



THE LAST DAYS

19

RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

NO EVIDENCE FOR A RAPTURE

PART ONE

FROM "LAST DAYS MADNESS"

BY GARY DEMAR

Objections to a pre-tribulational rapture are certainly not unique to this writer. The doctrine has been criticized since its inception in the early part of the nineteenth century. As you consider some of the texts used to support the doctrine, ask yourself this question: Is it self-evident that these texts teach a pre-tribulational rapture, that is, that the church will be taken off the earth prior to a future great tribulation? The arguments used by adherents of the pre-tribulational rapture position are complex, since no single verse actually teaches the doctrine. The complexity of these arguments requires that we consider the strongest texts in support of the position. It should be kept in mind that the entire pre-tribulational scheme is based on a faulty interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27. The dispensationalist maintains that the last seven years (the seventieth "week") is still future and that the rapture will inaugurate this final week (seven years) of the seventy weeks (490 years). This supposedly will give God the opportunity to deal exclusively with Israel as a nation again.

Revelation 4:1

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, 'Come up here, and I will show



you what must take place after these things.'

John Walvoord, an ardent believer in the pre-tribulational rapture, imports an already-constructed pre-tribulational rapture theory into texts that say nothing about the church being taken to heaven. His exposition of Revelation 4:1 is evidence of this:

It is clear from the context that this is not an explicit reference to the Rapture of the church, as John was not actually translated [raptured]; in fact he was still in his natural body on the island of Patmos. He was translated into scenes of heaven only temporarily. Though there is no authority for connecting the Rapture with this expression, there does seem to be a typical representation of the order of events, namely, the church age first, then the Rapture, then the church in heaven.¹

*Millions of Christians today hold to a system of interpretation (dispensationalism) that does not have one verse to prove one of its foundational doctrines, the pre-tribulational rapture of the church, the concept that makes dispensationalism dispensational. This system of interpretation is a **theological house of cards**.*

If one takes Walvoord's position, then Rosenthal is correct: There is no verse that explicitly teaches the doctrine!² All of the texts used to support the rapture theory presuppose the validity of the theory, a theory that does not have a single text to support it. The doctrine has been constructed before texts have been evaluated.

This unsound approach to Bible interpretation has done little to dissuade the adherents of the various rapture theories. Grant R. Jeffrey, for example, begins with Revelation 4:1 as one of the "five definitive indications supporting the pretribulation Rapture."³ Here's how the argument goes for those who see the rapture of the church in this verse:

- The voice that John heard was "like the sound of a trumpet speaking."
- When Jesus returns to rapture His church, He will do so "with the trumpet of God" (1 Thess. 4:16).
- Since a trumpet is used just prior to the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, we should assume that a rapture is in view when "a door [is] standing open in heaven," presumably to receive the raptured church (Rev 4:1-2).
- The church is no longer mentioned in the Book of Revelation; therefore, the church must have been raptured.
- John's being directed to "Come up here" is a depiction of the rapture in the same way that the church will be "caught up" at the time of the pre-tribulational rapture. Jeffrey writes, "When John was 'in the Spirit'... he was 'Raptured up' to Heaven..."⁴

This is absurd exegesis to be sure, but it is standard dispensational teaching.⁵ As has been noted, the pre-tribulational rapture doctrine assumes that the seventieth week of Daniel is separated from the sixty-ninth week and is yet to be fulfilled. The dispensational interpretation also assumes that the Book of Revelation was written about a time period in the remote future rather than for the people for whom events were to happen "shortly" (Rev. 1:1). For the readers of the prophecy in the first century, "the time is near" (1:3). The Book of Revelation was written before A.D. 70. Its purpose was to describe events leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem. The evidence for a pre-A.D. 70 date is overwhelming.⁶ For one thing, the tem-

ple was still standing when John received the Revelation and wrote it down for the "seven churches" (Rev. 11:1-2), churches that were in existence in John's day. Jesus assured the first readers of Revelation that He would be coming "quickly" (2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). Those who claim to hold a literal interpretation want to avoid the obvious conclusion of these verses—the prophecy is describing events that refer to the first-century church. This does not mean that the Book of Revelation has no meaning for today's church. The crucifixion occurred before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and no one claims that Christ's death has no meaning for today. Numerous events in the Old Testament are history, but they have meaning and application for our day as well: "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

But let's get back to the supposed evidence for a pre-tribulational rapture in Revelation 4:1. First, John didn't hear a trumpet. He heard a voice "like the sound of a trumpet speaking." Second, it is fallacious to argue that the absence of a reference to the church indicates its rapture (absence from the earth). Hal Lindsey states, "Since the Church is mentioned nineteen times in the first three chapters under divine outline of 'the things which are,' and since the Church is not mentioned or implied as being on earth even once after the statement 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things,' I conclude that it is the end of the Church age that is meant here, and that the Church is in heaven thereafter until it returns as the bride of Christ in Revelation 19:7-14."⁷ Notice that no text states this. These are Lindsey's conclusions.

Let's test Lindsey's hypothesis. The first three chapters of Revelation deal with churches, assemblies of saints in Asia Minor in the first century: the church in Ephesus (2:1), the church in Smyrna (2:8), the church in Pergamum (2:12), the church in Thyatira (2:18), the church in Sardis (3:1), the church in Philadelphia (3:7), and the church in Laodicea (3:14). After chapter three, Jesus (1:1) deals with those who make

up the church—the "saints" (5:8; 8:3,4; 11:18; 13:7,10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:8). In the first three chapters, local churches are addressed, not the church generally. After chapter three the "saints," individuals who make up the seven churches in Asia Minor and elsewhere, are referred to. Is there exegetical evidence for this interpretation? Yes. "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2; cf. 6:1-6; 14:33; 2 Cor. 2:1). Is Paul describing two groups of people? No! The saints constitute the church.

It takes amazing hermeneutical manipulation to create a doctrine where none exists. Lindsey's view must be read into the text. He begins with his pretribulational rapture theology (still not documented by arguments from Scripture) and forces it on a verse that must be twisted to prove what he claims it teaches. Nothing like what Lindsey believes can be found in Revelation 4:1.

Let's continue by applying Lindsey's hermeneutical logic to other passages. The words church and churches appear just once in the Book of Hebrews (12:23) and twice in 2 Corinthians (1:1 and 2:14): "The church is not mentioned as such in Mark, Luke, John, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, or Jude, and not until chapter 16 of Romans. Unless we are prepared to relegate large chunks of the NT to a limbo of irrelevance to the Church, we cannot make the mention or omission of the term 'church' a criterion for determining the applicability of a passage to saints of the present age."⁸

Is Bible interpretation based on word counts? The same reasoning process has been taken with the Book of Esther by liberal scholars: "There can be no doubt that the historicity and canonicity of Esther has been the most debated of all the Old Testament books. Even some Jewish scholars questioned its inclusion in the Old Testament because of the absence of God's name."⁹ If word counts are to be so heavily relied upon then Lindsey refutes his own argument. He finds the Antichrist all over the Book of Revelation, but the word is nowhere to be found.

If chapters 4-19 are not about the church, then what group of people would Jesus as the true author of Revelation have in mind? The dispensationalist believes that these passages describe the time of the great tribulation, when Israel, not the church, is in view. But word-count exegesis leaves us in something of a dilemma since the word Israel only appears once after the supposed rapture of the church, and not until Revelation 7:41. One would think that if the church is in view in the first three chapters because the words church and churches are used nineteen times, then shouldn't we expect to find the word Israel used more than once after chapter three if this entire seven-year period is about Israel? The word Israel does appear in 21:12, but the word churches appears in 22:16. Revelation 22:16 demonstrates that the entire book is "for the churches," not just the first three chapters.

A glaring inconsistency can be found in Tim LaHaye's defense of an any-moment rapture based on Revelation 4:1. He states that the "first-century church believed in the imminent return of Christ, possibly during their lifetime."¹⁰ He means by this that first-century Christians and Christians thereafter believed that Jesus could come at any moment. But later in the same book he writes, "Chapter 1 is the introduction; chapters 2 and 3 [of Revelation] cover the church age, using seven historical churches to describe the entire age. (For example, the church in Ephesus is the only one that refers to apostles because the first-century church alone included apostles.)"¹¹ Chuck Smith, another popular prophecy writer, pushes the same idea while maintaining that Jesus' coming is always imminent, that is, that He could come at any moment. But like LaHaye, he contradicts himself when he writes that "each of these seven churches... represents a particular period of Church history. For instance, the church at Smyrna represents the Church of the second through fourth centuries—a time when persecution was horrible and as many as six million Christians were executed for their faith. The church at Pergamum represents the beginning of the church-state system that developed under Constantine. And so on."¹²

How could Christians believe that Jesus

could come at any moment and also believe that He would not come until the last of the seven representative churches (Laodicea) appeared? This destroys the dispensationalist's doctrine of imminency, the any-moment rapture of the church. It also destroys literalism since the seven churches are purported to represent seven distinct periods of the church age, not individual churches. William Hendriksen comments on the seven churches/seven ages view:

The notion that these seven churches describe seven successive periods of Church history hardly needs refutation. To say nothing about the humorous—if it were not so deplorable—exegesis which, for example, makes the church of Sardis, which was dead, refer to the glorious age of the Reformation; it should be clear to every student of Scripture that there is not one atom of evidence in all the sacred writings which in any way corroborates this thoroughly arbitrary method of cutting up the history of the Church and assigning the resulting pieces to the respective epistles of Revelation 2 and 3.¹³

According to dispensationalists, the rapture is a two-stage event: Jesus comes for His saints before the seven-year tribulation period and with His saints at the end of the tribulation period to defeat antichrist and set up the millennial kingdom (Revelation 19). But there is no mention of the church in Revelation 19 following Jesus on His "white horse" (19:11). The "armies of heaven," not the church, follow Jesus on their "white horses" (19:14). If dispensationalists maintain that the "armies of heaven" are the church or saints, then this only shows that the word church does not have to appear for it to be present. A final point needs to be made. Dispensationalists teach that Jesus coming on "a white horse" in Revelation 19 is the second coming. Robert L. Thomas is a representative of this popular position:

This picture climaxes the NT emphasis on the second coming of Christ as the fulfillment and vindication of the Christian hope (e.g., Matt. 13:41-42; 25:41; Rom. 2:5; 2 Thess. 1:7-8, 9-10; 2:8).... It answers specifically to the theme verse of Rev. 1:7 which tells of the worldwide audience this event will have (cf. Matt. 24:27-31).... In fact, this is the only event in Revelation that corre-

sponds to that coming narrowly construed to refer to Christ's personal coming.¹⁴

In Acts 1:9-11 we are told that "a cloud received Him out of their sight" (1:9). No horse was involved. "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (1:11). Jesus did not go into heaven on a horse, and He will not return on a horse.

Like the dispensational hermeneutical methodology in general, the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine is a gigantic hoax. Because the pretribulation rapture is a pillar of the dispensational system, we should expect to find proof of its existence in clear texts. Even one text would suffice. There is not a single passage that clearly and dogmatically supports a pretribulation rapture. If so many people believe the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine, why is it that no verse can be appealed to that explicitly teaches it? Most pre-tribulationists have never been challenged to produce a verse.

NOTES

1. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 103.
2. For a critique of Walvoord's position of John's "translation" as a type of rapture, see Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 68-9.
3. Grant Jeffrey, *Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny* (Toronto: Frontier Research, 1988), 135.
4. Jeffrey, *Armageddon*, 136.
5. See Hal Lindsey *The Rapture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 88-91.
6. See Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1999).
7. Hal Lindsey, *The Rapture*, 90.
8. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 78. Also see Gundry's *First the Anti-christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997), 84-87.
9. Edward G. Dobson, "Esther," *Liberty Bible Commentary*, eds. Edward E. Hindson and Woodrow M. Kroll (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1982), 909.
10. Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm: Why Christians Will Escape All the Tribulation* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), 65.
11. LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm*, 74.
12. Chuck Smith with David Wimbish, *Dateline Earth: Countdown to Eternity* (Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen Books, 1989), 28-29.
13. William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1940] 1982), 60. In his *Dateline Earth*, Chuck Smith identifies the Church of Sardis with the Protestant Reformation because the Protestant Church celebrated Christmas. "Should Christians stop celebrating on December 25?" Smith asks. "Not at all. We enjoy glorious liberty as children of God to celebrate or not to celebrate, as we choose" (33). So why wasn't this true for those who started celebrating Christmas on December 25?
14. Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 382.

History Repeats Itself...

PROPHECIES CONCERNING THE Messiah's kingdom are now being fulfilled spiritually, but one needs to have that experimental knowledge of the indwelling Spirit of Christ in order to fully appreciate their present-day fulfillment. Failing to read the prophecies in the light of Christ's work of salvation caused the Jews to misunderstand the prophecies they knew so well. Unless our interpretations of prophecies reveal Christ we, too, will fail to grasp their true meaning. The Jews were led to reject Christ because of their misinterpretation of the prophecies concerning Israel: they forgot or overlooked the moral purpose of prophecy—personal salvation from sin. "Thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Spiritual pride, selfishness and sin in their hearts beclouded their spiritual discernment.

The Jews were rigid literalists in the interpretation of the Scriptures. They were expositors of prophecy "but without spiritual insight"; they did not study the prophecies in the light of God's moral purpose; they did not study the prophecies so that by them they would be strengthened to overcome sin in the heart. And yet it was for this purpose that they were given.

Similarly today, many thousands of professing Christians study the prophecies and misapply them in the same way as did the Jews: their interpretation of the prophecies agrees with the Christ-rejecting Jews and is actually opposed to the plain teachings of the New Testament. The Jews pointed to the prophecies picturing the triumph of Israel over her foes (such as those in Ezek. 38, 39; Joel 3; Zech. 12 and 14, etc.) and felt certain of the protection and blessing of God. Today, Christian expositors teach the same as did the Jews regarding those prophecies. Both have overlooked the spiritual qualifications required by those whose victory and blessedness are depicted: both have overlooked the moral purpose of the prophecies.

The New Testament clearly teaches that the church has inherited all the promises and blessings assured to Israel. To the Jews, Jesus said: "The Kingdom of God shall be taken from you [literal Israel]

and given to a nation [spiritual Israeli bringing forth the fruits thereof." (Matt 21:43.) To those who bear the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22, 23) in the Lord's vineyard (Matt 21:33-43; John 15:1-11, etc.) are assured the blessing and protection of God. "Ye [the church] are . . . an holy nation." (1 Pet. 2:9.)

The Jews looked for an earthly and temporal dominion. They claimed the literal, unconditional fulfillment of the prophecies concerning "Israel," refusing to see that they forfeited their right to them because of their failure to meet the conditions. Because of their false interpretations of the prophecies concerning the kingdom promised to Israel, the Jews rejected Christ and His spiritual kingdom. Similarly, to-day, many professing Christians fall into the same error of interpreting the prophecies concerning "Israel" in a literal Palestinian sense, failing to see that the Jews, by their rejection and crucifixion of Christ, forfeited all right to them. As the literal, Palestinian-centered system of interpretation was the means of the Jews' rejection of Christ and His spiritual kingdom, so, today, the literal, Palestinian-centered system of interpretation—Futurism—causes people to misunderstand and reject Christ's last-day Message concerning the last events in His spiritual kingdom of Israel. This Message is clearly enunciated in the book of Revelation, but because it is couched in Old Testament terminology its present moral purpose is not understood by those following the Futuristic system of interpretation.

Because of the imagery pertaining to Israel so abundantly used in the book of Revelation, futurists say that it is a book largely pertaining to the literal Jew in Palestine. Failure to understand the New Testament principle that Old Testament terminology is now employed in a spiritual, world-wide sense in connection with the church is responsible for much theological confusion. "Israel" is the key-word which unlocks prophetic problems—especially those in the book of Revelation. Only as they relate to the church can the prophecies be fully understood. Many commentators rightly emphasize that "the symbolism of the Revelation is wholly and exclusively Jewish"; only spiritual Israelites can understand the prophecies of the Apocalypse. It is estimated that at least 550 quotations from the Old Testament are found in the book of Revelation. The

following extract from "The Revelation of St. John," by Prof. W. Milligan, D.D., pp.27-30, illustrates what others have pointed out concerning the exclusively Jewish nature of the Revelation: "The Christian church, even among the Gentiles, had been grafted upon the stem of David. She had an interest in Zion and Jerusalem; she saw in Babylon the type of her enemies; she felt herself to be the true Israel of God. She was well acquainted with the tabernacle and the temple, with their pillars and incense, with their different altars, with the high priest's robes, with the seven-branched golden candlesticks, with the ark of the testimony with the hidden manna, and with the parchment rolls written both within and on the back. These symbols were therefore closely adapted to her condition, and must have gone home to her with peculiar power."

— LOUIS F. WERE

1949

Unscriptural Literalism

Dispensationalism has its source in a faulty and unscriptural literalism which, in the important field of prophecy, ignores the typical and preparatory character of the Old Testament. . . . This Dispensational system of interpreting Scripture is very popular today. The reasons are not far to seek.

Literal interpretation seems to make Bible study easy. It also seems reverent. It argues on this wise: 'God must have said just what He means, and must mean just what He has said; and what He has said is to be taken just as He said it, i.e., literally.' But the New Testament makes it plain that literal interpretation was a stumbling block to the Jews. It concealed from them the most precious truths of Scripture. The temple and its worship were typical of the high priestly work of Christ (Jn. 2:19). But the Jews failed to understand His application of it to Himself, and used His words to encompass His destruction (Matt. 26:61). . . . He came to fulfill the law and the prophets. But the fulfillment which He offered the Jews was so different from their literal and carnal desires and expectations that they sent their King to Calvary.

— OSWALD T. ALLIS

1947