question naturally arises at this point about Paul's discussion of these matters in 2 Thessalonians. Does his discussion of the coming of Christ in that letter confirm or contradict what we have seen in 1 Thessalonians?

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1, Paul turns once again to the topic of “the coming (*tēs parousias*) of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together (*episynagōgēs*) to him” (ESV).<sup>50</sup> It seems reasonable to understand “our being gathered together to him” as the rapture. In his earlier letter, Paul had described the rapture as an event in which we who are left alive until the coming (*eis tēn parousian*; 1 Thess. 4:15) would be “caught up together with them (*syn autois*) ... so we will always be with the Lord” (*syn kyriō*; v. 17).

Both verbally and conceptually, the rapture as an occasion of being gathered together to the Lord is linked to the parousia. Because Paul posted these as linked topics, one naturally expects the ensuing treatment to address them. However, Paul proceeds

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<sup>50</sup> Most of the commentators are agreed on this: Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 163; Green, *Thessalonians*, 302; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 238; Thomas, *2 Thessalonians*, 318.

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

immediately to the matter of a false rumor concerning the day of the Lord. This should not be surprising, however, since as we have seen in the preceding discussion of both 1 Thessalonians 4–5 and the Olivet Discourse, the expression *parousia* is not used merely of the visible descent but of the day of the Lord as a whole, of which the visible descent is the culmination. In what follows, Paul sketches a similar pattern to that given by the Lord in the Olivet Discourse, which conveys the key elements of Daniel’s seventieth week; but in doing so, he draws out the explicit meaning of the personification of the abomination of desolation given in Mark 13:14. The sequential pattern that Paul gives begins with an “apostasy” and the revelation of a “man of lawlessness,” who is described by means of a citation from Daniel 11:36 (note the intentional intertextuality with Daniel and the Olivet Discourse, especially the Markan version of the Olivet Discourse).<sup>51</sup> The blasphemous self-exaltation that characterizes the Man of Lawlessness leads him to an act in the temple of self-deification—this temple blasphemy corresponding to and apparently interpreting the abomination of desolation in Daniel’s seventieth week and in the Olivet Discourse.<sup>52</sup> The sequence of events is marked by false signs and deception, which the Lord had warned about, and it is finally brought to an end by the *appearance* of the Lord’s coming (*tē epiphaneia tēs parousias autou* [2 Thess. 2:8]—which corresponds to the Lord’s words in Matthew 24:30, “then will *appear* [*phanēsetai*] ... the sign of the Son of Man”).

All this is very interesting to us as further revelation on the tribulation sequence—especially as it contributes to the developing New Testament doctrine of the Antichrist and his activity in the midtribulational abomination of desolation. However, the question does arise as to how Paul intended this brief sketch of the tribulational pattern to answer the false rumor that the day of the Lord had already arrived. The problem in following Paul’s argument is the ellipsis in 2:3–4. Paul clearly begins to enumerate a sequential pattern—first comes the “apostasy” and the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness, the one who will blasphemously exalt himself as God in the temple—but after mentioning the Man of Lawlessness, he breaks from his sentence to exhort them to remember what he taught them. Perhaps if the Thessalonians had had poorer memories, they would have requested Paul to write them a third letter reviewing the whole of his eschatology.

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<sup>51</sup> Hengel, *Studies in Mark*, 18–20.

<sup>52</sup> Green provides a helpful overview of the hermeneutical discussion surrounding the identity and activity of the Man of Lawlessness, including the intertextual connections to Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, and other references. The suggestion he gives, however, that the temple is not likely the Jerusalem temple on the supposition that events in Jerusalem were too remote and not of interest to this audience seems shortsighted. Obviously, the Thessalonians were greatly interested in the Jerusalem event of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and they were very much interested in knowing about his return. There is no reason to think that the Lord’s slaying of an antichrist, self-deified in the Jerusalem temple, as part of a sequence of events that would involve their resurrection and translation would not have been a topic of interest to them. Green, *Thessalonians*, 308–13. In contrast to Green, see the discussion by Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 286–87.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Apparently, however, they did recall his teaching and were presumably helped by his remarks in this letter to dismiss the false rumor that the day of the Lord had begun. But the ellipsis is a problem for modern-day interpreters. Translators invariably attempt to fill the ellipsis and usually do so with something like, “that day will not come.” Paul is then thought to be arguing that the day of the Lord will not come until *after* certain eschatological events, in this case the “apostasy” and the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness.<sup>53</sup> Whatever the apostasy refers to, the activity of the Man of Lawlessness presented here actually belongs to the integrated day of the Lord / time of the end pattern taught by the Lord and recalled by Paul, not something that precedes it. The coming of the day of the Lord in both the Olivet Discourse and in 1 Thessalonians 5 is without signs, without warning. It comes suddenly and unexpectedly, as a surprise. No one knows when it is coming. Without something in the text to indicate otherwise, we are compelled to fill the ellipsis with something that accords with this canonical and, for Paul’s readers, traditional understanding (something that Paul himself apparently expected, as he directs them in 2:15 to “hold to the traditions that you were taught by us ... by our letter” [ESV]). Consequently, it would be better to surmise something like, “For that day would not be here unless there was first the apostasy” (2:3).<sup>54</sup>

Of course, it would have been simpler for this debate about the rapture’s relationship to the tribulation if Paul had made the obvious point that the rapture had not yet taken

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<sup>53</sup> Note the view of Best and Wanamaker that the apostasy and the Man of Lawlessness are not to be taken as sequential elements but rather together, suggesting that the appearing of both of these elements, not one after the other, is in view (Best, *Thessalonians*, 281; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 243–44).

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<sup>54</sup> This view taken here rehabilitates a suggestion made by Giblin (Charles Giblin, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-examination of 2 Thessalonians 2* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967], 122–39) without affirming the main point of his argument. The problem in the text is that the apodosis is unstated. Contrary to the traditionally suggested complement, one has to remember that “Paul did *not* say what he is alleged [traditionally] to have had in mind” (128). It is just as possible that Paul intended, as Giblin noted, something like “the Day of the Lord will not have arrived.” The problem with Giblin’s view, however, is his denial that Paul sees the issue as a matter of “clock-and-calendar time,” and that Paul was trying to communicate to the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord “is neither simply present *nor* simply future.” This is at the heart of Giblin’s contention that Paul was more concerned for qualitative aspects of the day of the Lord. This view has been rightly criticized by Best (*Thessalonians*, 280–81), who has been followed in this by Wanamaker (*Thessalonians*, 243–44) and Green (*Thessalonians*, 306–7). However, the rejection of Giblin’s qualitative as opposed to calendrical interpretation of the problem does not in itself rule out the suggested alternative solution to the missing apodosis—an alternative that can also be seen as answering the temporal concern. At this point, the interpreter makes a choice influenced by a broader, contextual understanding of the subject matter. The view chosen here fits with what we have seen as a developed notion of the day of the Lord as a complex event *containing* the elements Paul is highlighting and the tradition extending from the Olivet Discourse to 1 Thessalonians 5 that the day of the Lord *begins without signs*.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

place.<sup>55</sup> The fact that Paul begins to itemize tribulational events has seemed to some to favor a mid- or posttribulational view. However, this is neither necessarily nor even probably so. It is not necessary, because the itemization of unseen tribulational events is a legitimate way to discount the rumor regardless of the rapture's relationship to the tribulation. Furthermore, is it really the case that Paul says nothing about the rapture in his response?

The topic posted at the outset of 2 Thessalonians 2 was the parousia and “our being gathered to him.” If we are right in assuming that this refers to the rapture, then one naturally expects it to be addressed in the text that follows. Keeping in mind that Paul expected his readers to supply information from their earlier instruction on these things, the portion of his letter that seems to take up this part of the dual topic is 2:13–15.<sup>56</sup> Here we find the contrast between “you” and “them.” In contrast to “them” whose destiny is to be condemned and to perish (2:10–12; cf. 1:7–9, esp. “destruction,” *olethros*, used here in 1:9 and in 1 Thess. 5:3), “God chose you to be saved” (*heilato hymas ... eis sōtērian*). We have here a clear parallel to 1 Thessalonians 5:9, “For God did not appoint us (*etheto hēmas*) to suffer wrath but to receive salvation” (*eis ... sōtērias*).<sup>57</sup> In 1 Thessalonians 5 this language of “salvation” for “you” as opposed to “destruction” for “them” refers to the separation that takes place at the *onset*, the beginning of the day of the Lord, with the “salvation” taking place by means of the rapture described in 4:13–17. Significantly, Paul concludes his remarks on “the parousia and our being gathered to him” by referring them explicitly to “the tradition that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” In other words, he refers them back to the earlier letter where the rapture's relationship to the day of the Lord is made clear.<sup>58</sup> Thus, Paul refutes the false rumor that the day of the Lord has already come by first pointing out that the early elements of the

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<sup>55</sup> E. Schuyler English made an interesting suggestion (E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture* [Traveler's Rest, S.C.: Southern Bible Book House, 1954], 69–71) that *hē apostasia*, literally meaning “departure,” was actually a reference to the rapture. However, *apostasia* consistently means a “moral departure,” not a spatial departure. The view has rightly been rejected. Thomas, a dispensationalist, does not even mention it (Thomas, *2 Thessalonians*, 321–22). See Bruce on various suggestions for *apostasia* (*Thessalonians*, 166–67).

<sup>56</sup> Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 264–65.

<sup>57</sup> Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 264–65; Green, *Thessalonians*, 326, 328. Wanamaker notes the additional connection with 1 Thessalonians 5:9 by means of the word *peripoiēsis* (*Thessalonians*, 267). On the many similarities in thought between this section and 1 Thessalonians, see Best, *Thessalonians*, 310–22.

<sup>58</sup> Some, such as Wanamaker, have argued that 2 Thessalonians preceded 1 Thessalonians. If this were so, the prior letter in 2 Thess. 2:15 would be unknown to us. However, this would not change the fact that the salvation at the onset of the day of the Lord was part of the tradition received by the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:1–2, 9). If Wanamaker's suggestion were correct, then we might see 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:10 as clearing up any ambiguity remaining for 2 Thessalonians. However, most do not follow Wanamaker's view of the order of the letters, and I am not arguing for it in this essay.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

day of the Lord, that is, the tribulation sequence, have not occurred, and second, by reminding them of his earlier teaching that at the beginning of the day of the Lord they are destined for a raptured deliverance—which also has not occurred. The intended result of this teaching, stated in 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17, is to leave them at the same point as 1 Thessalonians 4:18, to be comforted in the hope of this coming salvation.

## PRETRIBULATIONISM AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The book of Revelation offers the most extended treatment of the theme of the tribulation found anywhere in the Bible. The integrated synthesis of the day of the Lord and Daniel's time of the end that the Lord sketched out for his disciples in the Olivet Discourse and which Paul drew upon and partially elaborated in his Thessalonian correspondence is represented here in a grand synthesis of biblical prophecies, types, and images rich in intertextual resonance. This prophetic synthesis dominates the book, beginning in the fourth chapter (after John's commissioning and his transmission of the seven letters, which occupies chapters 1–3) and extending to the final exhortations in chapter 22. Both of the two main divisions of this long section present the synthesis of which we have been speaking.<sup>59</sup> The first portion, beginning in chapter 4 and running to the conclusion of chapter 11, integrated Daniel's heavenly throne and Son of Man vision (Dan. 7:9–14) with judgment features that are typical of day of the Lord predictions. The second portion, beginning in chapter 12 and running through chapter 22, also integrates Daniel's time of the end narrative and chronology with day of the Lord features. And both sections are filled with intertextual allusions and citations to many other biblical texts. A full accounting and exposition is obviously not possible in this essay. However, some remarks are necessary regarding the extent of this integration, particularly the question of whether the beginning of the tribulation, as presented by the book of Revelation, is correctly identified as the day of the Lord. The focus of this consideration is on Revelation 6, in which the Lamb begins to break the seals on the seven-sealed book. It is common among pretribulationists to see these events as beginning the tribulation.

As the seals are being broken, John sees calamities breaking out upon the earth. Here we have the famous four horsemen of the Apocalypse, each introduced in tandem with the breaking of a seal: a conqueror, war, famine, and death. With the breaking of the fifth seal is a scene of martyred souls, and then with the breaking of the sixth seal, John sees great heavenly and earthly disturbances—a great earthquake, the eclipsing of the sun and moon, the stars falling, and all humankind fleeing to the mountain rocks and caves to

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<sup>59</sup> On the structure of Revelation, see Christopher R. Smith, "The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions," *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994): 373–93.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

hide from “him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (6:16–17 ESV).

There is no doubt that what John is seeing in the sixth-seal scene is the day of the Lord. The imagery parallels that found in a group of day of the Lord texts: Isaiah 2:19–21; 13:9–10, 13; Joel 2:10–11, 30–31; 3:15; and the explicit reference to “the great day of their wrath” is unmistakable. The question is whether this seal-breaking series presents the day of the Lord as occurring subsequent to the tribulational events of the first five seal visions or whether all of these events are meant to be taken as the day of the Lord.

Three considerations support the latter view—the view that all the tribulation events envisioned in Revelation 6 should be identified with the day of the Lord. The first is the parallel between the elements of John’s seal visions and the early elements of Jesus’ Olivet Discourse.<sup>60</sup> The parallel is striking. War, famine, and martyrdom are highlighted by Jesus in each of the synoptic accounts. The first vision—the conqueror—appears related to Jesus’ first warning in the Olivet Discourse, that of false christs—a warning that in turn is linked to the Danielic prediction of an imperialistic, militaristic, and arrogant figure who will appear at the beginning of the time of the end.<sup>61</sup> This is the Antichrist figure who will perpetrate the abomination of desolation in the middle of the tribulation and whom the Lord will destroy at its end. His character and activity are further developed in subsequent chapters of Revelation. Earlier in this essay, I argued that the elements listed in the early part of the Olivet Discourse should be taken as day of the Lord features, and that the whole of the Olivet Discourse presents a narrative pattern in which the day of the Lord and Daniel’s time of the end are thoroughly integrated. The obvious parallel between the beginning of the tribulation in John’s seals vision and the elements beginning

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<sup>60</sup> Mounce writes, “It should be noted that although the form of John’s vision is related to Zechariah, the subject matter corresponds to the eschatological discourse of Jesus in the synoptic gospels” (Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 152–53). For an overview of the synoptic parallels, see R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 158–60. Also, on the synoptic and Old Testament background, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 372–74.

<sup>61</sup> There is, of course, a number of interpretations for this figure. For a summary of views, see Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005), 148–51. Smalley rejects the identification with the Antichrist “because,” he says, “it breaks the sequence of otherwise impersonal causes which are mentioned during this scene” (150). He agrees with Mounce that the figure is a reference to “military conquest in general” (151; cf. Mounce, *Revelation*, 154). However, he notes that a majority of modern commentators view the rider as “a militaristic figure” (150). Support for a personal reference may be drawn from the Olivet Discourse, which forms a parallel to this text. In the Olivet Discourse, “false Christs” are not general, impersonal forces, even though they are listed with a group of “impersonal causes.” Perhaps it is best to put the two together in the sense that the initial appearance of the Antichrist does provoke general conditions of war according to the typology given in Daniel.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the narrative in Jesus' Olivet Discourse would favor taking the early Revelation 6 features as day of the Lord characteristics as well.

The second consideration has to do with the way the day of the Lord is said to begin in the second part of the Olivet Discourse and, as we have seen, in Paul's teaching as well. The day of the Lord will begin suddenly, without any warning, in a time of relative peace and security. The corresponding point in John's Revelation 6 visions would be the breaking of the first seal. No conditions, no signs, are presented as leading up to this event. It simply happens. But when it happens, the other elements follow—war, famine, death, and persecution leading to martyrdom. They are features of the day of the Lord, not of the setting in which it begins.

The third consideration is related to the grammatical/literary description of the day of the Lord's "coming" in Revelation 6. What is not usually observed is the connection between *ēlthen hē hēmera* in 6:17 and the use of *erchomai* earlier in the chapter. In the visions that correspond to the breaking of the first four seals, John hears each of the four living creatures calling "Come!" (*erchou*). In response we see the appearance of these elements, which we have already recognized as being features of the day of the Lord. A summons such as we see here in Revelation 6:1–8 is typical in Old Testament day of the Lord prophecies. See, for example, the summons by which the day of the Lord is introduced in Isaiah 13:2–4. In response to the summons, "they come ... the Lord and the weapons of his indignation" (13:5 ESV), and "Behold, the day of the Lord comes" (13:9 ESV). Likewise, in Joel 3:9 the summons "Let them come up" (ESV) and in 3:11, "Hasten and come" (ESV), bring on the day of the Lord. The summons is issued to participants of the day of the Lord, which by virtue of their arrival constitute the coming of the day itself. In Revelation 6:17 the expression "the day ... has come" is an acknowledgment by all people in the context of the heavenly and earthly disturbances of 6:12–14 and the flight to the mountains and caves in 6:15–16. However, within the literary structure of this unit—the breaking of the seven seals—the "has come" (*ēlthen*) in the sixth vision is an acknowledgment of the results of the summons to come (*erchou*), which is repeated four times at the beginning of the series. The summons "come" calls forth elements of the day of the Lord. The declaration "has come" looks back over all these elements and acknowledges what has in fact come to be.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Few of the recent commentaries discuss the use of *erchomai* in 6:17, much less its literary connection to the first part of the chapter. Thomas is correct to note that the aorist indicative *ēlthen* refers "to a previous



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The next and obvious question (for the purposes of this book) concerns the relationship of the rapture to the tribulation in the book of Revelation. The problem we have in answering this question is that, as in the Olivet Discourse, there is no *explicit* mention of the rapture in the book of Revelation. This silence per se favors none of the tribulational positions presented in this book. All one can conclude is that an explicit discussion of the topic of the rapture was not in keeping with the purposes of the book or the purpose of the Lord in revealing these visions. A pretribulational position will have to rely on Paul's teaching of a pre—day of the Lord rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:10, the tribulational understanding of the day of the Lord by means of (1) Jesus' own integration of day of the Lord features with Daniel's time of the end structure and (2) Paul's own access of this integrated understanding in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and the application of this understanding to the tribulation / day of the Lord scenario in the book of Revelation, building up a canonical answer to the rapture-tribulation relationship.

Although there is no explicit reference to the rapture in the book of Revelation, there does seem to be an implicit reference in the letters to the seven churches, the portion of the book that precedes the visionary exposition of the tribulation. In the letter to the church at Philippi, we find Jesus' promise (Rev. 3:10–11): "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon."

Much has been written about this promise in relation to the rapture.<sup>63</sup> One point of agreement is that "the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to try those who

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arrival of wrath, not something that is about to take place." He suggests that although the day of wrath extends back to the breaking of the first seals, it is not recognized as such until its progression makes the change in times undeniable (Robert Thomas, *Revelation, an Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 1:457–58).

<sup>63</sup> This passage has frequently been cited in pretribulational writings; however, much of the recent literature has come in response to Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). Gundry's views were similar to the interpretation of Schuyler Brown, "The Hour of Trial, Rev. 3:10," *JBL* 85 (1966): 308–14; and that of George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 62. A major response to Gundry was published by Jeffrey L. Townsend, "The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," *BSac* 137 (1980): 252–66. See also David G. Winfrey, "The Great Tribulation: Kept 'Out Of' or 'Through?'" *GTJ* 3 (1982): 3–18; Thomas R. Edgar, "Robert H. Gundry and Revelation 3:10," *GTJ* 3 (1982): 19–49; and Thomas, *Revelation*, 1:283–90. Paul Feinberg's essay, "The Case for the Pretribulational Rapture Position," in Richard Reiter, Paul D. Feinberg, Gleason L. Archer, and Douglas J. Moo, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 47–86, the forerunner to this book, devotes considerable attention to Revelation 3:10 and is dependent on Townsend. In fact, all three contributors discuss Revelation 3:10 in their essays or response articles.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

dwell on the earth” is the future tribulation.<sup>64</sup> The “hour of trial” does not refer to a sixty-minute period, but is an accepted general reference to a coming time of trial, as is the case in the Olivet Discourse when Jesus refers to “the day or the hour.” This time of trial is further explicated by the universal extent—the whole world, those who dwell on the earth—which excludes the idea of a merely local trial. These descriptions are repeated later in the book of Revelation, clearly linking this “hour of trial” to the tribulation envisioned in the greater part of the book.<sup>65</sup>

The major point of disagreement has to do with the interpretation of the promise, “I will keep you from the hour of testing.” Pretribulationists have repeatedly argued that this means being kept away from the time of the tribulation, and they have seen this as a promise of the pretribulational rapture. Obviously, a pretribulational rapture would in fact be a way of keeping some—those who are raptured—away from the time of the tribulation. A number of posttribulationists, however, have argued that the promise in Revelation 3:10 means being *protected through* the time of the tribulation. This view depends on a “dynamic” interpretation of the preposition *ek* and a particular comparison with John 17:15, where the same verb *tēreō* is used in combination with *ek* for Jesus’ prayer, “that you *tērēsēs autous ek* the evil one.”<sup>66</sup> The weakness of this comparison for the posttribulational argument has been noted by several scholars.<sup>67</sup> It is likelier that in John 17:15 Jesus was asking that the Father “keep them away from” the Evil One than “keep them through” the Evil One. The failure of the typical posttribulational interpretation in both passages is the failure to appreciate fully the object of the verbal phrase. In John 17:15 Jesus is asking that the disciples be kept from, preserved from, a personal being, the Evil One. Jesus’ qualification of his request—“I do not ask that you take them out of the world” (ESV)—simply excludes (from this particular prayer) one possible option for “keeping them away from” this Evil One, a “keeping away,” which could take place either in or out of the world. Jesus clarifies his request by eliminating a possible interpretation of his words.

As pretribulationists have often pointed out, in Revelation 3:10 the object of the verbal phrase is not the Evil One but “the hour of trial.” The promise is that they will be kept from the time of testing, and on the basis of John 17:15, we may consider that “removal from the world” is one of the possible ways this promise might be fulfilled. How else

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<sup>64</sup> Preterists, obviously, would not agree, but the majority would favor seeing the day of the Lord here. See e.g., Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 192–94; also Beale, *Revelation*, 289–92.

<sup>65</sup> See Rev. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8.

<sup>66</sup> See Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*; and Beale, *Revelation*, 290–91.

<sup>67</sup> See the works by Townsend, Edgar, Winfrey, and Thomas in n. 63 above.  
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## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

might it be fulfilled? Why not consider how it was actually fulfilled for the Philadelphian recipients of this letter? It is certainly *not* true that they were *kept through* the tribulation, for they died before the tribulation came. They were *kept from* the time of the tribulation by being *kept away from* it. The typical posttribulational interpretation is thus precluded from *possibility* by the actual fulfillment of these words to their original recipients.<sup>68</sup>

Of course, this raises the question as to whether the promise in Revelation 3:10 has anything to do with the rapture's relationship to the tribulation. Maybe not. On the other hand, since we have raised the question of different *possible* ways the promise, worded in this way, might have been fulfilled, we may consider the possibility that a pretribulational rapture *could have* fulfilled these words. Like the actual fulfillment, and unlike the typical posttribulational proposal, it would have involved *removal from the time of trial*. Furthermore, this removal would have taken place by means of removal from the earth, one of the possible means by which "keep away from" could be fulfilled, as seen in John 17:15, and as experienced by the Philadelphians by virtue of their physical death prior to the time of the day of the Lord.

The point is that the actual fulfillment of this promise to the original recipients solves the question as to whether *tēreō ek* meant "keep away from" or "keep through." It meant "keep away from." And once that has been established, we can ask what the possible ways are in which such a promise might be fulfilled. A pretribulational rapture, though, as it turned out, not the actual fulfillment for the Philadelphians, would have been a possibility. A posttribulational rapture would not have been.

Before we leave Revelation 3:10, we should note that in the pretribulational view being advanced in this essay, the Philadelphian Christians, who were kept from the time of tribulation by death, will in fact be raised from the dead at the beginning of the tribulation when it comes. And they will be raptured to be with the Lord along with living believers who altogether are delivered from the wrath to come. Thus, even though they died, they will be raised from the dead, so that their death prior to the time of the tribulation will

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<sup>68</sup> Amazingly, neither side in this debate has considered this point, including the recent commentaries on Revelation. Aune, discussing the debate between pre- and posttribulationists, notes, "unfortunately, both sides of the debate have ignored the fact that the promise made here pertains to Philadelphian Christians" (David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52a [Nashville: Nelson, 1997], 240). However, he proceeds from this observation to infer a local protection only. John Walvoord, however, has acknowledged that the death of the Philadelphians must be seen as the immediate fulfillment of the promise in Rev. 3:10 so that the bearing of the promise on the future tribulation is typological—a typology that supports pretribulationism: "If the Rapture had occurred in the lifetime of the Philadelphian church, they would have been kept from the Great Tribulation by the Rapture. However, they died before this event took place" (John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], 278).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

not finally be the way they will have been kept from the time of the tribulation. When the tribulation comes, their state will be changed. They will no longer be dead, but raised. And, in that resurrection state, they will be kept from the time of the tribulation by being caught up, or raptured, to be with the Lord.

## COHERENCE OF PRETRIBULATIONAL ESCHATOLOGY

36

So far we have focused on the biblical teaching on the parousia and tribulation in relation to the rapture taught by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4–5. But in the conclusion of this essay, I would like to address two harmonization matters that pretribulationism helps to resolve. One we have already addressed in part—the matter of two different orientations to the parousia on the part of redeemed peoples. The other has to do with two different entries into the kingdom, related to two modes of kingdom life.

The two orientations to the parousia are most easily seen in the Olivet Discourse. On the one hand, there is the orientation described in the second part of the discourse, in which one does not know the day or the hour, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected time. This is the same orientation given to the disciples in Acts 1, where the Lord tells them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (v. 7 ESV). As noted earlier in this essay, Paul draws upon the second part of the Olivet Discourse when he tells the church that the day of the Lord will come suddenly, like a thief.

The other orientation is that given in the first part of the Olivet Discourse and summarized in the illustration of the fig tree: “when you see all these things, you know that he is near” (Matt. 24:33 ESV). This is the orientation of watching the signs as the tribulational pattern unfolds.

Pretribulationism offers an eschatological pattern that fully respects both of these orientations—both expressions of hope in the Lord’s coming. Prior to the beginning of the day of the Lord/parousia, all those who belong to Christ are in the position described in the second part of the Olivet Discourse; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13–5:10; and Acts 1:7. There are no signs that clearly indicate whether the Lord’s coming will be sooner or later. That coming could happen at any time. At any time, the Lord may descend from heaven and take them up to himself to form the company that he will bring with him when he concludes the day of the Lord.

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On the other hand, even though the day of the Lord is an expression of divine wrath and an exercise of divine judgment, there will be those who repent, who heed the warnings (Rev. 14:9–11), and who in spite of a growing intense persecution, overcome the Beast and the Devil by their testimony and the blood of the Lamb because they “loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev. 12:11 ESV). They form the company who will be received by the Lord into the kingdom at the end of the day of the Lord, when he descends to the earth and begins his reign. Through the tribulation period, they are in the position described in the first part of the Olivet Discourse and in the book of Revelation. They will see the developing main feature of the day of the Lord—the revelation of the Antichrist and the abomination of desolation—that the church prior to the tribulation will not (2 Thessalonians 2). They will see the signs and know when he—that is, when his appearing (or as Paul says, the appearing of his parousia)—is near.

These two orientations are different and manifest two different forms of “imminency.” The imminence of the rapture is due to the lack of any signs by which its proximity may be determined. It may be near or far. The time is unknown. It will occur unexpectedly. It could happen at any moment for those who will form the company that Christ will bring with him when he descends to the earth at the end of the day of the Lord to begin his millennial reign. This is the imminency that pretribulationism has traditionally advocated when describing the rapture.

The imminence of the “appearing of his coming”—which is his descent to earth to begin his millennial reign—is related to the revealed structure of the tribulation and the signs that mark passage from its beginning to its end. Those who come to faith during this time and look for the coming of the Lord know that he is near when they see “all these things.” His coming will become imminent in the sense that it is known to be near as the revealed seven-year tribulation structure concludes. They will “lift up their head, for their redemption draws near.” Both posttribulationism and prewrath rapture views confuse these two forms of imminency, essentially replacing the imminency of the parousia (which is the imminency of the day of the Lord as a whole) with the imminency of the appearing of his coming.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> The imminency of the rapture has also traditionally been related to passages expressing Christian hope in terms of the coming of Christ for the church without any reference to a preceding time of trouble—passages such as John 14:1–3; 1 Cor. 15:51–55; Phil. 3:20–21; Titus 2:11–14; and 1 John 3:1–3; as well as the passages we have looked at in 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13–5:10. For a classical discussion of the pretribulation view of imminency, see John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 75–82.

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The second harmonization matter has to do with how entrance into the kingdom is related to two modes of kingdom life—one mortal and one immortal.<sup>70</sup> This duality does not apply to the final everlasting kingdom, for the final abolition of physical death, and consequently physical mortality, occurs at the point of transition from the millennial phase to the final kingdom. But the conditions of human immortality begin to appear in advance of the final kingdom. Already now, Christ is the firstfruits from the dead, manifesting in himself the glorified human immortality that will characterize life in the future kingdom. At the rapture, Paul teaches, Christ will bestow this immortality on the saints either by resurrection from the dead or by translation. Revelation 20 also teaches that at the beginning of the millennium, the dead in Christ will be raised and will reign with him for a thousand years. The immortal glorified saints, whether by resurrection or translation, inherit the kingdom with Christ and constitute a vast resurrected human population in accordance with kingdom prophecies.

However, the millennium also fulfills a number of prophecies that predict mortal kingdom conditions—with actual or possible death, biological multiplication, and other features that indicate a continuity with mortal life as we know it now. This expanding mortal life will grow to become a large population in the millennial kingdom.

Entrance into the millennial kingdom takes place with a view toward these modes of kingdom life. Obviously, some will have to enter as mortals if mortal kingdom conditions are going to be fulfilled. The entrance of immortals, is, as we already know, by resurrection or translation.<sup>71</sup>

The problem is how to account for the kingdom entry of mortals and immortals within the parameters of the biblical texts. What are those parameters? First, whenever the rapture takes place, it will result in the translation of *all believers alive at that time* into immortality (1 Cor. 15—we will all be changed; 1 Thess. 4—those who are alive, who are left—both passages indicating *all living believers*). Second, when the judgment takes place to determine who among the mortals will enter the kingdom, *only mortal believers will enter* (Matt. 25:31–46). The problem is, of course, that the more proximate the rapture is to the judgment of mortals, the fewer if any believers there will be to be admitted as mortals into the kingdom. Posttribulationism obviously has the greatest difficulty with this problem. Prewrath and midtribulation views allow more time for a believing remnant to develop, albeit during the time of the greatest distress and deception.

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<sup>70</sup> See the discussion by Feinberg, “Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” 72–79.

<sup>71</sup> Not all of those who come to faith in the post-rapture revival survive the persecutions of the tribulation period. Revelation 6:9–11 speaks of martyrs at that time, and Revelation 7:9–17 portrays them as a great multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation. These martyrs will be raised from the dead after Christ’s descent to earth (Rev. 20:4–6) and will enter the kingdom as immortals.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Pretribulationism resolves the problem better than the others not only by its expectation of the maximum time differential for the believing mortal remnant to develop—the full tribulational period of seven years—but also because it more reasonably places the post-rapture conversion/revival in the first half of the tribulation, prior to the greatest distress and greater deception.

## DISPENSATIONALISM AND THE PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE

39

As is well known, the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture has been a key feature of dispensationalism. The argument given in this essay, however, is not particularly dispensational. The argument presented here is an interpretation of the relationship of the rapture to the day of the Lord in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, drawing out the tribulational meaning of the day of the Lord by means of a context established through clear intertextual connections. Hopefully, this is an argument that will prove helpful to dispensationalists and nondispensationalists alike. However, dispensationalists have typically brought other considerations to bear in their argument for a pretribulational rapture, considerations that contribute to the meaning and purpose of the rapture and its role in the unfolding plan of God as that has been understood by dispensational theology.

Traditionally, dispensationalists have seen the tribulation as a period of dispensational change—from the dispensation of the church to that of the millennial kingdom. This dispensational change also marked a shift of focus in the purpose of God, from the church to Israel, or as classical dispensationalists put it more generally, from the heavenly people to the earthly people. In much of this thinking, the pretribulational rapture was a systemic feature of dispensational theology tied directly to ecclesiology—that is, to the identity of the church as a unique and separate redeemed people in the plan of God. As a “heavenly people,” the church was distinct from redeemed “earthly people,” meaning primarily Israel. The church, as a previously unrevealed heavenly program, comes into existence as a parenthesis within the earthly program of God's purpose for Israel. This parenthesis must be closed for the earthly program to resume. The closure of that parenthesis is the pretribulational rapture. By means of the rapture—signless, sudden, mysterious, like the church itself in the plan of God—the heavenly people would be removed from the earth to heaven. Daniel's chronology of the seventy sevens, having been interrupted by the church, would resume. The seventieth week—the seven-year tribulation—would commence, and God would begin again to prepare an earthly people for the fulfillment of the earthly promises.

Many of the classical dispensational arguments for the rapture take into account this dispensational view of the church as a unique heavenly people. For example, *the church*

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

by definition cannot be present when Daniel's "earthly" chronology resumes. The church cannot suffer "wrath," because it cannot by definition be present in the time of tribulation wrath. It is not just the existing church at the time of the rapture that is taken up; it is the church as a program in the plan of God that is consummated. Consequently, the promise in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, "for God has not destined us for wrath" (ESV) was used to argue that God has determined that the church per se will not be present during the tribulation period. Since the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the distinguishing mark of identity for the church, this meant that the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit ceases with the rapture. It logically follows, then, that those who come to faith during the tribulation period are not part of the church as the church is defined universally to be those united to Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is why dispensational arguments have typically stressed the observation that the word *church* does not appear in the book of Revelation after chapter 3. In accordance with this, dispensationalists have typically identified the restrainer in 2:6–7 as the Holy Spirit in his mode of indwelling the church—that is, in his church-forming work of baptizing believers into Christ. The removal of the restrainer would be the removal of the church. And finally, the dispensational view of the church has often been combined with a church-age view of the letters to the seven churches, with the Philadelphian church representing the true church being removed from the earth at the time of the rapture.

This church-program view of the rapture has in turn conditioned arguments formulated against pretribulationism—arguing, for example, that pretribulationism must be wrong because the presence of believers in the post-Revelation 3 tribulation scenario indicates the church must be present, or arguing that pretribulationism is wrong because the restrainer cannot be clearly identified as the Holy Spirit in his baptizing ministry.

The reader who wishes to pursue classical or semiclassical dispensational arguments for pretribulationism is directed to various publications in which they are set forth.<sup>72</sup> Many

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<sup>72</sup> The following are just some of the works one might consider. A classic in dispensational eschatology is J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958). The many writings of John F. Walvoord bear on the subject, including *The Rapture Question*, which has already been mentioned. See also his trilogy, *Israel in Prophecy*, *The Church in Prophecy*, and *The Nations in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962, 1964, and 1967). Walvoord published a study of the different types of posttribulationism in his work *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), and later in his life, *Major Bible Prophecies*, which has already been mentioned, and *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton: Victor, 1990). Another classic is Charles Ryrie's *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux, 1953). See also Ryrie's *What You Should Know about the Rapture* (Chicago: Moody, 1981). Finally, two essays in particular are recommended. One, as already noted, is the essay by Paul Feinberg, "The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position," in *The Rapture*, 47–86. Another is the



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

of these works present strong arguments for pretribulationism, and the reader is encouraged to consider these presentations. However, one needs to be aware of the ecclesiological dimension of the argument in these works and be prepared to pursue the matter in that direction.

Not all dispensationalists follow the classical model in distinguishing Israel and the church as two eternally separate redeemed people groups. Progressive dispensationalists distinguish Israel and the church administratively (organizationally), constitutionally (ethnic versus multiethnic), politically, historically, and typically—both revealing aspects or dimensions of the coming kingdom: multinational (including Israel and gentile nations) and united together in Christ by the Holy Spirit (testified to by the church in the present dispensation). But since they do not see the church as a uniquely separate redeemed people group, they typically do not argue that the pretribulation rapture is the programmatic separation of the church for the purpose of forming another group of the redeemed.<sup>73</sup> For progressive dispensationalists, the rapture occurs at the beginning of the tribulation because God wills it so, as revealed by Paul in his Thessalonian correspondence, not because it is necessary to separate the program of the church.

However, having arrived at this point, the argument having been made on exegetical grounds and distinguished from earlier programmatic arguments, I feel some obligation to suggest at least what larger eschatological meaning a pretribulation rapture might carry. Of course, as has been pointed out, the rapture will be a bestowal of grace on all who hope or have hoped in Christ—the deliverance from the day of wrath and bestowal of glory. It constitutes a sign of the sure and certain triumph of God's salvation in contrast to the judgment that is about to be poured out, a pattern that will be played out again in the unfolding events as the righteous are kept from the judgment that falls on the lost (cf. the sheep and goats judgment and the translation of mortal believers at the end of the millennium in contrast to the judgment of hell). Many pretribulationists have pointed out the prophetic events that take place between the rapture and the appearance at the end

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article by Zane Hodges, "The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 67–79.

<sup>73</sup> For an overview of progressive dispensationalism, including a review of the historical development of dispensationalism, see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), as well as the earlier work *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). One should also note the work of Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). A well-known work on dispensationalism is Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965). This was revised and expanded and published in 1995 under the title *Dispensationalism*. It offers a critique of progressive dispensationalism. For a comparison of views, see Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

of the tribulation, when the saints will come with Christ in glory. These include the judgment seat of Christ and the marriage supper of the Lamb, which presumably do not take place instantaneously. During the time of the tribulation, the raptured saints prepare to appear with Christ in his glorious descent. But we also may consider the impact of the fact of the rapture on those who will come to faith during the tribulation. We know that grace is extended during the tribulation period. The book of Revelation extends comfort and encouragement to those undergoing trial by consideration of Christ's resurrection and power to extend resurrection life to those he will. A pretribulation rapture would be a manifestation of Christ's ability to extend resurrection power and grant immortality—a sign that would strengthen those who will come to faith in the midst of the severest time of trouble and deception—to those who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb and make them white (Rev. 7:14), those who will conquer by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony and who will love not their lives unto death (Rev. 12:11), those who are called upon to endure to the end (Rev. 14:12) and who will likewise be granted immortality either sooner (at the beginning of the millennium by resurrection, Rev. 20:4, 6) or later (at the end of the millennium by translation, Rev. 21:4).

## CONCLUSION

My task in this essay has been to set forth the argument for pretribulationism. This is not the only argument that could be given, and the reader is reminded of references to other works on the subject given above. However, I hope that it is evident that there are biblical reasons for taking a pretribulation view of the rapture.

All of us in this volume have the advantage of following a previous publication on this subject that has been widely used with much benefit in evangelical institutions. The reader may want to consult the fine essay by my predecessor in the work, Paul Feinberg, for a different approach to the same subject.

Of course, each of us as contributors to this volume disagree about the relationship of the rapture to the tribulation. But the reader should be reminded that there is so much on which we do agree. Christ is coming again. He is coming to rule on the earth. There will be a resurrection of the dead in Christ and a translation of those who are alive at his coming. And we will reign with him, not just for a millennium, but forever. There is so much more that each of us could list that we affirm together. We have a living hope in the resurrection of Christ from the dead and a secure inheritance kept for us in heaven, coming with him when he comes (1 Peter 1:3–4).

Peter also reminds us that the prophets who prophesied about Christ's coming "searched and inquired carefully" not only as to who the Messiah would be, but also concerning the

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

time of prophetic events (1 Peter 1:10–12). Their work was not simply for themselves, but for others who would follow.

We are not prophets, just servants of Christ, trying to be faithful in understanding the Scripture, searching and inquiring carefully to understand the time of his coming in relation to the time of tribulation. All this work related to the timing of prophetic events will be useful if through it we and those who come after us, if the Lord tarries, actually grow thereby into a better understanding of God's Word and a more reliable knowledge of the hope that we have in Christ. One way to do that is to put these views on the table and seriously consider and critique them in the light of Scripture. I have full confidence and the highest esteem for my colleagues in this endeavor and look forward to this exercise of searching the Scriptures together. I think I can speak for all of us in saying that our desire for you the reader is to join us in this endeavor, to take these essays, and like the Bereans of old, examine the Scriptures with us to see if these things are so (Acts 17:11). Our desire, even more than wanting our readers to gain a better understanding of the Scriptures, is that as properly working parts of the body, we may all grow up in every way—in faith, hope, and love—into him who is the head, into Christ (Eph. 4:15–16).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Blaising, C. (2010). "A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture." In S. N. Gundry & A. Hultberg (Eds.), *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation* (Second Edition, pp. 25–73). Zondervan.