

REVELATION 5 AND THE RAPTURE

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

The pre-trib rapture teaching was introduced by Jesus in John 14:1–3 and is primarily taught in the Pauline Epistles; however, since it is true and part of God's plan, then one would expect the Book of Revelation to reflect this view. I believe Revelation does provide evidence that pretribulationism is presumed to be true and part of God's plan for the Church. In this article I will be stating some of reasons why Revelation reflects a pre-trib scenario and then I will examine more closely the evidence in Revelation 5 for pretribulationism.

THE CHURCH'S ABSENCE DURING THE TRIBULATION ON EARTH

The points I am making about Revelation and the pre-trib rapture are not proofs for the view; instead, they are observations from Revelation that I believe presupposes pretribulationism. In other words, if pretribulationism were true one would expect the church to not be depicted on earth in chapters 4 through 19, the section in Revelation covering the 70th week of Daniel. The church is referenced in chapters 4 through 19 but always in heaven, which is what one would expect if pretribulationism were true.

The first thing to notice is when the words "church" or "churches" is used and not used in Revelation. Robert Gromacki observes: "The singular "church" and the plural "churches" together occur 19 times in the first three chapters (1:4, 11, 20 [twice]; 2:1, 7, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19; 3:1, 6, 7, 13, 14, 22). . . . However, there is a strange silence of the term in chapters 4—19. . . . The church is not mentioned during the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments because the church is not here during the outpouring of these judgments."¹ The church is in heaven during this period of time. Furthermore, the church is mentioned again in Revelation 22:16 in the closing section of the book. This is what would be expected if pretribulationism were true.

While there are multitudes of believers depicted as alive and on earth during the tribulation, none of those believers (we call them "tribulation saints") are ever labeled with language that identifies them as members of the church, the Body of Christ. (The Church began on the Day of Pentecost and ends with the rapture.)

Another example of the church's absence during the tribulation is found in the fact that at the end of each epistle to the seven church in Revelation 2 and 3 the phrase "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). In Revelation 11:9 says, "If anyone has an ear, let him hear." It is significant that the phrase is the same exact one found seven times in chapters 2 and 3, however, in this instance when it occurs during the tribulation the phrase "what the Spirit says to the churches" is not included. Why? The best explanation is because the church is already in heaven and not on earth during the tribulation. The passage speaks to tribulation saints. This is what one would expect if pretribulationism were true.

THE CHURCH'S PRESENCE DURING THE TRIBULATION IN HEAVEN

The section in Revelation that covers the tribulation period (Rev. 4—19) begins with John being called up to heaven: "After these things I looked, and behold, a door *standing* open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like *the sound* of a trumpet speaking with me, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things'" (Rev. 4:1). The phrase "Come up here" is the same one used of the Two Witnesses when they are taken to heaven (Rev. 11:12). John, as a

representative of the church is taken to heaven to view the events of the tribulation from heaven, since that will be the perspective of the church during the tribulation. Once again, this is not a proof for pretribulationism, but it does reflect a pretribulationist presupposition.

I believe it can be demonstrated that the twenty-four elders in Revelation represent the completed church in heaven.² Gromacki says concerning the twenty-four elders: “they represent a group of redeemed people. Who are these people? Since the believers within the Old Testament period will not be resurrected until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth (Dan. 12:1–3; Rev. 20:4–6), the elders more likely represent the redeemed of the church.”³ This is another indicator that the completed church is in heaven during the tribulation.

Another indication that the completed church is in heaven during the tribulation is found in Revelation 19 in the fact that the Bride of Christ (the Church) has experienced the bema seat judgment and is prepared to return with Christ at the second coming. “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright *and* clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev. 19:7–8). How did the completed church get to heaven in order to return with Christ at the second coming? This status would presuppose a pre-trib rapture.

REVELATION 5 AND THE RAPTURE

We have already seen that identifying the twenty-four elders as representing the church in heaven supports pretribulationism. There is further support in Revelation 5 for pretribulationism as found in the song of redemption sung by the twenty-four elders (Rev. 5:9). David Hocking frames the issue:

The issue is critical to the argument—are the 24 elders singing a song of redemption about themselves or about others who would be redeemed during the Tribulation? It appears that the evidence is overwhelming and that the King James translation is the correct one of Revelation 5:9.⁴

The King James reads as follows:

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed US to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made US unto OUR God kings and priests: and WE shall reign on the earth.

This is an issue that is driven by two different readings in the Greek manuscripts. On the one hand, there is only one Greek manuscript (Codex Alexandrinus, 5th century) that omits “us” in verse 9. On the other hand, many Greek texts support the “us” in verse 9. So why do almost all modern translations of the last fifty years leave the “us” out of their translations? It is because the newer translations use a Greek text that favors the wrong reading in the Greek manuscripts. Actually, older manuscripts read “us” in the Greek text. G. K. Beale notes that there is overwhelming evidence supporting the inclusion of “us” in the text. Beale thinks “there is the possibility that the scribe of codex A accidentally dropped the ‘us’ when he went from the bottom of one column of the page to begin writing at the top of the next column.”⁵ This would be

a likely explanation as to why only one ancient Greek manuscript excludes the word “us” in verse 9.

The reason given by many recent textual scholars as to why they do not think the original Greek text should include “us” is because they say it causes the passage to be confusing even though they admit the objective textual evidence favors including the “us” reading.⁶ Greek scholar John Niemela has come up with what I believe is by far the best solution to this issue. Niemela argues that Revelation 5:9 and 10 is an antiphonal arrangement with the twenty-four elders singing verse 9 while the Living Creatures respond in verse 10.⁷ The narrative would go something like the following:

“And they sang a new song, saying, (“they” include both angels—the four living creatures—and redeemed humans—the twenty-four elders”).

The twenty-four elders sing:

*“You have redeemed **us** to God out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.”*

The four living creatures respond:

*“You have made **them** kings and priests to our God. **They** shall reign on the earth.”*

Niemela notes the implications of Revelation 5:9–10 now renders the following connotations in relation to the rapture and the tribulation:

With this understanding, the passage teaches the following eschatological sequence:

1. Rapture: Revelation 4:1,
2. The Bema (after 4:1, but before the twenty-four are called elders: 4:4),
3. Singing about the declaration at the Bema that the elders will rule as kings (5:10),
4. Christ opens the first seal (6:1).

Revelation 5:9–10 is a wonderful demonstration that the rapture precedes Daniel’s seventieth week. The twenty-four elders will be rewardable church-age believers, who will reign as kings and priests in the Millennium.⁸

CONCLUSION

We have seen that our Lord’s presentation of future events in the book of Revelation pictures the church in heaven during the seven-year tribulation period. This is what one expects if Jesus and the Epistles had already taught a pre-trib rapture. Thus, like a seamless garment, the New Testament can be properly understood from a pretribulational perspective. Maranatha!

⁶ Robert Gromacki, “Where is ‘the Church’ in Revelation 4–19?” in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today’s Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 355.

⁷ See the following article where I prove that the twenty-four elders represent the church <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-WhoArethe24EldersinR.pdf>.

⁸ Gromacki, “Where is ‘the Church,’” p. 361.

⁹ David Hocking, “The Rapture in Revelation,” A paper presented at the December 2011 Pre-Trib Study Group Conference, p. 8.

⁵ G. K Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 360.

⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies; Greek New Testament (Third Edition)*, (New York: United Bible Societies), 1971), p. 738.

⁷ Anyone interested in reading a more extensive defense of this view can access the paper at the following: John Niemela, "Revelation 5, The Twenty-four Elders, and the Rapture" a paper presented at the 2007 Pre-Trib Study Group Conference, <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Niemela-Revelation5TheTwenty.pdf>.

⁸ Niemela, "Revelation 5," p. 14.