

THE PRE-TRIBULATION ARMY OF HEAVEN:  
AN ANALYSIS OF REVELATION 19:14 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DOCTRINE OF  
THE PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

by

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## *Introduction*

It is hardly scandalous to consider the armies of Heaven in Revelation 19:14 to include the Church. Both dispensational and covenantal approaches seem to accept this possibility. As seen by the very little time commentaries spend on this discussion, the issue as to whether the armies of Heaven are made up of angels alone, the church alone or a combination of the two is something seen to be unremarkable.

Perhaps this is because there seems to be so many arguments made before considering the impact of this question. Is Revelation to be studied from the non-literal preterist position, the non-literal historical position or the non-literal idealist position, or is it to be studied from the literal futurist position? This is a question that seems to take the air out of discussions of this sort. Even after settling on a futurist position regarding how to approach the book as a whole, more decisions are to be made. One of the most important decisions relates to where the church is during these future events. If one views the church as being taken up, raptured, before the start of the Great Tribulation or sometime in the middle or even at the very end remains to be argued. By the time a person settles these fundamental questions, issues regarding the identity of the saints in Revelation 19:14 has been largely decided. Theology more than exegesis tends to drive the discussion. This is not only a shame but an undermining of the the basic idea of exegesis that most commentators claim to value. It is the contention of this paper that sound exegesis will make apparent the identity of the armies of Heaven and that this exegetical conclusion will lend weight to one answer above any other regarding the timing of the rapture and the literalness of things yet to come.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study seeks chiefly to answer two basic questions: who are the armies of Heaven in Revelation 19:14 and does this identity lend credibility to a pre-tribulation rapture of the church? The answers resulting from this study may seem to be irrelevant to those who put theology before exegesis but to those who consider exegesis the proper starting point of sound theology, this study aims to lend its weight to a contentious debate.

If the armies of Heaven in Revelation 19:14 are found to likely include the church, questions regarding the nature of the church and its unity with the coming King will necessarily imply a difference between it and the nation of Israel that is being delivered. If the armies of Heaven are seen to include the church, questions regarding the literalness and future tense nature of revelation will be addressed with weight brought to bear on the future position being correct. If the armies of Heaven are seen to include the church, questions regarding the timing of the rapture will be addressed with the post-tribulation position being most strongly opposed. If the armies of Heaven are seen to include the church, the personal relevance of Revelation will be seen.

To look forward to the future day when the feet of the saints will stand with Christ on the Mount of Olives to save a people for a millennial promise is one thing. To look forward to this future with confidence is quite another.

### *Thesis and It's Significance*

Revelation is a book meant to encourage the church. It begins with a declaration of this encouragement (Rev. 1:1, 3-4) and its intended recipients (Rev. 1:11; 2:1-3:22) and it ends with reference to these same recipients in glory (Rev. 22:16). Yet it is a book largely fulfilling Old Testament prophecy to an Old Testament nation (Rev. 7:4-8; 14:1-5).

Revelation is also about wrath. It is not about the wrath of Satan, though Satan does express his wrath against Israel (Rev. 12), but it is about the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:16; 14:10). This begs the question: where does the church, the Building of which Christ is cornerstone (Eph 2:19-22), the Body of which Christ is the head (Eph. 4:11-16), the Bride of which Christ is the bridegroom (Eph. 5:22-32), fit into the story?

It is the contention of this paper that the Church is kept from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 3:10), made unshakable pillars in the temple that is God Himself (Rev. 3:12; 21:22-23), named with a Heavenly City as the Bride of Christ (Rev. 3:12; 21:1-2, 9; Rev 19:6-8), named with the coming King Himself (Rev. 3:12; 19). It is the contention of this paper that the armies of Heaven include the redeemed and glorified Church, wearing white robes and crowns (Rev. 3:4; 4:2-4; 6:9-11; 7:9-10, 13-14; 19:11-14; 22:12-14) and coming to the rescue of a nation and people ready to enter the millennial promises of the Old Testament. More modestly, the thesis of this paper is that the armies of Heaven in Revelation 19:14 includes the glorified Church and that this designation lends credibility to a pre-tribulational rapture of the Church.

### *Presuppositions / Delimitations*

This study presupposes a literal, futuristic dispensational view of Revelation that is decidedly premillennial. It purports to lend credibility to a pre-tribulational rapture. Though these presuppositions may seem to beg the question regarding the identity of the armies of Heaven in Revelation 19:14 the goal is to exegetically examine this passage with a mind to go where the evidence leads. Being that inductive study has been set forth as the *a priori* method of this study, is fitting to set forth some of these basic presuppositions from the first chapter of Revelation itself.

Broadly speaking, Revelation 1:1-8, sets the tone of the book as a whole and sets the tone of this study as a whole. Revelation 1:1-2 demonstrates the purpose of this book. It is the revelation, or unveiling of Jesus Christ. This implies it is not therefore a mystery but a clear communication from God to us about the second coming and full manifestation of His Son's glory. Revelation 1:3 reveals the modest fact that Revelation is not meant to terrify but to encourage. Revelation 1:4-6, reminds us that regardless of what position one takes regarding the timing of the book, it was written by the Triune God to literal churches as an epistle, making it relevant to every age. Revelation 1:7, makes it abundantly clear that this book is meant about a literal future that hasn't happened yet. Revelation 1:8, bolsters this point with the certainty that this literal future will happen no matter what.

In terms of presuppositions, Revelation 1:7 carries substantial weight. Daniel 7:13-18 speaks of this coming with the clouds, Zechariah 14:1-5, predicts that every eye will see Him, Zechariah 12:9-14, and John 19:33-37 prophetically tell us that His people will see Him

as the one whom they pierced, and Matthew 24:27-30 proclaim that the earth and Jerusalem will mourn. Revelation 1:7, speaks of this literal coming and Revelation 19:11-16 shows this literal coming. It is simple based on these facts alone to see the non-literal approaches to Revelation as wanting. According to Steve Gregg in his book *Revelation Four Views*:

The most elaborate arguments for an alternative meaning of this verse is presented by some *preterist* commentators, who suggest that the passage does not predict the literal Second Coming, but is a figurative description of Christ's coming in vengeance to destroy Jerusalem, not in person, but using the Roman armies in a.d. 70.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that Daniel, Zechariah and Matthew, among others, all pointed forward to a Roman army invading Jerusalem does violence, not only Revelation 1:7, but to most Old Testament prophecy. In other words, if the worldwide finality of these passages speaks to a local, limited event why not see the global flood as also a local event? This is a dangerous precedent, untenable to a student concerned with a grammatical-historical and decidedly high view of Scripture. The non-literal historical and idealist approaches are even less tenable.

Even still, godly believers can differ on these presuppositions. Because of this fact, it is the goal of this paper to allow the exegesis of Revelation 19:14 to stand on its own.

#### *Literature Review*

If one were to type in the words "*Armies of Heaven Church*" in Google, the first article to come up is a non-denominational pastor answering the thesis question posed above.

The anonymous questioner asks:

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Re 1:7-8.

I am confused as I have always been taught and believed that it was the church who came back with Christ in Rev 19:14. You stated that the armies of Heaven, called Holy ones would be with Him and the Church, as the bride, would be in the New Jerusalem at this time and would arrive later. The ones who accompany Christ is described in Rev 19:14 as being dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Earlier in verses 7 and 8 the bride is described as wearing fine linen, bright and clean (NIV). Can you clarify this for me?<sup>2</sup>

The questioner appears to take the thesis position of this paper that the armies of Heaven wearing fine linen is the coronated glorified church riding with Christ to the defense of believers at the end of The Great Tribulation. According to the pastor who runs the site this belief is the traditional one but he disagrees.<sup>3</sup> He answers with an appeal to exegesis:

The Greek word translated “armies” refers to soldiers and guardsmen, and the fact that these are armies “of” heaven implies that heaven is their origin. The ones who most accurately fit the description belong to the great body of warrior angels, such as those who were standing by to defend the Lord on the night of His arrest (Matt. 26:53).

Angels are also described as being dressed in brilliant white in John 20:12 and Acts 1:10. And in Rev. 19:8 the brightness of the Bride’s garment comes from the Greek word “lampros” which means “shining, or magnificent”, but in Rev. 19:14 the whiteness of the clothing worn by the armies of Heaven is a different Greek word, “leukos”, which means a brilliant white. You would think that if the same clothing was being referenced John would have used the same word.<sup>4</sup>

Whether he is correct in his analysis remains to be seen but what can be modestly stated at the outset is that there is an exegetical argument worth examining either way. This humble example epitomizes the worth of this study and the illustrates the exegetical agenda ahead.

Do the Greek words τὰ στρατεύματα translated armies only refer to soldiers and

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<sup>2</sup> "Who Are The Armies Of Heaven? - Gracethrufaith". Gracethrufaith. N.p., 2016. Web. 8 Dec. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

guardsmen as stated above and does that even have bearing on whether or not the church can be in view? Does the dative ἐν preclude the church from being in view or can this only be referring to angels? Do the λευκοῖς or white garments of these armies in Revelation 19:14 indicate they are different from the λαμπρόν or bright garments of Revelation 9:8? This paper seeks to settle questions of this nature.

Not everyone sees the importance of this question however. Patterson, for example, skips the question and moves on to other things in his *New American Commentary*.<sup>5</sup> Mounce, similarly, in his *New American Commentary on the New Testament*, takes one sentence to address the issue, stating that it could be both angels and men but says nothing more.<sup>6</sup> Ford, in his *Anchor Bible Commentary*, likewise using one sentence, settles on the side by side route.<sup>7</sup> Lenski, after acknowledging there is indeed a debate as to the identity of the armies, uses three sentences to settle the issue by the “analogy of Scripture,” to say that

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<sup>5</sup> Paige Patterson, *The New American Commentary*. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2012, pg 348.

<sup>6</sup> Mounce is essentially saying that normally one would conclude the army to be made up of angels but based on Revelation 17:14 this army would be also made up of martyrs from the Tribulation (Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, pg 354.)

<sup>7</sup> Ford quotes Yadin from Qumran (1QM 12:7-9 (D-S) who at one point remarks “the elect of the Holy people” would fight side by side with angels and leaves it there (J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, pg 320.)



angels alone are in view.<sup>8</sup> Kistemaker, sets aside an entire paragraph to agree with Mounce and Patterson that the armies are made up of both saints and angels.<sup>9</sup>

In each case after these commentators make this decision they move on without any time spent on the theological ramifications of their designation. The most obvious implication of this mixed army has to do with the idea of more than one Resurrection. If the armies of Heaven are made up of glorified men and angels then surely there must be more than one general Resurrection. Though some of the more exegetical commentaries, such as G.K. Beal's, *New International Greek Testament Commentary*,<sup>10</sup> David E. Aune's, *Word Biblical Commentary*,<sup>11</sup> or Grant Osborne's, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*,<sup>12</sup> spend a bit more time on the subject virtually zero spend any time discussing the ramifications this saintly army has upon premillennial-pre-trib position.

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<sup>8</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963, pg 555.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Kistemaker, and William Hendriksen. *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001, pg 522.

<sup>10</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 960.

<sup>11</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 1059.

<sup>12</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 684.

### *Methodology*

The research methodology to be employed for this topic will begin with exegesis and move on to theological implications. A simple and helpful definition of exegesis is appropriate at this point. By exegesis, this author means: a study of the biblical text in its original language, in this case Koine Greek, to bring out from the text the author's intended meaning in its intended context. Both primary and secondary sources will have their due place. In order to ensure a true *inductive* handling of the text is carried out, this study will begin with an exegetical analysis of Revelation 19:14 in the Greek text with specific emphasis given to context in the larger theme of Revelation as a whole. Sources representing all four views (preterist, historical, idealist, and futurist) viewpoints will be used throughout the study.

In a seemingly obscure topic such as this it is important to keep the focus narrow and the conclusions modest. Because this study requires some very specific presuppositions regarding the nature of the church and Israel it is decidedly narrow already. With an emphasis on the Futurist position it becomes very narrow indeed. This limits the amount of impact a study like this can have. A Preterist or an Idealist, for example, will likely find the questions posed here to be irrelevant, though one would hope they could shed some light on their own exegetical insufficiencies regarding the literalness of Revelation as a whole. That said, it is the hope of this writer that the modest tone, exegetical precision and theological diligence of this paper would shed light on a glorious future for the church.

## *Proposed Outline*

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### II. Exegetical Analysis

### III. Theological Analysis

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## *Summary*

Is the Church included in the armies of Heaven in Revelation 19:14? If it is, does this lend credibility to the pre-tribulational rapture position? A diligent study of the text in question is the goal of this study.

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