

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Morgan Edwards: A Pre-Darby Rapturist

THOMAS D. ICE, PHD*

Introduction

1

Opponents of pretribulationism have often tried to “poison the well” by contending that a pre-tribulation understanding of the Bible is novel and/or has sprung from a polluted source.¹ These opponents insist that pretribulationism was a product of a momentary inspirational outburst. Instead, it is becoming increasingly clear that pretribulationism, like other biblical doctrines, can be demonstrated to have been the product of the normal development of the progress of doctrine in history. The last few years have witnessed the discovery of voices from the Church’s past testifying to a two-stage return of Christ.² While it is possible that some have held to some form of a pretribulational rapture throughout the history of the church, another instance of a pre-Darby rapturist has come to light within Evangelicalism. American Baptist pastor, historian, and educator, Morgan Edwards (1722–96), has surfaced to join the chorus of pre-Darby voices who taught a form of pretribulationism.

The Early and Medieval Church

The early church was clearly premillennial in their eschatology, with only a few dissenters. Irenaeus (d. ca. A. D. 202) “stated in the strongest possible terms that premillennialism was traditional orthodoxy” (*Ag. Her.* 5.32.1).³ Pretribulationism is not clearly represented within the extant writings of these early fathers. However, before one draws the conclusion that it is totally absent, it is possible that a few ancient statements do represent elements of a fuzzy form of pretribulationism.

* Dr. Thomas Ice is Executive Director of the Pre-Trib Research Center, Washington, D.C.

¹ See for example, Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973). MacPherson, *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* (Kansas City: Heart of America Bible Society, 1974). MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, N.C.: New Puritan Library, 1983). MacPherson, *Rapture?* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1987). MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Pubs., 1995). John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, Inc., 1982.)

² Timothy Demy and Thomas Ice, “The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July–September 1995), pp. 306–17.

³ Larry V. Crutchfield, s.v. “Irenaeus” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, gen. ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996.)

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

At least two elements of pretribulationism—Christ’s imminent return and a hope to escape tribulation—can be found in early church writings. The early church was often subjected to persecution for their faith and as a result tended to confuse church age tribulation with the tribulation of the 70th week of Daniel. At the same time they often spoke of a belief in an “any-moment” return of the Lord. Expressions of imminency abound in the Apostolic Fathers. Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, *The Didache*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas* all speak of imminency.⁴ Furthermore, *The Shepherd of Hermas* speaks of the pretribulational concept of escaping the tribulation.

You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly.⁵

Larry Crutchfield notes, “This belief in the imminent return of Christ within the context of ongoing persecution has prompted us to broadly label the views of the earliest fathers, ‘imminent intratribulationism.’”⁶ Crutchfield says concerning Irenaeus:

He seems to have believed that there would be an interval between the rapture of the saints and the final venting of the Antichrist’s wrath upon earth. His reference to the church being “suddenly caught up” and to the Antichrist’s “sudden coming” provide at least some (i.e., after ten kingdoms established and appearance of Antichrist) sense of imminency (Ag. Her. 5.29.1–2). While the evidence is not conclusive, it suggests at least the possibility that Irenaeus held to a remote/imminent, intratribulational rapture of the church.⁷

There appears, scattered throughout the church fathers of the first three centuries, statements that are not only premillennial but also reflect a possible undeveloped belief in pretribulationism. For example, Victorinus (d. A. D. 304), bishop of Petau, who wrote an early commentary on the book of Revelation. His explanation of Revelation 6:14 includes his belief that “the Church shall be taken away” at a point in the future when the passage under consideration will be fulfilled. Again, in Revelation 15:1 he says, “these

⁴ Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers” in *When The Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), pp. 88–101.

⁵ *The Shepherd of Hermas* 1.4.2.

⁶ Crutchfield, *Trumpet*, p. 103.

⁷ Crutchfield, s.v. “Irenaeus” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

shall be in the last time, when the Church shall have gone out of the midst.” Here he speaks of something that will have happened previously, apparently looking back to his statement in Revelation 6:14. It is hard to know exactly what he means, but it could reflect elements of pretribulationism. This seems even more likely in light of the fact that Victorinus was said by the anti-Chilist Jerome to have been a known premillennialist; yet his commentary was clearly amended in Revelation 20 to read as if he were Augustinian. An American Editor of Victorinus has concluded:

This confirms the corruption of the mss. Indeed, if the Victorinus mentioned by Jerome be the same as our author, the mention of Genseric proves the subsequent interpolation of his works ... It is evident that the fragment which is here preserved, ... is full of the corrections of some pious disciple of St. Augustine who lived much later.⁸

After Augustine (d. AD 430), there were clear efforts to redact premillennialism out of earlier church writings on the part of some copyists—Victorinus being an established example of such attempts—in a sincere but misguided attempt to bring these writings in line with what they thought to be the orthodoxy of the day. Another example is seen in the fact that during the Middle Ages the last five chapters of Irenaeus’ (ca. AD 120–97 ca. AD 202) *Against Heresies* were lost. It just so happens that those were the ones that contained the heart of his eschatological thought. Wilber Wallis explains:

The premillennial scheme seems to have disappeared completely after it was condemned as heretical at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. This disappearance was probably aided by the suppression of the last five chapters of Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* after the rejection of premillennialism and the loss of the Greek original. The reappearance of the full text of this ancient presentation of premillennialism in 1571 (later reconstructed from the Armenian and Syriac manuscripts) may have had something to do with the reemergence of premillennialism in the seventeenth century.⁹

In light of such revision and suppression, it is entirely within the realm of possibility that the early church could have had clearer pretribulational statements in their writings. Such a supposition is strengthened in light of the recent discovery by North American Evangelicals of Pseudo-Ephraem (4th–7th c.) and his sermon known as *On the Last Times*,

⁸ A. Cleveland Coxe, American Editor, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, X Vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), VII: 360, f.n. 17, 18.

⁹ Wilber B. Wallis, “Reflections on the History of Premillennial Thought,” in *Interpretation & History: Essays in Honour of Allan A. MacRae*, ed S.R. Laird Harris, Swee-Hwa Quek, and J. Robert Vannoy (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1986), p. 228.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the Antichrist, and the End of the World or Sermon on the End of the World. Latin copies of these texts were compiled and edited by C. P. Caspari.¹⁰ and have more recently received attention from the late Paul J. Alexander.¹¹ Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon contains a clear statement about the church's removal before the tribulation.¹²

Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms all the world?... For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord in order lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins.¹³

Pseudo-Ephraem demonstrates that a belief in the rapture was understood very early in the history of the church insuring us that others had a similar understanding and that some of the previously vague statements could have also been expressions of an early and undeveloped pretribulationism that was under attack and censorship.

The Reformation

Once premillennialism began to be revived in the early seventeenth century within various Reformed traditions, there was a corresponding increase of statements that some believe reflect pretribulationist views, in spite of the fact that historicism was the near unanimous approach to prophecy. As many Reformed scholars adopted premillennialism, some began to see the rapture as a distinct event from the return of Christ to the earth.

It has been claimed that some separated the rapture from the second coming as early as Joseph Mede in his seminal work *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), who is considered the father of English premillennialism. Paul Boyer says that Increase Mather proved "that the saints would 'be caught up into the Air' beforehand, thereby escaping the final conflagration—an early formulation of the Rapture doctrine more fully elaborated in the nineteenth

¹⁰ C. P. Caspari, ed. *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus den zweiletzten Jahrhunderten des kirchlichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelalters*, Christiania, 1890.

¹¹ Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, edited, with an introduction by Dorothy de F. Abrahamse. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. See also Alexander's "The Medieval Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and Its Messianic Origin," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 41 (1978): pp. 1–15, and *The Oracle of Baalbek*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Byzantine Studies, 1967.

¹² Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 152 (July–September 1995), pp. 306–17.

¹³ Caspari, 211.4, "*Omnes enim sancti et electi Dei ante tribulationem, quae uentura est, colliguntur et ad Dominum adsumuntur, ne quando uideant confusionem, quae uniuersum propter peccata nostra obruet mundum.*" The entire text is found in Caspari pp. 208–20 and the German commentary on pp. 429–72.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

century."¹⁴ Whatever these men were saying, it is clear that the application of a more literal hermeneutic was leading to a distinction between the rapture and the second coming as separate events.

Others began to speak of the rapture. Paul Benware notes:

Peter Jurieu in his book, *Approaching Deliverance of the Church* (1687) taught that Christ would come in the air to rapture the saints and return to heaven before the battle of Armageddon. He spoke of a secret Rapture prior to His coming in glory and judgment at Armageddon. Philip Doddridge's commentary on the New Testament (1738) and John Gill's commentary on the New Testament (1748) both use the term rapture and speak of it as imminent. It is clear that these men believed that this coming will precede Christ's descent to the earth and the time of judgment. The purpose was to preserve believers from the time of judgment. James Macknight (1763) and Thomas Scott (1792) taught that the righteous will be carried to heaven, where they will be secure until the time of judgment is over.¹⁵

Brethren researcher, Frank Marotta, believes that Thomas Collier in 1674 makes reference to a pretribulation rapture, but rejects the view, thus showing his awareness that such a view was being taught. Marotta writes of Collier:

Because he raised the question of the saints being raised at Christ's "first appearing in the clouds of heaven," instead of later on "at the entrance of the thousand years," it is apparent that Collier certainly considered the idea of a pretribulation rapture.¹⁶

This brings us up to the time of a British Baptist minister named Morgan Edwards.

Who Is Morgan Edwards?

Morgan Edwards was born May 9, 1722 in Trevethin parish, Wales, and after education at Bristol College, began preaching in 1738. He served several small Baptist congregations in England for seven years, before moving to Cork, Ireland, where he pastored for nine years. Edwards immigrated to America, and in May 1761, became pastor of the Baptist

¹⁴ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992), p. 75.

¹⁵ Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 197–98.

¹⁶ Frank Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: An Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist* (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1995), p. 12.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Church in Philadelphia.¹⁷ After the Revolutionary War (he was the only known Baptist clergy of Tory persuasion), Edwards became an educator and the premier Baptist historian of his day. In fact, he is widely recognized as the father of American Baptist historiography. His major work, *Materials Toward A History of the Baptists*, is an important seminal work outlining American Baptist history of the era. Edwards founded the first Baptist college in the Colonies, Rhode Island College, which we know today as Brown University of the Ivy League.

6

As was typical of the hard life of early American Colonists, Edwards experienced significant tragedy in his life. He outlived two wives and most of his children. During a “dark period” in his life, he ceased attending church, took to drink and was excommunicated from his church. “After making repeated efforts to be restored, he was received back into the church on October 6, 1788, and thereafter lived an exemplary life.”¹⁸ Baptist historian Robert Torbet described Edwards as

a man of versatility, being both a capable leader for many years and a historian of some importance. In temperament he was eccentric and choleric.... With all of his varied gifts, he was always evangelistic in spirit.¹⁹

Another historian similarly says of Edwards:

Scholarly, laborious, warm-hearted, eccentric, choleric Morgan Edwards, one of the most interesting of the early Baptist ministers of our country and one of those most deserving of honor. His very faults had a leaning toward virtues side, and in good works he was exceeded by none of his day, if indeed by any of any day ... He was an able preacher and a good man, but not always an easy man to get on with.²⁰

Baptist historian William Cathcart characterizes Edwards as:

... a master of scholarly attainments ... His attachment to Baptist principles was intense, and no man since the days of the Apostles ever showed greater love, or made more costly sacrifices for them than he did. He was full of generosity, he would give anything to a friend or a cause dear to him. Edwards was a man of

¹⁷ John McClintock & James Strong, “Edwards, Morgan” in *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981 [1867–87]), XII vols, III:69.

¹⁸ John S. Moore, “Morgan Edwards: Baptist Statesman,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (VI:1; January 1971), p. 31.

¹⁹ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950), pp. 243–44.

²⁰ Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publishing Society, 1907), p. 232.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

uncommon genius. In his day no Baptist minister equaled him, and none since his time has surpassed him.²¹

It was just such a man, with just such a spirit, that would be bold enough to set forth a view of Bible prophecy that went against the trends of his day. Morgan Edwards developed and published a pretrib rapture view long before J. N. Darby was even born.

7

Edwards and the Rapture

During his student days at Bristol Baptist Seminary in England (1742–44), Morgan Edwards wrote an essay for eschatology class on his views of Bible prophecy. This essay was later published in Philadelphia (1788) under the following title: *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties*.²² The term in the title, “Last-Novelties,” refers to what we would call today the eternal state; “novelties” refers to the new conditions of the future new heavens and new earth, not that he had a novel view of the Bible. Upon reading the 56-page work, it is evident that Edwards published it with only minor changes from his student days. Thus, it represents a view that he had developed by the early 1740s. Thus, we can date Edwards’ pretribulationism as originating in the early 1740s. The pretribulationism of Morgan Edwards can be seen in the following statement from his book:

II. *The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years.*

I say, somewhat more—, because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ’s “appearing in the air” (1 Thes. 4:17); **and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium**, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many “mansions in the father’s house” (John 14:2), and **so disappear during the foresaid period of time**. The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for “now the time is come that judgment must begin,” and that will be “at the house of God” (1 Pet. 4:17) ... (p. 7; emphasis added; the spelling of all Edwards quotes have been modernized)

What has Edwards said? Note the following:

²¹ William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, 1: 362; quoted in Marotta, *Morgan Edwards*, p. 6.

²² Morgan Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties*. (Philadelphia: Dobson and Lang, 1788). I was able to get a photocopy of the book at the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

- He believes that at least 1,003.5 years will transpire between resurrections.
- He associates the first resurrection with the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, occurring at least 3.5 years before the start of the millennium (i.e., at least 3.5 years before the second coming of Christ at the start of the millennium).
- He associates the meeting of believers with Christ in the air and returning to the Father's house with John 14:2, as do modern pretribulationists.
- He sees believers disappearing during the time of the tribulation, which he goes on to describe in the rest of the section from which the rapture statement is taken.
- He, like modern pretribulationists, links the time in heaven, during the tribulation, with the "bema" judgment of believers.

The only difference, at least in light of the above statements between current pretribulationism and Edwards, is the time interval of 3.5 years instead of 7. In fact, anti-pretribulationist John Bray wonders,

It would be interesting to know what, in those early years at the Academy, led Edwards to his concept of a pre-tribulation rapture. One could almost think he had been studying at one of our modern dispensational-entrenched schools, the teaching is so similar to that which is being taught today.²³

It would be interesting to know what he studied at Bristol, but Edwards says in his introduction that his views are not those normally held in his day because he was approaching eschatology with a literal hermeneutic. Such an approach is said by modern pretribulationists to be the primary determinate factor leading to pretribulationism. This is what J. N. Darby claimed and so does Edwards before Darby.²⁴ Edwards explains:

I will do my possible: and in the attempt will work by a rule you have often recommended, viz. "to take the scriptures in a literal sense, except when that leads to contradiction or absurdity." ... Very able men have already handled the subject in a mystical, or allegorical, or spiritual way. (pp. 5–6)

It is clear from the above comment that Edwards was taught literal interpretation by his teachers, but they did not apply it consistently throughout the whole Bible. Edwards was

²³ John Bray, *Morgan Edwards & the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (1788) (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministries, 1995), p. 8.

²⁴ See Floyd Elmore, "J. N. Darby's Early Years," in *When The Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), pp. 127–50.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

determined to apply in practice what he had been taught in theory, even though it contradicted the common practices of his day in the area of the study of Bible prophecy.

Historian John Moore, quoting from Rev. William Rogers' sermon at Edwards' funeral: "There was nothing uncommon in Mr. Edwards' person; but he possessed an original genius."²⁵ Thus, as an original thinker, Edwards, like Darby, saw his views flowing from a literal reading of the Bible. Also, like Darby, Edwards developed these views early in life. Edwards was between the age of 20–22, while Darby was about 26 years old.

9

Edwards expands on his earlier rapture statement later when he says,

Another event previous to the millennium will be the appearing of the son of man in the clouds, coming to raise the dead saints and change the living, and to catch them up to himself, and then withdraw with them, as observed before. [i.e., p. 7] This event will come to pass when Antichrist be arrived at Jerusalem in his conquest of the world; and about three years and a half before his killing the witnesses and assumption of godhead.... (p. 21)

Edwards clearly separates the rapture and the second coming as is evident from the following statements:

8. The last event, and the event that will usher in the millennium, will be the coming of Christ from paradise to earth, with all the saints he had taken up thither (about three years and a half before) ... (p. 24) millions and millions of saints will have been on earth from the days of the first Adam, to the coming of the second Adam. All these will Christ bring with him. The place where they will alight is the "mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east." Zech. 14:4. (p. 25)

Of interest is the fact that Edwards wrote 42 volumes of sermons, about 12 sermons per volume, that were never published. Other than his historical writings and ecclesiastical helps, his essay on Bible prophecy was his only other published work. It is significant that this essay, from his youth, was published and not something else. This evidences that there was some interest in his views on this subject. Such an interest would have surely risen out of his bringing it to the attention of those to whom he ministered. Yet, on the other hand, the book only went through one printing, showing that all books on the rapture do not automatically become a number one best seller. It could also reflect the fact that Baptists were not a large denomination at this time in America. Nevertheless, Edwards' work on Bible prophecy did have some circulation and exposed early

²⁵ John Moore, "Morgan Edwards," p. 33.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Americans to many of the ideas that would come to dominate Evangelicalism a century later.

Conclusion

Detractors of pretribulationism often want to say or imply that our view cannot be found in the pages of the Bible and must have come from a deviant source. Of course, we strongly object to such a notion and have taken great pains over the years to show that the New Testament not only teaches pretribulationism, but holds it forth as our “Blessed Hope” — a central focus of faith. In light of Edwards’ pretribulationism, Frank Marotta declares:

Gone as well are the claims that there were no pretribulationists prior to about 1830. Morgan Edwards was pretribulationist in the 1740s ... The truth of a doctrine is proved by Scripture, not its historical continuity in the teaching of the professing church. Antidispensationalists make the false claim that dispensational teaching is in error because of a lack of historical continuity. Can they prove the historic continuity of their own teaching? Both the Church of Rome and the Eastern Orthodox base their claims of authority on alleged historic continuity; and many so-called evangelicals have of late entered their folds on this account. Yet their claims of authority do not stand the test of Scripture.²⁶

The bringing to light of Morgan Edwards’ views of the rapture do demonstrate (again) that a consistently literal approach to Bible interpretation leads many to distinguish between Christ’s coming in the air *for* His bride and His return to earth *with* His saints. Edwards, along with Pseudo-Ephraem’s fourth century sermon (and likely others) make it clear, that, while Darby may have restored the pretribulationist rapture, he did not originate it. Pretribulationism is found first in the New Testament and at times throughout the history of the church. Maranatha!²⁷

²⁶ Marotta, *Morgan Edwards*, pp. 13–14.

²⁷ Ice, T. (1997). “Morgan Edwards: A Pre-Darby Rapturist.” *Conservative Theological Journal* Volume 1, 1(1), 4–12.