

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Review of the Book

The Rapture Question Answered Plain & Simple

MAL COUCH*

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INTRODUCTION

It is another book illustrating a pathetic misunderstanding of basic Hermeneutics 101! Robert Van Kampen, author of *The Sign* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1992), has written again on the pre-wrath rapture position in an attempt to shore up this view first presented by Marvin Rosenthal in his book *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1990). Van Kampen's book is entitled *The Rapture Question Answered Plain & Simple* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997, Hardback, 207 pages).

Before I even opened the book, I felt I knew the areas where Van Kampen would make his major mistakes in presenting his arguments. I felt like a "prophet," for I had learned from the past that most who depart from a pretribulational rapture position do so in three critical areas. First, they fail to consistently apply proper hermeneutics to a given passage, and this specifically in regard to dispensational and contextual issues. This brings about the second critical area of error, that is, a misinterpretation of the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24–25). And thirdly, this misinterpretation of the Olivet Discourse in turn brings about a misinterpretation of the Seal Judgments in Revelation 6. The Olivet Discourse is especially crucial in understanding the book of Revelation. There are many other areas of possible failure for solid interpretation, but for me, these would be the most obvious and critical.

What I had suspected was exactly the case! What is so interesting about the pre-wrath rapture argument presented by both Rosenthal and Van Kampen is how complicated their teaching is in order to arrive at their position. Some who are critical of this school of thinking have even jested that it is so complicated, even the apostles Paul and John would have difficulty explaining how this teaching works!

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WHO IS ROBERT VAN KAMPEN?

As the book jacket notes, Van Kampen was the founder of *Van Kampen Merrit*, an investment banking company that was sold to *Xerox Corporation* in the mid-1980s. This set him free to research, study, and write on biblical issues. Financially, he has helped many Christian organizations. He founded *The Scriptorium*, an organization “whose sole purpose is the scholastic defense of the authenticity, accuracy, and authority of God’s Word, the Bible.”

After selling his company in the spring of 1984, Van Kampen says that he headed for his Michigan summer home with “my computer, software that included two translations of the Bible with an exhaustive concordance, and my own thoroughly marked-up Bible.” Armed with these study tools he was on an important mission sparked by a statement supposedly written by Dr. Richard Mayhue. Van Kampen writes in *The Rapture Question Answered*,

I agreed with Mayhue that the pretribulation position was “logically invalid or at least unconvincing,” and therefore found myself leaning toward the posttribulation position because of the clear teaching of Christ in Matthew 24, the teaching of John in Revelation 12 and 13, and the teaching of Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2, all of which put the elect of God in the heart of Antichrist’s persecution. (p. 46)

What had Mayhue said that so triggered Van Kampen to question the pretribulation rapture position? Van Kampen says that he quotes from Mayhue’s Ph.D. doctoral dissertation written at *Grace Theological Seminary*, entitled “The Prophet’s Watchword, the Day of the Lord,” (p. 181–82). Van Kampen writes that Mayhue wrote:

... neither a pretribulation nor a posttribulation Rapture is taught directly in Scripture, and pretribulationists still have problems to solve in regard to their position ... perhaps the position of pretribulationism is correct although its proof at times has been logically invalid or at least unconvincing.

Is this what Mayhue actually said, or is he misquoted? Judge for yourself from the original pages and from the full context of what he wrote in his dissertation.

Strong and compelling Biblical reasons for preferring a pretribulational interpretation of the rapture have been offered. Neither a pretribulation rapture nor a posttribulation rapture is taught explicitly in the Scriptures ... The materials presented here [in this dissertation], however, do mount a strong inductive case for pretribulationism. Problems remain to be solved by pretribulationists. Yet at

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this state of the art, pretribulationism most consistently fits the Biblical data and is championed by this writer [Mayhue] as the view which best explains the coming of our Lord for His own. (p. 181)

But Van Kampen is sloppy in his research. The last line he quotes from Mayhue (“perhaps the position ...”) actually comes from page 189, not 182. Van Kampen misquotes Mayhue’s context that simply says, that often in debate, Walvoord could have been more logically valid.

Van Kampen also quotes Dr. John F. Walvoord, former president of *Dallas Theological Seminary*, from his book *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: n.d., 1957, p. 148), “... neither posttribulationism nor pretribulationism is an explicit teaching of the Scriptures. The Bible does not, in so many words, state either.”

But does Walvoord actually write this? The quote from page 148 of Walvoord’s book actually is a poor paraphrase, by Van Kampen, from a statement by George Ladd. Walvoord writes and includes this statement.

Ladd, in contrast ... concedes that posttribulationist rapture is an inference rather than an explicit revelation of Scripture in the following statement: “Nor does the Word explicitly place the Rapture at the end of the Tribulation.”

Nowhere could this author find Walvoord writing on page 148, or any other page, the quote Van Kampen attributes to him. Van Kampen’s “quote” could be a deliberate garbled composite of the statement above from Walvoord’s book. We hope this is not the case.

Since both men “quoted” are avowed pretribulationist rapturists, they are in no way simply being “soft” in their own convictions on the matter. What they are saying is, in their own opinion, one cannot find a passage that speaks directly to the pretrib position. Walvoord, Mayhue, and many others would argue that it requires a collection of verses and contexts to prove the pretribulationist rapture position.

But according to Van Kampen, the statement from these two scholars completely threw him off as to the issue of the pretribulationist rapture of the Church. His great quest thus began in which he had many hours of Bible study with Rosenthal, plus some time spent with others he felt would listen. From these encounters, the Pre-Wrath Rapture concept was born.

I believe a word is in order concerning the two quotes, or misquotes, Van Kampen gives from Walvoord and Mayhue. I personally believe several passages of Scripture come close, by their wording, in defining succinctly the Pretribulation argument. (Though not

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all pretributionalists are going to agree.) For example, Paul commended the Thessalonian church that they were committed “to be serving a living and true God, and to be waiting for His Son from heaven, ... that is Jesus, who will be rescuing us away from the wrath [on its way] coming” (1 Thess. 1:9b–10; *translation mine*). Much arguing has occurred over the Greek preposition *ek* which can be translated “out” or “away from.” Since Paul will pick up this argument again about the coming of deliverance (4:13–5:10), the overall context has the idea of “separation from” or “away from”¹ in the sense that the believer never was in the terrors or the grip of that wrath.

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Rosenthal and Van Kampen would argue that the wrath at the first of the tribulation, as recorded in the book of Revelation, is from nature and that the wrath of the Antichrist is actually Satan’s wrath. Believers will go through these two wraths, they state. But believers *will* be raptured from God’s wrath that is found later in the book of Revelation, they would further answer. The problem with this argument is that Paul says the believers are rescued simply from wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). He does not designate which wrath or whose wrath!

Amillennialists A. T. Robertson and Barnes both see this wrath of 1:10 as the future judgment of all the lost and not the wrath of the tribulation. The argument however turns out the same. Believers will not go through any part of that wrath. “It is the ... ascended Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who delivers from the coming wrath ... He is our Rescuer ...”² “It was the great purpose of his coming to save us from this approaching wrath.”³ On this verse Milligan well notes,

Ek ... emphasizes its completeness in the present instance—“He brings us altogether out of the reach of future judgment” ... “out of the wrath that is coming” ... [wrath] being used absolutely of the Divine wrath, and in accordance with the context ... and the general N. T. usage, having here the definite eschatological reference ...⁴

The other passage that I believe is clear on the pretribulational rapture issue is 1 Thessalonians 5:9: “Because God Himself has not positioned (*tithami*) us into wrath but instead (*alla*) into the safe keeping (*peripoiasis*) of deliverance by means of our Lord Jesus

¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., rev. F. W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, trans. William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), p. 234.

² A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, 5 Vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 4:14.

³ Albert Barnes, “1 Thessalonians—Philemon,” *Notes on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 16.

⁴ George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1980), p. 14.

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Christ" ... (*translation mine*). By context, Paul ties this wrath (*orgēs*) together with "the day of the Lord" (v. 2). Thus, the day of the Lord is the wrath *from the Lord!* The Greek word "positioned" is an aorist, middle, indicative of *tithami*. "To place, position, or destine" would be good definitions of the word. "We are not 'positionally destined' by Him (middle voice) into the coming wrath."

Finally, on the "disputed" page 148 of *The Rapture Question*, Van Kampen failed to quote Walvoord's excellent statement:

Pretribulationism is based on the fact that it allows a harmony of the Scriptures relating to the second advent. The separation of the translation from the return of Christ to earth permits each of the two events, so different in character, to have its own place. It solves the problem of the confusing and contradictory details in the post-tribulational interpretation illustrated in the difficulty of the posttribulationists themselves to work out a harmony of prophecies related to the second advent.

WHAT IS THE PRE-WRATH RAPTURE ARGUMENT?

Van Kampen's book is another attempt to make the pre-wrath position acceptable. Karleen explains what Rosenthal and Van Kampen are seeking to say:

The Rapture of the Church of Jesus Christ will occur, not at the beginning of the seventieth week of Daniel, but sometime after its midpoint, just prior to the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord will be a time of wrath from God upon the inhabitants of the earth. Church-age believers will go through the first half of the seventieth week—three and one half years—and more but will be spared the time of wrath.⁵

Showers adds:

Advocates of this view assert that the church will be raptured between the middle and end of the 70th week of Daniel 9 (perhaps about three-fourths of the way through the seven-year 70th week). According to this position, the church will go through the first half and a significant part of the second half of the 70th week before being removed from the earth.⁶

⁵ Paul Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture: Is it Biblical?* (Langhorne, PA: BF Press, 1991), p. 10.

⁶ Renald Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come!* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 1995), p. 13

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Benware further explains their position:

... the four seal judgments are not the wrath of God but, rather, the wrath of man ... the Great Tribulation is completely separate from the eschatological “day of the Lord.” This is important [to their] theory because the wrath of God is certainly part of the Day of the Lord. So to keep wrath out of the Great Tribulation, these two terms must be kept completely separate. The wrath of the Great Tribulation is the wrath of Satan.⁷

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CONSISTENT HERMENEUTICS AND CONTEXT

Van Kampen begins his book with an exercise in hermeneutics. His chapter on “The Beginnings” ends with his views on interpretation (pp. 23–33) that we can basically agree with, as far as they go. He writes “... we understand what we read or hear by taking what is said to us at face value—or, by taking it literally, if you prefer that word—in its most natural, normal, customary sense” (p. 23). Most can certainly agree with this statement. But on his short, half page discussion entitled “In Context,” he falls extremely short in explaining the important contextual issues in interpretation.

However, he correctly states, “Only when you know the context will you know how the writer intended the passage to be understood. A common danger is what is commonly called proof-texting: building an interpretation on the superficial application of a biblical text taken out of context” (p. 31).

It is at this point that Van Kampen will fail miserably!

He will insert the Church into contexts that are clearly meant for Israel specifically! He will create a “superficial application” that any beginning student interpreter could spot!

However, in his extremely short treatment of context he rightly concluded with, “The text has a completely different meaning when its context is taken into consideration” (Ibid.) This statement will be Van Kampen’s Achilles heel!

THE CHURCH IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

Since context is one of the most important elements in hermeneutics, it is especially appropriate to take note of the Olivet Discourse. First, the discourse was probably delivered about two days before Passover. After departing from the temple, Jesus turned to His disciples and uttered the incredible prophecy about the destruction of that

⁷ Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 222–23

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important building (Mt. 24:2). Shortly, the disciples ask Him three questions: (1) when will these things be, i.e., the fall of the temple, (2) what is the sign of your coming, (3) and what is the sign of the end of the age? (v. 3).

By the context, it is easy to see that they have asked questions that are exclusive to the nation of Israel. These are not questions about the Church! The answers that the Lord gives have to do with those inquiries. He does not suddenly shift out of context to some far off event dealing with the Church age. And though His answers deal with issues both near and far, they are still issues important for Jews. He speaks of the terrible tribulation coming, that the Jews certainly knew about (24:7–26).

He talked of issues that have to do with the Sabbath (v. 20), and He referred to His return to earth and spoke of Himself as the Son of Man (vv. 27, 30, 39, 44; 25:31); as well, He called Himself the King who would inherit the earthly kingdom (25:34, 40).

When Christ speaks of the two men in the field and one taken and one left, context would dictate that the one taken is brought before the King who has returned (24:45–51), and is judged for his unfaithfulness (vv. 50–51). The picture is that the King has come down to reign, and the “one taken” is removed for judgment as the kingdom begins! This is not the Rapture!

HOW DOES VAN KAMPEN REWRITE THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 24–25?

First, by very conveniently making every reference of the words “elect” in the Olivet Discourse and “saint” in the book of Revelation refer to believers in the Church. In other words he blends contexts and ultimately destroys contexts in order to make the texts say what he wishes.

Van Kampen makes every reference of “saint” and “elect” “refer to Christ or His angels or, when referring to human beings, to the genuine bond-servants of Christ within the [professing] Church” (p. 81). But with this statement, he oversimplifies the facts and contextually shoots himself in the foot! Both words must be seen in context. Both words are used in the Old Testament. But the Church, as Paul defines it in his epistles, is not in the Old Testament. In Paul’s epistles they indeed are used to describe the elect saints who now dispensationally belong to the body of Christ. And in Matthew 24–25, and in the book of Revelation, they are used to describe mainly tribulation saints.

But the Church is clearly not on earth in Revelation after chapter three. The word Church is not used. However, the “saints” (Rev. 5:8) described in heaven with numbers as “myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands” (5:11), seem clearly to be the raptured Church “elect” who arrive in heaven just before the terrible tribulation begins in chapter

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six. From pages 74–88 in his book, Van Kampen tries desperately to prove that all references to these words mean the Church, therefore, those same words used in Matthew 24–25 and Revelation are references to the Church. But a study of the words proves otherwise. Yet also remember, it is not simply a word definition that is at stake but also the issue of context!

THE WORD ELECT

The closest Old Testament word for “elect” is the word *bahghar* (to choose). It is used over 160 times. Its root meaning is “take a keen look at,” “to select, give preference to, elect, choose.”⁸ It is used exactly as the New Testament word is used: To call individuals to salvation (1 Ki. 8:16; Ps. 65:4), to choose (Ps. 135:4), all with a sovereign calling.

Used around fifty times (both verb and noun) in the New Testament, the word (*eklektos*) can be describing: the tribulation “elect” (Mt. 24:22); the elect saved out of the tribulation who are about to enter the Kingdom (24:31) “He shall gather together His elect” ...; and, the elect of those now in Christ in the dispensation of the Church (Col. 3:12).

THE WORD SAINT

Saint in the Old Testament means “to sanctify” and comes from the verb *kahdehsh*. The word can describe: the holiness of God (Ps. 99:5); the righteous believers in the Old Testament dispensation of the Law (Ps. 16:3; 34:9); and, the saved of the Lord who are in the tribulation (“saints of the Most High”; Dan. 7:18) with whom the Antichrist makes war (v. 21) and, who later enter the blessings of the Kingdom (v. 27).

The New Testament Greek word *hagios* may refer: to the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:6); the holiness of God the Father (John 17:11); the holy Scriptures (Rom. 1:2); the holy angels (Matt. 25:31); the saints of the dispensation of the Church (Rom. 1:7); and those who believe while in the tribulation, who also become saints of God (Rev. 13:10) and of whom many will die a martyr’s death in that holocaust (16:6, 17:6).

Again, words have their meaning within a context. They cannot be completely defined apart from a contextual relationship.

Finally, this statement by Van Kampen is important to note:

Yet those who hold to the pretribulation Rapture position insist that “the elect” who will undergo this horrible time of persecution will not be the church, but the

⁸ William Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 37.

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nation of Israel. However, as we saw in the last chapter ..., Israel is not saved until after the seven-year tribulation period is complete. (p. 79)

There are two things wrong with this statement. First, no pretrib rapturist would say that Jews only are saved during the tribulation. Many Jews and Gentiles will become believers during that awful period. Secondly, Van Kampen appears confused about the salvation of Israel following the tribulation. Yes, many Jews will be saved as the Kingdom begins, but also the nation is “saved” or restored as a political and historical entity with the Messiah ruling. So both facts are true. Jews will be saved during the tribulation *and* the nation is saved or restored as the Kingdom begins!

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THE GENERIC “YOU”

Van Kampen makes another interpretative error in Matthew 24 when he says the “you” of verse 9 is a reference to “the elect of God—you—who for the sake of Christ’s name will undergo persecution at the hands of Antichrist at the midpoint of the tribulation period (Matt. 24:9) cannot be the newly saved nation of Israel because she will not be saved until after the tribulation period is complete, ...” (p. 79).

Again, he confuses the restoration of the Jews as a nation over against the fact that many Jews will believe in Him during the tribulation. Jesus is not warning Church saints to flee Jerusalem when they see the Antichrist desecrate the temple. He is warning Jews who will be living in that city when they see, in the restored temple, “the abomination of desolation” spoken of by Daniel (Matt. 24:15; Dan. 9:27). The abomination is when the Antichrist enters the temple, stops the sacrifice, and turns violently upon the Jews. The Lord tells listening Jews to “flee to the mountains” (24:16) and pray your flight is not in the winter (v. 20).

Secondly, as Jesus in Matthew 24 describes that far off tribulation, the “you” is a generic reference to the Jewish people who will be reading about what is coming upon them from the pages of Matthew. The generic “you” principle is ironically also found in a passage that refers to the scattering of the Jews and their future restoration to the land (Deut. 28–30).

In chapter 28, Moses begins speaking to a new generation standing before him who will enter and conquer the land. He speaks of the promise of curses if they disobey the law (28:15). He tells them that for disobedience they will be driven “from one end of the earth to the other end ...” (v. 64). “And among those nations you shall find no rest, ... there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and despair of soul” (v. 65). Is he speaking of the generation standing in front of him, or some far future Israelites who will have forgotten their God?

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The answer is clear by context. The “you” is some far distant generation; the same in Matthew 24. Matthew 24:9 reads, “Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, ...” To Van Kampen, this is for the Church. But, since Matthew 24 is about Jewish issues and about future tribulation events that will fall upon the Jews, the “you” would not “suddenly” be the Church. It has to do with Jewish matters. The context of Matthew 24 has nothing to do with the Church!

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM MISQUOTE

Still trying to make Matthew 24 into a Church passage, Van Kampen defies his own hermeneutics to make verse 14 fit his scheme. The passage reads “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.”

Van Kampen misquotes the passage and writes: “Christ tells His disciples that ‘only after’ the gospel is preached to all nations, ‘then the end shall come.’ ” (p. 74) He left out “of kingdom”! In the Tribulation “the gospel of the kingdom” is in conflict with the kingdom of the Antichrist. The “gospel of the kingdom” message in the tribulation is, that the One who died for sins is soon to come and reign on the earth and destroy the Antichrist and all his evil works.

In Matthew 24, those hearing Christ speak did not yet fully understand the message of the gospel of personal salvation. They did understand the issue of “the good news” of the kingdom. By removing “of kingdom” Van Kampen makes the statement fit the missionary work of “the Church” in the tribulation.

The key witnesses, at least in the first of the tribulation, are the 144,000 sealed Jews (Rev. 7:1-8) and they are seen in heaven as martyred, “purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb (14:1-5).” This martyrdom takes place after the Antichrist makes his move (13:1-10), turns on the Jews and desecrates the temple (Matt. 24:15). This is why Jesus warns that a future generation of Jews, who will read His words, will leave Judea and flee into the mountains (v. 16). None of this has anything to do with the Church!

VAN KAMPEN’S VIEW OF THE SEALED JUDGMENTS

In the book of Revelation, to make his new scheme of prophecy make sense, Van Kampen must work hard to rewrite the verses about the start of the Tribulation. He begins by arguing that the events of chapter 6 are not from God’s wrath on the earth but simply natural catastrophes that take place with the breaking of the six seals. The Church, he says, will indeed be raptured from the wrath of God that falls later.

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To make this come out like he wants, Van Kampen has: (1) to re-arrange Revelation 6:1–8:7 to make it fit his argument and make it compatible with the Olivet Discourse and, (2) he must re-write the grammar of 6:17 and “wrath has come” to cause his scenario to make sense. His Comparative Accounts (p. 164) read like this:

The Olivet Discourse		Book of Revelation	
24:4	Warning To God’s Elect	22:19	Warning
24:5	False Christs	6:1–2	The First Seal
24:6	Wars	6:3–4	The Second Seal
24:7	Famines	6:5–6	The Third Seal
24:9, 21	The Great Tribulation	6:7–8	The Fourth Seal
24:9, 22	Death	6:9	The Fifth Seal
24:10, 24	Apostasy		
24:29	Sign of the End of the Age Sun, Moon, Stars	6:12–17	The Sixth Seal
24:30, 27	Sign of Christ’s Coming		
24:30	The Coming of Christ		
24:13, 31	The Deliverance of Christ’s Elect, The Rapture	7:9–14	The Great Multitude Out of the Great Tribulation
24:14, 37–39	The Wrath of God, The End of the Age or The Day of the Lord	8:1–7	The Seventh Seal

Without going into a lot of details, it is simply enough to say that this chart forces the tribulation into a mold created by Van Kampen. It ignores the rest of the book of Revelation and puts the fact that the wrath of God (and the Lamb) does not start in 6:17, as it plainly says it does. Notice, in this scheme of things, how the coming of Christ is

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glaringly left out of the picture of the early part of the book of Revelation, if indeed it is supposed to go there at all!

But I believe an equally terrible mistake is made in his interpretation of 6:16–17. Note how these verses read:

They [the men of earth] said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?”

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On these verses Van Kampen writes:

The critical phrase in this key passage is the phrase “has come,” which is a translation of the Greek verb *elthein*. *Elthein* is in the aorist tense, indicative mood of *erchomai*, the most common Greek verb for “come.” Those holding to the pretribulation position will tell you that because *elthein* is in the aorist tense, it must therefore refer to an action that began sometime in the past and has already been going on for some time, right up to the present. They will tell you that any verb in the aorist tense always refers to an action that began sometime in the past. (p. 153)

Because the word wrath is not mentioned in the book of Revelation prior to the sixth seal, and because the signs given in the sun, moon, and stars referred to the sixth seal parallel the signs that will occur announcing the day of the Lord’s wrath (Joel 2:31; cf. Matt. 24:29–31, 37–39), the context of our present text seems self-evident. It is an event soon to occur. (pp. 153–54)

The two paragraphs above have glaring interpretative errors in them. First, pretribulationists do not “always” say an aorist tense refers to an action beginning sometime in the past (It sounds as if he is describing a perfect tense!). Anyone knowing just a little Greek realizes there can be various ways aorist tenses are used. Context is again the secret. More on this later.

Secondly, concerning the six seals, Van Kampen says they are not God’s wrath. This way he can push the Rapture on further down in the book of Revelation, arguing that the Church can indeed go through the first part of the Tribulation because, it is not God’s wrath. He says the,

The *First Seal* (and its wrath, if you will!) pictures a [single] rider on a white horse, who actually are “many” (plural) false Christs who mislead many. (p. 140)

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The *Second Seal* and its horseman is unleashed and brings havoc on the earth. (p. 141) The *Third Seal* and its horseman is the wrath of food shortage and famine. (p. 142)

The *Fourth Seal* and its horseman picture the “Antichrist’s great persecution of the elect of God.” Also, it is “the time when the church in general will be put to the true test, separating the genuine bond-servants of Christ from the look-a-likes ‘on account of My [Christ’s] name’ (Matt. 24:9)!” Van Kampen also calls this “Satan’s wrath.” (p. 143)

The *Fifth Seal* “gives Satan the authority—the permission necessary—to test the whole world, [and] in particular, the professing church that represents 25 percent of the world’s population; ...” (p. 150)

THE SEALS OF REVELATION 6 BEGIN THE WRATH OF GOD AND CHRIST!

But the indicators are overwhelming that these seals in chapter six bring about the wrath of God and of Christ, who together begin the tribulation.

First, it is Christ Himself who breaks each official seal that starts the flood of events coming down upon the earth and its citizens. Christ is the sovereign first cause of these events of terror. They are described as universal in their scope and application. There is not a word below on earth from any who would be classified as the righteous, until the fifth seal (vv. 9–11). All men universally will be crying out in fear and pain.

Since with each seal broken, Christ “causes” something to happen, in an active sense, could this fifth seal be saying that it is not until this point that tribulation saints begin to express belief and are turning to God? After the Rapture there were zero believers on earth. The Church was taken home! But now with the fifth seal, the tribulation elect are mentioned and they are martyred for “the testimony which they had maintained” (v. 9).

Secondly, (and even Van Kampen partly notices this), three times in the seal judgments the text reads: “it was given to him ... in order that he might conquer” (v. 2), “it was granted to take peace out (*ek*) of the earth and that men might kill one another” (v. 4), “authority was given to them ... to kill” (v. 8).

“It was given/granted” is an aorist, passive, indicative of the verb *didomi*. Though the passive voice is used, the force of the verb *didomi* is not passive in its intent and usage. When Christ Jesus breaks the seals, the sinful forces (or personalities) begin to carry out His sovereign wrath, in much the same way Pharaoh did when his heart was hardened by the Lord. It is Christ who is using the Antichrist on the white horse to conquer (v. 2),

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manipulating evil men to kill others (v. 4), and unleashing Death and Hades to kill a fourth of the earth (v. 8)

THE HORROR OF THE SIXTH SEAL

When the sixth seal is broken (vv. 12–17), things are described as even more horrible on earth. When Jesus breaks this seal, there is a great earthquake, the heavens are shaken, and the “asteroids from outer space impact into the earth” (Greek; v. 13). From 6:12 and on, note the use of Old Testament “wrath” descriptions and passages.

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- Earthquake, sun becomes black, moon becomes as blood (v. 12).
- Displays wonders on the earth, sun into darkness, moon into blood, before “the great and awesome day of the Lord” (Joel 2:30–32).
- Sky split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up (v. 14a).
- “And the sky will be rolled up like a scroll” (Isa. 34:4).
- “His wrath [is] against the [nation’s] armies” (Isa. 34:2).
- “The Lord has a day of vengeance, of recompense for the cause of Zion” (Isa. 34:8).
- “Every mountain and island were moved out of their places” (v. 14b).
- Mountains quake because of Him, the hills dissolve, the earth (that is the world and all its inhabitants) is upheaved by His presence. Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire (Nahum 1:5–6).
- Men “hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains” (v. 15b).
- “Men will go into caves of the rocks, and into holes of the ground before the terror of the Lord, and before the splendor of His majesty, when He arises to make the earth tremble” (Isa. 2:19).
- “For the Lord of hosts will have a day of reckoning” (Isa. 2:12).

From the Greek text, verses 16–17 are interesting in the way both the present tenses and aorist tenses are used. The verses can read:

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And [men] *are saying right now* (Pres., Act., Ind.) to the mountains and to the rocks, "*Fall now* (Aor., Act., Imper.) upon us and *now hide* (Aor., Act., Imper.) us from the face of the One who *now is sitting* (Pres., Act., Part.) on the throne and [also] from the wrath of the Lamb; because *came* (*elthen*, Aor., Act., Ind.) the great day of their wrath, and who *presently is capable* (*dunatal*, Pres., Act., Ind.) *to be left standing*" (*astathanai*, from *histami*, Aor., Pass., Inf.).

The last line above seems to come from Joel 2:11 which reads: "The day of the Lord is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it?"

Van Kampen wants to make "came the great day of their wrath" to read as a future aorist tense. This way he can move the wrath further down in the book of Revelation and then have the Church going through part of the tribulation. But a future or proleptic aorist is very rare. I see this construction as an accumulative aorist in that it sums up the opening of all the seals beginning in 6:1. Hopefully, by showing what is exactly going on in these verses with Old Testament quotes and references, grammar and context, Van Kampen's argument can be put to rest.

SUMMARY

1. The present tenses in vv. 16–17 indicate that the world "at that moment" believes the wrath is upon them. (cf. "They are saying right then;" "the One now sitting on the throne;" "who is able right now to stand").
2. The aorist imperatives, "Now fall on us," "now hide us," clearly seem to indicate that right then the world is pleading that it be hidden from the wrath that has already come.
3. The aorist "the wrath came" would, by all normal interpretation, indicate the wrath has started!

OTHER VIEWS ON REVELATION 6:16–17

Most of the great Greek scholars (premillennial or amillennial), or respected commentaries, would not agree with Van Kampen's interpretation of these verses. Note the following quotes:

- "[Men] called on the mountains ... to fall on them and to hide them from God's wrath ... when God deals with the earth in this final period of great distress."⁹

⁹ John F. Walvoord, "Revelation" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, eds. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), pp. 948–49.

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- “The Lamb is the Lion again in the terribleness of his wrath.”¹⁰
- “The upheaval in nature which introduces the Great Day of Wrath, alarms to the same extent the men of the world. Society is disrupted and civilization is revolutionized and shaken ... None escapes.”¹¹
- “Has come may mean ‘has taken place’ or ‘has begun.’ ... Unbelievers, no matter how strong, cannot stand.”¹²
- “This hiding in caves and in cliffs, this crying for the mountains and the cliffs to fall on them and to hide them from the wrath, is the graphic picture of terror and despair, ... The repetition of ‘wrath’ is intentional; all of it now blazes forth.”¹³
- “ ‘And who shall be able to stand’; against either of them [God or Christ] or in their presence, and so as to bear them wrath and displeasure; all which expresses guilt, shame, and despair.”¹⁴
- “... even the swift agony of being crushed to death is preferable to being left face to face with the indignation of an outraged God ... The great day of God’s wrath has come, ...”¹⁵
- “It is not that nature has ceased to be herself, ... that overwhelms [men], but the resistless proof that all her awful potencies, now in such terrific motion, are God’s direct powers, aroused and inflamed with His dreadful anger, and charged as heralds and executioners of His almighty wrath.”¹⁶
- “The day of wrath is at the beginning of the day of the Lord, that extended period when God is going to deal directly in governing the entire world. It is significant that early in the book of Revelation the day of wrath is declared as

¹⁰ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, 5 Vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 4:347.

¹¹ J. Vernon McGee, *Reveling Through Revelation*, 2 Vols. (Los Angeles: Church of the Open Door, n. d), 1:58.

¹² Earl Radmacher, gen. ed., *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), p. 1275.

¹³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 242–43.

¹⁴ John Gill, *Revelation*, Exposition of the Old & New Testaments, 9 Vols. (Paris, ARK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 1989), 9:974.

¹⁵ W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 5 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 5:394.

¹⁶ Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1987), p. 158.

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having already come. It is another evidence that the great tribulation is already under way."¹⁷

- "Under the sixth Seal the first droppings of the coming storm of divine wrath cause universal terror and fear."¹⁸
- "Unlimited terror upon all the earth, at the world-wide dreaded wrath of Him upon the throne and of the Lamb: ..."¹⁹
- " 'The great day' is a phrase borrowed from the Prophets (Joel 2:11, 31, Zeph. 1:14; cf. Jude 6). Here it is combined with another prophetic phrase, 'the day of wrath' (Zeph. 1:15, 18, 2:3; cf. Rom. 2:5) ... *Elthen*, 'is already come' (i.e. it came when the signs of the end described in vv. 12–14 began)."²⁰
- "So with a general knowledge of what the Bible teaches about the future, the unsaved world correctly notes that 'the great day of their wrath' is already in progress."²¹

See Appendix: Revelation 6:17.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

There are but a few paragraphs in *The Rapture Question Answered* that help us understand Van Kampen's ultimate purpose and goal. Beside the fact that he just does not like the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture, his second purpose seems to be to warn believers they will be going through part of the Tribulation. What is interesting, however, is how little attention he gives to this purpose in this volume. If the Church is indeed facing the Antichrist and the Tribulation, he should have much more to say. He should be screaming out some instructions as to what to do as we enter the tribulation!

Instead, he closes with a short paragraph telling us he has done his job of briefly writing about it! "I rest my case. That's it, plain and simple. You, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief' (1 Thess. 5:4). You must now decide for yourself." (p. 207)

There is a bit of irony in his quoting of 1 Thessalonians 5:4. In the context of that passage, Paul is not saying we have spiritual choices to go or not to go through the Day of the

¹⁷ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 138.

¹⁸ Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1982), p. 160.

¹⁹ William R. Newell, *Revelation Chapter by Chapter* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1994), p. 108.

²⁰ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), p. 95.

²¹ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 459.

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Lord. He has just described the rapture (4:13–18). His statement in 5:4 is not optionalized! Paul is not asking us to make decisions. He has simply made a statement to the effect that we will not be overtaken by that Day of the Lord (5:2) that is clearly the wrath (v. 9) for which we are not destined!

But in that chapter, specifically 1 Thessalonians 5:6, one might ask, what does Paul mean when he says “so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober”? He clarifies 5:6 with the verses just before, 5:4–5. There Paul writes “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day [of the Lord, the terror] should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; ...”

By this Paul means that *positionally* and by their salvation, believers are not part of spiritual darkness but are part of the spiritual daylight. But in his Christian *walk* and *experience*, the believer in Christ should not live as if he is spiritually asleep! Paul makes his final emphatic point by writing, “But since we are of the day, let us be sober, ... For God has not destined us for wrath, ...” (vv. 8–9).

Van Kampen would probably want to point out, that if we were asleep, we would be fooled by the Antichrist. But the passage in no way says this!

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS

We have examined some of the most important problems in the book. Because there are so many other interpretative difficulties on almost every page in Van Kampen’s work, it is impossible to point out all of them. Just a few will be briefly cited here.

- On pages 94–101 (and elsewhere) Van Kampen argues for only one *parousia* or “coming,” or return of the Lord! By this, he fails to allow various contexts to speak for themselves. The Word of God clearly references a Rapture *parousia* and a Second Coming *parousia*! Again, one must pay attention to context. With utter confusion, Van Kampen writes

The prewrath view sees only one *parousia* of Christ and one Day of the Lord, both occurring when Christ comes to rapture the faithful and then begins His systematic destruction of the wicked who remain (the Day of the Lord)! (p. 100)

- On page 112 the author writes, “The parallel of Paul’s teaching to Christ’s Olivet Discourse is overwhelming! In both, the elect are ‘gathered together’ or ‘caught up together’ before the wrath of God begins.” It is incredible that Van Kampen could write this! The gathering together of the elect in Matthew 24:31

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clearly takes place “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (v. 29) and it is the Son of Man (the clear Jewish description of the king coming to reign on earth) who is coming down (v. 30) to establish His kingdom. This is not the saints “in Christ” going up before the Day of the Lord begins (1 Thess. 5:1)!

Van Kampen argues that the verb “to gather together” used in Matthew 24:31 is *episunago*, with the preposition *epi* giving an upward direction to the definition. His Greek research leaves much to be desired!

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Though the word *epi* can mean “upon,” *episunago* in the New Testament is never translated with that in mind, nor with the idea of “up.” In context, it is translated “of a crowd gathering,” “of birds of prey around a dead body,” “of a hen gathering its brood.” And it is only used in the Gospels, translated with the simple idea of “gathering together” (Matt. 23:37, 24:31; Mk. 1:33, 13:27; Lu. 12:1, 13:34).

- On pages 159–60 the author again tries his hand at Greek with Revelation 7:13–14. On 7:13, he says the Greek word *elthon* is in the past tense when, in fact, it is an aorist tense of *erxomai*. On 7:14, he says the verbs “washed” their robes and “made” them white are past or imperfect tenses, whereas they are also aorist tenses. Without going into detail as to what he is trying to prove, with such poor scholarship his arguments completely fall apart! And these kinds of errors are found throughout the book!
- A final blow to intellectual dishonesty occurs in Van Kampen’s treatment of the ancient writing the *Didache* (cir. 120 AD). On page 190 he writes,

... John Walvoord (*The Rapture Question*, pp. 53–54), Gerald Stanton (*Kept From The Hour*, p. 221), and Dwight Pentecost (*Things to Come*, p. 169), three of the most articulate supporters and defenders of the pretribulation Rapture position, end their quotation of the *Didache* in their endeavor to make it look like the *Didache* supports the imminent return of Christ. By implication they are attempting to give one the idea that if the *Didache* taught imminency, the *Didache* had to be pretribulational.

Van Kampen then quotes the paragraph mentioned by the three men above. His quote comes from *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Greek Texts with Introductions and English Translations*, ed. Michael W. Holmes et al., trans. J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989), page 235.

The first part of the quote reads,

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Be watchful for your life; let your lamps not be quenched and your loins not ungirded, but be ye ready; for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh.

This indeed sounds like “imminency” as pretribulationists teach, though the writer of the *Didache* is quoting part of the injunction in the Olivet Discourse to future believing Jews to be prepared for the coming of their king (25:13). But after warning the “Church” to “gather yourselves together frequently, seeking what is fitting for your souls,” the *Didache* author then begins a third person “they” scenario about what is coming on “them,” the world, not believers. He never again mentions “you” the Church! He writes of “the sheep turned into wolves,” “the world-deceiver with the earth delivered into his hands,” “all created mankind coming to the fire of testing,” and “many shall endure in their faith,” which is not a reference to Church saints but to those who come to faith while in the tribulation. And finally, “The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him. Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.”

But the “you” of the Church, which the *Didache* would have in mind, is not mentioned again in the paragraph! It only refers to “they”!

In quoting the *Didache*, and trying to prove his point, Van Kampen writes “ ‘... ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh,’ when ‘they that endure in their faith shall be saved [delivered]’ from ‘the world-deceiver’ ” (p. 191). Van Kampen tries to put the “ye” and “they” together in two quotes; he also reverses two lines and makes the quote say something like: “the faithful in the Church will be saved from the world-deceiver.” But this is not the paragraph order as quoted in the *Didache*!

Conclusion. (1) Though the *Didache* seems to say the Church is in Matthew 24–25, it does so only in a limited way. (2) But it *does* teach an imminency or immediacy in the Lord’s coming. Though, at the same time, (3) it is faithful to the fact that the terror of the tribulation is falling on “others” and not the “you,” the present Church believers.

No one should put their full argumentative weight on the writings of the post-apostolic fathers. We must remember that they were groping forward in attempting to understand the full teachings of the New Testament. Contextual and teaching mistakes were made, but we must give them credit for trying to put certain doctrinal truths together in order to make full sense of what they were reading. Walvoord’s quote (in *The Rapture Question*, p. 52) is but a brief, passing reference. His development of the biblical teaching on the rapture does not hinge on the *Didache* quote.

Yet, it is sad that Van Kampen is not completely honest in his use of the *Didache* passage.

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FINALLY ...

It must be noted, almost with a shock, at what limited references Van Kampen quotes in the section in the back of this book entitled: "Quotes and Referrals Index" (p. 210). Most in this bibliographical section are book references that he is trying to refute, with his arguments against the pretribulational rapture. He has very few supportive, scholarly confirmations for his pre-wrath reasoning. Now this alone does not discount a theory, but it certainly raises red flags.

As well, it is interesting to see how hard Van Kampen must work in trying to shoot down this or that doctrine, and then blast these or those beliefs, and challenge this or that statement, *etc. etc.* His book is almost one big negative by which he must refute, then re-work the interpretation of passage after passage. One soon gets tired in trying to follow his complicated "ins" and "outs" as he continually writes: "This doesn't mean that, and this is interpreted wrong!"

A FINAL NOTE

Unfortunately, the sad legacy of *The Rapture Question Answered* may be how it simply added more confusion to the great anticipation of The Blessed Hope of Jesus coming to take the Church home!

But when this view grows old and is someday gone, the prayer is that many will return to the clear biblical teaching of the pretribulational rapture position, *tried* and found *true*.

APPENDIX

On Revelation 6:17. "Sproule raises the possibility, without endorsing it, that *elthen* is a dramatic aorist that would give no time indication for the beginning of the great day of wrath (John A. Sproule, *In Defense of Pre-Tribulationism* [Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH, 1980], pp. 54–55). The only time an aorist indicative speaks of something future or something about to happen, however, is if it is a dramatic aorist (H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [New York: Macmillan, 1927], p. 198), a futuristic aorist (*BDF*, par. 333 [2], or a proleptic aorist (Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963], p. 74). Some contextual feature must be present to indicate clearly these exceptional usages. No such feature exists in the context of the sixth seal, so these special uses are not options here. Rosenthal cites a use of the same verb form in Rev. 19:7 to demonstrate its futuristic connotation (*Pre-Wrath Rapture*, pp. 166–67), but this usage is in one of the heavenly songs that often in the Apocalypse utilizes proleptic aorists (e.g., Rev. 11:15–19). His citation of *elthen* in Mark 14:41 is not relevant to the sixth seal, because the historical context of that passage

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clearly refers to Christ's coming crucifixion. The verb in Rev. 6:17 must be a constative aorist looking back in time to the point in the past when the great day of wrath arrived."^{22,23}

²² Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 460.

²³ Couch, M. (1997). "A Review of the Book 'The Rapture Question Answered Plain & Simple.' " *Conservative Theological Journal Volume 1, 1(3)*, 234–253.