

THE MEETING IN THE SKY

by Thomas Ice

Last month Dr. Tim LaHaye, Dr. Ed Hindson, and I did a weekend prophecy conference in the Philadelphia area. As usual, we had a time of questions and answers about Bible prophecy. One attendee turned in the following written question:

The Greek word for “meet” in 1 Thess. 4:17 is a technical term, used of an arriving dignitary or special guest, approaching the city of his destination. Residents would then go out to meet him and accompany him back to his destination. The word is only used in two other passages: Acts 28:15 and Matt. 25:1, 6. To do justice to the Greek word, Christ’s destination would be earth, not back to heaven, we would meet him in the clouds and accompany him back to earth. How do you explain that from a pre-trib view?

I want to take the rest of this article to point out the errors of assumption in this question and give a pre-trib reply to the question.

FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

Latent within the above question are false assumptions that must be corrected before anyone, pre-trib or anti-pre-trib, can respond to such a question. The Philadelphia questioner’s major, big-time error is his belief that the Greek word for “meet” is a technical term. (A technical term, as used here, refers to a word that would have specific connotations implicit in the word itself.) Here we have an example of a widely held belief in academic circles that is categorically wrong. So what is the error and how did it get started?

Origin of The Error

Taking the last question first, we can trace the source of the error to a German scholar named Erik Peterson. Peterson wrote an article in 1930¹ saying that the Greek word “to meet” (*apantêsis*) “is to be understood as a technical term for a civic custom of antiquity whereby a public welcome was accorded by a city to important visitors.”² Interestingly, it was in 1930 that English-speaking scholars Moulton and Milligan published their famous work on extra-biblical use of Greek vocabulary around the time of the New Testament.³ Moulton and Milligan say about “to meet” (*apantêsis*): “The word seems to have been a kind of technical term for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary . . .”⁴

The belief that Paul’s use of “meet” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is a technical term was then taken by those opposing pretribulationism as a knock-out punch against our understanding of Scripture. For example, posttribulationist Robert Gundry alleges: “This connotation points toward our rising to meet Christ in order to escort Him immediately back to earth.”⁵ Robert Cameron, a posttribulationist of a century past declares:

A very definite truth is settled, however, by the word translated “to meet,” which has a distinct and definite meaning. It is only used three times in the New Testament, and in every case it means to *meet and to return with* the person met. Therefore, those caught up, meet the Lord and return with Him.⁶

Actually, “to meet” is used four times in the New Testament (Matt. 25:1, 6; Acts 28:15; 1 Thess. 4:17).

More recently, I was at a national conference a few years ago when premillennial, posttribulationist, Rodney Stortz, attempted to dismiss the possibility of a pre-trib rapture by stating the “technical term” argument of “to meet.” In a chart I picked up at the conference, under a reference to 1 Thess. 4:13-18, Stortz said, “The word “meet” in these two verses is a technical Greek military term describing the returning military hero. The people used to go out “to meet” him and escort him back to the city.”⁷

A FEW QUICK POINTS

I will make a few quick points before I get into the heart of my rebuttal. First, neither Peterson nor Moulton and Milligan say that the Greek word “to meet” (*apantêsis*) includes the notion of returning with the dignitary to the place from which the greeting party came from. The idea of returning from whence one came appears to be a notion added by overly zealous posttribulationists in an effort to disprove pretribulationism. In fact, Milligan did not believe that the word “meet” implies that the dignitary return back with the greeters as noted in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians:

The thought is that the ‘raptured’ saints will be carried up into the ‘air,’ as the interspace between heaven and earth, where they will meet the descending Lord, and then either escort him down to the earth in accordance with O.T. prophecy, or *more probably* in keeping with the general context accompany Him back to heaven. (emphasis added)⁸

This is why F. F. Bruce warns that “there is nothing in the word *apantêsis* or in this context which *demand*s this interpretation; it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with his people) continues his journey to earth or returns to heaven.”⁹

Second, even if “meet” was a technical term in the way that some posttribulationists insist, which it is clearly not as will be demonstrated shortly, it would not follow that their return to earth would have to be immediate. Why could not, based upon a supposed meaning of the word, the return occur a little over seven years later?

Third, “meet” cannot be established as a technical term for the formal reception of a dignitary from New Testament use, as Rodney Stortz claims,¹⁰ since only two of the four instances may mean that. It cannot be established from an overall biblical use of Old and New Testaments.¹¹ Thus, if there is any basis for saying that it should be understood as a technical term in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 the case would have to be made from its use in extra-biblical instances. Yet, this cannot be done either, as I am about to demonstrate.

A POSTTRIBULATIONIST PROVIDES REBUTTAL

In the summer of 1995, I was in a seminary library looking through the most recent releases of theological journals when I noticed a very interesting article.¹² It was written by a posttribulationist who rebuts the notion that “to meet” is a technical term at all. Cosby confesses that while a college student he was dissuaded from pretribulationism to posttribulationism. Cosby tells us,

while doing my doctoral studies, . . . I translated Erik Peterson’s 1930 article . . . His citations of material from ancient Greek papyri, inscriptions, and literature found fertile soil . . . I was completely persuaded by his explanation that Paul’s use of *apantêsis* in 1 Thess. 4:17 presupposed a well known custom: the Hellenistic formal reception.

. . . While reviewing Peterson’s assertions, I discovered to my horror that some of them are simply not persuasive. . . . What began as an effort to strengthen Peterson’s argument became a disturbing exercise in scholarly honesty.¹³

What did Cosby find when he applied honesty to his scholarly research? He found the following:

One cannot responsibly claim that *apantêsis* is a technical term on the basis of its percentage of use in passages describing formal receptions. . . . Sometimes *apantêsis* describes a formal greeting of a dignitary, but often it does not. . . .

. . . Yet only a minority of the uses of these terms describes formal receptions. . . .¹⁴

Cosby continues to state the result of his findings:

The dominate scholarly understanding of *apantêsis* in 1 Thess. 4:17, based on the work of Peterson, does not sufficiently account for the differences between Paul’s words and description of receptions of dignitaries. All of the main elements of Hellenistic receptions found in ancient papyri, inscriptions and literature are missing from 1 Thess. 4:15-17. Asserting that Paul assumed his readers would automatically fill in such details lacks cogency when we compare Paul’s words with these accounts. If he truly assumed his audience would presuppose these details, then he deliberately reversed most of the usual elements. Claiming that *apantêsis* was a technical term carrying with it a standard set of expectations is not convincing. Furthermore, even if one assumes that Paul understood *apantêsis* in this way, the evidence demonstrates that he did not read such meaning wholesale into his description of the Parousia.¹⁵

What does Cosby mean by that last sentence? He concludes that Paul had a greater tendency, when he uses technical terms from the Greek language in general, to stand them on end. That is, Paul would use them as a polemic against the stock meaning of the day by reversing a latent implication. Cosby explains:

Peterson, therefore, was incorrect in reading the Hellenistic formal reception *into* 1 Thess. 4:13-17. The text itself does not support his assertion that Paul's use of *apantêsis* in 4:17 brings with it the entire baggage of the custom of greeting dignitaries. And if it did, we should admit that Paul deliberately *reverses* conventional expectations, which would actually fit what we know about his use of other conventions.¹⁶

So why have some scholars thought that this was a technical term supporting their belief that “to meet” carried their suggested meaning? Cosby provides the following suggestion:

the details come much more from Christian visions of the Parousia than from Greco-Roman models. Interpreting Paul's words in light of descriptions of Hellenistic receptions is helpful, but not as Peterson and others have envisioned. Such passages provide insight into the sociological background for 1 Thess. 4:13-17, but for a reason the opposite of what Peterson believed. Instead of being a cipher for understanding what Paul meant through the supposed use of a technical term, they function more as a foil—a loose pattern to play against when describing the coming of the heavenly king.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The pre-trib reply to the opening question is that the premise of the question is just flat out wrong. Posttribulationist, Cosby, has demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt and concluded “that Peterson's exegesis was eisegesis.”¹⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:17 does not specifically say or imply the direction of Christ's party once we all meet in the air. 1 Thessalonians 4:17 does say, “we will always be with the Lord.” I take it from John 14:1-3, which I believe is a parallel passage to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18,¹⁹ that Christ takes us back with Him to the Father's house. Thus, what 1 Thessalonians 4:17 lacks, John 14:1-3 supplies. After more than seven years, Christ, His bride, and the elect angels will then return to planet earth, not as a dignitary to be welcomed by the world, but as One who returns as a conquering judge. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Erik Peterson, “Die Einholung des Kyrios,” *ZST* 1 (1930), pp. 682-702.

² Quoted from Peterson's article on “to meet” (*apantêsis*) in the influential *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, X vols., edited by Gerhard Kittel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), Vol. I, pp. 380-81.

³ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and other non-Literary Sources*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930).

⁴ Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary*, p. 53.

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- ⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and The Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 104.
- ⁶ Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth About The Lord's Return* (New York: Revell, 1922), p. 116.
- ⁷ Rodney D. Stortz, *The Second Coming of Christ Prophetic Time Line*, (published by Twin Oaks Presbyterian Church of Ballwin, Missouri, 1999), panel three.
- ⁸ George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to The Thessalonians* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), p. 61.
- ⁹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Word Biblical Commentary 45; Waco: Word, 1982), pp. 102-03.
- ¹⁰ Stortz, *Prophetic Time Line*, panel three; also see Rodney Stortz, cassette tape recording "The Rapture," Tape 2 from the series *The Second Coming of Christ* (Twin Oaks Presbyterian Church of Ballwin, Missouri, 1999).
- ¹¹ For a total refutation of the possibility that "meet" can be established as a technical term from the Old Testament see G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle, 1985 [1945]), pp. 262-65.
- ¹² Michael R. Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of *Apantésis* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* (Vol. 4; 1994), pp. 15-34.
- ¹³ Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," p. 17.
- ¹⁴ Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," pp. 20-21.
- ¹⁵ Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," pp. 28-29.
- ¹⁶ Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," p. 31.
- ¹⁷ Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," p. 31.
- ¹⁸ Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," p. 32.
- ¹⁹ See the *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), p. 1151.