The ‘Earth-Dwellers’ and the ‘Heaven-Dwellers’ in Revelation: An Overlooked Interpretive Key

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The “Earth Dwellers” and the “Heaven Dwellers”: An Overlooked Interpretive Key to the Apocalypse

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Research and publication on the Book of Revelation has escalated to a frenetic pace. In such a climate, in which, seemingly, every exegetical and theological nuance has been treated from virtually every conceivable angle, it would seem unlikely that any material of significance would be overlooked. However, as will be seen, careful study of two overlooked groups in the Apocalypse, to whom we will refer, shorthand, as the “earth dwellers” and the “heaven dwellers,” provides considerable insight in regard to both the exegesis and biblical theology of this challenging book. Further, building from the exegetical/biblical theology conclusions, it is possible to approach a systematic theological issue that is ever vexing to many evangelicals—the location of the Rapture in Revelation—from a largely fresh perspective.

This article will proceed through all the uses of the Revelation phraseology having to do, first, with the earth dwellers, then the heaven dwellers, in sequential order. A number of conclusions in the exegetical and biblical theology areas will be stated at that point. Then, the fruit of these studies will be mined for their implications in regard to the Rapture. Before concluding, as is necessary for thorough theological reflection on such a highly debated topic, several other relevant considerations and several anticipated objections to the resulting view will be discussed.

Tracking the “Earth Dwellers” through Revelation

It is, frankly, surprising that no more insightful study of the earth dwellers in the Apocalypse has been forthcoming. The virtually identical wording is used in 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 (twice); 13:8; 13:14 (twice); 17:2; and 17:8 (see table
made clear. In 17:8, their ultimate spiritual explanation for their behavior is stated: They have not been included "in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world." 10 Simply put, they are the nonelect. 11

There is a climactic "zinger" to be noted, however, in regard to what is expected of the earth dwellers and what actually takes place. When the anticipated ultimate avenging of the blood of the martyrs (6:10) is climactically proclaimed in heaven, the judgment is focused on "the great harlot" (19:2), Babylon the Great. This unexpected shift in focus requires plausible explanation.

It appears that one of two possibilities would have to be the case. Either: 1) The earth-dwellers are so closely identified with Babylon the Great behaviorally (17:2) that to judge Babylon is effectively to judge the earth-dwellers; or 2) given that the Bride of the Lamb, who is clearly compared with Babylon in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse, seems to serve as a corporate image for all believers (19:7), as well as the eternal new Jerusalem (21:2, 9-10), the nonelect earth dwellers may well have been incorporated into the broader image of Babylon the Great. 12

### Table 1: Tracking the “Earth-Dwellers” through Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse(s)</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5:10</td>
<td>Those &quot;the hour of testing&quot; (= Trib. Period) is designed to test: the earth-dwellers begin to die.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:9-11</td>
<td>Martyrs' prayer is answered with a little longer &quot;until the seven plagues fall on the earth-dwellers.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:12</td>
<td>&quot;Earth-dwellers&quot; worship the Beast because their names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:10</td>
<td>&quot;Earth-dwellers&quot; rejected at deaths of the two prophetic witnesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:8 (17:4)</td>
<td>&quot;Earth-dwellers&quot; drunk on the immorality of Babylon the Great.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19:2</td>
<td>The blood of God's bond-servants (6:9-11) is shed, Babylon the Great harlot is drunk with blood.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

#### Tracking the “Heaven Dwellers” through the Apocalypse

If the identity of the earth dwellers in Revelation has not been adequately studied, the heaven dwellers have been almost completely overlooked. The obvious reason for the lack of attention is that the specific terminology is only found in 12:12 and 13:6. As will be seen, though, there is more than sufficient evidence in the text to constitute that the group in question is a very significant presence in the Apocalypse (again, see the summary chart at the end of this section).

The first usage of the two terms is so general, it initially seems questionable as to whether there is even a specific group in mind: "O heaven and you who dwell in them" (12:12). In that regard, this wording is parallel to the
usage related to the earth-dwellers in 13:12: “The earth and those who dwell in it.” Both uses appear to emphasize the ultimate “citizenship” (Phil. 3:20) of each group and perhaps how large the numbers are in each group.

The second usage clarifies the existence of a particular group, though. Here, the beast is said to blaspheme God’s name “and His tabernacle, that is, those who dwell in heaven” (13:6, NASB). While it should be noted that while the “that is” in the NASB rendering is supplied as explanatory, it is almost certainly correct. These “heaven dwellers” are, somehow, also God’s tabernacle (Gk., ten skenen autou).

It should be noted that the verb “to dwell” employed in both 12:12 and 13:6 is skenoo, which is cognate with skene (“tabernacle”). As will be seen, this verb will supply the key clue that links the wording “heaven dwellers” to their wider identity in the Apocalypse.

At this point, it is necessary to begin to track the wording related to this “wider identity.” As it turns out, this terminology reaches back to the very beginning of the book. Interestingly, it is a group of which “John” (1:4), the human author of Revelation, is a part, as indicated by the repeated use of first-person plural pronouns in 1:5b-6a: “To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.” The phrase, “all the tribes of the earth” (1:7) will also prove significant.

Before proceeding further, one must note the group with whom John is identifying himself. It is “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4). In other words, the group released from their sins by Christ’s blood (1:5), whose destiny is royalty and priesthood (1:6), put simply and globally, is none other than the church of Jesus Christ.

The next usage of this “wider identity” wording is in Rev. 5:9-10. The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders sing a “new song” (5:8-9a), proclaiming the Lamb’s worthiness to open the seven-sealed scroll (5:1, 9b).27 In the following “song” are found three of the same elements seen above in 1:5-7: Christ’s “blood” (5:9); “every tribe” (5:9), which, in this case, is clearly referring to those redeemed by His blood; and that the redeemed are “a kingdom and priests” (5:10a) to God. In addition, a prediction is appended to the final element: “And they will reign upon the earth” (5:10b).

At this point, it seems fairly safe to conclude that the repeated reference to: 1) Christ’s redemptive blood; 2) the kingdom/priestly destiny of the group in question; and 3) their origin from “every tribe” of the earth, means that both Rev. 1:5-7 and 5:9-10 are talking about the same group, the church. However, though difficult to counter exegetically, it is anything but “safe” to point out that essentially the same three elements are found in 7:9, 14-15, and to draw the natural conclusion.

In 7:9, a “great multitude” (Gk., ochlos polus) is seen “standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” They are said to represent every tribe (7:9). In addition, they wear robes whitened “in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). Finally, they are involved in priestly service in the heavenly “temple” (7:15). Since there are essentially the same three elements seen in 1:5-6 and 5:9-10 as referring to the church, it would seem virtually certain that the same group is in view in 7:9, 14-15.

The theological ramifications of the church going to heaven at this point in the Apocalypse will be explored later in this study. However, in our pursuit of understanding who the heaven dwellers are in the Book of Revelation, it is crucial to note at this point that the Lord is said to “spread his tabernacle over them” (7:15).

This is the clue that clearly equates the new heaven-based church to the heaven dwellers. The characterization of the heaven dwellers as God’s “tabernacle” in 13:6 means that passage is talking of the “great multitude” (7:9) who have arrived in heaven and over whom God has spread his tabernacle (7:15). Yet, 12:12 and 13:6 are hardly the end of the portrayal of the heaven dwellers in the Book of Revelation. Three sequential “pictures” in chapter 19 begin to reveal the “transitional” reality of the church/great multitude becoming heaven dwellers.

The only other passage besides 7:9 in Revelation where “great multitude” (Gk., ochlos polus) is found is in 19:1, 6. If this is referring to the same group as in 7:9 (and there is no good exegetical reason not to think so), we now see the church/great multitude/tabernacle/heaven dwellers pictured as a heavenly choir, singing “hallelujahs” to God for judging Babylon the Great (19:1-3).

There is also strong evidence to conclude that the “bride” of the Lamb (19:7-9) and the armies on the white horses (19:14) following the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (19:16) at the Second Advent are complementary images of the same group. Both are wearing “fine linen” (19:8, 14). The heavenly army’s garments are said to be “white” (19:14), as are the robes of the great multitude (7:14).

In addition, any thought that the heavenly armies here refer to angels is ended by the description of the same group in the parallel passage in 17:14. In the climactic battle at the time of the Second Coming, the Lamb will be victorious, “And those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful” (17:14). As Thomas observes, “‘called,’ ‘elect,’ and ‘faithful’ can apply only to saints, not to angels.”

There are two other scenes in Revelation that should be mentioned that would include the church/great multitude/heaven dwellers. The first is the description of the one thousand years in 20:6. Those sitting on the thrones in 20:4 are further described as “priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years” (20:6). This is precisely the wording seen in 5:9-10, which indicates that all the aspects laid out in 1:5-7, 5:9-10, 7:9, and 14-15 have finally been fulfilled.

The last passage to consider regarding the heaven dwellers focuses on the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb (21:2, 9-10). If the image of the bride in 19:7-9 is brought across into the eternal state here, as it almost surely is, the bride in chapter 21 apparently includes both a people and a place. If that is
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correct, then the last relevant image seen from tracking the heaven dwellers through the Book of Revelation is a corporate one: people residing in, or operating within, a wider environment or location.

Table 2: Tracking the “Heaven-Dwellers” through Revelation

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Related to Christ through His blood as His “Royal Priest”</td>
<td>Purchased by the Lamb's blood, to come out of every nation and tribe (see 1:5-6)</td>
<td>Out of every nation and tribe into heaven (“Great Multitude”); preparing to be the bride of the Lamb (“bride”)</td>
<td>Those who “dwell” (“tabernacle”; Gk. skenoo) in heaven (12:12; see 7:15)</td>
<td>Returning with Christ as “armies” (“linen”)</td>
<td>Ruling with Christ as royal priests (see 1:5-6; 5:9-11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exegetical Conclusions and Immediate Implications

From the above study, it is possible to state concisely whom the earth dwellers and heaven dwellers are in the Apocalypse, as well as lay out some fairly clear implications that follow from their identification.

First, the earth dwellers are the non-elect (Rev. 17:8) who are held responsible for the deaths of believing martyrs (6:10) and upon whom the “hour of testing” is focused (3:10). Given the apparent corporate nature of the “heaven dwellers/bride/New Jerusalem” imagery, which is clearly in direct contrast with the “Babylon the Great” imagery in the latter part of Revelation, it seems likely that the earth dwellers become part of the corporate imagery of Babylon. This is particularly probable in light of the fact that Babylon ends up being judged (19:2) for precisely what was expected to bring judgment upon the earth dwellers (6:10).

Second, if the earth dwellers are those whose names are not written in the Lamb’s Book of Life (17:8), then apparently the heaven dwellers are those whose names are in the Book of Life. They are the church (1:4; 11; chapters 2-3), the great multitude taken to heaven (7:9ff.), God’s “tabernacle” (7:15; 13:6), a heavenly choir (19:1ff.), the bride of Christ (19:7-9), the Lamb’s armies at the Second Advent (17:14; 19:14), and those who will reign with Him for both the one thousand years (20:6) and eternally (21:2; 9-10).

Beyond these basic characteristics, though, are the wider implications from an eschatological standpoint. For example, the “hour of testing” is designed to test the earth dwellers (3:10). This period has apparently not begun by 6:10, since the judgment on the earth dwellers has not yet started at that point (thus, the point of the martyrs’ pleas for vengeance). However, with the stating of the “woes” in 8:13, it is clear that the hour of testing has, with the trumpet judgments, finally commenced.

The “Earth Dwellers” and the “Heaven Dwellers”: An Overlooked Interpretative Key to the Apocalypse

Intersecting these observations related to the earth-dwellers are important implications from the study of the heaven-dwellers. This group, initially seen as the church in 1:5-6 and 5:9-10, is a great multitude taken to heaven in 7:9, who are also identified as God’s tabernacle (7:15; 13:6), and, finally, the heaven dwellers (12:12; 13:6).

The transport of the great multitude/church to heaven (7:9ff.), located between the delay of the “hour of testing” (3:10) mentioned in 6:10 and its obvious onslaught by 8:13, seems to be the most exegetically clear candidate for the location of the Rapture of the church in the Apocalypse. If the hour of testing does not begin until Revelation 8, as strongly inferred by the above study, the Rapture taking place in 7:9 would still be “pretribulational,” even if it is a significantly reconfigured form of pretribulationism. The remainder of this article will test this thesis with theological reflection on relevant corroborating evidence and several apparent objections.

A Theological Postscript

Eight additional pieces of evidence appear to support the above reconfigured pretribulational understanding:

1) The “hour of testing” is designed to test the earth dwellers (3:10), and the promise to keep from the “hour of testing” appears to be exemption from that time period, whenever it begins. 21

2) The “hour of testing” (3:10) appears to be referring to the same period as the “great tribulation” (7:14). This understanding is supported by the parallel structure of the Greek in the two passages. “I will keep you from the hour of testing” (Gk., tereso ek tois horas tou peirasmou) is the promise, and “those who come out from the great tribulation” (Gk., hoi erchomenoi ek tois thileseos tes megales) is to be understood as the fulfillment of that promise. It would thus be expected that the Rapture, if pretribulational, would take place at the point of the promise’s fulfillment (Rev. 7:9ff.).

3) The nature of the “scroll” (Gk., biblion) in Revelation 5, and its unsealing, has major implications for the issue at hand. If the contents of the scroll are the end-times events (i.e., “the hour of testing” and beyond), and the scroll is not open for viewing until all seven seals have been removed, then the events of the so-called Tribulation period could not begin until the trumpet sequence in Revelation 8. Thus, a Rapture located in Rev. 7:9ff. would still be pretribulational.

4) There has been no compelling explanation offered for why the Lamb’s worthiness to open the scroll is tied to His redemption of a group that turns out to be the heaven dwellers (see the discussion above). It is at least worth considering that, in this context, one outworking of Christ’s “overcoming” (5:5) is to be able to remove the redeemed heaven dwellers from the horrific events included in the scroll (i.e., “the hour of testing”).
5) The unsealing sequence in Revelation 6 is parallel in much of its content to Matt. 24:4-13. Significantly, this section of the Olivet Discourse expressly states in regard to the seals mentioned, “[This is] not yet the end” (24:6), meaning, in this context, “The end of the age” (24:3). The image used is “the beginning of birth pains” (24:8), meaning that the so-called “false” or “early” labor has begun, but the birth is not yet imminent. As a result, Carson understands these signs of “the beginning of birth pains” as spanning “the period between the advents.” If there is a strong probability that such a conclusion is correct, in regard to the “beginning of birth pains” portion of the Olivet Discourse, it would also seem likely that the same is true for the very similar passage in Revelation, in which the seals are removed from the scroll. If Revelation 6 is speaking of “the period between the advents,” then the end-times “hour of testing”/tribulation period could not begin until the trumpets.

6) It is amazing how truncated the concept of “tribulation” in the New Testament is presented in typical discussions of its meaning. Though there are forty-three uses of the Greek word thlipsis in the New Testament, often rendered “tribulation,” but also “affliction” or “distress,” only five to seven of those instances are eschatological. The remaining uses have to do with suffering in the Christian life during the course of the church age (e.g., Acts 14:22).

The problem that exists here is that the focus on the handful of eschatological uses of thlipsis has tended to cause some evangelicals to think that there is no “tribulation” now, but “tribulation” and “great tribulation” at the end of the age. A more balanced and inclusive way of expressing the range of actual usage of thlipsis in the New Testament, however, would be to say that there is significant “tribulation” during the course of the age (as related by its occurrences in Rev. 1:9 and 2:9-10), but unparalleled “great tribulation” at the end of the age (as used in 7:14).

Assuming this balanced understanding of “tribulation,” there is no decisive problem with seeing the events under the unsealing sequence as prior to the “hour of testing,” which begins with the trumpets. The proposed relocated “pretribulational” understanding would thus be after the “tribulation”/affliction of the course of the church age, but prior to the unique eschatological Great Tribulation.

7) In 6:11, the martyrs under the heavenly altar are told to “rest for a little while longer” until the full number of the martyrs is completed, for the judgment of the earth dwellers to begin (6:10). Clearly, the judging has begun by 8:13, with the “woes” pronounced on the earth dwellers. Since the dead in Christ are clearly also involved in the Rapture of the church (1 Thess. 4:13-17), perhaps this wording also signals that the Rapture for the martyrs is imminent. That conclusion may be implied by the fact that Rev. 7:9ff. is the next location in Revelation where a large group of believers, presumably including the living and the dead, but certainly many martyrs, appears in heaven. In addition, both the martyrs (6:11) and the great multitude (7:9, 13, 14) are wearing “white robes.” Is it merely coincidence that these are the only two passages in the Apocalypse where the exact wording “white robes” is used? If not, the physical bodies of the martyrs in the fifth seal (6:9-11) have apparently been a part of the Rapture of the great multitude (in 7:9ff.).

8) There is a kind of literary “eye of the hurricane” in Rev. 7:1-8:1. Following the strong cosmic effects under the sixth seal (6:12-17) and prior to the beginning of the trumpets sequence in 8:6ff., there is a global “calm” in 7:1-3 and a half hour of silence in heaven, when the seventh seal is lifted in 8:1. This “bookends” (or inclusio) structuring seems to cordon off chapter 7, the so-called first interlude of the Apocalypse, setting it off as somehow unique within the book. Certainly, chapter 7 also serves the purpose of answering the concluding question in 6:17. In the face of the Day of the Wrath of God and the Lamb, “Who is able to stand” (Gk., statheinai)? The four angels are “standing” (Gk. estotai) to hold back the four winds, until the 144,000 on the earth are sealed (7:1-3) and the “great multitude,” who are raptured to heaven, are seen “standing” (Gk. estotai) before the heavenly throne. In other words, the great multitude does not have to stand on the earth during the Day of the Lord because the Lord has removed them to stand before Him in heaven.

From a “big picture” theological perspective, it is odd how seldom a very logical question gets asked: “Based on other relevant New Testament passages, what passage in Revelation most readily resembles what the Rapture might be expected to look like?” For example, 1 Thess. 4:13-17 envisions a mixed group of living and dead. None of the proposed Rapture locations in Revelation besides 7:9-17 include conscious wording that so easily accommodates both, “Robes” are worn by both the dead (6:11) and the living (22:14) in Revelation. In addition, the focal statement of the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19-20 envisions a massive throng of disciples from “all the nations” by the “end of the age.” Is it sheer coincidence that Rev. 7:9 pictures as having arrived from earth “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation”? It is tempting to muse, “If it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, and it talks like a duck . . .”

In any event, suffice it to say that Rev. 7:9ff. looks much more like what the Rapture would be expected to, if we did not have the Book of Revelation. So, from a commonsense standpoint, since we do have the Apocalypse, is it really even-handed to discount, or ignore, the passage that looks more like a full-blown Rapture than any of its rival locations?

As can be seen, beyond the broad brushstrokes of this reconfigured pretribulationalism provided by the study of the earth dwellers and the heaven-dwellers in the Apocalypse, these nine pieces of evidence serve to: 1) clarify the position, both in its context in revelation and against the backdrop of the theology of the wider New Testament; and 2) broaden and deepen the exegetical and theological plausibility of the position, as significant data favoring it begins to stack up.
However, there is also evidence which at least appears to be contradictory, which must be carefully considered, if the plausibility of this fresh shape of pretribulationalism is to be sustained.\textsuperscript{24} Certainly, it is to be expected that objections will be raised on the basis of assumptions or doctrinal commitments. Beyond that, the writers are currently aware of six exegetical or theological factors that could constitute difficulties for the reshaped pretribulational position. The following discussion will briefly lay out these areas, along with what are believed to be viable answers to each (though further discussion is anticipated in regard to several, if not all, of them):

1) The “preview outline” of Revelation unpacked from 1:19 is often assumed to require that the Tribulation period starts with 4:1, which would place a Rapture in 7:9ff. somewhere in the middle of the Tribulation. The problem with that view is that the wording in 1:19 does not at all require that understanding. All it says is “the things which shall take place after these things,” which does not necessarily mean anything more than events somehow subsequent to the events of the present time. Now, clearly the part of the structure of Revelation that corresponds with this wording in 1:19 does begin in 4:1 (likely signaled by the presence of “after these things” twice). However, it makes no sense for a time period on earth (the “hour of testing” which is “to come upon the whole world”[3:10]) to begin with two chapters (Revelation 4–5) focused on heaven. Thus, at the earliest, the Tribulation could begin with Revelation 6. However, if (as argued above) the scroll in Revelation 5 contains the end-times events, and it cannot be opened for viewing/the outworking of those events until all seven seals are removed, then the Tribulation could not begin until the trumpets in Revelation 8.

2) The meaning of “keep from” (Gk. tereo ek) in Rev. 3:10 has often been tied to the Johannine partial parallel in John 17:15b, where tereo ek is also found: “keep them from the evil one.”\textsuperscript{30} The argument has been that, since Christ does not ask the Father to remove believers from “out of the world” (17:15a) in His high priestly prayer, but to “keep from” in the sense of protection within the world (a non-pretribulational understanding), neither would Rev. 3:10 mean removal from the world. Unfortunately, this is an “apples and oranges” comparison. John 17:15 is speaking of keeping from a person (i.e., the “evil one” [Satan]) or an influence (“evil”), while Rev. 3:10 is referring to a time period (the “hour of testing”). And, while it is no more decisive than John 17:15, to be even-handed, the implications of the partially parallel wording in John 12:27\textsuperscript{30} should at least be brought into the discussion: “save . . . from [Gk. soso ek] this hour.” Now, obviously, the word in 12:27 is “save” (Gk. sozo), not “keep” (Gk. tereo), as it is in 17:15 and Rev. 3:10. However, in John 12:27, it is a time period that is in view (“this hour”). Thus, the meaning is, apparently, that the Lord Jesus was wrestling with asking to be spared from not just the Cross, but the entire time frame in which the crucifixion and other surrounding events were to take place. Therefore, if the partial parallel is John 12:27 is equally relevant with the partial parallel in John 17:15, neither settles the question of whether or not the use of tereo ek in Rev. 3:10 supports a pretribulational understanding or not.

3) The strength of the effects related to the lifting of the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12–17) are so strong that it is very often concluded that the Tribulation period, including the Day of the Lord (6:17), must have begun. However, when the description of the cosmic effects are studied, it is quickly realized that they are echoing the wording from Joel 2:30–31: “And I will display wonders in the sky above and on the earth, blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, Before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.”\textsuperscript{31} The key word to notice here is before. These incredible cosmic signs are clearly stated to occur prior to the beginning of the Day of the Lord. In other words, as strong as the effects are, they are still part of a preliminary sequence.\textsuperscript{32} That would mean that the Day of the Lord/Tribulation does not begin until the trumpets (Revelation 8) and a Rapture prior to the beginning of the trumpets would still be pretribulational.

4) The aorist of erchomai (“to come”; Gk. elthen) in Rev. 6:17 is usually rendered by a past tense: “The great day of their wrath has come” (italics added). That translation implies that the Day of the Lord, of which “the day of wrath” is an interchangeable descriptor (e.g., Zeph. 1:15), has already begun at this point. However, Joel 2:30–31 (see above) disabuses the reader of that notion. In addition, a significant parallel use of elthen in a similar apocalyptic context in Jude 14 reveals that this form can have proleptic force. Though NASB attempts to be literal in rendering “Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones,” it is highly unlikely that the prophecy here has yet been fulfilled. The NIV’s “is coming” (i.e., at His Second Advent) is to be preferred. Thus, given the contextual clarification provided by Joel 2:30–31, it seems best to also translate Rev. 6:17 “is coming,” which would infer that the Day of the Lord does not begin until the trumpets and removes any tension with the reconfigured pretribulational view.

5) The use of the present participle hoi erchomenoi in Rev. 7:14 has been taken to mean that the “great multitude” has been coming out of the “great tribulation” over an extended period, which would rule out the idea of a Rapture in a moment in time. While such an understanding of the force of the present participle is definitely possible, it is at least as likely that the form hoi erchomenoi is a nominative absolute, and should be rendered “those who come.”\textsuperscript{33} If the nominative absolute here is a viable understanding, there is no problem for the fresh pretribulational understanding presented in this article.

6) In pretribulational circles, the understanding usually called “any-moment imminency” is often assumed, or appealed to, by saying something like, “There are no prophecies that have to be fulfilled before the Rapture.” If “any-moment imminency” could be proven to be correct, then the reconfigured pretribulational understanding could not be valid, given that the seals are seen as taking place during the course of this age. However, for this maximized understanding of imminency to be correct, it would have to be true from the first
interestingly, that passage in James mixes the call for patience, including the illus­
time imminency was taught in the New Testament, probably James 5:8-9.\footnote{34} As a result, whatever the sense of urgency in the “imminency” in James 5, it is not “any moment.” In addition, any-moment imminency also founders when it is realized that there are numerous intervening prophecies in the New Testament that had to take place before the Rapture. For just a couple of examples: 1) Paul had to witness at Rome (Acts 23:11) before the Rapture; and 2) The city of Jerusalem and the Temple had to be destroyed in A.D. 70 (Matt. 24:2) before the Rapture. Even in the Book of Revelation itself, some of the believers in the church at Smyrna had to suffer “tribulation” for “ten days” (2:10) before the Rapture. Now, admittedly, “ten days” is not a very long period of time. But, if even “ten days” had to intervene, the Rapture could not have taken place at ‘any moment.’ Therefore, if any-moment imminency is not a viable view, then the moderated understanding of imminency of the revised pretribulational view is not problematic.

III. Conclusion

In closing, it is freely admitted that the above study is much closer to a first word than a last word. Still, one needs to say here that the exegetical study of the earth dwellers and the heaven dwellers, as well as each of the nine pieces of evidence, carries its own logical or theological weight in regard to the question at hand. Even if one or more is debunked or discounted, the individual and cumulative weight of the remaining arguments and answers to likely objections does not just go away. That being the case, this revision of the pretribulational understanding of the Rapture (visualized below, in contrast to charts picturing the standard pretribulational and prewrath views), identifying it as the “great multitude” going to heaven in Rev. 7:9, with the “hour of testing” (i.e., Tribulation period) not beginning until the trumpets sequence, is offered to the evangelical community for what is hoped to be a process of thoughtful and productive exegetical and theological consideration and interaction.\footnote{35}

Table 3: Standard Pretribulational Position in Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rapture (Rev. 4:1)</th>
<th>Second Coming (Rev. 19:11-21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rev 1-3 (Any Moment Imminency)</td>
<td>7-Year Tribulation Period = Great Tribulation = Last 3 1/2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel’s 70th Week (Rev. 6-10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Worth of God and Day of the Lord, often underemphasized)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Prewrath Rapture Position in Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rapture (Rev. 7:9-17)</th>
<th>Second Coming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rev. 1-3 (Adjusted Imminency)</td>
<td>Tribulation Period = 20 Week = Tribulation Period = Rev. 8-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Birth Pains (Mt. 24:6) = Birth Pains (Mt. 24:6) =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and occur before</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and occur before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daniel’s 70th week (nature of scroll, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of 70 Week: Times of Gentiles (1:20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Witnesses (11:3) Reign of “Beast”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11:17, 12:5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day of the Worth of the Lamb/Day of the Lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focused Wrath of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day of the Lord and Wrath of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Restricted to Undefined Portion Of Last 3 1/2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Last 3 1/2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Last 3 1/2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day of the Lord and Wrath of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,290 Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,335 Days</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kingdom</td>
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<td>Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Millennium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Millennium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Exegetically Refined Pretribulational Position in Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rapture (Rev. 7:9-17)</th>
<th>Second Coming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rev. 1-3</td>
<td>Tribulation Period = Rev. 8-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second Coming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Millennium Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

\footnote{1}Copyright 2003 A. Boyd Luter and Emily K. Hunter.

\footnote{2}For example, less than a decade ago, it was relatively rare for a major commentary on Revelation in English to appear. But, the past five years have seen, e.g., David E. Aune, Revelation, 3 vols., WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, 1998); G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Craig S. Keener, Revelation, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); Simon J. Kistemaker, Revelation, NTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001); and most recently, Grant R. Osborne, Revelation, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002). This does not even begin to reflect the avalanche of articles and monographs on the Apocalypse.

\footnote{3}The Greek in Rev. 14:6, kathemenous epi tes ges, is better translated as either “those who sit on the earth” or “those who live on the earth.” At first glance, this may seem to be a fine distinction with “those who dwell on the earth,” but it appears to be a meaningful distinction, nevertheless. Apparently, those who “sit” on the earth (14:6) are intended to resemble the “earth dwellers” initially and externally, but then be able to positively respond to the preaching of the “eternal gospel” (14:6), something, as will be seen, the “earth dwellers” cannot do.

\footnote{4}This is an acceptable paraphrased rendering of katoikountas epi tes ges, which will be used throughout this presentation.

\footnote{5}It is difficult to know whether such a request made by those already in heaven (6:9) should be understood as a “prayer.”

\footnote{6}For a succinct discussion of the role of the martyrs in the Book of Revelation by one of the present writers, see A. Boyd Luter, “Martyrdom,” in the Dictionary of the
It is also worth mentioning that, not only is this the first mention of the beast in the book, it is the beginning of the awe-struck attitude of the earth dwellers toward the beast, which rapidly propagates to worship in Revelation 13, following the resurrection of the beast from his fatal wound (13:2, 12, 14).

This conclusion follows, given that the unrivaled reign of the beast for "forty-two months" (Rev. 13:5) would seemingly have to occur after the period of unrivaled testimony of the two witnesses (11:3-6), followed by their deaths, resurrections, and ascents to heaven (11:7-12), apparently soon followed by the beast’s own death and resurrection (13:3, 12, 14).

If it was not noted from the reasoning related to, and in, footnote 8, the three and a half years of the ministry of the two witnesses ("1,260 days"; Rev. 11:3) followed by the three and a half years of the reign of the Beast ("forty-two months"; 13:5) equals seven years as the total length of “the hour of trial” (3:10).

Though the NASB also renders Rev. 13:8 to the same effect as 17:8, the order of the Greek wording seems to indicate a focus on the predestined work of Christ instead (Lit., "the Lamb who has been slain from the beginning of the world"); Gk. tou arniou tou esphagma ou apo kata bolas kosmou).

Open Heist Greg Boyd has recently attempted to minimize the full force of this point by arguing in regard to this passage: “The names of the faithful have been in the process of being recorded since the foundation of the world” (Rev. 17:8). See his Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 106.

Being included in the corporate aspect of Babylon the Great would not exclude the individual angle, since it is as those who names were not recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life (17:8) that they are judged eternally and thrown into the lake of fire (20:12-15).

At this early point in the Apocalypse, it is not yet clear exegetically that the phrase “all the tribes of the earth” (1:7) has any direct relation to John and the churches in 1:5-6. As will be seen, though, this usage in 1:7 is the beginning of extensive rotating wording depicting the world’s population in 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, and 17:15.

It is intriguing to ponder why the Lamb’s redemptive work on the behalf of the church could be the sole stated factor of “worthiness” for opening the scroll stated here. Though not said in so many words, it is a reasonable inference that, if the contents of the scroll are the end-times events, then the Lamb’s shed blood sets aside the redeemed for ruling and priestly service (5:10), sparing them from the events recorded in the scroll.

It appears that the “kingdom” angle in 1:6 and 5:10 is delayed in its fulfillment until this group reigns upon the earth (20:6; see 5:10).

The beginning of Revelation 19 was, of course, the specific scriptural inspiration for the “Hallelujah Chorus” in Handel’s Messiah.

The reason for the reversal of wording from “Lord of Lords and King of Kings” in 17:14 to “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” in 19:14 is not obvious. However, it is a plausible explanation that the reversal in 19:14 would call attention back to 17:14, where the wording “called” and “chosen” and “faithful” would explain clearly the identity of the armies in 19:14.

Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 303. Among recent evangelical commentaries, this view is shared by, e.g., J. Ramsey Michaels, Revelation, IVPNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 199; and Simon J. Kistemaker, Revelation, 476.


A recent in-depth rethinking of the location of the Rapture in Revelation is Michael J. Svigel, “The Apocalypse of John and the Rapture of the Church: A Reevaluation,” Trans NS 22 (2001): 23-74. It should be noted that Svigel steers clear of the closely related issue of the timing of the Rapture. Two other observations on Svigel’s study should be stated here: 1) For the most part, Svigel has done a fine job of demonstrating the weakness of the various proposed locations of the Rapture to this point, though his own proposal of Rev. 12:5 does not appear to be notably stronger; and 2) though Svigel does discuss Rev. 7:9-17 (the conclusion reached inductively in this article), he treats only the standard surface arguments and handles virtually none of the fresh considerations in this article.

This understanding may also be corroborated by an implication from reversed distinctive wording in the letters to the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia. In 2:9, we read of “those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” In 3:9, the order of the phrases is flipped: “The synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews but are not.” This clear chiastic effect may be intended to contrast the short term “tribulation” (2:9, 10) of the church at Smyrna with the promise of exemption from the long-term “hour of testing” (3:10) to the church at Philadelphia.

See the helpful discussion of G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation, 342-44. Though Beale seems to give a slight edge to the codex format, probably due to the fact that it fits better with his recapitulationist scheme, he does imply that the scroll imagery fits the Danielic influence on the Apocalypse. Two commentaries that champion the view that the biblion is a scroll, and fairly consistently trace out the implications of that understanding, are Alan F. Johnson, Revelation, in the Expositor’s Bible Commentary, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981) 12: 465-67; and Kendell H. Easley, Revelation, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 90-92.


It is fairly likely that the reference to silence in heaven here is alluding to Zeph. 1:7: “Be silent before the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is near. . . .” If so, it is yet another piece of evidence that the end-times events of the Day of the Lord/hour of testing (3:10) do not begin until the trumpets.

For example, the Rev. 4:1-2 location has only John (the living) going to heaven; 5:9-10 simply says nothing about going to heaven at all; 11:12 has the two (formerly dead) witnesses going to heaven; 12:5 has only the (living) Son/Ruler (or, if we are to assume the unstated death and resurrection of Christ, the formerly dead) going to
heaven; and 15:2 has only martyrs going to heaven (see 12:12). The other reasonably plausible options have an even less-definite description: Between chapters 3 and 4 is an argument from silence; 14:14ff. is a “harvest,” with no clarification; and 19:11ff. refers to descending from heaven (in the Second Coming), but there is nothing about any group, living or dead, ascending to meet the Lord.


28Since the view developed in this article is essentially new, these potential problem areas have not been raised by other exegetes or theologians. Recent problems with locating the Rapture in Rev. 7:9ff. revolve around the per locution in the Rapture position, which argues its case very differently than the view arrived at in this presentation (see, e.g., Marvin Rosenthal, The Prewrath Rapture of the Church [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990]; or Robert Van Kampen, The Sign [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993]), to a large degree, do not apply. Rather, the reason for raising these problems at this point is to be as comprehensive, balanced, and evenhanded as possible in a relatively succinct introductory study of this sort. The strongest position is the one that best accounts for all the relevant evidence. So, rather than lay out only the positive evidence, it is more helpful to also face the areas of possible tension and attempt to offer a viable explanation. The authors, however, are under no illusion that the explanations provided will be viewed as definitive.

29The alternate translation is, “Keep them from evil.”

30See the helpful discussion in Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 1-7 An Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 287-88.

31The Apostle Peter cites this passage on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:16-21, noting the partial fulfillment of the signs (2:17-18) and effectively urging his hearers to call on the name of the Lord and be saved before the cosmic signs were revealed and “the great and awesome Day of the Lord” came (2:19-21).

32Admittedly, there are those who equate the Day of the Lord with the second half of the Tribulation period. However, though the climactic events of the Day of the Lord may occur near the Second Coming of Christ (e.g., Armageddon is called “the great day of God, the Almighty” [Rev. 16:14], very similar to the anticipated “great day of their wrath [i.e., of God and the Lamb; 6:16-17]), there is no compelling exegetical reason to conclude that the Day of the Lord is, necessarily, limited to the latter part of the Tribulation period (at least no more than localizing the Great Tribulation to the last half of the Tribulation).


34The dating for James assumed here is the mid-40s A.D., an increasingly common view among evangelicals.