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A Chronologically Oriented Reassessment of the Apocalypse Interludes: The Great Multitude Pretribulational Rapture

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Abstract

An emphasis on the literal hermeneutic and a belief in the distinctiveness of Israel have allowed dispensationalists to distill the complex sequence of fantastical events in John's Apocalypse into a comfortable flow chart of rapture, tribulation, return, millennium, and beyond. And yet, perhaps the divine plan is not this simple. For, hidden within the popular flow chart are exegetical decisions which appear to set aside the standard dispensational hermeneutic in order to impose a particular means of integrating the rapture and Daniel's 70th week into the chronology of Revelation. Indeed, as I will illustrate, there are several instances in which the text of Revelation is denied the opportunity to speak for itself. Specifically, my concern is with three passages, commonly characterized as interludes, which are typically handled by dispensationalists as amplifications, recapitulations, etc., rather than being allowed to further advance the chronological narrative, based on their locations within the literary sequence.

In fact, if deference is given to the contextual markers within these interlude passages, then the passages themselves provide indications for how the rapture and Daniel's 70th week should be integrated into the chronology of Revelation. Through the use of chronological markers in Revelation 11–13, I contend that the author of the Apocalypse has placed Daniel's 70th week within his narrative as a seven-year period of distress for both Israel and the planet. Similarly, through the use of sequential markers and imagery associated with the Church in Revelation 7—namely, the sudden appearance of a great multitude of every tribe and nation before the throne and before the Lamb, whose robes have been made white by the blood of the Lamb—the rapture event has also been placed within the narrative, well before the 70th week. Thus, a pretribulational rapture sequence exists, in which the Church is removed from the earth before the Great Tribulation, that time when Israel is made to recognize that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, yet after most of the seals have been opened. Consequently, a chronologically-oriented approach to the Apocalypse interludes leads to a *great multitude pretribulational rapture* framework. Regrettably, this does serve to disrupt the cherished flow chart; nonetheless, a chronologically-oriented approach does allow us to adhere more faithfully to the dispensational hermeneutic, as developed and defended by our dispensational forbears.

Keywords

Eschatology, Dispensationalism, Revelation, Interludes, Rapture, Tribulation

Cover Page Footnote

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A Chronologically Oriented Reassessment of the Apocalypse Interludes: The Great Multitude Pretribulational Rapture

A literal hermeneutic, the distinctiveness of Israel, and the glory of God—these are the first principles, the unique dispensational perspectives, which have allowed the complex sequence of fantastical events in John’s Apocalypse to be distilled into a comfortable flow chart of rapture, tribulation, return, millennium, and beyond.¹ Illustrated versions of this chart have well served the pedagogical needs of both scholars and lay teachers, particularly since the revisions to the dispensational system under Walvoord and Ryrie, and their affirmation of a pretribulational rapture and a premillennial return of Christ to establish His thousand-year reign.² And yet, perhaps the divine plan is not this simple. For, hidden within the popular flow chart are exegetical decisions which appear to set aside the standard hermeneutic in order to impose a particular means of integrating the rapture and Daniel’s 70th week into the chronology of Revelation.³ Indeed, as I will illustrate, there are several instances in which the text of Revelation is denied the opportunity to speak for itself.

Specifically, my concern is with three passages, commonly characterized as interludes, which are typically handled by dispensationalists as amplifications, recapitulations, etc., rather than being allowed to further advance the chronological narrative, based on their locations within the literary sequence. These interludes are found in Revelation 7, 11, and 12–13. In fact, if deference is given to the contextual markers within these interlude passages, then the passages themselves provide indications for how the rapture and Daniel’s 70th week should be integrated into the chronology of Revelation. Regretfully, this does serve to disrupt the cherished flow chart; nonetheless, a chronologically-oriented approach does allow us to adhere more faithfully to the dispensational hermeneutic, as developed and defended by our dispensational forbears, while avoiding the weaknesses of the pre-wrath rapture approach, which fails to accommodate the removal of the Church prior to the catastrophic events of Daniel’s 70th week. These are the events which ultimately bring Israel to its climatic recognition of Jesus as the promised King and Savior.

The fundamental question is whether an exegetical approach to these specific interlude passages is available, which better respects the core principles

¹ These represent the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, according to Charles Ryrie. Literal is perhaps better expressed as the normal or plain reading of scripture. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 38–40, 80–81.

² John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 20, 21, 33; Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 148–149; idem., *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 559.

³ Primary rapture passages include 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–54. 70th-week related passages include Daniel 7:24–25; 9:24–27; 12:1–11.

of dispensational hermeneutics, while also honoring integrative concerns tied to the rapture and Daniel's 70th week. If so, then this may offer better insight into the eschatological future, which Christians are encouraged to study and keep, to faithfully watch for, and to draw hope from (Rev 1:3; 16:15; Titus 2:13). My thesis is that a chronologically-integrated approach to these key interludes provides an appealing alternative to the traditional approach for those working from within a revised dispensational hermeneutic and framework.

Buist Fanning names the passages of interest, "the interlude of the two multitudes" (Rev 7:1–17), the interlude of the "temple measurements and the two witnesses" (Rev 11:1–11:14), and the interlude of "the dragon's war against the woman" (12:1–13:18).⁴ For each of these passages, discourse markers will be examined and contrasted with their use elsewhere to show that the markers are generally indicative of chronological progression. Based on this, the two 1,260-day periods identified in Revelation (Rev 11:3; 12:6) will be proposed as identifying the 70th week, which chronologically follows the sixth trumpet.⁵ And the appearance of the great multitude in heaven (Rev 7:9–17) will be proposed as identifying the rapture, subsequent to the sixth seal, just after the people of earth recognize that the wrath of the Lamb has now arrived (6:16–17). This effectively changes the traditional flow chart to the following sequence: "beginning of the birth pains," rapture, wrath of the Lamb, tribulation (70th week), return, millennium, and beyond.⁶ Thus, a pretribulational rapture sequence is preserved in Revelation, in which the Church is removed from the earth before the Great Tribulation. Consequently, I contend that a chronologically-oriented approach to the Apocalypse interludes leads to a *great multitude pretribulational rapture* framework. For these propositions, I will address key time intervals, dispensational concerns (e.g., Christians enduring wrath), and Olivet Discourse considerations (e.g., birth pains). Lastly, a summary assessment demonstrating how this approach aligns with common dispensational expectations will be provided.

Employing the Dispensational Hermeneutic

Dispensational theologians emphasize that "a consistent literal hermeneutic also takes prophetic statements contextually," where "meaning is

⁴ Fanning identifies a total of five interludes, which also encompass "John and the little scroll" (10:1–11) and a "preview of judgment and victory for the Lamb" (14:1–20). Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 63–64.

⁵ Note that Israel "followed a lunar calendar system (a month is thirty days, and a year is 360 days)." Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 276.

⁶ "Beginning of the birth pains" employs the language of Matthew 24:8 and Mark 13:8 but is intended here to encompass the events through Revelation 6:17.

discovered by context, from the immediate to the remote.”⁷ Accordingly, “the reader’s task is to discover the meaning already in a text, not determine what he thinks it ought to mean.”⁸ Further, and of particular concern to this paper, is the expectation that “when time elements are included, they are intended to be taken literally.”⁹ But is this indeed what is practiced, with regard to these interludes?

Typical Dispensational Handling of the Key Interludes

Robert Thomas reasonably points out that a literal or normal reading includes being attentive to the sequence of events within a passage. Accordingly, as he presents his view that Revelation’s seals, trumpets, and bowls should be understood as a chronological progression of judgments, he explains that, while “the sequence of the visions revealed could differ from the sequence of events fulfilling those visions...that would contravene normal expectation,” given the “chronological indicators.”¹⁰ These indicators include the enumeration of the events in each series, the explicit completion of certain events before the next event begins, the transition from one state to another (e.g., peace to war), and the identification of specific durations. Nevertheless, he takes a different approach when it comes to the interludes, which he calls intercalations, merely because they lack enumeration.¹¹ Because of this lack of enumeration, he determines that “the intercalation between the sixth and seventh seals (Revelation 7)...represents a pause in chronological advance...[as does] the similar insert between the sixth and seventh trumpets.”¹² For Thomas, the circumstances of the two witnesses are to be understood as a partial recapitulation, looking back over what has come before.¹³ This is despite the fact that the intercalation passages themselves contain chronological indicators (e.g., completion of events and identification of specific durations) and introductory phrases, which Thomas elsewhere recognizes as discourse markers which advance the chronological narrative.

This willingness to treat the interludes differently than the sequence of events found elsewhere in Revelation is consistent with the practice of earlier

⁷ Norman L Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Church, Last Things*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005), 449.

⁸ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 2:416.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, “The Theological Context of Premillennialism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (December 1993): 392.

¹⁰ Robert L. Thomas, “The Structure of the Apocalypse: Recapitulation or Progression?” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 58.

¹¹ Thomas, “The Structure of the Apocalypse,” 59.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Thomas’ view is that “the passage about the two witnesses (11:1–13) presumably gives another perspective on the same period covered by the first six trumpets that precede it in the sequence of visions.” *Ibid.*, 62.

dispensationalists. For example, Walvoord repeatedly promotes the view that Revelation proceeds chronologically, except for when it comes to the interludes.¹⁴ At one point he asserts that “this seventh chapter is not necessarily in chronological order,” and elsewhere, he claims that the woman and child of Revelation 12 represent Israel and Jesus, at the time of Christ’s first incarnation and ascension.¹⁵ When considering the interlude of the multitudes (Rev 7), he immediately jumps to his presupposition that the rapture has already occurred prior to Revelation 4, without exegeting whether the immediate text of Revelation 7 aligns (or not) with this view. In fact, his rapture determination is partly tied to his finding that “the Church” is not specifically mentioned between Revelation 3 and the end of the book (22:16), other than determining that the great multitude at the marriage supper must also refer to the raptured Church (19:1–8).¹⁶ And yet, he fails to consider whether the other great multitude reference, within the first interlude (7:9–17), might also refer to the raptured Church.¹⁷

Further, Walvoord dispositions the 42 months of Revelation 11 (partially) based on his presupposition that “Revelation is primarily concerned with the latter half of Daniel’s 70th week.”¹⁸ And he even goes so far as to confidently assert that “Revelation never speaks of a seven-year period, only a period of three and a half years.” Yet, Daniel is not solely interested in the week as a whole but also refers to the cataclysmic events which occur halfway through the week, when the one who makes “a strong covenant with many” puts “an end to sacrifice and offering,” after which comes the “one who makes desolate” (Dan 9:27–28). Thus, it is significant that Revelation likewise divides the seven-year period into two half-

¹⁴ According to Walvoord, “Chapter 7 does not advance the narrative but directs attention to two major groups in the tribulation.” And, while “the time periods [in chapter 11] are taken as literal time periods,” “the narrative does not advance in these chapters [10 through 14, except for 11:15–19].” Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 139, 175.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145, 188–191.

¹⁶ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 103. Walvoord also leverages the distinction that “the tribulation concerns Israel and the Gentiles, and not the church, and [that] the church is promised deliverance from the time of tribulation (1 Thess 5:9; cf. Rev 6:17; 1 Thess 1:9–10; Rev 3:10).” John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing, 1959), 252.

¹⁷ Walvoord identifies the great multitude of Revelation 7:9 as additional tribulation-era martyrs, given that they are those “coming out of the great tribulation” (7:14). Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 144–145. In contrast, Hindson contends that these are not necessarily martyrs but instead asserts that they represent all believers who were saved and who then died during the first half of the tribulation period. Edward E. Hindson, *The Book of Revelation: Unlocking the Future*, Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 91.

¹⁸ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 177, 190–191. Conversely, Ryrie understands the time of the two witnesses to be during the first part of the tribulation, and hence the specified three and a half years are to be understood as a retrospective looking back to the beginning of the seal judgments. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 547.

year periods of 1,260 days (Rev 11:3; 12:6) and likewise of 42 months (11:2; 13:5), while also speaking of the second period as “a time and times and half a time” (12:14), particularly since each of these are tied to disparate events in the narrative.¹⁹

Fanning likewise maintains that there is a general chronological sequence within and between each of the three series of judgments (seals, trumpets, bowls), except that he determines that the interludes do not have a role in advancing the narrative, but rather serve as “flashbacks to the background events, heavenly previews of the consummation about to come, or glimpses of relevant contemporaneous circumstances before the judgment sequence is picked up again.”²⁰ Again, this treatment of the interludes, as not being chronologically integrated with the balance of the narrative, is common among dispensationalists.

Discourse Markers Which Advance the Narrative

One must weigh many factors when exegeting a text. In this next discussion, we will consider the discourse markers employed by the three interludes and how these markers are handled elsewhere in the Apocalypse and in John’s Gospel. As Edward Hindson notes, the Apocalypse leverages “several key chronological terms [which] indicate the progression of this revelation of future events.”²¹ For example, he notes that καὶ is used extensively to bind together discourse units in a manner which “increases the reader’s anticipation of what is going to happen next.”²²

The interlude of the two multitudes utilizes one of Hindson’s chronological terms, to introduce both the passage of the 144,000, as they are being sealed for future service (Rev 7:1), and the great multitude in white robes who praise the Lamb (7:9). The phrases “after this” (μετὰ τοῦτο) and “after these things” (μετὰ ταῦτα) are used not only in this interlude, but also to mark the beginning of several passages in Revelation, where the phrases are similarly followed by verbs of perception—“I saw” (Rev 4:1; 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1) or “I heard” (19:1).²³ Dispensationalists generally recognize the temporal progression inherent in these phrases, as governing the content of the visions, except for those

¹⁹ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 135. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

²⁰ Fanning, *Revelation*, 62.

²¹ Hindson, *The Book of Revelation*, 9.

²² Hindson calls this phenomenon *polysyndeton*. Hindson, *The Book of Revelation*, 9–11, 75.

²³ The phrase is also used in Revelation at the end of declarative statements, in anticipation of future events, such as “those [things] that are to take place *after this*” (Rev 1:19; similarly, 9:12; 20:3).

phrases tied to this interlude.²⁴ In contrast, those who are not dispensationalists deny that there are temporal implications in the use of any these phrases, other than sometimes proposing that the visions themselves occurred sequentially.²⁵ John also favors these phrases in his Gospel, with eleven usages, which are all commonly treated as indicating chronological progression.²⁶

The interlude of the temple measurements and the two witnesses (Rev 11:1–11:14) utilizes the phrase “then I was given” (καὶ ἐδόθη) and “and I will grant” (καὶ δώσω), to advance the narrative of the measurements (Rev 11:1) and of the two witnesses (11:3), respectively. This is consistent with the practice in many other passages, in which similar καὶ statements are recognized as chronologically advancing the narrative, such as in Revelation 8—“then I saw,” “and...were given,” “and there was given,” etc. The interlude of the dragon’s war against the woman (12:1–13:18) similarly utilizes καὶ—“and a great sign appeared” (12:1), “and the woman fled” (12:6), etc. Ryrie explains the “principles of normal hermeneutic,” as requiring that “the meaning of any passage must be determined by a study of the words therein and their relationships in the sentences. Determining the grammatical sense of the text must be the starting point of normal interpretation.”²⁷ Likewise, the context must also be studied.²⁸ Accordingly, the grammatical and contextual markers suggest that these passages should continue to advance the narrative, consistent with how these markers are treated elsewhere.

In summary, we have shown that the dispensationalist practice is to apply a different approach relative to these specific interludes. The next step will be to

²⁴ For example, Fanning recognizes (1) that 4:1 “denotes not just the sequence in which John received the visions...[but] it designates the time frame subsequent to his...present circumstances”; (2) that 15:5 “includes the temporal note, ‘after these things’”; (3) that chapter 18 reflects the effect of the prior devastation, with “after these things I saw” signaling “a transition to a new segment of that theme [God’s judgment]”; and (4) that 19:1 introduces “the final phase of John’s visionary experiences...[concerning] the judgment of Babylon.” Fanning, *Revelation*, 197–198, 408, 451, 456, 476–477. Robert Thomas picks and chooses when to treat μετὰ ταῦτα as denoting the sequence of events within a vision or as merely denoting the sequence of visions. Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 29–30, 484.

²⁵ For example, Kuykendall asserts that in Revelation, “μετὰ ταῦτα should be understood as a discourse marker, not a temporal marker.” Michael Kuykendall, “The Twelve Visions of John: Another Attempt at Structuring the Book of Revelation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60, no. 3 (September 2017): 541. Likewise, Gregory Beale clarifies that “after these things” relates to “the sequential order in which John saw the visions, but not necessarily the historical order of the events they depict.” Gregory K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 84.

²⁶ Instances in the Gospel include John 2:12; 3:22; 5:1, 14; 6:1; 7:1; 11:7, 11; 13:7; 19:28; 21:1.

²⁷ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 129.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

explore the implications of instead treating these interludes as chronologically integrated and thus to allow the text to suggest how the rapture and the 70th week should be integrated into the chronology of the Apocalypse.

Revelation Has a Place for Daniel's 70th Week

We now begin the speculative portion of this paper by proposing an alternative approach to integrating Daniel's 70th week (Dan 9:27) into the chronology of Revelation. Many dispensationalists argue that this is the critical eschatological period from which Christians are to escape, both for the sake of keeping them from the "day of wrath" (1 Thess 5:9; cf. 1:10) and for the sake of removing them before the time of dispensational change, when there is a "shift of focus in the purpose of God, from the Church to Israel."²⁹

Recognizing the Two 1,260-Day Periods as the 70th Week

Craig Blaising argues that the "time of the end," Daniel's 70th week, is built up in Daniel into a structure "that has an identifiable chronology and basic narrative sequence."³⁰ Chronological references include a period of "time, times, and half a time" (Dan 7:25; 12:7) and a time period of 1,290 days (Dan 12:11)—slightly more than three and a half years.³¹ In Daniel 9:26–27, the 70th week is inaugurated with the arrival of "a powerful political figure" who establishes a covenant, but then halfway through the period he desolates the temple with an abomination, stops the regular sacrifice, and ushers in an unparalleled time of trouble—a time which ultimately culminates in deliverance (cf. Dan 12:1; Jer 30:7; cf. Matt 24:15).³² It is my contention, as elaborated below, that the interludes of the witnesses (Rev 11:1–11:14) and that of the dragon and the woman (12:1–13:18), which follow the sixth and seventh trumpets in Revelation, present a relatively compatible "chronology and basic narrative sequence," which aligns with the 70th week.³³

The sixth trumpet announces the second woe and begins with the release of the four angels to kill a third of mankind (Rev 9:12–21), followed by the eating of the little scroll (10:10) and the declaration that the temple court would be given over to the nations for forty-two months (11:2), while the two witnesses prophesy

²⁹ Craig A. Blaising, "A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture," in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, ed. Alan Hultberg, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 69.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

³¹ Again, note that Israel followed a lunar calendar, in which a year was 360 days.

³² Blaising, "A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture," 35.

³³ *Ibid.*

for 1,260 days (11:3). In parallel, the witnesses torment the earth (11:10), and when they have finished, the beast from the pit makes war on them and kills them (11:7). Note that nothing is said in Revelation concerning the “strong covenant” which inaugurates the 70th week (Dan 9:27); however, there is clearly a transition in Revelation 11 from a time period during which the temple itself is reserved for the Jews to a more ominous state of affairs, as God’s prophets are defeated (cf. Dan 11:31).

The seventh trumpet announces the coming of the third woe and begins with the proclamation that Christ has begun his reign on earth (Rev 11:14–15). The pregnant woman and dragon then appear (12:1–3), the child is born and taken up into heaven (12:5), and the woman flees for 1,260 days (12:6), where she is “nourished for a time, times, and half a time” (12:14) while war rages in heaven and on earth (12:7, 17). In parallel, a sea beast is introduced, who exercises authority for forty-two months (13:5). The story then progresses until Christ is revealed from heaven on his white horse and the battle is finished (Rev 19:11; cf. Matt 24:30). Of particular significance is that the seventh trumpet (Rev 11:15) stands between the two periods of three and one-half years and therefore roughly correlates with Daniel’s “abomination that makes desolate” (Dan 12:11; cf. 9:27; Matt 24:15). This abomination may be related to the sea beast who utters blasphemies, receives worship, and whose image must also be worshipped (13:5–8, 15).

Thus, there is a relatively compatible alignment between Revelation 11–13 and Daniel’s 70th week, with respect to “chronology and basic narrative sequence.”³⁴ In contrast, many dispensationalists, noting that the Gentiles are overrunning Jerusalem during the ministry of the two witnesses, have determined that this time of the two witnesses must describe the second half of Daniel’s 70th week, and hence overlaps with the time period during which the woman flees.³⁵ Remarkably, a chronologically-integrated approach, in which the two 1,260-day periods are treated sequentially, is not even considered, nor is it generally acknowledged that the temple itself is not overrun during the ministry of the two witnesses, per the account in Revelation.³⁶ Other dispensationalists assign the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Some of those who assign the period of the two witnesses to the second half of Daniel’s 70th week include the following authors: Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 240, 266; Clarence Larkin, *The Book of Revelation: A Study of the Last Prophetic Book of Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia: Rev. Clarence Larkin Estate, 1919), 84; Hindson, *The Book of Revelation*, 122, 124; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 85; Fanning, *Revelation*, 331, 353; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 177.

³⁶ Thomas recognizes that the temple has not been overrun, but then confidently asserts that “a continuation of Jewish worship while the rest of the city experiences Gentile intrusion is impossible.” Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 85.

period of the witnesses to the first half of Daniel's 70th week, but as a retrospective which stretches back to the time of the first seal.³⁷ Again, my proposition is that the two periods, each described as 1,260 days and as 42 months, are chronologically sequential, after the sixth and then the seventh trumpet.

Struggling with the Implications

If the above proposition is accepted, then Revelation also provides significant detail concerning events prior to Daniel's 70th week. Of course, dispensationalists already recognize that the eschatological "day of the Lord" extends well beyond Daniel's 70th week, even encompassing the final judgment (1 Cor 5:5), which occurs a thousand years after the millennial kingdom is established. Likewise, it should already be recognized that cataclysmic events are anticipated "before the day of the Lord comes" (e.g., Acts 2:20).³⁸ Significantly, if Revelation 11–13 correlates with the 70th week, then the events of Revelation 6–10 must all be interpreted as occurring before such. This seems particularly appropriate with regard to the opening of the seals in Revelation 6, as the breaking of seals on a scroll must necessarily occur prior to gaining access to whatever is actually written on the scroll. Again, breaking seals is of a different nature than reading a scroll itself. Correspondingly, the birth pains of the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:4–8) must be seen as precursors to events of the 70th week, which is likewise a satisfying approach to the birth pains metaphor. Further implications, with respect to the rapture itself, are addressed below.

Revelation Does Not Ignore the Rapture

Given the proposition that Daniel's 70th week aligns with the combined interludes of the two witnesses and of the dragon's war against the woman (Rev 11–13), the rapture could occur at any time before such and still satisfy the

³⁷ For example, Charles C. Ryrie, *Revelation*, Everyday Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 76–77; John C. Whitcomb, "The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow & Beyond: A Theological Collection in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie*, ed. Christopher Cone (Fort Worth: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), 359. Cohen creatively assigns the 42 months of Revelation 11:2 (the trampling) to the second half, but the subsequent 1,260 days of 11:3 (the witnesses) to the first half. Gary G. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation: An Investigation of the Key Interpretational and Chronological Questions Which Surround the Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 83, 133–134.

³⁸ Some dispensationalists define the eschatological Day of the Lord as beginning with the events of Revelation 6, coincident with the start of the tribulation, as they understand it. For example, J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 230.

dispensationalist's priority of keeping Christians from the "day of wrath" and of removing the Church before the time of dispensational change.

Recognizing the Great Multitude of Every Nation as the Rapture Event

The appearance of the great multitude of every nation "before the throne and before the Lamb" praising God (Rev 7:9–17) is hereby proposed as being the rapture event. In contrast, dispensationalists generally recognize the throng as tribulation saints, those who were converted during the time of the seals, and who then fell "victim to natural deaths or martyrdom for their faith."³⁹ However, the biblical account does not directly link this great multitude to the martyrs of Revelation 6, or suggest that the crowd has gradually been building, swelling the ranks of the earlier martyrs, as they supposedly move from under the altar to before the throne. Rather, the "I looked and behold" introduction to Revelation 7:9 suggests that their appearance was a surprise to John or perhaps even sudden. For example, when this phrase is employed in introducing John's first heavenly vision (4:1) and his vision of several of the horsemen (6:2, 5, 8), the ESV highlights this sense of surprise or suddenness with an exclamation mark.⁴⁰ And the various uses of the phrase in the LXX likewise carry a sense of surprise.⁴¹

One of the elders describes the great multitude as those "coming out of the great tribulation" (Rev 7:14).⁴² Thomas allows that this could either mean that they were "coming 'out of' the Great Tribulation while it is in progress or coming 'out from' the Great Tribulation before it begins," although he prefers the latter interpretation.⁴³ Given my prior proposition that the 70th week occurs significantly later in the eschatological timeline, his "out from" interpretation is quite suitable, as an escape from pending events, with the proposed rapture event preceding the terrifying events of the 70th week.

³⁹ Fanning, *Revelation*, 270–271; similarly, Patterson, *Revelation*, 203; Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 485. In contrast, Walvoord limits these "tribulation saints" to those who were martyred. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 144–146.

⁴⁰ The phrase is also used in Revelation 14:1 and 14:14, but the long sentences are not awarded an exclamation mark in the ESV.

⁴¹ The phrase is used six times in the LXX, with most instances evidencing a strong sense of surprise (e.g., Judg 3:24; 1 Kgdms 10:11). Arguably, the use in Genesis 37:25 also suggests a sense of unexpectedness.

⁴² Thomas surveys the various theories concerning the identity of the elders. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 344–349. I will refrain from speculating here.

⁴³ Thomas prefers the latter interpretation, given the placement of the narrative, before the seventh seal, which he understands to initiate the second half of Daniel's 70th week, which is what he believes Christ labeled as the Great Tribulation, per Matthew 24:15, 21. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 497n119.

Leading up to the events of Revelation 7, dispensationalists have long recognized the parallels between the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21) and Revelation 6. Thomas explains that “the beginning of birth pangs parallels the first six seals, the first four of them very closely.”⁴⁴ Therefore, the events of the Olivet Discourse must be addressed with any proposed revision to the pretribulational rapture timeline. And this consideration must preserve the dispensational recognition that the Olivet Discourse is primarily addressed to the Jewish nation, and that the references to “the elect” in this discourse specifically refer to the elect of Israel—those who are saved after the Church is raptured (e.g., Matt 24:24, 31).⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the obvious touchpoints between the discourse and Revelation are limited. If, per Thomas, the beginning of birth pangs in Matthew (24:3–8) are accepted as paralleling the first four seals in Revelation (6:1–8), and the abomination of desolation in Matthew (24:15) is accepted as being situated in the middle of the 70th week tribulation of Revelation 11–13, per my proposal, then the rapture of the great multitude and its appearance before the throne (Rev 7:9) must be situated somewhere within the events covered by Matthew 24:9–14. A more precise assessment is beyond our scope and will have to await a future paper.

Struggling with the Implications

If the rapture indeed occurs after the six seals, then the Church will suffer alongside humanity during this period. Paige Patterson, though believing that the Church does not enter the tribulation, recognizes that a “case [either way] cannot be built with finality...[therefore] the Church must be prepared for suffering and persecution.”⁴⁶ Of course, the expectation that the Church will endure a portion of the cataclysmic events described in Revelation has long been voiced by those who advocate for a mid-tribulation, pre-wrath, or post-tribulational rapture.⁴⁷

Indeed, advocates of the pre-wrath view have provided a useful exegetical approach for understanding the cries of desperation which follow the sixth seal, as the people cry out, “fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has

⁴⁴ Robert L. Thomas, “A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 193. Benware also affirms the correlation. Benware, *Prophecy*, 290; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 123.

⁴⁵ Larry D. Pettegrew, “The Messiah’s Lecture on the Future of Israel,” in *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters*, ed. idem. (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2020), 267; Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 228.

⁴⁶ Patterson, *Revelation*, 45.

⁴⁷ Alan Hultberg, “Introduction,” in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation.*, ed. idem., 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 18–19.

come, and who can stand” (Rev 6:16–17).⁴⁸ Alan Hultberg argues that “has come” is a recognition by humanity that the wrath “is now about to begin.”⁴⁹ Per Hultberg, this is consistent with how the verb is used elsewhere in Revelation.⁵⁰ Furthermore, this exegetical approach is convenient for my paradigm, as my great multitude pretribulation rapture is therefore before the final seal is broken and thus before the “day of wrath” formally begins. How terrible it would be, to go through the “birth pangs” leading up to the full judgment of God upon the earth, and to be aware that life was about to get much worse, that the God of the Bible was about to accomplish that which He had promised. One can well imagine the fear of those about to be left behind, as the Church is raptured off the planet.

Avoiding the Weaknesses of the Pre-Wrath Rapture Theory

This paper argues, therefore, that the rapture is represented in Revelation by the appearance in heaven of the great multitude from every tribe and nation, per Revelation 7:9–17. As this assertion happens to coincide with the pre-wrath rapture view, in which “the appearance of the innumerable multitude in heaven [is understood] to be a picture of the rapture of the Church,” it is important to highlight the many points of disagreement between the two theories.⁵¹ Three points of disagreement are particularly significant.

First is the disparate handling and alignment of Daniel’s 70th week (Dan 9:27) with the events of Revelation. Per my theory, the chronological discourse markers in the interludes can be leveraged to align the 70th week with Revelation 11–13, spanning the time of the two witnesses (11:1–3) and continuing until the arrival of the Lamb on Zion (14:1), prior to the first bowl judgment. Significantly, the seventh trumpet (Rev 11:15) stands between the two periods of three and one-half years and marks the emergence of the abomination of desolation. In contrast, pre-wrath advocates align Daniel’s 70th week such that it encompasses both Revelation’s seals and trumpets (presumably Rev 6–13), and they interpret the

⁴⁸ Separately, amillennialists take a fatalistic approach to this passage, given that they apply a different hermeneutic to apocalyptic genre. For them, “the Church has been through tribulation, is presently experiencing tribulation, and will continue to face tribulation until it reaches heaven.” Benware, *Prophecy*, 127.

⁴⁹ Hultberg, “Introduction,” 86.

⁵⁰ Hultberg observes that the root verb, ἔρχομαι, is used in Revelation “thirty-six times with relative uniformity” and that the form in Revelation 6:17, ἦλθεν, is used three other times with the sense of “‘is now about to begin’ (Rev 14:7, 15; 19:7).” Hultberg, “Introduction,” 86.

⁵¹ Alan Hultberg, “A Case for the Prewrath Rapture,” in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation.*, ed. idem., 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 133.

fifth seal as marking the mid-point of the 70th week, and hence the arrival of the abomination of desolation.⁵²

The second point of disagreement has to do with the dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church. Since my approach aligns the 70th week with Revelation 11–13, a rapture prior to the seventh seal is able to respect the dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church. Significantly, the Church is therefore removed from the earth before the 70th week (Dan 9:27), which includes the “abomination of desolation” (Matt 24:15; Dan. 9:27) and the Great Tribulation (Matt 24:21)—that time during which Israel is made to recognize that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Likewise, the Church is removed before God rains down His full wrath and judgment on the planet. In contrast, the pre-wrath view places the rapture (per Rev 7:9) in the middle of the second half of Daniel’s 70th week. With respect to the Olivet Discourse, Hultberg overtly rejects a “radical discontinuity between the Church and Israel...[rather] for Matthew the Church is viewed as in some sense the inheritor of the Jewish kingdom,” and so on.⁵³ Further, Hultberg understands the elect of Matthew 24 as referring to Christians, and therefore “Matthew expects the Church to see the abomination of desolation and the great tribulation.”⁵⁴ These views do not align with the dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church.

Third is with regard to the application of the dispensational hermeneutic to Revelation. My contention is that John employs discourse markers in Revelation 6–22 which convey a steady chronological progression. This is not to say that that there aren’t concurrent events. For example, Revelation 12:6 states that the woman was in the wilderness for 1,260 days and is followed by Revelation 12:7, which states, “now war arose in heaven.” These activities should be understood as being concurrent. In contrast, Hultberg does not affirm this hermeneutic, as he states that “I make no contention that Revelation is straightforwardly chronological—it is not; the visions have numerous recapitulations, interludes and such.”⁵⁵

⁵² Marvin J. Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 147; Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 19. Further, the pre-wrath view aligns the bowl judgments with the extra 30 days of Daniel 12:11.

⁵³ Hultberg, “A Case for the Prewrath Rapture,” 113.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁵ Alan Hultberg, “A Rejoinder,” in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation.*, ed. *idem.*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 183.

Beyond these three points of disagreement, I will defer to other scholars to contend with the pre-wrath view. Renald Showers, Paul Benware, Larry Pettegrew, and others have offered effective challenges to such.⁵⁶

An Assessment of the Proposition

In summary, the following eschatological sequence has been proposed: beginning of the birth pains (seals 1–6), rapture (of the great multitude), wrath of the Lamb (seal 7, trumpets 1–6), first half of the 70th week (two witnesses), abomination (trumpet 7), second half of the 70th week (woman, beasts), return of Christ (& bowls 1–7), millennium, and beyond. For simplicity, the above sequence doesn't reflect all of the eschatological events, but it is sufficient for our present purposes. For in this section, the great multitude pretribulational rapture proposition will be contrasted with common dispensationalist expectations.

John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue raise seven arguments in support of a pretribulational rapture. First is the promise that “the Church will be removed prior to the hour of trial that is coming on the entire earth” (Rev 3:10).⁵⁷ Per my proposed eschatological sequence, the Church is indeed removed prior to the worst portion of the cataclysmic events and certainly before the 70th week.⁵⁸ The second argument is the lack of references to the Church in Revelation 6–18; this has been dealt with above, by pointing out that the description in Revelation 7:9–17 makes clear that this is a reference to the Church.⁵⁹ Third is the observation that the “rapture is rendered inconsequential if the Church goes through the tribulation,” and fourth is the observation that the “epistles contain no preparatory warnings of an impending tribulation for church-age believers.”⁶⁰ I concur, and the above sequence avoids such; although, the Church is allowed to endure the precursor events associated with the six seals, which are not substantially worse than what Christians have already experienced throughout history. Fifth is the assertion that “1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 demands a pretribulational rapture,” as

⁵⁶ Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View*; Benware, *Prophecy*, 275–291; Larry D. Pettegrew, “Interpretive Flaws in the Olivet Discourse,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 182–184.

⁵⁷ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 899.

⁵⁸ Certainly, the Church has been made to suffer through devastating wars, anarchy, famines, plagues, and martyrdom in the past; hence, I contend that the events of the seals and birth pains do not rise to a level which violates the promise of deliverance. However, I also assert that the applicability of Revelation 3:10 should be challenged, as the promise was made to those who persisted within specific circumstances. Note that MacArthur does not similarly engage with Revelation 2:10 which, contrary to Revelation 3:10, anticipates ten days of tribulation and then death.

⁵⁹ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 899–900.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 900.

otherwise the Thessalonians would be expressing joy that their loved ones “will not endure the horrors of the tribulation” and apprehension over “their own impending trial.”⁶¹ Sixth is Christ’s promise that he was going to his father’s house to prepare a place for his disciples, which sets an expectation of an otherworldly abode, prior to their return to earth. And the seventh argument concerns the differences between the descriptions of the rapture and second coming. Again, I concur with these final arguments, and the proposed sequence supports such. Hence, the chronologically-integrated approach aligns well with MacArthur and Mayhue’s concerns, except in the areas which have already been addressed.⁶²

Conclusion

The foundation and appeal of the dispensational system is in its commitment to applying a literal hermeneutic, even to the prophetic writings. And yet, a weakness in following this hermeneutic principle has been identified, when it comes to the handling of the interludes. In this paper, we have shown that if a more consistent literal hermeneutic is employed, where deference is given to the chronological markers within the interlude passages, then Daniel’s 70th week can comfortably be aligned with two of the interludes, with each describing events which transpire over three and a half year periods. Perhaps even more significant is that this allows for a discrete rapture event to be “discovered” within the Apocalypse, which has previously been invisible to most dispensationalists due to their insistence that the rapture must proceed the tribulation period. And given that the standard pretribulation model begins the 70th week with the first seal, this traditional view forces the rapture to occur before such. However, this early placement of the rapture is no longer necessary with a 70th week which begins much later in the narrative. Therefore, a chronologically-integrated approach, such as that provided by the great multitude pretribulation rapture view, provides a reasonable alternative to the traditional eschatological flow chart.

Admittedly, there are aspects of this eschatological paradigm shift which yet require further academic investigation. Most interesting are the implications concerning the interlude of the dragon’s war against the woman. If this interlude is now taken as chronologically forward looking, then what are we to make of this

⁶¹ Ibid., 901.

⁶² Patterson’s comparable list also includes the imminency of Christ’s return; but this is not an issue as he does not preclude precursor events, so long as specific timing is not defined. Patterson, *Revelation*, 41–45. Other pretribulationists, such as Benware, assert that imminency does not allow for precursor events. Benware, *Prophecy*, 226, 269. And yet, I assert that per the birth pains metaphor, the period of pain before the birth is not unexpected, but only the timing and suddenness of such; hence, the text’s emphasis on imminency should not be threatened by precursors (cf. 1 Thess 5:3).

child born to the woman—in the future—who is to rule (or shepherd) all the nations, per Revelation 12:5? How does this influence our understanding of the segment between Christ's arrival on Mount Zion in Revelation 14 and the appearance of the rider on the white horse in Revelation 19? Further, with this eschatological approach, is it possible to correlate additional events in the Olivet Discourse with the events of Revelation? These are all worthy of further study. More broadly though, perhaps this present exercise will encourage dispensationally-minded scholars to pursue further chronologically-oriented reassessments of other aspects of the Apocalypse.

Before we conclude I must ask, does any of this matter? From a pastoral perspective, does it matter if we teach that the pretribulational rapture occurs before the first seal or after the sixth seal? Does it matter if we teach that Daniel's 70th week begins with the first seal or with the appearance of the two witnesses, after the sixth trumpet? Certainly, it matters whether we are consistent with our belief, when teaching, that a literal hermeneutic is the most faithful approach to scripture. We must be able to explain how our approach to the interludes is consistent with such. And certainly, it matters whether we are consistent with our belief, when teaching, that there are separate programs for Israel and the Church, and that we can explain how Daniel's 70th week impacts each. And regardless of how the end times play out, let us recognize that it is all for the glory of God. But what about the divine expectation that we hear and keep what is written in the book of Revelation, per Revelation 1:3? In this passage, *keep* is best understood in the sense of "give heed to" or "observe," and anticipates the "book's frequent exhortations to repentance, faith, endurance, obedience, and the like."⁶³ Therefore, if we accept that the Church will go through the first six seals of Revelation 6, then we should be preparing our flocks to endure times of famine, war, and martyrdom, lest we allow our churches to repeat the failures and apostasy of the seven churches of Revelation 2–3.

Of course, for many Christians, famine, war, and martyrdom are their present reality. But the American church could readily benefit from a reminder that we may well face severe famine, war, and martyrdom in the years ahead and that we will yet need to remain steadfast in our repentance, faith, endurance, and obedience. Let us come to terms with the challenges which we may yet face in the days leading up to the great catching away (1 Thess 4:17).

⁶³ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 60.

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