

An Overview of the Tribulation

by Randall Price

The eschatological period of divine judgment preceding the time of national Jewish redemption and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth is known as the Tribulation period. This concept was part of Jesus' eschatological teaching and was a frequent theme of the apostles and the early church. The primary source for the Tribulation doctrine developed from antecedent Old Testament usage. This is evident from the citations and allusions from the Old Testament in the principal New Testament eschatological texts of the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation. Therefore, the meaning and usage of its tribulation terms are essential to an understanding of the New Testament doctrine. Various views exist in evangelical interpretation of the time known in the Gospels as "the Tribulation" or "the Great Tribulation." In the first part of this essay I will consider briefly the various interpretations and in the second part look at how the New Testament concept of "the Tribulation" was developed from the Old Testament. The contention will be that an understanding of the Old Testament teaching will help us determine which view best interprets the New Testament presentation of the Tribulation.

Various Views. The time of tribulation on earth spoken of in the New Testament is variously interpreted as being fulfilled at one of several different periods. The school of Realized Eschatology, begun by C.H. Dodd, holds that Jesus "suffered and died in the great tribulation." They interpret every reference to tribulation as occurring during the lifetime, and particularly in the Passion, of Jesus. According to this interpretation, just as the eschatological expectation of tribulation was fulfilled in Christ's sufferings, so that of eschatological salvation (the general resurrection) was inaugurated with Christ's resurrection. The Reformed school (Amillennialists, Preterists, and Postmillennialists) interprets the Tribulation to take place just before the close of this age, which they hold is the millennium. Their Tribulation is the period during which Satan is released to go out and deceive the nations (Rev. 20:7-9). This text is taken as synonymous in time with the Tribulation predicted in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:14, 21) and the apostasy spoken of as occurring in "the latter times" (1 Tim. 4:1-3). The Symbolical school interprets the Tribulation allegorically, so that the Tribulation and Millennium (including the new heaven and earth) are symbolic of Christian "death" and "resurrection" through baptism. Historicists hold that the Tribulation occurred in the experience of the Church in the past, usually at some point during the history of Roman persecutions. Those of Nero, Caligula, or Domitian are usually the chief contenders, however there may as many events located as there are historicists to posit them. The Preterist school interprets the fulfillment of Daniel's seventy weeks by A.D. 70 with the events of the seventieth week taking place in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans. More extreme preterists hold that the Second Advent also occurred at this time, being symbolized in the Romans "coming in judgment" on the Jews.

While premillennialists agree on the Tribulation being future, they disagree on the duration of the Tribulation and the identity of the future "saints" who will be present during the Tribulation and for what part. The duration of the Tribulation is variously accepted to be three-and-one-half years, three-and-one-half plus years, or seven years. These differences in part relate to the different degrees of intensity experienced during this period. If one only considers the more severe outpourings of God's wrath during the trumpet and bowl judgments, the Tribulation only encompasses this time (mid-tribulationists, pre-wrath advocates). However, if one considers the first six seal judgments at the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week as displays of divine wrath, the Tribulation covers this entire period (pretribulationists). Although post-tribulationists would generally hold that the Tribulation is seven years in duration, they are not as concerned with its extent because they hold that believers are protected from God's wrath whenever it is

outpoured. These differences derive from whether a group accepts or rejects dispensationalism. Pretribulationists, who alone maintain a dispensational commitment, see those directly addressed in the Olivet Discourse to be exclusively Israel, rather than inclusive of the Church. The Church (composed of Jews and Gentiles) is to be removed before the seventieth week commences with the signing of the covenant with Antichrist (Dan. 9:27). Therefore the "Tribulation saints" are Jews who are restored to Messiah and Gentile proselytes to this form of Messianic Judaism. Thus, the distinguishable difference between believers in the present age and during the Tribulation is the restoration of Israel as the focus of God's election. As non-dispensationalists, mid-tribulationists, pre-wrath advocates, and post-tribulationists see the Church within the Tribulation. Midtribulationists see the Church surviving the first half of the seventieth week to be removed before the Great Tribulation commences. Pre-wrath advocates also see the Church in the first half of this period, but they do not interpret it as the seventieth week. This they believe begins only after the Temple is desecrated and the wrath of God begins to come upon earth. Thus, they take the Church past the mid-point point into the second half of the seven years, to be removed just prior to the descent of God's wrath. Post-tribulationists continue the Church until the end of the seventieth week, with the Church's removal connected to the timing of the Second Advent.

The Old Testament Usage. In order to understand the contribution of the Old Testament to the doctrine of the Tribulation, it is necessary to first consider the linguistic terminology used to express the concept in the New Testament and then its background in the Old Testament.

The Greek term commonly employed in the New Testament as a technical expression for the Tribulation period is *thlipsis* ("wrath," tribulation"). This may be observed in Luke's substitution of the phrase *anagke megale* ("great distress"), Lk. 21:23 for Matthew's *thlipsis megale* ("great tribulation"), Matt. 24:21, to distinguish the "days of vengeance" (the Roman destruction in A.D. 70) from the eschatological Tribulation. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, used *thlipsis* to render the Hebrew term *sar/sarah* ("trouble, tribulation, distress"). This Hebrew term was especially used in contexts in which curses based on violations of the Mosaic covenant were threatened or pronounced and appears in principal the Old Testament texts alluded to by the New Testament (e.g., Deut. 4:30; Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1). Synonymous terms with supporting texts containing the concept of a future Tribulation are: *Yom YHWH* ("day of the Lord") Obad. 15; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11,31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Isa. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Zech. 14:1; cf. *Yom YHWH hagadol v'elhanora'* ("great and terrible day of the Lord") Mal. 4:5; *Sar /sarah* ("trouble, tribulation") Deut. 4:30; Zeph. 1:16; *'Et/yom sarah* ("time/day of trouble") Dan. 12:1; Zeph. 1:15; *'Et sarah hi' l'ya'acov* ("day of Jacob's trouble") Jer. 30:7; *Chil* ("birthpangs") Isa. 21:3; 26:17-18; 66:7; Jer. 4:31; Mic. 4:10 (cf. Jer. 30:6); *Yom 'edom* ("the day of calamity") Deut. 32:35; Obad. 12-14; *Zaram* ("indignation") Isa. 26:20; Dan. 11:36; *Ma'asehu zar* ("the [Lord's] strange work") Isa. 28:21; *Shot shotef* ("overflowing scourge") Isa. 28:15, 18; *Yom naqam* ("day of vengeance" (Isa. 34:8a; 35:4a; 61:2b; 63:4a); *Yom 'evrah* ("day of wrath"); Zeph. 1:15; *Yom 'evrat YHWH* ("day of the Lord's wrath") Zeph. 1:18; *Yom m'esuqah* ("day of distress") Zeph. 1:15; *Yom sho'ah* ("day of destruction"), Zeph. 1:15; *Yom m'esho'ah* ("day of desolation") Zeph. 1:15; *Yom hoshek u'apelah* ("day of darkness and gloom") Zeph. 1:15; Amos 5:18, 20; Joel 2:2; *Yom 'anan u'arapel* ("day of clouds and thick darkness") Zeph. 1:15; Joel 2:2; *Yom shofar ut'aru'ah* ("day of trumpet and alarm") Zeph. 1:16; *Yom 'af YHWH* ("day of the Lord's anger") Zeph. 2:2, 3; [*Yom*] *sod mishaddai* ("[day of] destruction, ruin, from the Almighty" (Joel 1:15); *'Esh qina'to* ("the fire of His jealousy"), Zeph. 1:18. Lesser expressions also are used to describe this period as a time when God "arises to shake violently the earth" (Isa. 2:19), to "make the earth utterly emptied and ruined" (Isa. 24:1, 3, 6), to "break down" and "dissolve" the earth (Isa. 24:19), or to "punish the kings" and "the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity" (Isa. 24:21; 26:21).

These terms for tribulation are not necessarily in themselves *eschatological* expressions of tribulation. This is usually conveyed in the context by temporal phrases that may denote both an indefinite and definite sense of futurity. In some cases, such as "the Day of the Lord," the idiomatic nature of prophetic speech allows for an immediate application (e.g. Assyrian or Babylonian destructions) or a more remote or ultimate application to a future event (Tribulation and Millennium). Another chronological expression of future time during which the Tribulation is predicted is indicated by the Hebrew phrase *b'e'ah'arit hayyamim* ("the latter days"). The eschatological connotation of this formula is especially prominent in the biblical Prophets (e.g., Isa. 2:2; Jer. 23:20; 34:20; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek. 38:16; Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1) and Daniel (2:28; 8:19, 23; 10:14; cf. 12:8), although it is by no means limited to them, and is found as early as the Pentateuch (e.g. Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:29-31). When we examine the usage of the compound expression "latter days" in the Old Testament, we find that it is used in the general sense of "days to come" (cf. Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Deut. 31:29), but more often has the more definite sense of a time in the future. This latter sense encompasses both near (historical) and far (eschatological) points of reference; some being of an immediate future, and others spanning a comprehensive period from the author's vantage point until the Messianic age. By contrast, the Hebrew expression *'et qetz* ("end-time") is distinct from the term "latter days." While both are eschatological expressions, only *'et qetz* refers exclusively to the final eschatological period or event. In three texts (Amos 8:2; Lam. 4:18; Ezek. 7:2, 3, 6), *qetz* is employed in the context of the "Day of the Lord," with clearly eschatological intent. In Dan. 8:19; 9:26; 11:27, 45; 12:6, 13 it has eschatological significance or refers to the end of the age. The combined construction *'et qetz*, which appears uniquely in Daniel, and then in only the latter half of the book, is strictly eschatological (cf. Dan. 8:17; 11:35, 40; 12:4, 9). Here it appears 11 times as a chronological marker of a specific eschatological period (cf. Dan. 9:21, 25; 11:6, 13, 14, 24; 12:11). In Dan. 12:1-2, especially, it assumes the character of an apocalyptic *terminus technicus* denoting the final period that culminates the divine program, including all the events of that time.

The nature of the Tribulation is revealed by the characteristic terms we have seen as descriptive of this period. A brief catalog of such expressions gives a clear picture of the severity of this period: "wrath" (Zeph. 1:15, 18), "indignation" (Isa. 26:20-21; 34:1-3), "trouble, distress" (Jer. 30:7; Zeph. 1:14-15; Dan. 12:1), "destruction" (Joel 1:15), "darkness" (Joel 2:2; Amos 5:18; Zeph. 1:14-18), "desolation" (Dan. 9:27; Zeph. 1:14-15), "fire, burning" (Zeph. 1:18; Isa. 24:6), "punishment" (Isa. 24:21), "overflowing scourge" (Isa. 28:15, 18), and "vengeance" (Isa. 34:8; 35:4; 61:2). The accumulation of such terms dealing with divine judgment is exceptional, and it was this characteristic above all that served to highlight and heighten these references and project them onto the eschatological stage. The exceptional nature of the Tribulation is earmarked by such phrases as: "that day is great, there is none like it" (Jer. 30:7), or "such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time" (Dan. 12:1). These expressions emphasize the uniqueness of this specific judgment, while the accompanying contextual descriptions of the effects such judgments have on both God and Israel, affirm that this is a time unparalleled in Israel's previous history. Understanding the eschatological nature revealed by these Old Testament expressions of final judgment, Jesus likewise qualified the Tribulation of the end-time with a language patterned after Dan. 12:1: "such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall" (cf. Matt. 24:21; Mk. 13:19).

The nature of the Tribulation is also conveyed in related contexts by the use of a figure of intense suffering and expectation. Specifically, the *experience* of end-time judgment in the Tribulation is depicted by the travail of childbirth, Hebrew: *kayyoledah*, "as a woman giving birth" (Jer. 30:5-6). The eschatological "Day of the Lord" is often associated with the expression of birth-pangs as well (cf. Isa. 13:8; 25:17-18; 66:7-8; Jer. 22:23; 48:41; Hos. 13:13; Zeph. 1:14-18; Mic. 4:9-10; 5:1[2]). The New Testament also makes this association (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2-3). The Hebrew expression for these pains is derived from the root *chil*, which has the basic meaning of "being in labor," with the resultant idea of "fear" and "trembling." From the

use of this expression in the Olivet Discourse, it can be seen that the first half of the Tribulation is characterized by judicial "beginning birth-pangs" (Matt. 24:8), while in the second half judgment comes to full term, hence the designation "Great Tribulation" (Matt. 24:21). Just as the woman must endure the entire period of labor before giving birth, so Israel must endure the entire seven-year period of Tribulation. The divisions of this period of Tribulation are also illustrated by the figure, for just as the natural process intensifies toward the expectation of delivery after the labor ends, so here the Tribulation moves progressively toward the Second Advent (vss. 30-31), which takes place "immediately after" the Tribulation ends (vs. 29).

An explicit Old Testament passage for the Tribulation is Jer. 30:7. The reference to "Jacob" is to Israel as a national entity, and therefore the time of distress refers to a period of national trouble unlike any other. To what time of trouble was Jeremiah referring? As to the *time* of this trouble, some have argued that the use of the Hebrew time marker '*et*' (and its translation by the LXX as *chronos*), indicates a reference to a *specific* future time in contrast to a distant future. Interpreted literally, none of these elements could be fulfilled in these terms except in the future eschatological context (the days concluding and following the Tribulation period, cf. Matt. 24:29ff/ Mk. 13:24ff).

The premiere Tribulation text, cited by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14), and alluded to by Paul in his Day of the Lord Discourse (2 Thess. 2:4), is Daniel's prophecy of the seventieth week (Dan. 9:27). Detailing the events of the seven-year period of Tribulation, this passage uniquely set off the beginning, mid-point, and ending of the Tribulation. The beginning (vs. 27a) is designated as the time Israel enters into a covenant with the figure known as "the prince" (Hebrew *nagid*, "leader") that was predicted to come, and whose "people" (i.e., Gentiles [Romans]) destroyed the [Second] Temple (verse 26). Daniel's prophecy depicts the Tribulation period views the entire seventieth week as a time of wrath (cf. Dan. 12:7). The exilic condition he suffers is understood as a punishment for transgression, sin, and iniquity (Dan. 9:24b-c), and this condition will continue as a decree of divine wrath against Israel until the end when everlasting righteousness and the messianic consecration of the Temple can take place (vs. 24d-f). The resolution of Daniel's concerns for his city and people (Dan. 9:2, 24a) will not be realized until *after* the Seventieth Week has concluded and its events of deception and desecration have passed (Dan. 9:27; 12:1). Furthermore, Daniel understood that the desolation which will occur from the middle of the Seventieth Week is connected with the covenant that also commenced this period. The covenant with Antichrist (Dan. 9:27a; Rev. 11:1), and the cessation of the sacrificial program as a result of the Abomination of Desolation (Dan. 9:27b; ; Rev. 11:2) are signal events of the Tribulation (marking its beginning and midpoint). Therefore our Lord chose this text to warn a future Jewish generation that from the beginning of the birth-pangs they were already in the eschatological Tribulation (Matt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14; cf. 2 Thess. 2:4). The Seventy Weeks prophecy also evidences that Tribulation terms deal exclusively with a national Jewish context. The phrase "your people," i.e., Daniel's Nation (vs. 24), emphasizes this exclusivity. The context demonstrates this, describing the judgment as both the apex of punishment for national Israel, and the judgment of Israel's Gentile oppressors. Tribulation contexts also contain the elements of judgment, repentance, and blessing *always* in relation to the Land of Israel (cf. Rev. 11:18 with Dan. 9:27). Thus the application of Tribulation terms are limited to a period of national Jewish residency in the land, and to the people that represent that resident population.

When we examine the common elements of Old Testament references to the Tribulation, in every case the expected fulfillment is at a time corresponding to the end-time. The scope of the judgment is in most cases unparalleled and required salvation (physical deliverance) as a sign of the severity of the event. Each context involves idolatry in some form, whether generally as false prophets, or specifically as the Antichrist and the Abomination of Desolation, and each has in the context a reference to either the Temple or a promise of theocratic restoration.

Finally, the Old Testament presents at least five purposes for the Tribulation. First, the Tribulation will complete the decreed period of national Israel's judicial hardening as punishment for her rejection of the messianic program, which the partial return from exile did not remove, and which culminated in the national rejection of Jesus (Isa. 6:9-13; 24:1-6; cf. Jn. 12:37-41; Rom. 11:7-10). Second, it will produce a messianic revival among Jewish people scattered throughout the world (Deut. 4:27-30; cf. Rev. 7:1-4; Matt. 24:14). Third, the Tribulation will convince the Jewish Nation of their need for the Messiah in order to produce a national regeneration (Dan. 12:5-7; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 20:34-38; 36:25-27; 37:1-14; Zech. 12:9-13:2; Isa. 59:20-21). This will result in a massive return of Jews to the Land of Israel (Zech. 8:7-8; Ezek. 36:24; 37:21). Fourth, it will end the time of Gentiles and effect the deliverance of the Jewish People from Gentile dominion (Isa. 24:21-23; 59:16-20; cf. Matt. 24:29-31/Mk. 13:24-27; Rom. 11:25). Fifth, the Tribulation will purge the earth of wicked people in order to establish the Messianic Kingdom in righteousness (Isa. 13:9; 24:19-20; Ezek. 37:23; Zech. 13:2; 14:9; Isa. 11:9). This violent reduction of the world's unbelieving population will result from the divine judgments unleashed throughout the Tribulation (Rev. 6-18), climaxing with the battles of Armageddon under King Messiah (Rev. 19), and His purge of both rebel Jews and oppressive Gentiles at the end of the Tribulation (Ezek. 20:33-38; Matt. 25:31-46).

Bibliography

[Various viewpoints]: Richard R. Reiter, ed. *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. Studies of the New Testament and Its World.* ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985) [Realized Eschatology], Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), [Postmillennial], Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973) [Posttribulationist], Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990) [Pre-wrath], Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993) [Preterist], William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971) [Amillennial], [Pretribulationist perspective]: William F. Kerr, "Tribulation for the Church - But Not the Tribulation," *Understanding the Times.* eds. William Culbertson, Herman B. Centz (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), pp. 98-106, John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation: A Historical and Biblical Study of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour: Biblical Evidence for the Pretribulationist Return of Christ* (Miami Springs, Florida: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1991), Renald Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord Come!* (Bellmaer, New Jersey: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1995), T. Ice and T. Demy, eds., *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1995). Old Testament usage]: J. Randall Price, "Old Testament Tribulation Terms," *When the Trumpet Sounds.* eds. T. Ice and T. Demy (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), pp. 57-83, J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 229-250, T. Ice and T. Demy, *The Truth About the Tribulation.* Pocket Prophecy Series (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), pp. 8-12, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* s.v. "sar/sarah," by (Chicago: Moody Press, 19), 2: -