

Biblical Prophecy

magazine

Spring 2023 | Vol. 3, No. 1



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This is a biannual magazine published by Eschatos Ministries: Spring and Fall.

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P.O. Box 747, Rice Lake, WI 54868

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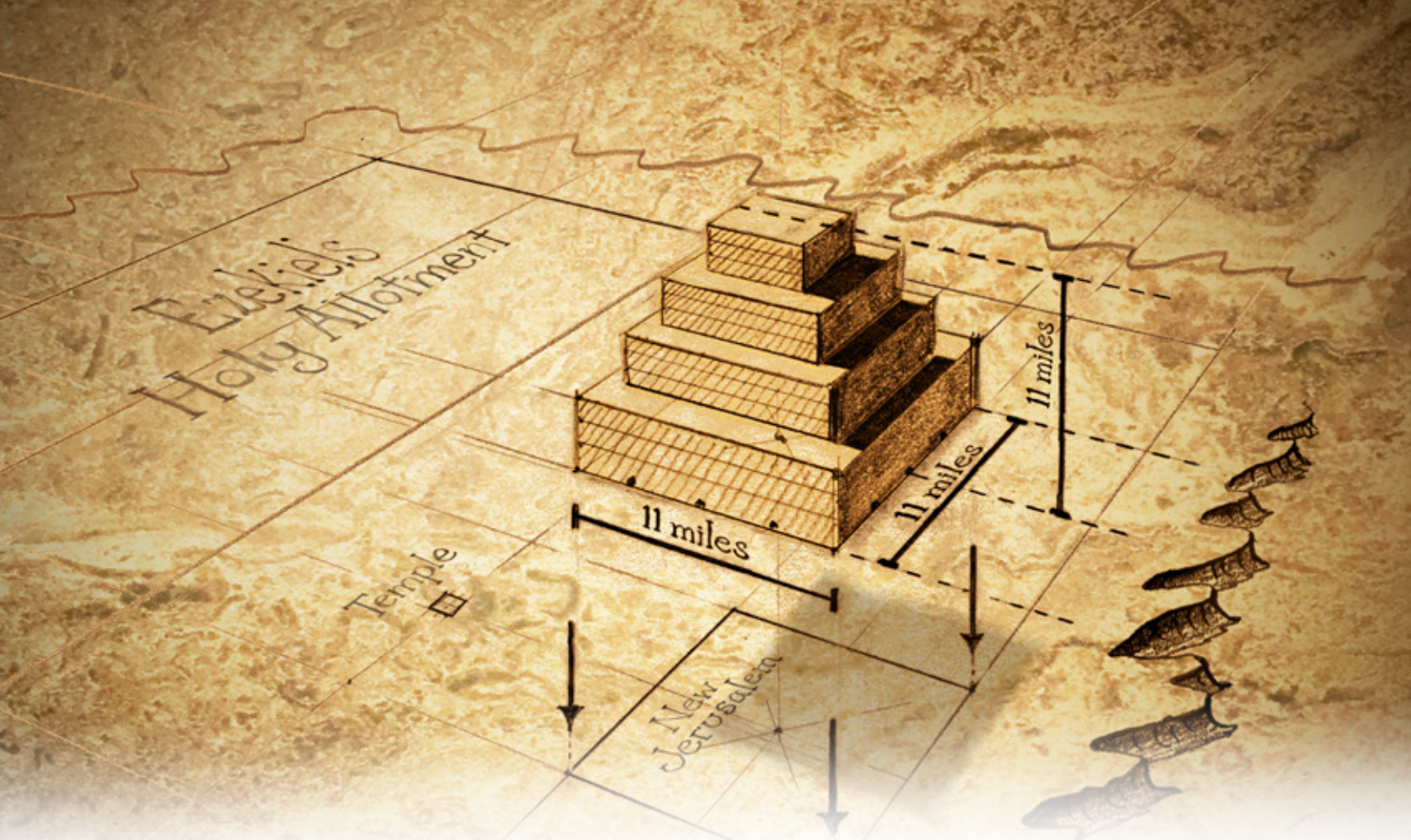
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COVER IMAGE

Artwork by Janet Willis.



The Size of New Jerusalem and Why John's and Ezekiel's Cities Are Compatible

— Janet Willis

This article focuses on biblical evidence for the compatible size between John's city (Rev 21:16) and Ezekiel's city (Ezek 48:30–35).

Through the ages, God has comforted believers with John's description of the holy city, New Jerusalem. Traditionally, the primary source of information about this city has been the last two chapters of the Bible (Rev 21–22). As John saw New Jerusalem descending out of heaven, he heard a voice from the throne saying, "Behold the tabernacle of God is *among* men, and He will dwell *among* them, and they shall be His people,

and God Himself will be *among* them" (Rev 21:3, emphasis mine).¹ This city is not only the dwelling place of God, but in the future, it will be our home too.

While I write as a premillennialist, I am challenging the traditional understanding of the size of the city. Premillennialists understand the dimensions of the city to be extraordinarily large, about 1,500 miles in each of three directions: length, width, and height. Most interpreters also believe the city

¹ All Scripture cited throughout is from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 unless otherwise indicated.

will not descend until the end of the millennium. I have previously investigated the overall shape of New Jerusalem and presented evidence that the city will be a structure shaped like a mountain.² In this article, I am expanding the scope to examine the general outward dimensions of God's city. First, I will explore the similarities between John's city (Rev 21–22) and the city Ezekiel saw (Ezek 48). Second, I will show how traditional interpreters calculate the external dimensions of John's city. Third, I will give evidence for why the size of John's city (Rev 21:16) should be reexamined. Fourth, I will look at the measurements of Ezekiel's city (Ezek 48:35) and show why his city has not been adequately compared to John's. I will describe issues that have made interpreting Ezekiel's measurements difficult but not impossible to solve. A correct understanding of the measurement of Ezekiel's city is key. Ezekiel says of his city that the base's length and width are equal (Ezek 48:30–34). Since John says his city "is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width" (Rev 21:16), we will be able to make a comparison of the two cities by determining the length of one side of each city. Therefore, I will present evidence that the length of each side of Ezekiel's city is compatible with the length of each side of John's city. Finally, I will examine the measurements of Ezekiel's Holy Allotment and show how the entire layout presents a panoramic view of how the city fits into the big picture. Ultimately, the compatibility of the measurements of these two cities points to the thesis that they are referring to the same city. Understandably, this conclusion has significant implications throughout the Scriptures, especially the timing of New Jerusalem's descent.

Similarities of John's New Jerusalem to Ezekiel's City

Ezekiel and John were each transported into the future, and while guided by an angelic being, they toured a place (Ezek 40–48; Rev 21–22). The experience that God gave to each of these two men is unique, and in both cases, very similar. This was not virtual reality. It was more like time travel. Each man had an angelic

guide with a measuring rod, and each guide gave detailed measurements. Then God specifically told the prophets to tell what they saw. Ezekiel says,

In the visions of God He brought me into the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain (*har*), and on it to the south there was a structure like a city. So he brought me there; and behold, there was a man whose appearance was like the appearance of bronze, with a line of flax and a measuring rod in his hand; and he was standing in the gateway. The man said to me, "Son of man, see with your eyes, hear with your ears, and give attention to all that I am going to show you; for you have been brought here in order to show it to you. Declare to the house of Israel all that you see." (Ezek 40:2–4)

Ezekiel saw a single structure with many dwelling places, for he said it looked like a city. At the end of his book, Ezekiel relates detailed measurements of that "structure like a city" (Ezek 48). In a parallel fashion, concerning the full revelation that God was about to show John, the Lord commanded, "Write in a book what you see" (Rev 1:1–2). At the end of his book, John says that God "carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain [*oros*], and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev 21:10). And similar to Ezekiel, God gave John measurements of the city he saw. As we examine the details from both prophets, we will see how both cities were a single structure, described to be square at the base (Ezek 48:30–34; Rev 21:16), with three gates on each side named for the twelve tribes of Israel (Ezek 48:30–34; Rev 21:12–13). Neither structure had a temple inside it (Ezek 48:10; Rev 21:22). Both were on elevated land (Ezek 40:2; Rev 21:10). Each city was declared to be holy (Ezek 43:12; Rev 21:10). Each city will be the place of God's throne (Ezek 43:7; Rev 22:3). Finally, Ezekiel's prophecy declared why this city is significant and gave this precious promise in perpetuity: "The name of the city from that day shall be, 'The Lord is there'" (Ezek 48:35). John proclaimed a similar truth when he said, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them" (Rev 21:3). These parallels compel us to investigate further and compare these two cities (see Figure 1).

² See Janet Willis, "Why New Jerusalem Is Shaped Like a Mountain," *Biblical Prophecy Magazine* 2.1 (2022): 4–17.

Ezekiel's Vision

to Israel: the Jews

The city ...

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| 1. is on elevated land. | Ezek 40:2 |
| 2. is separate from the temple. | Ezek 48:10 |
| 3. has a square base. | Ezek 48:30-34 |
| 4. has twelve gates, three on each side. | Ezek 48:30-34 |
| 5. gates named: 12 tribes of Israel. | Ezek 48:30-34 |
| 6. is located on land that is Most Holy. | Ezek 43:12 |
| 7. will be the place of God's throne
(the capital of the world). | Ezek 43:7 |
| 8. The Lord will be there. | Ezek 43:35 |
| 9. The Lord will be there forever. | Ezek 43:35 |

John's Vision

to the Church: Jews and Gentiles

The city ...

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. is on elevated land. | Rev 21:10 |
| 2. has no temple. | Rev 21:22 |
| 3. has a square base | Rev 21:16 |
| 4. has twelve gates, three on each side. | Rev 21:12-13 |
| 5. gates named: 12 tribes of Israel. | Rev 21:12-13 |
| 6. is Holy. | Rev 21:10 |
| Foundations named:
12 apostles | |
| 7. will be the place of God's throne
(the capital of the world). | Rev 22:3 |
| 8. The Lord will be there. | Rev 22:3 |
| 9. The Lord will be there forever. | Rev 22:3-4 |

Figure 1

Traditional Interpretations of New Jerusalem's Size

The apostle John describes the size of New Jerusalem with these words:

The city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as its width; and he measured the city with the rod fifteen hundred miles [12,000 *stadia*]; its length and width and height are equal. And he measured its wall, seventy-two yards [144 *pechus*] according to human measurements, which are also angelic measurements. (Rev 21:16–17)

Since most traditional interpreters, including this author, have considered John's measurement to be linear in each of these three directions, the city would be about 1,500 miles in length, 1,500 miles in width, and 1,500 miles in height. It is important to note that the various translations of Rev 21:16 convert the 12,000 stadia to 1,380, 1,400, or 1,500 miles. Estimates of one stadia also range from 600 to 606 feet. If one stadia equals 600 feet or .11 miles, we can multiply

.11 times 12,000 and get 1,320 miles. In other words, depending on the estimate of the size of a stadia, the traditional estimate of 1,500 miles is determined by rounding off the more specific number. Randall Price holds to this traditional view:

The New Jerusalem's dimensions are 1,500 miles equally in every direction, or as one engineer has figured, an area of 2,250,000 square miles. In our day of Hollywood special effects with spaceships the size of cities (like those in the science-fiction film *Independence Day*), such proportions are no longer impossible to imagine.³

Randy Alcorn also puts it this way,

The ground level of the city will be nearly two million square miles. This is forty times bigger than England and fifteen thousand times bigger than London. It's ten times as big as France or Germany

³ Randall Price, *Jerusalem in Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 312.



Figure 2

and far larger than India. But remember, that's just the ground level.⁴

Trying to comprehend the physical ramifications of something this size is not easy. If a structure like this were here on Earth, its height alone could affect the Earth's rotation (see Figure 2). Speaking of John's New Jerusalem, John MacArthur says, "A height of fifteen hundred miles is frankly difficult to envision. On the current earth, something fifteen hundred miles high would extend well out of earth's atmosphere (which is only about a hundred miles deep)."⁵ Those who have studied the topic of New Jerusalem have seen how many Old Testament references to a future Jerusalem sound like they refer to John's city.⁶ However, one significant difference seems to be the city's outer dimensions. Harold Seener gives special attention to the city Ezekiel saw, which had three gates on each side named for the twelve tribes of Israel. After discussing many of Ezekiel's details about that city, Seener refers to New Jerusalem in Rev 21:2–4 and concludes,

⁴ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 250.

⁵ John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2013), 119.

⁶ E.g., Isa 54, 60; Ezek 48.

At first glance it appears that this heavenly city of Jerusalem is the earthly city of Jerusalem, described by the prophet Ezekiel or Isaiah. Closer examination, however, reveals that this is not the case. They are two separate and distinct cities. This is clear in a description which John later gives of the heavenly city of Jerusalem. He states: "And the city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal" (Rev 21:16, NASV). The earthly city of Jerusalem, as described by Ezekiel, is not anywhere near that large (see Ezek 48:35).⁷

Seener's statement shows that he is assuming that John's measurements should be taken as linear measurements of each of the three dimensions. Traditionally, therefore, many interpreters have seen the similarities between Ezekiel's city and John's city but have concluded they are different. What they believe about the exterior dimensions of John's city is a crucial characteristic that influences their conclusion, especially on the timing.

The Size of John's New Jerusalem Reexamined

John's angelic guide measured the city with a gold measuring rod, and we are told, "The city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles [12,000 *stadion*]; its length and width and height are equal" (Rev 21:16).

Now as we read these words more than two thousand years later, it has been assumed that the 1,500 miles are a linear measurement in each of the three dimensions. That is why most interpreters think New Jerusalem would be about two-thirds the size of the United States and tower well into the exosphere if it were to land on earth. But we should ask ourselves, is there any reason why this is necessarily a linear measurement in each of the three dimensions? There is another way to understand it. Before giving the number, John says, "The city is laid out as a square,

⁷ Harold Seener, *Israel's Glorious Future: The Prophecies and Promises of God Revealed* (New York: Chosen People Ministries, 1996), 80.

and its length is as great as its width” (Rev 21:16). The immediate context is a critical clue. He first told us the shape of the base of the city, and by adding “its length is the same as its width,” he is emphasizing that shape as a square. Then he gave the number 12,000 stadia. He followed the number by adding information about the height, but his emphasis seems to be on the base. This focus on the base would make sense if the structure is shaped like a mountain (as discussed in my previous article). John may have intended the 12,000 stadia to be understood as the



Figure 3

area of the base of a pyramidal-shaped structure. He may be explaining *how* to calculate the number (see Figure 3). To put it plainly, the traditional assumption that John gave us an individual linear measurement of each side may be flawed.

We can take the square root of John’s measurement to find the length of each side and then convert it from stadia to miles (remember that a stadia is about 600 feet or .11 miles). If we take the square root of 12,000, we get about 110 stadia (i.e., 110 stadia x 110 stadia ≈ 12,000 stadia squared). This would be the length of each side of the base of the city. To convert stadia to miles, we take our length of 110 stadia and multiply it by .11 miles. The length of each side would then be about 12 miles. It is a simple concept, but it has significant implications. As we continue to examine this interpretation, I will explain the biblical evidence that supports this thesis. I will show why it is more likely that John intended for us to understand the 12,000 stadia as the area of the base of the city. Thus, the overall outward size of the city structure would be approximately 12 miles in length, 12 miles in width, and 12 miles in height.

First-Century Culture

As we closely examine John’s measurement, we should keep in mind to whom he was writing. In

their book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, Randolph Richards and Brandon O’Brien seek to help us understand “the cross-cultural nature of biblical interpretation.” They explain this by saying,

Because we believe that the Bible is God’s Word to us, no matter where on the planet or when in history we read it, we tend to read Scripture in our own *when* and *where* in a way that makes sense on our terms. We believe the Bible has something to say to us today . . . it is a better method to speak of what the passage meant to the original hearers, and then to ask how that applies to us. Another way to say this is that all Bible reading is necessarily contextual.⁸

The Greek culture strongly influenced Israel. This is the world John was in, and these were the people to whom John was writing. The early church had to deal with this influence (Acts 6:1). The book of Revelation and the entire New Testament were written in Greek. As we read the Bible today, especially those of us with Western eyes, we might not realize the advanced mathematics that the Ancient Middle East had attained. In the history of mathematics, first-century Greeks are known for their expertise in geometry. The Greeks of that era, such as Heron of Alexandria, used square and cube roots. The Babylonians had a process for finding square roots much earlier. Mathematical historians Merzbach and Boyer say,

Mesopotamian mathematicians were skillful in developing algorithmic procedures, among which was a square-root process often ascribed to later men. It is sometimes attributed to the Greek scholar Archytas (428-365 BCE) or to Heron of Alexandria (ca. 100 CE); occasionally, one finds it called Newton’s algorithm. This Babylonian procedure is as simple as it is effective.... A substantial proportion of the cuneiform tablets that have been unearthed are “table texts,” including multiplication tables, tables of reciprocals, and tables of squares and cubes and

⁸ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 11–12.

of square and cube roots written, of course, in cuneiform sexagesimals.⁹

Thus, in light of the Greek influence in first-century Israel, and considering the advanced mathematics of that day, it may be that John's intent was for his first-century readers to understand the 12,000 stadia as the area of the base of New Jerusalem. The length of each one of the base dimensions would be equal to the square root of 12,000 stadia. Converted to our measurements, it would be about 12 miles.

Old Testament Background

Besides considering first-century Israel's mathematical sophistication, we can consider its background in the Old Testament Scriptures, as well. Tim Sigler writes,

Just as volume II assumes that the reader understands volume I, so the authors of the New Testament assume a knowledge of the Old Testament as prerequisite for appreciating their message of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Of course, once a reader completes volume II, he will better understand volume I—but volume II is not to be placed as a grid over volume I before it has been read. Once Scripture is read in the order God revealed it, we should interpret the entire Bible in light of the entire Bible.¹⁰

Jesus expected those who lived during his lifetime to know the revelation that God had already provided (Luke 24:25–26). Some of his hearers did have Old Testament prophecies in mind. Extra-biblical evidence shows that by 100 B.C., some Jews wrote of a future city whose base was roughly like this proposed size of 12 miles in length and width. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain several fragmentary copies of a document titled *A Vision of the New Jerusalem*. The Old Testament Scriptures had already given information about a future Jerusalem, and this document seems to give evidence of that influence. 4Q554, Fragment 3, Column 2 names jewels used in the city's construction

and says, "its beams were gold."¹¹ The writer might have been thinking of the following prophecy from Isaiah, who spoke of a Jerusalem to come:

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and your foundations I will lay in sapphires. Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies, and your gates of crystal, and your entire wall of precious stones. All your sons will be taught of the Lord; and the well-being of your sons will be great. (Isa 54:11–13)

Dead Sea Scroll scholars Wise, Abegg, and Cook, commenting on the measurements given in *A Vision of the New Jerusalem*, note:

The city, for example, measures 140 *stades* on the east and the west and 100 *stades* on the north and south. In modern terms these dimensions would be 18.67 miles by 13.33 miles (a *stade* is 2/15 of a mile). This new Jerusalem would have been more significant than any ancient city and could only have been built by divine intervention, like the even larger city beheld by a later visionary in the New Testament book of Revelation (21:9–27).¹²

Further details even give measurements between the gates named for Israel's twelve tribes (4Q554 Frag. 2 Col. 1).¹³ The calculations in this reference by Wise, Abegg, and Cook use a *stade* of 2/15 of a mile (704 feet or .13 miles). If we use the estimate of a *stade* being 600 feet (previously calculated to be .11 miles), we can compare the two sizes. If we multiply .11 miles times 100 *stades*, we get 11 miles. Although they have that size on only two of the four sides ("100 *stades* on the north and south"), that is significant. The measurements are compatible with my proposed size of one side of John's New Jerusalem, 12 miles. But the Dead Sea Scrolls were written *before* John's lifetime. We will see how the writers of this Dead Sea scroll most likely had Ezekiel's prophecy about a future city in mind (Ezek 48:30–35).

⁹ Uta C. Merzbach and Carl B. Boyer, *A History of Mathematics* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2011), 26.

¹⁰ Tim M. Sigler, "Reading the Bible in the Right Direction," *Messianic Perspectives*, Jan/Feb 2015, Christian Jew Foundation Ministries, 2.

¹¹ Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: Harper One, 2005), 561.

¹² Wise, Abegg Jr., and Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 558.

¹³ Wise, Abegg Jr., and Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 558.

As we examine Ezekiel's measurements, we will see that this is close to the size he gives.

John's first-century audience might also have understood the similarities between John's city and Ezekiel's. If they already knew the size of one side of Ezekiel's city, they could have simply multiplied the length times the width to get the area of the base. With this in mind, we will look closely at Ezekiel's city, particularly the prophet's measurements. We will understand why those who read John's number (12,000 stadia) most likely looked at this number not as three individual linear measurements.

The Size of Ezekiel's City

Ezekiel's last nine chapters give extensive, architecturally detailed information about what God has in store for his people. Interpreters have had difficulty with these chapters, resulting in widely differing conclusions. Information about Ezekiel's city must be studied in light of the larger context of these nine chapters of his book. Commenting on these chapters, Walter Kaiser states,

Few chapters of the Bible separate interpreters into such strongly diverse camps of interpretation as the last nine chapters of Ezekiel—probably more than at any other place in the Scriptures. The literal method of interpreting the Bible seems to be miles away from those who spiritualize or allegorize these texts. Even more distressing is the fact that even within the camps of the amillennialists and the premillennialists, there often is very little homogeneity.¹⁴

Also addressing Ezekiel's nine chapters, Ralph Alexander says,

This is one of the most perplexing and difficult prophetic passages in Scripture. In many ways, however, this prophecy is only as difficult as one chooses to make it. If one abandons a grammatical-historical-cultural hermeneutic in favor of a figurative approach when studying this passage, he most certainly will encounter extreme difficulty. Figurative interpretation (often called *spiritual*,

though far from the latter) has as its final criterion the subjectivity of man's mind, resulting in as many interpretations as there are interpreters. Who can dispute the results of "spiritual" interpretation, for the student, himself, is always the authority? On the contrary, if one is willing (1) to lay their preconceived ideas aside, (2) to believe that the biblical text is accurately revealed, though it discusses things beyond the normal experience and understanding of mankind, and (3) to approach the text in a normal grammatical-historical-cultural way, they will discover that this passage is not nearly as difficult as one may have thought.¹⁵

Even for those who hold to a literal hermeneutic as they examine these last nine chapters of Ezekiel, the most misunderstood portion is the city at the south end of the Holy Allotment (the holy *terumah*). I will examine several factors that have made interpreting the "city" particularly difficult. First, I will show that Ezekiel's emphasis in these nine chapters was on the Temple, not on the city. Second, the unit of measure of the city Ezekiel saw is only implied. Third, estimates of the exact length of ancient units of measurement vary. Fourth, the suggested size does not fit the present topography of Israel. And fifth, I will address the issue of the height of the city.

Ezekiel's Emphasis on the Temple

Ezekiel first mentions the city briefly at the beginning of his tour. "In the visions of God He brought me into the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain, and on it, to the south, there was a structure like a city" (Ezek 40:2). To begin with, the majority of Ezekiel's tour concerns the future Temple. He briefly mentions the city at the beginning of his tour (Ezek 40:2) and then again at the end, giving essential details (Ezek 48). The intervening chapters focus on that future Temple. At this point, Ezekiel was a captive living in Babylon, and Solomon's Temple had been robbed and destroyed. When discussing these chapters, many commentators focus on the future Temple and don't deal with the city. No doubt, the Jews of Ezekiel's day were thinking of the loss of their Temple. But the Old Testament prophets discuss the city of Jerusalem. God's name

¹⁴ Walter Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 116.

¹⁵ Ralph Alexander, *Ezekiel* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1976), 129.

was connected to the city (Ps 132:13–14). “For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay because Your city and Your people are called by Your name” (Dan 9:19). The city represented, not just their homes, but the promises of God to them as a people, as a nation. Surprisingly, the nations around them knew some of these promises. Speaking of the destroyed city of Jerusalem, Jeremiah relates,

All who pass along the way clap their hands in derision at you; they hiss and shake their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem, “Is this the city of which they said, ‘The perfection of beauty, a joy to all the earth’”? (Lam 2:15)

The pagans are quoting from two different Hebrew psalms: “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth” (Ps 50:2); and “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth” (Ps 48:1–2). Even without the help of modern media, somehow God’s Word had circulated. Jeremiah laments the destruction of the city, saying, “The roads of Zion are in mourning” (Lam 1:4). He continues, “Her adversaries have become her masters, her enemies prosper; for the Lord has caused her grief because of the multitude of her transgressions” (Lam 1:5). But Jeremiah has hope, and that hope is based on the character of God. “For the Lord will not reject forever, for if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness” (Lam 3:31–32). Though God gave many Old Testament prophets details about a future Jerusalem, God chose Ezekiel to be the one to give details about that city, as well as details about a future temple. The topic of the Temple dominates his last nine chapters. As we read this section in our Bibles, the details are extensive, and the specifics can be overwhelming. However, these details send a powerful message: God means what He says. He is showing us a future reality. Included in that reality, just south of that Temple, is the city.

The Rod Is the Implied Unit of Measure for Ezekiel’s City

A second difficulty in interpreting Ezekiel’s prophecy is understanding the city’s measurements. The major

challenge is that Ezekiel gives numbers along with a unit of measure for the Temple, but when he speaks of the size of the city, the unit of measure is only implied (Ezek 45:6; 48:8–35). In today’s culture, if I say that my height is five-seven, most people would understand that I mean five feet seven inches. Implied units of measure are not that unusual. But in this case, we must grasp what God intended. Since the unit of measure is not mentioned in the original, some translators add the word “measures” or “units” in italics after the number (Brenton Septuagint and KJV) to inform the reader that

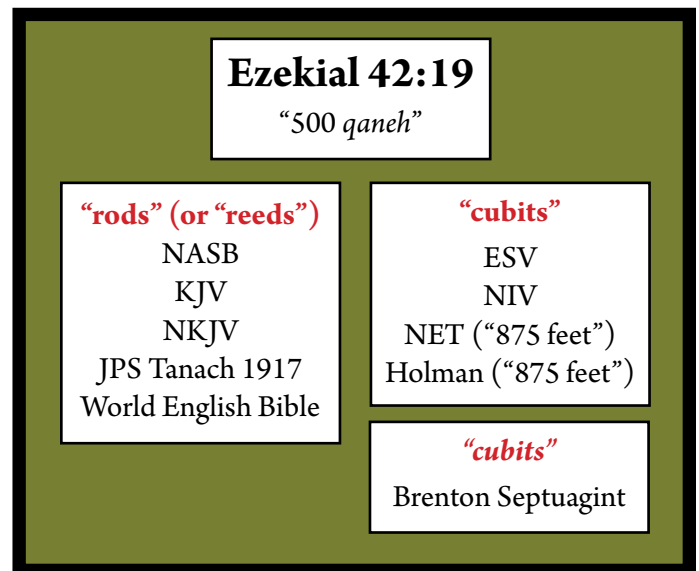


Figure 4

the unit of measure is only implied. The JPS Tanakh translators seem to lean toward the decision that the unit of measure is rods and therefore say “reeds” in italics. Other translations, such as the NET Bible and the NIV, assume that the unit of measure is not rods but cubits and convert the number to miles.

This has caused great difficulty and is probably one reason many commentators avoid dealing with Ezekiel’s city. Even worse, some confuse the Temple with the city.¹⁶ Those who have carefully cross-checked the larger context have concluded that the implied unit

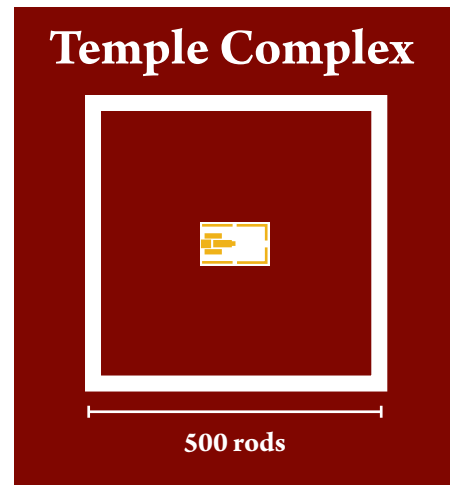
¹⁶ For example, Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr. seems to think that Ezekiel’s temple is where God will dwell with his people during the millennium (*Ezekiel* [The New American Commentary 17, B&H, Nashville, TN: 1994], 357). Ezekiel distinguishes the mountain-city from the temple (40:2; 48:15–35), and the Book of Revelation makes clear that there is “no temple *in* the city” (21:22 NET) and that the new city is “the residence of God” and his people will live there (21:1–27).

of measure is the “rod.” Ralph Alexander has compared Ezekiel’s other related measurements and gives the following evidence to support the view that “rod” is correct. Concerning the section of the Holy Allotment around the Temple and referring specifically to Ezek 45:1–4, he states,

This land segment will measure 25,000 by 10,000. Though the text does not explicitly state that “rods” are the nature of the measurement, this certainly seems to be the case when one examines verse 2. The Temple precinct, which lies in the middle of this allotment, is measured 500 by 500 square. In contrast the border around it is explicitly stated to be fifty cubits. The term “cubit” appears to be used purposefully to contrast the fifty measurements from the 500. Likewise, the same dimensions of the Temple complex are revealed in 42:15–20 as 500 “rods”¹⁷ (see Figure 5).

Since Ralph Alexander used Ezek 42:15–20 as an example, it is worth investigating this passage further. Ezekiel revealed how his angelic guide measured the outward dimensions of the Temple. The prophet said, “Now when he had finished measuring the inner house, he brought me out by way of the gate facing the east and measured it all around. He measured on the east side with the measuring reed [*qaneh*] five hundred reeds [*qaneh*] by the measuring reed [*qaneh*]” (Ezek 42:15–16). Various translations of this section again show divergence of opinion (see Figure 4). The NASB, Jewish Publication Society 1917, KJV, and World English Bible use “reeds” (or “rods”) wherever *qaneh* is. Other translations choose “cubits” (Brenton Septuagint, ESV). The NET uses the word “stick.” Some translators choose “cubit” and put it in italics to inform the reader that there is debate on this. Others assume “cubits” and convert the cubits to miles. But in translations like these, the reader is unaware of the discussion. In other words, the outer dimensions of the Temple complex are first given in Ezek 42:16–19 as “rods.” Then later, in Ezek 45:2, the unit of measure of that same Temple complex is only implied. Checking the full context of Ezek 45:1–6, especially verse 6, which refers to the area that includes not only the Temple but also the city, we see that the implied unit of measure for the city is “rods.” There is another reason to support “rods” over “cubits.” If the city’s unit of measurement is only cubits, then the city is only slightly larger than the Temple complex, which is not plausible. One last reason Ezekiel most likely intended “rods” is the extra-biblical evidence previously cited from the Dead Sea scrolls. The size given in the document *A Vision of the New Jerusalem* is more compatible with Ezekiel’s unit of measure being “rods” than “cubits.”

As we continue this investigation, we will examine a possible reason or cause for this debate. For now, let us move on to another category that has puzzled Ezekiel’s interpreters.



(Temple buildings not to scale)

Figure 5

The Length of the Rod

A third difficulty for interpreters is the size of the cubit and the rod. At the very beginning of his tour, Ezekiel defines the size of the rod. Ezekiel says, “In the man’s hand was a measuring rod of six cubits [*ammah*], each of which was a cubit and a handbreadth” (Ezek 40:5). We cannot be sure the exact length of a cubit. Even in Ezekiel’s day, units of measure varied from culture to culture. To explain some of these difficulties, Ralph Alexander writes,

Much has been said in seeking to ascertain the exact length of a cubit. Archaeological data has been sparse with respect to implements of measure in the ancient Near East. Likewise, linear measurements were determined by parts of the body, which vary with each individual. The cubit is measured from the tip of the middle finger to the point of the elbow. The palm, or handbreadth, is taken from the width of the hand at the base

¹⁷ Alexander, *Ezekiel*, 153.

of the fingers. Therefore, the palm is about three inches, whereas the cubit, being equal to six palms, is estimated at approximately eighteen inches. One can read of “royal cubits,” “long cubits,” and “short cubits,” but minute precision is unreasonable in light of the nature of the measurement. Ezekiel 40:5 and 43:13 indicate that Ezekiel’s cubit is the length of a normal cubit plus a palm, implying that there is a standard cubit shorter than that he employed. Most expositors, therefore, understand Ezekiel’s cubit to be the regular eighteen-inch cubit plus a handbreadth of three inches: a total length of approximately twenty-one inches.¹⁸

Henry Sulley, an architect who wrote a commentary on the last nine chapters of Ezekiel, gives a larger estimate. He writes,

Ezekiel saw the angel use for the purpose of measure and construction, a reed of six cubits long, each cubit being one cubit and one handbreadth (verses 5, 14). The equivalent of this measure in English numerals is difficult to determine. Evidence at present accessible will equally assign either 21 inches or 24 inches.¹⁹

He goes on to give his estimate of the length of a rod: “The exact length of the reed is not certain, but it is somewhere between ten feet six inches and twelve feet; if the former, five hundred reeds would be nearly a mile. If twelve feet, the length of five hundred reeds would be considerably over one mile.”²⁰ The five hundred reeds (or rods) are the size of the Temple complex. Sulley then comments on the size of the city, and using the larger estimate of 12 feet per rod, he calculates each side of the city to be 11 miles:

Our wonder increases when we consider the detailed arrangements of the third section of the holy square. A city and its suburbs, over eleven miles each way, is probably larger than any city of this Gentile era except London; its size is not, however, the feature of chief importance.

¹⁸ Alexander, *Ezekiel*, 138.

¹⁹ Henry Sulley, *The Temple of Ezekiel’s Prophecy* (Nottingham and London: Published by the Author, 1887), 12.

²⁰ Sulley, *The Temple of Ezekiel’s Prophecy*, 14.

The name bestowed upon it by God is full of meaning. The words [“Yehovah Shammah”] appear to be the climax of the whole vision.²¹

Thus, the range of the length of a “long cubit” could be from 18 to 24 inches, and thus the range of a rod could be from 10.5 to 12 feet. Ezekiel says the city will measure 4,500 rods in length and width (Ezek 48:15–16, 30–34). There is also an open space or border of 250 rods on each side of the city (Ezek 48:17). Therefore, the city would have 5,000 rods on each side ($250 + 4,500 + 250 = 5,000$). Speaking of Ezekiel’s city, Alexander explains it this way: “The city, unnamed at this juncture, will be 4,500 rods square with a border of 250 rods around it on all sides. The result is a 5,000-square rod city area.”²² With the understanding that Ezekiel’s implied unit of measure is rods, we can now calculate the range of the length of each side of Ezekiel’s city. To get the smaller estimate, we can multiply 5,000 rods times 10.5 feet per rod to reach 52,500 feet. We divide the 52,500 feet by 5,280 (feet per mile) and get 9.94 miles on each side. To get the larger estimate, we can multiply 5,000 rods times 12 feet per rod to get 60,000 feet. We then divide the 60,000 feet by 5,280 (feet per mile) and get 11.36 miles on each side. Thus, each side of Ezekiel’s city could range from 9.94 miles to 11.36 miles in length. Now we have compatibility based on careful study of both cities and understanding that ancient units of measure are only estimates. John’s city, New Jerusalem, is about 12 miles on each side, and Ezekiel’s city is about 9.94 to 11.36 miles on each side. Thus, the two cities are similar in size and answer the objection that they cannot refer to the same eschatological edifice. There are a few more issues to address.

Topographical Changes Allow for This Size

These measurements highlight one more difficulty that has caused many to misunderstand the size of Ezekiel’s city. The larger size using the rods obviously would not fit on the present topography of Jerusalem (see Figure 6). That is possibly what influenced some translators to choose cubits. If the rod is the correct unit of measure, Ezekiel’s entire Holy Allotment is bigger

²¹ Sulley, *The Temple of Ezekiel’s Prophecy*, 88.

²² Alexander, *Ezekiel*, 157.

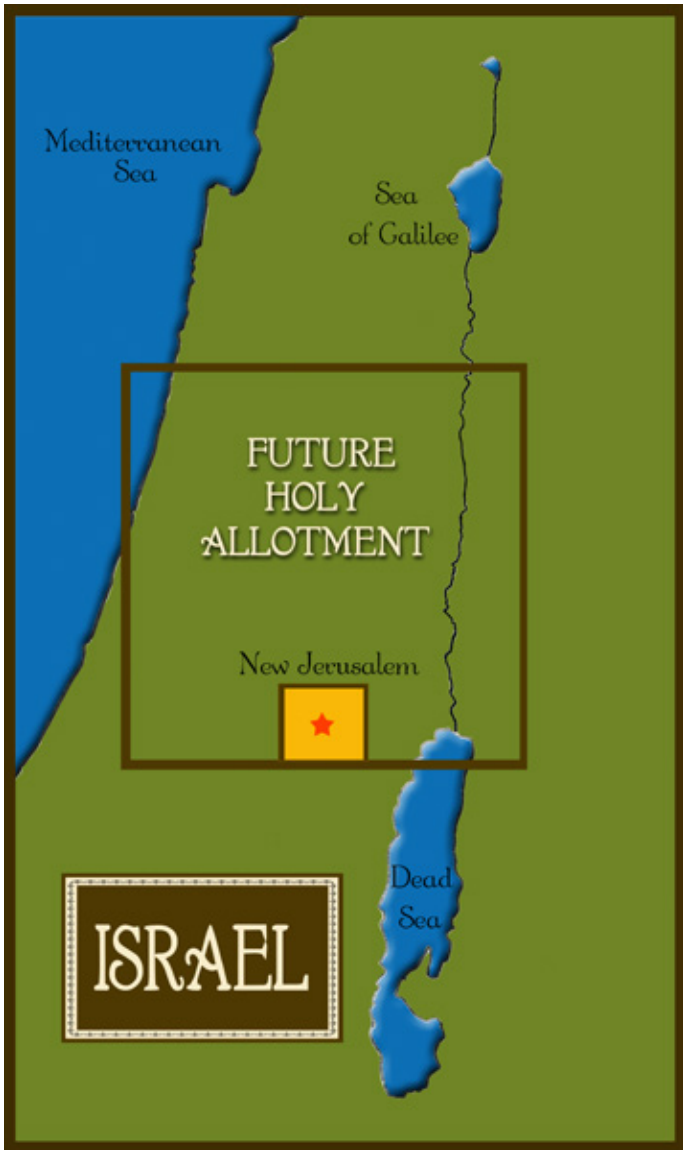


Figure 6

than the present land of Israel. If the rod is accurate, the Holy Allotment will be approximately 50 miles in length and width (Ezek 45:1–6). However, massive topographical changes just before the millennium are prophesied throughout the Old Testament (Ezek 38:20; Jer 4:24–26; Nah 1:5–6; Isa 24:1, 18b–20; Mic 1:3–4; Isa 40:4–5, 9; Rev 16:17–21).

One prophet even gives a measurable prediction that reinforces this fifty-mile square size. Zechariah reveals the size, location, and timing of when this topographical change will occur. He writes,

And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one. All the land will be changed into a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem; but Jerusalem will rise and remain on its site from Benjamin’s Gate as far as the place of the First Gate to the Corner Gate and from the Tower of Hananel to the king’s wine presses. People will live in it, and there will no longer be a curse, for Jerusalem will dwell in security. (Zech 14:9–11)

Randall Price estimates Geba to be 10 miles north of present day Jerusalem and Rimmon to be 45 miles south.²³ In other words, if Ezekiel’s intent was for us to understand the unit of measure to be rods, it correlates

²³ Price, *The Temple in Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2005), 467.



Figure 7

well with Zechariah’s prophecy. This massive change in the topography of Israel shows how Ezekiel’s size of the Holy Allotment matches up (see Figure 7).

So far, we have evaluated some reasons for disagreement when interpreting Ezekiel’s last nine chapters. His emphasis on the future Temple causes many to overlook what he said about the city. And three issues have generated difficulty in interpreting Ezekiel’s measurements: determining the unit of measure (rods or cubits), calculating the actual size of a cubit and a rod, and evaluating the practical aspect of how this would fit.

We have directly compared the size of Ezekiel’s city with the size of John’s city. Since most scholars agree that estimates of ancient units of measure vary, we have shown that at least the two cities are compatible. In other words, it is reasonable to say that, based on the size and other similar evidence discussed earlier, the city Ezekiel saw was likely the same city John saw. One last important parallel is that when Ezekiel gave the size of the city he saw after he gave the length (4,500 rods) and the width (4,500 rods), he followed that with the total or overall external dimensions of the structure at its base (Ezek 48:30–35). He says, “The city shall be 18,000 rods round about” (Ezek 48:35). By giving that combined outward measurement of the base, it’s almost as if God were setting the pattern, preparing us to compare Ezekiel’s and John’s prophecies.

The Extraordinary Height of the City

Trying to picture a structure almost eleven miles high is not easy (see Figure 8). The tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa, is nearly a half mile high, and Mount Everest is about 5.5 miles high. A commercial jet flying about 30,000 feet, about 5.5 miles high, would be halfway up to the pinnacle of New Jerusalem (see Figure 9).

The scale and understanding of the construction of something that high is challenging. John says of the city, “Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper” (Rev 21:11). The names of jewels throughout Scripture have changed through the years and are almost impossible to determine with any certainty. But John’s description helps us. He said

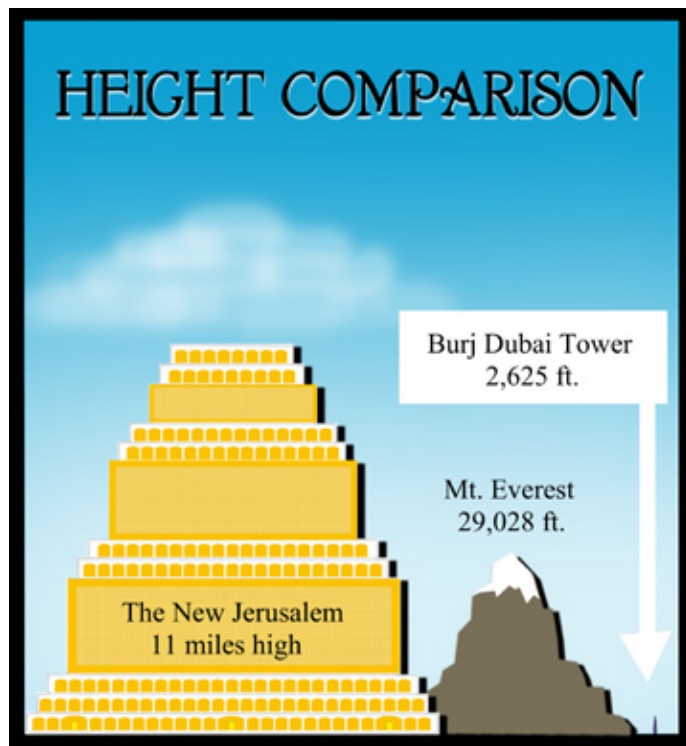


Figure 8



Figure 9

that the material makeup of the city was not only like a jewel but a clear jewel. Interestingly, diamonds come to mind; they are the hardest substance on Earth and have the greatest compression strength known to man. If Ezekiel saw New Jerusalem, the question arises, why did he not mention the extraordinary height? There are several possible reasons, but the simplest would be this: Ezekiel primarily gave the ground arrangement of the Temple. He never gave measurements of the

height of the Temple structure.²⁴ Height does not seem to be what God wanted him to reveal, even about the “structure like a city” at the south end of the Holy Allotment.

Another factor worth pondering is what Ezekiel already knew from personal experience. He might have heard about the pyramids in Egypt. Most ancient architecture was usually no more than several stories high, but when Ezekiel arrived in Babylon, some massive pyramidal structures were already there. The Great Pyramid in Egypt, 431 feet high, was already about two thousand years old in Ezekiel’s day. But something about 11 miles into the sky was higher than any mountain. It is possible God simply did not allow Ezekiel to talk about it, much like when he gave Paul a vision of heaven but did not permit him to talk about what he saw (2 Cor 12:1–4). We might also consider that Ezekiel’s primary audience was the readers of his day. The height of New Jerusalem would have displayed the names of the twelve apostles, which would have meant nothing to Ezekiel or his people. But the fact that the names of each of the twelve tribes were enshrined on the gates was undoubtedly a great encouragement to his fellow Israelites who had been exiled and taken captive. Ezekiel gives the names on each side: Reuben, Judah, Levi on the

north; Joseph, Benjamin, Dan on the east; Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun on the south; and Gad, Asher, Naphtali on the west (Ezek 48:30–34). It’s not that these men were exactly heroes. Moses was brutally honest in recording their sins. But as Ezekiel declared each name of their forefathers, the children of Israel would have gotten the message. Each gate was a memorial to the One who shows mercy to sinners. Twelve gateways to God’s city will proclaim “extraordinary grace!” (see Figure 10).

The Layout of Ezekiel’s Holy Allotment

If the “structure like a city” Ezekiel saw was New Jerusalem, what are the implications? Do all the details John describes correlate and make sense?



Figure 10

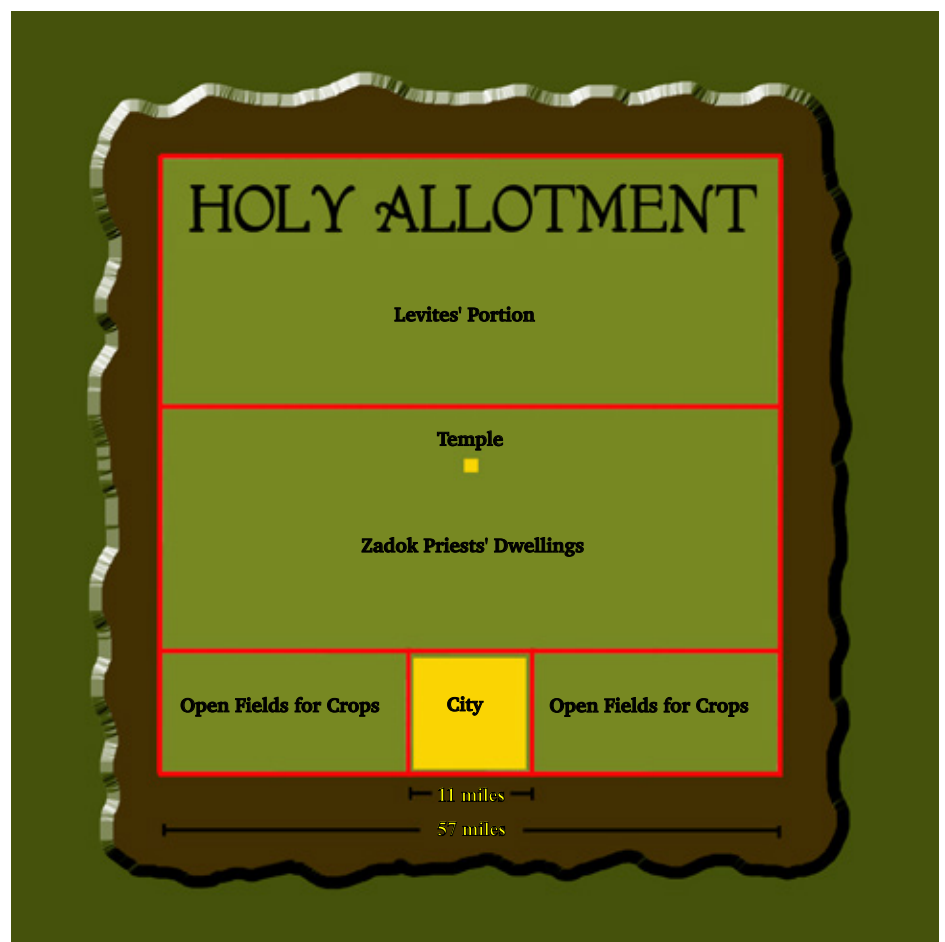


Figure 11

²⁴ There is a possible mention of the height of a platform underneath the Temple in Ezek 41:8, but translators differ on this.

Let's first look at the immediate context, the big picture described by Ezekiel. God gives the prophet enough detailed measurements about the Holy Allotment to map out the panorama (Ezek 48:10–20). On the north end is a section 25,000 rods by 10,000 rods where the mortal Levites will live. Immediately south of that is a section of the same size for homes of the mortal descendants of Zadok. They will be privileged to minister in the Temple, the centerpiece of their neighborhood (Ezek 48:10–11) [see Figure 11].

Then south of that section is a portion of 25,000 rods by 5,000 rods. That portion is divided into three sections. On each end are "open spaces" 10,000 by 5,000 rods for crops for food (Ezek 48:18–19). Then in that section (5,000 by 5,000 rods) is the "structure like a city," New Jerusalem. Modern metropolitan cities often have a collection of skyscrapers that make up their urban core. For instance, in Chicago, this section is called The Loop, and in New York City, it's Manhattan. But in this case, God has only one overwhelmingly huge "skyscraper" that dominates the landscape. The Lord guided Ezekiel to describe what he saw with architecturally accurate terminology. A "structure like a city" means a single building large enough to contain many dwelling places. Those are the words Jesus used when He spoke to his disciples. He said, "In My Father's house are many dwelling places" (John 14:6)—again, a single structure so massive that it contains many dwelling places. God's Word is precise!

We can now begin to piece together the whole puzzle. With all the details given by Ezekiel, we see how the Holy Allotment, with its designated neighborhoods, the Temple, and the massive mountain-like "structure like a city" at the south end constitute the entire metropolitan city limits of God's future capital, Jerusalem. As we look over all of Scripture, we can see that it is the crowning jewel of the capital complex of future Jerusalem. When John saw that massive mountain-like structure coming from God out of Heaven, he called it New Jerusalem. Future Jerusalem will go by several new names (Isa 1:26; 60:14; Jer 3:17; 33:16; Zech 8:3), but Ezekiel designates this structure that has landed, the one with twelve gates named for the twelve tribes,

with words of precision. He reveals that this structure will permanently "from that day" be called by another name that proclaims the precious reason for its preeminence. Ezekiel says, "The name of the city from that day shall be 'The Lord is there'" (Ezek 48:35).

Conclusion

To summarize the big picture of what has been covered, I first showed how the many similarities between John's city (Rev 21–22) and Ezekiel's city (Ezek 40:2; 48:30–35) compel us to carefully compare the two cities. Second, I explained how traditional interpreters calculate the size of John's city as three individual linear measurements, making it a structure that would be about 1,320 miles in each direction: length, width, and height. Third, I explained that the size of John's city (Rev 21:16) should be reexamined and would more likely be about 12 miles on each side (length, width, and height). Fourth, I examined why the measurements of Ezekiel's city (Ezek 48:35) have been difficult to determine and then showed why the measurement of Ezekiel's city is approximately 11 miles on each side. Finally, I examined the measurements of Ezekiel's

Revelation

10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. 12 It had great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates were twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. 15 The one who spoke with me had a gold measuring rod to measure the city, and its gates and its wall. 16 The city is laid out in a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, [12,000 stadia]; its length and width and height are equal.

"In the visions of God He brought me into the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain, and on it to the south there was a structure like a city." (Ezekiel 40:2)

"All the land will be changed into a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem; but Jerusalem will rise and remain on its site." (Zechariah 14:10)

"O afflicted one, storm tossed, and not comforted, Behold, I will set your stones in antimony ... and your entire wall of precious stones." (Isaiah 54:11-12)

"These are the exits of the city ... shall be the gates of the city, named for the tribes of Israel, three gates toward the north. ... On the east side ... shall be three gates ... On the south side ... shall be three gates. ... On the west side ... shall be three gates." (Ezekiel 48:30-34)

"behold, there was a man ... with a ... measuring rod in his hand." (Ezekiel 40:3)

"These shall be its measurements." (250 rods + 4500 rods + 250 rods = 5000 rods or 11 miles each side) (Ezekiel 48:16-17)

Figure 12

Holy Allotment to show how the entire layout presents a panoramic view of how the city fits into the big picture. John's first-century readers, therefore, reading Rev 21:10–16 verse by verse, would have seen specific words that triggered memories of specific Old Testament prophecies (see Figure 12).

Ezekiel had already provided the size of one side of his city as approximately 11 miles (Ezek 48:30–35), so John's readers could simply have used the measurement of Ezekiel's one side to get the measurement of one side of John's city. John's readers, then, would have understood this magnificent structure descending from heaven to be the city God had revealed to Ezekiel.

Now, almost two-thousand years after John wrote, assembling the puzzle of the New Jerusalem has been a challenge to us all. Information about Jerusalem's future is scattered throughout the Bible like puzzle pieces. I have gradually come to realize that God has provided the lid to the puzzle box through his prophet Ezekiel. By carefully consulting what he revealed, the puzzle can be assembled without ignoring any of the pieces and without jamming them where they don't fit. The size of the city Ezekiel describes (about 11 miles in length and 11 miles in width at the base) approximates the size of John's New Jerusalem (about 12 miles in length and 12 miles in width at the base). I believe the issue of size has been one of the main underlying barriers that has

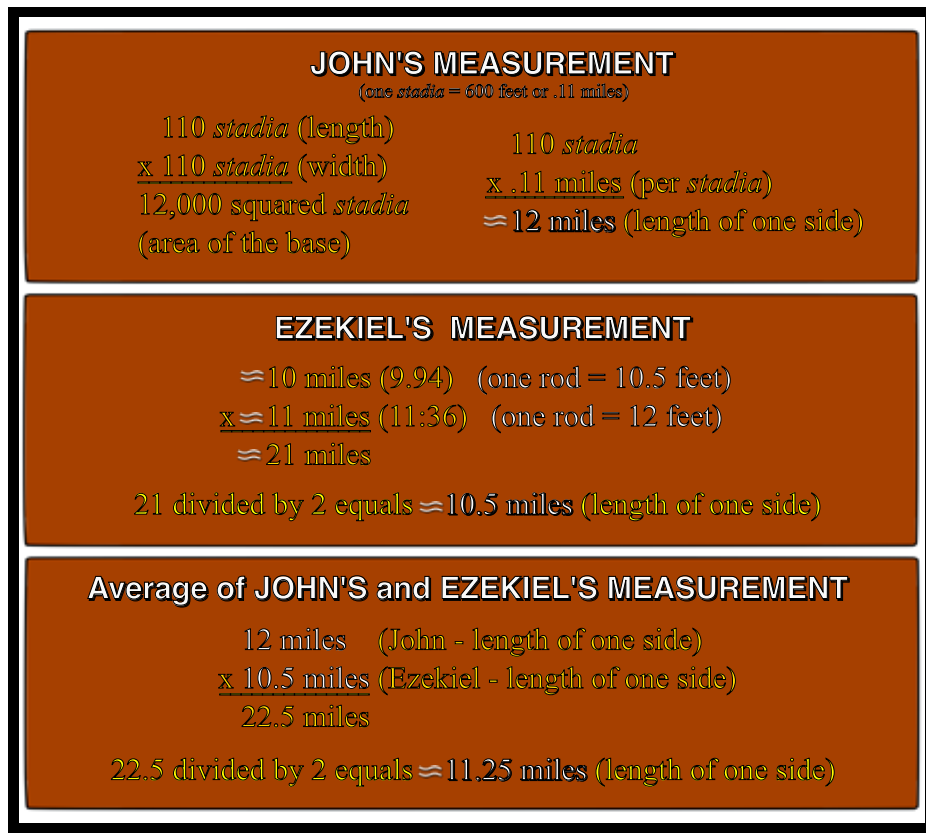
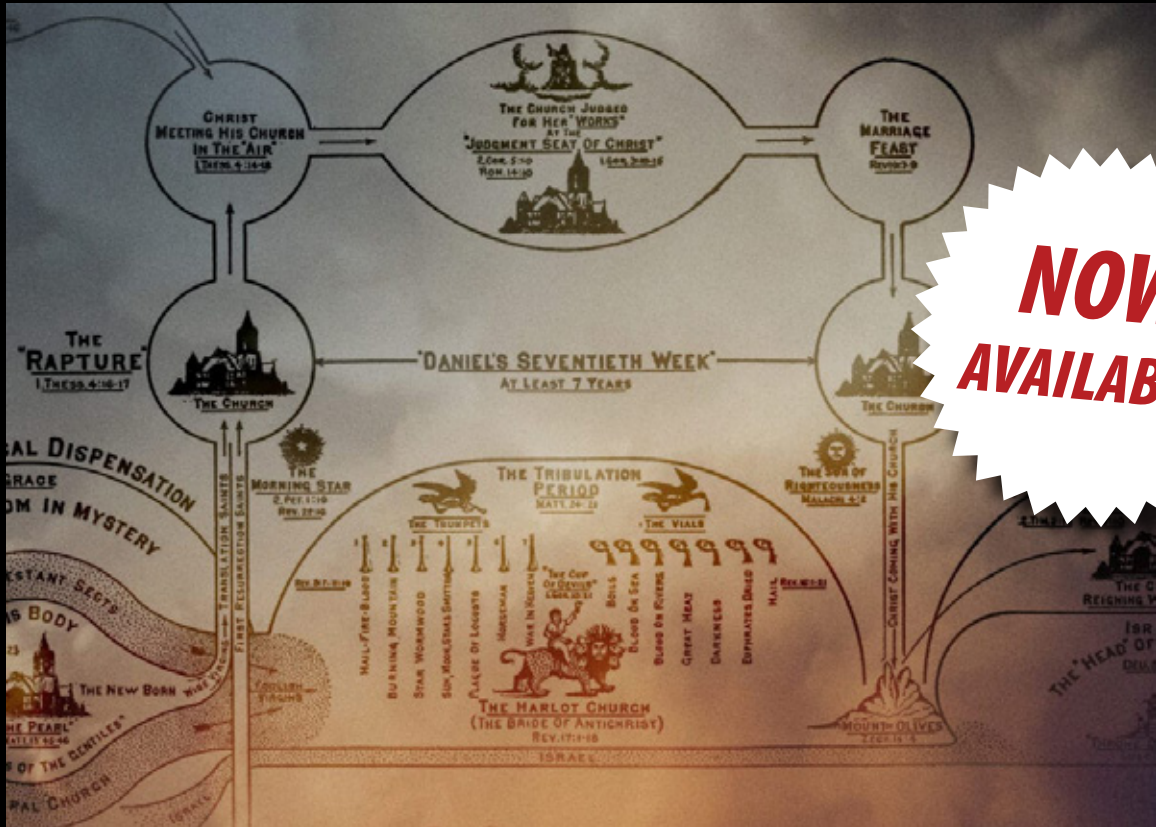


Figure 13

held many from understanding that New Jerusalem will descend to earth at the beginning of the millennium. If this interpretation is correct, it must align with the many prophecies throughout Scripture that deal with the timing comprehensively and coherently. May we better understand how God will answer the prayers of the millions who have asked, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). **BP**



Janet Willis is the author of *What on Earth is Heaven Like?: A Look at God's City, New Jerusalem*, and the children's book *God's Got a House and It's Coming to Earth*. For more resources go to scottandjanetwillis.com.



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PRETRIB

Examining the Foundations of
Pretribulation Rapture Theology

ALAN E. KURSCHNER



Prophecies Fulfilled Before the Rapture in the Early Church and Beyond

— Dr. Alan E. Kurschner

Jesus cannot return for his church before predictive prophecies have taken place during the church age, prophecies that militate against an imminent return of Jesus.

If it can be demonstrated that prophecies were intended to be fulfilled before the rapture, then pretribulation imminence theology lacks support. Imminence theology, especially pretribulationism, has generally believed that Christ's return became imminent after his ascension or after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit first indwelt believers.¹ However, if it can be demonstrated that even one predictive prophecy must take place before the rapture of the church, it invalidates the pretribulational concept of imminence. I will consider prophecies outlined in this article in roughly chronological order as they are fulfilled, with some prophecies requiring more comment than others.

¹ E.g., J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 203.

Paul Must Testify in Rome

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Have courage, for just as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” (Acts 23:11; cf. Acts 19:21)

The evening after Paul spoke in front of the Sanhedrin, the risen Lord gave him a prophecy that he “must” (δεῖ) testify in Rome. This prophecy no doubt encouraged Paul in his ensuing hardships, keeping the faith and being a bold witness so that he could fulfill God’s purposes through his ministry. It would be some years before this prophecy was fulfilled. The implications for imminence theology are evident: Jesus would not return for his church until this prophecy was fulfilled. It was God’s will not to send his Son back to rapture the church during Paul’s ministry. His plan was for Paul to spread the good news of Jesus throughout the regions of the Roman Empire—not only in the Roman Empire, but to Caesar himself: “For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve came to me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul! You must stand before Caesar, and God has graciously granted you the safety of all who are sailing with you’” (Acts 27:23–24). This prophecy was given to Paul during a storm as they were sailing to Rome. The prophecy states that Paul “must [δεῖ] stand before Caesar” to testify of the gospel. God ordained that the Jewish apostle Paul would testify in front of the Gentile Roman Caesar, proclaiming the Name above all names. This prophecy indubitably contradicts imminence theology. At the time this prophecy was given, Jesus’s return could not have been imminent.

It may be claimed that God “secretly” gave Paul this prophecy, thereby the church would not know and could continue to hold to imminence. This would be a strained and illogical attempt to maintain imminence for the following reasons:

1. The biblical fact remains that Jesus could not return before this prophecy was fulfilled.
2. It impugns the character of God by making him contradict himself, telling Paul one thing and the church the opposite.

3. The prophecy given to Paul was not kept in “secret.” He openly shared it with the ship’s crew so that he could encourage them that God would keep them safe (Acts 27:23–26). Furthermore, Paul certainly would have shared this wonderful story of God’s providential protection with the church in Italy.

I want to make one further point. Pretribulationism claims that Paul taught imminence in his Thessalonian epistles, claiming that he never mentions that the great tribulation will happen before the rapture.² My question, then, is how could Paul be teaching imminence in his Thessalonian epistles if, years later, he would receive a prophecy from the Lord stating he would testify in Rome before Caesar? In other words, the prophecies about Paul testifying contradict the claim that he was teaching imminence in his Thessalonian epistle. Jesus could not return before Paul testified.

In summary, this prophecy undermines the notion that the rapture could have happened during Paul’s ministry before he testified in Rome before Caesar. The Roman wheels of justice moved slowly. It would take, not days, weeks, or months, but years before he would testify (Acts 28:11, 30). This predictive prophecy contradicts imminence theology.

² Robert L. Thomas “Imminence In the NT, Especially Paul’s Thessalonians Epistles,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 13 (2002): 191–214. This is a claim that I would dispute for two reasons: First, Paul does not use the exact same phrase that Jesus uses, “great tribulation” (θλίψις μεγάλη), but he is consistent with the *concept* of it. For example, in 1 Thess 4:15,17, the term Paul uses to refer to “the remaining ones” (οἱ περιλειπόμενοι) indicates a notion of being *left, survival, continuing to exist, remain*. In ancient literature, the term was typically used in contexts of survival from persecution or some other type of tribulation in which others may have been killed. Paul uses this term to connect it to the Parousia (παρουσία) mentioned in 1 Thess 4:15. That is, the last generation of the church that survives up to the Parousia will be raptured (1 Thess 4:17). This survival is consistent with Jesus’s teaching from his Olivet Discourse where some (not all) believers will survive the persecution of the great tribulation: “For then there will be great suffering unlike anything that has happened from the beginning of the world until now, or ever will happen. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (Matt 24:21–22). These believers, Jesus teaches, will be delivered at his Parousia (Matt 24:27–31). The second reason is that Paul taught that the church will “first” (πρῶτον) encounter the Antichrist before Jesus returned for the day of the Lord (2 Thess 2:3).

Peter Will Grow Old and Die of Crucifixion

I tell you the solemn truth, when you were young, you tied your clothes around you and went wherever you wanted, but when you are old [γηράσκω], you will stretch out your hands, and others will tie you up and bring you where you do not want to go [i.e., crucifixion] (Now Jesus said this to indicate clearly by what kind of death Peter was going to glorify God.) After he said this, Jesus told Peter, “Follow me.” (John 21:18–19)

In this passage, Jesus makes a two-fold prophecy that Peter will live to be “old” and be martyred by crucifixion. Later in life, this same Peter would pen: “But if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but glorify God that you bear such a name” (1 Pet 4:16). These two prophecies precluded an “any moment” rapture during his lifetime. Jesus could not have returned until after this prophecy was fulfilled. To be clear, it does not mean that Jesus would return immediately after this prophecy took place; only that he would not return before it did.

Feeling the weight of this prophecy, pretribulationists have objected by citing 2 Pet 1:14, which says, “. . . since I know that my tabernacle [physical body] will soon [tachinos] be removed, because our Lord Jesus Christ revealed this to me” (2 Pet 1:14). Pretribulationists have reasoned that the rapture must have been imminent during the lifetime of Peter since 2 Pet 1:14 teaches that he knew that he would die “suddenly.”³ This misses the point for several reasons.

First, Peter did not write his epistle immediately after Jesus prophesied that he would grow old and be martyred. The prophecy was likely written in the 60s, almost three decades later. The prophecy given to Peter during Jesus’s earthly ministry that he would grow “old” (John 21:18–19) and Peter’s *much later* revelation that he would die “soon” (2 Pet 1:14) were clearly prophesied by the Lord at two different periods in Peter’s life. Second, and more importantly, the fact of Jesus’s prophecy remains regardless: Peter must die *first* before Jesus returns. This point is inescapable,

³ E.g., Gerald B. Stanton, “The Doctrine of Imminency: Is It Biblical?” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 231.

which is why attention seems to be diverted away from the actual predictive prophecy. The takeaway here is that Jesus unequivocally prophesied an event that will happen before his return: Peter would grow old and die as a martyr in his old age. Jesus would not return before this was fulfilled. Therefore, Jesus’s return for the church would not be imminent *as long as Peter was alive*.

Another challenge put forward is found in Acts 12:1–4, where Herod had Peter arrested to stand trial. Gerald B. Stanton argues:

[A]nd Herod had just killed James and seized Peter with the same intention (Acts 12:1–3). Certainly believers expected Peter’s early death, for when Rhoda bore the news of his release, they said, “Thou art mad,” and when he appeared to them “they were astonished” (Acts 12:15–16). They had no concept that his would be a long life, and as they looked for the Savior they certainly did not run around asking, “I wonder if Peter is dead yet?”⁴

There are several problems with this objection. First, Peter’s belief that he would die soon, recorded in 2 Pet 1:14, is not addressing the imprisonment in Acts 12 since 2 Pet 1:14 was written much later. Peter states in 1:14 that he would die *soon* “because our Lord Jesus Christ revealed this to me,” which goes without saying that Peter did not die in association with, or even soon after, the imprisonment account in Acts 12. I do not believe the pretribulation interpreter is willing to think that Jesus’s prophecy about Peter failed! The objection using Acts 12:1–4 does not work because it is irrelevant to a clear-cut prophesied event that must happen before Jesus returns. Lastly, Stanton makes another objection, claiming, “[T]he passage in question which recorded Christ’s conversation with Peter, John 21:18, could not have been a factor in their thinking, for it was not written and sent to the churches until 20 or more years *after* Peter’s death.”⁵ This reveals an ignorance of how the Gospels were written. That is like saying the gospel message was not known for decades until the Gospels were written down. The Gospels did not just appear out of thin air

⁴ Stanton, “Doctrine of Imminency,” 231.

⁵ Stanton, “Doctrine of Imminency,” 231.

decades later. There was an oral tradition that began to be circulated immediately after—even during—Jesus’s ministry. Eventually, all four Gospels were written down in order to preserve this oral tradition for later generations. Jesus’s prophecy to Peter would have been one of countless traditions of Jesus’s sayings and deeds (John 21:23–25). Why did Jesus prophesy this in the first place? This prophecy comes immediately on the heels of Jesus pressing Peter with the question, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15–19). Jesus instructs Peter that if he loves him, then he is to “Feed my sheep.” So the prophecy suggests that Jesus has a lifetime mission for Peter to make disciples until he gets “old.” His mission would then culminate in a martyr’s death “to glorify God” (John 21:19). In summary, this prophecy contradicts the pretribulation idea of an imminent rapture.

John Must Prophecy Again

Then the voice I had heard from heaven began to speak to me again, “Go and take the open scroll in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, “Take the scroll and eat it. It will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.” So I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it, and it did taste as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter. Then they told me: “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.” (Rev 10:8–11)

John is given a commission that he “must” (δεῖ) “prophesy” (προφητεύω) again about what will happen to “many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.” John is commissioned to prophesy about the contents of this scroll. Exactly what the “sweet” and “bitter” refers to is debated among interpreters. The bitterness likely refers to the judgment that will fall upon the nations. Nevertheless, the point I want to highlight is that John is told to *prophesy again*. Whether the Book of Revelation was written before AD 70 or, more likely, in AD 95 is not relevant. The point is that Jesus’s return to rapture the church could not have happened before

John would carry out God’s plan of prophesying. Jesus’s return could not have been imminent before the Book of Revelation was written, circulated, and read among the seven churches:

Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches—to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea Therefore write what you saw, what is, and what will be after these things. (Rev 1:11, 19; cf. Rev 4:1)

Many pretribulation interpreters have read these verses multiple times in their lifetimes, not realizing that the teaching therein contradicts imminence theology. This is another prophecy, among others recorded in the Bible, that must happen in the lives of the apostles—in this case, the apostle John. Remember that, if even one prophesied event must take place before the rapture, it contradicts the concept of imminence. Therefore, imminence theology is, once again, found wanting.

Jerusalem’s Destruction in AD 70 and Israel Becoming a Nation in 1948

The next prophecies that undermine imminence is Jesus’s prediction concerning Israel. During the old covenant dispensation, Jesus prophesied to Israel that God would judge Jerusalem with destruction, including its temple:

Now as Jesus was going out of the temple courts and walking away, his disciples came to show him the temple buildings. And he said to them, “Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down!” (Matt 24:1–2, cf. Luke 21:5–6)

“For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and surround you and close in on you from every side. They will demolish you—you and your children within your walls—and they will not leave within you one stone on top of another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” (Luke 19:43–44)

This prediction is problematic for pretribulationists.

Since Israel and Jerusalem will exist at the beginning of Daniel's Seventieth Week, and since most pretribulationists believe that the rapture will happen just before Daniel's Seventieth Week begins, the rapture, *according to their own view*, could not have happened before AD 63, seven years before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.⁶ The way many pretribulationists get around this is by dismissing the Olivet Discourse as being relevant to the church, which we will discuss later in this article.

Another related prophecy is from the prophet Ezekiel on the regathering of Israel back to her homeland. In the late 1800's, a trickling of Jews began to take place in such a regathering.⁷ Eventually, in 1948, in the aftermath of World War 2, Israel once again became a nation in her homeland. Today, God continues to providentially regather Jews around the world, even saving many of them. God's regathering program is attested by Ezekiel's "dry bones" prophecy in Ezek 37:1–14:

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and placed me in the midst of the valley, and it was full of bones. He made me walk all around among them. I realized there were a great many bones in the valley and they were very dry. He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said to him, "Sovereign Lord, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and tell them: 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones: Look, I am about to infuse breath into you and you will live. I will put tendons on you and muscles over you and will cover you with skin; I will put breath in you and you will live. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

⁶ Some pretribulation exponents believe in a gap of time between the rapture and the beginning of the Seventieth Week, thereby allowing the rapture to occur before AD 63. I have extensively critiqued this gap interpretation elsewhere, so I refer the reader to those resources (Alan E. Kurschner, *Pretrib: Examining the Foundations of Pretribulation Rapture Theology* [Rice Lake, WI: Eschatos Publishing, 2022], 123–150); Kurschner, *Antichrist Before the Day of the Lord: What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Return of Christ* (Pompton Lakes, NJ: Eschatos Publishing, 2013), 126–29.

⁷ Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2–21.

So I prophesied as I was commanded. There was a sound when I prophesied—I heard a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to bone. As I watched, I saw tendons on them, then muscles appeared, and skin covered over them from above, but there was no breath in them.

He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath—prophecy, son of man—and say to the breath: 'This is what the sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these corpses so that they may live.'" So I prophesied as I was commanded, and the breath came into them; they lived and stood on their feet, an extremely great army.

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are all the house of Israel. Look, they are saying, 'Our bones are dry, our hope has perished; we are cut off.' Therefore prophecy, and tell them, 'This is what the sovereign Lord says: Look, I am about to open your graves and will raise you from your graves, my people. I will bring you to the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, my people. I will place my breath in you and you will live; I will give you rest in your own land. Then you will know that I am the Lord—I have spoken and I will act, declares the Lord.'"

In his prophecy, Ezekiel uses biological metaphors to indicate three phases to Israel's salvation. In the first phase, her exiled circumstances are represented as "dry bones," "corpses," and "our bones are dry, our hope has perished; *we are cut off*." The second phase is Israel's present regathering to her homeland, but in an unregenerate, unbelieving status, rejecting Jesus as her Messiah. But this phase includes a believing remnant, which is realized as "a rattling": "[A]nd the bones came together, bone to bone. As I watched, I saw tendons on them, then muscles appeared, and skin covered over them from above, *but there was no breath in them*" (emphasis mine). Ezekiel also indicates this regathering, saying, "I will bring you to the land of Israel." The third and final phase is Israel's salvation, which is signaled by the key term *breath*: "I will place my breath in you, and you will live; I will give you rest

in your own land. Then you will know that I am the Lord.” The prophet Ezekiel made a prophecy to Israel, and about Israel, with much of it being fulfilled during the church age.

In summary, since most pretribulation interpreters believe Israel will exist when the rapture takes place, Jesus could not have returned for the church before Israel became a nation again. Therefore, Jesus’s return was not imminent before 1948.

Prophecies of a Delay in Jesus’s Farewell Address (John 14–17)

Contrary to the belief that Jesus taught an imminent return, Jesus taught a *delay* to his return. The delay is necessary for God to fulfill his goals through the church and within the larger history of the world. This delay began after Jesus’s ascension and continued during the early church, and God’s purposes for the delay, as we see, will continue until Jesus returns. There are several key passages that teach this delay: Jesus’s Farewell Address in John 14–17, the Olivet Discourse, and his parables.

Jesus’s Farewell Address is a good place to begin because pretribulationists admit that this pre-crucifixion instruction is for the church. Despite this admission, it does not seem to dawn on them that embedded in the Farewell Addresses is the teaching that his return will not be imminent but delayed. It is worth quoting at length S. P. Tregelles, a leading Greek scholar in the nineteenth century who raised concerns about a new “any moment” rapture teaching that was

arising during his lifetime. In *The Hope of Christ’s Second Coming*, he explains why this is a dilemma for an “any moment” rapture.

In the discourse of our Lord to His apostles the evening before His crucifixion (John 14–16), He contemplated His church as being left here on this earth for a considerable period: the instruction then given for its guidance during such an interval, and the mission of the Holy Ghost, as the other Paraclete, was for the right endowment of such to live and act in the circumstances. Jesus tells them in the beginning of this discourse, what their hope should be: “I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (14:3). So that every direction, every warning, and every promise of support, would relate to persons thus waiting. From this we may draw the instruction, that it is thus, and in no other way, that we are called to wait. One thing especially which the Lord promised to His disciples was suffering: “If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you . . . if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (15:18, 20). “They shall put you out of the synagogues; yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he does God service” (16:2). The whole of the three chapters may be taken as containing proof after proof, not only that there would be (as we know that the facts have shown) a long interval between the departure of the Lord and His



personal return, but that they were taught that such an interval would be; so that they knew that the Lord's coming could not take place until certain things had occurred, and until certain moral features of opposition between the Church and the world had displayed themselves.

Persecution is here one of the significant tokens; and this, too, had been specified particularly in Matt 24: "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you; and you shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake: and then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and hate one another" (vv. 9–10). This shall be the treatment received by the Church from without; but will all be truth and peace within its professing pale? "Many false prophets shall arise, and shall deceive many; and because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (vv. 11–12). In all this a course of time is distinctly marked out, as that which must elapse before Christ should come to receive His people to himself.

In every place in which the commission to preach the Gospel is stated, it is very clear that a sufficient length of time is supposed during which it would go forth into the different spheres of testimony. "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth; go you therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world [age]" (Matt 28:18–20). "Go you into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). "You shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and you shall be witnesses unto me, both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The church was taught that she was called to a place of service, and also of trial: the hope of the coming of her Lord was that by which she was to be animated in the one, and sustained in the other. She knew that certain moral signs should precede that coming; she knew also that certain definite

occurrences should first take place; but, resting on the word of her Lord, it was her calling to look onward, even though the interval were of necessity long. The Lord showed His grace in instructing His people by His truth. Had He held out different expectations, might it not have seemed as if He had indeed given a hope that must make ashamed?⁸

Tregelles's main point was that Jesus teaches his disciples that they will experience a delay—a significant delay—before he would return from heaven to receive them again. Two reasons for this delay are given: (1) trials of persecution will come upon the church, and (2) the process of evangelization of the gospel will take place for many peoples. Tregelles rightly critiques the budding "any moment rapture" teaching, explaining that the ordained delay of Jesus's return is necessary and will be fulfilled during the church age.

I'd like to expand a bit on Tregelles comments. John 14:2–3 says, "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." The notion of "making ready a place" contradicts imminence. Certainly, Jesus is all-powerful and could make a place ready in a split second. But Jesus is using language to communicate to his disciples that there will be a delay of his return *and a purpose in that delay*. Jesus is not simply inactive in his absence. He is accomplishing the Father's will in preparing "dwelling places in my Father's house." In short, Jesus explains the reason for his delay.

Next, John 14:12 says, "I tell you the solemn truth, the person who believes in me will perform the miraculous deeds that I am doing, and will perform greater deeds than these, because I am going to the Father." This prophecy of believers performing "greater deeds" must be fulfilled before Jesus returns. Whether this refers to the miraculous deeds recorded in the Book of Acts and/or deeds performed in subsequent centuries of church history is not the point. The

⁸ S. P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming: How Is it Taught in Scripture? And Why?* (London: Houlston & Wright, 1864), 21–22.

point is that John 14:12 would not have been fulfilled if Jesus had returned moments after he went back to the Father.

Next, John 14:16 says: “Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever” (cf. vv. 14:26; 15:26; 16:7–8, 13). The Advocate, of course, is the Holy Spirit. The sending of the Holy Spirit to teach and lead in truth during the church age creates a delay to Jesus returning.

Next, John 15:20–21 says, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they obeyed my word, they will obey yours too. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me” (cf. 16:1–4). Jesus prophesies that his disciples will be persecuted because they are associated with him. This is another prophetic event that militates against imminence.

Finally, John 17:20 says, “I am not praying only on their behalf, but also on behalf of those [future disciples] who believe in me through their [Jesus’s disciples] testimony.” In this instance, Jesus prophesies that his disciples will produce fruit from their evangelism. Again, this prophecy of future disciple-making renders imminence untenable.

In John 14–17, during the old covenant dispensation, Jesus gave church instruction to his disciples who would become the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20). The prophecies outlined above intend to show that Jesus’s return will be delayed—that there are pre-rapture prophecies that must occur before Jesus returns. This passage alone undermines an “any moment” rapture.

Prophecies of a Delay in Jesus’s Olivet Discourse

A few days earlier, before Jesus taught his Farewell Discourse, he delivered his Olivet Discourse to the same audience: his disciples. While pretribulationists typically dismiss the Olivet Discourse as a teaching not applying to the church, the fact remains that Jesus’s audience, his disciples, would become the foundation of the church. It is special pleading to claim that his Farewell Address given the day before his crucifixion to his disciples *is* for the church, but the Olivet Discourse given a few days earlier to the same group of listeners is *not*. The

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main theme concerning his second coming is that it will be delayed. The reason for the delay is for God to fulfill his divine purposes during the interadvent period. Jesus understands human nature—that it is impatient and vulnerable to fall into apathy while waiting for his return; hence his warning about losing spiritual vigilance during a season in one’s life.

In the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13, Matt 24–25, Luke 21), there are described three temptations that can cause the Christian to fall into apostasy: slothfulness, persecution, and false teachings. While I will not cover all these warnings, there are several events that speak to our question of an imminent return.

When the disciples asked about the sign of the end of the age and his coming, Jesus began to warn them what is *not* the sign, the beginning of birth pangs:

Jesus answered them, “Watch out that no one misleads you. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will mislead many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Make sure that you are not alarmed, for this must happen, *but the end is still to come*. For nation will rise up in arms against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these things are the beginning of birth pains.” (Matt 24:4–8, emphasis mine)

As noted above, Jesus’s audience for the Olivet Discourse was his Jewish disciples, who would form part of the foundation of the church. By extension, Jesus is warning all of his disciples lest they give up faith, thinking that this is the end. The conditions that Jesus states that must happen before his return are false christs, wars and rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes. He calls these “the beginning of birth pangs.”⁹ This metaphor indicates that they will be painful experiences for God’s people, but only preliminaries to the eschatological events that will lead up

to his return. Thus, it makes sense why Jesus would warn believers not to think that the end has arrived when they witness them. While these events will be intense, they will not be *as* intense as the “great tribulation” (*thlipsis megale*): “For then there will be great tribulation unlike anything that has happened from the beginning of the world until now, or ever will happen” (Matt 24:21). The Greek term *thlipsis* (tribulation) was a common word used for painful child birthing. Based on Jesus’s choice of terms in his discourse, this would suggest that there will be three stages of intensity: the *beginning* of birth pangs; the great tribulation (i.e., intense birth pangs); and by implication, the “birth” of Jesus’s arrival.

The next set of prophecies provides specificity and shifts to the persecution that Christians will receive from the world and concludes with the worldwide proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom to all the nations, signaling the end of the age:

“Then they will hand you over to be persecuted and will kill you. You will be hated by all the nations because of my name. Then many will be led into sin, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will appear and deceive many, and because lawlessness will increase so much, the love of many will grow cold. But the person who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be

⁹ I have elsewhere argued that the beginning birth pangs refer to the first three seals depicted in the Book of Revelation (Kurschner, *Antichrist*, 18–21).

preached throughout the whole inhabited earth as a testimony to all the nations, *and then the end will come.*” (Matt 24:9–14, emphasis mine)

It is impossible to read this passage about what must happen before Jesus’s return and walk away thinking that he can return at any moment. This is why many pretribulationist interpreters have traditionally dismissed Jesus’s teachings in the Olivet Discourse, relegating them to a new category of believers often called “tribulation Jewish saints.”¹⁰ However, it is contradictory for pretribulationists to claim that Jesus’s teaching on the end of the age in his Olivet Discourse does not apply to the church, while the Great Commission (which Jesus gave to his disciples only a few weeks later) is for the church. They fail to consider a key link between these two teachings.

Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, *I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matt 28:18–20, emphasis mine)

The Great Commission was given to his disciples—who, again, were founding members of the church—and told them that he would be with them to the end of the age (i.e., church age): “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Most people do not think of the Great Commission as a prophecy, but this part of the Commission is just that—a prophecy. Jesus is promising that he will be with you (i.e., the church) until the completion at the end of the age. How can Jesus teach that his return can be imminent up to the end of the age, while also teaching that prophesied events must happen before then? Since Jesus teaches in his Great Commission that the church will exist on earth up to the end of the age, by extension, the church will also be here for the events that will transpire before the end of the age. The only way around this is to postulate two ends of the ages. Jesus implores his disciples to “obey everything” that he taught them; he

did not say everything except the Olivet Discourse.

In summary, Jesus taught (1) in the Olivet Discourse, that the prophesied events of “the beginning of birth pangs” would occur before the end of the age. Therefore, the church will be here before the end of the age to experience the prophesied events of the beginning of birth pangs, and (2) in the Great Commission, that he would be with his church up to the end of the age.

Prophecies of a Delay in Jesus’s Parables

Finally, we turn to parables that teach a delay and argue against the idea of an imminent return of Jesus for his church. First, let’s look at parables and similitudes from Jesus’s Olivet Discourse. The first parable uses the fig tree as an analogy: “Learn this parable from the fig tree: Whenever its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things, know that he is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matt 24:32–34). This parable illustrates the delay that “all these things” (from verses 4–31) must take place first, and then you will know “that he is near, right at the door.” Pretribulationists have taken this latter statement out of context as a proof text for imminence. However, the immediate context states that it is only “when you see all these things” that his return will be at the door. Further, if we take “this generation” to refer to the generation that will witness “all these things,” then it supports our understanding that Jesus can return during any generation, but not at any moment, since the branch must first become “tender and puts out its leaves.” Only then will you know “that summer [i.e., his return] is near.” While we will, therefore, know the season of his return when we witness the prophesied predicted events outlined in verses 4–31, Jesus qualifies this statement that, after these events occur, you will still not know the exact day nor hour: “But as for that day and hour no one knows it—not even the angels in heaven — except the Father alone” (Matt 24:36). Later, he repeats this teaching as follows: “Therefore stay alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (Matt 24:42) and “Therefore you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour

¹⁰ I have responded to this pretribulationist interpretation elsewhere (see Kurschner, *Antichrist*, 205–208).

when you do not expect him” (Matt 24:44). In other words, these statements are predicated on the point that we will know the season of the Antichrist’s great tribulation, but we will not know the day nor hour of Jesus’s return when it cuts it short (vv. 22, 19, 30–31, 36). Only when the great tribulation is happening and the celestial disturbance event takes place (v. 29) will his return become imminent. Luke’s account reassured believers, then, that at that point when these things begin to happen, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

The next parable, or more specifically a similitude, indicating a delay is the Noahic illustration describing how people will be going on with their typical activities of life: “For just like the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. For in those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. And they knew nothing until the flood came and took them all away. It will be the same at the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt 24:37–39). Luke’s account gives the additional example of Lot: “Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot, people were eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building; but on the day Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be the same on the day the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17:28–30). To be sure, people were wicked in the days of Noah and Lot; however, the point Jesus is making here is that during the delay of the Parousia, people will be going on with their usual business, oblivious to the coming day of God. The implicit warning, of course, is to not be like them, but instead to be spiritually vigilant in every season of your life. For Jesus’s similitudes to work, there must be a delay when people forget about God and are distracted by the affairs of the world. Imminence does not make sense in light of Jesus’s use of these illustrations. Rather, the illustrations make sense if Jesus intended a delay whereby people become slothful and fixated on anything but God.

Interlude: A Response to a Pretribulation Objection

Pretribulationists have objected by claiming that the parables and similitudes that Jesus uses refer to

the period after the rapture at his second coming, which they place seven years later.¹¹ The traditional pretribulation interpretation views the gathering of the elect in Matt 24:31 as occurring at the end of the future seven-year period, where they see the elect as saved Israel and the wicked left behind as having gone through God’s eschatological wrath. However, Jesus’s similitudes of the days of Noah, the story of Lot, and the thief contradict pretribulationism. In those illustrations, Jesus is teaching that, before his return, the world will be going on with its ordinary business, unaware of impending divine judgment. But this makes no sense and is contradicted by the fact that the unprecedented wrath of God through the trumpet and bowl judgments occurs before the battle of Armageddon. The sixth trumpet by itself says one-third of humanity perishes (Rev 9:18)! How can the world be going on with their ordinary business, as it were in the days of Noah, completely oblivious while one-third of the earth’s population dies around them? *How would Jesus’s return at the judgment of Armageddon catch the ungodly off guard as a “thief”?* Rather, what Jesus is depicting is that the separation pictured in Matt 24:31 occurs—not in the context of Armageddon—but at the rapture, which will take place just before the day of the Lord’s wrath begins, followed by the trumpet and bowl judgments. By the time Armageddon finally arrives, the world will have already been beleaguered by God’s wrath. This is very different from the pretribulation belief that the world will be unaware of Jesus’s sudden coming for them as a thief after the trumpet and bowl judgments. The prewrath view makes much better sense of Jesus’s illustrations: During the Antichrist’s great tribulation, the world will be saying “peace and safety,” completely oblivious to God’s impending judgment. Those days of great tribulation will be cut short at some unknown day and hour when Jesus returns in the clouds and raptures his people, while that same day, God’s judgments begin. Incidentally, the apostle Paul is consistent on this point as he notes, “sudden destruction comes on them, like labor pains . . . For you know quite well that the day of the Lord will come in the same way as a thief in the night. Now when they are saying, ‘There is peace and

¹¹ E.g., Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, 63.

security, then sudden destruction comes on them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will surely not escape” (1 Thess 5:2–3).

Continuing the Prophecies of a Delay in Jesus’s Parables

Returning to Jesus’s parables illustrating his return, Luke gives us the point that there is a delay: “The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, *and you will not see it*” (Luke 17:22; cf. 23–37, emphasis mine). Jesus makes a predictive prophecy that his return is not imminent. To reinforce this delay, Jesus explains that the reason they will long for his return is the persecution that will characterize the period in between. Most interpreters stop at the end of Chapter 17, but Jesus’s teaching continues with a parable to illustrate this point: the prayer of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8). Jesus prophesies that the delay of his return will be characterized by severe persecution and may cause many to “lose heart” and even lose faith: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” God’s “chosen ones” will “cry out to him day and night” for justice. However, God promises that the persecution during the delay will eventually be cut short by his justice that will come with the return of the Son of Man.

Finally, there are three more analogies in the Olivet Discourse where Jesus illustrates the conspicuous delay of his return. First is the apathetic attitude of the evil slave: “But if that evil slave should say to himself, ‘My master is staying away *a long time*’” (Matt 24:48); second is the parable of the talents: “*After a long time*, the master of those slaves came and settled his accounts with them” (Matt 25:19); last, but not least, is the parable of the ten virgins: “When the bridegroom was *delayed a long time*, they all became drowsy and fell asleep” (Matt 25:5).

In summary, Jesus predicted that there would be a delay before his return. These illustrations and similitudes have applied to every generation of the church. Jesus could have returned during the first generation of the church, but it could not have been imminent following his ascension because that would have defeated the purposes for the delay. The point of illustrating his return with these parables and similitudes is to warn his listeners *not to lose*



vigilance during the delay lest those prophetic events he outlined happen quickly, falling like a row of dominos (the beginning of birth pangs, the abomination of desolation, and the great tribulation). Jesus may very well return within a season of our lives when we are distracted by sin, the affairs of the world, or deceived by false teaching. But we should be like the five wise virgins who did not presume on the bridegroom’s delay.

Finally, we turn to Jesus’s kingdom parables, which illustrate the necessity of a delay to Jesus’s return in order for the church to grow, militating against the notion that Jesus’s return was imminent immediately after his ascension. Many of the prophecies about the church age are found in Jesus’s kingdom parables, especially in Matt 13. There are some dispensationalists, considered hyper-dispensationalists, who believe that none of Jesus’s teachings from the four Gospels applies to the church. They would claim that there is no reference or allusion to a “church period” in the Gospels at all, including in Jesus’s kingdom parables in Matt 13.



The vast majority of pretribulationists, however, are not hyper-dispensationalists and would view the interim period spoken about by Jesus in his kingdom parables as referring to the church age. It is this latter, normative group of dispensationalists to which my points in this section are directed.

The disciples asked Jesus why he spoke in parables, and Jesus answered, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven . . . and the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age” (Matt 13:11, 39–40 NASB, cf. 24:14, 28:20). This period, when the mysteries would unfold before the end-of-the-age harvest, has been called the church age, during which the gospel is proclaimed—the season of growth of the wheat and tares. Illustrations that explain the mysterious church age include the parables of the sowing of the seeds (Matt 13:3–9, 18–30, cf. 36–43), the mustard seed growing into a tree (Matt 13:31–32), the leaven in the flour (Matt 13:33), the treasure (Matt 13:44), the pearl of great value (Matt 13:45–46), and the good and bad fish (Matt 13:47–50). These parables, especially the mustard seed, indicate that Jesus’s return will be delayed while God fulfills his purposes during this period before the final harvest.

There are other teachings from the Gospels during the old covenant dispensation in which Jesus illustrates that delay was always in the plan of God in order for the church to grow. For example, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it”

(Matt 16:18). Jesus prophesied to his disciple Peter of the new community he would build based on confessing that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus, of course, would not return before he built his church, through which God would accomplish many of his purposes. The objection that he could have returned one second, hour, day, or month, for example, after Pentecost, is a failed attempt to defend imminency. Pentecost established the church for God to begin accomplishing his purposes, including the incorporation of Gentiles into the new covenant community: “I have other sheep that do not come from this sheepfold. I must bring them too, and they will listen to my voice, so that there will be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

In summary, this article focused on a variety of predictive prophecies that have already been fulfilled in the church age before the rapture: (1) Paul must testify in Rome, (2) Peter must grow old and die of crucifixion, (3) John must prophesy again, (4) Jerusalem must be destroyed in AD 70 and Israel must become again a nation in 1948, (5) and delays found in Jesus’s Farewell Address, (6) Jesus’s Olivet Discourse, and (7) Jesus’s Parables. In the context of Jesus’s return, imminence means that no prophesied events must happen before the Lord returns for his church. At a minimum, if even *one* prophecy is predicted to occur before the rapture, then his return cannot be considered imminent. It is rather best to practice a posture of *expectancy* for the Lord’s return and not imminency. We should be prepared for the Lord’s return in any generation. If we slack off and become distracted from our expectancy, Jesus may very well come back in a season of our life unexpectedly. “Remember, I have told you ahead of time” (Matt 24:25). **BP**



Alan E. Kurschner, Ph.D., is a biblical scholar committed to proclaiming the good news of God’s salvation in this dark world and heralding the second coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. Dr. Kurschner is the founder of Eschatos Ministries, teaching Bible prophecy from a futurist, premillennial, prewrath perspective. He is the author of *Antichrist Before the Day of the Lord: What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Return of Christ*. He is also the host of the popular podcast *Bible Prophecy Daily*™.



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Letters of Encouragement



From Wisconsin:

After He called me out of the darkness, I began to study eschatology. I used the pretribulation model as my framework. Over the years, I struggled to understand the structure of the apocalyptic texts and how they supported notions like imminence, tribulation saints, and an absent church during the 70th week of Daniel. I observed no support for these claims in the text. I noticed the opposite. Fortunately, I discovered an author named Chris White and his view on a model called Prewrath. A new way of viewing the text was available to me. I found Dr. Alan Kurschner's work and began to comprehend the texts. Today, I lead a daily bible study for my coworkers and now include Prewrath in the teaching. After sharing the model with my pastor weeks ago, my pastor and I began searching for scholarly articles for more information with Dr. Alan Kurschner's assistance.

— *Jeremy*

From Florida:

I had read the Bible in my 30s with a thirst for God's Truth. In a Protestant church bible study class on Daniel, the leader mentioned at the end of the class that we wouldn't have to worry about the tribulation as "we would all be outta here!" I questioned the leader by saying "Then why does God tell us to preserve until the end even unto death?" I had never heard of the pre-trib view until then, but I knew they were wrong in their understanding. I was born again a few years later and became acquainted with Eschatos Ministries and conferences. It was there I learned all the terms pretrib, post-trib, and pre-wrath, and that's when I found out I was pre-Wrath before I even knew what it was! Praise God for Eschatos Ministries and conferences!

— *Karan*

From Tennessee:

The year was 2001, and I joined the team when The Holy Land Experience was birthed by Marv Rosenthal (Zion's Hope) in Orlando, Florida. This Bible Theme Park was a means for believers to be encouraged by the Jewish roots of their Christian faith. It was during this time that I learned of the PreWrath rapture position. In those early days of studying the PreWrath position, I was introduced to Robert Van Kampen's writings. I had the blessing of learning from Marv and David Rosenthal, Mike Ufferman, Dr. Dan

Hayden, Dr. Bill Jones, Charles Cooper, and Alan Kurschner. Alan's ministry, Eschatos Ministries, has been a trusted resource for me. I am so thankful for his passion for communicating God's Word to help the next generation to become overcomers by providing the foundational framework to properly understand the chronology and timing of the second coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

— Jon George 



Artwork by Jon George

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