How This Book Was Written

The method, the verification, and why the process was not the usual one

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The problem the method had to solve

Most books of theology are written the way sermons are: a learned person who already holds a position gathers the passages and the scholars that support it, writes persuasively, and cites the rest in footnotes the reader will never check. That is not a criticism of the writers; it is how the genre works, and it works well enough when the writer is inside a tradition that has already done the checking. My problem was that I was arguing against the tradition, and I knew exactly what would happen to a book like that from a man like me. The first overstatement would be found, and the whole argument would be dismissed with it. I wrote down the standard early and it governed everything after: at no point can I afford to be discredited on an overstatement. We are like attorneys, finding evidence to support our claims, and we have to be one hundred percent or as close to it as possible.

So the question was never only what the Bible says about the end of the age. It was how to write a book about it that a hostile reader could check, line by line, and not catch out.

The hermeneutic, in order

The reading method came first, long before the manuscript, and it is stated in the book rather than assumed. Read the English first and ask whether the plain sense fits. Then go to the Greek, not to one lexicon's gloss but to the whole range of the word in Strong's, Thayer, Kittel and Bauer, and ask whether the English rendering narrowed that range to serve a doctrine, and whether the rendering then became the doctrine. Then read the passage inside its first-century setting, with the presumption the apostles themselves held, that the end of the age they wrote about was near. Then strip away the assumptions that arrived later: that every end-times passage is about our future, that "thousand years" is a calendar count, that "coming on the clouds" is a physical descent, that the Antichrist, the man of lawlessness and the beast are one person. Each of those assumptions has a date and a human author, and the book gives both.

Underneath that sits a discipline I borrowed from the courtroom. Every passage is broken into its data points, each discrete claim, image, actor and action on its own line, and a case is built from the convergence of many points rather than from one verse read hard. Beside each passage the book keeps two lists: what the text says, and what the traditional reading claims. Whatever is on the second list and not the first is an assumption, and it is named as one. The book also keeps three words apart that English Bibles run together, gē, oikoumenē and kosmos, land, inhabited empire and world, because half the futurist reading of Revelation rests on translating the first as the third.

Every statement carries a grade

The thing I would most want a reader to know is that the manuscript does not let itself blur the line between what a text says and what I think it means. Every claim in the book was sorted into one of a handful of grades before it was allowed to stand. A data point is something the text says and the source can be checked. A documented fact is a named event, a named source, a date. A correspondence is a pattern-level match the book notes without pressing. An inference is my reading, and the book says “in this book’s reading” or “as this book reads it” every time, worded differently each time so the reader does not go blind to it. A position is a ruling I made where the evidence allows more than one honest reading; the book states it as mine. Where a statement concerns the unseen realm, it carries one of three labels: text, where Scripture says it; picture, where Enoch or Josephus or the Targums supply the image and are cited as picture; reading, where it is my inference. A reader who disagrees with me should always be able to see which kind of sentence he is disagreeing with.

The shelf and the four verdicts

Nothing in the book is cited from memory. Every source the book quotes or leans on had to be physically on what we called the shelf, a folder that grew to more than thirteen hundred files: the standard editions of Josephus, Tacitus, Eusebius and the fathers; the Greek New Testament; the Septuagint; the Dead Sea Scroll fragments at the verses that matter; the Ugaritic texts; the commentaries on both sides; the coins, inscriptions and archaeological reports; the nineteenth-century scholars the book quotes at length and the modern ones it argues with. When a source could not be obtained, the claim that rested on it was either removed or rewritten in a form that claimed no more than what the shelf could carry. A figure for the number of dispensationalists in the world, repeated in three chapters, came out of the book the night its source could not be found, and it is not going back in until it can be.

Each check returned one of four verdicts, and the verdict was written down: confirmed at the page; contradicted at the page; not found; or from memory. Confirmed meant the quotation stood word for word and the page number was right. Contradicted meant the book was wrong and was corrected, and some of those corrections were painful: a quotation attributed to George Eldon Ladd turned out to be another author’s; a phrase I had quoted from Barnabas turned out to be a translation not on the shelf; a description of Calhoun’s famous mouse enclosure, repeated from popular accounts, was wrong by a factor of four until his own paper was read. Not found was never grounds to change my wording on its own, because I often knew the source existed; it was grounds to keep looking or to say plainly that the book had not found it. From memory was a flag that the sentence could not stand as written until it had been read at the page.

The quotation discipline went further than most readers will notice. Every quotation of Josephus in the book was checked word for word against Whiston’s translation by a tool that reads his text by book, chapter and section with the modern numbering beside it. Every Scripture quotation names its version, and the version was chosen for accuracy at that verse rather than for the English that sounded best. Where the book reports what a

scholar holds, it quotes his sentence beside the claim, in the original where the shelf has it, because a report of a man's view from his reputation is how errors travel; I learned that from my own mistake with Barnabas 9.4, and it became a standing rule the same day.

The constitution and the log

A book this long, written and revised over months, will contradict itself unless something outside the writer's memory holds it together. Two documents did. The first is a constitution: every position the book takes, from the meaning of "this age" to the identity of the restrainer to the status of the seventy nations, written down once, with the date it was settled and the evidence it rests on, and with a list of phrasings the book never uses because each one smuggles in a conclusion. Every chapter was checked against it. When a later chapter needed a position the constitution did not have, the position was researched, stated in one plain sentence, argued from the texts, and settled before the chapter went on. When a settled position had to change, it was not quietly edited; it was amended, the amendment dated, and the superseded wording removed from every working document and archived, so that no later session could pick up the old text and build on it.

The second is a log. No sentence of the manuscript changed without an entry made before the change was shown to me: the number of the item, the sentence before, the current text, the sentence after, the position it touched, the evidence with its grade, the proposed wording, and the options with a recommendation. My decision, in my own words, was appended to the entry afterward. By the end there were more than eight hundred numbered items in the final phase alone, and more than four hundred built versions of the manuscript, each one produced by a script from the approved register, each one verified paragraph by paragraph against what it was supposed to contain before it was accepted. Every change can be traced to its reason and its approval. I do not know of another work of theology that can say that, though I would be glad to learn of one.

Reading against myself

Before the proof, the whole manuscript was read ten separate times with one brief, by readers instructed to find continuity breaks, tone failures, missing steps, thin reasoning, duplicated points, claims without sources and scholars introduced without credentials. Those reads produced over a thousand findings, each one located at its line and each one either corrected or answered in writing. More than a hundred of them were places where a sentence said more, or less, than the record carried; those are the ones I am most grateful for. A separate pass checked every cross-reference in the book, chapter by chapter, against what the chapters actually contain, and found seven that pointed to the wrong place.

One test governed tone throughout. The book is sharp, and it is meant to be, at the men who planted the distortions it traces and at the system that profited from them. It is never meant to be sharp at the millions who inherited those beliefs in good faith, because they are the people it is written for. So every chapter was asked a question I named after my own pastor, who preaches the view the book argues against: would he feel respected reading this, and could he hand it to his congregation without being embarrassed by its tone? Where a passage failed that test, it was rewritten, and twenty of them were.

The assistant, and what it did and did not do

I used an AI research assistant throughout, and the preface says so because a reader has a right to know. It is worth being exact about the division of labor, since the honest version is less dramatic than either the fear or the hype. The reading of the texts, the positions, the voice and every ruling are mine. What the assistant did was the work a research team does for a scholar who has one: it kept the constitution and the log, it built each version from the approved changes and verified it, it read the shelf and checked every quotation at its page, it reported the verdicts, it drafted options for me to rule on, and it told me, often, that I was wrong. I asked it to, in those words: double check my work, I am prone to be wrong and I want to uncover blind spots. The errors it caught in my drafts are in the log beside the corrections. A book written this way is not less the author's; it is the author's with fewer mistakes.

Why the result is different

I will not claim to have read every book of theology, so I will not claim that none of them was written this way. I will say what I have not seen elsewhere, and what a reader can test for himself. The chain of custody for every doctrine the book disputes is given, with the planter, the date and the primary source. Every quotation from an ancient source is cited to the edition, book, chapter and section, so that it can be checked in minutes rather than hours. Every inference is labelled as one. The strongest form of the opposing case is quoted, by page, at the point where the book answers it, with directions to where the reader can find the rest. The book states, in an appendix, what evidence would prove it wrong. And the record of how every sentence came to be, with the evidence and the decision, exists and can be produced.

I did this because the thesis demanded it. If the end of the age came in AD 70, if the kingdom is present and its authority is in the church's hands now, then the church has spent a long time waiting for something it already has, and a claim that large deserves a book that cannot be dismissed on a technicality. Whether the argument persuades is for the reader. That it can be checked is not.