

THE
DANGERS
OF PRE-TRIBULATIONISM

**A SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSIS TO
WHEN WILL THE MESSIAH RETURN?**

J.K. MCKEE



THE DANGERS OF PRE-TRIBULATIONISM

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Published by TNN Press, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries

1492 Regal Court

Kissimmee, Florida 34744

(407) 933-2002

www.tnnonline.net/tnnpress

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, The Lockman Foundation.

Printed in the United States of America

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ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

Special terms unique to this publication that may be used have been provided in the following chart:

ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*

Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament

ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)

b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)

B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.

BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)

BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*

C.E.: Common Era or A.D.

CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)

CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*

CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)

EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*

ESV: English Standard Version (2001)

GNT: Greek New Testament

Grk: Greek

HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)

Heb: Hebrew

HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2001)

IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*

ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

IVP: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*

KJV: King James Version

LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)

LS: *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Lidell & Scott)

LXE: Brenton's English translation of the Septuagint

LXX: Septuagint

m. Mishnah

MT: Masoretic Text

NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)

NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)

NEB: New English Bible (1970)

Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*

NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*

NIV: New International Version (1984)

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)

NKJV: New King James Version (1982)

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)

NLT: New Living Translation (1996)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament

Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition

v(s). verse(s)

Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*

Vul: Latin Vulgate

WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*

YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

INTRODUCTION

The report you are about to examine has been composed to address some serious doctrinal problems among Believers today. Many are of the position that any moment, perhaps in the next sixty seconds, Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) can come and rapture us all to Heaven prior to the Tribulation period. This belief, known as the pre-tribulation rapture, is extremely popular among those of our generation.

All too often, those who do not agree with pre-tribulationism can be, at the very least, branded as being misguided. However, in some circles, such people can be considered heretics, denying one of the (*supposed*) principal beliefs of Biblical faith. It is imperative that while we recognize that one's position on the timing of the return of the Lord is **not** a salvation issue, those of us not holding to pre-tribulationism must address why we believe it is flawed. We must answer the claims made in support of the pre-tribulation rapture from Scripture in a fair and reasoned manner that pre-tribulationists often do not demonstrate toward post-tribulationists.

My personal testimony of not believing in the pre-tribulation rapture is somewhat unique. I attended a fundamentalist Southern Baptist elementary school in my early years, so when the subject of the end-times came up, we were simply taught to believe in the pre-tribulation rapture. Any deviation from this belief (or even from the King James Version) was considered dangerous, or perhaps even cultish. This may have been the exception, as in many denominations and churches the end-times would not be considered that important, but it was my experience.

The end-times were always exciting to me, and I always wondered why I felt a deep fascination with the prophetic Scriptures, especially since we were not supposed to be here during the Tribulation but be raptured up to Heaven. Several years later when I entered into high school, I was exposed to alternative views that I had never heard before, and I began to question whether or not the pre-tribulation rapture had the validity that many gave to it. My salvation experience in 1995 had led me to conclude that since God was powerful enough to deliver me from all the sin and the demonic forces that had been influencing me, certainly He could protect us through the prophesied Tribulation period.

As a new Believer I began a process of reading through one chapter of the Gospels every morning. I started with the Gospel of Matthew, and was enriched by being able to sit down and meditate on the text. Within the first month of doing this I got to Matthew 24, the Messiah's Olivet Discourse on the Last Days. The verses that caught my attention in a morning quiet time were Matthew 24:29-31:

“Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (NIV).

Having read that Yeshua (Jesus) would gather the saints “after the distress of those days” in the NIV, I started comparing this text with some other Bible versions that I had convenient. I had been

accustomed to using the King James Version in elementary school, and it confirmed my suspicions, saying that the Messiah returned “Immediately after the tribulation of those days.”

This was the first time I had ever really examined what the Scriptures told me about the timing of “the rapture.” I had never known that our Lord Himself plainly said He was going to gather the saints after the Tribulation, and not before it as I had been taught. I began to get my hands on as much information pertaining to “the rapture debate” that a 14-year old could find. Two books that really helped me formulate some early opinions were George Eldon Ladd’s *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) and *The Church and the Tribulation* by Robert H. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973). Both of these works are considered “classics” in this debate, representing historical post-tribulationism. I also consulted some popular pre-tribulationist works, as the *Left Behind* series of prophecy novels was just starting to be released. While I was intrigued by the debate between pre- and post-tribulationists, I found myself moving more and more toward the post-tribulationist position. I was eager to discuss it with people I knew.

When I shared my newly found convictions with my peers, most rejected it. Many told me that they could not believe that God would ever make them go through the Tribulation, especially as they were planning to get married, have children, and start careers. God, in their words, would never “ruin their plans.” God would never make them experience the horrors of the Last Days, including the possibility of being martyred for the faith. To them, the Lord would simply return unexpectedly to take them to Heaven for a big “surprise party.” I was very shocked by these attitudes, because one with true faith in God would expect Him to provide total protection and guidance through whatever hardships life has to offer. ***True Biblical faith is not about “fun and games” at all.*** True commitment to the Lord requires sacrifices, and the Second Coming of Yeshua the Messiah is by no means a “surprise party.”

I found the attitudes of my peers to be unacceptable. Most of their words were simply immature and indicative of those who lacked life experience, but perhaps among a few they were words of outright rebellion toward God. The responses I received as I was “entertaining” post-tribulationism were disconcerting and very disturbing. This escapist, “partying” attitude from the “next generation” of Christians was one of the reasons that finally pushed me over the edge to renouncing a belief in the pre-tribulation rapture. It was also at this same time that my family was investigating a local Messianic Jewish congregation. In 1996, we fully entered into the Messianic movement, and for me personally, becoming Messianic is very closely connected with me becoming a post-tribulationist. As my sister Jane will now jokingly observe, “Being Messianic and a pre-tribulationist is a contradiction in terms. It will cause someone to spontaneously combust!”

My life’s testimony has been one where God continually has “ruined,” or more appropriately has altered, my personal plans. I would certainly not be writing this unless the Lord has put me through some trials and tribulations that have been influential in molding me as a person and have given me the strong faith that I have. In 1992, my father Kimball McKee died of melanoma, a deadly form of skin cancer that he had for only five months. In 1994, my mother was remarried and I was transplanted from my home of 14 years in the Northern Kentucky/Greater Cincinnati area to Dallas, Texas. Between 1994 and 1997 I attended four schools, because we moved around in the Dallas area. In 1998, our family lived in the Bay Islands of Honduras for eight months to assist with a missionary endeavor. While there we experienced the deadly Hurricane Mitch. This is only a short list of various trials that I have endured in my short time here on Earth, and anyone who has been in full time ministry can tell you that trials and challenges *inevitably come with the job*.

I cannot agree with the assessment that God would not put us into difficult circumstances, including the Tribulation period. The Prophet Isaiah says, “when Your judgments are wrought on

earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. But when the scoundrel is spared, he learns not righteousness” (Isaiah 26:9-10, NJPS). Through trials, we learn what the righteousness and holiness of God are all about, and we get to realize how much we need to rely on Him and be separated from the sinful world around us. Many of the First Century Believers in Yeshua the Messiah experienced persecutions, distresses, and even martyrdom. They endured trials that we cannot hope to imagine. Who are we to think that we are better than they? Who are we to think that we are better than those who walked and talked with Yeshua or His original Disciples? What gives us the right to be so presumptuous?

As editor of the Biblical news website TNN Online (www.tnnonline.net), an endeavor started in 1997, I am continually facing trials. This website today addresses a substantial amount of controversial views that I receive criticism for—much of it being unfair and unwarranted criticism. Some of this criticism comes from those in the Christian community, and some of it actually comes from those in the very Messianic community I serve. As if that were not enough, my college experience at the University of Oklahoma from 1999-2003 had its fair share of negativity from Christians on campus who did not understand my Messianic beliefs and Torah obedience, nor gave me an ample ability to speak. Some of my Christian peers—once again—felt that it was more appropriate to insult and berate me rather than to search the Scriptures for answers and seek reasoned and polite dialogue. I hold no ill feelings, but I have faced my fair share of difficulty from those “of the faith.”

Aside from the fact that the Lord will obviously put us through hard times, comes the required analysis of the popular doctrine known as the pre-tribulation rapture. Is it valid? Or does it have a shaky foundation? *The Dangers of Pre-Tribulationism* is intended to respond to many of the reasons why people believe in the pre-tribulation rapture. I intend to demonstrate to you why these reasons are flawed, often based on poor exegesis of the Scriptures, and in some cases expose the escapist agenda of its proponents. This report has been written as a supplement to my book *When Will the Messiah Return?* This book has more thoroughly addressed the doctrinal bases for this report, which has been written in conjunction with Stage #1 of “Constructing a Two-House Prophecy Scenario” discussed in Chapter 16. By necessity, many points discussed in *When Will the Messiah Return?* will be reemphasized in this analysis, and vice versa. However, it is highly advised and recommended that you have read *When Will the Messiah Return?* before reading *The Dangers of Pre-Tribulationism*.

The Dangers of Pre-Tribulationism was originally written as an article on the TNN Online website (in 1999) that addressed the top twelve reasons why people believe in the pre-tribulation rapture. Many TNN readers considered this article to perhaps be the most provocative, compelling, and controversial article on the entire website. This report has taken and expanded that article, addressing many more reasons. It shows why believing in the pre-tribulation rapture is dangerous and why it must be reevaluated and tried against Scripture.

I will also be discussing the specifics of “the rapture” and the false theological presuppositions used by many who believe in pre-tribulationism. Most importantly, for the hope that this analysis will be utilized properly and not misunderstood, please take note of the fact that there are references made to important outside books, articles, reference materials, or other periphery issues. **I ask that you consult the footnotes carefully.**

It is my hope and prayer that this will prove to be a guide for many of you who are seeking a fuller understanding of the end-times, and a Biblically sound eschatology. For those of you who have already seen some of the errors of the pre-tribulation rapture, this will be an excellent resource for you to use when encountering staunch pre-tribulationists. This treatise will reinforce

what you already know to be true. For those of you who are pre-tribulationists, I encourage you to reevaluate your view and see if it really is Scripturally valid, as it will be seriously challenged and dismantled.

It is not the purpose of this publication to “blast” or condemn pre-tribulationists by any means, but rather force people to reevaluate the pre-tribulation rapture teaching. Is it truly taught in the Bible? Or is it popular, because it is unscriptural and escapist? These are some questions that I ask you to keep in mind throughout your reading. It is my intention to answer the pre-tribulation rapture supports reasonably, and with love and humility as demonstrated to us by the actions of Messiah Yeshua and His Apostles, as well as with a fairness that is often not given to post-tribulationists.

J.K. McKee
Editor, TNN Online



THE MESSIAH WILL RETURN

The issues surrounding what many call “the rapture” and its timing have caused much unnecessary debate, slander, and criticism over the years in evangelical Christianity. People from all the various views surrounding the gathering of the Lord’s own unto Himself have slandered one another, and in many cases, have given eschatology¹ overall a bad name. To those of us who believe in reasoned discussion rather than fierce debate, this is of serious concern. While in mainstream Christianity, the pre-tribulation rapture position is overwhelmingly represented in comparison to post-tribulationism, the numbers are more even in the Messianic movement. We should be in an ample position to examine this subject fairly, rationally, and above all Scripturally.

We are commanded by the Bible to “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). We are also told to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Yeshua the Messiah tells us quite plainly, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). When we critique others for what they believe concerning an issue like this, it must be tempered in a spirit of mercy, compassion, and fairness. It must be done constructively so we can all gain something from the discussion, and if necessary change, or at least fine-tune our theological beliefs.

The issue surrounding the return of Yeshua is very important as far as our overall theology should be concerned. After His ascension into Heaven, the angels present attested, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Yeshua, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Without any doubt, the Messiah will return. As the Apostle’s Creed states concerning Yeshua: “[He] ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the Father whence he cometh to judge the living and the dead.”² **Regardless of our view, we must be united around the common hope that our Lord will come back as is prophesied.**

The primary concern surrounding the return of the Messiah for pre-millennialists—those who believe that Yeshua returns before His thousand-year Millennial reign—has never really been the event itself and what the resurrection involves, but rather its timing. It is the most debated topic between those who study prophecy today and will continue to be until He returns.

It must be said that one’s position on the return of the Messiah does not necessarily have to have a bearing on where he or she spends eternity. This does not have to be a “salvation issue,” as some make it out to be. But, there are concerns that should exist when a person gets too comfortable or too dogmatic with an opinion surrounding events that are *yet to occur*. We must be open to alternatives if the end-times do not play out exactly as we expect. We have to all recognize

¹ Eschatology: the study of end things, specifically related to end-time Bible prophecy.

² Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 26.