

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Rapture—Precisely When?

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Three questions are confronting the Christian world today with reference to this great event called the rapture. Will the church be caught up before Daniel's seventieth week begins? Will the church remain on earth during the first three and one half years of that period when universal peace and prosperity will obtain under the benevolent rule of Antichrist, and then be translated just before the great tribulation, which latter period is to occupy the last three and one half years? Will the church remain on earth through the great tribulation and be caught up at its close to return to the earth with the Lord Jesus at His second advent?

The answer to these questions will only be convincing to the reader if it is based upon the rules of Biblical exegesis. Otherwise, it will be merely the opinion of the present writer, and worth just that much—nothing. The writer, when introducing the subject of Greek exegesis to his students, lays down the following basic rule to which they must adhere throughout their exegetical work: "That interpretation of a Scripture passage which is not based upon the historical background of the Bible book in which it is found, the analysis of the book, the context in which it occurs, an intensive study of the Greek words, and the correct application of the rules of Greek grammar and syntax, is to be regarded merely as the opinion of the exegete, and has no more value in the theological classroom than a theory has in the halls of science. That interpretation which is based upon the above rules is to be regarded as correct until it can be shown by the reapplication of the same rules that an error of human judgment has crept in."

There is such a thing, therefore, as a scientific method of studying the Word. The student who follows the rules of an experiment in chemistry brings that experiment to a successful conclusion. The student who does not ends up with an explosion. Just so, the student who conducts his study of the Bible along the scientific lines noted above arrives at the correct interpretation, and the student who does not at the wrong one. The exegetical method the student uses in answering the question with reference to the time of the rapture will determine whether he believes in a pretribulational or a posttribulational rapture. Both teachings can be gotten out of Scripture; but one will be based upon scientific rules of procedure and be accepted as true, whereas the other must be looked upon as the mere opinion of the exegete.

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## THE EVIDENCE OF THE REVELATION

Adhering to the foregoing exegetical rules, we will examine John's testimony in the Revelation. The Book of the Revelation is the only book in the Bible which the divine author has analyzed for the exegete. John is told to "write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" (1:19). This analysis does not merely present three major sections of the book in their order but includes a time element which is of utmost importance. Clearly, the Holy Spirit does not have in mind merely the three parts of the book. The emphasis in His thinking is upon the correct sequence of events as they will occur in the prophetic program of God. This emphasis upon the time element is therefore geared to our problem as to the precise place of the rapture with reference to the seventieth week of Daniel.

The words "the things thou hast seen" clearly refer to the vision John had received of our Lord Jesus as it is recorded in the first chapter. The Greek words translated "the things which are" in an expanded translation read "the things that exist" or "the things that are in existence." The Lord Jesus called John's attention to certain things in existence at the time John was receiving this vision. He does not specify in this expression what those things were. The exegete, faced with that problem, follows the rule that "context rules" and allows the context (chapters two and three) to define what the things were, seven historic churches situated in Asia Minor. Each has a definite characteristic. Since these seven churches were not the only churches in Asia Minor at that time, it is evident that they were selected for these definite characteristics. Since that is so, we conclude that these definite characteristics are for the guidance of the church during its earthly history.

In a book of prophecy such as the Revelation, which was written in the first century to predict the future of Israel, the second advent, and the millennium, it would be most strange should the inspired writer hurdle the intervening years, especially since the book was written for the guidance of the church. These characteristics must have some connection with the history of the church during the interim between Israel dispersed in the first century and Israel restored for the millennium. As one compares these characteristics in their order with the history of the church, one discovers a striking resemblance between them and that history, so striking and in such an order that this similarity cannot be a mere coincidence or an attempt of an exegete to press them into the mold of church history in an effort to bridge the gap between the rejection of Israel in the first century and its restoration in the future. Thus, chapters two and three were, in the first century, the prewritten history of the church which today has been almost entirely fulfilled. "The things which are," therefore, are the seven ages of church history. The only thing which can terminate its history on earth is the rapture, the removal of the church to heaven.

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We now consider the words “the things which shall be hereafter.” The Greek of “shall be” is not the verb of being in the future tense, but the verb *mello* used with an infinitive. It is a device which the Greek writer uses when he wishes to indicate that a thing predicted will come to pass very soon, an idea which the simple future does not carry. It is used “of those things which will come to pass by fixed necessity or divine appointment” (Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon, in loco.*). The infinitive is that of the verb *ginomai*, “to become,” and is ingressive aorist, speaking of entrance into a new condition. The expanded translation reads, “the things which are about to become.” “Hereafter” in the Greek text is *meta tauta*, the demonstrative pronoun of the near object, in the neuter gender and the plural number pointing back to “the things which are.” The translation reads, “after these things.” John is now ordered to write: “the things which are about to become after these things,” namely, after the church age.

This he has done in chapters four to twenty-two. The end of chapter three marks the close of the church age. Everything predicted in the following chapters will occur after the church age closes. The seventieth week of Daniel begins with the rider on the white horse (Antichrist) of 6:2, and closes with the rider on the white horse of 19:11 (Jesus Christ). The great tribulation occupies the last three and one half years of the seven-year period. The rapture, by removing the church from the earth, closes the church age. Thus, that blessed event antedates not only the great tribulation but Daniel’s seventieth week. This is conclusive and final, and from this teaching there can be no appeal unless one wishes to set aside the rules of Biblical exegesis, which procedure is neither scholarly, scientific, nor ethical.

## THE EVIDENCE FROM PAUL’S WRITINGS

We turn now to Paul. Someone had written a letter to the Thessalonian church to the effect that the Day of the Lord was then present, forging Paul’s name to the manuscript (2 Thess. 2:2). The best Greek texts read “the day of the Lord,” not “the day of Christ,” as found in the Authorized Version. There is a distinction between the two days.

The Day of the Lord is a technical term used by the Old Testament prophets to designate a certain future period with regard to Israel. The expression is used in Lamentations 2:22; Isaiah 2:12; 13:6, 9; 34:8; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14; Amos 5:18; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7, 8, 18; 2:2–3; Zechariah 14:1; and Malachi 4:5. From a study of these passages, the following should be clear: first, this day has to do with the nation Israel, not the church; second, the period is still future; third, the period is one of judgment upon Israel; fourth, it refers to the period of the great tribulation, since events which are predicted by the prophets are those which John predicts in the Revelation; and fifth, it is the time of the coming of Messiah in judgment.

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The Day of Christ (Phil. 1:6, 10) is a New Testament expression, used of the church and the coming of the Lord Jesus for the church. The Thessalonian saints thought that they had missed the rapture, and that the persecutions they were enduring were part of the great tribulation. Paul writes to assure them that such was not the case. He bases his proof upon the fact that “a falling away” must take place before the great tribulation starts.

The words “a falling away” are the Authorized Version rendering of *apostasia*. The verbal form *aphistamai* from which it comes is present middle of *aphistēmi*, the root verb, which we will study. The simple verb *histēmi* in its intransitive sense means “to stand,” the prefixed preposition means “off, away from,” and the compound verb, “to stand off from.” The word does not mean “to fall.” The Greeks had a word for that, *piptō*. *Aphistēmi*, in its various uses, is reported by Thayer as follows: “to make stand off, cause to withdraw, to stand off, stand aloof, to desert, to withdraw from one”; in contexts where a defection from the faith is in view, it means “to fall away, become faithless.” The verb is rendered by the translators of the Authorized Version “to depart,” in Luke 2:32; 4:13; 13:27; Acts 12:10; 15:38; 19:9; 22:29; 2 Corinthians 12:8; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 2:19; Hebrews 3:12. In Luke 8:13 it is translated “fall away,” in Acts 5:37, “drew away,” and in Acts 5:38, “refrain.” Had they translated the word here instead of interpreting it, they would have rendered it by the word “departure.” The reader will observe that the predominant translation of the verbal form is “to depart,” also, that where it is translated “fall away,” the context adds the idea of “falling away” to the verb, which action is still a departure.

E. Schuyler English, to whom this present writer is deeply indebted for calling his attention to the word “departure” as the correct rendering of *apostasia* in this context, also informs us that the following translators understood the Greek word to mean “a departure” in this context: Tyndale (1534), Coverdale (1535), the Geneva Bible (1537), Cranmer (1539), and Beza (1565), and so used it in their translations. *Apostasia* is used once more in the New Testament and is translated “to forsake” (A. V.), signifying a departure. The neuter noun *apostasion* in Matthew 5:31; 19:7; and Mark 10:4 is rendered by the Authorized Version, “divorcement,” which word also signifies a departure, here, from antecedent relations.

The writer is well aware of the fact that *apostasia* was used at times both in classical and koine Greek in the sense of a defection, a revolt in a religious sense, a rebellion against God, and of the act of apostasy. Liddell and Scott in their classical lexicon give the above as the first definition of the word. Moulton and Milligan quote a papyrus fragment where the word means “a rebel.” But these are acquired meanings of the word gotten from the context in which it is used, not the original, basic, literal meaning, and should not be imposed upon the word when the context does not qualify the word by these meanings,

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as in the case of our Thessalonians passage, where the context in which *apostasia* is embedded does not refer to a defection from the truth but to the rapture of the church. The fact that our word “apostasy” means a defection from the truth is entirely beside the point since we do not interpret Scripture upon the basis of a transliterated word to which a certain meaning has been given, but upon the basis of what the Greek word mean to the first century reader. The fact that Paul in 1 Timothy 4:1 uses this verb in the words “some shall depart from the faith” and finds it necessary to qualify its meaning by the phrase “from the faith” indicates that the word itself has no such connotation. The translators of the Authorized Version did not translate the word, but offered their interpretation of it. They should have translated it and allowed the student to interpret it in its context.

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With the translation of the word before us, the next step is to ascertain from the context that to which this departure refers. We note the presence of the Greek definite article before *apostasia*, of which the translation takes no notice. A Greek word is definite in itself, and when the article is used the exegete must pay particular attention to it. “The basal function of the article is to point out *individual identity*. It does more than mark ‘the object as definitely conceived,’ for a substantive in Greek is definite without the article” (Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 137). This departure, whatever it is, is a particular one, one differentiated from all others. Another function of the article is “to denote previous reference. Here the article points out an object the identity of which is defined by some previous reference made to it in the context” (*ibid.*, p. 141). Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 has just spoken of the coming of the Lord. This coming is defined by the words “our gathering together unto him,” not as the second advent, but as the rapture. The Greek word rendered “and” can also be translated “even,” and the translation reads, “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, even our gathering together unto him.”

The article before *apostasia* defines that word by pointing to “the gathering together unto him” as that departure. This article determines the context which defines *apostasia*. The translators took the context of verses 10–12 as deciding the significance of the word, but they went too far afield, not grasping the function of the definite article preceding *apostasia* which points back to the rapture of verse 2, not ahead to the refusal to believe the truth of verses 10–12. The article is all-important here, as in many instances of its use in the Greek New Testament. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, Paul had given these saints teaching on the rapture, and the Greek article here points to that which was well known to both the reader and the writer, which is another use of the Greek definite article. Thus, the departure of the church from earth to heaven must precede the great tribulation period. And we have answered our questions again. It might be added that the reason why Paul merely speaks of a pretribulation rapture rather than a preseventieth week

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rapture is that he is addressing himself to the needs of the Thessalonian saints and is not explaining the particular place of the rapture in the prophetic program of God.

## THE PROMISE TO PHILADELPHIA

We will allow John to speak once more. Our Lord promises to keep the Philadelphia church, namely, the present missionary church, “from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth” (Rev. 3:10). The word “keep” is *tērēō*, “take care of, to guard,” the word expressing watchful care, and being suggestive of present possession, the watchful care resulting in safe custody (Thayer). The word “temptation” is *peirasmos*, “adversity, affliction, trouble.” It is preceded by the definite article, which makes this period of adversity a particular one, and since it is predicted to affect the entire earth, it must refer to the great tribulation period. The preposition “from” is in the Greek text *ek*. In its general usage it means “out from.” The promise is that this church shall be guarded, kept in safe custody out from the great tribulation. This suggests the interpretation that the church will enter the great tribulation, and in the nick of time be taken out of it, which interpretation is in conflict with our previous teaching.

Here a rule of exegesis comes into play. The exegete must not base his interpretation upon a single word without taking the analysis of the book and the context into consideration. The two latter which teach a pre-seventieth week rapture forbid any interpretation which is diametrically opposed to their requirements. In a case where the interpretation based on one meaning of a word is not in harmony with the context, the exegete makes a further study of the word to see what other usage of the word would fit the context. The words in the inspired text always agree with the context when properly interpreted. We turn to *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* by Moulton and Milligan, that last court of appeal when one wishes to find out exactly how the first-century person used the word, and we find that it was used in the case of a donkey. The clause in the early manuscript reads, “has removed it [the donkey] from my reach.” The donkey was placed out of the reach of the person spoken of. God promises to guard this church out of the reach of the great tribulation. He does this by removing it from the earth in the departure of which Paul speaks.

## THE IMMINENCY OF THE RAPTURE

We offer one more demonstration of the fact that a pre-seventieth week rapture is taught in the Bible. It has to do with the character of the rapture as imminent. Webster defines the word as “threatening to occur immediately, near at hand, impending.” Paul writes in the first century, “The Lord is at hand” (Phil. 4:5). The words “at hand” are the translation

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of *eggus* which Thayer defines as “near,” and adds, “concerning things imminent and soon to come to pass,” the Pauline teaching being that the rapture is to be regarded always as an imminent event, and in view of that he writes to the Philippians: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Christ Jesus.” Paul lived in the anticipation of the imminent return of the Lord.

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John, by his use of the subjunctive mode, teaches the same thing. He says: “And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2:28). The words “when he shall appear” are in the indicative mode, which is the mode of reality, of certainty. But John does not use the indicative, but rather the subjunctive mode, which is the mode of uncertainty. He writes: “Be abiding in him in order that whenever he may be made manifest.” The subjunctive teaches the uncertainty of the time of the rapture, therefore, its character of imminency. John’s entire admonition is: “And now, little born ones, be abiding in Him, in order that whenever He may be made manifest, we may have instant freedom of speech and not be made to shrink away from Him in shame at His personal presence.” The saint should live in such close and intimate fellowship with his Lord, with nothing of sin between himself and the Lord Jesus, that at the rapture that fellowship may continue unbroken into heaven, with no sin in his life causing a sudden jar and a shrinking away from Him in shame. Thus, the Bible writers make the teaching of the imminency of the rapture a ground of appeal for holy living and diligent service.

To teach that the church will go through the tribulation period or even enter it is to nullify the teaching of the imminent coming of the Lord and thus prevent the salutary effect of the imminency of the rapture from becoming operative in the lives of the saints. Events on earth are not ready for the great tribulation. The Jewish temple in Jerusalem must be built, and Antichrist crowned as emperor of the revived Roman Empire before Daniel’s seventieth week begins. If the church is to endure a Protestant purgatory, the rapture cannot occur for a long time yet, and would therefore not be imminent.

There is nothing in Scripture which indicates that the church will either enter or pass through the tribulation. Israel is given many signs which will warn her of the near approach of that period (Matt. 24), but the gospels and epistles are devoid of any sign given the church. The epistles speak of the day of Christ Jesus, an expression not found in the Old Testament or the gospels. This is a day to which the church is to look forward with joy. It is the end of the pathway of the church. If this day does not occur before the

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tribulation, then there is no place for it in the prophetic calendar of events which will take place during or after that period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wuest, K. S. (1957). "The Rapture—Precisely When?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 114, 60–69.