

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 28

The Rapture of the Church in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as an Actual Event

It has become popular in some circles in recent years to suggest that the whole question of the timing of the rapture is irrelevant because there will be no such event in the future, at least not an event that is separate from the coming of Christ at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. Ben Witherington writes, “It should be clear from the beginning of v. 16 that Christ is said to come *down* out of heaven and meet his followers somewhere else.... The meeting does not take place in heaven, so there is no rapture into heaven here.”¹ Usually a literal catching up of saints is dispensed with by appealing to a Graeco-Roman background of a formal reception of a dignitary. N. T. Wright expresses the parallel this way:

When the emperor visited a colony or province, the citizens of the country would go to meet him at some distance from the city.... When they met him, they wouldn’t then stay out in the open country; they would escort him royally into the city itself. When Paul speaks of “meeting” the Lord “in the air”....[t]he point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place they have come from.²

Wright’s appeal to this background—like that of many modern scholars who follow the same approach—serves his purpose of removing the reality of the actual catching up from the timeline of future events. In his masterful work, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Wright takes a bit of a detour in what comes across like a rant when he argues that 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 “is a highly contentious passage, being used with astonishing literalness in popular fundamentalism and critical scholarship alike to suggest that Paul envisaged Christians flying around in mid-air on

¹ Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 141.

² Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 145.

clouds. The multiple apocalyptic resonances of the passage on the one hand, and its glorious mixed metaphors on the other, make this interpretation highly unlikely.”³ In another work he writes:

These two verses in 1 Thessalonians 4, then, have been grievously abused by those who have constructed out of them a big picture of a supposed “rapture”. This has had its effect not only on popular fundamentalism, but on a fair amount of New Testament scholarship, which has assumed that Paul really meant what the fundamentalists think he meant. Only when we put together the several different things that he says on the same topic does the truth emerge. This is a typical piece of highly charged and multiply allusive rhetoric. The reality to which it refers is this: Jesus will be personally present, the dead will be raised, and the living Christians will be transformed. That, as we shall now see, is pretty much what the rest of the New Testament says as well.⁴

It should be evident to anybody familiar with scholarly discussions of the rapture as well as critical commentaries on 1 Thessalonians that Wright’s otherwise careful and commendable scholarship is tarnished by a number of rhetorical devices, tricks, and fallacies. For instance, by noting that understanding 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as a literal catching up into the clouds is used by “fundamentalism” and “critical scholarship,” Wright presents a kind of false choice and guilt by association. A reader with imprecise definitions of “fundamentalism” and “critical” is left believing that a literal rapture is only held by people on extremes: fundamentalists or critics. This leaves the average reader longing for a “third way” that avoids such negative associations, a third way Wright conveniently provides.

Wright also lampoons the doctrine of the rapture with a caricature that sets up a strawman: he claims that those who believe in a literal rapture envisage “Christians flying around in mid-air on clouds.”⁵ Elsewhere, he mischaracterizes the rapture doctrine associated with the believers’ resurrection this way: “It would therefore be nonsense to imagine that the presently alive Christians are literally going to be snatched up into the sky, there to remain forever. How would they then be with the others who, having died previously, will be raised and given new bodies?”⁶ I can think of no reasonable treatment of the rapture teaching that suggests anything remotely close to this. The final question seems to suggest Wright is ignorant of what people who believe in a literal assumption of the church actually believe and teach, because, again, nobody teaches this. It appears Wright is unfamiliar with the actual substance of the position he is claiming to disprove, or he is intentionally misrepresenting it.

³ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: SPCK, 2003), 215.

⁴ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 145–146

⁵ Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 215.

⁶ N.T. Wright, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, N.T. Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 32.

Wright also leans upon what I see as a modern prejudice against the pre-modern worldview in which Jesus spoke and acted. He notes, “When Paul talks of Jesus ‘descending,’ he doesn’t suppose that Jesus is physically above us at the moment. Heaven, where Jesus is, isn’t another location without our space, but another *dimension*.”⁷ We may stipulate that the heavenly realm of God and angels is not “up” in the physical sense. But this itself does not mean the catching up of the glorified church is not foreseen as a literal event. Just as Moses ascended the mountain covered in clouds, Jesus ascended the Mount of Transfiguration to appear in his glory, and the resurrected Lord ascending into the clouds to enter the heavenly realm, we may quite reasonably and responsibly assent to the notion that through these very real, physical acts God communicated a spiritual reality. Could Christ have simply vanished from the earthly dimension to the heavenly dimension? Certainly. But what would that have communicated in the first-century world? The action of ascension itself communicates something to the observers. Thus, to cast aspersions against a literal ascension of the resurrected/transformed saints from the earth to heaven because the spiritual, heavenly realm is not literally “above the clouds” seems rash, especially considering the fact that even in our modern world, people still think of heaven as “up.”

Wright presents his own case for a “metaphorical” reading of the rapture passage, suggesting that when Paul speaks about the Lord descending and the living saints being snatched into the air, he is not thereby communicating a literal event. Rather, Wright suggests that Paul is employing “richly metaphorical ways” to allude to three other stories in this passage.⁸ Here he appeals to three backgrounds his readers were expected to bring to the text to understand the metaphorical rather than literal nature of the rapture. I will interact with each of Wright’s alleged backgrounds in turn. First, he suggests that Paul starts with the story of Moses coming down the mountain: “The trumpet sounds, a loud voice is heard, and after a long wait Moses appears and descends from the mountain to see what’s been going on in his absence.”⁹ The alleged background is Exodus 19:18–20 and Exodus 20:18. Those passages read:

Exodus 19:18–20; 20:18	1 Thessalonians 4:16–17
<p>Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up....</p> <p>When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.</p>	<p>For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever.</p>

⁷ Wright, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 32.

⁸ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 145.

⁹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 145.

While both passages mention a trumpet, Paul makes no mention of other telltale elements of Moses’s encounter with Yahweh in Exodus: no smoke, fire, violent shaking, thunder, lightning, or any other detail that would more clearly tie the two scenes together. Yes, Yahweh comes down to the mountain, but not in the air. Yet the people are not “caught up”; in fact, they do not even come up. Moses alone comes up the mountain; the people are so frightened they run away. How the descent of Christ and the catching up of the saints into the air mirrors God coming down, Moses coming up, then Moses descending again to check on the people is inexplicable. I see no compelling exegetical evidence that Paul had in mind Moses’s meeting with Yahweh on the mountain as an explanatory background to 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17—at least not enough evidence to disprove a literal future assumption of the church. I would regard this as a careless appeal to background material.¹⁰

Wright’s second story has more promise. He writes, “Then there is the story of Daniel 7, in which the persecuted people of God are vindicated over their pagan enemy by being raised up on the clouds to sit with God in glory. This ‘raising up on the clouds’, which Jesus applies to himself in the gospels, is now applied by Paul to the Christians who are presently suffering persecution.”¹¹ I think the parallels in imagery between Daniel 7 and 1 Thessalonians 4 are much more compelling. In fact, I would not be surprised if Paul had this vision of the Son of Man at least in the back of his mind, though I probably could not demonstrate it exegetically beyond a reasonable doubt.¹² Yet, pleading in the alternative, even if Paul fully intended to direct the minds of his readers to the coming of the Son of Man in Daniel 7, how does this disprove a literal assumption of the church from earth at the coming of Christ? In fact, I will demonstrate below that even those early fathers who did see a background here in Daniel 7 still understood 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 to portray a literal event. Thus, the argument that the background of Daniel 7 rules out a literal rapture is a *non sequitur*.

Daniel 7:13–14	1 Thessalonians 4:16–17
As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.	For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever.

Finally, Wright ushers in his final background image, already alluded to above: the picture of the greeting party going out to receive a dignitary visiting a city. Wright says:

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 41–43.

¹¹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 145.

¹² Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 180.

Putting these two stories together, in a typically outrageous mix of metaphors, enables Paul to bring in the third story, to which we have already alluded. When the emperor visited a colony or province, the citizens of the country would go to meet him at some distance from the city. It would be disrespectful to have him arrive at the gates as though they his subjects couldn't be bothered to greet him properly. When they met him, they wouldn't then stay out in the open country; they would escort him royally into the city itself. When Paul speaks of 'meeting' the Lord 'in the air', the point is precisely not—as in the popular rapture theology—that the saved believers would then stay up in the air somewhere, away from earth. The point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place they have come from. Even when we realize that this is highly charged metaphor, not literal description, the meaning is the same as in the parallel in Philippians 3:20. Being citizens of heaven, as the Philippians would know, doesn't mean that one is expecting to go back to the mother city, but rather that one is expecting the emperor to come *from* the mother city to give the colony its full dignity, to rescue it if need be, to subdue local enemies and put everything to rights.¹³

Though it has been claimed that ἀπάντησις (“meeting”) is a kind of technical term for sending a greeting party to meet a royal dignitary approaching a city in order to usher them back into the city,¹⁴ this idea approaches the semantic fallacy of making false assumptions about technical meaning or an unwarranted restriction of the semantic field, if not also a careless appeal to background material.¹⁵ In a 1930 study, German scholar Erik Peterson made a case that ἀπάντησις is a technical term for a formal reception of a dignitary and that this background should inform our reading of the use of the term in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.¹⁶ Six decades later, Michael Cosby set out to strengthen Peterson's argument and ended up rejecting the idea that ἀπάντησις is a technical term.¹⁷ Cosby admitted to wanting Peterson's argument to be true because of its apparently devastating effects on the reality of the rapture. He writes: “The journey into this research forced me to confront my own deeply held biases. I still detest what I perceive to be the misguided teaching on the Rapture of the Church in some Christian circles because of the abuses it produces. So I did not want to face the possibility that Peterson's interpretation was incorrect, since it was

¹³ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 145.

¹⁴ Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 141. Cf. Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 226; Stephen Motyer, *Come, Lord Jesus! A Biblical Theology of the Second Coming of Christ* (London: Apollos, 2016), 237–38. Cf. also Helmut Koester, *Paul and His World: Interpreting the New Testament in Its Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 59–60.

¹⁵ See Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 41–43, 45–47, 57–60.

¹⁶ Erik Peterson, “Die Einholung des Kyrios,” *Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 7 (1929–1930): 682–702. Cf. Bédard Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Gabalda: 1956), 198.

¹⁷ Michael R. Cosby, “Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4 (1994): 15–34. Also see earlier critiques in Jacques Dupont, “‘Avec le Seigneur’ a la Parousie,” in *ΣΥΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΩ: L'union avec le Christ suivant Saint Paul*, Part 1: “Avec le Christ” dans la vie future, ed. Jacques Dupont (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952), 39–79.

such an effective and easy means of dispensing with the fanciful notion of the Rapture.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Cosby describes the conundrum he faced:

A man with a mission, I sought to locate further texts describing Hellenistic formal receptions so that the case would be airtight and the information readily accessible. When I first began to see some problems with the theory, I did not want to face them.

Only after a period of about a year was I able to admit the possibility that Peterson’s exegesis was eisegesis. With great hesitation I carefully examined the data, and honesty forced me to admit I had been wrong. In a way this was a triumph, for it illustrated again the power of the text to transform the view of the reader.

At this point, with only a small amount of residual resentment, I admit that the text of 1 Thess 4:13-17 leaves open the matter of whether or not the Christians are caught up in the air in order to escort the Lord back to earth. By comparing this passage with the other New Testament texts that speak of the Parousia it remains clear, at least to me, that the Parousia in Paul’s mind included divine reward of the righteous and judgment of the wicked. But honesty forced me to defuse the most effective bomb in my historical arsenal that so readily destroys the fanciful notion of the Rapture. How much of our scholarship do we perform while looking over our shoulders at the beliefs of our youth that have become sources of embarrassment to us as scholars?¹⁹

Paul’s reference to saints being caught up “in the clouds (ἐν νεφέλαις)” certainly has no direct relationship to the imagery of a greeting party meeting a dignitary outside the city. Rather, it is used in passages in which God descends from heaven to earth—theophanic epiphanies (e.g., Exod 16:10; 34:5; Num 11:25; Deut 31:15). However, the term παρουσία can be used in the sense of an official visit by a dignitary,²⁰ but it can also simply mean the arrival or coming in a general sense (2 Cor 7:6; 10:10; Phil 2:12). Mostly it is simply a quasi-technical term used in reference to the return of Christ (Matt 24:3; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; etc.). This seems to be its use in 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

The same is true of the term ἀπάντησις itself. It means “the action of going out to meet an arrival,” especially “as a mark of honour.”²¹ However, this is far from a technical meaning for an “official welcoming of a dignitary.” The phrase εἰς ἀπάντησιν, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, is used two other times in the New Testament: once in Matthew 25:6—“But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet (εἰς ἀπάντησιν) him’”; and in Acts 28:15—“The brothers and sisters from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and

¹⁸ Cosby, “Hellenistic Formal Receptions,” 32.

¹⁹ Cosby, “Hellenistic Formal Receptions,” 32–33. Readers are urged to locate and read Cosby’s article carefully. Not only does he interact with Peterson’s primary source evidence, he provides a helpful catalogue of proponents of the position in his own day.

²⁰ Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1343.

²¹ Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 178.

Three Taverns to meet (εἰς ἀπάντησιν) us.” The Septuagint uses the phrase numerous times, mostly in reference to a general reception or meeting when a person or thing arrives (1 Kgs 6:13; 9:14; 13:10, 15; 15:12; 25:32, 34; 30:21; 2 Kgs 6:20; 19:25), though in 1 Kings 4:1 it is used for an army going out to meet εἰς ἀπάντησιν another army for battle.²² Cosby observes that “1 Thess 4:14-17 does not specifically mention any of the elements normally associated with receiving dignitaries” and concludes, “The dominant scholarly understanding of the ἀπάντησις in 1 Thess 4:17, based on the work of Peterson, does not sufficiently account for the differences between Paul’s words and descriptions 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.”²³

Cosby’s reluctant dismantling of the “Hellenistic reception” background did not sit well with many New Testament scholars, especially those who deeply desired to continue using it to reject a literal catching up in the sky at the coming of Christ. For instance, Robert Gundry attempts to salvage the Hellenistic reception background by piecing together similar elements from passages other than 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 and pointing out that Cosby himself admits the reception of a dignitary was part of the general cultural milieu of first century readers.²⁴ Yet he does not address the greatest problem surfaced by Cosby’s investigation—the numerous non-technical uses of ἀπάντησις in Greek literature and the lack of clear parallels to the alleged background of the reception party in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 itself.²⁵

In 2012, Candida Moss and Joel Baden authored an article suggesting that 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 rather depends on a Rabbinical background.²⁶ They note, “A closer examination of rabbinic texts pertaining to the Day of the Lord will reveal that there were traditions in which the righteous escaped judgment and destruction in Sheol by flying and being borne aloft by clouds.”²⁷ After exploring Rabbinical backgrounds that may have been familiar to Paul, they conclude:

The structural, thematic, conceptual, and functional parallels between 1 Thess 4.16–17 and rabbinic expectations about the Day of the Lord are illuminating and suggestive. Taken

²² Cosby notes, “Of its many occurrences in Diodorus Siculus’ *Bibliotheca historica*, for example, most involve the meeting of soldiers in battle, and the same is true for the historical work of Polybius. Sometimes ἀπάντησις describes a formal greeting of a dignitary, but often it does not.... In the LXX the noun ἀπάντησις is used frequently in 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles and sporadically in other books, particularly 1–3 Maccabees. Often it designates the hostile meeting of armies, although it also describes virtually any kind of meeting” (Cosby, “Hellenistic Formal Receptions,” 20, 21).

²³ Cosby, “Hellenistic Formal Receptions,” 22, 28–29.

²⁴ Robert H. Gundry, “A Brief Note on ‘Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul’s use of ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17,’” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 39–41.

²⁵ In a final line, Gundry seems to expose a strong motivation for retaining the background, despite Cosby’s own admission that the argument is weak: “Of course, this connotation is hardly needed to keep Cosby or anyone else from slipping back into the doctrine of a pretribulational rapture of the church” (Gundry, “A Brief Note,” 41). This is the very same kind of confirmation bias about which Cosby’s article warns, and it is a pit into which numerous New Testament scholars have fallen in the subsequent decades.

²⁶ Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, “1 Thessalonians 4.13–18 in Rabbinic Perspective,” *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 199–212.

²⁷ Moss and Baden, “1 Thessalonians 4.13–18,” 204–5.

seriously, the similarities both press hard against assumptions in Pauline scholarship and offer some intriguing solutions to questions that have plagued interpreters of 1 Thessalonians.²⁸

While this discussion of possible Rabbinical backgrounds does not settle the issue of the precise setting within which 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 should be read, it should be noted that the language in this section of 1 Thessalonians already depends heavily on Old Testament Jewish imagery related to the eschaton (trumpet, resurrection, archangel, Day of the Lord, destruction, etc.). In light of this, the Rabbinical background has a *prima facie* greater weight than the reception of a dignitary in the Graeco-Roman world, especially since scholarly consensus on that Hellenistic background is ambiguous and disputed.

In sum, not enough evidence decisively points to the specific metaphorical scenario of a greeting party meeting a victorious king to usher him back to the city, though this image may still be in the back of Paul's mind as a general cultural milieu. Even if the imagery were intended, though, it is a *non sequitur* to conclude that this means there will be no literal catching up of the saints.²⁹ Rather, it would only illustrate what those who hold to a literal rapture already actually teach (regardless of their views on the particular timing of the event): Christ will descend as a warring judge to do battle against his enemies; his remnant will meanwhile be rescued to meet him in the air; wrath will be inflicted upon Christ's enemies; then Christ and his people will eventually return to earth to take possession.

F. F. Bruce is far more nuanced in dealing with the potential background of the dignitary and meeting party: “When a dignitary paid an official visit (παρουσία) to a city in Hellenistic times, the action of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escort him back on the final stage of his journey was called the ἀπάντησις.”³⁰ After providing a few examples, he concludes, “These analogies...suggest the possibility that the Lord is pictured here as escorted on the remainder of his journey to earth by his people—both those newly raised from the dead and those who have remained alive. But there is nothing in the word ἀπάντησις 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.”³¹

So, it is irresponsible to rest an entire case against a literal rapture event in Scripture upon merely plausible backgrounds that do not themselves disprove a literal rapture, even if they are true. And it is especially irresponsible to criticize the traditional view of the catching up of the saints with the kind of cutting overconfidence with which the novel and idiosyncratic

²⁸ Moss and Baden, “1 Thessalonians 4.13–18,” 212.

²⁹ In fact, I would have honestly preferred that a better case could be made for the background of a reception of a dignitary, as it would strengthen rather than weaken the idea of a scenario in which the resurrected/transformed saints ascend to meet the Lord, abide with him “outside the city” until the city is judged and liberated, then return with him joyously to partake in the kingdom on earth.

³⁰ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 102.

³¹ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 103.

interpretation is often expressed. At this point I challenge what I see as the most vulnerable weakness in the modern insistence that the catching up of the saints is merely an image or metaphor rather than a literal snatching from earth to heaven: its novelty and idiosyncrasy in the history of interpretation.

Following the metaphorical background argument popularized by people like N. T. Wright, it has become fashionable among modern rapture critics to interpret the imagery of the catching up of the saints from earth in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as symbolic of something other than an actual translation and ascension into heaven. Sometimes packaged in incredulous and condescending tones, the modern interpretation rejects the classic interpretation through a subtle process of demythologizing the text and contextualizing it within an apparent Roman cultural idiom.

The very term Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 points in the direction of an actual catching away into the heavenly realm. Paul employs the Greek verb ἀρπάζω in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 in reference to an actual assumption into the heavenly realm—with some ambiguity as to whether it was bodily or spiritually: “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up (ἀρπαγέντα) to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up (ἠρπάγη) into paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” Scarcely any commentary attempts to suggest Paul’s use of ἀρπάζω in 2 Corinthians 12:2, 4 was anything other than literal—a sudden assumption into the third heaven—paradise.³²

In what follows, however, I demonstrate that the earliest Christian readers of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 understood the catching up of the transformed living and resurrected dead saints to refer to a literal future event—not a metaphor for something other than assumption. I believe the burden of proof is on the modern exegete’s sophistic explanation for why this passage, even granting its vivid apocalyptic imagery, is not teaching an actual, physical ascension of the saints after the manner of Christ’s ascension and similar to Paul’s assumption in 2 Corinthians 12:2, 4. The burden of proof does not rest on those who hold to an actual resurrection, actual transformation, and actual ascension of the saints into heaven based on a straightforward reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

³² With few exceptions, commentators take Paul’s description of an assumption or catching up into heaven literally, not metaphorically. For ancient interpretations on this, see Iren. *Haer.* 2.30.7; 5.5.1; Tert. *De Praescriptione* 24; Orig. *Cels.* 1.48; John Chrysostom, *Hom.* 26.2 (on 2 Cor 12.); Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 3.24.4; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 12; etc. For a sample of modern commentators, see, e.g., William R. Baker, *2 Corinthians*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 424–27; David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 509–15; George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 581–83; R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 209–11; Larry Kreitzer, *2 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 121–24; Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 8 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 193–97; Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 595; V. G. Shillington, *2 Corinthians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 230; C. H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 123.

Irenaeus of Lyons (Second Century). I have already treated his passage in some detail in *The Fathers on the Future* chapter 18. Though Irenaeus of Lyons does not explicitly cite 1 Thessalonians 4:17, in his discussion regarding the church’s present persecutions by the nations in comparison with the future Tribulation, he writes, “And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this (*repente hinc Ecclesia assumetur*/ἀθρόως ἐντεῦθεν τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἀναλαμβάνομένης), it is said, “There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be” (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.29.1). The action pictured by Irenaeus’s future passive indicative (*repente*) *assumetur* (“will be suddenly taken up”)—and its equivalent genitive absolute in the Greek fragment (ἀναλαμβάνομένης)—is equivalent to that pictured in the future passive indicative ἀρπαγησόμεθα (“will be suddenly caught up”) in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Semantically, the addition of the adverb *repente*/ἀθρόως renders the phrase comparable to the Greek ἀρπαγησόμεθα. Contextually, both passages refer to the taking up of the church in an eschatological passage. In Paul’s text, “we who are alive” at the coming of the Lord will be “caught up together with” those who had been raised to life—thus, all those “in Christ” will be caught up together. Similarly, in Irenaeus’s passage, the “church” as the subject of *assumetur*/ἀναλαμβάνομένης is caught up prior to the great Tribulation mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 24:21. However, it is possible that Irenaeus had in mind not 1 Thessalonians 4:17 but Matthew 24:40–41, where, in the context of coming judgment, “one will be taken and one will be left” (Matt 24:40; cf. Luke 17:34). At least in the Vulgate, the same term, *assumetur*, is used in Matthew 24:40–41 and its parallel in Luke 17:34–35, and given that Irenaeus cites Matthew 24:21 in reference to the “great Tribulation,” this connection seems plausible. He expressly mentions Luke 17:34 in *Against Heresies* 27.1 in connection with the coming judgment. Yet it is equally plausible that Irenaeus employs the more vivid *repente assumetur* instead of the Gospels’ unmodified *assumetur* in order to correlate Jesus’s words with Paul’s in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It seems unlikely that Irenaeus would have envisioned two instances when the church would be “suddenly taken up”—one recorded in the Gospels, the other in 1 Thessalonians. Of course, it may be that Irenaeus had not thought through these details precisely. In any case, if Irenaeus was referring to the “snatching” of the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 with his reference to the church being “suddenly taken up” in *Against Heresies* 5.29.1, this would indicate that Irenaeus understood the catching up in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as a literal future event, not a mere symbol of metaphor.

Clement of Alexandria (Third Century). In his discussion of the degrees of heavenly glory, Clement describes those who, in this life, develop a high degree of spiritual maturity by living “according to the Gospel” (*Stromata* 6.14). Such Christians advanced in holiness and perfection will share the same destiny as the chosen apostles—the “chosen of the chosen.” Though they may not hold the office of presbyter here on earth, in heaven they will be exalted to the presbyterate of the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4:4. In this context of those rewarded in the highest degree of glory in heaven, Clement writes:

Since, according to my opinion, the grades here in the Church, of bishops, presbyters, deacons, are imitations of the angelic glory, and of that economy which, the Scriptures say, awaits those who, following the footsteps of the apostles, have lived in perfection of righteousness according to the Gospel. For these taken up in the clouds (Ἐν νεφέλαις τούτους ἀρθεντας/*Hos sublato in nubibus*), the apostle writes, will first minister [as deacons], then be classed in the presbyterate, by promotion in glory (for glory differs from glory) till they grow into “a perfect man.” (*Stromata* 6.14)

Here Clement draws together several passages, including 1 Thessalonians 4:17, but instead of employing Paul’s vivid and dramatic language of ἀρπάζω, he uses the more neutral term ἀρθέντας (“join”), translated in the Latin as *sublato* (take up). Regardless of what one makes of Clement’s discussion concerning the levels of glory and ascent in the heavenly realm, it is evident that Clement understood the language of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as referring to a literal ascent to heaven of at least some of the saints.

Tertullian of Carthage (Third Century). Though his purposes are primarily to argue against the docetic and dualistic theology of Marcionism, Tertullian touches on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in his large work, *Against Marcion*, associating it with the resurrection and return of Christ. In the first mention in 3.25, he connects the catching up of the saints with an actual ascent into heaven—a point which, in fact, is crucial to his argument of establishing that the church has both an earthly and heavenly promise because the true God is God of both heaven and earth. He writes:

Amos says: “He buildeth His ascensions into heaven;” certainly not for Himself alone, but for His people also, who will be with Him. “And Thou shalt bind them about Thee,” says he, “like the adornment of a bride.” Accordingly the Spirit, admiring such as soar up to the celestial realms by these ascensions, says, “They fly, as if they were kites; they fly as clouds, and as young doves, unto me”—that is, simply like a dove. For we shall, according to the apostle, be caught up into the clouds to meet the Lord (even the Son of man, who shall come in the clouds, according to Daniel) and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” (*Adv. Marc.* 3.25)

The fact that Tertullian prefaces this quotation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 with passages directly related to the faithful ascending to heaven demonstrates that this passage is a literal catching up from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm. Also, it is notable that even though Tertullian connects 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 with a background imagery of Daniel 7, he still holds to a literal assumption of the church to heaven.

In *Against Marcion* 5.15, Tertullian quotes 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 (“caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” [*quod in nubibus auferentur in aerem obviam domino*]) along with Isaiah 60:8 (see LXX), then explains, “Now, as Christ has prepared for us this ascension (*Hunc*

ascensum si Christus nobis praeparavit), He must be the Christ of whom Amos spoke: ‘It is He who builds His ascent up to the heavens,’ even for Himself and His people” (*Adv. Marc.* 5.15). Thus, the *in nubibus auferentur*, equivalent to the Greek ἀρπαγησόμεθα, is interpreted as *ascensum* into heaven, just as literal as Christ’s own ascension. Later he writes:

If, again, Christ in His advent from heaven “shall change the body of our humiliation, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body,” it follows that this body of ours shall rise again, which is now in a state of humiliation in its sufferings and according to the law of mortality drops into the ground. But how shall it be changed, if it shall have no real existence? If, however, this is only said of those who shall be found in the flesh at the advent of God, and who shall have to be changed, what shall they do who will rise first? They will have no substance from which to undergo a change. But he says (elsewhere), “We shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord (*simul rapiemur in nubibus obviam domino*)” Then, if we are to be caught up with them (*si cum illis sublati*), surely we shall likewise be changed together with them. (*Adv. Marc.* 5.20)

Tertullian gives no hint of anything other than a literal understanding of the “catching up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In fact, he provides an interpretive gloss of the original *rapiemur* with *sublati*—the same term used by the translator of Clement of Alexandria in *Stromata* 6.14. Thus, Tertullian regarded the catching up of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as an actual assumption into heaven, concurrent with the transfiguration of the mortal bodies of living saints and resurrection of dead saints—all of whom would be taken up together.

In his argument against those who say the souls of all Christians—rather than only of the martyrs—ascend to Paradise rather than to Hades immediately upon death, Tertullian appeals to the catching up of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. His argument is that if all the saints are already in heaven with Christ, why would they long for the resurrection? If, however, they are kept in Hades until the coming of the Lord before they may ascend to heaven, then resurrection would certainly be a real hope. He writes: “How, indeed, shall the soul mount up to heaven, where Christ is already sitting at the Father’s right hand, when as yet the archangel’s trumpet has not been heard by the command of God,—when as yet those whom the coming of the Lord is to find on the earth, have not been caught up into the air (*eraptis in aerem*) to meet Him at His coming, in company with the dead in Christ, who shall be the first to arise” (Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul* 55). Like the reference to the catching up in *Against Marcion* 5.20, this text links the assumption of the living into the air at the coming of Christ with those who had been resurrected. Tertullian uses the verb *eripio*, “to snatch away” (*ex + rapio*), a synonym for ἀρπάζω. Because the whole argument relates to the timing of the ascent of Christians to heaven, one must take Tertullian’s words as referring to a literal catching up to heaven.

In an argument against an over-realized eschatology that denies a future fulfillment, Tertullian directly quotes 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17, then argues that the resurrection therein mentioned could

not be merely spiritual because the attending prophecies had not yet occurred. He writes, “For, allowing that the word of the gospel may be called ‘the trump of God,’ since it was still calling men, yet they must at that time either be dead as to the body, that they may be able to rise again; and then how are they alive? Or else caught up into the clouds; and how then are they here?” (*Res.* 24). The “they” refers to the heretics who are claiming this passage is fulfilled in them and their non-literal, realized eschatology. Regardless, Tertullian’s point affirms a literal interpretation of the catching up of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. He interprets the passage as having two objects: those who are dead, who will then rise again; and those who are alive, who will disappear from the earth.

After quoting Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:2–3 regarding being clothed with our heavenly garments, Tertullian notes:

Before we put off the garment of the flesh, we wish to be clothed with the celestial glory of immortality (*virtutem caelestem aeternitatis*). Now the privilege of this favour awaits those who shall at the coming of the Lord be found in the flesh, and who shall, owing to the oppressions of the time of Antichrist, deserve by an instantaneous death (*merebuntur compendio mortis*), which is accomplished by a sudden change, to become qualified to join the rising saints; as he writes to the Thessalonians: “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we too shall ourselves be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” (*Res.* 41).

Tertullian here adds a peculiar (and unwarranted) gloss on the transformation of the living saints who had suffered under the Antichrist and are still found in mortal flesh at the coming of the Lord—their transformation to glory will be accomplished by an instantaneous death and resurrection, which seems to contradict Paul’s assertion in 1 Corinthians 15:51—“We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.”³³ It may be that Tertullian is reading 1 Corinthians 15:51 as a reference to being lain to rest in a grave and asserts the instantaneous death/resurrection of the living saints at the time of the return of Christ because it better fits the 2 Corinthians 5:1–2 passage regarding being clothed with immortality after death. In any case, in this context Tertullian affirms that these resurrected/glorified saints, having put on immortality, are taken into heaven—“Owing to the fact that our flesh is undergoing dissolution through its sufferings, we shall be provided with a home in heaven” (*Res.* 41).

³³ Tertullian actually paraphrases this in the next section as “We shall all indeed rise again (though we shall not all undergo the transformation) in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump” (*Res.* 42), which fits his doctrine of instantaneous death/resurrection but does not actually match Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 15:51 or 1 Thess 4:17.

These passages are sufficient to show that Tertullian read 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as referring to a literal resurrection/glorification of dead and living saints at the coming of Christ and their subsequent ascent into the clouds for the purpose of entering heaven. He did not understand it as merely symbolic, metaphorical, or affective language.

Origen of Alexandria (Third Century). Origen read 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 as referring to the same future event of resurrection of the dead and transformation of the living saints (*Cels.* 2.66; 5.17). In 2.66, after quoting Romans 14:9, that Jesus died and rose to be Lord of both the dead and the living, Origen notes:

Jesus died that He might be Lord of the dead; and that He rose again to be Lord not only of the dead, but also of the living. And the apostle understands, undoubtedly, by the dead over whom Christ is to be Lord, those who are so called in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, “For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible;” and by the living, those who are to be changed, and who are different from the dead who are to be raised. And respecting the living the words are these, “And we shall be changed;” an expression which follows immediately after the statement, “The dead shall be raised first.” Moreover, in the first Epistle to the Thessalonians, describing the same change in different words, he says, that they who sleep are not the same as those who are alive; his language being, “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them who are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died, and rose again, even so them also that sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent them that are asleep” (*Cels.* 2.66).

That Origen understood the destination of those caught up in the clouds as a literal spiritual location somewhere “between heaven and earth” is made clear in *On First Principles* 2. 11.5–6.

Then, if that atmosphere which is between heaven and earth is not devoid of inhabitants, and those of a rational kind, as the apostle says, “Wherein in times past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now worketh in the children of disobedience,” Again he says, “We shall be caught up in the clouds to meet Christ in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” We are therefore to suppose that the saints will remain there until they recognise the twofold mode of government in those things which are performed in the air. (*Princ.* 2.11.5–6).

We may (and I would say, must) quibble with Origen over the subtleties of his personal eschatology here, but it is clear that he regarded the catching up of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as a literal, not metaphorical, event.

Gregory of Nyssa (Fourth Century). Gregory of Nyssa illustrates the conformity of resurrected humanity to the resurrection of Christ by drawing a parallel between Christ’s ascension to heaven and the resurrected body’s ascension to heaven according to 1 Thessalonians 4:17. He writes: “For that which has taken place in Christ’s Humanity is a common boon bestowed on mankind generally. For as when we see in Him the weight of the body, which naturally gravitates to earth, ascending through the air into the heavens, we believe according to the words of the Apostle, that we also ‘shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.’” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 12.1). There can be no doubt Gregory of Nyssa regarded the catching up of the saints into the air to be a literal future event. Elsewhere, Gregory describes the sudden event of the resurrection of the dead and transformation of the living at the trumpet announcing the resurrection, “which awakens the dead, and transforms those who are left in life, after the likeness of those who have undergone the resurrection change, at once to incorruptibility; so that the weight of the flesh is no longer heavy, nor does its burden hold them down to earth, but they rise aloft through the air—for, ‘we shall be caught up,’ he tells us, “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (Gregory of Nyssa, *on the Making of Man*, 22.6).

Methodius of Olympus (Fourth Century). In his explanation of the coming of the Bridegroom in Matthew 25:6, Methodius writes, “But the cry which was made when it was said, ‘Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him,’ is the voice which shall be heard from heaven, and the trumpet, when the saints, all their bodies being raised, shall be caught up, and shall go on the clouds to meet the Lord” (Methodius, *Concerning Chastity* 6.4). Methodius immediately interprets 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in a peculiar way, differing from commentators prior to him. He understands the “dead in Christ shall rise first” as referring to our bodies—which were dead in the grave—and “we which are alive” as referring to our souls that are spiritually alive. Thus, he sees not two groups of people—the dead resurrected and the living transformed—but one: the spiritually alive who, though physically dead, are raised in new bodies. In any case, Methodius understands this company of resurrected saints to be caught up to heaven literally: “For we truly who are alive are the souls which, with the bodies, having put them on again, shall go to meet Him in the clouds” (*Concerning Chastity* 6.4).

John Chrysostom (Fourth Century). John Chrysostom may also be added to the unison choir of patristic voices in support of a literal catching up of the saints according to 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Commenting on Matthew 24, Chrysostom first correlates the ascension and return of Christ; just as Christ was taken up in a cloud at the ascension, he will appear in the clouds at his return: “And He cometh in a cloud as He was taken up” (*Homily* 76.3). This is in concord with the statement of the angels in Acts 1:9–11. Then, commenting on the saying of Christ in Matthew 24:31—sending

angels to gather the elect from the four winds—Chrysostom correlates this with the gathering of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17.³⁴ He writes:

And why now doth He call them by angels, if He comes thus openly? To honor them in this way also. But Paul saith, that they “shall be caught up in clouds.” And He said this also, when He was speaking concerning a resurrection. “For the Lord Himself,” it is said, “shall descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel.” So that when risen again, the angels shall gather them together, when gathered together the clouds shall catch them up; and all these things are done in a moment, in an instant. For it is not that He abiding above calleth them, but He Himself cometh with the sound of a trumpet. And what mean the trumpets and the sound? They are for arousing, for gladness, to set forth the amazing nature of the things then doing, for grief to them that are left. (John Chrysostom, *Homily 76.4*)

Just as Christ’s ascension was a literal skyward event, so the return will be a literal skyward event; and if the return was a literal skyward event, so will be the catching up of the saints after resurrection (also see his similar literal handling of this text in *Homily 14 on Romans 8:12–13*).

In his homilies on 1 Thessalonians itself, Chrysostom describes his interpretation in even greater detail. In *Homily 8 on 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17*, he writes:

If He is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within. And upon the coming of an affectionate father, his children indeed, and those who are worthy to be his children, are taken out in a chariot, that they may see and kiss him; but those of the domestics who have offended remain within. We are carried upon the chariot of our Father. For He received Him up in the clouds, and ‘we shall be caught up in the clouds.’ (Acts i. 9.) Seest thou how great is the honor? and as He descends, we go forth to meet Him, and, what is more blessed than all, so we shall be with Him. (John Chrysostom, *Homily 8 on 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17*).

Note that Chrysostom appeals to the Roman cultural background of a king’s honored people meeting him outside a city to laud him. Whereas modern commentators have appealed to this background to dispense with a literal interpretation of the catching up of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Chrysostom uses it to amplify, illustrate, and explain the literal catching up of the saints. Thus, even granting the appeal to the Roman background, this does not eviscerate a literal catching up into the sky.

³⁴ I challenge this correlation in chapter 6 and 17 of *Fathers on the Future*, but the correlation between Matt 24 and 1 Thess 4 is common among commentators in the Christian tradition, especially among those who a priori reject a regathering of the elect of Israel.

Another point should be noted in Chrysostom's writings on the catching up of the saints to heaven. In several places he associates it with a rescue from the judgment coming upon the earth, which is reserved for the wicked who are literally left behind. We see this in his *Homily on Matthew 24:16–18* as well as his *Homily 8 on 1 Thessalonians 14:15–17*. Though we see nothing like a long, drawn-out period of Tribulation, we do see the order of a catching up first, followed by judgment upon the earth by fire, followed by the ushering of the resurrected saints into the heavenly kingdom and the banishment of the wicked into eternal condemnation. We see this vividly described: "What trembling then, what fear will possess those that remain upon the earth. For one woman is caught up and another is left behind, and one man is taken, and another is passed over. (Matt. xxiv. 40, 41; Luke xvii. 34, 35.) What will be the state of their souls, when they see some indeed taken up, but themselves left behind? Will not these things be able to shake their souls more terribly than any hell?" (*Homily 8 on 1 Thessalonians 14:15–17*). Given the basic elements of Chrysostom's eschatological expectations, it may be that he held to something similar to what is called a pre-wrath rapture position today.

Rufinus of Aquileia (Fourth Century). In his discussion of the final affirmations of the creed, Rufinus quotes 1 Thessalonians 4:17, then notes, "And do not marvel that the flesh of the saints is to be changed into such a glorious condition at the resurrection as to be caught up to meet God, suspended in the clouds and borne in the air, since the same Apostle, setting forth the great things which God bestows on them that love Him, says, 'Who shall change our vile body that it may be made like unto His glorious body.' [Phil. 3:21] It is nowise absurd then, if the bodies of the saints are said to be raised up into the air, seeing that they are said to be renewed after the image of Christ's body, which is seated at God's right hand" (Rufinus, *The Exposition of the Creed* 46). That Rufinus expected a literal catching up of the saints into the air is evident from the fact that he defends the plausibility of the event based on the nature of the resurrection body.

Aphrahat the Persian and Ephrem the Syrian (Fourth Century). Two fourth-century fathers from the oriental church also testify to the literal assumption of the church. Aphrahat the Persian regards 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as a literal event: "And death shall be swallowed up in life, and body shall be swallowed up in Spirit. And by the power of the Spirit, that man shall fly up to meet the King and He shall receive him with joy" (*Demonstration* 6.14). Likewise, Ephrem the Syrian has a similar literal reading of the catching up of the saints: "Moses was a type of the dead, and Elijah a type of the living, that fly to meet Him at His coming. For the dead that have tasted death, them He makes to be first: and the rest that are not buried, are last caught up to meet Him" (*Hymns on the Nativity* 1). The catching up of the saints of the future is as literal as the assumption of Elijah in the past.

Augustine of Hippo (Fifth Century). As we have seen, earlier interpretations of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 differed as to whether those who were alive at the coming of the Lord would be

transformed without experiencing death or would be instantly resurrected after a sudden death. Augustine reveals his awareness of this dispute in his discussion of 1 Thessalonians 4. He writes:

But it is commonly asked whether those whom our Lord shall find alive upon earth, personated in this passage by the apostle and those who were alive with him, shall never die at all, or shall pass with incomprehensible swiftness through death to immortality in the very moment during which they shall be caught up along with those who rise again to meet the Lord in the air? For we cannot say that it is impossible that they should both die and revive again while they are carried aloft through the air. For the words, “And so shall we ever be with the Lord,” are not to be understood as if he meant that we shall always remain in the air with the Lord; for He Himself shall not remain there, but shall only pass through it as He comes. For we shall go to meet Him as He comes, not where He remains; but “so shall we be with the Lord,” that is, we shall be with Him possessed of immortal bodies wherever we shall be with Him. We seem compelled to take the words in this sense, and to suppose that those whom the Lord shall find alive upon earth shall in that brief space both suffer death and receive immortality. (*Civ.* 20.20)

Though I must differ from Augustine on his understanding of the nature of the living saints’ transformation (resting, as it is, on a faulty textual variant in 1 Cor 15:51), it is evident that Augustine regarded the catching up of the saints as a literal event at the coming of Christ in the air, which is also a literal event. If Christ’s ascent into the clouds recorded in the narrative of Acts 1 was literal, then so is the return of Christ in the clouds a literal event, as promised by the angels then present. And if the return of Christ in the clouds is a literal event, so too is the catching up of the church to the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Elsewhere Augustine connects this catching up of the saints to heaven—their being gathered together unto him—with their enthronement at Christ’s right hand and invitation into the kingdom (*Civ.* 20.24).

Augustine also refers to 1 Thessalonians 4:17 with a seemingly literal rendering of the text in *Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants* 2.50 (31): “At last, upon some there will be bestowed this blessing at the last day, that they shall not feel death itself in sudden change, but shall be caught up along with the risen in the clouds to meet Christ in the air, and so shall they ever live with the Lord.” This event, Augustine believes, is a future event, connected to the bodily resurrection” (*Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel of John* 9).

Theodoret of Cyrus (Fifth Century). On the nature of the resurrected, glorified body, Theodoret writes:

After the resurrection our bodies also will be incorruptible and immortal, and being released from what is earthly will become light and æthereal. This moreover is distinctly taught us by the divine Paul in the words ‘It is sown in corruption, it is raised in

incorruption, it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown in dishonour it is raised in glory; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body’ and in another place ‘We shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.’ If then the bodies of the saints become light and æthereal and easily travel through the air, we cannot wonder that the Lord’s body united to the Godhead of the only begotten, when, after the resurrection, it had become immortal, entered in when the doors were shut” (Theodoret, *Letter 145 to the Monks of Constantinople* [NPNF 2.3:315–16]).

Theodoret thus understood the catching up of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to be a literal event, made possible by the “aethereal” quality of the resurrection body.

Jerome of Stridon (Fifth Century). In a text relaying Jerome’s responses to various Bible questions, we read: “Paul says that some shall be ‘alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord;’ and that they shall be ‘caught up to meet the Lord in the air’ (1 Thess. iv. 15, 17). Are we to suppose this assumption to be corporeal and that those assumed will escape death? Yes, Jerome answers, but their bodies will be glorified” (*Letter 59 to Marcella*). In another place Jerome explains 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as metaphorical: “Minervius and Alexander two monks of Toulouse had written to Jerome asking him to explain for them a large number of passages in scripture. Jerome in his reply postpones most of these to a future time but deals with two in detail viz. (1) ‘we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed,’ 1 Cor. xv. 51; and (2) ‘we shall be caught up in the clouds,’ 1 Thes. iv. 17. With regard to (1) Jerome prefers the reading ‘we shall all sleep but we shall not all be changed,’ and with regard to (2) he looks upon the language as metaphorical and interprets it to mean that believers will be ‘assumed’ into the company of the apostles and prophets. The date of the letter is 406 a.d.” (Jerome, *Letter 119 to Minervius and Alexander*). It appears Jerome takes the “clouds” as referring to the “cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12:1. In any case, the assumption itself is literal—to be assumed into the company of apostles and prophets is to be taken into the heavenly realm. The question of the meaning of the clouds is subject to dispute in Jerome’s mind. This fifth-century interpretation of “clouds” as a metaphor seems to be the earliest, and even this does not alter the literal assumption.

Conclusion on the Event of the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17

Through the overwhelmingly harmonious chorus of testimonies regarding the literal assumption of the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, I have demonstrated this to be the clear patristic consensus on the matter. This does not, of course, demonstrate its truthfulness, but in my theological method, the literal interpretation serves as the “default” position unless it can be overturned by compelling exegesis. Again, unprecedented interpretations are not invalid per se, but they bear the burden of proof.

In the foregoing discussion, I have demonstrated that Wright—and those who have adopted the same metaphorical reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and thus rejected a literal assumption of the church—often either misunderstand or intentionally misrepresent the classic rapture doctrine. The language of the passage often fails to confirm their speculative Old Testament or cultural backgrounds, and in any case, those backgrounds, even if accepted, do not disprove a literal rapture. The metaphorical reading of the catching up of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is also overly modernistic and—in light of the history of interpretation—idiosyncratic, unprecedented in the patristic period; it is not, therefore, merely the odd interpretation of fundamentalists and critical scholars. The burden of proof is on the metaphorical reading of this passage, a burden which its supporters have failed to meet.