

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Posttribulationism's Appeal to Antiquity

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Posttribulationists often appeal to history in support of their view. Traditionally, from the early church fathers on down to the nineteenth century, posttribulationism has been the predominant eschatological view of the church; and pretribulationism, “the new kid on the block.”<sup>2</sup> One posttribulationist submits

that all of the evidence of history runs one way—in favor of Post-tribulationism. The witness of those Fathers who were nearest in time to the Apostles—who lived in the century immediately following them—is invariably against the Pre-tribulation teaching. The indication, consequently, is that the Apostles were Post-tribulationists.<sup>3</sup>

But this conclusion is more elaborate in its claim than it is in fact. If we want to know where the *Apostles* stood on the rapture we would surely want to look *not* at the patristic writings but at the New Testament itself. The Bible is our sole authority on what the Apostles thought and is not to be judged by the Fathers. It is much to be preferred that *Paul* tell us what Paul thought than for *Barnabas* to tell us what Paul thought.<sup>4</sup> Besides, whether the posttribulationism of the historical church “favors” posttribulationism and is “invariably against” pretrib teaching is open to question.

Ladd's appeal is more discrete:

Let it be at once emphasized that we are not turning to the church fathers to find authority for either pre- or posttribulationism. The one authority is the word of God, and we are not confined in the strait-jacket of tradition ... While tradition

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Norman F. Douty, *The Great Tribulation Debate* (Harrison, Arkansas: Gibbs Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 125–26.

<sup>4</sup> The anonymous author of this epistle is not the Barnabas of Acts 4:36 and companion of Paul. See F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1960), p. 21; Ludwig Shopp, ed. *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M. F. Marique and Gerald G. Walsh (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), p. 187.

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does not provide authority, it would nevertheless be difficult to suppose that God had left his people in ignorance of an essential truth for nineteen centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Now this seems more reasonable. Except that pretribs do not suppose that God left His people in ignorance for nineteen centuries. Rather, the church did either lose or suppress the truth. Would any student of history deny that the church did pervert and suppress the truth for centuries?<sup>6</sup> Ladd goes on to argue from the church fathers on down to post-reformation times that posttribulationism was the predominant eschatological view of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Gundry likewise finds what he calls “historical confirmation”<sup>8</sup> in the eschatological views of the historical church. Gundry argues that “the antiquity of a view weighs in its favor, especially when that antiquity reaches back to the apostolic age. For those who received their doctrine first-hand from the apostles and from those who heard them stood in a better position to judge what was apostolic doctrine than we who are many centuries removed.”<sup>9</sup> More recently he says,

We’re dealing here with perspective, of course, not proof. For Bible-believing Christians, proof lies in the pages of Scripture, and the view that seems to represent its meaning most naturally is the view that seems best to adopt. Agreed. But Christians belong not only to current communities of faith. They also belong to a community of faith that spans the whole of church history. And since the Spirit of God has been at work throughout that history, Christians should at least respect primary beliefs of the church at large, past as well as present, and suspect the new and novel at least to the extent of requiring extraordinarily good scriptural evidence in its favor.<sup>10</sup>

Again, this seems fairly reasonable. Whatever the merit of this argument, it is one that has been used by both sides of the rapture question as well as the millennial question. We

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<sup>5</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 19–20.

<sup>6</sup> The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was “lost” as soon as the Apostles died, and remained so until the Reformation, and even then was not fully recovered until the nineteenth century. It still labors against clericalism. The doctrine of justification by faith was soon lost and not recovered until the Reformation. Did God leave the church ignorant all these centuries? Ignorant it was, but its ignorance was self-imposed.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 19–34.

<sup>8</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 172. In his more recent book, *First the Antichrist*, Gundry changes the words “historical confirmation” to “perspective” but the discussion is essentially the same.

<sup>9</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, pp. 143–44.

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all like to be able to claim antiquity. Unless of course, that antiquity proves embarrassing. In this paper, I want to suggest that posttribulationism's claim to antiquity is, in some sense, legitimate, but in the end, embarrassing; especially to Gundry's model of posttribulationism.

## The Eschatology of the Historical Church

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By "historical church" is meant the church at large from the first century down to about the eighteenth century. Both Ladd and Gundry cover this period in their appeal to antiquity. Ladd cites certain church fathers (*The Didache*, Barnabas, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius, Hippolytus) as supporting posttribulationism and then addresses the Middle Ages, the Reformation and Post Reformation period, all as holding predominantly to posttribulationism.<sup>11</sup> Gundry cites the same church fathers as Ladd and adds some of his own. In all, Gundry mentions twenty-two sources including Luther and Calvin.<sup>12</sup> It is Gundry's conclusion that "the historical argument confirms posttribulationism."<sup>13</sup>

### *The Early Fathers' Eschatology*

With the following exceptions and/or qualifications, it may be conceded that the early church fathers were posttribulationist in their eschatology.

1. The early church fathers were notoriously confused and thus confusing on many subjects including eschatology. As Larry Crutchfield says, "The cause of the confusion among modern scholars on this issue is no mystery. They are confused because the fathers were confused on the subject."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, pp. 19–34.

<sup>12</sup> Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, pp. 144–153. Gundry claims to find posttrib support in the following: *The Didache*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Justyn Martyr, Irenaeus, the letter from the Gallic churches to the churches in Asia and Phrygia, Tertullian, Methodius, Commodianus, Hippolytus, Cyprian, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, Victorinus, Lactantius, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, Augustine, Bede, Bernard, Luther, and Calvin.

<sup>13</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, p. 188. He makes a similar conclusion in his more recent (1997) book, *First the Antichrist*, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 88. For just one example of diversity in understanding the fathers, see Diedrich H. Kromminga, a premillennialist, who "discerned in the Epistle of Barnabas 'a very early amillennial type of eschatology.'" *The Millennium in the Church: Studies in the History of Christian Chiliasm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), p. 40; cited by Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 75.

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2. As Erickson correctly notes, “there are in the writings of the early fathers seeds from which the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture could be developed.”<sup>15</sup>
3. There is strong evidence that the early church fathers believed in an imminent return of Christ.<sup>16</sup> Erickson says, “it is true that these early Christian writings contain a belief in imminency.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the posttribulationism of Ladd and Gundry denies imminence. Any credible claim to antiquity it would seem, must explain this discrepancy. Moreover, as some have pointed out, the early church fathers thought they were already in the tribulation period.<sup>18</sup> This would explain imminency in the early fathers and why they “did not give consideration to a possible pretribulation interpretation.”<sup>19</sup> But it does not explain the denial of imminence by modern posttribulationism. Thus, there is not clear continuity between the posttribulationism of the fathers and that of today. Today’s posttribulation appeal to antiquity is only partially true.
4. Not all of the passages cited by Ladd and Gundry can be considered indisputable, as Crutchfield shows.<sup>20</sup> To take just one example, and this is my own, Gundry appeals to the letter from the churches of Vienna and Lugdunum (Lyons) to the churches in Asia and Phrygia as “evidence” (*First the Antichrist*, cp. 145 with 148) of posttribulationism. He writes:

The letter describes a recent persecution as something like the persecution that Satan will incite against the whole church during the tribulation: “For with all his strength the adversary attacked us, even then giving a foretaste of his activity among us which is going to be without restraint ...”<sup>21</sup>

Several things may be said of Gundry’s interpretation of this passage. First, there is no certainty here, that the anticipated persecution or “activity” of which this is a “foretaste,”

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<sup>15</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Options*, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962); Crutchfield, pp. 91, 101; John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 29; Erickson, *Options*, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> Erickson, *Options*, p. 131. Though Erickson also notes that “it is difficult to find in them an unequivocal statement of the type of imminency usually believed in by pretribulationists.”

<sup>18</sup> Payne, pp. 12–17; John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>19</sup> Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Crutchfield, pp. 86–103.

<sup>21</sup> Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, p. 148.

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is a reference to *the* tribulation. I'm not sure what source Gundry is quoting (he doesn't say<sup>22</sup>), but consider the following translations:

"For with all his strength the enemy fell upon us, giving us a foretaste of his future unrestrained activity among us."<sup>23</sup> Cruse's translation of Eusebius reads: "For the adversary assailed us with his whole strength, giving us already a prelude, how unbridled his future movements among us would be."<sup>24</sup> As the preceding translations suggest, the future unbridled "activity" referred to may be in the near future or far future, but need not necessarily be the *final* future. In other words, the "future movements among us" could be any of many persecutions yet future to these Christians (c. A.D. 177).

Second, the "us" does not necessarily put the church in the tribulation. "Us" need not refer specifically to the church, the body of Christ, but to Christians in general; *i.e.*, followers of Christ. In this case, followers unto the point of martyrdom of which there will be many in the tribulation. Surely martyred church saints can identify with OT saints and with tribulation saints who were and will be martyred, and as such be a distinct group (*i.e.* martyred saints) without losing their distinction as believing Israelites, church saints and tribulation saints. On the other hand, "us" may be a specific reference to church saints, as Gundry assumes. This would indicate the church in the tribulation, but it might also indicate a presumption of replacement theology held by the author of the letter, which was common of the early church fathers and which by nature is posttribulationary.

So, Gundry may be right, he may not. This may be a reference to the tribulation in which the writers of this letter (church saints) one day expect themselves to be, or it may not. But the "evidence," as Gundry puts it, is far from indisputable. That only is my point.

5. The early church fathers very soon departed from the teaching of the Apostles. As William Kerr says, "The distinction between Biblical revelation and man's interpretation of that revelation is nowhere more clearly seen than in the Patristic Literature. All sorts of doctrinal interpretations have crept in, many of them wholly

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<sup>22</sup> I would assume *ANF vol. VIII*, eds., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. However, my translation of that source as given by Logos Research Systems reads: "For with all his strength did the adversary assail us, even then giving a foretaste of his activity among us which is to be without restraint" See Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume VIII*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997. This is of course, similar to, but not the same as, Gundry's quote.

<sup>23</sup> *The Letter of the Churches of Vienna and Lyons to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia*, Christian History Institute's Pocket Classics (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, trans. by Christian Frederick Cruse and *A Historical View of the Council of Nice*, by Isaac Boyle (reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 169.

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foreign to the Bible.”<sup>25</sup> Froom says: “The early church followed the Apocalypse when it regarded the thousand years as that measure of time dividing the great events of a vast transition period, lying between the close of the present dispensation and the eternal ages to come, *but made mistakes in the nature of the event.*”<sup>26</sup> In a brief survey of the Patristics, Wm. Kelly said: “These early writings are most defective and, through ignorance of the scriptures, often opposed to the truth ...”<sup>27</sup> B. W. Newton, a posttribulationist and rival of Kelly concurs: “As soon,” he says, “as the Apostles died, the doctrines and practical habits of the Church changed. For a time the doctrine of the millennial reign lingered. Irenaeus and others maintained it, but none taught it scripturally.”<sup>28</sup> These are serious indictments of the “fathers” and if true (I believe they are) cast a huge shadow of doubt over the verity of their theological views, eschatological or otherwise.

6. In fact the church fathers simply did not do theology. Walvoord says of the post-apostolic age “there was no detailed and systematic form of eschatology in general or premillennialism in particular.”<sup>29</sup> Another writer says, “It must be stressed ... that at this time [*i.e.*, the early days of the Christian era] the church did not give itself to serious theological endeavor in the area of prophecy. As a result, the views are inchoate, obscure, and unsystematic.”<sup>30</sup> One Church historian simply says, “The early Church did not engage in theology.”<sup>31</sup>

Though some pretribs may be unwilling to concede that the early church fathers were generally posttribulationist in their eschatology, it can hardly be denied that some, if not most of them were. Crutchfield makes this admission: “Some of the fathers, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Lactantius, and others, clearly have posttribulationist elements in their views

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<sup>25</sup> William F. Kerr, “The Lord’s Return in Patristic Literature,” in *Understanding the Times*, Eds., William Culbertson and Herman B. Centz (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington: Review and Herald, 1946–1982), 1: 892. Italics mine.

<sup>27</sup> William Kelly, *W. Kelly’s Writings on Prophecy* [ed., though not indicated, is probably R. A. Huebner] (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1997), p. 186. “This book is a collection of writings on prophecy by W. Kelly. It includes most of what he has written on this subject except the major work, *The Second Coming and Kingdom.*” The article from which this quotation is taken first appeared as “The So-Called Apostolical Fathers On the Lord’s Second Coming,” in *The Bible Treasury*, New Series, Vol. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Wills Newton, *Aids to Prophetic Inquiry*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Houlston and Sons, 1881), p. 315.

<sup>29</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ian S. Rennie, “Nineteenth-Century Roots,” in *Dreams, Visions and Oracles*, eds. Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963), p. 5.

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concerning the end-times.”<sup>32</sup> Erickson states: “there are in these writings some clearly posttribulation expressions.”<sup>33</sup> And Walvoord concedes that while “all of the early fathers are not clear on the question, some of them were posttribulation.”<sup>34</sup> But as we shall see in a moment, this should hardly surprise us.

## *Medieval Eschatology*

Under the Alexandrian allegorism of Origen and the widespread influence of Augustine, amillennialism soon became the predominant eschatological view of the church. The book of Revelation was given an historical interpretation in which the events described in that book were thought to form an outline of the history of the church. When Constantine “Christianized” the Roman Empire the church became the Roman Church which was thus understood to be the kingdom on earth. Consequently, the eschatology of this era gave little or no thought to the rapture.

## *Reformation and Post-Reformation Eschatology*

The reformers, occupied chiefly with soteriology and ecclesiology carried over amillennial and historical approaches to eschatology. Antichrist was identified with the papacy. “This ‘historical’ type of interpretation with its application of the Antichrist to papal Rome so dominated Protestant study of prophetic truth for three centuries that it has frequently been called ‘the Protestant’ interpretation.”<sup>35</sup>

Ladd is correct when he says “the idea of a pretribulation rapture had no place in their interpretation of prophecy.”<sup>36</sup> But then, neither did a posttrib rapture. Significantly, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*<sup>37</sup> lacks any discussion of eschatology under the chapter headings “Medieval Theology” and “Reformation Theology.” There simply isn’t much eschatology in these periods to discuss.

It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that a return to the literal method of interpretation brought about a return of a futurist, premillennial interpretation of prophecy.

As leaders and Bible teachers of this movement published their expositions of prophecy in journals and tracts, and prophecy conferences were held promoting the imminent

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<sup>32</sup> Crutchfield, p. 454, footnote number 87. Crutchfield adds this qualifier: “But we have been unable to find an instance of the unequivocal classic posttribulationism taught today.”

<sup>33</sup> *Options*, p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay: Dunham Publishing Company, 1957), p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> Ladd, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), chapters 29 and 30.

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return of Christ, premillennialism became again, as it was in the first three centuries, not only a viable eschatological option, but the preferred view of many.

The embracement of a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic, or the return of literal interpretation, resulted in the return of premillennialism and the futurist view of prophetic interpretation with vigor. What's more, literal interpretation gave rise to dispensationalism and pretribulationism. Not all premillennialists of this period were in agreement on the time of the rapture. In the beginning, many of the prophecy conferences found both posttribulationists and pretribulationists united under the one banner of premillennialism proclaiming the soon return of the Lord as the church's blessed hope. Not until they began to debate the time of the rapture, and to fine-tune their views did the parties on both sides of the issue seem to polarize and form what we now know as posttribulationism and pretribulationism; more sophisticated systems of premillennial eschatology.

Now there are basically two kinds of premillennialism today. There is "covenant premillennialism," sometimes called "historic premillennialism" because it takes after that form of premillennialism found in the early church, and which characterized the first three centuries of the church. Ladd prefers the title "historic" premillennialism. As we have seen, and as Ladd argues, historic premillennialism (or "covenant premillennialism"<sup>38</sup>) was and is posttribulationist. That is, most, if not all historic or covenant premillennialists hold a posttribulationist view of the rapture.

A second form of premillennialism is called dispensational premillennialism. Dispensational premillennialists are consistently pretribulationist in their view of the rapture.

Except (perhaps) for Gundry who pleads exception. I say "perhaps" because with all due respect I'm not sold on Gundry's dispensationalism. Though Gundry claims to write from a dispensational "backdrop,"<sup>39</sup> he does not hold the strong distinction between the church and Israel that pretrib dispensationalists do. He uses what he calls a "scripturally

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<sup>38</sup> We can not say of the early fathers (historic premillennialists) that they were *covenant* premillennialists, because covenant theology did not arise until about the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But they both have one thing very much in common; that is, they both embrace *replacement theology*. It is this factor that is critical to this paper.

<sup>39</sup> Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 12–28; see also Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 61; Steven L. McAvoy, "A Critique of Robert Gundry's Posttribulationism," (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), p. 5.



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measured dispensationalism,"<sup>40</sup> which in fact blurs the distinction between Israel and the church.

Historic premillennialists are posttribulationists largely because they (to a greater or lesser degree) see the church as having replaced Israel. Replacement theology is indigenous to posttribulationism, and *vice-versa*. On the other hand, dispensational premillennialists are pretribulationists largely because they maintain a sharp distinction between the church and Israel. For the dispensationalist, the church in no way supersedes or replaces Israel in the outworking of God's prophetic plan.

The crucial backdrop of the rapture question then is not eschatological but ecclesiological. One's view of the nature of the church will determine one's view of the rapture of the church. After all, if the church has superseded Israel and includes the saints of all ages including OT and tribulation saints as well then it is only natural to expect the church to go through the tribulation. As Walvoord says, "If these believers in the Tribulation are properly described as members of the church, it leads inevitably to the conclusion that the church will go through the Tribulation."<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, if the church is distinct from OT saints as well as tribulation saints, and the tribulation focuses primarily on Israel as the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7), and the remainder of Daniel's 70 weeks, then we would not expect the church to go through the tribulation. Gundry himself admits this:

An absolute silence in the OT about the present age, a total disconnection of the Church from the divine program for Israel, and a clean break between dispensations would favor pretribulationism: the Church would not likely be related to the seventieth week of Daniel, or tribulation, a period of time clearly having to do with Israel.<sup>42</sup>

Gundry then proceeds to argue that a not-so-absolute silence in the OT about the present age, a not-so-disconnected relationship of the Church and Israel, and a not-so-clean break between dispensations leaves room for posttribulationism. Gundry wants to have his cake (dispensationalism) and eat it too (replacement theology). In other words, he *claims* to distinguish Israel from the church, but in *fact* he does not. This failure to distinguish between Israel and the church is probably Gundry's greatest weakness.

I believe that of Ryrie's famous three-fold *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, the consistent distinction between Israel and the church is the most telling. This is not to diminish the

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<sup>40</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question: Revised and Enlarged Edition*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>42</sup> Gundry, *The Church*, p. 12.

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importance of consistently applied literal interpretation, which in fact leads necessarily to the first. But there have been many futurist premillennialists who held a “measured” dispensationalism (whether they claimed to or not), which did not clearly distinguish the church from Israel, who were posttribulational on the rapture question. Replacement theology, and that’s what Gundry’s system amounts to, is inherently posttribulational.

Nearly a half a century ago, Walvoord reminded us that “the rapture question is determined more by ecclesiology than eschatology,” and that “any answer to the rapture question must therefore be based upon a careful study of the doctrine of the church as it is revealed in the New Testament.”<sup>43</sup> One’s eschatology is intricately tied to one’s ecclesiology. This brings us to the ecclesiology of the historical church.

## The Ecclesiology of the Historical Church

It will be seen that from the very first century, the church has been erroneously and tragically held in the grip of replacement theology. Primitively at first, but with more sophistication and more dreadful consequences as history unfolded. It was not only the development of doctrine or theology that was seriously perverted but the ecclesiastical traditions and forms of worship were based on supersessionism. Hostile and violent attitudes were taken against the Jews due in no small part to replacement theology. By Origen’s time this attitude of contempt towards Israel had become the rule.<sup>44</sup> Out of the idea that the church (the good) had replaced Israel (the bad) “grew the caricature of the Jew with which patristic literature is filled.”<sup>45</sup> The origin of replacement theology may be found in the post-apostolic period.<sup>46</sup>

### *The Early Fathers’ Ecclesiology*

It is interesting that of all the church fathers that Gundry cites as evidence for posttribulationism, evidence which he says is “about as strong and uniform as could be imagined,”<sup>47</sup> all give evidence of replacement theology.<sup>48</sup> Every one of these twenty-two

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<sup>43</sup> Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (1957), p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Eric Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), p. 89.

<sup>45</sup> James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York: Hermon Press, 1934), p. 374; cited by Diprose, *Israel*, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> Diprose, *Israel*, pp. 71, 73-174.

<sup>47</sup> Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, p. 145.

<sup>48</sup> The one reference which Gundry makes to the fathers which may not conclusively display replacement theology, is Victorinus in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John*. However, in 4:7-10, Victorinus speaks of the twelve patriarchs as of “the twenty-four fathers.” The use of the word “fathers” here is typical of the Patristics in referring to the church. Also, in 12:1, he states that “the woman clothed

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sources, which is *in itself not questionable*, presumes replacement theology. Of course we are not surprised to find those sources from about the third century on, up to and including Luther and Calvin, holding to replacement theology. This is widely acknowledged. What *is* startling, is to find replacement theology so firmly entrenched in the early church fathers.

Replacement theology holds that the church has replaced Israel in the outworking of God's plan. Israel has been permanently rejected and set aside as the chosen people of God. The church is the new Israel, and heir to the OT covenant promises which were made to Israel. Generally speaking, this was the presumption of the early church fathers, and was the assumption of those whom Robert Gundry cites as supporting posttribulationism. It would make this paper tediously long to deal with every reference Gundry cites or even more than a few. So I confine my comments to just two examples.<sup>49</sup> The two I have chosen are dated among the earliest.

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with the sun. travailing in her pains, is the ancient Church of the fathers, prophets, and saints, and apostles, which had the groans and torment of its longing until it saw that Christ, the fruit of its people according to the flesh long promised to it, had taken flesh out of the selfsame people." Here, the church is said to have given birth to Christ, according to the flesh. On the face of it, this confuses the church with the OT saints through whom Messiah is said to come.

In any case, Victorinus speaks of a rapture of the church in 6:14. Explaining the words "rolled up" (Rev. 6:14), he says this is "For the heavens to be rolled away. That is that the Church shall be taken away ... that the good will be removed, seeking to avoid the persecution." Later, in 12:5, he quotes a text "I saw all men withdraw from his abodes" and comments: "That is, the good will be removed, flying from persecution." Again, in 15:1 he describes end-time judgments and says, "these [plagues] shall be in the last time, when the Church shall have gone out of the midst." I would not argue that these references indicate a pretrib rapture necessarily, but they certainly do not support a posttrib rapture.

Finally, Victorinus does not clearly hold to a seven-year tribulation period or a premillennial return of Christ for that matter. Let those who attribute chiliasm to him explain the final words of his commentary: "Therefore they are not to be heard who assure themselves that there is to be an earthly reign of a thousand years; who think, *that is to say*, with the heretic Cerinthus. For the kingdom of Christ is now eternal in the saints, although the glory of the saints shall be manifested after the resurrection." At the mention of Cerinthus, the editor makes the following comments in a footnote (p. 76): "[Here is evidence that Cerinthus (see vol. I, pp. 351, 352) and other heretics had disgusted the Church even with the less carnal views of the millennium entertained by the better "Chiliasts," such as Commodian. See vol. Iv. Pp. 212 and 218.]"

Gundry's references to Chrysostom and Athanasius (*First*, p. 152), say nothing about a posttrib rapture. His references to Methodius and Commodianus (p. 149) are also futile. Mention of a posttribulation resurrection of saints or "Christians" as Gundry has it, does not prove a posttrib rapture. Pretribs do not deny a posttribulation resurrection. These passages simply do not prove *or even support* a posttribulation rapture of the church.

<sup>49</sup> These examples are taken from Robert Gundry's more recent book, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).

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*The Didache* (c. late first century-second century<sup>50</sup>). Appealing to this document Gundry says:

... the saying of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24:30–31 and its parallel Mark 13:26–27 put the gathering of the elect at his coming right after the tribulation. Well, late in the first century already, or early in the second, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* quoted that saying twice and substituted “the church” for “the elect” (9:4; 10:5). This document went on to tell Christians that they must stand firm through the reign of Antichrist, which as in other early Christian literature is set out in the future, right up to Jesus’ subsequent coming and the accompanying resurrection of the saints [at which point he quotes *The Didache* 16:1–8].<sup>51</sup>

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But as Gundry’s own citation shows, this document, early as it probably was, clearly assumes a replacement theology view of the church and Israel. The writer(s) of *The Didache* do in fact replace Israel with the church. Indeed, Matthew 24:30–31 and Mark 13:26–27 do put the gathering of the elect at the posttribulational coming of Christ. But they do not say “church” as does *The Didache*.

The Evangelists use *εκλεκτους* (“the chosen ones”). In its quotations of the Evangelists, *The Didache* substitutes “*εκλεκτους*” (as Gundry notes) with “*εκκλησια*” (“church”). Now if you believe that the elect of all ages are part of the church, or to put it another way, if you believe that the church consists of believers of all ages including those of the OT and the tribulation period, in short, saints of *all* ages, then such a substitution, while not forgivable,<sup>52</sup> is understandable. But as pretribs have long pointed out these “elect” are *not church elect*. Certainly they are saved, believers, saints, Christians, or whatever you want to call them, and as such are “elect.” But they are not *church* elect. To call someone in the tribulation period a “Christian” is to label them as one of God’s elect, a follower of Christ to be exact, but not necessarily a member of the *body* of Christ.

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<sup>50</sup> For dates, authorship and other introductory data on the Patristics see: J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Farmer, eds. and translators, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992); J. B. Lightfoot, ed. and translator, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 5 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1889, 1890; reprint ed., Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989); Ludwig Schopp, ed., *The Fathers of the Church*, 72 vols., vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M. F. Marique and Gerald G. Walsh (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962; Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, eds. *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 6: *The Didache, The Epistle of Barnabas, The Epistles and Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, The Fragments of Papias, The Epistle to Diognetus*, translated and annotated by James A. Kleist (New York: Newman Press, 1948).

<sup>51</sup> Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, 145–146.

<sup>52</sup> After all, the writer(s) of *The Didache* was not translating but quoting the original Greek of the Evangelists.

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Another indication of replacement theology in *The Didache* is found again in these same passages that Gundry cites. In connection with the gathering of the elect (which the *Didachist* calls “the church”), the writer(s) of *The Didache* quote Jesus’ words “from the four winds” (Matthew 24:31; Mark 13:27) and “farthest ends of the earth” (Mark 13:27). But a glance at any study Bible will show that these words of Christ are themselves a quote from the OT. Even the words “He will gather you” are an OT quote. The words of Jesus as recorded by Matthew and Mark are direct quotes and allusions to words originally spoken to (and so applicable to) Israel. Consider the following OT passages:

“If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it” (Deut. 30:4–5a).

This is from what could be called the *locus classicus* of the OT. This passage (with its context) sets the stage for all that follows. The rest of the OT is the out-working of Deuteronomy 28–30, especially chapter 30. This is spoken to national Israel. The covenant blessings and curses relate directly and specifically to Israel. The regathering that is promised relates to Israel’s eschatological restoration to the land following their conversion in the end times, as the Zechariah reference indicates:

“for I have dispersed you as the four winds of the heavens” (Zech. 2:6).

These are words spoken to Israel in exile, and anticipate Israel’s restoration and return to the land in millennial bliss as “head” of the nations, never again to be the “tail” (Deut. 28:13; 44; 30:1–10). There is no reason to assume that Jesus was taking words originally spoken to, and applicable only to Israel, and applying them to the church, unless you already believe that. Commenting on *The Didache*, William Kelly says, “the name of David figures strangely in 9<sup>53</sup> and 10 where we have in 14 Mal. 1:10, 14 utterly perverted, as do the Papists notoriously to the mass. It is the old unbelief of substituting the Church for Israel.”<sup>54</sup>

It should be evident by now that the issue here is not eschatological but ecclesiological. It’s not what we believe about the time of the rapture but the nature of the church that

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<sup>53</sup> The equivalent appears in Clem. Alex. And Origen, all referring, as Dr. Bigg judges, not to the Lord, but to the Eucharistic cup! It really seems so; but how incongruous the mixture of Jewish figure with a strictly Christian institution! [footnote by Kelly to above quote by Kelly].

<sup>54</sup> *W. Kelly’s Writings on Prophecy*, 185. Kelly is referring to “the way Malachi 1:10–12 was interpreted by [for example] Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Augustine and Cyril of Jerusalem, all of whom understood this passage to mean that, while the Jews have been dismissed, Christians offer sacrifices which are acceptable to God.

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determines how we understand these words of Jesus. Fundamentally, our ecclesiology will determine our eschatology.

There are other indications in *The Didache* of replacement theology. The words “be gentle, for *the gentle will inherit the land*” (3:7) in context seem to spiritualize the promise concerning Israel’s inheritance of the land. Elsewhere the readers of *The Didache* are exhorted to provide generously for every “genuine prophet who is willing to settle among” them, “for they are,” says the *Didachist* “Your high priests.” Here is indication that the church had replaced Israel. Very early in the church, ecclesiastical order began to be based on the OT Levitical system. There was a gradual assimilation and adaptation of Judaism and a return to Old Testament categories of sacrifice and priesthood. What facilitated this shift, was the assumption that the church had replaced Israel because Israel had defaulted. The OT became a “Christian” book and the church began to understand itself as *the new Israel*. Ronald E. Diprose examines the church fathers and concludes:

Our purpose in examining the post-apostolic literature and later patristic writings has been to see whether this return to Levitical categories depended in some way on *replacement theology*. We have found considerable evidence that presuppositional *replacement theology* did in fact facilitate the normalization of Levitical categories in the Church. A striking case of this is the way Malachi 1:10–12 was interpreted by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Augustine and Cyril of Jerusalem, all of whom understood this passage to mean that, while the Jews have been dismissed, Christians offer sacrifices which are acceptable to God. Thus, on the assumption that the Old Testament is a thoroughly Christian book, it became a standard practice for the Lord’s Supper and the Christian ministry to be described in Levitical terms.<sup>55</sup>

This had many ramifications for ecclesiology. In particular it led to the virtual eclipse of the apostolic concept of the Church as a charismatic body, the abandonment of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the neglect of gospel preaching. Moreover it facilitated the development of a new concept of Christian unity which was no longer conceived of as being based on the gospel of the grace of God but rather on cohesion with the bishop of Rome.

So far as liturgical developments are concerned, the use of Levitical terminology such as “sacrifice” and “altar” in the context of the Lord’s Supper obscured the memorial nature of the ordinance and the unique value of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice.

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<sup>55</sup> Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, 139.

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What emerges from the data we have examined is that the radical transformation of the Christian ministry, during the second and third centuries, was to a large extent the result of the Church taking over Levitical practice on the assumption that such instruction was intended for the Church. This assumption was a fruit of *replacement theology*, according to which the Church, and not Israel, was the true subject of the Law and the Prophets.<sup>56</sup>

Kleist, finds “a touch of anti-Semitic bias apparent” in *The Didache*.<sup>57</sup> Diprose has skillfully demonstrated that anti-Semitism was one of the tragic consequences of replacement theology,<sup>58</sup> and that it developed very early in church history. “According to Christian tradition as it developed during the early centuries, Israel is a renegade nation to be treated with contempt.”<sup>59</sup>

*The Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 117–138). Both Ladd and Gundry appeal to *Barnabas* as holding to posttribulationism. Does it? Yes. Did *Barnabas* hold to replacement theology? Again, yes. Consider the following passages from this epistle:

4:6–7—“... and do not imitate certain people by heaping sin after sin upon yourselves and saying: ‘Their covenant is ours also.’ Ours, indeed; but in the end they lost it ...” *Barnabas* is saying that the covenant is no longer Israel’s; it is ours and ours (*i.e.*, the church) only. Israel lost it permanently.

4:8—“... and their covenant was shattered, that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed in our heart.”

4:14—“And furthermore, consider this, my brethren: since you see that Israel, even after such striking exhibitions of power in its midst, has yet been rejected, let us beware that the Scripture text, *Many are called, yet few are chosen*, may not be verified in us.” Again, for *Barnabas*, this rejection is permanent.

6:16–19—“We, then are the ones whom He has led into the fertile land ... we shall rule the land ... when we ourselves are so perfected as to become heirs of the Lord’s covenant.”

13:1–6—“and the older shall serve the younger.” Quoting this passage, *Barnabas* explains that Israel is the “older” and the church the “younger.” The church has

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Italics his.

<sup>57</sup> *Ancient Christian Writers Vol. 6: The Didache, etc.*, translated and annotated by James A. Kleist (New York: Newman Press, 1948), 6.

<sup>58</sup> Diprose, 129–131. These pages simply summarize what his whole book proves about anti-Semitism and replacement theology.

<sup>59</sup> Ronald E. Diprose, “The Jewish Christian Dialogue and Soteriology,” *Trinity Journal* 20 NS (1999): 23.

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inherited Israel's place by reason of Israel's default. *Barnabas* concludes, "You see by what means He has ordained that our people [the church] shall be first and the heir of the covenant."

14:1–4— "Yes, indeed! But let us see whether the covenant which He had given to the fathers [Israel] to give to their people, was actually given. He has given it; but they, owing to their sins, proved unworthy of the favor ... Moses received it, but they did not prove themselves worthy."

16:1, 5— In verse one *Barnabas* refers to Israel as "those wretches" who "erred" and concludes in verse six that "it has been revealed that the city, the temple, and the people of Israel are doomed! For the Scripture says: *And it will happen in the last days that the Lord will doom to destruction the flock of the pasture and the fold and their watchtower* And what the Lord says is as good as done."<sup>60</sup>

*The Epistle of Barnabas* reads like a modern-day primer on replacement theology. No modern statement of replacement theology would contain the anti-Semitism that it does, but the idea of supersessionism is there. Supersessionism is the idea that the church has superseded Israel. Supersessionism is replacement theology. In a recent *JETS* article, Craig A. Blaising asks whether there are theological reasons to believe that Israel has a future. He notes that "The traditional answer through the history of the Christian Church has been, no."<sup>61</sup> He then states:

This traditional answer to the question of Israel's future is what is known as supersessionism. Israel has been replaced or superseded by the Gentile Church. Supersessionism first arose after the suppression of the Bar Kochba revolt in AD 135. It was expressed in the writings of second-century Christians, such as Justin Martyr and Melito of Sardis, and also in the Letter of Barnabas ... It quickly spread to become the prevailing viewpoint of the Christian Church.<sup>62</sup>

Blaising properly concludes that Israel does indeed have a future in the plan of God.<sup>63</sup> And though he dates the rise of replacement theology as early as A.D. 135, Diprose traces it all the way into the first century, as I have sought to do.<sup>64</sup> It may be that *The Didache* cannot be dated first century, though this is the prevailing opinion. In any case,

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<sup>60</sup> Quotations from *The Didache* and *The Epistle of Barnabas* are from Kliet.

<sup>61</sup> Craig A. Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44/3 (September 2001): 435.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>64</sup> Paul may very well have written Rom. 9–11 as a polemic against the infiltration of replacement theology.



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replacement theology got a foot-hold very early in the church and was deeply embedded by the third and fourth centuries. Few, if any, question the supersessionism of the third and fourth centuries, and of that on down to the nineteenth century. What was unplowed ground to me, is that the early church fathers had so early embraced replacement theology. As Diprose says, “*Replacement theology* was an accepted position of a majority within Christendom from postapostolic times until the middle of the nineteenth century.”<sup>65</sup> An examination of the literature all the way back to the patristic period confirms this.<sup>66</sup>

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) considered the church to be “the true Israelite race” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, CXXXV); Irenaeus taught that God’s promises for Israel are for the church. According to Diprose, Irenaeus

... disinherits Israel of promises which are clearly addressed to her and at the same time manifestly makes the Church the new or true Israel. In other words he bases his exegesis on the assumption that the Old Testament should be read in the light of what we have called *replacement theology* which he apparently considered to be part of orthodox Christian thought.<sup>67</sup>

Diprose demonstrates that Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, on up to Ambrose and Augustine, not only held replacement theology but helped establish it as the “orthodox” view of the church.<sup>68</sup> “A cursory reference to the writings of Augustine and Jerome will suffice to show its depth. It came in like smoke from the bottomless pit, and has brooded over Christendom ever since.”<sup>69</sup>

## *Medieval Ecclesiology*

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 370–444), and Pope Gregory (540–604) carried this on. Allegorical interpretation, replacement theology, and anti-Semitism were further advanced by The Synod of Antioch (341), the Synod of Laodicea (c. 341–381), the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Council which met at Trullo (692), the seventh “ecumenical” council (II Nicea, 787), the fourth council of Toledo (c. 631), and the fourth Lateran Council in 1215.<sup>70</sup> In the Middle Ages, the church was the new Israel. Christians despised Israel, because they

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<sup>65</sup> Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, 32.

<sup>66</sup> There are early church sources that are not cited by Gundry or Ladd, which do not seem to hold posttribulational views of the rapture but interestingly enough, they do not show signs of replacement theology either.

<sup>67</sup> Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, 83.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 83–94. See also the entire discussion in chapter four (pp. 105–140).

<sup>69</sup> B. W. Newton, *Aids to Prophetic Inquiry*, 319.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 94–102. Again, see chapter four.

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were under the curse of God, and doomed to judgment for their rejection and crucifixion of Christ. The Church had become heir to the OT covenant promises. According to Archibald Robertson, the eclipse of millenarianism in the early Christian centuries produced an earth-bound “medieval theocracy.”<sup>71</sup>

## *Reformation and Post-Reformation Ecclesiology*

Though some began to turn from it, allegorical interpretation still held sway in the church. Replacement theology was the view of the church right down to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

We should not be surprised then, to learn that the early church was posttribulational in their eschatology. If they believed in replacement theology, and they did, then it follows that they would expect the church to go through the tribulation. The early church’s ecclesiology dictated their eschatology. So also in the Middle Ages, the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods; until the nineteenth century.

## *Nineteenth Century Change in Ecclesiology*

In the nineteenth century literal interpretation was rescued and applied.<sup>72</sup> The result was the restoration of premillennialism, and the rise of dispensationalism and pretribulationism. It is insisted by premillennial dispensational pretribulationists, and admitted by its opponents, that the consistent application of a literal hermeneutic naturally leads to premillennial dispensational pretribulationism. This school of theology is usually traced to John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). There were other premillennialists

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<sup>71</sup> Archibald Robertson, *Regnum Dei, Eight lectures on the Kingdom of God in the history of Christian Thought*, The Bampton Lectures 1901, London: Methuen & Co., 1901; cited by Diprose, 141.

<sup>72</sup> I believe that the roots of this movement go back earlier than the nineteenth century.

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besides Darby<sup>73</sup> and some earlier than Darby.<sup>74</sup> But Darby seems to have been the first to develop a *dispensational pretribulational* premillennialism.<sup>75</sup> Although there may be reason

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<sup>73</sup> E.g., *Extracts on Prophecy, Chiefly the Approaching Advent and Kingdom of Christ From the Writings of ...* [ed. anonymous] (Glasgow: James A. Begg, 1835) contains premillennial extracts from Wm. Burgh, W. Anderson, *Dublin Christian Herald*, G. T. Noel, E. Irving, S. R. Maitland, W. Cuninghame, J. A. Begg, S. Madden, B. A. Simon, J. Mede, J. M. Campbell, J. Hooper, W. W. Pym, Bishop Newton, J. Fletcher, W. Dodsworth, T. Goodwin, Toplady, C. S. Hawtrey, W. Dalton E. Bickersteth, H. Melvill, *Presbyterian Review*, J. Fry, A. Keith, T. Erskine, W. Marsh, J. H. Stewart, W. Cowper, and J. Keeble. Some of these writers place premillennialism much earlier than Darby. Joseph Mede for example places it two centuries before Darby! See also William Burgh, *Lectures on the Second Advent of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and Connected Events: With an Introduction on the Use of Unfulfilled Prophecy* (Dublin: William Curry, Jun. and Company, 1835; William Burgh, *The Pre-Millennial Advent and Personal Reign of Christ Demonstrated in Four Advent Sermons* (Dublin: Richard Moore Tims, 1840). Ladd mentions Burgh along with many others, 35–60.

Horatius Bonar, *Prophetical Landmarks; Containing Data for Helping to Determine the Question of Christ's Pre-Millennial Advent* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1876); J. C. Ryle, *Prophecy* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1991); previously published in 1867 under the title *Coming Events And Present Duties*.

<sup>74</sup> Ladd, 34. See the works mentioned in the footnote above. See also Thomas Ice, "Edwards, Morgan," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. by Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 100–102; Edward Hindson, "Mede, Joseph," in *Idem.*, 250–51.

<sup>75</sup> I am aware of the controversy concerning the origin of the pretrib rapture view. Here, unfortunately, we have not space to discuss it. Suffice it to say that there is no credible evidence connecting Darby's pretrib views to a hysterical teenage Margaret MacDonald, or a heretical Edward Irving. In fact so far as I can tell, Edward Irving was a posttribulationist who also held to replacement theology. See, e.g., E. Irving, "The Redeemer's Glorious Appearing, and Not Our Death, the Hope Set Before Us in the Scriptures," in *Extracts on Prophecy, Chiefly the Approaching Advent and Kingdom of Christ; from the Writings of ...* (Glasgow: James A. Begg, 1835). In this article Irving says: "As the former coming of Christ is to our faith, so is the future coming of Christ unto our hope, one, common and free to all his saints." Then in the next paragraph, "take into consideration the apostolic, and prophetic, and patriarchal, I may say, the universal object of hope during the canonical and primitive ages of the church, viz., the coming of Christ in power and majesty, and the resurrection from the grave of every member of his mystical body, the casting of Satan out of the earth, and the reign of the saints for a thousand years; and I say that you have here an object worthy the hope of the church, to which the eye of hope turns with delight, which is full of application to all the present infirmities of our condition, and is the proper recompense of all our sufferings." (p. 77). Irving goes on to say (p. 78): "and then shall come to pass that saying of the prophet, Death shall be swallowed up in victory. In the next place, we shall be gathered with all the saints of God since the world was, who shall all stand in their lot in the latter day, and in their flesh shall see God, the general assembly of the first-born whose names are written in heaven, the church of the living God, the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the glorious army of the martyrs, the whole host of the redeemed, whom he shall bring with him, and we, who remain till his coming, shall be caught up with him into the air, and shall be for ever with the Lord."

In another article, "The Blessedness Reserved for the Righteous Only," published in the above same book, Irving says (pp. 283–284): "In the day of his Coming, our blessedness shall stand in having garments white and clean; such only he will take with him, and such also he will bring with him to triumph over the wicked. (xix. 4.) And this is confirmed by the parable of the marriage-supper, which adds a new and important feature, that the Father, when the Church is presented to him by Christ, will by no means endure in that glorious company, one single person, who has not those robes of righteousness. Moreover,

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to believe that the doctrine of a pretrib rapture was taught prior to Darby, and may even have been the popular view.

Two centuries before Darby, Joseph Mede (1586–1638), commenting on the rapture said this: “The usual interpretations, suppose the rapture of the saints into the clouds, to be for their present translation into heaven. But suppose that be not the meaning of it; for the words, if we weigh them well, seem to imply it to be for another end, namely, to do honor unto their Lord and King, at his return, and to attend upon him when he comes to judge the world.”<sup>76</sup> He goes on to suggest a posttribulation rapture, or more accurately, an intra-tribulation rapture near the end of the tribulation. What could he mean then, by the words “the usual interpretations” *etc.*, but a pretrib rapture? This would not only place the pretrib rapture teaching two centuries before Darby, but also suggest that it was “the usual view.”

If it was not till the nineteenth century that dispensational truth was recovered, so be it. If it came through an eccentric though godly Irishman so be it. In fact we might note here that his opponents readily credit Darby for introducing dispensationalism, but they are sometimes reluctant to grant him the origin of pretribulationism. This, they say, came through a teenage girl caught up in the charismatic influence of Irving’s church. But it is *not* unreasonable to suppose that if Darby *did* introduce dispensationalism to Europe and America (and I think he did, in sync with others similarly led) he also introduced pretribulationism. We have said that dispensationalism logically leads to

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if it be inquired how the filthy garments of nature are purified, and preserved pure for us, the answer is given by one of the elders, who said unto John, ‘These are they which came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ ” As the quotes indicate, Irving confuses the saints of all ages with the church, has the church present in the tribulation, and raptured at the close of the tribulation.

See also Edward Irving, *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving* 5 vols., edited by G. Carlyle (London: Alexander Strahan & Co., 1864). These writings indicate very clearly that Irving held to replacement theology (e.g., vol. 1: 384–85, 391, 392–393, 396, 410, 412, 419–22; vol. 2: 309, etc.) at least at the time he wrote. See also, Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, 2 vols., translated with a Preliminary Discourse by Edward Irving (London: L. B. Seeley and Son, 1827). The “Preliminary Discourse” is 194 pages long (i–cxciv) and indicates Irving held (1) an historical view of the book of Revelation (xxxviii–xl), (2) that the end times were upon us and that *the* time was “near at hand” (iii), (3) replacement theology (iv–vii, xxxii, xxv, xxviii, xli, etc.), (4) a posttrib view of the rapture (xiii–xiv, xxxi, xxxv).

Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville: Millennium III Publishers, 2000), struggles vainly to tie the origin of pretribulationism to E. Irving. He succeeds only in showing that some of Irving’s “associates” who contributed articles to the same journal Irving did (*i.e.*, *The Morning Watch*), expressed pretrib views. MacPherson offers *not one* quote from Irving himself, which indicates he held pretrib views.  
<sup>76</sup> J. Mede, “The Saints Caught Up to Meet the Lord in the Air,” in *Extracts on Prophecy*, 154–155.

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pretribulationism. Well, if Darby gave us dispensationalism, then it follows that he also gave us pretribulationism. Walvoord is quite correct when he says:

... any careful student of Darby soon discovers that he did not get his eschatological views from men, but rather from his doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, a concept no one claims was revealed supernaturally to Irving or MacDonald. Darby's views undoubtedly were gradually formed, but they were theologically and biblically based rather than derived from Irving's pre-Pentecostal group.<sup>77</sup>

Pretribulationist eschatology derives from dispensational ecclesiology. Based on consistent literal interpretation of Scripture, Darby saw a real distinction between Israel and the church. Pretribulationism was the natural result. As Darby developed his ecclesiology<sup>78</sup> which was distinctly dispensational, pretribulationism naturally came to the fore.

## Conclusion

So pretribulationism is quite recent. The origin of pretribulationism is not recent, since it is found in the New Testament. But its recovery and development after centuries of neglect occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Posttribulationism on the other hand can legitimately claim a certain antiquity in that the early church fathers were posttribulationist, only not the same as present-day posttribs. In fact, present-day posttribulationism is quite recent itself. Present-day posttribs like Ladd, who are historic premillennialists naturally find comfort in the antiquity of their view because they hold to replacement theology as well as posttribulationism, as did the early fathers. For Gundry however, who claims to be a dispensationalist, the fact that the early church fathers were supersessionists proves embarrassing. Unless Gundry too, holds to replacement theology.

Moreover, one must consider the unorthodox, often fanciful, and sometimes heretical ideas with which the patristic writings are filled. When measured by Scripture, serious errors abound not only in the area of eschatology but other areas such as ecclesiology, Israelology, pneumatology, theology proper, angelology, and even soteriology. Already they were preaching a different gospel (Gal. 1:6–9). Eager that the “elder should serve the younger” (*Barnabas* 13; 14:1–5), the early church usurped the place of Israel, condemned Israel to eternal damnation, pronounced themselves the “new Israel,” eventually

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<sup>77</sup> Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope*, 47. As the sources cited in the above footnote indicate, Irving, though a premillennialist, held a replacement view of the Church and Israel, a posttrib view of the rapture, and a non-literal, spiritualized future for Israel, *if any*. Irving's views are nothing like Darby's views.

<sup>78</sup> The nature and function of the church was almost a life-long obsession with Darby.

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“ascended the throne of the Caesars” and proceeded to “sanctify” themselves. As Newton said:

Even before the Apostles died, the disposition to exalt themselves in the world by means of God’s Truth, and to reign as kings before the time, was manifested; but the Apostles checked it. “Already ye are full,” said the Apostle Paul to the Church at Corinth, “already ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you ... We are fools for Christ’s sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised ... we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day.” Such was the place which the Apostles held, and while they lived, the Churches were not permitted quite to abandon it ... For a little while, the Churches walked in this path; but when the Apostles died, they corrupted themselves. They sought influence and aggrandisement in the world by means of God’s truth. They adulterated the doctrines, and lowered the principles of Christ into adaptation to the world’s thoughts. Adulterated Christianity soon won the world’s favour [*sic*]; for it was found serviceable to men’s *present* interests. Accordingly, to debased and fallen Christianity, kingship was tendered, and thus, to use the expression of a modern writer, “Christianity ascended the throne of the Caesars.” It enthroned itself and apostatized.<sup>79</sup>

William Kelly’s estimation of the worth of the patristic writings is no less negative:

Christendom from early days assumed ... that He [God] had cast off Israel, and given the church an indefeasible title: a false, proud and ruinous delusion. Here in these apostolic fathers the germ grows and spreads apace as if it were flag-weed, till judgment destroys it for ever [*sic*].

Are these the men or the writings to produce as of value to interpret the Scriptures which reveal truth incompatible with this vain conceit? For their denial of Israel’s hopes led to the transfer of earthly glory to the church now ... These early fathers had lost the truth of our calling upwards, and took more and more the glowing visions announced to Israel as meant for us, and not for them ... But the principle of looking to “the early belief” is a false one ... The scripture is the standard; in no way what the Christians may have believed, thought, said, or done, even in apostolic days.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> B. W. Newton, *Aids to Prophetic Inquiry*, 364, 366.

<sup>80</sup> Wm. Kelly, “The So-Called Apostolic Fathers on the Lord’s Second Coming,” *W. Kelly’s Writings on Prophecy*, 188.

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In the same work, Kelly finds “it surprising that anyone who has the least regard for orthodoxy or even decency should cite from ‘The Shepherd’ of Hermas.” He gives good reasons why.<sup>81</sup> He then speaks of the mystery of the church, calls attention to the fact that this “great secret now revealed” escaped all the Patristic remains [writings], and every theologian till our day [*i.e.*, early 19<sup>th</sup> century].”<sup>82</sup> “Tradition,” he says, “furnishes not an echo of it.”<sup>83</sup>

Should the fact that the early fathers were posttribulational in eschatology motivate me to be likewise? I do not believe so. I remain a convinced dispensationalist who sees a sharp distinction between Israel and the church, and thus a future for Israel in which they shall see the literal fulfillment of their entire covenant promises. It will perhaps appear arrogant to some, but I am saddened at the nineteen centuries of replacement theology held by the church to the detriment of both the church and Israel, and perhaps the nations.

Sometimes the majority is wrong. Sometimes the “fathers” erred. Antiquity or tradition is not necessarily right. One thing is needful of my view: and that is, is it biblical? I for one am content to live with the lateness of pretribulationism, for it is built on a sound ecclesiology, that in turn is built on a literal interpretation of the Scriptures alone.

In his recent book, *First the Antichrist*, in which he exhorts believers to look first Antichrist and *then* the Lord Christ, Gundry speaks of the lateness of the pretrib view as an “historical embarrassment” to pretribulationism.<sup>84</sup> On the contrary, posttribulationism’s association with replacement theology is the “historical embarrassment,” and Darby’s and the Plymouth Brethren’s recovery of dispensationalism and pretrib truth, an historical triumph.

I should like to close with the words of the Roman Catholic scholar, Enzo Bianchi who said that “Israel is the church’s eschatological goad and it is no accident that the church

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 187. Says Kelly, “Besides, the Muratorian Canon has convinced all scholars, that this Hermas lived at about the middle of the second century, a brother of Pope Pius the first, and not therefore ‘the brother’ mentioned by the apostle. Far be it from my wish to expose the mere trash of a weak and fanciful mind in its Visions, Commands, and Similitudes. But it is a far graver case, when Hermas talks of God’s holy angel filling a man with the blessed Spirit! of men’s having all their offences blotted out because they suffered death for the name of the Son of God! and, worse still if possible, of the Holy Spirit being created first of all! Think of citing such a one on the question of our having to pass through the great tribulation!” (p. 187). *The Shepherd of Hermas* is also inter-laced with evidence of replacement theology.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>84</sup> Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, 155.

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has lost the sense of eschatological tension; this happened as the church increasingly lost sight of the mystery of the permanence of Israel."<sup>85, 86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> This statement was made on Nov. 28, 1987 by Bianchi, at a seminar on the theme: 'Twenty years after Nostra Actate,' Bologna. Elv.o Bianchi, "Israeelachiesa," *Storia cristiana*, 10 (1989): 93; cited by Diprose, 141.

<sup>86</sup> McAvoy, S. L. (2002). "Posttribulationism's Appeal to Antiquity, Part I." *Conservative Theological Journal Volume 6*, 6(17), 104–120. "Posttribulationism's Appeal to Antiquity, Part II." *Conservative Theological Journal Volume 6*, 6(18), 234–252.