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Frank W. Nelte

"GREAT TRIBULATION" AND "THE GREAT TRIBULATION"

[This is Part 1 in a series of four articles. All four are connected to a common subject and should ideally be read in sequence. The 4 articles in this series are:

Part 1 = "Great Tribulation" And "The Great Tribulation"

Part 2 = The Great Multitude

Part 3 = The 144,000

Part 4 = The 144,000 Cannot Be Physical Israelites

Articles 2, 3 and 4 are based on the foundation of the article(s) that preceded them.]

The New Testament speaks about both, "great tribulation" (three times) and about "**the** great tribulation" (once). We in God's Church, on the other hand, almost never talk about "great tribulation". We almost always only talk about "the great tribulation". Why is that? Do these two expressions refer to the same event? Or do they refer to completely different things? Does the inclusion or omission of the definite article here really make a difference?

What's the answer? Do you know? And does the answer make a difference to our understanding of prophecy? Is this just a technicality, a striving about words? Or could this have a major impact on how we understand the prophetic events that lie ahead?

Let's examine the Bible for the facts regarding these questions.

THE PROBLEM

The churches of this world, whose god is Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4), coined the expression "the great tribulation" long before Mr. Herbert Armstrong was ever on the scene. **The churches of this world own the expression "The Great Tribulation"**. You just need to check the internet to see how many different churches have supposed explanations for "the great tribulation". And all those explanations are dead-wrong.

And then along came Mr. Armstrong. God used him to explain much truth to the people whose minds God was opening. The truths Mr. Armstrong understood and then explained all depended on Mr. Armstrong himself seriously and carefully examining those questions for himself. That was the principle of "**ask** and it shall be given to you ..." (Matthew 7:7). For that matter, even Joshua in Old Testament times should have "asked" God for counsel in the matter regarding the Gibeonites (see Joshua 9:14-15), but Joshua didn't get God's answer because Joshua didn't ask God. And that lack of asking God then created big problems for Israel.

Now Mr. Armstrong likewise never "asked" God about the term "The Great Tribulation", meaning that he didn't carefully examine this term on its own merits. He simply accepted it from the Protestants as a supposed God-given name for a specific end-time event. That was rather unfortunate.

A careful examination of the New Testament shows that Jesus Christ **never** used the expression "**the great tribulation**" at any time during His ministry. Did you know that? The only expression in this regard that Jesus Christ ever used during His ministry was "great tribulation". During His ministry Christ never used the definite article with this expression.

Here is the distinction:

The expression "**great tribulation**" is nothing more than **a descriptive term**, very much like the expressions "great trial", "great distress", "great affliction", etc. All of these descriptive terms convey the same general meaning, without implying one unique event in human history. They describe what things will be like during the period of time under consideration. And there could be dozens of "great distresses" or "great afflictions" or "great tribulations" or "great trials" in the course of human history.

The expression "**the great tribulation**", on the other hand, is not a general descriptive term for some unspecified event. No, for us the expression "the great tribulation" is the identifier for one specific event; it is **the name for one very specific event**. It identifies a specific event, distinct from other events that may involve identical or similar conditions to what "the great tribulation" will be like. The focus of this expression with the definite article is to pinpoint something very specific.

To illustrate this:

There could be three or five or more periods in human history that might qualify to be identified as "great tribulation". But only one of those three or five or more periods could possibly have the title "the great tribulation".

These differences have the following effect on our understanding of the Scriptures.

If we conclude that in a specific Scripture there is a specific event that God has named "the great tribulation", then we will be pressured into interpreting any other references to "great tribulation" as references to the same specific event, which we have already identified, even when those other biblical references don't include the definite article.

On the other hand, if we conclude that "great tribulation" is only a descriptive term for one of perhaps many different periods of severe stress, a term for something that might occur repeatedly during human history, **then** we are more likely to evaluate other references to "great tribulation" on their own merits within their own contexts. This approach will leave totally open an understanding of what the expression "the great tribulation" might then be referring to.

Can you follow?

THE KEY SCRIPTURE

The most important Scripture by far for this subject is Matthew 24:21.

For **then shall be great tribulation**, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. (Matthew 24:21)

This is the Scripture which some of the world's churches have used to coin the name "The Great Tribulation", as a specific event that still lies ahead of us. And Mr. Armstrong freely accepted this name for that specific yet future event. That acceptance in turn then influenced how he interpreted other references.

To be clear:

Accepting the name "The Great Tribulation" for that prophesied event is not the real problem! We can freely call that event "The Great Tribulation" if we want to do so. But **doing so harbors a potential problem**, which we then need to be careful to avoid.

The real problem involves the conclusions we might draw from assigning the name "The Great Tribulation" to the event in Matthew 24:21.

The conclusion we draw all too often from assigning that name to Matthew 24:21 is that when we then come across a reference in prophecy where God does refer to "**the** great tribulation", we assume that this must be a reference to the same event as is described in Matthew 24:21.

That assumption is totally, absolutely and completely unjustified and wrong!

Here are the facts.

THE GREEK WORDS

The Greek word for "great" is "**megas**".

The Greek word for "tribulation" is "**thlipsis**".

The Greek feminine definite article is "**he**".

[The endings of these words change slightly if they are used with the accusative case (the object) and with the genitive (the possessive) case. The adjective-endings also change depending on whether the adjective applies to a masculine noun or to a feminine noun, etc. These variations don't affect the basic meaning, and they are inconsequential in our evaluation.]

Here is Matthew 24:21.

For then shall be **great tribulation**, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. (Matthew 24:21)

The Greek text for "great tribulation" reads "**thlipsis megale**".

And here is Acts 7:11.

Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and **great affliction**: and our fathers found no sustenance. (Acts 7:11)

The Greek text rendered as "great affliction" reads "**thlipsis megale**".

We have here an example of deliberate obfuscation by the translators! Where in Matthew 24:21 they

translated the Greek words "thlipsis megale" as "**great tribulation**", they deliberately translated the same Greek words "thlipsis megale" in Acts 7:11 as "**great affliction**". There are multiple hundreds of examples of this type of obfuscation throughout the Bible, places where the English language translators very deviously attempted to obscure any association between different Scriptures that use the same Greek or Hebrew words as are used in other Scriptures.

The intent underlying these two different renditions for "thlipsis megale" was to prevent the reader from recognizing that the Greek text is identical for both expressions. It's a devious translation, plain and simple. It's not that these are wrong translations. They are acceptable translations. But **the lack of consistency** here is intended to mislead the reader into not recognizing the connection between these two expressions.

Let's note the following things about Matthew 24:21 and Acts 7:11.

- 1) Matthew 24:21 refers to a condition that is **yet future**.
- 2) Acts 7:11 refers to a time **over 3000 years ago**, during the lifetime of Jacob and his sons.
- 3) In both verses there is **no definite article** for our expression.
- 4) In both verses this expression could have been correctly translated either as "great tribulation" or as "great affliction". This expression without a definite article has the **identical meaning in both verses**.
- 5) So if we claim that Matthew 24:21 refers to "the great tribulation", then it means that Acts 7:11 also refers to "the great tribulation". But there cannot be two different periods that both qualify for the same name. (And anyway, there is no definite article in the Greek in either expression.)
- 6) In both Scriptures "thlipsis megale" is only a descriptive term, which term is not intended to be a name for those particular periods of time.

Notice the next Scripture.

Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her **into great tribulation**, except they repent of their deeds. (Revelation 2:22)

The Greek text rendered as "into great tribulation" reads "**eis thlipsin megalen**".

In this Scripture Jesus Christ Himself is speaking about the Thyatira era of the Church of God. This is a quotation of Jesus Christ's words. So let's note the following things:

- 1) Jesus Christ spoke the words in Matthew 24:21.
- 2) Jesus Christ spoke the words in Revelation 2:22.
- 3) In neither case did Jesus Christ use the definite article for this expression.
- 4) Jesus used the identical expression "thlipsis megale", first during His ministry to refer to an event at the end-time, and then in Revelation 2:22 to refer to something during the Thyatira era many centuries before the end-time.

We have now considered all three places in the New Testament where the expression "thlipsis megale", without the definite article, is used. This expression was used twice by Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:21 and

Revelation 2:22) and once by Stephen before he was killed (Acts 7:11). None of these three references include the definite article. And in none of these three references is this expression "thlipsis megale" intended to be a name for an event. It provides in each case a descriptive term for what conditions were like or will be like, for three separate occasions in human history.

So thus far we have not seen any evidence for God supposedly calling the stressful time yet ahead "the great tribulation". Rather, we have seen that at least three different periods of time in human history have an equal claim on the theoretical name "the great tribulation": the seven years of famine in the days of Jacob and his sons, a stressful time for people in the Thyatira era, and a reference to a very stressful time still ahead of us.

But the Bible does not refer to any of these three occasions as "the" great tribulation!

Before considering the one Scripture that uses the term "the great tribulation", let's examine the parallel accounts to Matthew 24, to see how this event is described by Mark and by Luke.

THE ACCOUNT IN MARK'S GOSPEL

Mark chapter 13 and Luke chapter 21 are the parallel sections to Matthew chapter 24. Let's first look at the account in Mark:

For [in] those days shall be **affliction**, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be. (Mark 13:19)

The Greek word here translated as "affliction" is "**thlipsis**", the same word that is translated "tribulation" in Matthew 24. This means that Mark 13:19 reads equally correctly: "for in those days shall be tribulation, such as was not ...".

So notice:

The translators chose to translate this Greek word by two different English words in Matthew 24:21 and in Mark 13:19, **even though these two verses clearly refer to the same event**.

The translators knowingly referred to the exact same event one time as "great tribulation" and one time as "affliction". This amounts to splitting hairs, since "tribulation" and "affliction" basically convey the same thought. But by not translating consistently they obscured that these expressions represent the same Greek word.

The Greek text reads "thlipsis megale" in Matthew 24:21 and "thlipsis" in Mark 13:19. Mark's Gospel is based on information provided by the Apostle Peter.

There is no question that this is a reference to the most severe time of stress ever for the period of time from Adam's creation to Christ's second coming. So in our minds we can readily justify calling it "the great tribulation". But even so, we should recognize that Mark did not bother to include the adjective "megale", and neither did he include a definite article for "thlipsis".

Clearly Mark did not intend the noun "thlipsis" to be viewed as the God-given name for that extremely difficult period of time that still lies ahead. The Apostle Peter, Mark's source of information, did not believe that the dangerous times ahead had been given the name "The Great Tribulation" by Jesus Christ Himself. Whether we call that time "tribulation" or whether we call it "great tribulation" or whether

we call it "affliction" or "great affliction" didn't make a difference to Peter.

Now let's look at the parallel verses in Matthew 24:29 and in Mark 13:24.

Immediately **after the tribulation of those days** shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: (Matthew 24:29)

The expression "after the tribulation of those days" is a translation for "**meta tes thlipsin ton hemeron ekeinon**".

Next:

But in those days, **after that tribulation**, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, (Mark 13:24)

The expression "after that tribulation" is a translation for "**meta ten thlipsin ekeinen**".

The Greek pronoun "ekeinos" used in both these verses means: **the one there, that one**. Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament points out that this demonstrative pronoun is "used to **distinguish accurately from others** the things or the persons spoken of".

In other words, Jesus Christ was saying that these things would not happen after any of a number of different tribulations. No, He was saying that they would happen "**after that specific tribulation**", the one He had identified a few verses earlier.

The way Jesus Christ worded this shows that there would indeed be multiple times of "tribulation" in the course of human history. And in a vision a few decades later Jesus Christ then told John about one particular other "great tribulation" in the days of the Thyatira era of God's Church.

Now let's examine how Luke recorded these things.

THE ACCOUNT IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Here is what Luke wrote:

But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be **great distress** in the land, and wrath upon this people. (Luke 21:23)

The Greek text rendered as "great distress" reads "**anagke megale**".

So Luke did not even use the Greek word "thlipsis" here. He used a different Greek word to refer to this stressful time ahead. And neither did Luke use a definite article with this expression.

Instead of describing that stressful time with the word "thlipsis", Luke used the Greek word "**anagke**". This word means: necessity, stress due to either external or internal factors. It is used 18 times in the New Testament, and is mostly (and appropriately) translated as: necessity, of necessity, necessary, must needs (be), etc.

We might consider 2 Corinthians 6:4, where Paul used the words "thlipsis" and "anagke" in the same

sentence, to see how they relate to one another.

But in all *things* approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, **in afflictions** (Greek "en thlipsesin"), **in necessities** (Greek "en anagkais"), in distresses, (2 Corinthians 6:4)

These two Greek words "thlipsis" and "anagke" do overlap in meaning, but they are also somewhat distinct. They both refer to undesirable difficulties that may confront us in life. But it doesn't really make a difference whether we call that time of greatest trouble still ahead "great thlipsis" or "great anagke".

So let's summarize what we have found. Here is how the gospel writers refer to that future time of trouble.

- 1) **Matthew** refers to it as "great tribulation".
- 2) **Mark** refers to it as "tribulation", without the word "great".
- 3) **Luke** refers to it as "great distress" or "great necessity".

In addition, the martyr **Stephen** referred to "great tribulation" in the days of Jacob and his sons. And **Jesus Christ** referred to "great tribulation" at the time of the Thyatira era of the Church.

In none of these accounts do we ever have the expression "**the great tribulation**". So if we ourselves ever decide to call one specific time of trouble "**the great tribulation**", then that is not a problem, provided we realize one important point. Do you know what that is?

When we, and not God (!), attach the label "the great tribulation" to the time of trouble still ahead of us, then **we cannot assume that God must comply with our labeling!**

In other words, when God later uses the expression "the great tribulation", implying that from God's point of view there is only one that qualifies for this name, then we cannot assume that God is referring to the exact same time period to which we apply the term "the great tribulation".

We have to let God show us what He means when He speaks about "the great tribulation". It could perhaps refer to the same period of time that we have in mind when we use this expression. But it could equally well refer to something different from what this expression means to us.

THAT'S THE POINT WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND!

You might say: Is that all? Why have you been so long-winded in telling me this?

My reply is: I have been long-winded in presenting this point because you have a monumental mental block against the expression "the great tribulation" applying to anything other than the stressful time still ahead for this world. Your mind is closed to the possibility that the term "the great tribulation" could mean anything other than what you have always understood.

I have been long-winded because on this particular subject "you are dull of hearing" (see Hebrews 5:11), and that condition makes it difficult to explain the truth.

You might then say: Oh, my mind is open to the truth. I always accept the truth God shows me.

My reply then is: I seriously doubt that, at least for the great majority of readers.

My goal has been to level the playing field, to create an environment where there is at least a very slim chance that you might perhaps evaluate the one biblical reference to "the great tribulation" on its own merit, within its own context, without imposing your own meaning on this expression.

I have shown that throughout His ministry Jesus Christ never once referred to "the great tribulation". I have also shown that in referring to the seven eras of God's Church Jesus Christ never spoke about "the great tribulation". In both cases (i.e. during His ministry, and in the prophecy about the seven eras) Jesus Christ only spoke about "great tribulation".

We should note that in discussing the seven eras of God's Church, which take us right up to Christ's second coming, there is never a reference to "the great tribulation", though there are certainly times of "tribulation" and even "great tribulation". But the term "the great tribulation" simply does not feature in the context of Revelation 2-3, in the context of God's Church right up to the time when Jesus Christ "stands at the door and knocks" (see Revelation 3:20). There is no place for **the biblical usage** of the expression "the great tribulation" in relating the history of God's Church! (That "biblical usage" is found in Revelation 7:14.)

So if you like, by all means continue to refer to the difficult time still ahead as "the great tribulation". That is not a problem, if you then at the same time recognize that **God may use this expression "the great tribulation" with a totally different meaning.**

Now we are ready to examine Revelation 7:14.

But that we will do in "Part 2" of this series of three articles. The article that examines Revelation 7:14 in its own context is titled "The Great Multitude". And the information in that article may surprise some of you.

Frank W Nelte