

CONSISTENT BIBLICAL FUTURISM
Part III
by Thomas Ice

I want to now turn to dealing with specific issues in an attempt to apply a consistent, grammatical, historical, contextual method of interpretation that yields a futurist outcome. My approach will be to argue that we should move from the clear to the less clear passages to see if there are parallel items in the clear passages that help us interpret the less clear passages. I know some will dispute my judgment as to what are the clear passages, but I will provide a rationale for my decisions. I am attempting to establish a framework for development of a consistent futurism, as opposed to an inconsistent historicist-futurist model, which is too often put forth within dispensational circles in our day.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

I believe that when it comes to establishing a framework that refers to the 70th week of Daniel, or as I call it “the tribulation,” the book of Revelation provides the clearest guidance on this matter. In fact, I cannot think of one futurist who does not believe that the boundaries of the tribulation are covered in chapters four (some begin at chapter six) through 19 of Revelation. Such agreement is an amazing consensus on the matter, most likely because it is so clear from the text as to limit dispute. There are some significant differences among futurists as to the exact sequence of events within chapters four through nineteen, but not that these chapters parallel Daniel’s 70th week (Dan. 9:24–27). “If our interpretation is the right one there must be perfect harmony between these three: Old Testament Prophecy: Matthew xxiv:4-44, and Revelation vi-xix.” insists Arno Gaebelin.ⁱ I believe just such a harmony exists, especially between the Olivet Discourse and Revelation. This is what convinces me that verses 4–14 refer to the first half of the tribulation. Gaebelin continues:

If this is the correct interpretation, if Matthew xxiv:4-14 refers to the beginning of that coming end of the age and if Revelation vi refers to the same beginning of the end and that which follows the sixth chapter leads us on into the great tribulation, then there must be a perfect harmony between that part of the Olivet discourse contained in Matthew xxiv and the part of Revelation beginning with the sixth chapter. *And such is indeed the case.*ⁱⁱ

Revelation four and five are the heavenly prelude and cause of the tribulation that begins to unfold on earth in chapter six. This would mean that the clear teaching of Revelation is that the tribulation begins in chapter four or six and runs until Christ returns in chapter nineteen. Thus, it is significant that the seal judgments in Revelation 6 parallel “the beginning of birth pangs” in Matthew 24:8. “The acceptance of this view, in part,” observes McLean, “is dependent on how much weight is given to the parallels between the synoptics and Revelation.”ⁱⁱⁱ Since all futurists see the Olivet Discourse as parallel to Revelation to some degree, it makes sense that these two portions of Scripture would be focused on the same basic time period—the tribulation. McLean has displayed these relationships in the following chart:

TEXTUAL PARALLELS BETWEEN THE SYNOPTICS AND SEAL JUDGMENTS

	Revelation	Matthew	Mark	Luke
	6	24	13	21
False Messiahs, Prophets	2	5, 11	6	8
Wars	2-4	6-7	7	9
International Discord	3-4	7	8	10
Famines	5-8	7	8	11
Pestilences	8			11
Persecution-Martyrdom	9-11	9	9-13	12-17
Earthquakes	12	7	8	11
Cosmic Phenomena	12-14			11 ^{iv}

BIRTH PANGS

Matthew 24:8 characterizes the events of verses 4–7 as “the beginning of birth-pangs.” The Greek word *ôdionon* means “the pain of childbirth, travail-pain, birth-pang.” It is said to be “intolerable anguish, in reference to the dire calamities which the Jews supposed would precede the advent of the Messiah.”^v Another authority agrees and says, “of the ‘Messianic woes’, the terrors and torments that precede the coming of the Messianic Age.”^{vi} The notion that birth pangs have been taking place throughout the entire Church Age is a historicist notion. The consistent futurist position makes more sense within the framework of the birth pangs motif. Within the context of the motif employed by Christ, we would see the pregnancy beginning with Acts 2, the beginning of the Church. The beginning of the birth pangs would parallel with the beginning of the tribulation, since these take place within a pregnancy right before the birth occurs. The birth, in this context would relate to the second coming of Christ to earth, after the tribulation, which is compared to birth-pangs.

It is likely that our Lord had in mind the Old Testament reference to birth pangs in Jeremiah 30:6–7, which says, “Ask now, and see, if a male can give birth. Why do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth? And why have all faces turned pale? ‘Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s distress, but he will be saved from it.’” In the context of Jeremiah 30 the Lord clearly promises restoration to the people of Israel and Judah, however, it will be through tribulation, as noted in Jeremiah 30:6–7. Thus, the birth-pang motif encompasses what we often call today the tribulation period. These prophecies do not relate to the church age, but instead, they deal with the nation of Israel.

Randall Price explains the birth pangs of Messiah as follows:

The birth pangs are significant in the timing of the Tribulation, as revealed by Jesus in the Olivet discourse (Matt. 24:8). Jesus’ statement of the “birth pangs” is specifically that the events of the first half of the Tribulation (vv. 4-7) are merely the “beginning,” with the expectation of greater birth pangs in the second half (the “Great Tribulation”). Based on this analogy, the entire period of the seventieth week is like birth pangs. As a woman must endure the entire period of labor before giving birth, so Israel must endure the entire seven-year Tribulation. The time divisions of Tribulation are also illustrated by the figure, for just as the natural process intensifies toward delivery after labor ends, so here the Tribulation moves progressively toward the second advent (vv. 30-31), which takes place “immediately after” the Tribulation ends (v. 29). As there are two phases of the birth pangs (beginning labor and

full labor), so the seven years of Tribulation are divided between the less severe and more severe experiences of terrestrial and cosmic wrath, as revealed progressively in the Olivet discourse and the judgment section of Revelation 6—19.^{vii}

Paul also uses the motif of birth pangs in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 where he says, “While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.” The context of this passage relates to the tribulation period, which fits the other uses of birth pangs.

Raphael Patai in his helpful book, *The Messiah Texts*, has dozens of references to extra-biblical commentary from Jewish writings in a chapter entitled “The Pangs of Times.”^{viii} Patai tells us that “the pangs of the Messianic times are imagined as having heavenly as well as earthly sources and expressions. . . . Things will come to such a head that people will despair of Redemption. This will last seven years. And then, unexpectedly, the Messiah will come.”^{ix} This widespread Jewish idea fits exactly into the framework that Jesus expresses in the Olivet Discourse. The birth pangs of Messiah, also known as “the footprints of the Messiah,”^x support the notion that Matthew 24:4–14 relate to the tribulation period leading up to the second advent of the Messiah since it is known as a time of great tribulation that results in Messiah’s earthly arrival.

CONCLUSION

Since we move from the clear texts to the less clear, we see that when it comes to the timing of when the judgments of Revelation six takes place, all futurists believe that they will occur during the first part of the tribulation. I consider this to be clear because all futurists hold this view and the timing of these events are not disputed within our circles. In the next step I showed the parallel between the events of Revelation six and Matthew 24:4–14. Not only are the same events mentioned in both passages, but there is also a general parallel in the order in which they will occur. Once again, the clear passage is Revelation six, which displays these events as the result of the Lamb initiating each phase by opening a seal containing the plan for each judgment to commence.

It would appear to me that the burden of proof concerning this matter would be with the futurist-historicist to show that Christ’s prophecy of events in Matthew 24:4–14 differ from those in Revelation six. The events of Matthew 24:4–14 and Revelation six are parallel to each other. Seeing these passages as parallel make the most sense and provide a framework for understanding similar passages throughout the Old Testament within the context of the tribulation, not our current Church Age. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, [1910] 1961), p. 476.

ⁱⁱ Gaebelien, *Matthew*, p. 481.

ⁱⁱⁱ John McLean, “Chronology and Sequential Structure of John’s Revelation,” in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today’s Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 323.

^{iv} McLean, “Chronology and Sequential,” p. 326.

^v Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 679.

^{vi} William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 904.

^{vii} J. Randall Price, "Old Testament Tribulation Terms," in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 72.

^{viii} Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts: Jewish Legends of Three Thousand Years* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), pp. 95-103.

^{ix} Patai, *Messiah Texts*, pp. 95-96.

^x Price, "Tribulation Terms," p. 450, f.n. 56.