

<p> <u> Will There Be a Seven Year Great Tribulation? </u>

<p> It must be made clear immediately that the New Testament stresses again and again, as all would agree, that Christians will go through tribulation of some kind during their lives. Indeed some were doing so even when Paul wrote to them, as is made clear, for example, in 1 & 2 Thessalonians. It was then a common phenomenon. And no one can doubt that for some their tribulation would become intense, and is so even now for some at the present time. There are many today who are suffering ‘great tribulation’ around the world.

<p> Tribulation in general is a common feature of the New Testament writings. It is made quite clear that both God’s people, and the world, must go through tribulation, even sometimes great tribulation. (But that is not the same as ‘the Great Tribulation’ spoken of by certain prophetic groups).

<p> So we must agree that Scripture says that the world will also go through tribulation, and that some of that will occur towards the end, for the trend is for things to get worse and worse even when they appear to be getting better (1 Timothy 3.1-5). And there is certainly much tribulation in the Middle East, Africa and Asia today. But when considering these verses we should note that verse 6 relates it to Paul’s time as well. Tribulation was already getting worse and worse.

<p> There will always be tribulation somewhere in the world. It is through much tribulation that we will enter under the Kingly Rule of God (Acts 14.22). But that is a very different thing from the seven year period at the ‘end of the age’ which is held by many to be a unique period of tribulation, something which is in fact unheard of in the New Testament unless you follow one particular view of that most difficult of all books to interpret, Revelation.

<p> Let us then consider the question of ‘The Great Tribulation’ as held by many today. This is seen by them as a period of especially great tribulation which will either precede or follow the rapture and be over a seven year period, although some would agree that the actual tribulation only covers a part of that period. The question, however, is, is this period actually mentioned in Scripture at all?

<p> <u> Biblical references to the idea of Great Tribulation. </u>

<p> We will first consider the actual phrase itself. The phrase ‘great tribulation’ actually only appears three times in the New Testament and not at all in the Old, and in no case are there any real grounds for seeing it as occurring at the end of the age. The first mention is in Matthew 24.21, (thlipsis megale), see also Mark 13.19 which omits ‘great’. Note that it is without the definite article. Matthew writes, ‘Then shall be great tribulation such as has not been seen from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be.’ This is contained in the great address by Jesus to His disciples answering the question as to when the temple will be destroyed, and what would be the signs of His coming. But the question is, when was this great tribulation to take place? The parallel in Luke 21.20-24 gives us the answer quite plainly. It is before and during the period of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, followed by the period when the are scattered into all nations, so that Jerusalem is trodden down of the Gentiles. It will continue until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. So this great tribulation of the Jews began in 70 AD and has continued ever since in fulfilment of Moses’ prophecy in Deuteronomy 28.64-68.

<p> This tribulation has been great indeed and is alternatively described by Luke as ‘wrath upon this people’. But relatively few, if any, would deny that Luke is certainly speaking of the period around 70 AD, for it leads on to the times of the Gentiles and the scattering of the Jews. What, however, the believers in ‘The Great Tribulation’ argue is that Luke is in fact referring to words not mentioned by Matthew and Mark, and vice versa (a view which a comparison of the texts in our view makes ridiculous). Thus they argue that Matthew’s ‘great tribulation’ refers to the end times, and Luke’s to 70 AD. And yet even then Matthew’s would have to be seen as local, for it is made quite clear in the text that it can be avoided by ‘fleeing to the

mountains', a regular procedure for Palestinian Jews in times of trouble.

<p> However, let us consider the facts further. In Matthew 24.16 we have the words 'then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out the things that are in his house, and let him that is in the field not return back to take his cloak. But woe to them that are with child and to those who give suck in those days.' And then in Matthew 24.29 reference is made to sun, moon and stars and the effects on them, finishing with 'and the powers of the heavens will be shaken'. The crucial passage comes in between.

<p> But if we compare this with Luke 21.21, 23 and 21.24a and 26b it will demonstrate that Luke also similarly refers to the fleeing to the mountains and the effects in sun, moon and stars. But the teaching that he puts in between appears at first sight to be very different. It is put in language that makes clear exactly what will happen after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. However once we consider that Luke is trying to make Jewish concepts clear to Gentile readers, and that both are paraphrasing from the Aramaic and summarising Jesus' words in different ways, we can in fact see that they are saying the same thing in different words. There is to be great trouble and then Jerusalem will be destroyed in accordance with what Jesus had said earlier. And the opening and closing phrases are exactly the same.

<p> This is especially so as both writers began the discourse with Jesus' reference to the same question about the destruction of Jerusalem and are answering the same question! Readers must judge for themselves, but it seems to me that only people determined to prove a theory could argue for a method of interpretation which see Matthew and Luke as referring to different periods. Why on earth should Luke omit such important teaching about the end times? And why should Matthew and Mark omit reference to the destruction of the temple when that was what the disciples' question was stated by them to be all about? In our view no one without a theory to defend would ever doubted that the coming destruction of the Temple in 70 AD was in mind in what followed, for Jesus referred to 'these stones' and was indicating the actual stones to the disciples.

<p> Thus we conclude that this 'great tribulation' mentioned by Jesus did occur, but it occurred in 70 AD and onwards, in what preceded and followed the destruction of Jerusalem, and was Jesus' answer to questions about the coming judgment on the Temple.

<p> The second Biblical mention of 'great tribulation' is in Revelation 2.22. There the false teachers and their adherents in the church of Thyatira are threatened with 'great tribulation' (thlipsis megale) unless they repent. Again there is no definite article. Now quite apart from the question of the dating of these false teachers and what is to happen to them, (whether they were first century teachers or latter day teachers), there are no grounds at all for relating this 'great tribulation', which will come on them as a punishment, to any particular period of time, or as happening to others elsewhere. It is rather mentioned as being their punishment, and the phrase is without the definite article. It is simply saying that they will experience great tribulation because of their behaviour.

<p> The third and final Biblical mention of great tribulation is in Revelation 7.14. There John was dealing with the multitude which no one could number out of all nations, who were seen in Heaven following the narrative about the sealing of 'the twelve tribes of Israel'. It is said of them, (translating over-literally) 'these are the coming ones out of the tribulation, the great one, (tes thlipsis tes megales) and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

<p> The exegesis of this verse in context, considering all possible views, would take a great deal of time. But apart from the assumptions of particular views, the question as to when this event took place is not apparent from the text and must therefore depend on other references in Scripture. It could refer to the 1st century or to the 21st century AD. They are simply Christians coming out of 'the great tribulation'. But why do we have the definite article here? The definite article on 'great tribulation' here can either be seen as referring back to the

'great tribulation' of 2.22 ('the great tribulation that I spoke of in 2.22'), or more probably to the fact of the more general high level of tribulation mentioned elsewhere in the Revelation, which was also certainly 'great'. The timing of this is totally based on one's particular interpretation of the book, which will be affected by the basis from which one views it. Those who read into it a seven year future period without any real grounds to support their view will be convinced. Those who see it as referring to history will not be so convinced. It cannot therefore be used in itself to prove that there will be a Great Tribulation in the last seven years of the age. Such a view is based on the doubtful and controversial interpretation of one or two passages.

<p> We should notice that the order of the words ('great' following 'tribulation') is the same as in 2.22 (and in Matthew 24), and therefore it does not necessarily have special significance here. And relation to a time period will very much depend on our view of the Book of Revelation as a whole, which is a highly debatable subject. It is our view that it relates to the great tribulation suffered by the church at various times and in various parts of the world through the centuries.

<p> So while the general meaning of the Book of Revelation is clear in terms of heavenly effects on earthly life, we must recognise that some detailed interpretations very much depend on the interpretation of a few key phrases, which seem innocuous in themselves but are given an importance and meaning far beyond what is obvious. In other words they can depend on inferences, which are then doubtfully used to support a particular position which is not openly apparent, and which can be interpreted widely differently. (One example is - 'the things which you saw, the things which are, and the things which will be hereafter' (Revelation 1.19) which naturally interpreted simply means, 'what you have seen, what is true at this point in time, and what will follow this point in time', but by some is taken to mean 'what you have seen, what is happening to the church and will happen later, and what will happen when the church has been raptured. But it does not obviously mean the latter. The interpretation is made in order to support the theory.

<p> So in this all too brief survey we conclude that references to 'great tribulation' tell us little about when such tribulation was to take place, apart from in the case of the first which would be around 70 AD. There is in context no reason for referring any of these verses to the last seven years of the age.

<p> In fact the suggestion of a 'last seven years of the age' is simply based on an erroneous interpretation of chapter 9 of Daniel's prophecy which seeks to put in a gap between the sixty ninth seven and the seventieth seven for which there is no justification in the text. See the article on Daniel's seventieth week.