

# THE DAY OF THE LORD AND CERTAIN SO-CALLED “PRECURSORS” by Steve McAvoy

Posttribulationists attempt to establish a posttribulational *terminus a quo* (beginning point) for the Day of the Lord by appealing to certain “precursors” which they maintain must precede, or occur *before* the Day of the Lord begins.<sup>1</sup> They argue that since these precursors occur during the Tribulation period, The Day of the Lord cannot include the Tribulation period. For example, Robert H. Gundry states: “Clearly, the day of the Lord will not begin with the tribulation or any part of it . . .”<sup>2</sup>

It is the purpose of this essay to demonstrate that these so-called precursors do *not* establish a posttrib *terminus a quo* for the Day of the Lord, thus excluding the Tribulation from being part of the Day of the Lord. An examination of these so-called “precursors” gives evidence that the Day of the Lord includes the Tribulation; if not entirely at least in part.

Dr. Robert Gundry is probably the leading spokesman for posttribulationism today. His two books, *The Church and the Tribulation* (1973), and more recently, *First the Antichrist* (1997), argue vigorously that because of certain precursors which are said to occur *before* the Day of the Lord, and which occur during the Tribulation, the Day of the Lord cannot include the Tribulation. The following comments therefore, are directed exclusively to Dr. Gundry’s arguments as they occur in these two books. On this issue (except in one instance), there is little or no difference between the two books; his arguments remain fairly consistent. Consequently, my remarks may cite only one reference, or one book, without in all cases noting the parallel references in the other book.

Dr. Gundry points to certain events, which he holds<sup>3</sup> are precursive to the Day of the Lord and argues that since these events do not occur until the close of the Tribulation and *after* it (in the case of Joel 2:30, 31), the Day of the Lord cannot begin until after the Tribulation.<sup>4</sup> These events are: (1) ἡ ἀποστασία and the revelation of the Antichrist, or man of lawlessness (2 Th 2:1-4), (2) the appearance of Elijah (Mal 4:5), and (3) certain celestial portents (Joel 2:30, 31), which he places after the Tribulation period.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Norman F. Douty, *The Great Tribulation Debate* (Harrison, AR: Gibbs Publishing Company, 1976), 91 ff. ; William R. Kimball, *The Rapture: A Question of Timing*, (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 1985), 156 ff. ; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 93 ff. ; Bob Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 37-46; Douglas J. Moo, et. al., *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing Company, 1984), 183-84; Septimus Sears, *The Things Which Shall Be Hereafter* (London: Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, 1867), 29-30; Harold Lindsell, *The Gathering Storm* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 145 ff.; Alexander Fraser, *The Return of Christ in Glory* (Scottsdale, PA: The Evangelical Fellowship, 1953), 37; S. P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: The Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, 1964), 63-64; Charles R. Erdman, *The Return of Christ* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1922), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 95.

<sup>3</sup> Older pretribulationists also precluded the Tribulation from the Day of the Lord, partly on the basis of these precursors. There are also present-day pretribs who exclude the Tribulation from the Day of the Lord.

<sup>4</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, 93-96; idem., *First*, 37-46, 117-126.

The argument revolves around the temporal indicators “first” and “before” in the above passages. Gundry’s discussion raises several questions: (1) do the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness need to take place before the Day of the Lord begins? Or do they in fact, mark the beginning of the Day of the Lord.? (2) Must Elijah’s ministry run its course and Joel’s celestial portents take place before the Day of the Lord begins, as Gundry maintains? And (3), do all these events occur as late as Gundry suggests? We will first consider the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4.

### **The Ἀποστασία and the Revelation of the Man of Lawlessness**

In his earlier work, *The Church and the Tribulation* (1973), Gundry placed these events “within the tribulation” (p. 93). In his latter work, *First the Antichrist* (1997), he places them, i.e., the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, “all posttribulationist” (120). This is the one instance of difference mentioned earlier one page one. The following comments are pertinent to both positions.

It is true that posttribulationists and pretribulationists have traditionally held these events to be precursive to the Day of the Lord. But it is better to understand Paul to be saying that these events *characterize* and/or *initiate* rather than precede the Day of the Lord; that chronologically the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness occur first in a series of successive events within the Day of the Lord. Several exegetical factors support this conclusion. First, is the meaning of πρῶτον. Most commentators understand πρῶτον in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 to mean “before.” But few explain why. Actually, the more usual and common meaning of πρῶτον is “earliest in sequence” rather than “prior to.” Liddell and Scott define πρῶτον as “foremost . . . at the front or end of the pole” . . . of time, “looking towards first dawn” . . . of order, “serving as ordinal to . . . earlier.” . . . “first part, beginning,” and “first, in the first place, at the beginning.”<sup>5</sup> Moulton and Milligan state the adverbial use as “at the first” or “earlier.”<sup>6</sup> Of its use in the LXX, Bartels says:

In the LXX *protos* (c. 240 times) usually represents, as does *arche* (beginning) . . . . Generally speaking, the meanings correspond to classical Gk. . . . Even when an order or succession is not directly specified, it is there in the background.<sup>7</sup>

Concerning its use in the NT, Bartels says that in a temporal sense, πρῶτον means “the first in a series.” and confirms the “frequent occurrence of *protos/proton* in the NT as an expression of order or sequence (69 times).”<sup>8</sup> Michaelis, in *TDNT* assigns the use of πρῶτον in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a sequential meaning.<sup>9</sup> *BAGD*,<sup>10</sup> Thayer,<sup>11</sup> and Bullinger<sup>12</sup> all concur

<sup>5</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1940), 1535.

<sup>6</sup> James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930), 557.

<sup>7</sup> K. H. Bartels, “First, Firstborn,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 1:665.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 666.

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Michaelis, “πρῶτον.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968) 6: 869.

<sup>10</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. By Walter Bauer. Translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. Second edition revised and augmented by Wilbur

that *πρῶτον* usually denotes that which is earliest in sequence. Blass and Debrunner also indicate that it is used of the beginning of a sequence.<sup>13</sup>

Concerning the use of *πρῶτον* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Dunham writes:

There is simply no warrant whatever for assuming it must mean, or is even preferred to mean “before” in this passage. Even its positive form *PRO*, which is more commonly translated “before” when used in this way, will have an object in the genitive case, *a factor which our text is lacking*.<sup>25</sup> [author’s footnote below] This is not to say *PRWTON* cannot mean before, but simply to say this meaning is neither required nor preferred in II Thess. 2:3 [author’s emphasis].<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See BAG, p. 708, Lk. 11:38, etc.

Other resources which confirm that *πρῶτον* should be understood as that which is first or earliest in sequence are listed below.<sup>15</sup> Lexically speaking then, *πρῶτον* is best understood in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as “first in a series of events” which constitute the beginning of the Day of the Lord and not something which should precede that Day.

Contextually, there seems to be no reason to understand *πρῶτον* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as anything other than its usual and primary sense, “earliest in sequence.” Moreover, this interpretation is supported by parallel passages where the combination of *ἐὰν . . . πρῶτον* occurs. In Matthew 12:29 and Romans 15:24 where this combination occurs, the action of the *ἐὰν* clause is simultaneous with or included in the sequence covered by the apodosis. Action in the apodosis is in each case in present time as it no doubt is in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, 3. This action of the Day of the Lord includes events of the *ἐὰν* clause here. Also, in two other passages, Mark 3:27 and John 7:51, *ἐὰν* is followed by two predicates. *Πρῶτον* occurs with the first, and it indicates the priority of the former predicate to the latter. Both actions of the *ἐὰν* clause make up part of the action covered by the apodosis.<sup>16</sup> Again, the action in the

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Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer’s fifth edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 725. See also the new 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., which gives as its first definition “pert. to being first in a sequence.”

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, “corrected edition,” (Marshallton, DE: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1889), 554-55.

<sup>12</sup> Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1971), 288-89.

<sup>13</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, A translation and revision of the ninth-tenth German edition by Robert Funk (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 34.

<sup>14</sup> Duane A. Dunham, “Before the Day of the Lord” (unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Northwest section of the Evangelical Theological Society, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, May 4, 1985), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1:607; Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 3: 187-88; W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London; Oliphants, 1940; Spiros Zodihates, ed. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, revised ed. (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993; Edward Robinson, *A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament*, “a new edition” (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1850), 639-40.

<sup>16</sup> In conditional sentences the clause containing the condition is called the protasis, and that containing the conclusion is called the apodosis. The protasis is introduced by some form of *εἰ if*.” [or *ἐὰν*, see above] William W. Goodwin, *A Greek Grammar*, new edition (London: Macmillan, 1894; reprinted 1974), 294. Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001),

apodosis in each case is in present time as in 2 Thessalonians. 2:3. If the apodosis in this passage is “the Day of the Lord is not present:” then the coming of the ἀποστασία first and the revelation of the man of lawlessness after it are sequential events included in the Day of the Lord.<sup>17</sup>

The second exegetical factor which supports this conclusion is the meaning of ἐνέστηκεν in verse two, and its relationship to the anacoluthon of verse three. 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is an incomplete sentence in the Greek. Most translators, in supplying words to complete the sentence, have placed them in the future tense. While it is true that the future tense is more normal in this type of conditional clause, it is not without basis to use the present tense here. Thomas states, “If the context warrants, as this one certainly does, a present idea is certainly legitimate and even preferable.”<sup>18</sup> The use of the future is probably based on a mistranslation of ἐνέστηκεν in verse two. The word should be translated, “is present.”<sup>19</sup> The translation “has come” as long as the idea that the Day of the Lord has arrived and *is now present* is maintained. Moreover, it is more consistent to carry over the same tense as in verse two into verse three.<sup>20</sup>

Though he adopts the future tense, Best notes the relationship between verse two and verse three, and says, “We . . . assume that the anacoluthon of vv. 3f is to be completed with a recasting of the words of v. 2c, viz., ‘the day of the Lord will not be present.’”<sup>21</sup> Thomas, after developing this point along with other literary and grammatical aspects, concludes:

Transferring these grammatical findings back into II Thessalonians 2:3, we arrive at the following sense: “The day of the Lord is not present unless first in sequence within that day there has come the apostasy and following this apostasy’s beginning the revealing of the man of lawlessness.” Rather than the two events preceding the day of the Lord, as has so often been suggested, then these are happenings that compose the early stages of that day after it has begun. By observing the non-occurrence of these, the readers could rest assured that the day whose early stages are so characterized had not yet begun.<sup>22</sup>

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20, explains “apodosis” as the “then” clause of a conditional (if-then) sentence. It tells what will happen at the fulfillment of the premise presented in the “if” clause, the protasis.

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion by David Allen Russu, “The Tribulation and the Day of the Lord in II Thessalonians 2” (M.Div. thesis, Talbot Theological Seminary, 1976), 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology: The Analogy of Faith” (unpublished notes, Talbot Theological Seminary, n.d.), 10, cited by Gordon Roger Beck, “The Eschatological Extent of the Day of the Lord” (M.A. thesis, Talbot Theological Seminary, 1980), 63.

<sup>19</sup> This is the consensus. See e.g., F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 165; James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, ICC, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912; E. J. Bicknell, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, WC (London: Methuen & Co., 1932; Alfred Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: Robert Scott, 1918), 44; William Kelly, *Pamphlets* (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, reprint 1971), 418-420; William Trotter, *Plain papers on Prophetic and Other Subjects*, new edition, revised (Oak Park: Bible Truth Publishers, n.d.), 287-88.

<sup>20</sup> Beck, “The Eschatological Extent of the Day of the Lord,” p. 64 who cites Gottlieb Lunemann, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 208.

<sup>21</sup> Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972), 281.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Thomas, “A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology: The Analogy of Faith,” 11; cited by Beck, “Eschatological Extent,” 64.

In his excellent commentary on 2 Thessalonians, Thomas further writes:

Grammatically similar constructions elsewhere (Matt. 12:29; Mark 3:27; John 7:51; Rom 15:24) show that these two happenings are conceived of as within the day of the lord, not prior to it. The day of the Lord has not yet arrived because these two conspicuous phenomena that will dominate the day's opening phase had not yet happened.<sup>23</sup>

The above interpretation by Thomas better fits the context as to a continuing use of the present tense. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 Paul tells them that the Day of the Lord is not occurring "at present" and in 2:5-7 he tells them what actually is taking place "at present." Based on this understanding, neither the ἀποστασία nor the revelation of the man of lawlessness must necessarily precede the Day of the Lord, but are instead events which mark the beginning of the Day of the Lord, leaving the way open for both the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord to Commence at the same time. As Russu notes,

The meaning of the term *enesteken* (is present) in light of the use of the term *prwton* (first) supports the fact that Paul is describing certain events which are known to be part of the Tribulation as being part of the day of the Lord.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Paul is *not* saying that the ἀποστασία and revelation of the man of lawlessness are two events which must precede the Day of the Lord. Rather, he is saying that the Day of the Lord is not present because the two events which inaugurate that day are not present. If we take the more usual and common meaning of πρῶτον as indicating "first in sequence" rather than "prior to" in verse three, and properly carry the "present" meaning of ἐνέστηκεν<sup>25</sup> into the ellipsis of verse three, the meaning would be: "You should not consider the Day of the Lord to be present unless you have first witnessed the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness (which inaugurate that day). Or, as James Robinson Boise translates it: "let no man deceive you in any manner, because (that day will not arrive) unless there shall have come the falling away (the apostasy) in the first place, and there shall have been revealed . . . the man of lawlessness."<sup>26</sup>

We may therefore conclude, contrary to posttribulationism, that the Day of the Lord can and does (must) include the Tribulation period during which these events will certainly occur. This makes a posttribulational *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord impossible. It is interesting to note that in Gundry's earlier book he held, along with most everyone else, that these two events fell "within the tribulation."<sup>27</sup> In his latter book he places them "all

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<sup>23</sup> Robert L. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 11: 320.

<sup>24</sup> David Allen Russu, "The Tribulation and the Day of the Lord in II Thessalonians 2" (M.Div. thesis, Talbot Theological Seminary, 1976), 64.

<sup>25</sup> See Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvner, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek Testament*, unabridged, revised edition in one volume (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 623.

<sup>26</sup> James Robinson Boise, *Notes, Critical and Explanatory, on the Greek Text of Paul's Epistles*, edited by Nathan E. Wood (New York/Boston/Chicago: Silver, Burdett and Company, 1896), 496.

<sup>27</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, 93.

posttribulation.<sup>28</sup> One wonders why. Perhaps he sees the merit of the above interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 and so moves these events so as to place them *after* the Tribulation thereby salvaging his posttrib *terminus a quo* for the Day of the Lord. For posttribulationism depends upon a posttrib *terminus a quo* for the Day of the Lord. If the Day of the Lord begins any earlier than *after* the Tribulation, posttribulationism is impossible. Whatever the reason for his change of mind here, he does not explain. Unfortunately this has the appearance of slight of hand, which weakens rather than strengthens his case.

It is not within the scope of this paper to establish when these two events, the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, will occur but most would place them within the Tribulation, some no later than the middle of the Tribulation; others make a good case for the beginning of the Tribulation. In my view, these events not only mark the beginning of the Day of the Lord but the beginning of the Tribulation as well.

### **The Appearance of Elijah and Certain Celestial Phenomena**

The two other so-called precursors to the Day of the Lord are the coming of Elijah and Joel's celestial phenomena. Malachi prophecies that Elijah will reappear "before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord (Mal. 4: 5). "Hence," Gundry argues, "the day of the Lord cannot include the tribulational period during which Elijah will minister –unless Malachi's prediction has already been fulfilled or Elijah will reappear to minister before the tribulation." He concludes, "The day of the Lord, then, cannot begin until the expiration of Elijah's ministry which occupies the final half of the tribulation."<sup>29</sup> He also appeals to certain celestial phenomena which are said to occur before (לִפְנֵי, *lipne*)<sup>30</sup> "the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Joel 2: 30, 31). He relates these to the portents mentioned in Matthew 24:29 which are said to occur "after the tribulation of those days," and the similar phenomena mentioned in Joel 3:15 which are associated with Armageddon, and concludes that "the day of the Lord will not begin with the tribulation or any part of it."<sup>31</sup>

However, it is not necessary to hold that these events will precede the beginning of the Day of the Lord. Neither the appearance of Elijah nor the celestial phenomena mentioned by Joel must necessarily precede the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord. Before addressing this central issue however, Gundry's discussion of Malachi's prophecy elicits several comments. First, he assumes what he has not proven. We are not told to look for the "expiration" of Elijah's ministry (*supra*) before the day comes, but the appearance of Elijah himself.<sup>32</sup> Gundry illegitimately assumes that Elijah's ministry must run its course before the day comes. But the text only states that Elijah will be *sent* before the "great and terrible Day of the Lord." Thus, the coming of the Day of the Lord need not wait for the "expiration" of Elijah's ministry.

Furthermore, assuming that Elijah may be identified with one of the two witnesses of Revelation eleven, it is probable that his ministry occurs during the first half of the

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<sup>28</sup> Gundry, *First*, 120.

<sup>29</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, 93-94; see also, *idem.*, *First*, 38-41.

<sup>30</sup> *BDB*, s.v. "לִפְנֵי," p. 817. When used of time, לִפְנֵי always indicates chronology.

<sup>31</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Actually, the Church is never told to watch for this event or *any* of the so-called precursors. Contrary to Gundry, the Church is not to look for or expect, first the Antichrist, but first Jesus Christ. See my closing statement.

Tribulation. Though Thomas places their ministry in the last half of the Tribulation,<sup>33</sup> Cohen makes a strong case for locating the ministry of the two witnesses in the first half of Daniel's seventieth week, and concludes:

It must be unhesitatingly concluded that the ministry of the two witnesses, who are clothed in sackcloth, corresponds to the first 3 \_ years, that they are slain by the beast at the midpoint of the week, at the time he commits the abomination of desolation, and that the 3 \_ days they lie dead are the first days of the second half of the week. Thus, it is realized that the forty-two months of Revelation 11:2 tell of the iniquitous Gentile domination of the last 3 \_ years, and the 1,260 days of Revelation 11:3 speak of God's messengers to the world during the first 3 \_ years.<sup>34</sup>

In answer to the question of the witnesses being introduced right after a verse that mentions events in the latter half of the week (Revelation 11:2),<sup>35</sup> Cohen remarks that "merely because one item follows another they cannot automatically be regarded as dealing with the same time period (e.g., Mathew 4:16-21 cf. Isaiah 61:1-2)."<sup>36</sup> Gundry can hardly object because he himself points out that in Revelation, "chronologically, the apocalyptic visions dart back and forth."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it seems more likely that the end of the first half of the Tribulation is the time that the two witnesses will lie dead in the streets for three and a half days while the whole world will "rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents" (Rev. 11:10, *ESV*). Those horrific days which end the second half of the Tribulation hardly seem compatible with such rejoicing, making merry and exchanging of gifts by the whole world.

Mayhue also places the two witnesses in the first half of the Tribulation period. He sees John the Baptist as a type or "kind" of Elijah who did not fulfill Malachi's prophecy. He sees yet another "kind" of Elijah who will come during the first half of the Tribulation. He then suggests that

If the time relationship of John's death to Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem is paralleled in "kind" at Revelation 11, then the martyrdom of the two witnesses would occur at the midpoint of the Tribulation period or shortly thereafter.<sup>38</sup>

The point is, whether the two witnesses are placed in the first half or the second half of the Tribulation period, the Day of the Lord can begin as early as the beginning of the Tribulation period, but no later than mid-Tribulation. Whichever conclusion one adopts is fatal to posttribulationism. On the other hand, pretribulationism can live with either view. Granted, pretribs would prefer that the Day of the Lord begin at the start of the Tribulation, for this would necessitate a pretrib rapture. But if the Day of the Lord does not begin until mid-Tribulation, pretribulationism is still an option while posttribulationism is impossible.

More importantly however, neither Elijah's appearance nor Joel's celestial phenomena must necessarily precede the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord. It is usually

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<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 85 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Gary G. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 135.

<sup>35</sup> As Gundry, *The Church*, 94.

<sup>36</sup> Cohen, 135 n.

<sup>37</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Lee Mayhue, "The Prophet's Watchword: Day of the Lord." (Th D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1981), 118.

assumed to be clear from Joel 2:30, 31 and Malachi 4:5 that these events must occur before the Day of the Lord *begins*. But Scripture also indicates that similar celestial phenomena will occur at other times as well. Joel 2:1, 2, 10; Amos 5:8, 18; 8:9; and Zephaniah 1:15 indicate that such heavenly phenomena occur *during* the Day of the Lord<sup>39</sup> If the sixth and seventh seals occur during the Tribulation, and certainly they must (contra Gundry), then similar phenomena do occur during the Tribulation (Rev. 6:12-14; 8:10-12).<sup>40</sup>

In Matthew 24:29, Jesus says that such celestial phenomena will occur *after the* Tribulation. Gundry attempts to harmonize these occurrences of celestial phenomena into one occurrence; after the Tribulation but before the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord. But this position suffers the following weaknesses: (1) he is forced to place the sixth and seventh seal judgments *after* the Tribulation; a view which is hardly tenable, (2) it does not account for similar phenomena which are said to occur *during* the Tribulation, (3) it does not explain how the coming of the Day can be unexpectedly sudden as a thief in the night in spite of immediately portentous events (1 Thess. 5:2), and (4) it does not explain how men can proclaim peace and safety in the midst of such frightening events.

We are still faced however, with the fact that certain celestial signs are said by Joel to occur *before* the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes, which may be the same signs Jesus places *after* the Tribulation (or they may not). But does this require us to place the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord after the Tribulation as Gundry and other posttribs insist? For the following reasons, I believe that neither the coming of Malachi's Elijah nor the coming of Joel's celestial signs must occur before the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord.

First, it may be argued that the events of which Joel and Malachi speak do not precede the *beginning* of the Day of the Lord, but a particular climactic event within that Day. Both Joel and Malachi use the very same phrases in announcing these events. They speak not simply of events which occur before the Day of the Lord, but of events which occur before "the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes." It is possible, if not probable, that these words refer to a particular climactic event (the advent of Christ) *within* the Day of the Lord as distinguished between other events in the Day. Pentecost, for example, says:

That the Day of the Lord may refer either to the entire period encompassed by that phrase, that is, from the beginning of the seventieth week of Daniel through the millennial age or it may refer to any of the events of that period under that name. Thus it is not necessary to hold that Elijah will appear during the church age because he will come "before" the Day of the Lord. This could have reference to his appearance before the awful judgments descend just prior to and in connection with

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<sup>39</sup> Beck, "The Eschatological Extent," 85; Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 20, who states in a footnote (56) "In 2:31 these celestial phenomena are precursors of the Day, but here and in 2:10, as in Isa. 13:10, 13, they occur on the Day."

<sup>40</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 141, holds that such celestial phenomena occur throughout the whole tribulation period as well as in the climax that marks its close. However, unless the sixth seal is opened at the beginning of the tribulation period, it is doubtful that these celestial phenomena will occur throughout the whole period. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, 123-26, 162, places the opening of the sixth seal somewhere near the middle of the Tribulation. Regardless of whether these celestial phenomena occur throughout the whole week or are confined to the latter half, the indication is that such phenomena will occur during the tribulation.



the second advent, which is an event of the Day of the Lord. In fact, the descriptive adjectives, great and dreadful, seem to relate this prophecy to that very experience.<sup>41</sup>

Referring to Joel's adjectival description of the Day of the Lord as "great and terrible" Strombeck insists that "this passage must refer to a limited period of special terror and wrath during the day of the Lord."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Stanley Ellison stated:

We should note that Joel and Malachi refer to the day of the Lord by a special designation. They speak of a part of it as the "great and terrible [dreadful] day of the Lord" (Joel 2:31; Mal. 4:5). Interestingly, these are the first and last of the writing prophets to Judah. This special designation suggests that a part of the period will be particularly intense, a fact also noted in the New Testament.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, Showers has argued persuasively that the Day of the Lord has a twofold nature or double sense in that it has a broad sense and a narrow sense. He states:

That the Day of the Lord will have a twofold nature and, therefore, two phases. In addition, we should note that the biblical expression "the Day of the Lord" has a double sense (broad and narrow) in relationship to the future. The broad sense refers to an extended period of time involving divine interventions related at least to the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel and the thousand-year millennium. . . . Concerning this broad sense, A. B. Davidson wrote, "Though the 'Day of the Lord,' as the expression implies, was at first conceived as a definite and brief period of time, being an era of judgment and salvation, it many times broadened out to be an extended period. From being a day it became an epoch."<sup>15</sup> [author's footnote below]

The narrow sense refers to one specific day—the day on which Christ will return to the earth from heaven with His angels.

Just as the word "day" in Genesis 1:5 has both a broad sense (a 24-hour day—"and the evening and the morning were the first day") and a narrow sense (the light part of a 24-hour day in contrast with the darkness part—"And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night")—so the expression "the Day of the Lord" has both a broad and a narrow sense in relationship to the future.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Davidson, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 381.

Showers goes on to say that both Joel 2:31 and Malachi 4:5 are referring to the narrow sense of the Day of the Lord. He says, "we should note that the Scriptures apply the expression 'the great and terrible Day of the Lord' to the narrow Day, not the broad Day. The implication is that the narrow Day will differ from the rest of the broad Day, not only in duration, but also in significance."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 310.

<sup>42</sup> J. F. Strombeck, *First the Rapture*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Moline, IL: Strombeck Foundation, 1964), 54.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley A. Ellison, *Biography of a Great Planet* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1975), 47-48.

<sup>44</sup> Renald E. Showers, *Marantha Our Lord, Come* (Bellmawr: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1995), 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

Thus, it is conceivable that Malachi 4:5 and Joel 2:31 may be speaking of events which are precursive not to the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord, but to the climactic event within that Day which is distinguished as “great and terrible,” namely the actual second advent of Christ to earth.

There is a second argument not necessarily mutually exclusive, which may explain why we need not consider Malachi 4:5 and Joel 2:31 as precursive to the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord. The temporal indicators in both passages are identical: לְפָנַי בּוֹא (lipne . . . bw’, “before . . . comes”). The verb בּוֹא however, may mean either “coming” or “going,” depending on the context. Among usages listed by *BDB* are “come in, come, go in, go . . . come to pass.”<sup>46</sup> Sometimes בּוֹא refers to the “going down” or “setting” of the sun (Genesis 15:12).<sup>47</sup> When used of the harvest it means “come in = be gathered.” It is so used in Leviticus 25:22 where בּוֹא refers to the completion of the harvest.<sup>48</sup> Preuss says that בּוֹא is used “not infrequently” in the sense of “fulfill,”<sup>49</sup> and Holladay gives “happen, be fulfilled” as one of the usages of בּוֹא.<sup>50</sup> Both von Rad<sup>51</sup> and Martens<sup>52</sup> attest to the fact that this word is sometimes used with the meaning of “comes to pass” (cf. 1 Samuel 9:6).

It is possible therefore, to understand Joel 2:31 and Malachi 4:5 to be saying that before the Day of the Lord *comes to pass* (i.e., before it is over), Elijah will appear and certain celestial phenomena will occur.

This interpretation has several things to commend it: (1) the common use of the verb בּוֹא as “come to pass” when used of God’s Word or purpose,<sup>53</sup> or as “go” in many contexts as with the sun setting, or the harvest ending; that is, it seems to have the idea of looking for the end or completion of whatever it addresses, so that it could legitimately be translated as “before the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes to pass.” (2) Joel 2 describes the Day of the Lord as one of darkness and gloom (2:2) and as “great and terrible” (2:11). It is more likely that 2:30, and 31

continue in the same time frame rather than some sudden change in perspective to phenomena prior to the beginning of the period for which the readers are totally unprepared. They speak of darkness due to heavenly changes before the day *goes* or ends rather than as a flashback to before it starts.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, this view accounts for similar phenomena which are said to occur *during* the Day of the Lord and the Tribulation; (3) it renders the Day of the Lord an event without precursive signs, and thus explains how the Day of the Lord can occur unexpectedly sudden as a thief in the night; (4) it explains why men can proclaim “peace and safety” immediately prior to the

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<sup>46</sup> *BDB*, s.v. “בּוֹא,” pp. 97-98.

<sup>47</sup> Merrill F. Unger and William White, eds., *Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), 64.

<sup>48</sup> *BDB*, s.v. “בּוֹא,” p.98.

<sup>49</sup> *TDOT*, s.v. “בּוֹא,” by Horst Dietrich Preuss, 2 (revised ed., 1977): 31.

<sup>50</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:94 n.

<sup>52</sup> *TWOT*, s.v. “בּוֹא,” by Elmer A. Martens, 1 (1980): 94.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Dunham, 6-7.

*terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord; (5) it explains why Paul omits any mention of precursive events in 2 Thessalonians 2 when he identifies the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord with the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness as occurring first in sequence. Why did Paul not say “you are not in the Day of the Lord because you have seen none of the signs which herald its approach,” if indeed the outstanding events described by Joel and Malachi occur immediately before the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord as Gundry suggests? And (6) it makes it unnecessary to place the sixth and seventh seal judgments after the Tribulation, and allows that the Tribulation be part of the Day of the Lord—thus explaining why the Tribulation and Day of the Lord are described in similar terms especially in the OT prophets.

Thus, it is preferable to understand the temporal clauses in Joel 2:31 and Malachi 4:5 to be promising that distinctive celestial phenomena and Elijah’s appearance will occur not prior to the beginning of the Day of the Lord, but before the day is fulfilled or comes to pass. We need not hold that Elijah’s appearance or that Joel’s celestial phenomena are precursive to the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord. Nor must we hold that the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness are precursive to the Day of the Lord. Even if we take the ἀποστασία as the rapture of the church, we must see it as first in a series of events that mark the Day of the Lord.

### Summary

Gundry’s attempt to establish a posttribulation *terminus a quo* (beginning point) for the Day of the Lord raises more problems than it solves. At times, he places Armageddon (which he seasonably defines as a single battle), the sixth and seventh seal judgments, the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments, and the bowl judgments *after* the Tribulation. At other times, he places them *at* or *near* the end, and as “bringing us to the end” of the Tribulation. Even the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, he places after the Tribulation<sup>55</sup> Thus his arguments are anachronistic and contradictory. He himself seems unable to decide. Contrary to Gundry, the Day of the Lord does *not* begin after the Tribulation, but includes, at least that part of the Tribulation in which the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness occur. These two events do not precede the Day of the Lord, but mark its inauguration. They are the first in a series of events which characterize the Day of the Lord.

What is more, neither the appearance of Elijah (Mal. 4:5) nor Joel’s celestial phenomena (2:30-31) need occur before the Day of the Lord can begin. The biblical data requires only that they occur before the Day of the Lord comes to an end (is fulfilled, or comes to pass). Depending upon one’s interpretation of the ἀποστασία and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, the *terminus a quo* of the Day of the Lord can be placed as early as the beginning of the Tribulation period or as late as mid-Tribulation. In either case posttribulationism is impossible.

One other thing should be said. Nowhere are we, the church, told to watch for the Day of the Lord, Elijah’s coming or Joel’s celestial signs, as Gundry contends. The New Testament exhortation *for the church* is to watch and be ready for the imminent coming of Christ not the Antichrist. For the church, it is not “first the Antichrist” but first the Christ.

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<sup>55</sup> Gundry, *First the Antichrist* 120.

