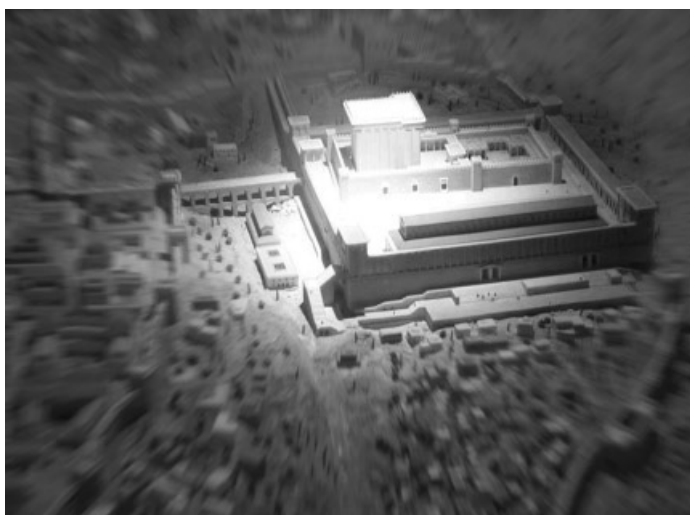




RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

‘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.

CHARIOTS IN THE CLOUDS



Thus were the miserable people persuaded by these deceivers, and such as belied God himself; while they did not attend, nor give credit, to the signs that were so evident, and did so plainly foretell their future desolation (1); but, like men infatuated, without either eyes to see or minds to consider (2), did not regard the denunciations that God made to them (3). Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year (4). Thus also, before the Jews’ rebellion, and before those commotions which preceded the war, when the people were come in great crowds to the feast of unleavened bread, on the eight day of the month Xanthicus, [Nisan,] and at the ninth hour of the night, so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day-time; which light lasted for half an hour (5). This light seemed to be a good sign to the unskilful, but was so interpreted by the sacred scribes as to portend those events that followed immediately upon it.

—Flavius Josephus

1. Isaiah 47:13-15
2. Matthew 13:14-15; Deut 29:4; Isaiah 6:9-10
3. Revelation 9:20-21
4. Isaiah 34:5; Luke 21:11; Matthew 24:29
5. Zechariah 14:7; Isaiah 30:26

“Behold, he shall come up as clouds, and his chariots shall be as the whirlwind” - Jeremiah 4:13

“For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.” - Isaiah 66:15, cf. 19:1

“There will be terrors and great signs from heaven”
- Luke 21:11

“And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.”
- Mark 9:1

“Jesus told him, You said it. I am telling you then, that henceforth you shall see the Son of Man sitting from the right of the Power and coming over the clouds of heaven.”
- Matthew 26:64 (ARAMAIC BIBLE)

Josephus (A.D. 75) - Jewish Historian

“Besides these signs, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month Artemisius, [Jyar,] a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sun-setting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armour were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities. Moreover, at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner court of the temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, “Let us remove hence” (Jewish Wars, VI-V-3).

Tacitus (A.D. 115) - Roman historian

“Prodigies had occurred, but their expiation by the offering of victims or solemn vows is held to be unlawful by a nation which is the slave of superstition and the enemy of true beliefs. In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armour. A sudden lightning flash from the clouds lit up the Temple. The doors of the holy place abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that the gods were leaving it, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure. Few people placed a sinister interpretation upon this. The majority were convinced that the ancient scriptures of their priests alluded to the present as the very time when the Orient would triumph and from Judaea would go forth men destined to rule the world.” (Histories, Book 5, v. 13).

Dan Harden

“The imagery is exactly the same—Christ would return the way He left, on the clouds. Neither section is in the midst of an apocalyptic section, so both should be treated similarly. Interestingly, here I will refer to R.C. Sproul’s message “Last Days Madness” one last time. In reference to this very passage (‘every eye shall see him’, ‘coming on the clouds’), he notes that Josephus records that there were many eyewitnesses to the strange appearance of chariots and warriors in the clouds surrounding the city during the War of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem. Dr. Gentry states that Christ only came metaphorically in AD 70. And yet Sproul makes an allusion that this may have indeed been more than merely a metaphorical appearance! Josephus states that there were many witnesses to this. Are we to disregard it merely because we *want* the coming of Christ in AD 70 to be merely metaphorical? As we saw at the beginning of Dr. Gentry’s article, his view demands that this coming was merely metaphorical. Yet maybe in light of Josephus, he should consider that it may indeed have been more. In fact, in light of the strength of the language throughout the NT regarding Christ’s imminent coming, it seems clear that what was preached was of more substance than a mere metaphorical coming. I believe the evidence here is stacked against Dr. Gentry.”

Ernest L. Martin

“Christ Jesus told the apostles that when they (or any of the saints) would see Jerusalem surrounded by armies then let the people of God flee from Jerusalem and Judea. ‘When you shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh’ (Luke 21:20).

The meaning of this verse has puzzled many people. How can it be that when Jerusalem is completely surrounded (encircled on all sides) with armies, then the people of God are told to flee the whole area of Judea (of which Jerusalem is a part)? If this is the strategy, then it seems that Christ is saying to surrender to the armies. But this is not what Christ meant in his warning.

In actual fact, this prophecy of Christ Jesus was fulfilled to the letter in the period just before the war that destroyed Jerusalem from A.D.67 to 70. We have the eyewitness account of Josephus himself (he was the Jewish historian who accompanied the Roman armies to Jerusalem and saw or reported all that occurred in Judaea within that three and a half year event that occurred in the heavens that could not be identified as having its origin on earth. This was clearly a ‘sign’ from heaven and I have not the slightest hesitation in stating that it was an exact fulfillment of what Christ Jesus said would occur that is recorded in Luke 21:20. Note what Josephus said happened just before the war with the Romans commenced.

On the twenty-first of the month Artemisium [the last day of the 2nd Passover season In A.D.66], there appeared a miraculous phenomenon, passing belief. Indeed, what I am about to relate would, I imagine, have been deemed a fable, were it not for the narratives of eyewitnesses and for the subsequent calamities which deserved to be so signalized. For before sunset throughout all parts of the county [everywhere throughout Judea] chariots were seen in the air and armed battalions hurtling through the clouds and *encompassing the cities*” (War, VI.5.3 or Loeb VI.298, emphasis mine).

This is the very thing that Christ Jesus said to watch for. And then (about two weeks later) Josephus tells us:

Moreover, at the feast which is called Pentecost, the priests on entering the inner court of the temple by night, as their custom was in the discharge of

their ministrations, reported that they were conscious, first of a commotion and a din, and after that of a voice as of a host, ‘We are departing hence’ (War, VI.209,300).

With these two signs what did the Christians in Jerusalem and Judea do? Eusebius tells us that this is the time they began to leave the region because of the command of Christ and went to a city called Pella on the east side of the Jordan River (Ecclesiastical History, III.5). They and the apostles obtained safety from the holocaust that soon enflamed Jerusalem and Judaea.

Chariots and armed forces seen in the skies all over Judaea and encompassing the cities of the Jews was similar to times recorded in the early history of Israel. Angelic powers (in this case, good angels) accompanied the armies of Israel when it was the normal period (in ancient Times) for hostilities to occur. The Bible says: ‘And it came to pass, after the year had expired, at the time angels go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon’ (II Samuel 11:1). The King James translators (and most modern ones) read the Hebrew as ‘kings,’ not ‘angels.’ But there is no reason whatever for reading the text as ‘kings.’ The verse was intended to show that angelic powers were there to aid Israel in their battles when they went to war.

A further reference (which even corroborates angelic connections with wars or the preparations for wars on earth) is 11 Samuel 5:23-24. God said to David that when he heard “the sound of a going [forth] in the tops of the mulberry trees, then you [David] shall bestir yourself [to war].” This swishing sound in the tops of the trees of a turbulent waving action of the wind was recognized by David as caused by the Lord and his angelic hosts going to battle with David (see also Genesis 32:1.3 and II Kings 6:17 about angels accompanying God). But in A.D.66, instead of helping Israel win the war with the Romans that the people of Judaea were about to start, the angelic hosts were seen in the clouds in chariots and as armed soldiers encompassing the cities of Judaea and enclosing them on all sides for capitulation. This is precisely what Christ Jesus said to watch for in his Olivet prophecy.”

The Same Argument the Liberals Use

BY GARY NORTH from the publisher's preface to Kenneth Gentry's *The Beast of Revelation*

By interpreting Jesus' promise that He would soon return in power and judgment against Israel as if it were a promise of His second coming at the rapture, dispensationalists are caught in a dilemma. They teach that Paul and the apostles taught the early church, in Dave Hunt's words, "to watch and wait for His imminent return," yet Jesus has delayed returning physically for over 1,950 years. How can we escape the conclusion that the apostles misinformed the early church, a clearly heretical notion, and an argument that liberal theologians have used against Bible-believing Christians repeatedly in this century? But there is no way out of this intellectual dilemma if you do not distinguish between Christ's coming in judgment against Israel in A.D. 70 and His physical return in final judgment at the end of time.

Contrary to Dave Hunt, with respect to the physical return of Jesus in judgment, the early church was told just the opposite: *do not* stand around watching and waiting.

"And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey" (Acts 1:10-12).

Those who prefer figuratively to stand around looking into the sky are then tempted to conclude, as Dave Hunt concludes, that the church today; by abandoning pre-tribulational dispensationalism—as if more than a comparative handful of Christians in the church's history had ever believed in the pre-tribulational rapture doctrine, invented as recently as 1830—has "succumbed once again to the unbiblical hope that, by exerting godly influence upon government, society can be transformed." It is time, he says, for Christians to give up "the false dream of Christianizing secular culture. . . ."

In short, let the world go to hell; we Christians will escape the burning building of because we all have been issued

free tickets on God's helicopter escape.

Fear paralyzes people if they see no escape, or if their hoped-for escape is seen by them as a miraculous deliverance by forces utterly beyond their control. Also, a short-run perspective inevitably impoverishes people. The fundamentalist world until the late 1970's had been "immobilized for Jesus" by its all-pervasive dismissal of the "inevitably grim" pre-rapture future and by fundamentalism's rejection of that future. Despairing Christians have believed with all their hearts that anything they could do to improve this world would inevitably be swallowed up by the beast and the antichrist. Then why work, save, and postpone the enjoyments of this world in order to build up a capital base that will be inherited by your enemies? People buried their earthly fears by means of the make-believe dream of God's helicopter escape from the Great Tribulation – a tribulation that ended in A.D. 70. *Fundamentalists buried their talents when they buried the future.* That was the fate of the older dispensationalism: it was buried alive. People's fears could not serve as stimuli to long-term planning and building.

No longer. Fundamentalism's make-believe world of false prophecies regarding ancient events is drawing to a close. This book and its fatter, fully documented companion volume (*Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*), will speed up the process.

It is time for a resurrection, the resurrection of Christian hope. It is time for a parallel resurrection: the resurrection of comprehensive Christian service in every area of life. This means that it is time for Christian dominion. It is time to stop asking ourselves "What ever happened to heaven?" and start asking: "Whatever happened to the Great Commission and the kingdom of God?"

Heaven is for dead men in Christ; earth is for living men in Christ. Our responsibility for this world ends only at the point of our physical death or our complete physical and mental incapacitation. Let those fundamentalists whose primary goal in life is to escape earthly responsibility in the present and surely in the future – and also to "get out of life alive" at the rapture – bury their talents

in ceaseless speculations regarding heaven. The rest of us should concentrate on the goal of building the kingdom of God through covenantal faithfulness to God's law. We should begin to take seriously God's promise to the righteous man: "His soul shall dwell at ease; and his seed shall inherit the earth" (Psa. 25:13).

The Right Hand of Glory

This anti-dominion perspective conveniently ignores the "passage of passages" that dispensationalist authors do their best to avoid referring to, the Old Testament passage which is cited more times in the New Testament than any other, Psalm 110. What few church historians have recognized is that it was also the church fathers' most cited passage in the century after the fall of Jerusalem. (Dispensationalists keep citing unnamed early church fathers in general for support of their thesis that the early church fathers were all premillennialists—an assertion disproved by one of their own disciples.) Psalm 110 may be the dispensationalists' least favorite Bible passage, for good reason.

The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies (Psa. 110:1-2).

This passage makes it clear that a legitimate goal of God's people is the extension in history and on earth of God's kingdom, to rule in the midst of our spiritual enemies and opponents. But more to the point, the Lord speaks to Jesus Christ and informs Him that He will sit at God's right hand until His enemies are conquered. Obviously, God's throne is in heaven. This is where Jesus will remain until He comes again in final judgment.

This is also what is taught by the New Testament's major eschatological passage, I Corinthians 15. It provides the context of the fulfillment of Psalm 110. It speaks of the resurrection of every person's body at the last judgment. Jesus' body was resurrected first in time in order to demonstrate to the world that the bodily resurrection is real. (This

is why liberals hate the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Christ, and why they will go to such lengths in order to deny it.) This passage tells us when all the rest of us will experience this bodily resurrection. What it describes has to be the final judgment.

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father, when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death (I Cor. 15:22-26).

Jesus reigns until God the Father has put all enemies under Jesus' feet. But Jesus reigns from heaven; if this were not true, then how on earth could He be seated at the right hand of God, as Psalm 110 requires? Any suggestion that *Jesus will rule physically on earth in history* (meaning before the final judgment), away from His place at God's right hand, is also a suggestion that the right hand of glory is not all that glorious. Yet this is exactly what premillennialism says must and will happen in history. This is premillennialism's distinctive doctrine.

Representative Presence

What premillennialism inevitably denies is that Jesus Christ reigns in history through His earthly followers, and *only* through them, just as Satan rules his kingdom in history through his earthly followers, and *only* through them. Satan never will appear physically in history to command his troops, and neither will Jesus Christ. Satan does not have to reign from some city in order for him to exercise power; neither does Jesus Christ. Are we to believe that Satan's kingdom is not a true kingdom just because he is not present physically? Yet Dave Hunt, exposé of cults and New Age conspiracies, denouncer of satanism everywhere, nevertheless insists:

"There can be no kingdom without the king being present. . ."

He refuses to understand what Jesus taught from the beginning: *Jesus Christ is covenantally present with His people in their weekly worship services and especially during the Lord's Supper*. Jesus exercises covenantal judgment in the midst of the congregation during the Lord's Supper, which is why self-judgment in advance is required.

Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world. Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another (I Cor. 11:27-33).

I suspect that it is dispensationalism's lack of emphasis on the sacrament of Holy Communion that has led them to adopt the strange belief that Satan's kingdom rule is real even though he is not physically present on earth, yet Jesus' kingdom reign cannot become real until He is physically present on earth. In each case, the two supernatural rulers rule representatively. In neither case does the Bible teach that the supernatural ruler needs to be bodily present with his people in order for him to exercise dominion through them.

Obvious, isn't it? But when have you heard a sermon or read a book that mentions this?

No Earthly Hope

If the church is just about out of time, as dispensational authors keep insisting, decade after decade, then what legitimate hope can Christians have that they can leave the world a better place than they found it? None, says Lehman Strauss in Dallas Seminary's journal, *Bibliotheca Sacra*:

"We are witnessing in this twentieth century the collapse of civilization. It is obvious that we are advancing toward the end of the age. Science can offer no hope for the future blessing and security of humanity, but instead it has produced devastating and deadly results which threaten to lead us toward a new dark age. The frightful uprisings among races, the almost unbelievable conquests of Communism, and the growing antireligious philosophy throughout the world, all spell out the fact that doom is certain. I can see no bright prospects, through the efforts of man, for the earth and its inhabitants."

This same pessimism regarding Christians' ability to improve society through the preaching of the gospel has

been affirmed by John Walvoord, for three decades the president of Dallas Seminary: "Well, I personally object to the idea that premillennialism is pessimistic. We are simply realistic in believing that man cannot change the world. Only God can."

But why can't God change it through His servants, just as Moses changed the world, and as the apostles changed it? The apostles' enemies announced regarding them: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also" (Acts 17:6b). No one has ever announced this about dispensationalists!

This utter pessimism concerning the earthly future of the institutional church and Christian civilization is what lies behind the traditional premillennialists' lack of any systematic social theory or recommended social policies. They believe that it is a waste of their time thinking about such "theoretical" matters, since they believe that Christians will never be in a position to implement them, even if such standards exist.

Because he has no faith in the long-term efforts of Christians to transform this world through obedience to God, the consistent dispensationalist retreats from the hard conflicts of society that rage around him, just as the Russian Orthodox Church did during the Russian Revolution of 1917. The existence of this dispensationalist attitude of retreat is openly admitted by dispensational pastor David Schnitger:

"North and other postmillennial Christian Reconstructionists label those who hold the pretribulational rapture position pietists and cultural retreatists. One reason these criticisms are so painful is because I find them to be substantially true. Many in our camp have an all-pervasive negativism regarding the course of society and the impotence of God's people to do anything about it. They will heartily affirm that *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth*, and that this must indeed be *The Terminal Generation*, therefore, any attempt to influence society is ultimately hopeless."

This book presents a message of moral responsibility. Every message of true hope inevitably is also a message of moral responsibility. In God's world, there is no hope without moral responsibility, no offer of victory without the threat of persecution, no offer of heaven without the threat of hell. Deny this, and you deny the gospel. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.