

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

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

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Go Deeper Excursus 27

Escape from the Coming Wrath in the Shepherd of Hermas¹

In the patristic period, the Shepherd of Hermas was highly valued as an inspiring—if not inspired—work (e.g., Origen, *Princ.* 1.3.3; 2.1.5; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 3).² Yet in the modern period, it continues to vex scholars with regard to date, authorship, and integrity.³ I believe a strong case can be (and has been) made for some type of redactional development of the Shepherd between the years 80 and 140 by the hand of the same author, Hermas, who edited his own work throughout his life.⁴ Leslie Barnard reasonably dates Visions 1–4—the main focus of this section—to the late first century and the remainder of the work around 135.⁵ In any case, the writing is generally assumed to have come to its final form before the middle of the second century.⁶

In Vision 2, the revelator introduced in the first vision—the Elder Lady (Herm. Vis. 1.2; cf. 2.4.1)—presents Hermas with a little book, the contents of which Hermas is to report to God’s people (Vis. 2.1.3). The book contains a personal warning and call to repentance for Hermas and

¹ This section is adapted from a paper presented to the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, conducted virtually online in 2020, and then subsequently adapted into relevant excurses related to Visions 2, 3, and 4 in Caroline P. Buie and Michael J. Svigel, *The Shepherd of Hermas: A New Translation and Commentary*, The Apostolic Fathers Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), 88–90; 120–24; 137–39. The translation of passages from the *Shepherd* are from the Buie/Svigel translation.

² See Philippe Henne, *L’unité du Pasteur d’Hermas: tradition et rédaction* (Paris: Gabalda, 1992), 15–44, and Philippe Henne, “Canonicité du ‘Pasteur’ d’Hermas,” *RThom* 90.1 (1990): 82–83.

³ Norbert Brox, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern, vol. 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 29–33; Alastair Kirkland, “The Literary History of the Shepherd of Hermas,” *Second Century* 9 (1992): 87–102; Caroline Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 18–20.

⁴ See Buie and Svigel, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 25–36. Cf. Robert Joly, “Le milieu complexe du ‘Pasteur d’Hermas’,” In Wolfgang Haase, ed., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt Part II, Principat*, vol. 27, 1, *Religion (Vorkonstantinische Christentum: Apostolischen Väter und Apologeten)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), 527–29; John Christian Wilson, *Five Problems in the Interpretation of the Shepherd of Hermas: Authorship, Genre, Canonicity, Apocalyptic, and the Absence of the Name “Jesus Christ”*, Biblical Series, 34 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1995).

⁵ Leslie W. Barnard, “The Shepherd of Hermas in Recent Study,” *Heythrop Theologica Journal* 9 (1968): 32.

⁶ Joseph Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 64–65.

his family (2.2.2–4), as well as a general call to repentance for all the saints in light of a coming day of reckoning. Though the eschatological tone of this passage has been generally acknowledged,⁷ attention to its chronology as it relates to the idea of the eschatological “second chance” for Hermas has not been well developed, or it has been intentionally downplayed. Osiek points out the puzzle of the “second chance” for repentance for some category of sinners:

The time of salvation is now..., yet it will not last forever—a warning that focuses the urgency of the message on the present. Later, the end of that time will be imaged as the completion of the Tower (Vis. 3.8.9), after which change is not possible (Vis. 3.9.5; Sim. 9.32.1; 10.4.4). But the completion of the Tower is also the end (Vis. 3.8.9). It is therefore not certain that the end of possible conversion for believers is something more proximate than the “end time,” even though this creates more difficulty to explain how the outsiders seem to have more time. The answer lies not in chronological but in narrative theological structure: believers have the word of revelation already addressed to them in baptism and repeated in Hermas’ proclamation; the time for conversion is therefore the immediate present, whereas for unbelievers, it is the time in which they hear the message.⁸

However, I argue that the solution to the difficulty created by the idea of an availability of repentance for the heathen distinct from that for the saints is, in fact, found in careful attention to Hermas’s eschatological chronology. The saints have “until this Day” (μέχρι ταύτης τῆς ἡμέρας) as the fixed deadline for repentance (Herm. Vis. 2.2.4; 2.2.5). The phrase “this Day” again occurs in Vision 3.2.2 in connection with an opportunity to repent of and be cleansed from the sin of double-mindedness. This demonstrates that the warning does not refer literally to the day on which the message is given but something more akin to “that day” (ἡ ἡμέρα ἐκείνη) found in the Septuagint associated with the coming Day of the Lord or impending judgment upon this earth (cf. Joel 1:15) (see chapter 15 in *The Fathes on the Future* and Go Deeper Excursus 22). Hermas’s use of “this Day” instead of the more typical “that Day” may serve to underscore the imminence of the appointed Day after which the opportunity for the saints’ repentance will be lost.⁹

So, the saints addressed in Vision 2.2.4–5 are given a final opportunity to repent, but this opportunity comes to an end (ἔχει τέλος) (2.2.4). If they repent of their double-mindedness, “they will fully receive the promises with great glory” (2.2.6) and the end of their journey will be “with the holy angels” (2.2.7). In Similitude 9.25.2, this destiny with the holy angels is ascribed to “apostles and teachers” and such people who walked in righteousness and truth. According to

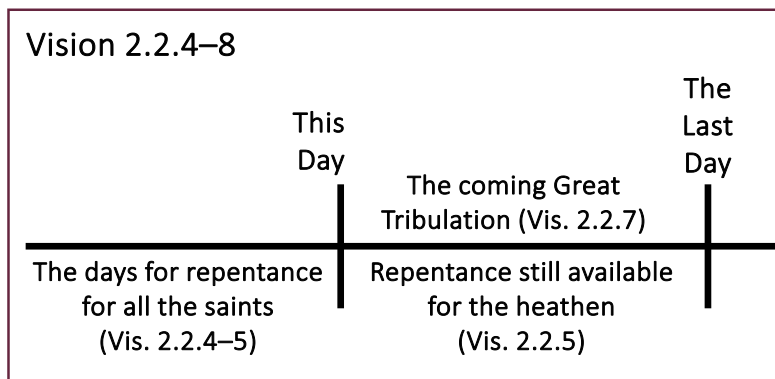
⁷ Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 55; Brox, *Hirt*, 99–100

⁸ Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 55; cf. Martin Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, Apostolischen Väter, vol. 4, HNT (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), 447–48.

⁹ The phrase “these days” (ταύτας τὰς ἡμέρας) is used in Similitude 9 to refer to the time until which repentance is possible for those who had previously denied the Lord. That text connects the appointed time to the completion of the Tower: “If, then, any are about to repent, it must happen quickly, before the Tower is completed, but if not, they will be destroyed” (Sim. 9.26.6).

Irenaeus, this is also the destiny of those resurrected, glorified saints who will be ruling in the coming kingdom (*Against Heresies* 5.35.1).

Even though the “saints” or “righteous” have until “this Day” to repent, Hermas is told that “for the heathen, repentance is available until the ‘Last Day’” (τοῖς δὲ ἔθνεσιν μετάνοιά ἐστὶν ἕως ἐσκάτης ἡμέρας) (Herm. Vis. 2.2.5). Thus we have two distinct appointed times: “this Day” set for the believers to repent of double-mindedness, and “the ‘Last Day’” until which unbelievers will still have a chance to repent. Those who denied the Lord have therefore been granted mercy to repent prior to “this Day” (2.2.8). Yet if a person continues to deny the Lord “in the coming days”—presumably those days following “this Day”—they will be “stripped of their life” (2.2.8). These coming days, it seems, are those referred to in 2.2.7 by the eschatological term “the coming Great Tribulation” (τὴν θλίψιν τὴν ἐρχομένην τὴν μεγάλην) (2.2.7; cf. 2.3.4). If this is the case, then Vision 2.2 establishes an eschatological chronology that calls believers to repentance prior to “this Day,” urges some to faithfulness during the coming “Great Tribulation,” and allows for others to be granted repentance until a later “Last Day.”



Yet this leaves unanswered questions. Are the first two groups—those who repent prior to “this Day”—the same as those urged to endure “the coming Great Tribulation”? And what about believers who fail to repent prior to “this Day”? Will they be cut off from such an opportunity or, like the “heathen,” will they also have a “second chance” for repentance between “this Day” and the “Last Day”? These questions are addressed in the subsequent Visions 3 and 4.

In Vision 3, Shepherd of Hermas uses a vision of a tower that represents the church under construction until the end of the age. Individual stones—representing people—are variously placed in the tower at different times and under different conditions, or they are rejected from entering the tower because of defects or deficiencies. In Vision 3.5.5, we see the fate of those who are tossed aside, though not too far from the tower. Because of their close proximity to the tower, these stones have an opportunity to repent and have a place in it. However, this opportunity persists only as long as the tower is in the process of being built. Once it is finished, that opportunity for being placed in it will come to an end.

At this point, we must differ from Osiek’s insistence that “*the accent is not on chronology but*

on the immediacy of the call to conversion.”¹⁰ As was the case in Vision 2.2, chronology and urgency cannot be separated, nor can one dismiss the chronology and comprehend the matter of the “second chance” given to those stones cast near the tower. In this vision of the stones the lady addresses the unanswered question left from Vision 2: what is to become of those saints who do not repent prior to the arrival of “this Day”? Will they, like the heathen, have an opportunity to repent after “this Day” but prior to the “Last Day”? The answer, it seems, is yes and no depending on how near to the tower one is upon its completion. Through the image of the scattered stones—some tossed far away, some near—we recognize that some may still have a second chance for repentance even after “this Day” or, in terms of Vision 3, after the completion of the tower.

In Vision 3 the imminent completion of the tower is the external circumstance that creates the urgency for immediate conversion, as was “this Day” and coming “Great Tribulation” in Vision 2. The opportunity for incorporation into the church will eventually end with its completion, evidently when the last stone is placed. Yet this leads to a natural question: once all the stones have been placed and the tower is completed, do any of the stones that were near the tower, desiring to repent, have any hope? Do they, as it were, have a “second chance”?

In Vision 3.7, Hermas asks the lady whether the stones thrown away have an opportunity for repentance and whether they have a place in the tower, to which the lady responds that they do have an opportunity for repentance, but they would not fit into the tower being built (3.7.5)—presumably because once the tower is completed, no more stones can be added. Rather, those stones have an opportunity to be part of a “more subordinate place” after they are tormented to fulfill the days of their sins (3.7.6), assuming, of course, that they repent of their evil deeds.

At the outset, it must be determined what Hermas means by “all these stones that had been thrown away” (Herm. Vis. 3.7.5). Contrary to some treatments, this is not a reference to every category of stones that did not fit into the tower prior to its completion, but to a subcategory: those specifically mentioned in Vision 3.5.5. Brox rightly insists on this precise reading, scolding interpreters who assume that Hermas is referring to a second chance for all stones rejected by the builders.¹¹ Such a universal second chance would contradict the stern warnings in Vision 2.2. Rather, these stones refer to those who are “ones who sinned but want to repent, so they weren’t thrown too far away from the Tower” (Vis. 3.5.5).

What are we to make of the “second chance” for repentance after the completion of the tower and those who are relegated to the “subordinate place”? Bernhard Poschmann’s evaluation of this scenario in terms of personal eschatology—what happens to a person when they die—is fairly

¹⁰ Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 72 (emphasis hers).

¹¹ He notes, “Hermas fragt nämlich nicht nach »allen Steinen, die nicht in den Turmbau paßten«, sondern (nur) nach »allen *weggeworfenen* Steinen, die nicht in den Turmbau paßten«; »alle *weggeworfenen* Steine« bedeutet aber eine Einschränkung und bezeichnet nur eine Teilmenge aller Steine, die nicht in den Turmbau passen. Denn außer »allen *weggeworfenen* Steinen« gibt es »alle *weit* *weggeworfenene*«. Seit Vis III,2,7.9 und in 5,5; 6,1; 7,1 operiert Herma mit dieser wichtigen Unterscheidung zwischen den »*weggeworfenen*« und den »*weit* / μακράν (sc. vom Turm) *weggeworfenen*« Steinen” (Norbert Brox, “Die *weggeworfenen* Steine im Pastor Hermae Vis III,7,5,” *ZNW* 80.1–2 [1989]: 132).

typical: “Their fate in the next life remains obscure. A continuation of penitential punishment in the afterlife or an inferior degree of beatitude have been suggested. However, these are mere guesses.”¹² In contrast, when we read Visions 2, 3, and 4 together, it appears that Hermas’s emphasis is less on personal eschatology and more on the coming Great Tribulation and the “Last Day.”¹³ Insisting that Hermas is dealing with personal eschatology and thus personal soteriology has led to the correlated insistence that for him there is only one opportunity for post-baptismal repentance (or penance) to restore one’s right standing with God and his church. However, if one reads the Shepherd in the context of a looming, imminent cosmic eschatological event just over the horizon, then the offer of a single repentance to his readers makes good sense of the language and imagery.

With regard to the “more subordinate place” (τόπος...πολὺ ἐλάττωνι), some, like D’Alès, understand this to refer to the literal place in the narthex of the church, where catechumens and the penitent are relegated until their full conversion or penance is accepted and they are reincorporated into the church.¹⁴ However, Osiek calls this view “anachronistic.”¹⁵ Poschmann sees it more as an inferior situation rather than place—the time between beginning a process of penance and being fully admitted into the church.¹⁶ However, Giet reminds us that this inferior place is not occupied by the penitents but is the place the penitent will earn by means of their repentance.¹⁷ One’s understanding of this “more subordinate place” must be governed by the eschatological warnings and promises in the broader context of Visions 2, 3, and 4.

This brings us to the statement in Vision 3.7.6 that these stones will fit into this subordinate place “only when they have been tormented and have fulfilled the days of their sins.” The word βασιανίζω means “to subject to punitive judicial procedure” or “to subject to severe distress,” usually in a physical sense.¹⁸ In the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the term is used for physical tortures endured by believers at the hands of persecutors (2.2; 6.1). Later in the Shepherd, we find much

¹² Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. and rev. by Francis Courtney (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 32.

¹³ Brox rightly points out the strong eschatological warning looming over the passage (“Die weggeworfenen Steine” 133).

¹⁴ A. D’Alès, *L’édit de Calliste: Étude sur les origines de la pénitence Chrétienne*, Bibliothèque de théologie historique, 2nd ed. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1914), 62–64. D’Alès admits this view risks over-literalizing Hermas’s vision and falling into anachronism, but nevertheless suggests, “Telle nous paraît l’interprétation la plus naturelle” (D’Alès, *L’édit de Calliste*, 64).

¹⁵ Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 75.

¹⁶ “Der τόπος ἐλάττων bezeichnet also den Zustand des Büßers, der bei aufrichtiger Bekehrung seine Buße noch nicht vollendet hat und deswegen für die Aufnahme in den Turm noch nicht reif ist” (Bernhard Poschmann, *Paenitentia Secunda: die kirchliche Busse im ältesten Christentum bis Cyprian und Origenes: eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung* [Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1940], 156). This points either to an “innere Zustand des Büßers” or to an “äußere Stellung zur Kirche.” Poschmann does not consider the possibility of a distinct eschatological position for those who had not been repentant by the time of the completion of the Tower.

¹⁷ He writes, “Toutefois l’Eglise parle ici, non de la place occupée par les penitents, mais de celle qu’ils auront méritée par leur pénitence” (Stanislas Giet, *Hermas et les Pasteurs: les trois auteurs du Pasteur d’Hermas* [Paris: University of France Press, 1963], 26).

¹⁸ BDAG, 168. Ignatius of Antioch uses the term to refer to inner turmoil (Ign. *Eph.* 8.1).

more detail added to the concept of βασανίζω.¹⁹ In Similitude 6.3, the shepherd shows Hermas a vision of the “angel of punishment,” who is seen punishing sheep with beatings (Herm. Sim. 6.3.1). The shepherd interprets the sheep in this parable as those who wandered from God and followed the lusts of this world; therefore, they are inflicted with great punishments (6.3.3). When asked to describe these punishments, the shepherd replies, “The various punishments and torments are torments in this life (βιοτικάί εἰσι βάσανοι). For some are punished by losses, others by poverty, some by various illnesses, and some by every kind of disturbance. Still others are abused by the rabble and suffer in many other ways” (6.3.4). In this case, the “tortures” appear to be similar to the kind of earthly discipline envisioned by Hebrews 12:7–11.²⁰ Except in three instances when it refers to inner turmoil (Herm. Mand. 4.2.2; Herm. Sim. 7.4; 9.9.3), the verb βασανίζω and its related descriptors in the Shepherd refer to earthly torments designed for the disciplining and purifying of God’s people. In light of this, the Shepherd seems to have no concept of a post-death purgatory.²¹

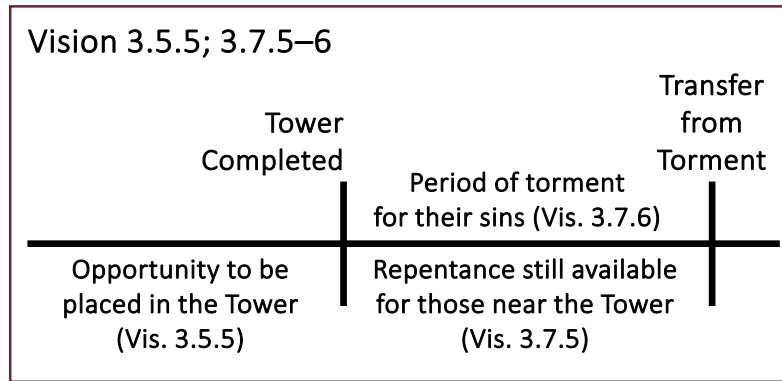
Though Osiek acknowledges that the Shepherd refers to torment and tribulations occurring in this life, she argues that “more likely, some kind of eschatological punishment is in view” in Vision 3.7.6. Though I agree with Osiek that the reference is to eschatological torments, they do not refer to torments in the afterlife. That is, reading Visions 2, 3, and 4 together, these are torments endured in the coming Great Tribulation. The purging envisioned in Vision 3.7.6 are both this-worldly and eschatological in the sense that Hermas anticipates a period of judgment, tribulation, and purifying torment about to arrive in this world and upon this earth. Those who are near the tower—that is, within the orbit of the church—and who are close to repentance will have an opportunity to be saved. However, because they did not repent prior to “this Day” (Vis. 2) and prior to the completion of the tower’s construction (Vis. 3), they will be relegated to a subordinate place compared to those who had been incorporated into the tower.²²

¹⁹ The term βασανίζω is found in the Similitudes thirteen times: 6.3.1; 6.4.1 (2x), 2 (2x), 4 (2x); 6.5.3, 4 (2x), 6.

²⁰ Later Hermas enquires about the length of time a person must endure such torment compared to the time they spent in “luxury and pleasure” (Sim. 6.4.1). The Shepherd explains that one hour of torment is equal to thirty days, so if a person is tormented for a single day (twelve hours), it is equivalent to a whole year (6.4.4). We may be tempted to anachronistically project back onto Hermas the later concept of purgatory, but we must recall that the context of this discussion is still torments one experiences in this earthly life (βιοτικάί εἰσι βάσανοι, Sim. 6.3.4). He further explains the reason behind this counter-intuitive economy of luxury versus torment: luxury is fleeting and easily forgotten while punishment and torment has lasting effects on the memory—that is, a little suffering goes a long way for reforming wicked behavior (Sim. 6.5.1–7).

²¹ However, once the doctrine of a posthumous purgation develops later in the history of the church, Hermas’s imagery and language would be ready-at-hand for contributing to the doctrine. On the development of the doctrine of purgatory and even its displacement of the idea of an earthly, eschatological purgation during an earthly tribulation, see Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 83–84.

²² Giet rightly notes, “Leur retour tardif et imparfait à Dieu, qui peut se faire sur terre, au terme des épreuves eschatologiques, ne leur permettra pas d’entrer comme partie intégrante dans la construction de la tour, topôt achevée pour eux.” Giet, *Hermas et les Pasteurs*, 26.



This eschatological reading of the text fits well with the warning of Vision 3.9.5: “Beware of the coming judgment! Those in a privileged position, therefore, ought to seek out those who are hungry until the Tower is completed. For after the Tower is finished, you’ll long to do good, but you’ll have no opportunity.” The phrase “coming judgment” (τὴν κρίσιν τὴν ἐπερχομένην) in Vision 3.9.5 is likely parallel with the “coming Great Tribulation” (τὴν θλίψιν τὴν ἐρχομένην τὴν μεγάλην) in Vision 2.2.7 and later in Vision 4.1.1, 4.3.6. This “coming judgment” is associated conceptually with the time of the completion of the tower—that is, the completion of the building of the church. Reading these visions together, Hermas appears to have in mind a convergence of several events: the time when the church is completed with the incorporation of its last member, the time of the coming judgment, the appointed Day after which the opportunity for repentance and thus participation in glory and fellowship with angels is lost, and the time of the coming Great Tribulation.

Vision 4 ties the eschatology of Vision 2 and 3 together. At the beginning of the fourth vision, the author tells us in advance that it is “a type of the coming Tribulation” (τύπον τῆς θλίψεως τῆς ἐπερχομένης). In light of the eschatological use of the term in Vision 2.2.7 and 2.3.4, as well as the relation to the “coming judgment” in 3.9.5, the translation “coming tribulation” is preferred to the more neutral “impending persecution.” The theme of coming judgment associated with the completion of the tower is recurrent throughout the Visions (see Vis. 3.9.5), and this particular vision is specifically associated with God’s wrath (Vis. 4.2.6), not merely with earthly persecution by, say, the Roman authorities.²³ Osiek rightly notes, “While the word can simply refer to any kind of trouble, in apocalyptic literature it most often carries the meaning of eschatological tribulation, or affliction that is ordered to the eschaton.”²⁴

The first point that must be made clear is the distinction between the faithful saints and those

²³ Thus, I have translated the term θλίψεως as the more technical “Tribulation” rather than the general “persecution,” which we believe fails to grasp the author’s portrayal of eschatological ultimacy. Holmes translates this phrase as “a foreshadowing of the impending persecution” (Vis. 4.1.1) (though he translates the similar phrase in 4.2.5 as “a foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming). Brennan translates the phrase in 4.1.1. as “a type of the tribulation which was coming.” Lightfoot: “a type of the impending tribulation.” Lake has “a type of the persecution which is to come.” Osiek has “an omen of the coming tribulation.”

²⁴ Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 91.

who require repentance, a common theme in *Hermas* from the start. *Hermas* says that the Lord gave him his previous visions to “grant repentance to his servants who had succumbed to sin” (*Herm. Vis.* 4.1.3). Now *Hermas* is asking that God would “complete” these visions. This implies that the fourth vision is a completion of these same themes of impending judgment, a final call to repentance, and the various classes of church members and attendees who will be dealt with differently in the coming judgment. Thus the eschatology of Vision 4 is rightly read in harmony with the eschatology of Visions 2 and 3.

As *Hermas* is walking along a road pondering these things, he hears a voice urge him to hold to an unshakable faith: “Don’t be double-minded, *Hermas*” (*Vis.* 4.1.4). With that puzzling statement in his head, he sees a dust cloud approaching that eventually reveals a massive monster charging toward him (4.1.6–10). In light of *Hermas*’s previous visions, it seems that in this “type of the coming tribulation,” *Hermas* himself symbolizes faithful, true Christians: those who fit well into the building of the tower, and those prepared by an unwavering faith against the coming tribulation and thus have confidence instead of fear. It appears that at least the righteous, faithful saints—represented by *Hermas*—are not to fret over the coming tribulation because they will somehow survive it unscathed (*Vis.* 4.1.9). This is confirmed by the Lady’s interpretation in the next chapter (*Vis.* 4.2.4–6). *Hermas*’s escape from the vision of the beast due to his faith and fortitude is a type of opportunity for the elect to escape the coming Great Tribulation—that is, if they are prepared for it: “Trust in the Lord, you double-minded, because he is able to do all things—he sends his wrath away from you and sends out punishments upon you double-minded” (4.2.6).

However, *Hermas*’s experience must not to be taken as universal for all believers. Rather, in this reading, *Hermas* represents those who overcome their double-mindedness, who heed the call to repentance prior to “this Day” (*Vis.* 2), who are incorporated into the tower prior to its completion (*Vis.* 3), and who are righteous and holy because of their confidence in God. Yet the vision also deals with those who, by being close to the church and near to repentance, will have a sort of second chance for repentance and purification in the coming tribulation. This is symbolized by the colors of the beast, explained in Vision 4.3.2–6.

Vision 4 presents two possibilities: the saints may escape the coming tribulation by having repented prior to “this Day” (*Vis.* 2)—that is, prior to the completion of the tower (*Vis.* 3); or, the saints may become victims of the divine plagues (*Vis.* 4.3). Those who endure the judgments of the coming tribulation fall in one of two categories: (1) those destroyed by God’s wrath, represented by red blood in Vision 4, which corresponds to the stones that were cast far off in Vision 3; or, (2) those purified by the torments, represented by the red fire in Vision 4, which corresponds to the stones that were cast near the tower in Vision 3. From this, we gather that the pouring out of judgment from the beast’s mouth is an expression of the coming wrath of God, for in Vision 4.2.6 we are told that God “sends his wrath away from you and sends out punishments upon you double-minded.”

