

# THE MEETING IN THE SKY

by  
**Thomas Ice**

A while back, Dr. Tim LaHaye, Dr. Ed Hindson, and I spoke at a weekend prophecy conference in the Philadelphia area. As usual, we had a time of questions and answers at the end of the conference. 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?

This article will point out the errors of assumption represented by this question and to give it a pre-tribulational reply.

## **False Assumptions**

Latent within the above question are false assumptions that must be understood and corrected before anyone can respond to such an inquiry with either a pre-tribulational or anti-pre-tribulational answer. The Philadelphia questioner’s major blunder—and it is huge—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.) What we find here is an example of a widely held belief in academic circles that is categorically wrong. What is this error? How did it start?

## Origin of the Error

Taking the last question first, the source of the error is a German scholar named Erik Peterson. He wrote an article in 1930<sup>1</sup> saying that the Greek word *to meet* (*apantēsis*) “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.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, it was in 1930 that English-speaking scholars Moulton and Milligan published their famous work on extra-biblical usage of Greek vocabulary around the time of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Moulton and Milligan have this to say about the term *to meet* (*apantēsis*): “The word seems to have been a kind of technical term for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary. . . .”<sup>4</sup>

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

---

<sup>1</sup> Erik Peterson, “*Die Einholung des Kyrios*,” *ZST* 1 (1930): 682–702.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Peterson’s article on “to meet” (*apantēsis*) in the influential *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:380–81.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and The Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 104.

means to *meet and to return with* the person met. Therefore, those caught up, meet the Lord and return with Him.<sup>6</sup>

Actually, *to meet* is used four times in the New Testament (Matthew 25:1, 6; Acts 28:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:17).<sup>7</sup>

More recently, I was at a national conference when premillennial posttribulationist, Rodney Stortz, attempted to dismiss the possibility of a pre-tribulational rapture by stating the “technical term” argument of “to meet.” In a chart given at the conference, under a reference to 1 Thessalonians 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.”<sup>8</sup>

### A Few Quick Points

A few quick points are pertinent before getting to the heart of my rebuttal. First, neither Peterson nor Moulton and Milligan state that the Greek word *to meet* (*apantēsis*) includes the notion of returning with the dignitary to the place from which the greeting party came. The suggestion of returning from whence one came appears to be an idea 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

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth about the Lord’s Return* (New York: Revell, 1922), 116.

<sup>7</sup> The Majority Text has this word four times (Matthew 25:1, 6; Acts 28:15; and 1 Thessalonians 4:17). Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> substitutes another word in Matthew 25:1, so it has three occurrences.

<sup>8</sup> Rodney D. Stortz, *The Second Coming of Christ Prophetic Time Line* (Ballwin, MO: Twin Oaks Presbyterian Church, 1999), panel three.

keeping with the general context accompany Him back to heaven (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

This is why F. F. Bruce warns, “there is nothing in the word *apantēsis* or in this context which *demands* 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.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, even if *meet* were a technical term in the way that some posttribulationists insist (which it is clearly not as the article will demonstrate shortly), it is not required that their return to earth be immediate. What would preclude the return (based upon this supposed meaning of the word) from occurring a little over seven years later?

Third, one cannot establish *meet* as a technical term for the formal reception of a dignitary from New Testament use, as Rodney Stortz claims,<sup>11</sup> since only two of the four occurrences may mean that. Nor is one able to establish such a meaning from examining its overall biblical usage in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>12</sup> Thus, if there is any basis for saying that *meet* should be understood as a technical term in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 the case would need to be made from its use in extra-biblical instances. Yet, this cannot be done either, as the following will show.

---

<sup>9</sup> George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to The Thessalonians* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 61.

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, ed. Ralph P. Martin, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 45 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 102–3.

<sup>11</sup> Rodney 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* (Ballwin, MO: Twin Oaks Presbyterian Church, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> For a 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* (London: Lang, 1945; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle, 1985), 262–65.

## A Posttribulationist Provides Rebuttal

In the summer of 1995, while in a seminary library looking through the most recent releases of the theological journals when a very interesting article caught my eye.<sup>13</sup> A posttribulationist had written it in an attempt to rebut the very notion that *to meet* was a technical term! Cosby confesses that while a college student Peterson's article had swayed him 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 *apantēsis* 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.<sup>14</sup>

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

One cannot responsibly claim that *apantēsis* is a technical term on the basis of its percentage of use in passages describing formal receptions. . . . Sometimes *apantēsis* 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. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Cosby continues to state the result of his findings:

The dominant scholarly understanding of *apantēsis* in 1 Thess. 4:17, based on the work of Peterson, does not sufficiently

---

<sup>13</sup> Michael R. Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of *Apantēsis* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4 (1994): 15–34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

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 *apantēsis* was a technical term carrying with it a standard set of expectations is not convincing. Furthermore, even if one assumes that Paul understood *apantēsis* in this way, the evidence demonstrates that he did not read such meaning wholesale into his description of the Parousia.<sup>16</sup>

What does Cosby mean by that last sentence? He suggests 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 *apantēsis* 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.<sup>17</sup>

Why have some scholars thought that this was a technical term which, in turn, supported their belief that “to meet” had its specialized 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.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 28–29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

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.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

The pre-tribulational reply to the opening question is that the premise of the question is flatly wrong. Posttribulationist, Cosby, has demonstrated and concluded beyond a shadow of a doubt “that Peterson’s exegesis was eisegesis.”<sup>19</sup> 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, however, does say, *we will always be with the Lord*. I surmise from John 14:1–3, which I believe is a parallel passage to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18,<sup>20</sup> 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. He will return not as a dignitary to be welcomed by the world, but as One who returns as a conquering Judge. Maranatha!

—End—

Thomas Ice earned his B.A. degree from Howard Payne University, Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, and Ph.D. from Tyndale Theological Seminary. He presently is Executive Director of the Pre-Trib Research Center in Arlington, Texas. Dr. Ice has also pastored churches in Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia, is an adjunct professor at *Chafer Theological Seminary*, conference speaker, and author of several books, including *Dominion Theology* and *Overrun by Demons*. His email address is [icet@711online.net](mailto:icet@711online.net).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>20</sup> See the *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2000), 1151.