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A Case for the Prewrath Rapture

ALAN HULTBERG

The prewrath rapture position rests on two major theses: that the church will enter the last half of Daniel's seventieth week¹ and that between the rapture of the church and the return of Christ to earth will be a significant period of extraordinary divine wrath.² If these two theses are demonstrated, then of necessity the rapture can neither be pretribulational, a position that requires that the rapture occur before the middle of Daniel's seventieth week (though that usually argues for a rapture before the beginning of that week) nor posttribulational (in the classic sense), a position that requires no significant period of time intervening between the rapture and the return of Christ to earth. It seems to me, however, that absolute demonstration of these points is close to impossible, since much of the evidence is patient of multiple interpretations. I will thus seek in this essay to demonstrate the probability of the prewrath rapture; that is, that the most probable reading of the evidence serves to support the two major theses of this position.³ My argument will proceed by demonstrating these theses in turn. First, I will

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¹ I assume the following in this essay: (1) that Daniel's seventieth "week" represents the final seven years of world history, (2) that the final kingdom in Daniel is Rome, and (3) that Daniel presents Rome's domination of the Jews as having both a historical (first-century AD) and an eschatological (end of history) manifestation. See Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, NAC 18 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 267–73; Gleason L. Archer Jr., "Daniel," in *Daniel—Minor Prophets*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:116–19. Cf. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 21 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978), 171, 177–78. The Olivet Discourse, the Thessalonian correspondence, and the Apocalypse all seem to rely on these assumptions, as will be shown below.

² A number of other theses regarding eschatology are maintained by one or more proponents of the prewrath rapture, including, for example, the significance of the 1,290 and 1,335 days mentioned in Dan. 12:10–11 and the identity of the restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2. These are sometimes disputed by critics, and in many cases I believe the critique to be justified. But the basic prewrath position does not stand or fall on these theses, and I will not consider them in what follows.

³ Such an argument is usually attacked in at least one of two ways. First, it is frequently suggested that providing alternative interpretations of key texts undermines the probability of the argument. This is a red herring. The question in all exegesis is, which is the best interpretation? And the best interpretation is not overthrown or made less probable merely because competing interpretations exist. Second, it is sometimes argued that such a case is necessarily weak because it builds inference upon inference, one uncertainty on another (see, e.g., Paul S. Karleen, *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church: Is It Biblical?* [Langhorne, Pa.: BF Press, 1991]). This is only true if, on the one hand, the inferences are not the most probable, and, if, on the other, one inference actually depends upon other weak inferences. My case will not depend for the most part on this kind of linking of inferences but on an accumulation of relatively independent strands of highly probable evidence. There is nothing necessarily weak about such a case. Finally, it is valid to test the probability of interpretations by comparison with other related texts. On the

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show that the church will enter the last half of Daniel's seventieth "week"; then I will show that the church will be raptured before the end of that week, prior to the outpouring of God's wrath. We begin, then, with evidence for the first thesis.

THE CHURCH WILL ENTER THE SECOND HALF OF DANIEL'S SEVENTIETH WEEK

Three passages in Scripture are especially important in demonstrating that the church will enter the last half of Daniel's seventieth week: the Olivet Discourse, 2 Thessalonians 2, and Revelation. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus seems to indicate that his disciples would see both the Danielic abomination of desolation and the subsequent tribulation (Matt. 24:15–22; Mark 13:14–20) immediately prior to his parousia. Paul appears to expect the former in 2 Thessalonians 2, and John appears to expect at least the latter in Revelation 2, 7, 13, and 17. In what follows, I will attempt to show that in each of these cases the author does in fact expect the church to see the abomination of desolation or to experience the Danielic tribulation and thus to enter the last half of Daniel's seventieth week. If any of my arguments prove successful, then this part of the case for a prewrath rapture will have been made. The case, of course, is considerably strengthened if all the arguments prove successful. We will begin with a consideration of the Olivet Discourse.

Matthew 24

The Olivet Discourse is a response by Jesus to his disciples' question concerning the end of the age (Matt. 24:3).⁴ Their question was elicited by Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Jewish temple, and their assumption seems to have been that the destruction of the temple was an eschatological event.⁵ Jesus' response is designed in part to distinguish the first-century destruction of the temple from the end of the age when the Son of Man comes.⁶ Thus Jesus notes that the disciples will see certain catastrophic events

supposition that the biblical authors will not contradict one another, the thesis that best harmonizes the greatest number of the most probable interpretations of the various texts is the best thesis, and an interpretation can be made more probable if it fits with that harmonization. This is a valid case of building inference upon inference.

⁴ For simplicity's sake, and because I will later consider Matthew's perspective on the audience of the Olivet Discourse, I will talk here about the Olivet Discourse in its Matthean form. The basic analysis holds true for the Markan version and, for the most part, the Lukan, though Luke places a greater emphasis on first-century events. For a reconstruction of the tradition behind the New Testament, see David Wenham, *The Rediscovery of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse*, Gospel Perspectives 4 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984).

⁵ This assumption probably comes from Dan. 9:26–27, which predicts the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by "the people of the ruler who will come," the final opponent of God and his people. First-century Jews recognized the Romans as the people of the ruler to come. See Baldwin, *Daniel*, 174–75; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 561–62.

⁶ There is considerable debate as to the relationship of the first-century destruction of Jerusalem to the Danielic tribulation and the return of Christ. For an older but still useful overview, see D. A. Carson,

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surrounding the destruction of the temple⁷ but that explicitly do not signal the end (Matt. 24:5–13; see esp. v. 6). These, Jesus says, are merely the beginning of birth pains (Matt. 24:8). The primary sign of the end will be “ ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel” (v. 15),⁸ which will initiate the great Danielic tribulation (v. 21; cf. Dan. 12:1). This tribulation will end when the “sign of the Son of Man” will appear in the sky and the angels will gather his elect from the four winds (Matt. 24:29–31). Though the disciples would see a proleptic fulfillment of these events in the destruction of Jerusalem,⁹ the end of the age and the coming of the Son of Man were yet future. The disciples are thus addressed as both primary witnesses of these tribulational events and as representatives of the final generation.

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The context of the Olivet Discourse is thoroughly Jewish, and this has led most pretribulationists to deny that the church is in view in this chapter, especially as the “elect” of the final generation who are gathered at the end of the age and who are addressed representatively in the warnings to the disciples. So, for example, Renald Showers points to (1) the Jewish referents in the Old Testament allusions in the discourse, (2) the Jewish environment of the discourse and its warnings, and (3) the fact that Gentiles aren’t explicitly addressed as a topic till Matthew 25 as proof that Jesus addresses the Olivet Discourse to his disciples as Jews.¹⁰ John Walvoord adds that the nature of the

“Matthew,” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:491–95. The two best alternatives are the following: (1) Jesus was claiming that the destruction of Jerusalem was the Danielic abomination of desolation and that the subsequent Danielic tribulation is a characterization of the persecution of God’s people since then, one that will continue until the second coming (see, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992], 355–57). On this scenario, the abomination of desolation is not a sign of the end or is so only in the sense that the last days began with the destruction of Jerusalem but will not end till the coming of the Son of Man. This view requires that Daniel’s relatively precise three and one-half years is symbolic. (2) Jesus is claiming that the destruction of the temple is like, and even prophetically related to, the abomination of desolation and tribulation, but that the two are not to be equated. Though the destruction of Jerusalem is a significant eschatological event, and even if the interadvent age is characterized by tribulation, the coming of the Son of Man will nevertheless be immediately preceded by the abomination of desolation and three-and-one-half-year tribulation as outlined in Daniel (see, e.g., David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972]). The hyperbolic language of Matt. 24:21–22 supports this reading, as do the “immediately” of v. 29 and Paul’s anticipation of an actual Antichrist figure and his very specific understanding of the abomination of desolation in 2 Thessalonians 2.

⁷ Note v. 6, “You are about to hear ...” (*mellēsete ... akouein*).

⁸ A major shift is indicated by *oun* (“therefore”; NIV “so”) in verse 15 (*de*, “but,” in Mark 13:14). See BDAG, 736–37, where *oun* can indicate a transition to something new or even adversative to what precedes. Cf. Wenham, *Rediscovery*, 177; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:326, 345.

⁹ Note the “you” of vv. 15, 23, 25, 26, the injunctions in vv. 32–35, and the parallels in Luke 21.

¹⁰ Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 124–29.

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disciples' question, a question that assumes Jewish kingdom hopes, points to the Jewish nature of Jesus' discourse.¹¹ None of those assertions are objectionable. The disciples do not view themselves, nor are they treated by Jesus in Matthew, as anything other than faithful Jews who are beginning the community of the Messiah. It is not surprising then that the question and response recorded in the Olivet Discourse have such a Jewish character. But neither do they show that the church is not in view in the Olivet Discourse, unless one begins with the assumption of a radical discontinuity between the church and Israel. This assumption, however, is very unlikely.

Space does not permit a full discussion of this topic;¹² it will suffice for our purposes to show that for Matthew the church is viewed as in some sense the inheritor of the Jewish kingdom, with the destruction of Jerusalem playing a significant role in the transition, and that the disciples form the core of the new messianic community.¹³ That Matthew has such a view can be seen in the following lines of evidence.

1. *Israel comes to its fulfillment in Jesus as Messiah.* Quite apart from the clear motif in Matthew that as the promised Messiah Jesus brings the Old Testament to its fulfillment (summed up in Matthew 5:17 and seen in the numerous fulfillment quotations but attested in several other ways throughout the gospel), many scholars have noted that Matthew portrays Jesus as fulfilling the role of Israel itself.¹⁴ Thus, for example, in the early chapters of Matthew, Jesus, like eschatological Israel, is visited by Gentiles bearing gold and frankincense (Matt. 2:11; cf. Isa. 60:1–6); like Israel is called as God's son out of Egypt (Matt. 2:13–14; Hos. 11:1; cf. Ex. 4:22–23), and, like Israel, successfully endures temptation in the wilderness through filial obedience to the law (Matt. 4:1–11; Deut. 6–8; see esp. 8:1–5).¹⁵ Later he is presented as both the Suffering Servant (Matt. 8:17; 12:17–21;

¹¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 87.

¹² The exegetical and theological questions are voluminous. My own perspective is a form of progressive dispensationalism. For a general introduction, see Craig Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); idem, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook on Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1993). Cf. the analysis in Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), esp. chap. 4.

¹³ Cf., e.g., R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989), 206–41; Scot McKnight, "Matthew, Gospel of," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 536–38; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 25–27.

¹⁴ Besides France, *Matthew*, 206–10, see idem, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 50–53; C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1970), 106–8.

¹⁵ See also the possible use of Hos. 6:2 in Matt. 16:21 (and parallels) as part of the motif of Jesus representing Israel.

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20:28) and the Son of Man, both corporate “messianic” figures representing Israel.¹⁶ Thus for Matthew, to belong to Israel one must belong to the Messiah, Jesus.

2. *Jesus founds a new community centered in the twelve apostles.* Matthew is well known for explicitly presenting Jesus as founding a new community, the *ekklēsia* (16:18; 18:17). The language comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament *āhal* [yīsrāēl] or “congregation [of Israel],” and indicates that the messianic community that Jesus is founding is in some sense the “true” or “new” Israel. Furthermore, this community is centered in the twelve apostles, the number twelve representing a reconstitution of Israel (see, e.g., Matt. 19:28).¹⁷ The impetus for founding this community is Jesus’ rejection by unbelieving Jews.

3. *The Jewish rejection of Jesus leads to the rejection of Israel and establishment of the church.* A basic theme of Matthew’s gospel is that Jesus, the King, preaches the kingdom of heaven to Israel (2:20; 10:5–6; 15:24) but is ultimately rejected by them.¹⁸ This theme comes to a head in the narratives of the Passion Week, where Jesus enters Jerusalem as the messianic King but is confronted and eventually killed by the Jewish authorities. In a series of parables and denunciations leading up to the Olivet Discourse and the plot to kill him, Jesus condemns Jewish unbelief and announces the “disinheritance” of Israel. The parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21:33–45 is most significant. Jesus concludes the parable by announcing to the chief priests and elders of the people that, as a result of their rejection of him, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (v. 43). The fact that Jesus gives the kingdom to another “nation” (*ethnos*) and that Matthew explicitly reports the complicity of the entire nation in the rejection of Jesus (27:25) demonstrates that Jesus does not intend merely the rejection of the Jewish leadership but of Israel as a whole. Thus these denunciations lead on the one hand to the pronouncement against Jerusalem (23:37–39) and the Olivet Discourse (chaps. 24–25) and on the other to the Great Commission (28:18–20), which allows the gospel to move beyond Israel to all nations in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (1:1) and of Israel’s role in the Old Testament. This witness of the new messianic community will continue to the end of the age (24:14; 28:20) when Jesus returns.

4. *The purpose of the discourses in Matthew is to train the church in discipleship.* Another basic and related theme in Matthew is that the only proper response to Jesus is discipleship. To

¹⁶ The idea of the Messiah as the Son of God (e.g., Ps. 2; 110), which stems from the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:12–14), also suggests that the Messiah represents Israel.

¹⁷ This is not to say that Matthew sees no future for Israel. Matt. 23:39; 24:30 suggest a conversion of Israel at the return of Christ (Zech. 12:10). Matthew 24:30, however, seems to distinguish the gathered elect from the repentant tribes of Israel.

¹⁸ France, *Matthew*, 213–27.

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be a member of the messianic community is to be a disciple (or “student”), and to be a disciple is to obey the teaching of Jesus (7:21–27; 28:19–20).¹⁹ Matthew’s gospel, structured as it is around five major discourses of Jesus, is designed to convey that teaching. Thus each discourse begins with the introductory formula “His disciples came to him” (5:1; 10:1; 13:10; 18:1; 24:1)²⁰ and concludes with variations of “when Jesus had finished these words” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). This makes it highly unlikely that the teaching of the Olivet Discourse is directed to the disciples as anything but disciples, representatives of those the gospel is designed to instruct.²¹

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I conclude, then, that when Jesus warns his disciples of the Danielic abomination of desolation and the great tribulation, he does so as to representatives of the messianic community, the church. And though the rapture itself is not explicitly mentioned in the Olivet Discourse (the most likely reference is the gathering of the elect at the *parousia* [“coming”] of the Son of Man in Matt. 24:31), what is important here is that if Matthew expects the church to see the abomination of desolation and the great tribulation, then the rapture must occur after the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week. This point is confirmed in Paul’s teaching on the rapture and the return of Christ in the Thessalonian epistles, which is itself a reflection of the tradition underlying the Olivet Discourse. In particular, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4, Paul also identifies the abomination of desolation as the major sign by which the approach of the rapture could be known, thus placing the rapture after the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week.

2 Thessalonians 2

1 Thessalonians 4:15–16 Places the Rapture at Matthew 24:31

The letters to the Thessalonians are unique among the letters of Paul for containing such concentrated and detailed instruction on the *parousia*.²² Much of this instruction was related orally to the Thessalonians prior to the writing of the letters, when Paul first founded the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 1:9–10; 2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 3:6). This teaching included the certainty of tribulation (1 Thess. 3:4), the uncertainty of the timing of the day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:1–2), and the fact that certain events must precede the day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:1–5). Paul refers to this teaching as “traditions” (ESV; *paradoseis*) passed on to the Thessalonians by himself and his coworkers, Silas and Timothy (2 Thess. 2:15), and many have noted the probable dependence of at least some of these traditions on those underlying the Olivet Discourse, as indicated by the extensive correspondence

¹⁹ Thus Matthew characteristically refers to the twelve apostles as the “disciples.”

²⁰ Matthew 10:1 has “he called his twelve disciples to him.”

²¹ So, e.g., Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 32, 770.

²² Cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:1–11, 23; 2 Thess. 1:6–10; 2:1–15.

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between Matthew 24 (and parallels) and the Thessalonian epistles.²³ Thus, in response to a concern raised by the Thessalonians regarding “those who fall asleep” (v. 13), Paul reassures his readers that

we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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. 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. (1 Thess. 4:15–17)

The parallels between this passage and Matthew 24:30–31 are noteworthy. In both, there are references to the parousia of Jesus in the clouds to gather his saints, accompanied by a trumpet blast and angels. Some of these elements feature into other parousia passages in the Thessalonian epistles as well; for example, Jesus’ coming with angels (2 Thess. 1:7 and perhaps 1 Thess. 3:13) and his gathering the saints (2 Thess. 2:1 and perhaps 1 Thess. 1:10; 3:13; 5:9; 2 Thess. 1:7; 2:13). An especially interesting parallel is 2 Thessalonians 1:6–10, in which there is an emphasis on Jesus’ powerful vengeance on his enemies and glorification in his saints when he “is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire” (ESV; cf. Matt. 24:30–31). This evidence indicates that, though no “rapture” is explicitly mentioned in Matthew 24:31, it is precisely there in the tradition that Paul places the rapture. He states in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 that at least this expansion on the tradition is due to a “word from the Lord” (ESV), whether an *agraphon* or a prophetic utterance,²⁴ undermining any force to the argument that points to differences between the two texts to deny a connection between them.²⁵ Thus 1 Thessalonians 4:15–16 confirms my reading of Matthew 24 and suggests that Paul, like Matthew, expects the church to experience the events of the last half of Daniel’s seventieth “week.”

²³ See esp. Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted: The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse in Mark 13 Par.* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1966), 178–79; G. Henry Waterman, “The Sources of Paul’s Teaching on the 2nd Coming of Christ in 1 and 2 Thessalonians,” *JETS* 18 (1975): 105–13; David Wenham, “Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol. 11, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 345–75, and most modern commentators (e.g., Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 170–71, 179–81, 184, and F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45 [Waco: Word, 1982], 95, 108).

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²⁴ If the “word of the Lord” upon which Paul based his rapture teaching was a post-Easter prophetic utterance, this may account for the “mystery” of 1 Cor. 15:51–52.

²⁵ See, e.g., Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture View*, whose list of fourteen differences between Matt. 24:31 and 1 Thess. 4:16 is largely based on silence.

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1 Thessalonians 2:3 Says That the Rapture Is Preceded by the Abomination of Desolation

The dependence of Paul on the Jesus tradition underlying the Olivet Discourse continues in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 (cf. Matt. 24:13–15, 24).²⁶ Like Matthew 24:15, Paul points the Thessalonian church to certain signs related to the appearance of the Danielic Antichrist that must precede the coming of Christ to reassure them that “the day of the Lord” has not arrived. He writes:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? (2 Thess. 2:1–5)

Let's note a few things about this passage. First, Paul refers to the parousia of the Lord Jesus and our “gathering to him” (cf. Matt. 24:31) as “the day of the Lord.” The former is language that connects 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:12 and the underlying Jesus tradition. It suggests that when Paul refers to signs prior to the day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4, he means to include the rapture as being preceded by those signs.²⁷ This is also implied in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11. There Paul continues the discussion regarding the parousia begun in 4:13–18.²⁸ Whereas 4:13–18 was concerned with the relationship of the resurrection to the rapture at the parousia, 5:1–11 is

²⁶ Cf. Wenham, “Paul and Apocalypse,” 349–52. Note the concurrence of language regarding gathering (2 Thess. 2:1; Matt. 24:31), disturbance about the parousia (2 Thess. 2:2; Matt. 24:6), apostasy/falling away (2 Thess. 2:3; Matt. 24:10), lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:3, 7, 8; Matt. 24:12), deceptive signs and wonders (2 Thess. 2:10–11; Matt. 24:20), and the injunction not to let anyone deceive you (2 Thess. 2:3; Matt. 24:4). Though the correspondence between 2 Thess. 2:1–12 and the Olivet Discourse is not as obvious as that in 1 Thessalonians, the combined evidence of the two related Pauline eschatological texts makes it virtually certain that Paul is dependent on the Jesus tradition in both.

²⁷ All sides agree that the unexpressed protasis of 2 Thess. 2:3 (“for [something will or will not be true], unless ...”) is “the day of the Lord will not come.” The use of “Let no one deceive you in any way” recalls the similar phrase in Matt. 24:4, where the same thought is in mind: let no one deceive you into thinking that the day of the Lord has come.

²⁸ So, e.g., Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 176; John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, rev. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 211–12. Though *peri de* (“now concerning”) introduces a new topic (as in 1 Thess. 4:9 and perhaps 4:13; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12), it does not necessarily signal a radical departure from what precedes (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1–24, 25–40). First Thessalonians 5:9–11 clearly shows that Paul is continuing the discussion begun in 4:13.

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addressing the timing of these events²⁹ and the need for watchfulness on the part of the Thessalonians in light of that timing. Note that Paul refers to the parousia/rapture as the day of the Lord (5:1–2).³⁰ In the Old Testament, the day of the Lord is that time when God enters history to judge his enemies and, sometimes, to vindicate his people.³¹ In particular, the eschatological day of the Lord is when God will gather the nations for judgment and Israel for salvation and blessing (e.g., Isa. 2:12–21; 13:6–16; Ezek. 30:3; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:14–2:3). When Paul uses the phrase here, he undoubtedly has such passages in mind, for one of the primary features he emphasizes about the day of the Lord (Jesus) is the “sudden destruction” that will fall upon the unbelievers (v. 3) and the wrath in that day from which believers will be spared (v. 9; cf. 1:10). Thus, Paul can also say in 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8 (cf. 2:8) that Jesus will give rest to his church and deal out retribution to the church’s enemies on the day he is revealed. But more important, it is critical to note that in this passage Paul explicitly states that the day of the Lord will overtake believers. This confirms that the rapture, associated with the parousia in 4:15–17, is in fact considered by him as part of the day.

Paul’s basic response to the question about the timing of the parousia is that the Thessalonians already know that the day will come like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2). Here the emphasis is on the unanticipated arrival of the parousia. Paul elaborates this concept for unbelievers in verse 3; the day will come on them both unexpectedly and destructively. In verses 4 and 5, by contrast, the day will not come upon believers as a thief, because they are not in darkness, being children of the light and of the day. Walvoord argues that Paul means in verse 4 that the day will not overtake believers at all,³² but this interpretation is unlikely. First, this interpretation does account well for the inclusion of the comparative “as a thief.”³³ If Paul meant to say that the day will not

²⁹ “Times and dates,” or sometimes just “the time,” was stock language for eschatological events in Judaism and early Christianity, perhaps stemming from Dan. 2:21. Cf. Acts 1:7; 3:19–21; Mark 13:33; Rev. 1:3; 2 Bar. 14:1–2 (which, like Rev. 1:1, alludes to Dan. 2:29, 45); 4 Ezra 7:75.

³⁰ All pretribulationists, as far as I know, agree with this. Most would understand that Paul uses the expression “the day of the Lord” in its broadest sense here, that is for the entire complex of eschatological events from the rapture to the millennium.

³¹ See, e.g., Richard H. Hiers, “Day of the Lord,” in *ABD*, 2:82–83, and his bibliography. In general I concur with Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 218, that “based on the Old Testament ... the Day of the Lord is a time of judgment, culminating in the second coming of Christ, and followed by a time of special divine blessing to be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom.”

³² Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 221.

³³ Cf. Douglas Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” in Richard Reiter, Paul D. Feinberg, Gleason L. Archer, and Douglas Moo, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 185. On the strong preference for the singular *kleptēs* over the plural *kleptas* found in a few manuscripts, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: UBS, 1994), 565. Cf. Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 155.

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overtake believers, period, why add “as a thief”? Walvoord understands Paul to mean that the day will not overtake believers as a thief because they do not belong to the same time period (night) to which unbelievers belong. But this does not really solve the problem, since Walvoord is only accounting for the causal clauses, not the comparative. In effect it merely has Paul saying, “But that day will not overtake you as a thief, because it has nothing to do with you.” The question then remains, why the comparative? On Walvoord’s reading, Paul did not need to include it. Second, this reading cannot account well for the specific parenthesis to watch and be sober in verses 6–8. Walvoord makes them general exhortations to the kind of behavior befitting Christians: because we are “day people,” let us be sober and alert like day people.³⁴ But this begs the question: alert for what? The context would seem to indicate the day of the Lord. But why should Christians be alert for the day of the Lord if it will not overtake them?³⁵ Finally, understanding Paul to say that believers will not be overtaken by the day of the Lord overlooks the connection to the dominical traditions recorded in Luke 21:34–36 and Matthew 24:42–51.³⁶ In these passages the disciples are warned to remain sober and alert so that the day will not come on them suddenly like a trap or a thief. Rather, they are to look up when they see the signs of the parousia, for their redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28). Thus 1 Thessalonians 5:4 does not seem to mean that believers will not experience the day of the Lord.

It is much more probable that this verse means that, in contrast to the day of the Lord coming on unbelievers unexpectedly and destructively, the day will not come *this way* for believers.³⁷ This is because believers are neither morally liable to its destructiveness nor ignorant of its approach (1 Thess. 5:4–5).³⁸ They are thus to watch for its coming and avoid moral slippage (vv. 6–8). Verse 9 sums up the discussion by reiterating that though the

³⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, n.d.), 84. See also John MacArthur Jr., *First and Second Thessalonians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 161; Morris, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 154–56. Cf. Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 186.

³⁵ Walvoord clearly feels the force of this point, because he is forced to conclude his discussion with a subtle shift, distinguishing the *wrath* of the day of the Lord, which wrath will not overtake believers, from the day of the Lord itself, which will overtake believers, since it begins with the rapture. “In effect, Paul was saying that the time of the Rapture cannot be determined any more than the time of the beginning of the day of the Lord; but this is of no concern to believers because our appointment is not the wrath of the day of the Lord but rather the salvation that is ours in Christ” (*Rapture Question*, 222). Morris, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 156–57, notes the probable connection of the injunctions to watch to the context but lets the matter drop.

³⁶ Cf. Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 185.

³⁷ So most commentators. See, e.g., Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 181; Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, SP 11 (Collegeville, Minn.: Glazier, 1995), 252.

³⁸ Though Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, sees unexpectedness as primarily in view, he admits the context allows both a moral and cognitive sense to being “in darkness.” The parenetic focus on both sobriety and watchfulness argues for a balance between the two (so most commentators).

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day overtakes unbelievers by wrath, it will bring believers salvation from wrath.³⁹ This is similar to 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8, a passage we noted earlier as related to the Olivet Discourse tradition, where Paul says that the revelation of Jesus from heaven will bring retribution on unbelievers and rest to believers. First Thessalonians 4:15–16, part of the larger context of 5:1–12, suggests that the salvation to be brought to believers at the parousia is in fact the rapture. We conclude then from 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:12 that Paul understands two events to occur in relation to the parousia. Jesus will pour out his wrath on unbelievers, and he will rapture his church to allow them to escape that wrath. This complex of events Paul refers to as the day of the Lord.

The foregoing makes it extremely probable that when Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2 “concerning the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him” he has one basic event in mind, the same event he spoke about in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:12,⁴⁰ the coming of Jesus to rapture the church and to mete out judgment on his enemies. Like 1 Thessalonians 5:1, Paul refers to this event as the day of the Lord. Pretribulationists often see a broader meaning to “the day of the Lord” here than in 1 Thessalonians 5:2,⁴¹ namely, the seventieth week of Daniel. They thus hope to separate the signs of the day of the Lord from the rapture in order to avoid the conclusion that verse 3 gives signs that precede the rapture. Two arguments are given. The first rests on a negative understanding of the phrase “quickly shaken from mind or stirred up” (*tacheōs saleuthēnai hymas apo tou noos mēde throeisthai*).⁴² This phrase is taken to mean that, due to the tribulation they were experiencing, the Thessalonians were afraid they had missed the rapture (and thus should not be in the day of the Lord). But the phrase is neutral; it can be used negatively or positively.⁴³ Thus posttribulationists argue that the Thessalonians are excited because they believe the rapture to be on the near horizon. The latter is better because it explains much more easily why Paul answers their misconception as he does in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4. If Paul had taught that the day of the Lord begins at the beginning of the seventieth week and is preceded by the rapture, it is hard to conceive of why he points to signs of the *second half* of the seventieth week as reassurance.⁴⁴ In fact, Paul says the signs must happen “first,” before the day of the Lord. Beyond that, if Paul had taught that the day of the Lord began with the tribulation, it would mean that he

³⁹ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 262.

⁴⁰ Cf. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 163.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 239; Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture View*, 175. But cf. MacArthur, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 271.

⁴² Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 238–39.

⁴³ The exact phrase does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament or LXX (though cf. Acts 17:13), but the term “agitated” or “stirred” (*throeō*) can be used both ways (cf. LXX Song of Sol. 5:4; the reading of P⁷⁵, B, 1241 at Luke 24:37). See BDAG, 460, 911. Cf. the use of *throeō* in Matt. 24:6.

⁴⁴ Cf. Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 188–89.

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taught it begins essentially simultaneously with the abomination of desolation. But this would make the teaching about its anticipated but unknown nature in 1 Thessalonians 4 meaningless. A sign is required to make it anticipated, but an indeterminate space of time after the sign is required to make it unknown. Thus Paul probably had taught the Thessalonians that they were subject to the Danielic tribulation (1 Thess. 3:3–4) and that they would be raptured at some unknown point from the midst of the tribulation at the outset of the day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:4–5). The Thessalonians presumably had been misled to believe they had been experiencing the Danielic tribulation and that the day of the Lord had now arrived. They thus assumed they were soon to be raptured. Paul argues that the day of the Lord had not arrived, citing as evidence to the contrary the nonoccurrence of signs that must precede that day (and not only the day of the Lord but the Danielic tribulation as well).⁴⁵

The second argument given to support a pretribulational reading refers to the syntax of 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Robert Thomas understands 2 Thessalonians 2:3 not to give signs that precede the day of the Lord but events that occur at the beginning of, that is, within, the day of the Lord.⁴⁶ He argues on the basis of Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27; John 7:51; and Romans 15:24 that *ean mē ... prōton* (“unless ... first”) indicates the event in the apodosis (the “then” clause in an “if ... then ...” construction) is simultaneous with or included in the event in the protasis (the “if” clause in the construction). But this evidence hardly carries the weight Thomas wants it to. Romans 15:24 is not a parallel construction to 2 Thessalonians 2:3, and the other three examples (the only parallels in the New Testament, LXX, and Josephus) can easily be understood as presenting the action in the apodosis as preceding the action in the protasis. So in Matthew 12:29 and Mark 3:27, the robber gains access to the house and its goods by first binding the homeowner, and in John 7:51 judgment is not meted out unless the case is first heard. In other words, Thomas’s reading of the evidence is too fine, if not also totally unnecessary and unnatural.⁴⁷ We thus

⁴⁵ Richard, *Thessalonians*, 345–46, suggests that 2 Thess. 2:6 serves to distinguish current Thessalonian suffering from the final period of tribulation; that is, that Paul wishes to reduce his readers’ apocalyptic fervor by positing a period of eschaton-like affliction that precedes the actual end and placing his readers in that period. This pastoral strategy, if in fact it is true, corresponds to the function of vv. 3–14 in Matthew’s version of the Olivet Discourse.

⁴⁶ Robert L. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” in EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:320. See also his unpublished 1975 “Exegetical Digest of the Epistle of II Thessalonians,” 65, which forms the basis of his exposition in the former. LXX Septuagint

⁴⁷ He is thus not followed by any commentators, as far as I know. What the parallels do show, however, is that *prōton* relates “the apostasy” to the day of the Lord in 2 Thess. 2:3 and not to the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness, as has occasionally been argued. Cf. Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 343.

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conclude that when Paul gives signs in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 that will precede the day of the Lord, he means these signs to precede the rapture as well.

The second thing we want to note about 2 Thessalonians 2:1–15 is that the primary sign that must precede the day of the Lord is the abomination of desolation. That this is the case is not immediately clear; however, the connection to the Jesus tradition again suggests as much. Paul mentions two events in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 that must precede the day of the Lord, the apostasy and the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness. Neither is explicitly explained in the context. Verses 9–12 offer the most obvious contextual possibility for identifying the apostasy—a satanically inspired departure from the truth associated with the coming of the Man of Lawlessness.⁴⁸ The close connection between the apostasy and the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness in verse 3 gives considerable

⁴⁸ Although “the apostasy” (*hē apostasia*) was something known to Paul’s readers (signified by the article and the mention of Paul’s oral teaching in v. 5), modern scholars disagree as to its exact referent. The term itself means “defiance or abandonment of an established authority” and thus “rebellion, abandonment, breach of faith” (BDAG, 120; cf. Heinrich Schlier, “ἀφίστημι, ἀποστασία, δικοστασία,” in *TDNT* 1:512–14; W. Bauder, “ἀφίστημι,” in *NIDNTT* 1:606–8). It and its cognates are used in the LXX especially in the sense of religious apostasy, though it can refer to a political rebellion. *Apostasia* itself is used only four times in the LXX (Josh. 22:22; 2 Chron. 29:19; Jer. 2:19; 1 Macc. 2:15), each in the sense of religious apostasy. Jeremiah and 1 Maccabees use the term in a virtually technical sense. Jewish apocalyptic texts speak of an apostasy of Israel in the last days, though some may envision a general worldwide religious rebellion against God (2 Bar. 41:3; 42:4; Jub. 23:14–21; 1QpHab. 2:1–10; cf. *b. Sanh.* 97. It is not clear whether 1 Enoch 91:3–10; 93:9; 4 Ezra 5:1–13 refer only to Jews or to all peoples). The New Testament foresees an apostasy of professing Christians (Matt. 24:11–12; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1–5; 2 Peter 3:3–6). Most pretribulationists understand Paul to speak of this apostasy. The difficulty with this view is that apostasy was occurring in the church already in the first century, so that its function as a sign of the day of the Lord would seem ineffective. Thus Walvoord, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 120, and Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” 322, understand the present apostasy to become so universal as to be unprecedented. Walvoord associates this greater apostasy with the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness. Though Walvoord does not point to the text, 2 Thess. 2:8 may support his view. (Contra, see MacArthur, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 272.) Most scholars believe Paul has some such eschatological religious apostasy in mind, especially given the mention of the temple and the connection of this tradition to the Olivet Discourse (cf. Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9–12). It is worth noting the proposal by Eberhard Nestle, “2 Thess. 2.iii,” *ExpTim* 16 (1904–05): 472–73, that *hē apostasia* is to be taken as “the Belial,” citing Codex A of LXX 3 Kings 20:13 (ET 1 Kings 21:13); Aquila of Deut. 15:9; Judg. 19:22; 1 Sam. 2:12; 10:27; 25:17; 30:22; Prov. 16:27; Nah. 1:11. In this case, “unless the apostasy comes” means “unless Satan comes.” As such, the “man of lawlessness” is the “man of Belial” (*’iš b’līa’al*; cf. MT 2 Sam 20:1), presumably accounting for Paul’s reference to his coming in accord with the activity of Satan (2 Thess. 2:9). Interestingly, some of the church fathers identified *hē apostasia* as the Antichrist, though ultimately that would not make good sense of the following clause (“and the man of lawlessness is revealed”). E. Schuyler English’s (*Re-thinking the Rapture* [Traveler’s Rest, S.C.: Southern Bible Book House, 1954]) theory that *hē apostasia* refers to the rapture does not seem to be held by any modern scholars. See Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation: A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 115–18.

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force to this identification.⁴⁹ But more, the language and concepts of verses 9–12 closely parallel Matthew 24:24 (and parallels), forming part of the complex of passages in 1 Thessalonians 4–5 and 2 Thessalonians 2 that relate Paul's eschatology to the Jesus tradition. Both posit a period of extremely deceptive "signs and wonders" associated with a figure or figures representing a false christ. In Matthew this period is during the "great tribulation" (vv. 21, 23–24) that follows "the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, *standing in the holy place*" (v. 15 ESV, emphasis added; cf. the masculine participle in Mark 13:14, "standing where he does not belong").⁵⁰ This language corresponds to Paul's when he speaks of the Man of Lawlessness taking his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God (2 Thess. 2:4). For this reason, and due to the allusion to Daniel 11:36 in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, most scholars are agreed that Paul is thinking of the abomination of desolation when he mentions the session of the Man of Lawlessness.⁵¹ But the connection to this tradition also strongly suggests that the

⁴⁹ So Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 244; Richard, *Thessalonians*, 326, 348–49. Morris, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 219n20, notes the close connection but is unsure of the temporal connection between the apostasy and the revelation. One may wonder why Paul lists the apostasy first if it is instigated by the revelation. On the other hand, one may also wonder why Paul mentions the apostasy with the revelation of the Antichrist in 2 Thess. 2:3 but does not elaborate on it and yet elaborates on a kind of apostasy associated with the coming of Antichrist in vv. 8–12 not otherwise necessary to his argument. Richard, *Thessalonians*, 351–52, suggests that Paul begins and ends his discussion with apostasy, at least in terms of moral failure, because that is the primary danger in the Thessalonian church when Paul writes. But absent any reference associating the Thessalonians with actual apostasy, this explanation has little merit. MacArthur, *Thessalonians*, 272–74, suggests that the apostasy *is* the revelation and that both concepts signify the abomination of desolation. But it is hard to see how the *kai* functions epexegetically in v. 3, and MacArthur must downplay the force of v. 9. Marvin J. Rosenthal, *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church: A New Understanding of the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Second Coming* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990), 199–206, has argued on the force of the allusion to Dan. 11:36 that the apostasy is the covenant the prince to come makes with the Jews (Dan. 9:27) that begins the seventieth "week." The revelation is then identified with the abomination of desolation that is part of the breaking of the covenant in the middle of the week. This proposal has some cogency but is somewhat speculative. It also has against it that Daniel 9 does not refer to this covenant as an apostasy, though "many" (9:27) may signal apostate Israel over against the remnant (cf. 11:39). Rosenthal offers that the contextually related capitulation to the religious domination of Antiochus IV (Dan. 11:30–32) is referred to in 1 Macc. 2:15 as *hē apostasia*.

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⁵⁰ Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 523.

⁵¹ Daniel's seventieth week is initiated by a covenant that the final king makes with the Jews, and that covenant is apparently broken when, in the middle of the week, the king causes sacrifices to cease in the Jerusalem temple in association with an abomination of desolation (Dan. 9:27). Daniel 12:11 mentions these same events, this time in association with a king who "exalts and magnifies himself above every god" (Dan. 11:36), the passage Paul alludes to here. So when Paul identifies this Danielic king with the one who proclaims himself in a session in the Jerusalem temple to be God, he is apparently identifying a known Danielic event. The only such event even remotely related to Paul's session is the nebulous abomination of desolation.

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session of the Man of Lawlessness in the temple is in fact what Paul means by the sign of the Lawless One being “revealed,” since, as we noted above, the abomination of desolation is singled out in Matthew 24:3–15 as the primary sign of the nearness of the final events.⁵²

That Paul intends the session of the Man of Lawlessness in the temple to clarify what he means by that person’s significant revelation is also suggested by the rest of 2 Thessalonians 2:6–12. First, there is no other likely candidate for the revelation in the context. Though Paul mentions the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness three times (vv. 4, 6, 8) in 2 Thessalonians 2:4–12 and refers to the coming of the Lawless One once (v. 9), he never explicitly says how it is that the Man of Lawlessness is revealed. Verses 6 and 8 tell us he cannot be revealed until the restrainer is removed, but the identification of the restrainer is so uncertain that the information is hardly helpful to modern exegetes not privy to Paul’s oral teaching (v. 5).⁵³ Verses 9–12 state that the “coming” (*parousia*) of the Lawless One⁵⁴ is accompanied by a vast satanic deception (endorsed by God), but the vast deception by itself cannot be the revealing of the Lawless One, especially if it is the apostasy mentioned in verse 3. Thus verse 4, which mentions a kind of manifestation of the Man of Lawlessness, his session in the temple of God wherein he displays himself as being God, is the only option left.

Second, the syntax of 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 intimately ties the session to the revelation. Verses 3 and 4 are one sentence in Greek (contra NIV), so that when Paul follows the mention of the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness with a description of features that primarily identify him, the close connection of these clauses, and especially the forcefully concluding result clause, strongly suggests that Paul intends the session, an act of “displaying himself” (*apodeiknunta heauton*), to be an explanation of the revelation. In

⁵² Cf. Wenham, *Rediscovery*, 177–79.

⁵³ See the commentators for the various proposals. It is doubtful that, if the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, his removal involves the rapture of the church as many pretribulationists contend. First, Paul has already stated that the church is around in the day of the Lord, which comes after the restrainer is removed. Second, Paul would hardly offer to the troubled Thessalonians the nonrevelation of the Lawless One as evidence that the day of the Lord had not arrived if the very thing that allows the revelation of the Lawless One is the rapture. Why not just tell them that it cannot be the day of the Lord because it is impossible for the day of the Lord to occur without the rapture first occurring? (The prewrath view does not have this problem, because it does not make the rapture a necessary condition for the day of the Lord.) Third, if the Holy Spirit were removed from the world after the rapture, there could be no repentance after the rapture, but the Scriptures indicate otherwise. The restrainer may be the Spirit, but if so, Paul is speaking of the removal of his restraining influence and not his complete removal from the world.

⁵⁴ *Parousia* here is probably (though not certainly) parallel to the revelation (*apokalupsis*, though Paul uses the verb form), since Paul can use both terms for the coming of Christ as well (2 Thess. 1:7; 2:8).

NIV New International Version

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other words, Paul identifies the Man of Lawlessness precisely by pointing to the unique act of God-defiance by which he is manifested to the world. If Paul does not do so here, we have no good explanation for the inclusion of these clauses, especially when Paul does not otherwise explain the revelation.

One might argue that Paul mentions the session in the temple merely because that is a major action of the Antichrist. But that would beg the question. If the session is a major action by which the Antichrist can be identified, why does Paul mention *that* action in close connection with the revelation and not some other? It is possible that Paul did not need to mention what the revelation is because the readers were already well aware of it and that he just happened also to mention the session of the Man of Lawlessness. But the explanatory value of the alternative, that Paul mentioned the session because it is the act by which the Man of Lawlessness is revealed, is much greater. Second Thessalonians 2:5, far from indicating that Paul did not explain the revelation because the readers already knew what it was, actually indicates that Paul is repeating here what he had taught them earlier.

Showers argues that the passive voice used to refer to the revelation of the Antichrist (“is revealed”; 2 Thess. 2:3, 6, 8) disallows its identification with the session, which is actively undertaken by the Antichrist.⁵⁵ Certainly the passive voice of the references to the revelation point to the action of God in the revealing of the Antichrist (v. 6 in particular), but unless one wants to argue that creaturely actions cannot fall under the sovereignty of God, there is no problem. Verse 10 indicates that the satanic deception at the coming of Antichrist is under the control of God. Showers further argues, based on Revelation 6:1–2, that the revelation of Antichrist will be his diplomatic or military victories by which he becomes “the next great world ruler.”⁵⁶ But apart from the difficulty of conceiving how great diplomatic or military victories are sufficiently unique to constitute a sign (whether for Paul’s audience, used to Roman imperial might ruling for the most part their known world, or any other audience), the context of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 associates the coming of the Antichrist not with political victory but with religious deception.⁵⁷ No doubt the Antichrist will be an imperial figure, but that does not seem to be what Paul has in mind in 2 Thessalonians 2.

Thus the best reading of 2 Thessalonians 2:3–5 is that Paul understands the parousia of Christ, in which he raptures the church and pours his wrath on his enemies, to be

⁵⁵ Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture View*, 185–87.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 187–89.

⁵⁷ Cf. Matt. 24:6–7, 15: “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars ... these are [merely] the beginning of birth pains. But, when you see the abomination of desolation....”

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preceded by the abomination of desolation.⁵⁸ This obviously implies that the church will enter the second half of Daniel's seventieth "week." Further, 2 Thessalonians 2 as a whole is found to fit with the apocalyptic tradition represented by Matthew 24. Most significantly, in both places the major sign of the final events *is* the abomination of desolation. The two passages serve to confirm one another; Matthew 24 confirms that Paul teaches the rapture to follow the abomination of desolation, and 2 Thessalonians 2 serves to confirm that Matthew 24 addresses the church.

This Reading Does Not Affect the "Imminence" of 1 Thessalonians 5:1–12

Scholars have long noted the apparent inconsistency of the imminent expectation of the parousia in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 and the teaching that certain signs must precede that event in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4. This has been taken by some as evidence that Paul did not write 2 Thessalonians. Pretribulationists sometimes take this as evidence that two different aspects of the parousia are in view in these two passages, an unexpected rapture in 1 Thessalonians and the wrath of God in 2 Thessalonians. But it is not necessary to see any inconsistency.⁵⁹ First, according to our exegesis, Paul expressly stated in 1 Thessalonians 5:4 that the parousia will not be unexpected for believers. Presumably this is at least because of the signs mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 (note that in both passages Paul refers to his earlier oral teaching on the issue; 1 Thess. 5:1; 2 Thess. 2:5).⁶⁰ This does not mean that believers will know "the day and hour," but it does mean that they will be aware of the general time period. Second, Jesus also mixed "imminence" with signs, not least the abomination of desolation, in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:32–33, 42–

⁵⁸ Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," 321, makes much of the fact that Paul nowhere says the church will actually see the apostasy or the revelation, but this makes Paul use an odd argument to get his point across. If Paul believed that the Thessalonians would not experience the day of the Lord, why not just say so? In fact, he doesn't just say to the Thessalonians, "You can't be in the day because the events preceding or signaling the beginning of the Day haven't happened yet." Rather, he goes on to elaborate on, *for no apparent reason*, many more things they won't see. Further, the fact that Paul speaks in 2 Thess. 1:6 of the coming of Christ as dealing retribution on the Thessalonians' persecutors means he believes that the coming of Christ to destroy the Antichrist in 2:8 can conceivably be experienced by them. Cf. "we who are still alive and are left" in 1 Thess. 4:17.

⁵⁹ See esp. Bruce, *Thessalonians*, xlii–xliv. Cf. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1970), 570–72; D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 345; Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 443–44; Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 178.

⁶⁰ So Bruce, *Thessalonians*, xliii.

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44, and parallels).⁶¹ Thus both Paul and Jesus enjoin their audiences to watch for the parousia.

More generally, the injunctions to watch and the unknowability of the time of the parousia do not logically entail an “any moment” rapture, as pretribulationists often argue, as long as the number of intervening events or the duration between the events and the rapture are unknown.⁶² This creates a problem for posttribulationism if it maintains a strict period of three and one-half years between the abomination of desolation and the rapture, but it creates no problem for the prewrath view, because the prewrath view does not specify the exact timing between the two events.⁶³

Revelation

The timing of the rapture after the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week is also presented in Revelation. Two passages in particular demonstrate this—Revelation 7:9–17 and 13:1–18. In the one, the church is pictured as having come out of “the great tribulation” (that is, the Danielic tribulation), and in the other the church is pictured in the Danielic tribulation. We begin with Revelation 7.

Revelation 7 Places the Church in the Tribulation

In Revelation 5, the messianic Lamb received a seven-sealed scroll from God. He began to open the scroll, breaking the first six seals sequentially, in Revelation 6. With the opening of the sixth seal, the arrival of the wrath of God and of the Lamb was recognized. The allusions to Isaiah 2:12–22; 13:6–16; 34:1–15; Joel 2:1–11, 30–32; 3:9–17; Zephaniah 1:14–18; Malachi 3:2 make clear that “the day of God’s wrath” is John’s language for the day of the Lord. When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven, an allusion to Zephaniah 1:7 and Zechariah 2:13, signaling the ominous calm before the storm of God’s wrath. The trumpets that will effect God’s wrath are then given to seven angels,

⁶¹ Ibid. Matthew 24:45–51; 25:5, 19; Luke 12:41–48; 19:11–27 also argue for a delay in the coming of Christ that goes against a strict imminence.

⁶² Cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 141. Tacit, and ironic, approval of this fact is the constant search of the newspaper for signs of the near coming of Christ by some who argue for an “any-moment” rapture. On the evidence against an any-moment rapture being demanded by the New Testament language of expectancy, see Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 30–37.

⁶³ Thus posttribulationists usually argue that the period between the two events is not precisely three and one-half years, either because the abomination of desolation (and all other events in the Olivet Discourse besides the parousia) occurred in the first century (so Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 [Nashville: Broadman, 1992]; Carson, “Matthew”) or because of a shortening of the seventieth week (Matt. 24:22; so Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 42, a position similar to Rosenthal’s, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 108–9). Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 209, also offers without commitment that the unknowable quality of the parousia may apply to all generations but the last.

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and fire from the altar, mixed with the prayers of the saints (cf. 6:9–10) is cast to earth. Thereafter the trumpets are blown and supernatural cataclysms embroil the earth. Between the opening of the sixth seal in Revelation 6:12–17 and the seventh seal in 8:1–5, however, comes an interlude in the action. The process of opening the seals is halted in Revelation 7 in order to allow for the protection of God's servants before God's wrath is poured out (Rev. 7:1–3). In this interlude, John sees (or is made aware of) two groups. The first is a group of 144,000 Israelites, whose "sealing" (being given a distinguishing mark) is recorded in Revelation 7:4–8. After this, in Revelation 7:9–10, John sees an innumerable multitude from every nation standing before the throne of God in heaven, clothed in white robes, holding palm branches, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God ... and to the Lamb." When questioned regarding the identity of this group, John is told that it is comprised of those who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and will experience eschatological blessings. The best way to understand this second group is as a picture of the church.

That this group is the church is clear from the language used to describe it.⁶⁴ In Revelation 7:9 the innumerable multitude is said to come from "every nation, tribe, people and language"⁶⁵ and in 7:14 to have washed their robes "in the blood of the Lamb." This is language that John already applied to the church in Revelation 5:9. There the Lamb is said to have "purchased with [his] blood ... men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." John clearly intends to describe the church there, because 5:10 repeats the description of the church as a kingdom and priests (cf. Ex 19:6) that was used in a similar context in 1:5–6: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father." Though it could be that the description of the innumerable multitude is intended by John to cover a larger group than the church, so that the multitude includes both the church and others,

⁶⁴ Cf. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 139; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 447; Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 100; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 433; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 303. Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture View*, 150, argues that the multitude cannot be the church or John surely would have recognized someone! Such an approach treats the genre far more literally than it should.

⁶⁵ The phrase "every nation, tribe, people and language" comes from Daniel (3:4, 7, 29; 4:1; 5:19; 6:25; 7:14), where it describes the inhabitants of the empires generally and those who serve the one like a son of man in the eschaton particularly. It carries that same weight in Revelation (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15), describing both humanity in general (ruled over by the empires) and those who belong to the Son of Man. The latter are distinguished from the former by other descriptions in context. See Alan Hultberg, "Messianic Exegesis in the Apocalypse: The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christology of Revelation" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2001), 277–82.

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the point is moot without other compelling evidence.⁶⁶ John certainly intends to describe the church.

Some have suggested that the innumerable multitude represents a subset of the church, namely martyrs, either of all time or of the final tribulation.⁶⁷ Proponents offer that the mention of white robes (Rev. 7:9, 13, 14), the washing of the robes in the blood of the Lamb (v. 14), and the fact that the multitude comes out of the great tribulation all signal martyrdom. So it is pointed out that the martyrs under the altar were given white robes after the opening of the fifth seal (Rev. 6:11) and those victorious over the dragon in Revelation 12:11 were said to be so “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” So also the whitening of the robes is said to be an allusion to Daniel 11:35, where “Some of the wise [during the Antiochene persecution] will stumble,⁶⁸ so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless [*lalbēn*, ‘to whiten’]” (cf. Dan. 12:10).⁶⁹ Thus, that the multitude “comes out of the great tribulation” must mean that they have been martyred.⁷⁰

Most commentators, however, do not see any martyrological language here.⁷¹ On the one hand, the church itself is often viewed as consisting entirely of “martyrs” in the book of Revelation.⁷² To be a “witness” in Revelation is not necessarily to die for one’s faith but

⁶⁶ It is true that the wearing of white robes (Rev. 4:4; though cf. 3:5, 18; 19:8, 14) and the enjoyment of eschatological blessings (Rev. 21:4, 6) may apply to a larger group than the church. But this is not evidence that John is necessarily here describing a larger group than the church, since the church is clearly to be included in the group and John may only be applying the language to the church as a subset of the larger group. More telling is the lack of evidence that John intends to describe some subset of this supposed larger group other than the church.

⁶⁷ R. H. Charles, *The Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 1:189; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, MNTC (New York: Harper and Bros., 1940), 133–37; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John*, BNTC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1966), 96.

⁶⁸ Though *kāšlû* means “stumble,” the verb is being used here for being killed, as Dan. 11:33 makes clear.

⁶⁹ See esp. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 227–29.

⁷⁰ Some also see the innumerable multitude as martyrs on the supposition that they are the same group as the 144,000 (Kiddle, *Revelation*, 138; Caird, *Revelation*, 100). Since the 144,000 are taken from the fuller number of “every tribe of the sons of Israel” (Rev. 7:4), and since the sons of Israel can only mean the whole church, the 144,000 are a subset of the whole church. But we then have the curious proposition that it is only the martyrs, those who will specifically die for their faith, who are protected from the wrath of God, while the rest of the church, who will specifically not die for their faith, are exposed to the wrath of God. For a further critique of the identification of these two groups, see below.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 447; Swete, *Revelation*, 100; Mounce, *Revelation*, 154; Beale, *Revelation*, 433; Osborne, *Revelation*, 318.

⁷² Beale, *Revelation*, 171–72, 269–72; Osborne, *Revelation*, 285–86. Cf. Caird, *Revelation*, 293, 296–298; Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 233–35. Revelation 12:11 is an instance of the church viewed as “martyrs.” Cf. 2:10, 13; 13:10; 20:4 (and 11:7, if one understands the witnesses to represent the church). The “one who

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to be faithful throughout one's life, however one dies. Thus, even if it could be shown that the language in 7:9–17 is undoubtedly martyrological language, it would not show that the whole church is not in view. On the other hand, and more important, none of this language is confined to martyrs in Revelation. There is nothing in "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation" that necessarily implies martyrdom, or even death for that matter. And, though white robes are given to the martyrs under the altar after the opening of the fifth seal (Rev. 6:11), the wearing of white robes is common of all Christians in Revelation (3:5, 18; 19:8, 14). Similarly, though Revelation 12:11 certainly has a martyrological context, it is doubtful that conquering "by the blood of the Lamb" means "being killed for the faith like he was," thus making "by the word of their testimony [and did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death]" synonymous with "because of the blood of the Lamb." First, conquering by the blood of the Lamb is meant to recall Revelation 5:5, 9, where the messianic victory was the *redemption* wrought on the cross. The "brethren" in 12:11 are victorious over the serpent because of the Lamb's redemptive death. Second, the syntax of 12:11, where John repeats the prepositional phrase (*dia* + accusative), shows that John gives two reasons for the victory, not one. Thus the brethren conquer because of the Lamb's redemptive death and because of their own faithfulness to the gospel till death, whether by martyrdom or not (cf. Rev. 2:10). And while the whitening of the robes may allude to Daniel 11:35 (on the strength of the clear allusion to Dan. 12:1 in the phrase "the great tribulation"), it may also allude to Isaiah 1:8 (cf. Ps. 51:7). The other evidence that "washed in the blood of the Lamb" is a redemptive theme and not a martyrological one argues for the latter.⁷³

It is also argued that the context requires the innumerable multitude to be martyrs. In Revelation 6:9–10, after the fifth seal was broken, John saw martyrs under the altar crying out for vengeance. In verse 11, they are told they must wait until the full number of martyrs is completed. Since God's wrath begins with the sounding of the trumpets, the

overcomes" in each of the letters to the churches is that one who is faithful to Jesus until death of whatever sort.

⁷³ Both John Walvoord (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ* [Chicago: Moody, 1966], 144–47) and Robert L. Thomas (*Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 485) understand the innumerable multitude to represent those who have believed during the tribulation era, that is, after the rapture of the church. Walvoord takes them to be martyrs, but Thomas sees no reason to view them as such; rather, he understands them to be those who have died in any way during the first six seals. But the thesis that these are "tribulation saints" runs afoul of the clearly ecclesial language of 7:9–17 and the lack of any good evidence that John means to signify a group other than the church. Walvoord offers that the twenty-four elders represent the church and that therefore the innumerable multitude must be a different group. But this is to make the obscure interpret the clear. There is no plain indication that the twenty-four elders represent the actual church (raptured and present in heaven), whereas there is clear evidence that the innumerable multitude do. Without the presupposition of a pretribulation rapture, one would hardly conclude that this is a group other than the church, whether the full body or only part.

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innumerable multitude must be the completed set of martyrs. There is a certain cogency to this argument. But despite the reasonableness of anticipating a scene completing the martyrs before God's wrath is poured out, it seems doubtful that Revelation 7 functions that way, or, if it does, that the martyrs are to be identified with the innumerable multitude. First, as we have seen, nothing in the description of the multitude necessitates they are martyrs. Second, one wonders why, if 7:9–17 is about the completion of the set of martyrs, this scene appears after the sixth seal and not before. Though God's wrath will not be administered until the blowing of the trumpets, it is with the opening of the sixth seal that God's wrath is said to arrive, immediately upon the directive to the martyrs to wait. The implication is that by the time the sixth seal is opened, the full complement of martyrs has been achieved.⁷⁴ A better solution is to understand the appearance of the innumerable multitude in heaven to be a picture of the rapture of the church. This is confirmed by a set of scenes in Revelation 14–16 very similar to Revelation 6–8.

Revelation 12–16 forms a literary unit in the book. It is set off by the mention of three heavenly “signs” John sees (Rev. 12:1, 3; 15:1). The first two signs establish the cosmic context of the eschatological events depicted in Revelation 13–14. The war of the Danielic Beast against the saints (Rev. 13:7; cf. Dan. 7:21; 12:1; Rev. 12:11–17) is part of the larger war of the diabolical serpent against God's people that began in the garden (Rev. 12:9).⁷⁵ The war with the Beast will be concluded in the winepress of God's wrath (Rev. 14:17–20), and the third sign elaborates on that wrath (Rev. 15:1; 16:1–21). In the midst of this description, after the portrayal of the Beast's satanic domination of the world and persecution of the saints (Rev. 13:7–10; cf. Dan. 7:21), the 144,000 reappear, standing on Mount Zion with the Lamb. They seem to form the counterpoint to the Beast and his followers in chapter 13, as if John depicts two teams, poised at opposite ends of the arena awaiting a contest. In 14:6–12, three angels announce the stakes of the contest. The first angel urges repentance upon those who dwell on earth, because the hour of God's judgment has arrived (14:7). The second and third angels announce the dire consequences of those who side with the Beast: they will drink the wine of the wrath of God (14:10). But before the harvest of the grapes of wrath, John sees another harvest, when “one like a son

⁷⁴ Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 396.

⁷⁵ The woman in Revelation 12 seems to be a symbol of the messianic community. Her war with the dragon extends from the garden of Eden (12:9) to the final period of history (12:14 and the rest of the book, which is dependent on this episode). Thus, as Eve, she gives birth to a messianic child whose life is sought by the ancient serpent (12:4; Gen. 3:15). As Israel, she bears the attributes of Joseph's dream (12:1; Gen. 37:9) and brings forth the Messiah (12:5; Ps. 2:9). Though she herself is protected by God, the rest of her children are exposed to the wrath of the dragon in the work of the Beast (12:17; 13:7). Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 456.

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of man” reaps the earth (14:14–16).⁷⁶ This harvest apparently completes the “redemption” begun with the 144,000, who are its firstfruits (14:4). Thereafter, in the third sign, which elaborates on the outpouring of God’s wrath in 14:17–20, John sees “those who had been victorious over the beast” (Rev. 15:2; cf. 7:14) standing before the throne of God (15:2; cf. 4:5–6; 7:9) and singing of their salvation (15:3; cf. 7:10).⁷⁷ The implication is that these are those harvested by the Son of Man in 14:14–16, since the bowls of God’s wrath are poured out after this group appears in heaven, just as the harvest of wrath occurs immediately after the harvest of the earth by the Son of Man.⁷⁸

Thus Revelation 14–16 parallels Revelation 7–8 quite closely. In both we find the sequence of the 144,000 on earth with God’s seal (name) on their foreheads, followed by the appearance of a victorious group in heaven that had come from the tribulation, followed by the outpouring of God’s wrath.⁷⁹ This suggests that the group in Revelation 15:2 is the same as the innumerable multitude in 7:9. But the group in heaven in Revelation 15:2 arrives there not by death but by being harvested from the earth by one like a son of man coming on a cloud. This is a clear picture of the parousia, and thus the appearance of this group in heaven is probably John’s version of the rapture.⁸⁰ This implies that the innumerable multitude in Revelation 7:9–17 also appear in heaven via the rapture.

⁷⁶ Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, among others, understands the harvest in 14:14–16 merely as an angel judgment parallel to the grape harvest that follows. This thesis is highly unlikely. See esp. the decisive argument by Bauckham, 290–96. Besides the parallelism of chaps. 14–16 to 6–8, that John can allude to Dan. 7:13 and not mean to identify Jesus is virtually impossible given the thematic centrality of Rev. 1:7, 13.

Furthermore, it is hard to imagine the point of the two harvests if both are judgment, especially if the first is distinguished from the second by its agent and the second from the first by its being explicitly related to God’s wrath.

⁷⁷ The salvific character of the song in Rev. 15:3–4 is indicated by its being called “the song of Moses” (cf. Ex. 15:1–21). Cf. Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 296–307.

⁷⁸ Cf. Beale’s elaborate analysis of the relation of the victors in 15:2–4 to the harvest in 14:14–20 (*Revelation*, 784–85). He does not tie 15:2–4 to 14:14–16 as the ones harvested due to his understanding of 14:14–16 as solely judgmental.

⁷⁹ The literary connections among the three “judgment” series in Revelation indicate that the seventh seal encompasses the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet encompasses the seven bowls. Thus the trumpets are given upon the opening of the seventh seal (8:1–2), and the trumpets end and bowls begin with the opening of the temple in heaven (11:19; 15:5). Each series then ends with the same theophanic phenomena, indicating the coming of God and his kingdom (11:15–18; cf. 16:17). Seals 1–6 bring us to the arrival of the day of God’s wrath, and seal 7 (incorporating the trumpets and bowls) is the outpouring of God’s wrath. The seven bowls represent a final, intense period of judgment against the Beast and his worshipers during which repentance is impossible.

⁸⁰ See Traugott Holtz, *Die Christologie der Apokalypse des Johannes*, TUGAL 85 (Berlin: Akademie, 1971), 134; Pierre Prigent, *L’Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, CNT 14, 2nd ser. (Lausanne: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1981), 232–33. Both Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 293–95, and Swete, *Revelation*, 189–90, while acknowledging the harvest is the eschatological ingathering of the faithful effected by the coming Son of Man, understand

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That Revelation 7:9 is the parousia, and thus the rapture, is further suggested by the use of the Olivet Discourse tradition in Revelation 6:1–17. Many have noted the parallels between the first six seals and the events enumerated in Matthew 24:5–31.⁸¹ Thus the first seal (Rev. 6:1–2) is probably representative of the rise of false christs, if not the Antichrist, corresponding to Matthew 24:5 (cf. 24:24). The second seal, war (Rev. 6:3–4), corresponds to the “wars and rumors of war” in Matthew 24:6–7. The third seal, famine (Rev. 6:5–6), corresponds to the famines of Matthew 24:7. The fifth seal, martyrdom (Rev. 6:9–11), corresponds to the martyrdom of Matthew 24:9. And the sixth seal, cosmic disturbances (Rev. 6:12–14), corresponds to the cosmic disturbances of Matthew 24:31.⁸² In Matthew, the cosmic disturbances occur at the parousia when the Son of Man comes on the clouds and gathers the elect, a scene that surely is represented in Revelation 14:14–16 and the corresponding appearance of a group of victors in heaven. Thus it is virtually certain that Revelation 7:9–17, introduced by the cosmic disturbances of the sixth seal and parallel to the scene of the victors harvested by the Son of Man in 14:14–16, is a picture of the raptured church. The fact that in Matthew 24:29 the parousia is said to follow “the great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21) explains, then, why the innumerable multitude is said in Revelation 7:14 to have come out of “the great tribulation.”

Some have argued against a rapture in Revelation 7:9–17 by noting the present participle *erchomenoi* (“coming”) in 7:14,⁸³ which is taken to have durative force (“these are those coming out of the great tribulation”). Thus the arrival of the innumerable multitude in

this ingathering in terms of evangelism. Bauckham offers in support that the lack of judgment imagery in both Rev. 14:14–16 (in particular threshing) and Dan. 7:13–14 indicates that the reaping by the Son of Man does not lead to judgment. However, it certainly does lead to the grape harvest and the treading of the winepress, which is an image of Christ judging the nations (Rev. 19:15); and in Dan. 7:9–14 the arrival of the one like a son of man is concurrent with the judgment of the fourth beast. It is better to see a multifaceted parousia in Revelation: grain harvest/rapture, grape harvest/wrath, glorious return to consummate the wrath and initiate the kingdom. Beale, *Revelation*, 770–73, though he recognizes both the connection to Matt. 24:30 and the theme in the synoptic tradition and Revelation of the parousia as bringing salvation and judgment (a theme also present in Paul), nevertheless understands the harvest by the Son of Man in 14:14–16 as a judgment, based solely on the parallel harvest in verses 17–20. But as we have noted, the juxtaposition and distinctive descriptions of the two harvests makes their identity hard to accept.

⁸¹ E.g., Charles, *Revelation*, 1:158–60; Mounce, *Revelation*, 140; Walvoord, *Revelation*, 123; Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 416; Beale, *Revelation*, 373–74; Osborne, *Revelation*, 270. Cf. the somewhat more cautious judgment of Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 424; Swete, *Revelation*, 92.

⁸² The fourth seal, death (Rev. 6:7–8), has no particular correspondence to the Olivet Discourse. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 452, has argued that the cosmic disturbances of the sixth seal are like those of Matt. 24:29 but are not the same, since in Matthew they come after the tribulation, at the very end, but not in Revelation. Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 291. But this presupposes that the parousia is a single, unified event and that John cannot expand what Matthew has portrayed as unified.

⁸³ See esp. Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture View*, 147–50. Cf. Charles, *Revelation*, 1:209.

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heaven is not all at once, as would be expected of a depiction of the rapture, but continuous, as would be expected of the individual dead arriving in heaven upon their deaths. But this makes the participle bear far more weight than it is able. On the one hand, the preceding evidence of a rapture in 7:9–17 argues strongly against it, and on the other hand, the other verbs in Revelation 7:9–17 make a durative understanding of the participle unlikely. So, in verse 9 John sees the multitude standing (*hestōtes*) before the throne, the perfect participle depicting them in a particular state. But one would expect a verb like “arriving” or “gathering” if John were intending to convey the continual arrival of new persons in the crowd. Thus also the elder asks John in verse 13, “From where have they come (*ēlthon*)?” (ESV), using an aorist. Though not decisive, one would expect a present or imperfect form here if John were intending to convey constant arrival. More important, a substantival participle, as is *hoi erchomenoi* (“those who come”), generally loses specific aspect in *koinē* Greek, so that there is no necessary reason for *hoi erchomenoi* to have durative force, let alone present time reference.⁸⁴ So compare the use of the present tense substantive participle in Revelation 20:10: “The devil, who deceived (*ho planōn*) them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur.” Here the present participle refers to the past work of deception recorded in the immediately preceding verses. For this reason, most commentators understand *hoi erchomenoi* to mean merely “those who come” or “who have come” and not “those who are [continually] coming.”⁸⁵

So the best understanding of the innumerable multitude is as the raptured church. And when John says that the church has come out of the great tribulation, the most obvious implication is that the church will experience at least part of the Danielic tribulation. This also accords with the warnings to the church about the upcoming tribulation in Revelation 2:10, 22.

Revelation 13 Places the Church in the Tribulation

Though the seven churches of Asia to which John writes the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:4, 11) are seven literal, first-century churches, they are probably intended to represent the entire church.⁸⁶ John indicates this in several ways. First, the number seven itself is a highly significant number in Revelation (note the seven Spirits of God, seven lampstands, seven stars, seven seals, seven eyes, seven horns, seven trumpets, seven thunders, and

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⁸⁴ Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 625–26, who notes that present participles denote time contemporaneous with the main verb or can even refer to the past, especially when articular. Cf. BDF, § 339.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 430n14d-d, 473; Mounce, *Revelation*, 164; Osborne, *Revelation*, 324; Swete, *Revelation*, 102; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HKNT 16 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1926), 69.

⁸⁶ See Beale, *Revelation*, 186–87, 226–27.

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seven bowls). It undoubtedly stands for fullness or a complete set. Thus, that John writes to seven churches suggests he intends these seven to represent all churches, especially since other churches existed in Roman Asia in the first century (Acts 20:4; Col. 1:2; 4:13). Second, though each oracle in Revelation 2–3 is addressed to an individual church, its warnings and promises are addressed to all churches, as indicated by the plural “churches” in the stereotypical call to hear (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; cf. 2:23). Third, the eschatological promises to individual churches in the oracles are fulfilled for all Christians in the final state (cf., e.g., Rev. 2:7; 22:2, 14). So Revelation is a book to seven first-century churches intended to instruct all churches. This makes the book of Revelation somewhat complicated in its temporal perspective.⁸⁷ On the one hand, there are clear indications of a first-century perspective, an expectation that the events prophesied in the book will be fulfilled in the lives of John and his near contemporaries (e.g., the numerous assertions of the nearness of the events and the application of the book to the seven churches of Asia). On the other hand, there are clear indications of a future perspective, so that at least some of the events await the eschaton for fulfillment (e.g., the parousia and defeat of the Beast, the resurrection, and the final judgment). This makes dealing with the symbolism of Revelation difficult, because it is not always apparent whether John is talking about the near perspective or the far or both simultaneously.

This complication is perhaps felt most acutely in the oracles to the seven churches, given that the seven churches are both real churches and representative of the entire church. Clearly first-century issues are addressed in these oracles, but they are related to eschatological events elaborated in the rest of the book. A case in point involves the oracles to the churches of Smyrna (Rev. 2:8–11) and Thyatira (2:18–29), in which the resurrected Christ warns of an upcoming period of tribulation. The Smyrnans are warned that “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation” (Rev. 2:10 ESV). The Thyatirans are told that a certain false prophetess and her followers will be cast “into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works” (2:22 ESV).⁸⁸ Though the tribulation to which these churches will be exposed seems imminent, the representative nature of the churches and the portrayal of the tribulation as obviously eschatological later in the book argues that John is also warning future churches of the great Danielic tribulation.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ See Marvin C. Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

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⁸⁸ On “the hour of testing” in Rev. 3:10, see below.

⁸⁹ In my opinion, the best way to deal with the phenomena of Revelation is to understand them from a dualist perspective—that John portrays soon-to-be increased pressure to capitulate to Roman imperial

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In Revelation 13 John portrays the career of a beast called forth from the sea by Satan and inspired by him to dominate the world. Features of the portrayal allude to the fourth beast of Daniel 7 and its blasphemous little horn (cf. Dan. 7:8, 20, 21, 25; Rev. 13:5–7). In Daniel the fourth beast is both a historical and an eschatological image. It represents the fourth kingdom to dominate Israel, the kingdom that supplants Greece, namely Rome, but its little horn is its final king, whose “war against the saints” constitutes the great eschatological tribulation (Dan. 7:21, 25; 12:1, 7). The Beast in Revelation has similar historical and eschatological connections. Thus, in Revelation 17:10 the Beast represents a Roman emperor. In Revelation 17 John sees the Beast being ridden by a harlot, and this harlot is interpreted for John as “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (v. 18) and is described as sitting on seven hills (17:9). For John’s readers, the harlot can only be Rome.⁹⁰ The Beast itself is interpreted as the eighth of a series of kings and a “reincarnation” of one of the prior seven kings (17:10–11). The fact that the beast-king is ridden by a woman representing Rome probably indicates the Beast is a Roman emperor, most likely Domitian, the eighth emperor from Augustus, who is predicted to “reincarnate” Nero as an antichrist.⁹¹ Thus the Beast’s “war against the saints” in Revelation 13:7 is primarily that historical tribulation referred to in Revelation 2:10, 22, and its worship has to do with the imperial cult.⁹² And yet the Beast represents more than merely a first-century Roman emperor, because both it and the harlot who ride it are described in language that link them to broader Danielic imperial themes⁹³ and because

demands through the lens of the eschatological imperial demands of the Antichrist and the final victory of Christ. A coming Roman emperor (Domitian) will be an antichrist to John’s churches, a type of the final Antichrist (cf. 1 John 2:18; 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:7–8). This is similar to the perspective of the Olivet Discourse on the first-century destruction of Jerusalem as a type of the eschatological tribulation and owes itself to a similar reliance on the eschatology of Daniel, which relates the Antichrist to the first-century Roman destruction of Jerusalem and typifies him by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Cf. C. Marvin Pate “A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation,” in idem, *Four Views*, 95–175; Osborne, *Revelation*, 1, 21–22. Rev. 1:19 may indicate this dualist perspective. In this case it should be read, “Write therefore about what you see (*eides*), both (or, perhaps, “namely,” *kai*) what is and (*kai*) what must happen after these things.” Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 163.

⁹⁰ The description of the harlot follows known iconography of the *Dea Roma*. See esp. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 920–22, 944–45.

⁹¹ See Swete, *Revelation*, 220–21; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005), 436. Cf. Charles, *Revelation*, 2:69–70. Thus many scholars understand the number of the Beast’s name, 666 (or 616), to be a gematria of Hebrew transliterations of Greek and Latin versions of Nero Caesar.

⁹² See, e.g., Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 756. The opposition of the imperial cult to the churches was alluded to in the letter to Pergamum. “Satan’s throne” was said to be in that city, a reference to Pergamum’s distinction as the official head of the imperial cult in Asia.

⁹³ So, e.g., the Beast is a composite of all four of the imperial beasts of Daniel 7 (cf. Dan. 7:4–7; Rev. 13:1–2), and the harlot is identified with “Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of

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they are involved in clearly eschatological events.⁹⁴ Not the least of these eschatological connections are the deceptive signs performed by the Beast's false prophet (Rev. 13:13–14), which should probably be taken as another reference to the apocalyptic Jesus tradition as found in the seals vision (cf. Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9–10).⁹⁵ This seems to confirm that John has two perspectives in mind when he warns his churches about an upcoming tribulation. The "war against the saints" prosecuted by the Beast in Revelation 13:7 is both the historical tribulation expected to engulf the seven churches and the eschatological tribulation awaiting the future church.⁹⁶ This explains, then, why John can see the church in Revelation 7:9–19 as coming out of the great tribulation. The tribulation of Revelation 13 is concluded in Revelation 14 by the harvest of the earth by the Son of Man and the subsequent outpouring of the bowls of wrath on the kingdom of the Beast and destruction of the harlot, Babylon, who rides the Beast.

Conclusion

We conclude, then, that Matthew, Paul, and John all agree that the rapture of the church will occur after the middle of Daniel's seventieth "week." All three expect the church to see the eschatological Antichrist, Matthew and Paul explicitly anticipating the church's witness of the abomination of desolation, and Matthew and John explicitly anticipating the church's experience of the eschatological tribulation. And all three are best understood as placing the rapture of the church after these events. Furthermore, all three seem to depend on the same Jesus tradition for their view. The best reading of the exegetical evidence, then, is against a pretribulation rapture. But the best reading of the exegetical evidence also undermines a posttribulation rapture, because, though the church will be raptured after the middle of Daniel's seventieth week, the evidence also demands that it will be raptured before the end of the week.

the earth" (Rev. 17:5; Dan. 4:30). "Babylon the great" is the expression of human imperial hubris to which God is opposed in Daniel, hubris that Daniel links to the tower of Babel in 1:2.

⁹⁴ So, e.g., the Beast forms a ten-nation confederacy in opposition to the Lamb (Rev. 17:14; 19:19–21), and the harlot is destroyed by these kings immediately prior to the return of Christ (Rev. 14:8–20; 17:16; 18:1–19:21).

⁹⁵ Thus the worship of the Beast's image may conform to the session of the Man of Lawlessness in 2 Thess. 2:4.

⁹⁶ This suggests further that the details about the Beast in chapter 13 that cannot easily be given a first-century referent probably refer to realities pertaining to the future Antichrist. Though the worship of the Beast in general can refer to the imperial cult, the worship of the Beast in response to its recovery from a fatal wound, the deceptive signs of the false prophet, the talking image, and the economic control go far beyond Roman imperial efforts and are somewhat related to Paul's idea of the Man of Lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2.

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THE WAY THE CHURCH AVOIDS GOD'S WRATH AT THE END OF THE AGE IS BY THE RAPTURE

That the church will not experience God's wrath is clear first in Paul's letters. Three times in his letters, Paul mentions that Christians are not destined for God's wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). Certainly Paul can mean by these statements that believers will not be exposed to the wrath of God in the final judgment because of the atonement wrought by Christ. This is probably the case for Romans 5:9. But Paul can also speak of an outpouring of God's wrath on the day that Jesus is revealed, that is, at the parousia (1 Thess. 5:2–3; 2 Thess. 1:6–10; 2 Thess. 2:8).⁹⁷ It is in this context that we find the other two promises of protection from divine wrath. Thus in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the Thessalonians await the arrival of God's Son from heaven, who "rescues [them] from the coming wrath." This wrath and the Thessalonians' rescue from it are referred to in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–4, when the day of the Lord overtakes unbelievers destructively but believers benignly, prompting Paul to conclude in 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10 that "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." This latter statement refers back to the discussion of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and implies that the salvation obtained by believers on the day of the Lord is effected by the rapture. This, then, is what Paul probably refers to in 1:10. When Jesus is revealed from heaven, Christians will be rescued by the rapture from the wrath to come. The same idea is found in 2 Thessalonians 1:6–11, where the parousia brings affliction and retribution to those opposed to God and his people but relief to oppressed Christians. That Paul has the rapture in mind here is suggested by the overarching concept to the discussion of the judgment of the Antichrist and his dupes in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12; namely, "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him" (2:1). Like 1 Thessalonians 5:9, the discussion here concludes with an announcement of salvation to the church: "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers [and sisters] loved by the Lord, because from the beginning⁹⁸ God chose you to be saved" (2:13). Though this may refer generally to salvation from divine judgment, the context (both 2 Thessalonians 2 and the broader Thessalonian correspondence) suggests it includes the divine wrath to be brought at the parousia.⁹⁹ Thus it is most likely that when Paul promises protection to the church from

⁹⁷ Cf. Rom. 1:18; 2:5; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6. These texts share language with the former that implies they are speaking about this parousia wrath, but the conclusion is not certain.

⁹⁸ The witnesses to 2 Thess. 2:13 are evenly divided as to whether Paul wrote "firstfruits" (*aparchēn*) or "from the beginning" (*ap archēs*). Though Paul's style favors "firstfruits," its lack of sense in the context leads me to accept "from the beginning" as the better reading. So also Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 265; contra TNIV, Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 568. The text-critical problem does not materially affect my argument.

⁹⁹ Cf. Richard, *Thessalonians*, 262.

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divine wrath, he means to include the rapture as protection from the wrath Jesus metes out at his coming.

This implies that Paul has a complex of events in mind when he speaks of the parousia. The parousia involves first the rapture, then divine wrath, then a return to earth. Paul does not give any indication as to the duration of this complex of events, but that he requires a complex of events is evident.¹⁰⁰ Thus, arguments that Paul's second-coming language suggests a unified rapture/return are of no import. For example, Paul's use of *apantēsis* ("meeting") in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is frequently offered as evidence of a posttribulation rapture. It is argued that the word has a semitechnical meaning of local officials leaving a city to meet an approaching dignitary who is making his *parousia* there and then accompanying him back into the city.¹⁰¹ Even granting Paul's use of the term here in that sense (it can also merely mean a meeting of any sort),¹⁰² the metaphor says nothing as to the duration of the meeting and subsequent return.¹⁰³ Thus the word could still be used for a two-stage parousia, as long as the rapture and return to earth are viewed as a single event. Similarly, that Paul uses the terms *parousia* ("coming" or "presence"), *epiphaneia* ("appearance" or "manifestation"), and *apokalypsis* ("revelation") interchangeably for the rapture and return of Christ (as do the other New Testament writers) is no argument against the second coming as a complex of events.¹⁰⁴ In any instance, larger or narrower events may be in view. Moo admits as much but argues that the thesis "cannot be accepted unless there is clear evidence for such a division."¹⁰⁵ That evidence is found in Revelation.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Even the posttribulationist must agree that Paul taught the day of the Lord/parousia as a complex of events, for otherwise it is impossible to explain the situation of 2 Thessalonians 2. If Paul had not taught that the day of the Lord was a complex of events, why would the Thessalonians have assumed the day of the Lord had come despite the lack of the glorious appearing of Jesus (2 Thess. 2:2), or why would Paul argue for signs to precede the day of the Lord rather than point to the obvious fact that Jesus had not returned yet? Cf. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," 318.

¹⁰¹ See Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 102–3, for evidence.

¹⁰² BDAG, 97.

¹⁰³ Cf. Moo, "Posttribulation Rapture," 181.

¹⁰⁴ This is true as well for Gundry's evidence concerning the timing of the resurrection (*Church and Tribulation*, 146–51).

¹⁰⁵ Moo, "Posttribulation Rapture," 177.

¹⁰⁶ A similar case to this is the argument of amillennialists against a literal millennium. Certain New Testament texts are most simply understood to posit the resurrection and final judgment to occur at the second coming of Christ. Therefore the millennium must not be literal. Premillennialists respond that what seems a single event elsewhere must be a complex of events given the literalness of the millennium. Or again, Jewish theologians argue that Jesus cannot be the Messiah, since all messianic events reported of him in certain Old Testament passages did not occur during his life. Christians respond that what

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Revelation Shows a Complex Parousia Involving the Rapture, an Outpouring of Wrath, and the Return of Christ to Earth

What could appear as nearly simultaneous in Paul is extended in Revelation. We have seen above that Revelation 6–8 and 14–16 present the rapture immediately prior to the outpouring of God’s wrath. Thus in Revelation 14:14–20, following an announcement of the arrival of the hour of God’s judgment (14:7) and yet prior to the grape harvest (14:17–20) in which all who worship the Beast will be forced to “drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger” (14:10, 18–20 NASB), John sees Christ harvest the earth at his parousia. Once the victorious church is in heaven (15:2–4), the seven bowls full of the wrath of God (15:1, 7; 16:1) are poured onto the kingdom of the Beast (16:1–21). At the end of this period of wrath, Jesus returns to earth to establish his kingdom (Rev. 19:11–21; cf. 16:13–18; 17:14). Similarly, in Revelation 6:17, with the opening of the sixth seal, it is recognized that the great day of the wrath of God has arrived. But prior to the outpouring of God’s wrath in the trumpet judgments (8:1–11:19), the 144,000 are sealed for protection from it (7:1–3; cf. 9:4) and the church is raptured to heaven. Only after this are the trumpets blown, the last of which brings the arrival of God’s kingdom (11:15–18).

A few objections to this view can be made. First, on the supposition that the 144,000 are identical to the innumerable multitude, the scene in 7:9–17 is said to be proleptic of the end. That is, John is said to see the church under two perspectives in the interlude of chapter 7: as the church militant on earth, protected by God from his coming wrath but still exposed to martyrdom at the hands of the Beast, and as the church triumphant in heaven, having completed its course of tribulation in faithfulness.¹⁰⁷ But, on the one hand, this reading runs afoul of the parallel passage in Revelation 14–16. There the parousia harvest *precedes* the wrath harvest. The only way to deny this is to affirm that the harvest of the one like a Son of Man sitting on a white cloud is identical to the following grape harvest. But as I have argued above, this is exceedingly unlikely. On the other hand, it is also unlikely that John means to convey the identity of the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude, since he almost goes out of his way to describe them in opposing terms.¹⁰⁸ Thus (1) the 144,000 are explicitly numbered, while the great host is explicitly called

appears as a single event in the Old Testament is shown in the New Testament to be a complex of events separated in time.

NASB New American Standard Bible

¹⁰⁷ See, e.g., Beale, *Revelation*, 395–96, 405–6. Cf. Charles, *Revelation*, 1:195, who notes that in 7:9–17 “there is an actual breach in the unity of time which has been so carefully observed in 4–7:4–8, ... looking to the close of the great tribulation.”

¹⁰⁸ See Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 440–47. Cf. A. Feuillet, “Les 144.000 Israélites Marqués d’un sceau,” *Nov Test* 9 (1967): 191–224; Heinrich Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT 16a (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1974), 126. What follows reproduces essentially verbatim parts of my “Messianic Exegesis,” 302n109, and 315.

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innumerable. (2) The 144,000 are explicitly listed as coming from the various tribes of Israel, whereas the innumerable multitude comes from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue. (3) The 144,000 appear on earth, while the multitude appears in heaven. (4) The 144,000 are sealed as protection against the perilous time they are about to enter (Rev. 9:4), while the innumerable multitude have come out of the great tribulation. Similarly, in chapter 14 the 144,000 are firstfruits of the harvest (14:4), while the heavenly crowd are the fullness of the harvest (14:14–16). At the very least, if the 144,000 are understood to represent members of the church, they do not represent the whole church but some subset.

Richard Bauckham has argued that the striking contrasts between the two groups are rhetorical, their juxtaposition serving to jar the reader from Jewish militaristic categories to more universal and martyrological ones.¹⁰⁹ The innumerable multitude is thus identical to and used to reinterpret the 144,000. He bases his reading on the analogous reinterpretation of the Lion by the Lamb in Revelation 5:5–6, where John is told of the victory of the Lion of the tribe of Judah but sees a lamb standing as though slain. Here John hears the number of those sealed as 12,000 from each of twelve tribes of Israel but sees an innumerable multitude from every tribe, nation, people, and tongue. But Bauckham's position cannot be maintained for two reasons. First, it is clear in Revelation 5 that John intends the Lamb to represent the Lion, because the Lion is a mere title mentioned before the actual appearance of the Lamb. In chapter 7, however, there is an elaborate process of directing the actual sealing of a group of God's servants (vv. 1–3) followed by an accounting of those sealed (*tōn esphragismenōn*), the perfect participle implying that the sealing had taken place. It is only after this group has actually been sealed that John sees the innumerable multitude. Second, the relevant language is significantly different in chapter 7 than in chapter 5. In Revelation 5:5 an elder tells John that the Lion has overcome; then John says, "And I saw ... a Lamb" (*kai eidon ... arnion*)—that is, the scene begun in 5:1 regarding the search for one worthy to open the scroll is continued. In 7:9, however, the transition statement is "After this I looked, and behold" (ESV; *meta tauta eidon, kai idou*), indicating a new stage in the action (cf. 4:1; 7:1; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1).

Thus the idea that 7:9–17, the appearance of the innumerable multitude in heaven, is proleptic of the end cannot be maintained. It neither accounts for the two harvests of chapter 14 nor for the distinction of the innumerable multitude from the 144,000.

A second objection to understanding that Revelation 7:9–17 portrays the rapture of the church is that God's wrath has already been present in the first five seals. In support of

¹⁰⁹ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 215–29.
ESV English Standard Version

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this idea, some argue that because the Lamb opens the seals, the effects of opening the seals must be considered God's wrath.¹¹⁰ But granted that God is in control not just of the opening of the seals but of all events in Revelation, by expressly noting the arrival of God's wrath in the sixth seal, John clearly intends to differentiate the effects of the sixth and seventh seals from the first five. It is only the latter that encompass God's wrath in the sense that John intends.¹¹¹ This is patent also from the qualitative difference between the "normal" catastrophes of the first five seals (corresponding to the nonsign "beginning of birth pains" in Matt. 24:3–13) and the supernatural catastrophes of the last two, which include the trumpets (corresponding to the parousia of Matt. 24:29–31). Furthermore, the cosmic disturbances of the sixth seal are signs of the day of the Lord, the great day when God comes to judge his enemies, as the allusions to Isaiah 2:12–22; 13:6–16; 34:1–15; Joel 2:1–11, 30–32; 3:9–17; Zephaniah 1:14–18; and Malachi 3:2 make clear. Hence the next events in the narrative are the sealing of the 144,000 expressly to protect from them God's wrath (7:1–3; cf. 9:4), the rapture of the church, and the opening of the seventh seal.¹¹² The breaking of this seal has a fourfold effect: silence in heaven for half an hour, noted in Zechariah 2:13 and Zephaniah 1:7 as attending the coming of God in judgment,¹¹³ the deliverance of seven trumpets to seven angels, the casting of fire to the earth (mixed with the prayers of the saints, apparently for vindication; Rev. 6:9–11),¹¹⁴ and phenomena indicating a theophany (Rev. 8:1–5).¹¹⁵ In other words, the opening of the seventh seal initiates the wrath of the day of the Lord, taking us to the very end, when God comes to earth to vindicate his own. The seven trumpets then recapitulate the seventh seal, focusing on the extended judgments that accompany the day of the Lord but ending with the same theophanic phenomena as the seventh seal (Rev. 11:19), indicating the arrival of the kingdom of God. Thus the wrath of God that John has in mind is clearly the wrath of the day of the Lord displayed in the seven trumpets (thus 11:18, "your wrath has come").

¹¹⁰ See, e.g., Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture View*, 52–58.

¹¹¹ Thus, while I agree with Showers, *ibid.*, 68–72, that Rev. 6:7–8 probably alludes to Ezek. 5:17; 14:21, and that in Ezekiel these represent God's judgment, for the above stated reason I do not agree that this demonstrates that the wrath of God referred to in 6:17 began in seal 4. These are still part of the "normal" catastrophes of the first five seals and not the clearly distinct catastrophes of seals 6 and 7. Showers's attempt to show that the phenomena of seal 4 signify "Day-of-the-Lord wrath" fails because it relies on the assumption that the phenomena are unique to the eschatological day of the Lord, which is hardly the case (let alone the lack of evidence that they signified as much in Jewish apocalyptic tradition), and that the use of the Hebrew words *'ap* ("anger") and *hēmā* ("fury") are also uniquely associated with the eschatological day of the Lord.

¹¹² What follows in this paragraph is taken largely verbatim from my "Messianic Exegesis," 299–300.

¹¹³ Cf. Zeph. 1:7; Zech. 2:13, the first of which deals with the coming of God to judge the apostate among them, the second with the coming of God to vindicate his people.

¹¹⁴ Probably an allusion to Ezek. 10:2.

¹¹⁵ See esp. Ex. 19:16–20. Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 458–59.

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In the sixth seal, then, the ungodly are responding to the cosmic disturbances as portents of the arrival of the day of wrath, not of its earlier presence.

Thomas argues that the aorist “has come” (*ēlthen*) in the cry of the ungodly upon seeing the cosmic disturbances of the sixth seal (“the great day of [God’s] wrath has come,” Rev. 6:17) is to be understood as constative, summarizing the phenomena of the first six seals.¹¹⁶ But this is clearly not the case. In the first place, that the aorist indicates the arrival of the day of the Lord is manifest from what has just been said. But, second, John uses the same construction in Revelation 14:7, when an angel announces before the two harvests that the hour of God’s judgment “has come” (*ēlthen*). Here *ēlthen* can only mean “has arrived.” Given the parallelism of Revelation 6:12–11:18 and 14:1–16:21, the verb is to be taken in the same sense in Revelation 6:17.¹¹⁷

In support of the contention that the tribulation from which the innumerable multitude have come is equivalent to the day of wrath, pretribulationists note that some Old Testament passages dealing with a future period of distress for Israel and that are associated with the day of the Lord use Hebrew words that can be translated “tribulation” (e.g., Deut. 4:30; Zeph. 1:14–15).¹¹⁸ Against this view, we note first that whatever else may be said about a period of distress for Israel in the Old Testament, John is talking specifically about the Danielic tribulation, which is the final three-and-one-half-year period when the Antichrist “wars against the saints” (Dan. 7:21, 25; 12:1, 7; Rev. 13:7).¹¹⁹ This is evident from the general Danielic background to Revelation and the use of the tribulation motif in Revelation 13. Once again, though it is true that both Daniel’s and John’s perspectives (indeed, by nature, the perspective of all Jewish apocalyptic literature) is that God is ultimately in control of history and its outcome, neither Daniel nor John indicate that the persecution of the saints by the Antichrist is an expression of the wrath of God.¹²⁰ Second, even if it can be shown that the Jews will experience God’s wrath during at least part of the tribulation period, John is talking about the church avoiding the wrath of God, not the Jews. In fact, that seems to be the point of the sealing of the 144,000 in chapter 7. This group probably represents the remnant of Israel¹²¹ sealed

¹¹⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 458, 460.

¹¹⁷ See also Rev. 14:15; 19:7.

¹¹⁸ See, e.g., Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, 42–44; Showers, *Pre-wrath Rapture View*, 33.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 172–73.

¹²⁰ Moo (*ibid.*, 173–74) asserts that the use of *za’am* (“indignation,” “curse”) in Dan. 11:36 attests to divine wrath in the tribulation (cf. 8:19). But *za’am* is not always an indicator of God’s wrath in the Old Testament (Bertil Wiklander, “Māoîz,” *TDOT*, 4:106–8), and in Dan. 11:36 it surely refers to the indignation of the Antichrist against the covenant (so cf. 11:30). Cf. John J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 338–39.

¹²¹ Cf. Kraft, *Offenbarung*, 126; J. A. Draper, “The Heavenly Feast of Tabernacles: Rev. 7:1–17,” *JSNT* 19 (1983): 136; Feuillet, “Les 144.000,” 221. Though John can speak frequently of the church in terms that

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to go through the day of wrath on earth (Rev. 9:4), while the innumerable multitude is raptured to heaven for protection from God's wrath. Presumably the 144,000 either become Christ-followers simultaneously with the rapture or are marked to become Christ-followers prior to the rapture and become such afterward.¹²² They then stand with Christ as the primary witnesses during the period of wrath.¹²³

If this is the case, it may explain the statements by Jesus in Matthew 24:22 (Mark 13:20) that the days of the tribulation would be "cut short" (*ekolobōsen*) for the sake of the elect and in 24:29 (Mark 13:24) that the parousia would immediately follow the tribulation.¹²⁴ It is doubtful that, as Rosenthal argues,¹²⁵ Jesus means that the originally three-and-one-half-year tribulation will be shortened to something less. Rather, Jesus is speaking in relation to the church. Though Israel will fully experience the three-and-one-half-year tribulation as Daniel predicted (and the partly overlapping day of the Lord), the church will experience only the first part of that tribulation (and not the day of the Lord). After the church has undergone its tribulation, it will be "raptured."

relate it to Israel (e.g., as a kingdom of priests, Rev. 1:6; 5:10), he also seems to keep Israel and the church somewhat distinct (e.g., the description of the New Jerusalem incorporating elements of both, Rev. 21:12–17; cf. 4:4). The indications that the 144,000 are the remnant of Israel include the allusion to the sealing of the remnant in Ezek. 9:4 and the fact that they are taken "from every tribe of the sons of Israel" (Rev. 7:4 ESV); they are a portion of the entire nation. In Rev. 14:1–5, the detail that "no lie was found in [the] mouths" of the 144,000 (v. 5) alludes to the prophecy in Zeph. 3 of the coming of God in anger to judge the nations and restore Israel (Zeph. 3:8; cf. Ps. 2:12). The result of God's judgment will be the gathering of the nations to "my holy mountain" (3:11 ESV). In the meantime, however, God promises to leave among the nations a humble people who "will take refuge in the name of YHWH" (Zeph 3:12; cf. Rev. 14:1, where the protective seal on the foreheads of the 144,000 is the divine name), namely, "the remnant of Israel, [who] will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths" (Zeph. 3:13).

¹²² In Rev. 11:13, at the "rapture" of the two witnesses, a great earthquake destroys a tenth of Jerusalem, killing seven thousand people and causing the conversion of the rest. The number seven thousand is probably used ironically here in contrast to the number of the remnant in 1 Kings 19:18. There, seven thousand were faithful; here, all but seven thousand turn to God. The interpretation of Rev. 11 is notoriously difficult, especially with regard to the timing of the events depicted. Note that Joel 2–3 and Zeph. 1 depict the day of the Lord as a time for judgment and salvation for Israel.

¹²³ Thus they are also described in ways that imply they are the eschatological messianic army. See Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 217–23.

¹²⁴ These are hard verses for anyone to deal with, because either Jesus means that God's original determination, communicated to Daniel, that the tribulation will be three and one-half years will be altered, or he means that God in eternity past had first considered making the tribulation longer than three and one-half years but finally decided to make it precisely that length. The first seems unlikely on the face of it as well as on the emphasis of a three-and-one-half-year period in Revelation (11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5). The second makes virtual nonsense of the term "cut short."

¹²⁵ Rosenthal, *Pre-wrath Rapture*, 108–13.

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This understanding also renders the debate over Revelation 3:10 moot. In Revelation 3:10, the church at Philadelphia is promised that “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.” If we understand the hour of testing to be the tribulation, then, as posttribulationists argue, “protect [you] from” (*tēreō ek*) would mean something like “preserve you in the midst of and bring you safely out of” (cf. Rev. 7:14).¹²⁶ On the other hand, if the hour of testing is the period of extraordinary divine wrath, then *tēreō ek* would mean, as pretribulationists argue, “keep [you] out [entirely].” Both meanings for the phrase are possible.¹²⁷ Because Revelation emphasizes the encounter with the Beast and the decision to worship him or the Lamb as the basis for judgment or reward (Rev. 12:9; 13:3, 8, 12, 14; 14:9–10; 15:2; 20:4), it seems best to understand “the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” to focus on that particular issue rather than on the wrath of God, which is less for testing than for judgment (or perhaps to prompt those on earth to make the right choice).¹²⁸ The nature of the protection is probably more spiritual than physical, since in Revelation victory over the Beast is not in avoiding martyrdom but in remaining faithful to Jesus to the point of death (12:11). Still, if as 7:14 suggests, the rapture is in view, physical protection may be involved as well. At any rate, the evidence of the actual visions in Revelation is clear: the church will experience persecution by the Antichrist and be raptured prior to an extended period of divine wrath, a period that ends with the return of Christ to earth.

Some Objections

Revelation 20

Moo makes the point that, since the first resurrection occurs in Revelation 20:4, the rapture must also occur there, since the rapture and the resurrection are simultaneous

¹²⁶ Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 57–58. The *ek* (“out of”) does not need to mean “all the way through and out the other side”; it could merely mean preserve you within until such time as I take you out. If the former is accepted, then John may have only in mind the “churchly” tribulation of Matt. 24:22. But nothing in Revelation would indicate this. Rather, John seems to think of the tribulation in its entirety and the protected church being taken out of the midst of it.

¹²⁷ John 17:15, the only other use of *tēreō ek* in the New Testament, does not strike me as helping to decide the case. Merely because there Jesus contrasts protection from Satan with being taken out of the world does not mean that the phrase *tēreō ek* always means protection from something while remaining within its sphere of influence, let alone in the world. This is to import the context of a single passage into the basic semantics of the phrase. The phrase means simply “protect from.” Cf. Feinberg, “Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” 63–72.

¹²⁸ See Smalley, *Revelation*, 92. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that the hour of testing is the period of wrath. See, e.g., Osborne, *Revelation*, 193.

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events.¹²⁹ The point is well taken, but it goes against a posttribulation rapture as well, since Revelation 20:4 makes the rapture not only posttribulational but postparousia, a virtual nonrapture. According to Paul, the rapture is the meeting of the coming Lord Jesus in the air by both living and dead Christians. Posttribulationists understand this to mean that as Jesus is descending to earth at his second coming, the dead in Christ will be resurrected and together with the living will be caught up to meet Jesus and immediately accompany him back to earth. But this is manifestly what we do not have in Revelation 20:4. If Revelation 20:4 included the rapture, John would have Jesus descend to earth, defeat the Beast, bind Satan, and then rapture the saints. What sort of rapture could that possibly be? Or does Jesus return to heaven and come a second time between 19:21 and 20:4? Surely not! In this case, either John has no doctrine of the rapture, or the resurrection of 20:4 is not a resurrection of the church, or the resurrection of 20:4 is “misplaced” for thematic reasons. The latter two options are patently better than the first for theological and exegetical reasons. Theologically, they avoid a contradiction between Paul and John. Exegetically, they conform to the other evidence in Revelation that the rapture occurs before the outpouring of God’s wrath and that the parousia is a complex of events. Thus the return of Christ to earth in Revelation 19:11–21 with no rapturelike event is due to the fact that the rapture already occurred with the initial harvest in Revelation 14:14–16. The parousia is not concluded until Christ returns at the end of the second, judgment harvest, made clear by the allusions to Isaiah 63:3 and Joel 3:13 in Revelation 14:19–20; 19:15.

The fact that Jesus is accompanied in his descent by the armies of heaven gives additional credence to this interpretation.¹³⁰ In Revelation 17:14, those who accompany the Lamb, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, in his defeat of the Beast and the kings of the earth “are the called, chosen and faithful” —almost certainly human believers. In Revelation 19:14 the armies of heaven who accompany the descending Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, are “dressed in fine linen, white and clean.” This phrase was used just six verses earlier to refer to the garments of the bride of the Lamb and interpreted as “the righteous acts of the saints.” There can be little doubt that the armies of heaven are or include the church, and this suggests that the church had been raptured earlier, in line with 7:9–17 and 14:14–16.

It is granted that there is no mention of resurrection in Revelation 7:9–17 or 14:14–16 and 15:2–4. But even though a resurrection is reported in 20:4, it seems to me likelier given the preceding that either it is reported at this point because of the association with the reign of Christ (that is, that John reserves mention of the resurrection until its main significance for him, coregency, is in view) or because this is the resurrection of

¹²⁹ “Posttribulation Rapture,” 200–201.

¹³⁰ See, e.g., Mounce, *Revelation*, 354–55; Beale, *Revelation*, 960. Cf. Hultberg, “Messianic Exegesis,” 341–44.

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tribulation saints (Dan. 12:1). The latter is possible on the supposition that the 144,000 are the remnant of Israel during the last period of the tribulation.

1 Corinthians 15:52

Finally, some argue against a prewrath rapture by reading the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11:15–19 in light of 1 Corinthians 15:52. If Paul says that the rapture occurs at the “last” trumpet, and the last trumpet in Revelation occurs at the end of God’s wrath, then the rapture is not prewrath.¹³¹ Most scholars, however, see no relationship between the schematic trumpet series in Revelation and Paul’s mention of the last trumpet, not least because all evidence points to Revelation having been written after the lifetime of Paul. Rather, Paul is probably referring to the frequent mention of a trumpet call announcing the day of the Lord and the gathering of Israel (Isa. 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:16; Zech. 9:14; cf. *ApocAb* 31:1–2; Pss. Sol. 11:1–3; Matt. 24:31; 1 Thess. 4:16).¹³² It is the “last” trumpet not because Paul is thinking of a series of trumpets but because it is the trumpet that signals the final day. The image in Revelation that corresponds to this is not the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15–19 but the cosmic disturbances of the sixth seal and subsequent interlude before the wrath in Revelation 6:12–7:17. So, once again, John portrays both the rapture of the church in heaven, like Paul, and the sealing of the remnant of Israel on earth in anticipation of Israel’s regathering, like the Old Testament, in association with the arrival of the day of the Lord.¹³³

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, I have attempted to show the following:

1. That the warnings presented in at least Matthew’s version of the Olivet Discourse about the Danielic abomination of desolation and the tribulation that follows were directed to

¹³¹ See, e.g., Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 148–51.

ApocAb *Apocalypse of Abraham*

¹³² So most commentators. See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987), 381; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 801–2. Cf. Moo, “Posttribulation Rapture,” 179.

¹³³ This also allows mortals to enter the millennium and thus fulfill such passages as Isa. 65:17–25. I have not argued against posttribulationism on the basis of its not allowing mortals to enter the millennium, because I am not convinced that unbelievers cannot be present in the millennium. Both the sheep and goats parable (Matt. 25:31–46) and Zech. 14:16–19 can allow for it, while Rev. 19:21 does not necessarily disallow it (cf., e.g., Gundry, *Church and Tribulation*, 166–67). If mortal *saints* must be present in the millennium, then posttribulationists have a real problem. That the millennium fulfills kingdom promises to Israel would seem to argue that, in fact, some mortal Israelites must be in the millennium. Isaiah 65 and other Jewish kingdom promises appear to take this for granted.

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Jesus' disciples as representatives of the church, since that is how Matthew regularly views the disciples and how he regularly aims his teaching material in his gospel.

2. That Paul associates the rapture with the outpouring of Christ's wrath on the nations at the parousia, a complex of events he refers to as the day of the Lord, and that those events will be preceded by the Danielic abomination of desolation. Paul is dependent on the tradition behind the Olivet Discourse for this. Though Paul is not explicit, it is best to read him as positing the rapture as the thing that spares the church from experiencing the parousia wrath.

3. That John in Revelation also anticipates the church experiencing the Danielic tribulation, and that he makes explicit what Paul implies: the church will be raptured immediately prior to the outpouring of God's wrath in the day of the Lord, some time before the end of the tribulation period, and will return with Christ to earth at the end of that extended period of wrath. The parousia, then, is a complex of events that begins with the rapture after the middle of Daniel's seventieth "week," proceeds through a period of wrath on the nations, and concludes with the return of Christ to establish his kingdom. Neither pretribulationism nor posttribulationism can account for this complex of events and its timing. The only position that can is the prewrath rapture position.

Though I believe the three propositions above represent by far the best way to interpret the evidence I have presented in this essay, I also acknowledge that the evidence is not finally conclusive. If it were, the colleagues with whom I interact in this book, who are both keen exegetes and proven scholars, would not differ with me. Nevertheless, I am fairly certain that Dr. Moo will find my evidence that the church will enter the tribulation compelling and that Dr. Blaising will find my evidence that the church will be raptured before the return of Christ to earth compelling, and I find in that some confirmation that perhaps the prewrath position integrates the evidence best.¹³⁴

¹³⁴Hultberg, A. (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. 109–154). Zondervan.