Discussing the mythology found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 has made me remember something that happened some 35 years ago. It’s a pretty funny story.

At the time I was still a church going Christian. The church I was attending was evangelical, but I was moving away from a conservative theology and its strict, literal interpretation of the Bible. I was becoming socially quite liberal, and was starting to take a more liberal view of the Bible. I still thought that in *some* sense it was the Word of God, but I did not think that it was infallible or true in every way. I had already come to see that parts of it contradicted one another, that there were historical implausibilities, and mistakes of various kinds.

For me at that stage, the Bible was not so much the words God had given his human authors as it was a book that was written with real religious insight by special authors whose words were a medium through which God could deliver his message to humans. It wasn’t the only way God spoke to people, but it certainly was one way, and a cherished way. Still, not all of it could be taken as literally true.

At that point I had come to realize that the whole idea of a “Rapture” in which the dead would rise to meet God and then the living believers in Jesus would be taken up to meet them all in the clouds was a metaphorical description of how in the final analysis, however the end comes, God will make right all that is wrong in this world. The passage is ultimately about how God is sovereign. This world may be a cesspool of misery and suffering now, but God will overcome all that is evil and will repay all who do it, and he will reward his faithful, somehow or other. It was a passage meant to inspire hope, not a passage that was meant literally as a indicating a calendrical event that was to occur sometime next Thursday.

I had a bunch of intellectual Christian friends in Princeton at the time (I was working on my Masters degree), and all of us had come up through fundamentalist circles. One of them invited us over for a pool party; she and her husband were house sitting at a gorgeous place off in the country outside of town, where they had a very nice pool, tennis court, and other niceties. And as happens in groups like that, we all started telling stories about our fundamentalist pasts, having a lot of very good laughs about how we used to be. (Included in the group were two people who were to go on and also to be publishing academics, one a philosopher and another a historian.)

As we talked we eventually got around to our former ideas that there would be a rapture. The conversation took on a specific topic. We had all been influenced by, and at one time had loved, a fundamentalist movie that had been popular in the mid 1970s, called “Thief in the Night.” This was obviously many, many years before the “Left Behind” books and films, but the movie was a kind of earlier incarnation of all that.

It was about a liberal Christian minister who, because he was heretically liberal, did not believe in the literal meaning of the Bible, including and especially the view that Jesus was literally coming back from heaven to take his followers out of the world before the tribulation appeared. The minister, obviously, was the bad guy. And then something happened. In fact, the rapture happened. Suddenly millions of people disappeared from earth. Completely vanished. They had been raptured. But not the liberal minister. He had been left behind.

The movie is about the tribulations that then hit the earth as catastrophe after catastrophe struck. And this liberal minister had to live through them. He of course came to realize (whoops, too late...) that the Bible *is* literally true, and he has a life-transforming change
of heart, repenting of his sin of thinking that human reason can be used to understand God’s holy word.

So we’re at this pool party, and we start talking about this movie and having a good laugh about it, reminding each other of this scene and that scene and so on and laughing about the idea of this one guy in particular being left behind. One of our friends wasn’t saying much though (he was one of the ones that later became an academic) (I’m not mentioning his name. He’s actually a well known scholar). When we were finished talking about it, someone asked him why he wasn’t saying anything.

He replied that his father was the actor who had played the liberal minister.

Yikes! ⬌

When I Started in Textual Criticism
The Myth of the Rapture: Calling a Spade a Spade