

## Who's Afraid of a Thief in the Night?

CHRISTOPHER D. STANLEY

*Dept of Theology, St Bonaventure University, St Bonaventure, New York  
14778, USA*

In several NT passages an audience is urged to be ready for the parousia of Christ, which will come upon them 'like a thief in the night'. This image plays upon a common stock of cultural lore regarding the nocturnal activities of house burglars. A review of the evidence suggests that poor people and women had the most to fear from burglars. For them, the idea of Jesus coming 'like a thief in the night' might have induced feelings of fear rather than anticipation. In the case of women, the image may have functioned as a means of social control.

The phrase 'like a thief in the night' has been used by apocalyptic groups across the ages to describe their belief in the sudden and imminent return of Jesus Christ to execute judgment upon the world. Through their influence, the image has captured the imaginations of ordinary Christians throughout the centuries.

Why has the idea of Jesus returning 'like a thief in the night' proved so powerful in Christian circles? The phrase has been in use since the early days of the Christian movement, where it appears in a range of texts from diverse times and places (Matt 24.43/Luke 12.39; 1 Thess 5.2, 4; 2 Pet 3.10; Rev 3.3; 16.15). As an apocalyptic image, the phrase is uniquely Christian; it has no precedent in the Hebrew Bible or Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

So where did the expression come from? Why did a series of early Christian authors find it useful to compare the imminent parousia of Christ to the nocturnal activities of a house burglar? Whose interests did the image serve? Questions such as these are routinely ignored by the commentators, most of whom seem to think that the meaning of the image is so obvious that they can pass over its literal significance and focus their comments on the metaphorical application of the image.<sup>2</sup> The present study represents a modest effort to fill this lacuna. After a

1 According to Ernest Best (*The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986] 205), there is no pre-Christian evidence for the use of 'thief' imagery in Jewish apocalyptic texts, so the eschatological application would have been new in Christian circles. All the occurrences of 'thief' imagery in the Hebrew Bible are non-eschatological (Job 24.14–16; Jer 49.9; Hos 7.1; Joel 2.9; Obad 5).

2 None of the commentaries consulted for this study offered more than cursory comments about the activities of thieves or people's reactions to them in antiquity.

brief examination of the uses of 'thief' imagery in the NT, I will focus the bulk of my attention on the social reality that gave rise to these images, that is, the practice of house burglary in the Greco-Roman world. Along the way I will seek to ascertain whether the image of a burglar breaking into a house by night would have evoked a similar set of responses from anyone in the ancient world or if some people might have had reason to respond differently than others. Finally I will offer a few observations about the socio-rhetorical significance of the phrase 'like a thief in the night' as it is used in our NT texts.

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The Greek noun κλέπτης ('thief') appears 16 times in the canonical NT texts, while the cognate verb κλέπτω ('steal') is used 11 times. The Coptic equivalent of the noun also appears in Thomas 21, yielding a total of 28 occurrences. Eleven of the references are purely literal: in six cases someone is described as being a 'thief' or 'stealing' something on a one-time or habitual basis (Matt 27.64; 28.13; John 12.6; Rom 2.21; 1 Cor 6.10; 1 Pet 4.15), while in five other places (counting parallel passages) a Christian audience is warned to avoid this kind of behaviour (Matt 19.18/Mark 10.19/Luke 18.20; Rom 13.9; Eph 4.28). None of these passages offers any insight into the way thieves actually carried out their activities. This leaves 17 occurrences in 8 different passages (Matt 6.19–21/Luke 12.33–4; Matt 24.42–4/Luke 12.39–40; John 10.1–10; Thomas 21; 1 Thess 5.1–5; 2 Pet 3.10; Rev 3.3; 16.15) where the audience's presumed familiarity with the work of thieves serves as the literal reference point for a metaphorical application.<sup>3</sup> Only seven of these verses (in five different passages) refer to the eschatological parousia of Christ or God (Matt 24.43/Luke 12.39; 1 Thess 5.2, 4; 2 Pet 3.10; Rev 3.3; 16.15), and two of these (Rev 3.3 and 16.15) are uncertain.<sup>4</sup> But the diverse provenance of the few assured texts suggests that the image of Jesus returning 'like a thief' was a common motif in early Christian parenthesis.<sup>5</sup>

What was the significance of this image for early Christian audiences? A review of the relevant verses shows that it was used primarily as an ethical motivation:

- 3 A similar image appears in Thomas 103, but the Coptic noun there is a cognate of ληστής ('brigand'), not κλέπτης ('thief'). Mark 3.27/Matt 12.29/Thomas 35 also refer to the activities of a house burglar, but the κλέπτ- word group is missing from these verses.
- 4 Commentators are divided over whether the threatened 'coming' of the exalted Christ in Rev 3.3 and 16.15 refers to an eschatological or a historical judgment, though the imminent eschatology of the book renders all such distinctions questionable. An eschatological element might also be implied in Matt 6.19–21/Luke 12.33–4, where Jesus calls his disciples to store up (eschatological?) 'treasures in heaven' where burglars cannot break in and steal.
- 5 The same image appears often in the writings of John Chrysostom and Augustine. Other church fathers who make use of the image include Tertullian, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory the Great.

Christians should remain steadfast and be on their guard against the corrupting influences of the surrounding (non-Christian) culture, because Jesus (or God) could appear at any moment and call them to account for their conduct.<sup>6</sup> The image works by playing on the fears of the audience: who would want to end up on the wrong side of the divine judgment?<sup>7</sup>

But the same point could have been made without the ‘thief’ imagery. The metaphor of standing before an all-powerful and all-righteous judge who metes out punishments as well as rewards should have been enough to motivate any first-century Christian to proper conduct. So what does the ‘thief’ imagery add to the picture?

Most of the passages cited above refer to a particular kind of thief, the house burglar, who is depicted as coming at night while the residents are sleeping. Apparently burglary occurred often enough that a first-century author could use it as the basis for an analogy without fear of being misunderstood. Note the language of the following texts:<sup>8</sup>

**Matt 6.19:** ‘Do not store up for yourselves *treasures* on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where *thieves break in and steal.*’ (cf. Luke 12.33)

**Matt 24.43:** ‘If the owner of the house had known *at what time of night the thief was coming*, he would have kept watch and not *let his house be broken into.*’ (cf. Luke 12.39)

**Mark 3.27:** ‘In fact, no one can *enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions* unless he first *ties up the strong man.* Then he can *rob his house.*’ (cf. Matt 12.29; Thomas 35)

6 On the ethical application of the image, see Matt 24.48–51/Luke 12.45–6; 1 Thess 5.6–8; 2 Pet 3.11–12; Rev 3.2–3. Only in Rev 16.15 is the ethical implication of the image not spelled out.

7 The precise identity of the one who will ‘come’ to execute judgment is unclear in some of the passages. In Matt 24.44, the ‘Son of Man’ (v. 44) is apparently Jesus (cf. ‘your master’ in v. 42 with ‘your coming’ in v. 3), but the identification is missing in the parallel saying in Luke 12.40. In 1 Thess 5, ‘the Lord’ appears to be the exalted Christ as in the preceding passage (cf. 4.15, ‘the Lord’s own word’), but the reference in both places is uncertain. In 2 Pet 3.10, ‘the Lord’ again appears to refer to Jesus (cf. v. 2, ‘the command of our Lord and Saviour’ with v. 9, ‘the promise [of the Lord]’), yet v. 12 equates the ‘day of the Lord’ with the ‘day of God’, and v. 13 seems to refer to ‘God’ as the issuer of the ‘promise’. In Rev 3.3 and 16.15, the ‘I’ is clearly the exalted Christ. Fortunately the point of this study is unaffected by such questions. The phrase ‘the coming [or parousia] of Christ’ will be used in this article as a cipher for the anticipated event of divine judgment, however that event is understood.

8 Other kinds of theft mentioned in the NT include animal rustling (John 10.1–10), grave robbing (Matt 27.64; 28.13), and temple looting (Rom 2.21). Though the venue is different, these crimes are similar to house burglary in that they involve entering a place by stealth and carrying away something of value. (Note the reference to ‘night’ as the anticipated time of the grave robbery in Matt 28.13.) The ‘brigand’ or ‘bandit’ (ληστής) is a different kind of thief, a member of a gang who uses (or threatens to use) violence while committing open robbery, usually outside the home (cf. Luke 10.30, 36; 2 Cor 11.26).

**Thomas 21:** 'For this reason I say, if the owners of a house know that *a thief is coming*, they will be on guard before the thief arrives, and will not *let the thief break into their house and steal their possessions*.'

**1 Thess 5.2:** 'For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come *like a thief in the night*.' (cf. v. 4, '*surprise you like a thief*')

**Rev 3.3:** 'But if you do not *wake up*, I will come *like a thief*, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.'

**Rev 16.15:** 'Behold, I come *like a thief*. Blessed is he who *stays awake* and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be *shamefully exposed*.'

The explanatory comments that accompany these verses stress the element of surprise: 'The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him' (Matt 24.43/Luke 12.39); 'Destruction will come upon them suddenly' (1 Thess 5.3; cf. v. 4, 'surprise'); 'You will not know at what time I will come to you' (Rev 3.3); etc.<sup>9</sup> The use of force by the burglar (whether against the building or its inhabitants) is also mentioned as a reason for concern in some of the passages (cf. 'break in', 'tie up', etc.).

Of course, a first-century urban audience would have known more about the activities of burglars than is implied in these passages. The image works precisely because it plays on a broad stock of cultural lore – a mixture of fact, hearsay, and personal experience – that would have sprung to mind whenever anyone mentioned that despised character, the thief (or burglar).<sup>10</sup> The very thought of a burglar invading one's house would have stirred up a host of negative emotions: fear, loathing, indignation, anger, defensiveness, etc. Women and men, rich and poor, young and old may have differed in the intensity of their feelings, but their reactions would have been negative nonetheless. Thus the idea of comparing Christ's parousia with the coming of 'a thief (in the night)' was not entirely fortuitous.

And yet the image survived. Why? What was it about this simile that gave it such power? In whose hands? A critical review of the ancient sources suggests that

<sup>9</sup> A similar idea is implied in Rev 16.15: the sudden and unexpected intrusion of a burglar could prove embarrassing to the sleeping homeowner if his clothes were not ready at hand when he set out to pursue a thief fleeing through the streets. The significance of the image is not spelled out in 2 Pet 3.10, but the passage seems to hinge on the unexpectedness of the event (cf. vv. 3–4, 7). Perhaps by this time the image was so well known that no explanation was needed.

<sup>10</sup> There is ample evidence to indicate that thieves were viewed negatively in antiquity by people of every social level. To cite only two sources from different ends of the chronological spectrum, Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1382a) avers that 'everyone hates a thief or informer', while Tertullian (*Spect.* 15) laments, 'Would that we did not even inhabit the same world with these wicked men!' The wealthy obviously had more to lose from thieves, and thus regarded them with a special disdain.

(a) the image of Christ coming ‘like a thief (in the night)’ served the interests of those who held positions of power in the early church as they sought to regulate the conduct of others in their community; (b) the ‘thief’ image gained its power from its subliminal appeal to the fears and prejudices of the intended audience; (c) the power of the image cut across class lines, though it would have been especially potent with the poor, who were most vulnerable to the predations of thieves; and (d) the image is fundamentally androcentric, and may therefore have evoked unintended negative reactions from many of the women in the audience. The remainder of this article will develop these points more fully.

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The ancient sources give us only fleeting glimpses of the techniques and strategies used by house burglars in carrying out their work. To learn about their activities, we must read between the lines (and often against the grain) of a wide range of texts. The Roman law codes contain many useful snippets of information, but their late date (three to four centuries after the turn of the era in their present form) raises questions about their relevance to first-century thieves, especially in the outlying provinces.<sup>11</sup> Brief references can also be found in several of the comedies and rhetorical works of the classical Greek period, but the early date of these texts likewise renders them suspect. The handful of verses in Josephus, Philo, and the NT are too spotty to give us much information, and other first-century texts are even less helpful. A few of our later sources (especially Apuleius and John Chrysostom) offer fuller descriptions of the activities of burglars, but their pertinence to earlier times and places cannot always be assured. With such limited resources, the best that we can do is to look for patterns of activity that recur across a wide range of materials from diverse times and places. Fortunately, the materials are consistent enough to allow us to construct a fairly coherent (though still limited) picture of the conduct of first-century thieves.

To understand how house burglars carried out their work, we need to know something about residential housing patterns in the Greco-Roman world. Fortunately, there are a number of good recent studies of Greek and Roman domestic architecture to assist us on this point.<sup>12</sup> Houses in ancient towns and

11 C. F. Kolbert has prepared a helpful collection of relevant texts from the *Digest of Justinian: The Digest of Roman Law: Theft, Rapine, Damage and Insult* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

12 Since the early Christian texts were addressed primarily to people who lived in cities, the comments that follow will focus on urban housing patterns and ignore the somewhat different structures of rural homes and villas. Recent studies of urban domestic architecture include Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1994); E. J. Owens, ‘Residential Districts’, and A. J.

cities (even those of the wealthy) typically adjoined one another like modern condominiums or terraced houses, with no open space between them. Most were fairly plain on the outside, with walls of unpainted or whitewashed plaster or stucco and few (if any) windows facing the street. Light entered the house through an open-roofed central courtyard (the peristyle in Greek architecture, the atrium in Roman houses), not from the street. This self-enclosed pattern of construction was designed to give the family a measure of security against unwanted intruders from the surrounding streets, i.e. burglars.<sup>13</sup>

What distinguished a rich house from a poor one was not its external beauty, but its size (square footage and number of rooms) and the quality of the internal decoration. The houses of the poor were small, dark, and cramped, their inner walls linked with those of their neighbours to form a dense residential block. Those who worked at a trade often lived in a single room above or behind their workshop, while other families lived in second-storey apartments above the shops of their neighbours. Rooms on the upper storeys were reached by a narrow stairway that opened off the street or through a dark passageway that wound through the building.<sup>14</sup>

The house of a rich family, on the other hand, contained a panoply of rooms designed to serve the needs of family members and the many slaves who lived and worked in the house. At the centre of the residential complex was an open courtyard surrounded by a series of small rooms that were used for storage, sleeping, and eating. On one side of the courtyard was a special room (the *tablinum*) where

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Brothers, 'Urban Housing', *Roman Domestic Buildings* (ed. Ian M. Barton; Exeter: University of Exeter, 1996); and J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981). Two older but still useful studies are D. S. Robertson, *Greek and Roman Architecture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1943), and Bertha Carr Rider, *Ancient Greek Houses* (Chicago: Argonaut, 1964). A highly readable overview of recent scholarship on the subject can be found in Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 5–32.

- 13 The link between Roman architectural patterns and the concern for security is noted by Eugene Dwyer, 'The Pompeian Atrium House in Theory and in Practice', *Roman Art in the Private Sphere: New Perspectives on the Architecture and Decor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula* (ed. Elaine K. Gazda; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991) 28–9. This explains why even poor houses that lacked the necessary footage for a courtyard had only small openings in the facade for lighting.
- 14 On the housing of the poor, see Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses*, 80–1, 108–10; Owens, 'Residential Districts', 24–5; Brothers, 'Urban Housing', 49–50. Note the dreary comments of Osiek and Balch (*Families*, 32): 'The majority of urban dwellers lived in small, dark, poorly ventilated, crowded buildings where privacy was unavailable, adequate sanitation impossible, and the spread of disease inevitable . . . The vast majority of residents of an ancient Mediterranean town lived lives full of hardship, poor health, and crowding, with high rates of infant mortality and low life expectancy.'

the paterfamilias greeted clients and conducted business.<sup>15</sup> The house of the rich man was a quasi-public space, open not only to clients who came to pay their respects but also to anyone else who chose to enter. Certain parts of the house were closed to the general public (family bedrooms, dining halls, baths, etc.), but the vestibules, halls, and courtyard were typically crowded with non-family visitors. These areas were decorated with mosaic floors, elaborately carved columns, ornate statuary, and frescoed walls to reflect the social status of the homeowner.

So how did burglars ply their trade in such a milieu? As in every culture, the houses of the rich were an inviting target. The quasi-public nature of wealthy Roman residences meant that the burglar could examine the premises before staging his raid. The fact that money and valuables were commonly stored in rooms around the courtyard or in a heavy chest (under lock and key) in the courtyard area would have made his planning even easier.<sup>16</sup> But with so many people flowing in and out of the house, nothing could be done in the daytime. The thief would have to await the cover of darkness.<sup>17</sup>

But rich people in antiquity, as in every age, knew how to protect their property, and they had ample reason for doing so. Bringing a thief to justice could be difficult since most cities had no standing police force to hunt down criminals,<sup>18</sup> and the greatest penalty that could be exacted if the thief were caught was double restitution, typically from a person who had little or no resources from which to

15 As the Roman architect Vitruvius observed (*De Architectura* 6.5.1), ‘Magnificent vestibules and alcoves and halls are not necessary to persons of a common fortune [i.e. those lower on the social ladder], because they pay their respects by visiting among others, and are not visited by others.’ Quotations from Vitruvius are taken from the Loeb volumes edited by Frank Granger (London/New York: W. Heinemann/G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931–4). For more on the link between the patronage system and Roman domestic architecture, see Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses*, 5–6, 9, 11–14; Dwyer, ‘Pompeian Atrium House’, 26–9, 39; Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 17, 24–5.

16 Brothers, ‘Urban Housing’, 41; Dwyer, ‘Pompeian Atrium Houses’, 28. As Dwyer observes, ‘The number of locks and keys used to secure the property of the household must have been sizable even in smaller establishments’ (*ibid.*, 28).

17 The rather fanciful etymology of the Latin word for ‘theft’ that appears in the *Digest* of Justinian is relevant here: ‘The very word for “theft” (*furtum*) is itself derived from a Latin word meaning “black”, because it is committed secretly, in the dark and most often in the night’ (Kolbert, *Digest*, 103). Apuleius places a similar idea in the mouth of one of his thieves: ‘Following the rules of our profession, we watched for that moonless time of night when sleep comes strongest’ (*Metam.* 4.18). In the ancient world, most people outside the wealthy upper class went to bed soon after dark (Lionel Casson, *Everyday Life at Rome* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, rev. and exp. edn 1998] 19, 31).

18 On the lack of police in Greek cities, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City From Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940) 211. Even in Rome the police force worked only in the daytime during the Augustan age (Casson, *Everyday Life*, 40). Night watchmen were fairly common in Roman cities by the second century CE, but they were usually humble citizens conscripted into service and paid poorly for their work (Jones, *City*, 212).

pay.<sup>19</sup> If the thief could be caught in the house at night, however, the homeowner could kill him with impunity and so avoid the loss.<sup>20</sup> Wealthy homeowners therefore took serious steps to guard against the entry of a burglar and to ensure that he would be killed if he did find a way into the house. Windows were small and situated high above the ground, with stone or ceramic grills across the openings to prevent illicit entry. Doors were locked with heavy bolts, and a large beam was sometimes braced against an inside wall for extra security.<sup>21</sup> A trusted slave was stationed at all times in a cubicle next to the entrance, and other slaves slept outside the master's bedroom door and in the open courtyard.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes watchdogs were kept in the house to give warning of intruders.<sup>23</sup> For a thief to slip in undetected at night and carry off valuables from a wealthy home would have been

- 19 The penalty was four times the value of the goods if the person was caught in the act or double if caught later, though some sources say that the burglar could also receive a beating and be sent to work in the mines. If the thief was unable to pay, the victim could sell off the thief's possessions to obtain at least partial recovery. The stricter penalties required by the fifth-century BCE Twelve Tables (flogging and enslavement for a free person, execution for a slave) had apparently been relaxed by the time of the empire. On the penalties for theft, see O. F. Robinson, *The Criminal Law of Ancient Rome* (London: Duckworth, 1996) 27–8; W. W. Buckland, *A Manual of Roman Private Law* (Cambridge: CUP, 1953) 321–3; P. J. Thomas, *Introduction to Roman Law* (Deventer: Kluwer Law and Taxation Publishers, 1986) 121–3; J. A. C. Thomas, *Textbook of Roman Law* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1976) 357–61; John Crook, *Law and Life of Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1967) 163–74.
- 20 Roman law presumed that a thief in the night was more dangerous than one who stole during the daytime, since the homeowner could not easily tell if the thief was wielding a weapon. To avoid being prosecuted for murder, the homeowner had to either call out to his neighbours (to demonstrate the presence of the thief) or take the thief before a magistrate to formalize his right (Israel Drapkin, *Crime and Punishment in the Ancient World* [Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989] 234).
- 21 On ancient windows, doors and locks, see Brothers, 'Urban Housing', 41; Dwyer, 'Pompeian Atrium House', 28. As Brothers observes, 'The elaborate nature of all these arrangements for security clearly demonstrates the dangers which were around in the streets, especially at night' ('Urban Housing', 41). Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses* describes several occasions when his characters encountered heavily bolted doors at private homes, including one that had a double gate to foil intruders (1.22; 2.23, 2.32; 3.5, 3.28). Other passages mention locks on the doors of individual rooms (1.11, 1.14; 2.30; 3.15; 4.10; 7.1), including storerooms where treasures were kept (3.28; 4.18). In cases where armed gangs succeeded in breaking into a house, it appears that axes were the tool of choice for breaking into locked storerooms and chests (3.28).
- 22 Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses*, 39, 43, 47. Keys were typically entrusted to a reliable servant, which may explain why the *Digest* of Justinian is replete with discussions of slaves who were caught stealing. Items mentioned in the *Digest* that may have been stolen by slaves from wealthy homes include gold and silver dishes, coins, pearls, a silver vase, and lumps of gold, silver, and copper.
- 23 Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 15, 25, 231 n. 80. Ancient references include Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 1.3c; Petronius, *Satyr.* 29.2; Martial, *Epig.* 7.20; and Suetonius, *Vit.* 16.



a considerable feat. From time to time a gang of well-armed robbers might attempt to break down the gate of a house and overcome the sleepy residents, but even they could not be assured of success.<sup>24</sup> A safer target for a burglar seeking a large pay-off would have been the private warehouses where the rich deposited their excess resources, but these, too, were well guarded.<sup>25</sup>

As in most cultures, it was probably the poor who suffered most from the predations of burglars.<sup>26</sup> The houses of the poor were so sparsely furnished that it would have been difficult for a thief to find much worth stealing. Yet they did what they could to protect their meagre possessions. Like their rich neighbours, they placed locks on their doors, but their locks were inferior in quality and could be shattered with a strong blow. Poor people were also more likely to be at work and away from home in the daytime, and they had no slaves to watch over their houses by night. A thief would have found it much easier to break into a poor home (and overpower the residents if necessary) than to burgle the house of a wealthy person.

Yet burglary remained a hazardous enterprise even in poorer areas. Houses were so small that a burglar would have found it difficult to sneak into an occupied dwelling at night without waking the residents.<sup>27</sup> And since the poor usually lived in areas of high population density, it would have been fairly easy for the alerted residents to rouse their neighbours to help chase down an escaped thief.<sup>28</sup> But a thief did not have to run far to lose himself in the dark streets of a typical city,

24 Apuleius narrates several fictional instances of armed gangs breaking into wealthy houses in this way (e.g. *Metam.* 3.5, 3.28). In some cases the gang succeeded in robbing the home of its valuables, while in others the gang members were killed or frightened away (2.32; 4.10, 4.12, 4.21).

25 Robinson, *Criminal Law*, 27. Many of the largest houses also had workshops with separate entrances that might have proved attractive targets to a burglar (Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses*, 135; Owens, 'Residential Districts', 20–4; Brothers, 'Urban Housing', 42). Of course, if a burglar could succeed in bribing the doorkeeper at an opportune moment (several ancient references are cited in Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 231 n. 82), he might have been able to gain free access to the house and its possessions.

26 According to crime researcher Pamela Wilcox Rountree ('A Reexamination of the Crime–Fear Linkage', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 35 [1998] 366), recent crime data for the United States show that 'poor individuals (those with annual incomes less than \$7,500) are still at the highest risk for both violent and burglary victimization . . . as they are more likely to live near offenders and less likely to have adequate resources to buffer their vulnerability'.

27 An obvious exception would be the case where the thief actually broke down the door and tied up the residents before robbing them, a crime that bore stiffer penalties under the Roman law of *iniuria* (see Robinson, *Criminal Law*, 49; Kolbert, *Digest*, 87, 133, 134, 161; cf. Mark 3.27/Matt 12.29/Thomas 35).

28 Apuleius narrates several instances of neighbours being called to help in the pursuit of an escaped thief (*Metam.* 3.28; 4.10; 7.7), though the chase was not always successful.

and few men (and even fewer women) would have ventured far in the dangerous alleyways at night.<sup>29</sup> Apparently burglars succeeded often enough for some (presumably poor) people to conclude that the potential gains outweighed the risks. Robbing the homes of the poor might not have been lucrative, but it must have yielded enough to feed a poor burglar's family.

A more fruitful target in the poorer areas of town would have been the many workshops that lined the city streets. Most of these shops were open to the street in the daytime, with a large doorway extending across the front for easy access. At night the owner would cover the door opening with boards and secure them as best he could. The artisan and his family would then retire to a room behind or above the shop for sleeping.<sup>30</sup> While the family was close enough to hear a noisy intruder, a careful burglar could probably remove enough of the material covering the door to enter the shop and make off with inventory, tools, and other valuables.<sup>31</sup> Goods of this sort were easy to sell, and a thief would have had no trouble finding a buyer for such items in the cities of antiquity.<sup>32</sup>

Other aspects of ancient urban architecture also encouraged burglars to select the houses of the poor as their targets. The inferior construction of many poorer homes made locked doors less of a barrier to a determined thief. While wealthy

29 On the dangers associated with city streets at night, see especially Apuleius, *Metam.* 1.15, where the porter at the gate describes the roads as 'infested with robbers' at night, and 2.18, where an armed gang is said to roam the streets killing whoever passes by. According to John Chrysostom, even thieves were afraid of being attacked and killed while sneaking around in the dark (*Hom. 1 Thess 2*). Besides criminals, ancient city dwellers also feared what Apuleius described as 'ghosts and demons' that were thought to prowl the city at night (*Metam.* 6.30).

30 On the prevalence of these workshop/residences (*pergulae*) in Pompeii, see Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses*, 80, 108–10, and Erich Lessing and Antonio Varone, *Pompeii* (Paris: Finest S. A., 1996) 109–10. Similar information on Ephesus can be found in A. G. McKay, *Houses, Villas and Palaces in the Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1975) 68. Wallace-Hadrill (*Houses*, 80) notes that up to 40 per cent of the shops uncovered in Pompeii appear to have included living quarters. An especially poor artisan might have to sleep in the shop with his family. On the hard lives and poverty of most artisans and shopkeepers, see Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 32–7.

31 Among the items mentioned as stolen in the law codes are tools and pieces of timber, which are more likely to have come from a workshop than a private home. Even food and clothing, which also appear as objects of theft, could have been stolen from shops that made and sold these items. The *Digest* of Justinian (Kolbert, *Digest*, 105; cf. 126–7, 129) mentions at least three instances of this kind of theft (e.g. 'A cleaner who has taken in clothes for cleaning or mending can bring an action if they are stolen from him, provided he is solvent, because he is responsible in his contract for their safekeeping'). The same point is made in Gaius's *Institutes of Roman Law* 205.

32 A number of ancient sources condemn those who accept stolen goods ('fences') for the support they offer to thieves – see Robinson, *Criminal Law*, 28. The law codes also include cases dealing with the resale of stolen property.

houses were built of heavy stones, the homes of the poor were usually made of mud brick or carefully stacked rocks that had to be plastered regularly to forestall deterioration. Several ancient sources refer to thieves digging through the walls of a poor house in order to gain access to its contents (cf. Matt 6.19–20; Matt 24.43/Luke 12.39).<sup>33</sup> Another architectural feature that made poor areas more enticing to burglars was the prevalence of apartment blocks in which a series of rented rooms opened onto a common courtyard or internal corridor.<sup>34</sup> A cagey burglar could simply wait in the common area until a room became empty, then loot the room of its contents. A third characteristic of poorer neighbourhoods that made them susceptible to thieves was the presence of balconies overhanging many city streets. Instead of breaking into the ground floor of an apartment building, a burglar could easily climb up onto the balcony where his activities would be less obvious. Thieves were also notorious for hiding on balconies and attacking unwary pedestrians from their perch.<sup>35</sup>

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Along with the poor, women of all social classes have historically been especially vulnerable to the effects of crime. It is therefore worth asking how women might have been affected by burglary (or the threat of burglary) in the ancient world. Were women more likely to be victimized by burglars (or fear their presence) than men? Was it common for male burglars to rape or abuse their female victims? Did women take special precautions to protect themselves against burglars? Unfortunately, we have little evidence (and no direct testimony) about how ancient women may have reacted to the thought of a burglar invading their home and stealing their possessions. But a careful analysis of the crime data through the lens of contemporary environmental psychology can help us to develop an informed opinion about their possible reactions.

One of the first points to note is that in both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies the home was normally regarded as lying within the woman's sphere of

33 The verb *διουρύσσω* in Matt 6.19–20 and Matt 24.43/Luke 12.39 refers to a thief 'digging through' the walls of a house. (See *BAGD* for other references in the ancient literature.) On the use of mud brick for poorer houses, see McKay, *Houses*, 224–6. John Chrysostom also refers to thieves 'digging through' the walls of a wealthy house (*Hom. 1 Thess* 3, 18).

34 For a detailed description of these buildings, see Packer, *Insulae*, 66–71. While they are especially common at Ostia and Rome from the second century CE onward, McKay has shown that they were in use during Augustan times in the eastern part of the empire, including Tyre and Ephesus (*Houses*, 217). Cf. Brothers, 'Urban Housing', 50–1; Robertson, *Greek*, 306–9.

35 On the presence of balconies, see especially Robertson, *Greek*, 297 (Athens), 301 (Delos), 303 (Pompeii), and 307 (Rome). The *Digest* of Justinian (Kolbert, *Digest*, 134) mentions someone who 'knowingly lends a ladder for a thief to climb up', presumably onto a balcony.

control. The wife and mother was responsible for managing the daily affairs of the household, including its physical assets.<sup>36</sup> We can assume that she would have felt a special concern to protect these assets from loss or dissipation, especially in a family with limited resources. But since women were not trained to handle weapons in antiquity, most women would have been ill prepared to defend their family's possessions against a man intent on stealing them, especially under cover of darkness. As far as we know, rape was uncommon in conjunction with robberies in antiquity, but the threat of physical violence was quite real, since the thief knew that he could be killed with impunity if caught in a house at night.<sup>37</sup> The image of a burglar (or gang of burglars) killing people in their sleep was common enough to strike fear into the hearts of women and men alike.<sup>38</sup> For a poor woman, the thought of a successful burglary would have been doubly painful, since the few moveable possessions that a burglar might steal would have been vital to the daily operation of her household. Comparative studies suggest that a woman whose house had been robbed would have experienced feelings of anger, indignation, shame, and helplessness at the violation of the only space over which she, like most women of antiquity, had any measure of control.<sup>39</sup>

36 See especially the lengthy (and highly androcentric) description of the woman's role in Xen. *Oec.* 7.8–9.15 (cited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 21992] 198–201). According to Sarah Pomeroy (*Families in Classical and Hellenistic Greece* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1997] 33), 'The two most important aspects of a wife's job were producing children, and guarding the household'.

37 Rape of both women and men (especially slaves) was all too common in antiquity – see *Rape in Antiquity* (ed. Susan Deacy and Karen F. Pierce; London: Duckworth, 1997). But a limited review of the evidence reveals only one reference to a person being raped at home as part of a robbery, and in that case rape was clearly the primary aim of the perpetrator, not robbery (*ibid.*, 175). As Deacy points out, 'It is when *parthenoi* leave their *oikoi* without male protection that [voluntary or coerced] sexual encounters occur' (*ibid.*, 49). The fact that married people usually slept together in the same room (Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses*, 113) would have made night-time rape difficult unless the husband were away from home. Whether burglars were regarded nonetheless as potential rapists is unknown, though we can probably guess that the thought passed through the minds of ancient women (and their fathers or husbands) from time to time.

38 Among the robberies described in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* are several in which a gang of robbers either kills or plots to kill the residents of a house in the course of a burglary (3.5; 4.18, 4.12). John Chrysostom also refers several times to burglars who murder people in their sleep (*Hom. 1 Thess* 1, 2, 9, 24).

39 Environmental psychologists use the term 'territoriality' to describe the psychological bond that humans feel with their place of residence. What makes burglary particularly upsetting for many people is the fact that, in addition to taking valuable property, the burglar has intruded into a space previously deemed safe and secure. The more physically intrusive the burglar's actions (e.g. going into bedrooms and emptying personal belongings onto the floor), the greater the sense of violation and the stronger the emotional reaction. Other

The same is probably true for a woman whose husband's workshop had been burgled. The wives of artisans often worked alongside their husbands in their shops, so that the woman's livelihood would have been jeopardized as much as the man's by the loss of tools, inventory, and other key materials.<sup>40</sup> And in the very common case where the workshop adjoined the family's living quarters, the woman's sense of ownership and responsibility for the home most likely extended to the shop area as well. Thus a robbery in a workshop could have left a poor woman with a sense of loss and violation that rivalled or exceeded that of her husband.

But it was not only poor women who had reason to fear the appearance of thieves. No amount of protection could make the homes of wealthy women impervious to burglars. The rate of successful burglaries need not have been great to strike fear into the hearts of the wealthy, especially when much of their wealth was tied up in moveable property.<sup>41</sup> Comparative studies suggest that the efforts of wealthy men to guard their wives and possessions against harm may have served to make the women even more anxious.<sup>42</sup> But rich women still had less

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factors that can increase the intensity of the reaction include the theft of personally meaningful goods and physical damage to the person's belongings. A good discussion of the subject is Barbara B. Brown and Paul B. Harris, 'Residential Burglary Victimization: Reactions to the Invasion of a Primary Territory', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 9 (1989) 119–32. For a review of the theoretical issues, see Ralph B. Taylor, 'Toward an Environmental Psychology of Disorder: Delinquency, Crime, and Fear of Crime', *Handbook of Environmental Psychology* (ed. D. Stokols and I. Altman; New York: Wiley, 1987) 655–90. On the emotional effects of burglary, see Martin S. Greenberg and R. Barry Ruback, *After the Crime: Victim Decision Making* (New York: Plenum, 1992) 155–71, and Irvin Waller, 'Assistance to Victims of Burglary', *Coping With Burglary: Research Perspectives on Policy* (Boston: Kluwer, 1984) 233–48.

<sup>40</sup> The theft of valuable items that had been brought to the shop for repair could be especially devastating to a poor family, since they would be held liable for the lost property. Justinian's *Digest* states clearly in three places (see n. 31 above) that the person who has taken in clothing for cleaning or repair is liable to the owner if the item is stolen while in his or her possession.

<sup>41</sup> Apuleius's vivid depictions of roving bands of armed robbers attacking the homes of wealthy city dwellers (*Metam.* 3.5, 3.28; 4.10, 4.28) may be exaggerated, but his narrative clearly reflects the fears of many upper-class citizens.

<sup>42</sup> Recent studies of the relation between crime and fear have found that the kinds of things that people do to protect themselves from burglars often end up isolating them from their neighbours, thereby increasing their attitudes of fear towards outsiders. See Pamela Wilcox Rountree and Kenneth C. Land, 'Perceived Risk Versus Fear of Crime: Empirical Evidence of Conceptually Distinct Reactions in Survey Data', *Social Forces* 74 (1996) 1353–76; Pamela Wilcox Rountree and Kenneth C. Land, 'Burglary Victimization, Perceptions of Crime Risk, and Routine Activities: A Multilevel Analysis Across Seattle Neighborhoods and Census Tracts', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 33 (1996) 147–80.

reason to worry than their poorer sisters, whose very survival could be threatened by a successful burglary.

A final factor that might have led ancient women to react differently than men to the thought of a burglar invading their home at night concerns their relative abilities to defend themselves. Throughout the Mediterranean world, women were taught to rely on men for protection rather than fending for themselves in times of danger. Men were encouraged to fight to protect their family and property, while women were trained to submit to male domination.<sup>43</sup> While there were no doubt exceptions, we can guess that a woman of any social level would have felt fairly helpless (and thus fearful) at the thought of an unknown and potentially violent male invading her home, since society offered her no acceptable means of response except perhaps to keep a lamp burning through the night.<sup>44</sup> If a neighbour's house had been burgled during the night, a man could ease his fears by keeping a weapon nearby while he slept. A woman was allowed no such comfort.

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With these social realities in mind, we can now turn to a brief review of the diverse ways in which a first-century Christian audience might have responded to the phrase 'like a thief in the night' when used to describe the parousia of Christ.

In Matt 24.43/Luke 12.39, the imagery is thoroughly androcentric. The 'master of the house' (οἰκοδεσπότης) in this brief parable is undoubtedly a male, and the kind of 'readiness' that is envisioned here ('keeping watch' to prevent the house being broken into) is a typically masculine action. The alerted homeowner is pictured as sitting quietly in his darkened house with a weapon close at hand, perhaps in the company of a few neighbours, waiting for the burglar to appear.<sup>45</sup> One

43 Cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. 1 Thess* 9: 'It is not sufficient to watch and be sober, we must also be armed. For if a man watch and is sober, but has not arms, the robbers soon dispatch him. When therefore we ought both to watch, and to be sober, and to be armed, and we are unarmed and naked and asleep, who will hinder him from thrusting home his sword?'

44 Cf. *ibid.* 18: 'When a candle is set, all are brought to light, and the thief cannot enter.' Yet the presence of a lighted lamp might not be enough to protect the residents from harm, as Chrysostom rightly observes: '[A] robber having set foot in the house, while all are sleeping, when stealing everything, if he see anyone having lit a lamp, both extinguishes the light and slays him who holds the lamp, in order that he may be allowed in security to steal and rob the property of others'.

45 Apuleius (*Metam.* 4.10) tells the story of a wealthy man who waited inside his darkened house and nailed a burglar's hand to the door as he reached through the keyhole to dislodge the bolt. Alternatively, the homeowner could be pictured as sitting in the house with a lamp burning to dissuade the burglar from his plans. John Chrysostom (*Hom. 1 Thess* 24) speaks of

can imagine him relishing the thought of exacting vigilante justice on this hapless thief who foolishly let his plans become known. The metaphor would certainly have been attractive to many male listeners in the audience. But what if the 'master of the house' in this story were a woman? What if she had no male friends or relatives whom she could call upon to protect her? What if she were old or sick or infirm? What if she had small children who would be asleep in the house at the time when she knew the burglar was coming? What if she lived on the edge of survival, aware that the loss of her meagre possessions would leave her destitute? Under such desperate circumstances, most women (and many men) would have chosen to leave the house ahead of the thief in order to protect their lives. A few hardy souls might have steeled themselves to fight a losing battle in defence of their family and possessions. But whatever their response, the thought of sitting at home awaiting the arrival of a burglar who was certain to come would have inspired a deep dread in the hearts of most women in antiquity. Apparently the man who framed this parable either (a) did not consider the possibility that it might arouse such negative thoughts and feelings in the women of the audience, or (b) anticipated this possibility and chose to play on the women's fears in a subtle effort to control their behaviour.<sup>46</sup> Either view reveals a lack of sensitivity to the real-world plight of female listeners. For them, the effect of the parable may have been exactly the opposite of that intended by the author – instead of eagerly awaiting the coming of the 'Son of Man', many women might have found themselves responding with fear to the thought of someone coming to them 'like a thief in the night'.

A similar use of 'thief' imagery can be seen in 1 Thess 5.1–3, where the negative side of the image is actually intensified. According to Paul, the soon-to-come 'day of the Lord' will be a time of destruction from which those who are unprepared 'will not escape' (v. 3). Here again we encounter the (male-oriented) call to be

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people who 'have lighted a candle, and would be as it were watching in the depth of the night, while men are sleeping'. A similar idea is found in *Hom. 1 Thess* 9: 'In the case of those who are watching and who are in the light, if there should be any entry of a robber, it can do them no harm', presumably because they can see to defend themselves.

<sup>46</sup> The Jesus Seminar listed the Matthew passage in black (i.e. inauthentic) and the Lukan version in grey (probably inauthentic) due to their belief that Jesus did not speak in apocalyptic terms. See Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 252, 341–2. The traditional view that traces the saying to Jesus is upheld by W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989–97) 3.385. A mediating position is taken by David E. Aune (*Revelation 1–5* [Dallas: Word Books, 1997] 221–2), who argues that the reference to the 'Son of Man' is a later addition to a (possibly) authentic parable. According to Richard Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter* [Dallas: Word Books, 1983] 305), 'The fact that eschatological use of the thief image is found frequently but exclusively in early Christian literature shows that it derives from Jesus' parable.'

'alert and sober' (v. 6) rather than asleep when the burglar comes, though this time the hour of his arrival is unknown. As in the previous passage, we can assume that the 'thief' imagery would have been more troubling to women than to men.<sup>47</sup> But this time the gender effect is reinforced by a second comparison: the anticipated destruction will come suddenly, 'like labour pains on a pregnant woman' (v. 3). To a man this is simply a useful analogy. But to a woman living in an era before painkillers, when many women actually died giving birth, the comparison of the 'day of the Lord' with 'labour pains' would have evoked feelings of anxiety and even dread.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps Paul meant to strike fear into the hearts of his female listeners; more likely he simply took over a common simile without thinking about its implications.<sup>49</sup> But whether he intended it or not, Paul's choice of images in these verses (comparing the impending judgment to the sudden appearance of a night burglar and the pains of childbirth) would have spoken powerfully to women that the coming 'day of the Lord' was not an event to be taken lightly. When therefore he insists (vv. 4, 9) that the addressees should not be fearful since they will not be among the ones to suffer on that day, his words would have come as a welcome relief to many of the women in the audience. But the threat of judgment is not wholly lifted: behind the moral injunctions of v. 6 and v. 8 lies the implicit charge that those who fail to act in the prescribed manner are not really 'sons (!) of light' and will therefore suffer destruction in the coming 'day of the Lord'. This attempt to regulate the conduct of the Thessalonian believers would have been most effective with those who had already been stirred to fear by the earlier imagery of thieves and birth pains, i.e. the women in the audience.

The situation in 2 Pet 3.10 is similar to 1 Thessalonians. Here again it is 'the day of the Lord' that is compared to the coming of a thief, and here again the image is intensified by a more explicit description of the judgment and destruction that is soon to come upon the ungodly.<sup>50</sup> But this time the devastation extends even further: the entire universe will be caught up in a fiery conflagration. As with the previous passages, the readers are told to 'be on your guard' (v. 17) in anticipation of these events, which means watching carefully over their behaviour (vv. 11, 14–15, 17). The gender implications of this imagery are similar to the other passages

47 While the poor certainly had more to lose from a successful burglary than the rich, it would be difficult to generalize about the relative intensity of their feelings concerning burglars.

48 This aspect of the image is recognized by John Chrysostom, though he fails to observe its implications for female listeners: '[Paul] has not only glanced here at the uncertainty, but also at the bitterness of the pain. For as she while sporting, laughing, not looking for anything at all, being suddenly seized with unspeakable pains, is pierced through with the pangs of labour – so it will be with those souls, when the Day comes upon them' (*Hom. 1 Thess 9*).

49 The latter possibility seems more likely in view of his references to the audience as 'brothers' (vv. 1, 4) and 'sons of light and sons of day' (v. 5). Note also the use of military imagery in v. 8.

50 The reference to the thief coming 'in the night' is absent in 2 Pet 3.10, but the cultural context makes it likely that this is what the author meant.



studied thus far. The one new feature here is the promise of a 'new heaven and new earth' in which only the righteous will live (v. 13). A promise of this sort would have appealed especially to the poor, for whom the present world offered little in the way of material pleasures or comfort. But the same image might also have helped to balance any anxious reactions that women may have felt as a result of the 'thief' imagery in v. 10 and the graphic depictions of the coming judgment in vv. 7, 10, and 12. Without such a promise, the author's expectation that the readers will 'look forward' to the coming 'day of the Lord' would seem rather senseless. The author is still seeking to regulate the conduct of the audience (vv. 11, 14–15, 17), but this time the 'stick' of divine judgment is balanced by the 'carrot' of eternal reward.

In Rev 3.3 and 16.15, on the other hand, the threat of divine judgment is directed squarely at the audience. In Rev 3.3, the image of the night burglar is used to communicate not only the unexpectedness but also the danger associated with the coming judgment. The nature of the danger is never specified; apparently the author thought it better to leave that to the imaginations of the readers. No doubt every reader had heard stories about what could happen if an armed burglar should sneak into one's home unannounced at night. As before, the call to 'be alert' (v. 3) implies a readiness to fight (or at least scare off) a potential burglar, an image that applies more readily to the men than to the women in the audience. But this time the threat would have sounded equally menacing to both genders – if a thief were to attack a person who was sleeping, the danger could be just as great for a man as for a woman. From our earlier observations, we might surmise that a woman would have felt more threatened by this prospect than a man. But we can be sure that the author's subliminal appeal to widely held fears about thieves would have intensified the effect of his call to men and women alike to adjust their behaviour (i.e. to 'repent') to meet the demands of the heavenly voice.

In Rev 16.15, by contrast, the masculine orientation of the language is patently obvious. Not only are the pronouns all masculine, but the imagery seems to assume that the awakened homeowner will throw on his clothes and chase the burglar down the street.<sup>51</sup> In light of the dangerous reputations of ancient streets at night, it is difficult to imagine that anyone would have envisaged a woman chasing after a thief in the dark, especially if she were unclothed.<sup>52</sup> The possible effect of the thief's visit on the woman of the house is simply ignored in this passage. As it stands, the image seems to work by drawing an implicit comparison

51 So Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) 804. Pursuit and capture of the thief and/or the stolen goods was required (at least under the later law codes) in order to recover fourfold damages (Buckland, *Manual*, 321).

52 The passage does not explicitly say that the thief comes 'at night', but the references to being 'alert' (or staying awake) and being unclothed imply a night-time visit.

between the sense of shame that a man would feel running naked through the streets at night and the much deeper sense of shame that he would feel if he were unprepared for the divine judgment. But the idea of Jesus coming like a night burglar would have induced more fear than shame in the minds of the female members of the audience. The ultimate effects of the image (i.e. changed conduct) would have been the same in either case, but the means to that end would have been different for women than for men.

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The time has come to summarize some of the implications of our investigation.

1. A gender-sensitive reading of early Christian uses of the phrase 'a thief in the night' reveals that the imagery is fundamentally androcentric. Not only does it reflect a masculine point of view, but it also appeals to the values and social expectations of males. The image works by playing on the man's sense of responsibility to protect his family and possessions from the attacks of a night burglar. The key word is 'readiness': just as a man should be ready to fight off or scare away a burglar who unexpectedly attacks his household, so he should be ready to give account for his deeds before the impending divine judgment. The ultimate aim of the image is to motivate the recipients to follow the standards of conduct prescribed by the author.
2. For women, the image of Jesus coming 'like a thief in the night' would have been more problematic. The thought of a burglar entering their homes at night would have stirred up feelings of anxiety and fear in the minds of most women, and the negative emotions associated with this image could easily have carried over to their views of the parousia. As elsewhere in society, many women would have heard in this image a call to control their behaviour or suffer the consequences. This appeal to women's fears may or may not have been intended by those who employed the image, but it was clearly embedded in the language and culture of the times.
3. The image of Christ coming 'like a thief in the night' works by playing on a common stock of cultural lore and prejudice about thieves. In reality, most burglars were simply poor people struggling desperately to keep themselves and their families alive. Many had lost their ability to pursue legitimate occupations due to the inequities of the ancient socio-economic system.<sup>53</sup> In

53 Ramsay MacMullen (*Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* [New Haven, CN: Yale University, 1974] 85, 116), observes that many thieves were either displaced people from the countryside or city dwellers who stole out of hunger. John Chrysostom likewise refers at

popular lore, however, thieves were dangerous and evil creatures to be feared, resisted, and even killed. When Christian authors played on these popular images to advance their arguments, they implicitly endorsed the dehumanization of a whole class of people and reinforced the social system that oppressed them. Happily, this was not the whole story – thieves were welcomed into the early Christian house churches with the proviso that they should ‘steal no more’ (Eph 4.28). But the NT contains enough negative stereotypes of thieves (e.g. John 10.10; 1 Cor 6.10; 1 Pet 4.15) to suggest that first-century Christian men could be as insensitive to the effects of their words on those at the bottom of the social ladder as they were at times with women.

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several points to the importance of poverty as a motivation for thieves: ‘Again, what is stealing? Is it a matter of necessity? Yes, a man will say, because poverty causes this’ (*Hom. 1 Thess 2*; cf. 10, 18, 37). In Chrysostom’s eyes, however, this is only an excuse; it is really laziness that keeps people from working for a living.