

## THE RAPTURE IN TWENTY CENTURIES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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*The coming of God's Messiah deserves closer attention than it has often received. The future coming of the Messiah, called the "rapture," is imminent, literal and visible, for all church saints, before the hour of testing, premillennial, and, based on a literal hermeneutic, distinguishes between Israel and the church. The early church fathers' views advocated a sort of imminent intra- or post-tribulationism in connection with their premillennial teaching. With a few exceptions, the Medieval church writers said little about a future millennium and a future rapture. Reformation leaders had little to say about prophetic portions of Scripture, but did comment on the imminency of Christ's return. The modern period of church history saw a return to the early church's premillennial teaching and a pretribulationist rapture in the writings of Gill and Edwards, and more particularly in the works of J. N. Darby. After Darby, pretribulationism spread rapidly in both Great Britain and the United States. A resurgence of posttribulationism came after 1952, accompanied by strong opposition to pretribulationism, but a renewed support of pretribulationism has arisen in the recent past. Five premillennial views of the rapture include two major views—pretribulationism and posttribulationism—and three minor views—partial, midtribulationist, and pre-wrath rapture.*

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### Introduction

The central theme of the Bible is the coming of God's Messiah. Genesis 3:15 reveals the first promise of Christ's coming when it records, "He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel."<sup>1</sup> Revelation 22:20 unveils the last promise when it records "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly,' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." In fact, the entire Bible can be

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.

understood in relation to this theme. The Old Testament declares, *He is coming* (Isa 7:14; 9:6). The four Gospels declare, *He has come—and is coming again* (John 1:29; 14:3, 18-19). Finally, Acts, the epistles, and the book of Revelation declare, *Having come, He is coming again* (Acts 1:11; 2 Thess 1:10; Rev 1:7).<sup>2</sup>

As Alva J. McClain points out, the revelation of the Messiah's coming is a "revelation in which the different elements are related, not mechanical, but dynamic and progressive. . . . A revelation in which the different elements are related, not in any merely *external* manner, but as the parts of a *growing plant* are related."<sup>3</sup> As Mark 4:26-28 describes it, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil. . . . The soil produces crops by itself; first the *blade*, then the *head*, then the *mature grain* in the head." In the same way, "[T]he doctrine of our Lord's Coming into the world unfolds like a growing plant, which at every stage of revelation contains the germ of the yet unrevealed."<sup>4</sup> Each element of this *progressive revelation* takes the reader deeper into the complexity of His coming.

- The Old Testament gives the promise of Christ's coming.
- The Gospels unfold this coming in two comings.
- The Gospels unfold the *first* coming as a series of events, including the Virgin conception, birth, perfect life, ministry, atoning death, resurrection, appearances, and ascension.
- The Epistles unfold the *second* coming into two main *phases*; the rapture and the revelation.
- The Book of Revelation unfolds these two *phases* into a series of events, separated by 7 years (Dan 9:27). The *first* of these is the rapture, accompanied by the resurrection, translation, judgement seat of Christ, and the marriage supper of the Lamb. The *second* of these is the revelation, accompanied by Armageddon, the millennial kingdom, and the white throne judgement.<sup>5</sup>

The deeper one looks into the coming of Christ, the more complex, intriguing, and astonishing it becomes, much like the beauty and complexity of human DNA under the microscope, or the heavens as viewed through a telescope (Ps 8:3-4).

Sadly, many fail to discern this intrigue and approach prophecy with the use of Ockham's Razor principle (from the great English scholastic, William of Ockham,

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Dehany Bernard (*The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament, Eight Lectures delivered before the University of Oxford on the Bampton Foundation, 1864* [New York: American Tract Society, 1891] 22) terms this dynamic of Scripture as progressive revelation and profoundly concludes that "the progressive system of teaching in the New Testament is an obvious *fact*, that it is marked by distinct *stages*, and that it is determined by natural *principles*." See 22-46 for his full development.

<sup>3</sup>Alva J. McClain, with revisions by Dr. John C. Whitcomb, Jr., "Christian Theology: Biblical Eschatology" (unpublished classroom syllabus; Winona Lake, Ind.: Grace Theological Seminary, n.d.) 39.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

1280-1349). In Ockham's development of a nominalistic pursuit of the real, he insisted upon using the razor to slash away at complex explanations "of the hierarchy of being, of ideas and concepts, which sheer speculation had invented" in the realist's pursuit of what is real.<sup>6</sup> He asserted that what could be done with fewer assumptions is done in vain with more, and therefore, he called for the "rejection and pruning of all concepts which are not absolutely necessary."<sup>7</sup> posttribulationists, historic premillennialists, postmillennialists as well as amillennialists<sup>8</sup> all say, "Apply the razor!" and in doing so, reduce the two-phase second coming of Christ to one phase. Such tragic conclusions are similar to those of anti-trinitarians who find one person in the Godhead rather than three, or early students of Christology who said one nature of Christ rather than two distinct natures in the one person of the God-man (Phil 2:6-8). Rather than "apply the razor," one should plunge into the depths of biblical teaching on the comings of Christ, making clear the biblical distinctions, and look deeply into the issues and nuances of the text, rather than being satisfied with traditional answers originating in unquestioned preunderstandings when approaching the text.

### The Subject at Hand

The study of the rapture is part of a wider study of the *parousia*. The Greek word *παρουσία* (*parousia*) literally means "being along side," "presence," or "to be present."<sup>9</sup> New Testament usage makes it clear that the *parousia* is not merely the act or arrival of the Lord but the total situation surrounding Messiah's coming.<sup>10</sup> Oepke writes, "The *parousia*, in which history is anchored, is not a historical event. . . . It is rather the point where history is mastered by God's eternal rule."<sup>11</sup> The uses of the term in 2 Thess 2:1; Jas 5:7-8; 2 Pet 1:16; 1 John 2:28 all refer to the coming of Christ in general. Thus, the *parousia* looks backward to Christ's first coming on

<sup>6</sup>Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 27.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>8</sup>Each position entails an oversimplification of the doctrine of Christ's coming. For example, posttribulationism, which often operates within a dispensational framework, regards the second coming "as having one posttribulation phase." Historic premillennialism, which takes a similar position but uses covenant theology as its underpinning, eliminates the Israel-church distinction among the people of God. Amillennialism disallows the earthly millennial kingdom and thus views Christ's future coming as a brief event followed by the eternal state. See Rolland Dale McCune, *An Investigation and Criticism of "Historic" Premillennialism from the Viewpoint of Dispensationalism* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Grace Theological Seminary, 1972) 5-9.

<sup>9</sup>Albrecht Oepke, "*παρουσία*," *TDNT*, 5:859.

<sup>10</sup>Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept From the Hour* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956) 20 notes, "The primary meaning seems to be *presence*, rather than mere coming, as further illustrated by 1 Cor 10:10. . . . The eschatological use of the word seems to add the thought of *arrival*, or *advent*, and is not restricted to either phase of the second coming" [emphasis original].

<sup>11</sup>Oepke, "*παρουσία*" 5:870.

earth and looks ahead to the future, beginning with the rapture, followed by the seven-year tribulation, followed by the revelation (second coming), followed by Armageddon, and finally the one-thousand-year millennial or theocratic kingdom. It is a wider term than “The Day of the Lord,” which is best understood in Scripture as the judgement which climaxes the tribulation period (2 Thess 2:2; Revelation 16–18) and millennium just prior to the eternal state (2 Pet 3:10-13; Rev 20:7–21:1).<sup>12</sup> The pretribulation view of the rapture to be considered here sees the rapture of the church taking place at the beginning of the next phase of the parousia and thus before the tribulation period begins.

The rapture represents the translation or removal of the church to be with Christ forever. Scripture describes this great event in 1 Cor 15:52 by “the dead in Christ shall rise first, and we shall be changed”; in John 14:3 by “I will come again, and receive you to myself”; and in 1 Thess 4:17 by “we shall be caught up together with them in the clouds . . . and thus shall we always be with the Lord.” The word for “caught up” in 1 Thess 4:17 is from the Greek word ἄρπάζω (*harpazō*) which means “to take by force” or “to catch up or away,”<sup>13</sup> and is also related to the Latin verb *rapiō*, meaning “caught up,”<sup>14</sup> or the noun *raptura*.<sup>15</sup> Assuming that the rapture begins the parousia,<sup>16</sup> several characteristics important to discussing the history of the rapture should be noted.

- The coming of Christ at the rapture is imminent, in the sense of an any-moment coming. Though there are no signs for the rapture, there are signs of the second coming to follow and these may appear before the rapture. Note Phil 3:20-21; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:16; Titus 2:13; Jas 5:7-9
- The coming of Christ at the rapture is literal and visible. Rev 1:7 states “Every eye shall see Him.”
- The coming of Christ at the rapture is for all church saints, deceased or living. First Thess 4:14, 17 and 1 Cor 15:51 record the order of this great event.
- This coming of Christ occurs before the outpouring of the great trial upon the earth. A literal translation of Rev 3:10 states that the believer is kept

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<sup>12</sup>Richard L. Mayhue, “The Prophet’s Watchword: Day of the Lord,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985):230.

<sup>13</sup>Werner Foerster, “ἄρπάζω,” *TDNT* 1:472.

<sup>14</sup>Robert G. Clouse, “Rapture of the Church,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 908.

<sup>15</sup>*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993 ed., s.v. “rapture.”

<sup>16</sup>Support for this position and the characteristics that follow can be found in other articles of this issue of *TMSJ*.

- in “a continuing state outside of” the *hour* of testing upon the earth.<sup>17</sup>
- This coming of Christ is premillennial, that is, before Christ returns to fight the battle of Armageddon and set up the 1,000-year kingdom, and judge unbelievers. First Cor 15:23-24 along with Dan 12:1-2 places the coming of Christ before these events.<sup>18</sup>
  - This coming of Christ assumes a literal, normal hermeneutic in the interpretation of Scripture, and it recognizes a fundamental theological distinction between Israel and the church.

Having identified the pretribulation rapture and its major characteristics, this article will now focus on a history of those who have held this position.

### The Rapture in Church History

The rapture in church history is really a history of pretribulationism. Other related, historically held views do not distinguish between the two phases of Christ’s coming: rapture and revelation. Partial, midtrib, and pre-wrath positions are recent positions that have very little if any history.

#### The Early Fathers

A cursory examination of the early church fathers reveals that they were predominantly premillennialists or chiliasts.<sup>19</sup> Clear examples in the writings of Barnabas (ca. 100-150), Papias (ca. 60-130), Justin Martyr (110-165), Irenaeus (120-202), Tertullian (145-220), Hippolytus (c. 185-236), Cyprian (200-250), and Lactantius (260-330) make this understanding impossible to challenge successfully.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Note the careful development of the issues surrounding Revelation 3:10 by Paul D. Feinberg, “The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position,” in Richard Reiter et al., *The Rapture: Pre-Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984) 64-70.

<sup>18</sup>See Robert D. Culver, “A Neglected Millennial Passage from Saint Paul,” *Papers . . . read at the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society*, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids, 1955) 27-33.

<sup>19</sup>Millard Erickson (*The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. [Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2001] 31) defines *chiliasm* as “Belief in an earthly millennium; in particular, in the early centuries of the church a premillennialism that held a very vivid and imaginative view of conditions during the millennium.” George E. Ladd (*Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952] 23) forcefully concludes, “[W]ith one exception [Caius] there is no Church Father before Origen who opposed the millenarian interpretation, and there is no one before Augustine whose extant writings offer a different interpretation of Revelation 20 than that of a future earthly kingdom consonant with the natural interpretation of the language.”

<sup>20</sup>See Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981): Barnabas, *The Epistle of Barnabas* 15 (146-47); Papias, *Fragments of Papias* 6 (154-55); Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80 (238); Irenaeus, *Irenaeus Against Heresies* 5, 30, 3-4 (559-60); Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 22 (560-61); Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 65 (218); Cyprian, *The Epistles of Cyprian* 55:1 (347), *The Treatises of Cyprian* 11:1-2 (496);

It is also significant to note that the early fathers largely held to a period of persecution that would be ongoing when the return of the Lord takes place and most would see the church suffering through some portion of the tribulation period.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, it is very clear that the early church fathers believed in the imminent return of Christ, which is a central feature of pretribulational thought.<sup>22</sup> This lack of precision among the fathers as to the exact time of Christ premillennial return has led to confusion among scholars as to how to understand the fathers in these areas. As Larry Crutchfield notes, "If anyone searches the fathers for a fully detailed, systematic presentation about the doctrine of last things, he searches in vain. . . ."<sup>23</sup> The following is a brief survey of imminency as taught by the early church fathers. Though these facts are informative and important to the contemporary discussion, that it is never appropriate to build a doctrine based on the teachings of the fathers must be kept in mind.

*Clement of Rome (ca. 90-100)*

Clement wrote, "[O]f a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, 'Speedily will He come, and will not tarry'; and 'The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.'" "Let us therefore earnestly strive to be found in the number of those that wait for Him, in order that we may share in His promised gifts."<sup>24</sup> Clement quotes Hab 2:3 and Mal 3:1 in a clear statement of imminence.

*Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 98-117).*

Ignatius wrote, "The last times are come upon us. Let us therefore be of a reverent spirit, and fear the long-suffering of God, lest we despise the riches of His goodness and forbearance." On the basis of Romans 2:4, he continues, "For let us either fear the wrath to come, or let us love the present joy in the life that now is; and let our present and true joy be only this, to be found in Christ Jesus, that we may truly live."<sup>25</sup> Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, "Be watchful, possessing a sleepless spirit," and "Be ever more becoming more zealous than what thou art. Weigh carefully the times. Look for Him who is above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became

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and Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* VII, 24-26 (219-22).

<sup>21</sup>Charles A. Hauser ("The Eschatology of the Early Church Fathers" [unpublished Th.D. dissertation; Winona Lake, Ind.: Grace Theological Seminary, 1961] 25-57) carefully surveys the early fathers on this issue and concludes, "These men are sure that the Church would go through the tribulation" (56).

<sup>22</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 80; also *The Rapture Question*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 51-54.

<sup>23</sup>Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995) 88.

<sup>24</sup>Saint Clement, *Epistle to the Corinthians* 23, 35 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:11,14.

<sup>25</sup>Ignatius, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* 11 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:54.

visible for our sakes.”<sup>26</sup>

*The Didache (ca. 100-160)*

The final chapter of the *Didache* provides one of the clearest and comprehensive statements on imminency: “Be watchful for your life; let your lamps not be quenched and your loins not ungirded, but be ye ready; for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh.”<sup>27</sup> In the same paragraph, the author urges “gathering yourselves together frequently,” in light of the imminence of the Lord’s return. He then speaks of the appearance of the “world-deceiver” (which the context indicates is the Antichrist) and the persecution associated with his coming.

*Barnabas (ca. 117-138)*

The *Epistle of Barnabas* reflects a similar view of imminency when it states, “For the day is at hand on which all things shall perish with the evil [one]. The Lord is near and his reward.”<sup>28</sup>

*Shepherd of Hermas (ca. 96-150)*

The theme of imminency continues in the *Shepherd of Hermas* as the church is compared to a tower: “Let us go away, and after two days let us come and clean these stones, and put them into the building; for all things round the tower must be made clear, lest haply the master come suddenly and find the circuit dirty, and he be wroth, and so these stones shall not go to the building of the tower, and I shall appear to be careless in my master’s sight.”<sup>29</sup>

*Summary*

These statements of imminency have led George Ladd, J. Barton Payne,<sup>30</sup> and Robert Gundry to affirm that the early fathers held to posttribulationism in the modern sense. Gundry states, “Irenaeus, who claims to hold that which was handed down from the apostles, was as forthright a posttribulationist as could be found in the present day.”<sup>31</sup> Gundry’s assumption, however, is unwarranted for several reasons. First, the early fathers (before 324) lived in a world of Roman persecution which was for them a way of life and a factor in all they believed and did. The

<sup>26</sup>Ignatius, *The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp* 1, 3 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:93-94.

<sup>27</sup>*The Didache, or Teaching of the Apostles* 16 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, rev. and trans by J. B. Lightfoot (London: Macmillan, 1926) 235.

<sup>28</sup>Barnabas, *The Epistle of Barnabas* 21, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:149.

<sup>29</sup>*The Shepherd of Hermas* S.9,7 in *The Apostolic Fathers* 465.

<sup>30</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 20. J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 17.

<sup>31</sup>Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 175.

Romans called them “atheists” for failing to worship their gods.<sup>32</sup> Second, the early fathers treated these issues of persecution in a simplistic, unreflective manner, which is hardly a well developed posttribulation position.<sup>33</sup> This data leads Crutchfield to describe thoughtfully the still unclear writings of the fathers as “intratribulation-al,” that is, “within” or “during” the tribulation.<sup>34</sup>

In the end, no one can produce a clear statement of patristic eschatology regarding the rapture. What can be concluded is the following:

- The early fathers placed strong emphasis upon imminency.
- They early fathers understood a literal coming of Christ, and a literal 1,000-year kingdom to follow.
- A type of imminent intratribulationism (Crutchfield) or imminent posttribulationism (Walvoord)<sup>35</sup> with occasional pretribulation inferences was believed.<sup>36</sup>
- The early fathers understood a kind of “practical persecution,” due to times of general Roman persecution that they experienced, rather than a specific fulfillment of future tribulation wrath.

Crutchfield rightly concludes,

This view of the fathers on imminency, and, in some, references to escaping the time of the Tribulation, constitute what may be termed, to quote Erickson, ‘seeds from which the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture could be developed. . . .’ Had it not been for the drought in sound exegesis, brought on by Alexandrian allegorism and later by Augustine, one wonders what kind of crop those seeds might have yielded—long before J. N. Darby and the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Medieval Church**

The period between Augustine and the Renaissance was largely dominated by “Augustine’s understanding of the church, and his spiritualization of the

<sup>32</sup>W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965) 238-40.

<sup>33</sup>These two reasons are well developed by Crutchfield, “The Blessed Hope” 91-94.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>35</sup>Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* 53-54.

<sup>36</sup>Crutchfield, “The Blessed Hope” 77. Millard J. Erickson (*Contemporary Options in Eschatology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977] 131) concludes the following, “While there are in the writings of the early fathers seeds from which the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture could be developed, it is difficult to find in them an unequivocal statement of the type of imminency usually believed by pretribulationists.” In response to this Crutchfield adds, “The seeds were indeed there but were crushed under the allegorist’s foot before they could sprout and bear early fruit” (454).

<sup>37</sup>Crutchfield, “The Blessed Hope” 103.



Millennium as the reign of Christ in the saints.”<sup>38</sup> There were only “sporadic discussions here and there of a literal, future Millennium,”<sup>39</sup> making examples of pretribulationism very rare. Medieval scholar, Dorothy deF. Abrahamse further explains the situation when she notes, “. . . Augustine had declared that the Revelation of John was to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally, and for most of the Middle Ages Church councils and theologians considered only abstract eschatology to be acceptable speculation.”<sup>40</sup> She goes on to observe, “Since the nineteenth century, however, historians have recognized that literal apocalypses did continue to circulate in the medieval world and that they played a fundamental role in the creation of important strains of thought and legend.”<sup>41</sup> Consistent with this conclusion, several important instances of pretribulationist thought have come to light in recent years.

### *Ephraem of Nisibis (306-373)*

Ephraem was an extremely important and prolific writer. Also known as Pseudo-Ephraem, he was a major theologian of the early Eastern (Byzantine) Church. His important sermon, “On the Last Times, the Antichrist and the End of the World,” (ca. 373) is preserved in four Latin manuscripts and is ascribed to St. Ephraem or to St. Isidore.<sup>42</sup> If not written by Ephraem, it is written by one greatly influenced by him.<sup>43</sup> This Pseudo-Ephraem sermon declares the following: “All the saints and elect of God are gathered together before the tribulation, which is to come, and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins.”<sup>44</sup> Alexander offers an insightful comment on these words when he says, “This author, however, mentions another measure taken by God in order to alleviate the period of tribulation for his saints and

<sup>38</sup>John Hannah, *Our Legacy, The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs, Col.: NavPress, 2001) 315. See also, Robert E. Lerner, “The Medieval Return to the Thousand-Year Sabbath,” in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGuinn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1992) 51-53.

<sup>39</sup>Hannah, *Our Legacy* 315-16.

<sup>40</sup>Dorothy deF. Abrahamse, “Introduction,” in *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* by Paul J. Alexander (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1985) 1.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 1-2. For further development of this important field of research, see Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, “The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation,” *BSac* 152 (1995):308-11.

<sup>42</sup>Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* 136. The full text of the sermon may be found at <[http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet\\_2000/timeline/ephraem.html](http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet_2000/timeline/ephraem.html)> or in Grant R. Jeffrey, “A Pretrib Rapture Statement in the Early Medieval Church,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995) 109-15.

<sup>43</sup>Paul J. Alexander, “The Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses in the Medieval West and the Beginnings of Joachimism,” in *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves*, ed. Ann Williams (Essex: Longman, 1980) 58-95.

<sup>44</sup>Pseudo-Ephraem, *On the Last Times* 2.

for the Elect.”<sup>45</sup>

In this sermon, Pseudo-Ephraem develops an elaborate biblical eschatology, including a distinction between the rapture and the second coming of Christ. It describes the imminent rapture, followed by 3½ years of great tribulation under the rule of Antichrist, followed by the coming of Christ, the defeat of Antichrist, and the eternal state. His view includes a parenthesis between the fulfillment of Daniel's sixty-nine weeks and his seventieth week in Daniel 9:24-27.<sup>46</sup> Pseudo-Ephraem describes the rapture that precedes the tribulation as “imminent or overhanging.”<sup>47</sup>

*Codex Amiatinus (ca. 690-716)*

This significant<sup>48</sup> Latin manuscript from England was commissioned by Abbot Ceolfrid of the monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth in Northumberland. Ceolfrid intended to give it to the Pope as a gift but died on his way to see him. It was produced during the era of the commentaries of Venerable Bede, who was also a monk at Jarrow and whose works were heavily influenced by Jerome's Vulgate.<sup>49</sup> In the title to Psalm 22 (Psalm 23 in the *Vulgate*), the following appears: “Psalm of David, the voice of the Church after being raptured.”<sup>50</sup> The Latin phrase *post raptismum* contains a verb from the root *rapio* which can mean either “to snatch, hurry away” or “to plunder, take by assault.”<sup>51</sup> This title is not carried over from Jerome's *Vulgate* and thus is likely the product of the Jarrow monastery. A history of the period of Ceolfrid's life presents no evidence of invasion or suffering<sup>52</sup> as if the title was inserted for comfort in light of a difficult condition in the church. In contrast, Ceolfrid writes of the Christ's future sudden return and the resurrection of the believer, “[W]e show that we rejoice in the most certain hope of our own

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<sup>45</sup>Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* 210. For issues relating to the authorship, interpretation, and date of Pseudo-Ephraem, consult Demy and Ice, “The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation” 311-13.

<sup>46</sup>Jeffrey, “A Pretrib Rapture Statement” 116-18.

<sup>47</sup>Pseudo-Ephraem, *On the Last Times* 2.

<sup>48</sup>F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947) 179.

<sup>49</sup>Ernst Wurthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 206.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>51</sup>Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A New Latin Dictionary* (New York: American Book Company, 1907) 1523.

<sup>52</sup>William Hunt, “Ceolfrid,” in *Dictionary of National Biography*, eds. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (Oxford: Oxford University, 1922) 3:1333-34; H. W. Gwatkin et al., eds, *Germany and the Western Empire*, in *The Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1922) 7:554-56.

resurrection, which we believe will take place on the Lord's Day."<sup>53</sup> Though not conclusive and still in need of further study, it appears that Codex Amiatinus presents another example of pretribulational thought in the Middle Ages.

*Brother Dolcino (d. 1307)*

A recent study of the fourteenth-century text, *The History of Brother Dolcino*, composed in 1316 by an anonymous source, reveals another important pretribulational passage.<sup>54</sup> As leader of the Apostolic Brethren in northern Italy, Brother Dolcino led his people through times of tremendous papal persecution.<sup>55</sup> One of the group wrote the following astonishing words:

. . . [T]he Antichrist was coming into this world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; and after he had come, then he [Dolcino] and his followers would be transferred into Paradise, in which are Enoch and Elijah. And in this way they will be preserved unharmed from the persecution of Antichrist.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the writer of this *History* believed that Dolcino and his followers would be transferred to paradise, expressing this belief with the Latin word *transferrentur*, the past participle of which is used to derive the English word "translation," a synonym for rapture.<sup>57</sup> Dolcino and his followers retreated into the mountains of northern Italy to await their removal at the appearance of Antichrist. While Dolcino and many of his followers were killed by a papal crusade in 1306, the movement lasted into the fifteenth century.<sup>58</sup>

**The Reformation Era**

The Reformation in general is bleak with regard to prophetic teaching, as evidenced by the lack of writings and commentaries on prophetic books.<sup>59</sup> The strongest statements concerning imminency during this period actually come from Anabaptists, known as the Taufer, who drew their theology from the Scriptures more

<sup>53</sup>"Ceolfrid's letter to Nechtan," in Venerable Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. and with an Introduction by Leo Sherley-Price, rev. by R. E. Latham (New York: Dorset Press, 1968) 323.

<sup>54</sup>This research is fully developed by Francis Gumerlock, "A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century," *BSac* 159 (2002):349-62.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 356-57.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 354-55.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>58</sup>Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969) 246-47.

<sup>59</sup>Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman, 1988) 323.

than other groups that bore the name Anabaptist.<sup>60</sup> One such learned man was Balthasar Hubmaier, who after rebuking his radical chiliastic contemporaries, then says, “[A]lthough Christ gave us many signs whereby we can tell how near at hand the day of his coming is, nevertheless, no one but God knows the exact day. . . . Take heed, watch and pray; for you know either the day nor the hour. . . . [T]he Judge is already standing at the door. . . .”<sup>61</sup>

Martin Luther and John Calvin also make similar statements concerning imminency. Calvin, when commenting on Zechariah and Malachi, writes, “Whenever the day of the Lord is mentioned in Scripture, let us know that God is bound by no laws, that he should hasten his work according to our hasty wishes; but the specific time is in his own power, and at his own will.” Commenting on Christ’s teaching in the Gospels, he writes, “[Jesus] wishes [the disciples] to be uncertain as to his coming, but to be prepared to expect him . . . every moment.”<sup>62</sup> Truly, the Lord’s return was one of the great undeveloped themes of the Reformation era.<sup>63</sup>

### The Modern Period up to Darby

The modern period is usually understood as beginning in 1648 with the final acceptance of the Protestant Reformation at the Peace of Westphalia. The period saw the rebirth of premillennialism for at least three important reasons.<sup>64</sup>

- Due to the influence of Renaissance humanism, the Reformers went back to the investigation of original written sources by the fathers and the Scriptures. This gave them access to fresh and accurate Greek texts, uncorrupted by the Vulgate traditions. It also exposed them to new editions of the early fathers including the distinct premillennial teaching of Irenaeus.<sup>65</sup>
- Much of the allegorical hermeneutic that dominated the Medieval period was repudiated. Calvin particularly reintroduced exegetical exposition

<sup>60</sup>George H. Williams, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, vol. 25, *Library of Christian Classics* (London: SCM, 1957) 19-40, identifies this element of the Radical Reformation as the Evangelical Anabaptists, as distinct from the Spiritualists, Revolutionaries, and the Evangelical Rationalists. The Spiritualists and Revolutionaries, particularly, had elaborate futuristic views based on speculation.

<sup>61</sup>Balthasar Hubmaier, “Apologia,” *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*, trans. and eds. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1989) 541-43.

<sup>62</sup>For these and other examples of Calvin’s comments on the second advent, see J. Graham Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom, An Anthology Arranged Alphabetically by a Grateful Reader* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992) 336-38.

<sup>63</sup>George (*Theology* 323) quotes the great Pilgrim pastor, John Robinson (1576?-1625), commenting soon after the passing on of Calvin, “The Lord hath yet more truth and light to break fourth out of his holy Word.”

<sup>64</sup>Thomas Ice, “Rapture, History of the,” *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996) 346.

<sup>65</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5:31-36 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:560-67.

back into the church.<sup>66</sup>

- Many Reformers contacted Jewish sources and had learned Hebrew. This moved many of the Reformers to take passages concerning Israel more historically rather than continuing to take them allegorically. This led to more historical or realized eschatological positions among the Reformers.<sup>67</sup> Futurist interpretations including premillennialism began to be more prominent in the church as noted earlier.

This more recent focus on premillennial thought in the late 1500s and early 1600s is not surprising. James Orr makes an astute observation concerning the way various doctrines have been the focus of interest and development at various periods of time. He writes, “[T]he articulation of the system [of dogma] in text-books is the very articulation of the system [of dogma] in its development in history.”<sup>68</sup> Theological articulation moves from Prolegomena to Theology Proper, to Anthropology, to Christology, to Soteriology, and finally to Eschatology as the last major doctrine to be clarified. Orr speaks of law and reason underlying this development with the law having both a logical and historical development.<sup>69</sup> It is very significant that God in His providence brought into the church a rich development of eschatology. The following is a brief survey of pretribulational thinking that occurs during this period.

#### *Joseph Mede (1586-1638)*

Mede is considered the “father of English premillennialism,”<sup>70</sup> having written *Clavis Apocalyptica* (“Key of the Revelation”) in 1627 in which “He attempted to construct an outline of the Apocalypse based solely upon internal considerations. In this interpretation he advocated premillennialism in such a scholarly way that this work continued to influence eschatological interpretation for centuries.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Consult “Calvin’s Method and Interpretation” and “Prolegomena to Exegesis,” T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 2d ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 85-108, 192-205. See also Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference* (Bellmawr, N.J.: Friends of Israel, 1990) 136.

<sup>67</sup>Luther performed all his deeds in the conviction that the Last Days were at hand, seeing the Pope as the Antichrist. See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957) 261.

<sup>68</sup>James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (1901; reprint Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, n.d.) 21.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 22. Hannah (*Our Legacy* 29) enumerates seven areas in the historical progressive articulation of doctrine ending with “The Doctrine of Last Things, or Eschatology (1650-present).”

<sup>70</sup>Ice, “Rapture” 346.

<sup>71</sup>Robert G. Clouse, “Joseph Mede (1586-1638),” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 646.

*Increase Mather (1639-1723)*

This theologian and president of Harvard College (1685) was a significant American Puritan. Concerning the future coming of Christ, he wrote that the saints would “be caught up into the air” beforehand, thereby escaping the final conflagration.<sup>72</sup>

*Peter Jurieu (1637-1713)*

Jurieu was a “prominent theologian and apologist in the French Reformed Church. He came to believe that Calvinists would be restored to France, because of his interpretation of the prophecies of the Apocalypse.”<sup>73</sup> In his work, *Approaching Deliverance of the Church* (1687), he 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 judgement at Armageddon.”<sup>74</sup>

*John Gill (1697-1771)*

Gill was a profound scholar, Calvinist theologian, and Baptist minister at Horsleydown, Southwark, for over fifty years.<sup>75</sup> He published his *An Exposition of the New Testament* in three volumes between 1746-48. In his commentary on 1 Thess 4:15 he wrote,

The Apostle having something new and extraordinary to deliver, concerning the coming of Christ, the first resurrection, of the resurrection of the saints, the change of the living saints, and the rapture both of the raised, and living in the clouds to meet Christ in the air, expresses itself in this manner. The dead saints will rise before the living ones are changed, and both will be caught up together to meet the Lord.<sup>76</sup>

Concerning 1 Thess 4:17 he comments,

Suddenly, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and with force and power; by the power of Christ, and by the ministry and means of the holy angels; and to which rapture will contribute the agility, which the bodies both of the raised and changed saints will have; and the rapture of the living saints will be together with them; with the dead in Christ, that will then be raised; so that the one will not prevent the other, or the one be sooner with Christ than the other; but one being raised and the other changed, they'll be joined in one company and general assembly, and be rapt up together: in the clouds; the

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<sup>72</sup>Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1992) 75.

<sup>73</sup>Robert G. Clouse, “Jurieu, Pierre (1637-1713),” *The New International Dictionary* 557.

<sup>74</sup>Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) 197-98; see also Grant R. Jeffrey, “Was the PreTrib Position of the Rapture Seen Before John Darby” (unpublished paper presented at the Pretrib Study Group, Dallas, Tex., 1993) 2-3.

<sup>75</sup>Robert G. Clouse, “John Gill (1697-1771),” *The New Dictionary* 413.

<sup>76</sup>John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1853) 2:561.

same clouds perhaps in which Christ will come, will be let down to take them up.<sup>77</sup>

As Jeffrey observes, “there is some ambiguity in Dr. Gill’s 1748 teaching of the timing and sequence of prophetic events.” Yet Jeffrey notes many important conclusions, including

- The Lord will descend in the air.
- The saints will be raptured in the air to meet Him.
- Christ will preserve the saints with Him until the general conflagration and burning of the world is over.
- The saints will reign with Christ for a thousand years.<sup>78</sup>

Similar pretribulational views can be found in commentaries by Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), James MacKnight (1721-1800), and Thomas Scott (1747-1821).<sup>79</sup>

#### *Morgan Edwards (1722-1795)*

Edwards was a Baptist preacher, evangelist, historian and educator, having founded Rhode Island College (Brown University). During his student days at Bristol Baptist Seminary in England (1742-44), he wrote an essay on Bible prophecy. The essay was published in Philadelphia in 1788 as *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties*. After a careful examination of this document, Thomas Ice concludes the following about Edwards’ position on the rapture from his statement, “The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years.”<sup>80</sup>

- He believes that 1,003.5 years will transpire between resurrections.
- He associates the first resurrection with the rapture of 1 Thess 4:17, occurring at least 3.5 years before the start of the millennium.
- He associates the meeting of believers with Christ in the air with John 14:2.
- He sees believers disappearing during the time of the tribulation.<sup>81</sup>

### **Concluding Analysis**

Critics of rapture history who have argued that belief in the pretribulational rapture was not embraced before John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) deny the clear

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Jeffrey, “A Pretrib Rapture Statement” 121-22.

<sup>79</sup>Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* 198. Scott taught that “the righteous will be carried into heaven, where they will be secure until the time of the judgement is over.”

<sup>80</sup>Thomas Ice, “Morgan Edwards: Another Pre-Darby Rapturist,” *The Thomas Ice Collection* (<<http://www.according2prophecy.org/apredarby.html>>) 1. See also, Frank Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: An Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist* (Elkton, Md.: n.p., n.d.).

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 2.

testimony of theologians and commentators of earlier periods. The clear statements of Pseudo-Ephraem, John Gill, and others now make clear that pretribulationism has had a long and credible history of people who understood it,, taught it, and who lived their lives in light of it. George Ladd is no longer credible when he writes, "We can find no trace of pretribulationism in the early church, and no modern pretribulationist has successfully proved that this particular doctrine was held by any of the church fathers or students of the Word before the nineteenth century."<sup>82</sup> Rapture critic John Bray makes a similar inappropriate comment in the form of an offer.

People who are teaching the pretribulation rapture teaching today are teaching something that never was taught until 1812. . . . Not one of the early church fathers taught a pretribulation rapture. . . . I make the offer of five hundred dollars to anybody who will find a statement, a sermon, article in a commentary, or anything, prior to 1812 that taught a 2 phase coming of Christ separated by a stated period of time, such as the pretribulation rapturists teach.<sup>83</sup>

It is time for Mr. Bray to make good on his \$500.00 offer!

### **The Modern Period from Darby to the Present**

#### *John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)*

Darby was a man of significant influence in the shift from historicism to futurism in premillennial thought and the modern force behind the development of dispensationalism. Darby was well educated and had a fruitful ministry in the Church of England up until 1826.<sup>84</sup> After much consideration and a series of providential circumstances, Darby broke with the Anglican church in 1828-29, envisioning "A spiritual church, joined to a heavenly Christ, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and awaiting their Lord's return."<sup>85</sup> Darby soon began to teach openly an Israel-church distinction and a two-stage distinction in the second coming of Christ. This included a quiet appearance of Christ to remove all true Christians from the earth (the presence of Christ), followed by the removal of the restraining work of the Holy Spirit from the earth and the reign of Antichrist, after which would be the public appearing of Christ in glory. The pretribulation rapture view which Darby had discovered while in Bible study between 1826-27, was later supported by Edward Irving (1792-1834) and challenged by B. W. Newton.<sup>86</sup> His views of the

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<sup>82</sup>*Blessed Hope* 31.

<sup>83</sup>John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, Fla.: John L. Bray Ministries, 1980) 30-31.

<sup>84</sup>For a brief survey of his life and thought, see Floyd Elmore, "J. N. Darby's Early Years," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Ice and Demy 127-59.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>86</sup>F. Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1968) 129-30.



church and especially his prophetic teaching spread like wildfire through the Plymouth Brethren movement, and after a visit America, they became popular throughout American evangelicalism.<sup>87</sup> Two early proponents of Darby's views in America were James H. Brookes (1830-97) and J. R. Graves (1820-89).

### *Post Darby Period*

The pretribulational position spread through influence of the Niagra Bible Conference era (New York, 1878-1909)<sup>88</sup> and received wide exposure in the popular prophetic publications, *The Truth, Our Hope, The Watchword*, and *Maranatha*. It was also carried forward in William Backstone's book, *Jesus is Coming* (1909), and the work of C. I. Scofield in his popular *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), published in Britain and America, and other works.<sup>89</sup> Prominent pretribulational Bible teachers articulated the position on the Bible conference circuit, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including Arno C. Gaebelein (1861-1945), A. J. Gordon (1836-1895), James M. Gray (1851-1935), R. A. Torrey (1856-1928), Harry Ironside (1876-1951), John F. Strombeck (1881-1959), Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952), Alva J. McClain (1888-1968), Clarence E. Mason, Jr., Charles Lee Feinberg (1909-1995), J. Dwight Pentecost (1915- ), John F. Walvoord (1910- ), Gerald B. Stanton (1918- ), and Charles Ryrie (1925- ). During this period, critics attacked it as the "any-moment theory."<sup>90</sup>

In the mid twentieth century almost every North American Bible institute, Bible college, and evangelical seminary expounded dispensational pretribulationalism. This included Moody Bible Institute, Philadelphia College of Bible, The Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Talbot Theological Seminary, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary. Many evangelical denominations and movements held to pretribulationism, including the Bible Presbyterian Church, The Evangelical Free Church, the Fellowship of Grace Brethren, many independent Bible churches, independent Baptist churches, and Pentecostal denominations including Assemblies of God and Foursquare Gospel churches. The position was again popularized in 1970 by Hal Lindsey.<sup>91</sup>

A resurgence of posttribulational thought after 1952 challenged

<sup>87</sup>See John M'Culloch, "Brethren (Plymouth)," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928) 2:843-48.

<sup>88</sup>Richard R. Reiter ("A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions," *The Rapture* 12) notes, "Many readers concluded that pretribulationism held by many Plymouth Brethren in Britain was adopted wholesale by the [Niagara] conference."

<sup>89</sup>C. I. Scofield, *Addresses on Prophecy* (New York: A. C. Gaebelein, 1902) 89-103.

<sup>90</sup>See *ibid.*, 11-34, for a helpful history of this period. Also note the respective articles in Couch, ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*.

<sup>91</sup>Hal Lindsey and C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). Also, for a general history of this period, see *ibid.*, 35-44.

pretribulationism with the writings of George Ladd (1911-1982),<sup>92</sup> J. Barton Payne (1922-1979),<sup>93</sup> and Robert Gundry (1932- ).<sup>94</sup> These challenges have prompted excellent responses which have added credibility to the pretribulationist rapture view.<sup>95</sup>

In the past decade have come new important works supporting pretribulationism, including those by Paul Benware, Mal Couch, Larry Crutchfield, Timothy Demy, Paul Feinberg, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Grant Jeffrey, Thomas Ice, Paul S. Karleen, Renald Showers, and Robert Thomas.<sup>96</sup>

*David MacPherson, a Less Than Credible Side Issue*

David MacPherson has now published five books, all setting forth the same contrived view of the origin of the pretribulationist rapture.<sup>97</sup> Having first made his assertions, MacPherson approaches his subject looking for proof. He uses his skills as a former investigative newsman to assemble selectively huge amounts of data, presenting his view with a vindictive, preachy, sarcastic tone.<sup>98</sup> MacPherson aggressively attacks pretribulationism by attributing its origin to Margaret MacDonald, as a result of a prophetic revelation she had in the spring of 1830, at the age of fifteen. Margaret was attracted to the charismatic influence of the Irvingite Movement by 1830 and her pretribulationist rapture vision was recorded and published by Robert Norton in 1861. "MacPherson uses this finding to project the notion that the doctrine of the pretribulationist rapture is of demonic origin through 15-year-old Scottish lassie."<sup>99</sup> MacPherson then claims that J. N. Darby and the Plymouth Brethren, who taught the pre-trib view, received it from Margaret

<sup>92</sup>George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*.

<sup>93</sup>J. Barton Payne *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids, 1962).

<sup>94</sup>Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). See John A. Sproule, *A Revised Review of "The Church and the Tribulation"* (Postgraduate Seminar: New Testament Theology; Winona Lake, Ind.: Grace Theological Seminary, 1974; Birmingham, Ala: Southeastern Bible College, n.d.).

<sup>95</sup>A little known example of this is McCune, *An Investigation and Criticism of "Historic" Premillennialism from the Viewpoint of Dispensationalism*.

<sup>96</sup>See notes in this article and the general bibliography (255-63) for the respective contributions of these authors. See also publications of the Pre-Trib Research Center (P.O Box 14111, Arlington, Tex. 76094-111; e-mail <icet@711online.net>).

<sup>97</sup>In order of publication, Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City, Mo.: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973), *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* (Kansas City, Mo.: Heart of America Bible Society, 1974), *The Incredible Cover-up, the True Story on the Pre-Trib Rapture* (Plainfield: Logos International, 1975), *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, N.C.: New Puritan Library, 1983), *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, S.C.: Millennium III Publishers, 1995).

<sup>98</sup>Adequate assessments of MacPherson may be found in Thomas D. Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulationist Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald," *BSac* 147 (1990):155-68, and John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 42-51.

<sup>99</sup>Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulationist Rapture Did Not Begin" 157.

MacDonald after 1830. MacPherson then asserts that an elaborate plot was devised by Darby, William Kelly (1821-1906), and others to cover up the origin.<sup>100</sup>

The reality of MacPherson's five books is that he has still not produced the evidence for his claims and what he does offer has fundamental flaws.<sup>101</sup>

- Margaret MacDonald does not teach a pretribulationist rapture in her prophecy and thus she could not give to Darby what she never believed herself. Even anti-tribulationist John Bray acknowledges this!<sup>102</sup>
- MacPherson amasses an overwhelming amount of evidence that does not relate to his case, but which serves as a kind of smoke screen around the edges.
- Darby developed his view in 1826-27, at least three years before MacDonald's vision! His visit with Margaret in 1830 was of no consequence.
- The Brethren were not united on this issue, so Newton, Mueller, and Tregelles would certainly have exposed such a fraud on Darby's part.

MacPherson engages in biased revisionism. No major scholar familiar with original sources has sided with him.<sup>103</sup> Sandeen calls it a "groundless and pernicious charge."<sup>104</sup> F. F. Bruce, himself a Brethren author, writes, "Where did Darby get [his view]? . . . [I]t was in the air in the 1820s and 1830s among eager Bible students of unfulfilled prophecy. . . . [D]irect dependence by Darby on Margaret MacDonald is unlikely."<sup>105</sup> It appears that MacPherson's converts are rabid anti-pretribulationists because MacPherson has "proved" only what he set out to find.<sup>106</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

It is important to point out that judgment of the credibility of the pretribulationist rapture is whether it is found in the Scriptures! Though history informs one's interpretation of Scripture, it should not drive his interpretation. The real source of the pretribulationist rapture will be developed in the ensuing articles

<sup>100</sup>MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* 87-120.

<sup>101</sup>See Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulationist Rapture Did Not Begin" 158-61.

<sup>102</sup>John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulationist Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, Fla.: Christian Chiliasm; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 250. Charles R. Smith, "Review of *Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin*, by Dave MacPherson," *Grace Spire* (May-June, 1974):9.

<sup>103</sup>Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulationist Rapture Did Not Begin" 161-63.

<sup>104</sup>Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970) 64.

<sup>105</sup>F. F. Bruce, "Review of *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin*, Dave MacPherson," *Evangelical Quarterly* 47 (1975):58.

<sup>106</sup>Note Robert Gundry's endorsement on the cover of *The Rapture Plot*, "As usual, Dave MacPherson overwhelms his critics with a superior knowledge of the primary sources. His is a rare combination of historical research and investigative reporting."

of this issue of *TMSJ*. Church history records a long and at times painful development of the articulation of the doctrine. As pointed out earlier, such is also the case with Christology, soteriology, and other doctrines as well. The following is a brief summary of the history of doctrine as it relates to the pretribulation rapture:

- The apostolic fathers were premillennial but the details and implications of the rapture doctrine were not worked out.
- By the fifth century the amillennialism of Origen and Augustine had all but eliminated premillennialism.
- This continued through the Reformation with the Reformers preferring to ignore the millennium rather than teach against it. They were more “no-mil” than “a-mil.”
- The seventeenth century brings a rebirth of premillennialism. A long with it flourished postmillennialism until the end of the French Revolution (1789). After 1800, premillennialism made a great surge but was still dominated by historical schools of interpretation.
- By 1826 literal interpretation of prophecy took hold and “futurism” saw the light of day!<sup>107</sup>

Ice concludes, “This environment of a literal, futurist, premillennial framework interacting with the progress made by systematic theology provided the momentum that led to the understanding of the pre-tribulation rapture.”<sup>108</sup> In the providence of God, the early eighteen hundreds became the first time since before the rise of allegorical interpretation that a climate existed conducive to the development of the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture. Features of this period include:

- The thriving of premillennialism which gave rise to pretribulationism.
- The return of premillennialism brought with it the application of literal, normal hermeneutics to prophetic passages of Scripture such as Daniel and Revelation. A literal hermeneutic leads to futurism in interpretation.
- The return to a strong belief in imminency just as was seen in the early centuries.
- These teachings of imminency and a pretribulation rapture received wide acceptance.<sup>109</sup>

In conclusion, this historical study leaves two striking realities:

- That dispensational premillennialism with its articulation of a pretribulation rapture is recent, and

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<sup>107</sup>Ice, “Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulation Rapture Did Not Begin” 166.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 166-68.

- That history is normative to (i.e., sets the standards for) the truthfulness of doctrine.

### **Five Premillennial Views of the Rapture**

Once premillennialism is embraced there are five views held concerning the rapture. The following is a brief identification of these views to serve as a reference point for further study in this series of articles.

#### *Pretribulationism—a major view*

This view holds to the supernatural removal of the church out of the world before the tribulation (70th week of Daniel) begins. It has the following main features: (1) it maintains a clear distinction between Israel and the church; (2) the church is exempted from the wrath of God (1 Thess 5:9); (3) it maintains imminency concerning the coming of Christ; and (4) it distinguishes between the rapture and the second coming.<sup>110</sup>

#### *Partial Rapture View—a minor view*

This view holds that only faithful, spiritual Christians will be taken by Christ at the rapture. Thus only those who are “watching and waiting” are taken. The rest will repent of their carnality during the tribulation. Matthew 24:40-51 is interpreted as “be on alert.” Issues related to the doctrine of salvation and divisions of the body of Christ plague this view.<sup>111</sup>

#### *Midtribulation Rapture View—another minor view*

This view teaches that the rapture will take place at the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation or after 3 1/2 years. The view holds that only the last half of Daniel’s seventieth week is tribulation.<sup>112</sup> The position struggles for convincing texts. Though asserting that only the last half of the tribulation contains judgement, they struggle to deal with the fact that God pours out His wrath through the entire 70th week.

#### *Pre-Wrath Rapture View—another minor view*

This view was recently developed and popularized by Marvin Rosenthal and Robert Van Kampen.<sup>113</sup> The view holds that the church will be raptured about

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<sup>110</sup>Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* 164-87.

<sup>111</sup>Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* 97-113.

<sup>112</sup>Gleason L. Archer, “The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position,” *The Rapture* 113-46.

<sup>113</sup>Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990); Robert Van Kampen, *The Sign of Christ’s Coming and the End of the Age* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1992).

three quarters of the way through the seventieth week of Daniel. The view divides the tribulation period up into (1) the beginning of sorrows, (2) the great tribulation, and (3) the Day of the Lord. The third period is the time of God's wrath from which Christians will be spared. This threefold division creates numerous and significant linguistic, exegetical, and theological problems regarding the seven-year length of God's wrath and the length of the Day of the Lord.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup>Paul S. Karleen, *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church, Is It Biblical?* (Langhoren, Pa: BF Press, 1991) 88-91.

*Posttribulation Rapture—a major view*

This view has been widely popularized by Ladd, Gundy, and others.<sup>115</sup> It holds that the rapture occurs at the end of the great tribulation period, when Christ returns. Posttribulationism differs from pretribulationism on several basic issues: (1) the nature of the tribulation, (2) the distinction between Israel and the church, (3) the doctrine of imminency, (4) the distinction between the rapture and the second coming, (5) the meaning of eschatological terms, and (6) sometimes hermeneutical issues.<sup>116</sup> There are four distinct positions within this view.<sup>117</sup>

- Classic posttribulationism or historic premillennialism. Here the events of the tribulation are understood to have always been in place and the church is already under God’s wrath. Christ’s return is “imminent,” but the view relies on both allegorical and literal hermeneutics. This is the view of J. Barton Payne,<sup>118</sup> and is sometimes known as moderate preterism as well.<sup>119</sup>
- Semiclassic posttribulationism This view also holds that the tribulation is a contemporary event but teaches that some events of the tribulation are still future. The view forsakes imminency and also draws on conflicting hermeneutical principles. There are considerable differences between proponents of this view. This is a kind of catch-all view for those who do not fit the other categories.
- Futurist posttribulation view. A relatively new but very popular view held by George Ladd and others. This view holds to a future seven-year tribulation followed immediately by the second coming. The church goes through the entire tribulation and the Israel/church distinction is blurred. Hermeneutics are more literal in this view.
- Dispensational posttribulation. This is the view of Robert Gundry<sup>120</sup> who attempts to keep the distinction between Israel and the church clear, while believing that the church will live through all seven years of tribulation. At the same time he believes that the church will also in some way be “exempt” from God’s wrath. In this view, imminency is aggressively denied.

These views mutually exclude each other so that they cannot be combined. The posttribulation view puts great confidence in the length of time during which it has

<sup>115</sup>In addition to references cited above, see, Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, *The Great Tribulation Past or Future? Two Evangelicals Debate the Question* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

<sup>116</sup>See Reiter et.al, *The Rapture* 169-232.

<sup>117</sup>Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope* 21-69; Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* 190-92..

<sup>118</sup>Payne, *Imminent Appearing*.

<sup>119</sup>Ice, “Introduction,” *The Great Tribulation* 7.

<sup>120</sup>Gundry, *The Church*.

been held. The view suffers in its understanding of wrath during the entire tribulation period as evident in the views above. These views also blur the distinction between Israel and the church and make the rapture and second coming into one event, despite their dissimilarities in Scripture. Again, the imminency of the Lord's return is lost.

### **Conclusion**

The Scriptures are clear about Jesus' coming, once in a manger and once in two phases, i.e., at the rapture and at the second coming. Though this view is strong and cogent today, it has suffered from the lack of development and clear articulation as have other doctrines in history. It is under attack from those who choose not to see future prophecies fulfilled in the same way that all past prophecies have been fulfilled. It is also under attack from those who use history to drive interpretation and those with different hermeneutical or interpretive pre-commitments when they approach Bible prophecy. Finally, it is worthy of deeper study, clearer argumentation, and fervent protection. May this series of articles strengthen, protect, and proclaim the marvelous truth of the imminent return of Christ to rapture his church before the 70th week of Daniel begins.