

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

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INTRODUCTION

John the Baptist described Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29). In the book of Revelation, when no one was found worthy to take the scroll from the One who sat upon the throne, the weeping Apostle John looked up expecting to see a Lion and instead saw a Lamb (Rev. 5:1-6). Christ, the Lamb, is the only one worthy to take and open the scroll because He alone has purchased for God the souls of men with His own blood (Rev. 5:7-9). The Lamb who brought salvation to men not only saved men from their sins, but He also brought them into the fold as adopted children (Eph. 1:5). Although the metaphor of adoption is a powerful picture of our inclusion into the family of God, it is inadequate to show the full realm of God’s deep love for His children. In Revelation 19:6-9, John wrote that sometime in the future, the Lamb would become married to His bride who would be bright and clean and made ready to meet her Bridegroom. This picture of the Church being joined together with her Lord is one of the most exciting events that are anticipated in eschatological history. No longer will the Church be away from her Lord for all of eternity. “Amen, Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

The purpose for this study is to find answers to the following two questions: 1) When is the time of the marriage and 2) where is the marriage to occur? Clarifying the issues surrounding these questions will help the reader to understand where the marriage event occurs in the timeline of events and how it fits into the overall scheme of Revelation. This study will also strengthen the pre-tribulational view of the rapture by showing that although there are some

within the dispensational camp who would disagree upon finer points, the clarity of Scripture and its literal and straightforward reading demands that the rapture occur before the tribulation.

In order to systematically deal with the subject, this paper will first lay out the major views in regards to the above two questions. As each view is put forward, interaction will follow in order to show where the point is strong or where it is lacking evidence. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn that will prayerfully be the most biblically balanced view among those presented.

VIEWPOINTS

The context of the Marriage of the Lamb (MOL) passage (Rev. 19:6-9) follows the destruction of Babylon (Rev. 18) and precedes the Second Coming of Christ (Rev. 19:11-16). All agree that the MOL will occur before the Second Coming of Christ, but what occurs before and after this event is what is in dispute. This must be noted because those who hold to a post-tribulational rapture position see the MOL as occurring after the tribulation.¹ In regard to this issue, all dispensationalists agree, the MOL occurs in heaven following the rapture.² As such, this paper will address the minor differences in each of these two groups, beginning with the post-tribulationalist views.

Post-Tribulation View

As stated above, those who hold to a post-tribulation rapture agree that the MOL will occur before the Second Coming, but they place the rapture of the Church also just before the Second

¹ Proponents of this view include William R. Newell, G. K. Beale, and Robert H. Gundry.

² Proponents of the pre-tribulational rapture that agree upon the time and place of the MOL include John F. Walvoord, Renald E. Showers, J. Dwight Pentecost, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, Robert L. Thomas, Henry M. Morris and Charles C. Ryrie. James Oliver Buswell agrees with the exception of seeing the rapture occurring after the seventh trumpet is sounded (*A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 482).

Coming and at the end of the tribulation period. Newell states that the MOL occurs after the overthrow of Babylon because it immediately succeeds verses 1-5 where the celebration of the judgment occurs.³ Beale agrees with this idea seeing the necessity of the existence and destruction of Babylon in the preparation of the Bride for her marriage in which the perseverance is the righteous acts of the saints.⁴ Gundry adds that in the text the supper is not necessarily spoken of in the past.⁵ Here, Gundry states, the verb ἦλθεν, an aorist, may be an ingressive or dramatic, denoting that the marriage supper would occur immediately upon Christ's descent.⁶

Of course, the best way to deal with this view would be to address the issue of the timing of the rapture of the Church, which is outside of the scope of this paper. Newell's premise that the MOL must obviously occur after the fall of Babylon because of its place in the flow of the text is simplistic and has little merit. James Buswell correctly states, "It should be clear that this reference to the marriage of the Lamb is not part of a chronological series. Nor is there any transitional phrase such as, 'After these things. . . .'"⁷ Newell himself sees a contrast, viewing the Day of Wrath as the most fearful and the marriage of the Lamb as the most blessed of all occasions so far in the creation,⁸ yet he fails to see that this passage is part of an intercalation

³ William R. Newell, *Revelation: A Complete Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1935), 295.

⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* in NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and Carlisle, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1999), 934.

⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 86.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷ James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1962), 2:482.

⁸ Newell, 292.

within the book's chronological pattern.⁹ Beale's argument of the necessity of the Church's perseverance through the tribulation also makes this error.

But is what Beale says about the perseverance being a necessary preparation true? If it is true, then what of those who die before the rapture and are also included in the Bride of Christ? How is it that they are prepared? Is the tribulation the only means of purifying the Church? A more satisfying answer is that the saints who are robed in fine linen (Rev.19:8) are inclusive of all Church age believers. The fine linen, which is the righteous acts of the saints, are both given to her and with these righteous acts she clothes herself. This is a beautiful picture of the sanctification process in every believer's life. The dual nature of the process of sanctification is seen clearly in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." God prepares the works beforehand so that the believer will walk in them. He gives the righteous acts to the believer so that the believer can clothe himself in them. The preparation or sanctification is completed at the rapture of the Church into the arms of the Savior. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-9 Paul encourages the Corinthian church that the mortal bodies that groan for heaven are merely earthly tents that will someday be replaced by a building from God that will last eternally. Imperfections will be swallowed and all believers shall be made complete in Christ. The tribulation is not necessary for the purification of the Church.

Finally, Gundry's argument that the MOL should post-tribulation because of the usage of ἤλθεν could possibly be an ingressive or dramatic aorist is lacking much proof. Thomas states

⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 366.

that this verb is a proleptic aorist,¹⁰ as does Robertson who sees this as a prophetic aorist¹¹. Dana and Mantey give several uses of the aorist including ingressive, dramatic and epistolary.¹² The ingressive aorist, according to Dana and Mantey¹³, shows the action is contemplated in its beginning as compared to the dramatic aorist which is the usage where the action is accomplished or is about to become accomplished. The epistolary aorist is an action that is seen by the author from the viewpoint of the reader, so that the reader would see the event happening or about to take place. The correct view is difficult to ascertain since the text simply states that the marriage has taken place but does not state when it happened. The marriage event must be separated from the occasion of the marriage supper as two events with the marriage having occurred (aorist) and the supper being prepared as yet. For Gundry to throw out the possibility of a dramatic or ingressive aorist as possibilities does nothing for his argument. To truly come to his conclusion, one must first adopt his post-tribulational stand on the rapture.

With the post-tribulationalist it can be agreed that the MOL will occur following the rapture and that the rapture will occur before the millennium. The timing of the rapture is the place where this view and the pre-tribulational view differ and in the end this causes a difference on the timing of the MOL. Post-tribulational proponents not only lack much proof for their viewpoint, but they also seem to overlook the placement of the Bema seat judgment of believers (2 Cor. 5:10) in their timeline as well as the muddling of the distinctions between the bride of

¹⁰ Thomas, 365-66.

¹¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1933), 6:411.

¹² H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 196-98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 196-98.

Christ as the Church and the wife of Jehovah as Israel.¹⁴ As to arguments that question the validity of a rapture occurring just before the Second Coming so that the saints are lifted up and then back down to the earth, Gundry's only argument is that such calculations of timing are not only "unnecessary," but "ludicrous."¹⁵ Unfortunately, this is a seriously lacking answer to a major problem for the post-tribulationist.

Pre-Tribulational View

Of those who hold to a pre-tribulational view of the rapture, it must be stated that all agree upon the time of the MOL being at the time of the rapture in heaven.¹⁶ This view relies not only upon the presupposition that the pre-tribulational view is correct, but also understands the historical background of biblical marriage rites and how these should influence the readers understanding the time and place of the MOL.

Marriage in Biblical Times

Fruchtenbaum states that there four distinct stages to the Jewish marriage system: the arrangement, the fetching of the bride, the marriage ceremony and the marriage supper or feast.¹⁷ Walvoord lists three major aspects: the marriage contract, the fetching of the bride and the marriage supper. He understands the consummation of the marriage (what Fruchtenbaum calls the marriage ceremony) as part of the marriage contract stage when the contract is actually

¹⁴ Gundry, 85.

¹⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹⁶ For examples see John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 271; Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1995), 245; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1964), 227; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:396; Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Press, 1983), 406.

¹⁷ Fruchtenbaum, 405-6.

fulfilled.¹⁸ Showers also sees three stages, the first being the betrothal, followed by the taking of the bride and finally the marriage feast.¹⁹ With minor differences, the consensus is that there was a time in which a man and a woman were contractually committed to one another as betrothed, being unmarried, yet legally bound. When the bridegroom had prepared to bring his bride home he would go to the bride's home and fetch her to take her to his father's home where the marriage was consummated. At this point the marriage contract was fulfilled and the man and woman were actually married. Following the consummation, the wedding feast began and the friends of the bridegroom were invited to meet the bride.²⁰

Application to the Marriage of the Lamb

Ephesians 1:4 states that "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we be holy and blameless before Him in love." This passage speaks of the choosing of God a people for Himself before the foundation of the world. Often times a feature of the marriage contract was the payment of a dowry.²¹ Scripture states that the believer was bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23) and that purchase price was Christ's own precious blood (Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Rev. 5:9). The betrothal or espousal of the believer to Christ comes at the time the Church is redeemed.²² In 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, "For

¹⁸ Walvoord, 271.

¹⁹ Renald E. Showers, "The Marriage and Marriage Supper of the Lamb," in *Israel My Glory* 49:3 (June/July, 1991):9-10.

²⁰ For an in-depth look at marriage, please see C. S. Keener, "Marriage," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 680-92 and Hazel W. Perkin, "Marriage, Marriage Customs," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988), 3:1405-10.

²¹ Walvoord, 271.

²² *Ibid.*, 271.

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a spotless virgin.” Paul’s desire was for a purified church. This same goal is in view in Ephesians 5:25-32 where Paul describes the love of Christ for the Church in which He might sanctify her and cleanse her by the word so that He might present her to Himself without spot or wrinkle, but holy and blameless. This correlates to the clean white linen that the Bride clothes herself in Revelation 19. The preparation for the marriage is taking place here on earth, but where the wedding is to take place still must be answered.

The Rapture of the Church

For the pre-tribulationist the next event upon the eschatological timeline is the rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18; 5:9). This matches with the marriage stage of the fetching of the bride. Christ spoke of this same scenario in Matthew 25:1-13 where the bridegroom came for his bride and took her away at an unexpected hour. In Revelation 19:7 the great multitude shout that the marriage of the Lamb has come (see above discussion regarding this aorist) and that the bride has made herself ready. Because of this, the pre-tribulationist view prefers to regard the marriage as having come at the rapture looking ahead to the marriage supper. Walvoord states “when Christ comes for His church at the rapture, the second phase of the wedding is fulfilled, namely the Bridegroom goes to receive His bride.”²³ This is the majority pre-tribulationist view as to when the actual marriage occurs. Since the pre-tribulationist rapture of Church brings them into union with Christ in the clouds, the marriage place is said to be in heaven. Even Newell agrees with this premise, stating that there is no other place that the marriage could occur!²⁴ Of course,

²³ Ibid., 271.

²⁴ Newell, 292, 95.

as Walvoord is quick to point out, the text does not say where the marriage takes place, although the timing and the marriage custom do point to this conclusion.²⁵

The Place of the Bema Seat

With the MOL in heaven at the rapture, the pieces of the coming events fall into place. Second Corinthians 5:10 states that all believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Since the Bride who appears in Revelation 19 is clean and white and adorning herself in the righteous acts of the saints, it can be understood that the judgment seat is the occasion in which the believer's works will be tested by the Refiner's fire to see if he has produced those works which are gold, silver and precious stones or wood hay and stubble (1 Cor. 3:10-15). After going through this final purifying, the Bride is adorned in the cumulative righteous works of the saints (Rev. 19:8). Following the MOL and the Bema seat of Christ would naturally follow the marriage supper of the Lamb.²⁶

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

The issue of the marriage supper of the Lamb has various views, even among premillennial dispensationalists. Showers²⁷ and Chafer²⁸ see the marriage supper of the Lamb occurring immediately following the MOL in heaven, with a second feast occurring during the millennium for Israel as the remarried wife of Yahweh. Showers further draws upon the analogy to the Jewish custom by stating that the Marriage supper in heaven will last for the entire tribulation

²⁵ Walvoord, 270.

²⁶ John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 285.

²⁷ Showers, *The Marriage*, 10.

²⁸ Chafer, 4:396.

period and correspond to the custom of a week long wedding feast. Pentecost²⁹ and Fruchtenbaum³⁰ both see the marriage supper as occurring after the Second Coming of Christ, during the millennium on earth. They reason that passages such as Matthew 22:1-14; 15:1-13 and Luke 14:16-24 show Israel waiting for the return of the Bridegroom and the Bride for the feast.

Although there are differences as to the place of the supper and even how many wedding celebrations there will be, Walvoord is correct in stating that what is of primary importance at this point, however, is the order of events.³¹

CONCLUSION

Marriage, as was mentioned earlier, is used in Scriptures to illustrate the abundant love that God has for His people. He chose to use this analogy for His covenant with Israel and to show that her chasing after other gods was akin to a wife who is unfaithful to her husband. Throughout the Old Testament, through the prophets, God called Israel to repent and to come back to Him, but she refused. One day she will return to Him and He will make a new covenant with her and will reaffirm His vows to her in a way that she has never seen (Jer. 31).

In the New Testament, God has also called a people unto Himself. The Church is pictured as the Bride of Christ who was purchased out of slavery to sin and brought into His everlasting care. To this Bride, God has given the Holy Spirit as a pledge of the inheritance that she is to receive. The Holy Spirit in effect acts as an engagement ring or a down payment for what has been promised to the Bride. Although Christ has purchased the salvation of the saints, the future

²⁹ Pentecost, 227.

³⁰ Fruchtenbaum, 407

³¹ Walvoord, 271.

holds for the Bride many other blessings. Among them are a glorified body, pure and fully sanctified; eternity with the Bridegroom; a heavenly home that the Savior has been preparing since He left His disciples in Jerusalem and so much more.

Christ's desire is to present to Himself a pure and holy Bride, since He Himself is pure and holy and will not be satisfied with anything less. He purchased the Bride and then washed her with the cleaning that comes by His word. When they are brought together in marriage, the Bride shall clothe herself in the righteous acts of the saints that the Bridegroom prepared beforehand for her to walk in. His gaze will have refined her and all the impurities of earth will be burned up and she will be completely new. What a wonderful picture of Christ's love for the Church.

Although there are differences as to when this marriage will take place, whether after the tribulation or before, and there are differences of opinion as to when the celebration supper will take place and who will be present, all agree that this consummation will occur. The opinion held by this writer is that the pre-tribulational position best handles all of the pertinent texts and finds answers to all of the questions that arise because of the timing of events. Even those outside of the pre-tribulational camp acknowledge the Jewish customs fit in well with the pre-tribulational stand and John's reference to these customs.

Finally, it must be remembered that Revelation chapter nineteen begins with the announcement and praise of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who will one day come to overthrow Satan for good and will bring all men under subjection. Contemplation of the fact that the King of Creation took sinful man and died upon the cross for his sins in order to buy him out of bondage so that this King could make the Church His bride should bring a shout of Hallelujah! to every believer's lips.