

A HISTORY OF PRE-DARBY RAPTURE ADVOCATES

by Thomas Ice

Critics of pretribulationism frequently state that belief in the rapture is a doctrinal development of entirely recent origin. They argued that the doctrine of the rapture or any semblance of it was completely unknown before the early 1800s and the writings of John Nelson Darby. While it is clear that pretribulationism was not widely known since the days of the New Testament writers, there have been clear examples of some form of pretribulationism sprinkled throughout church history.

We need to deal with the history of the rapture, not because it is the basis for determining truth, which can only be found in Scripture alone, but because these issues are often at the heart of the critics of pretribulationism. Dr. Charles Ryrie has rightly said, "The fact that the church taught something in the first century does not make it true, and likewise if the church did not teach something until the twentieth century, it is not necessarily false."ⁱ Norman Geisler notes that "heresies can be early, even in apostolic times (cf. 1 Tim. 4 and 1 Jn. 4), and (re)discovery of some truths can be later (like pretrib)."ⁱⁱ With this in mind, a careful study of church history shows that the pre-trib rapture position has historical precedent well before Darby.

HOW TO FIND THE RAPTURE IN HISTORY?

Even though pretribulationists have always rightly emphasized the priority of Scripture as the sole basis for establishing biblical orthodoxy,¹ nevertheless, it is important to look at the first eighteen hundred years of the church's history to gain an understanding of what has gone before on this matter of the pre-trib rapture.² Even if pre-Darby rapture statements appear, we need to see how they do or do not match up to what Darby taught.

Pre-trib rapture critic William Bell has formulated four criteria for establishing the validity of a historical citation regarding pretribulationism. If any of his four criteria are met, then he acknowledges such a reference is "of crucial importance, if found, whether by direct statement or clear inference." The criteria are as follows:

- (1) Any mention that Christ's second coming was to consist of more than one phase, separated by an interval of years
- (2) Any mention that Christ was to remove the church from the earth before the tribulation period
- (3) Any reference to the resurrection of the just as being in two stages

¹ For example, Charles C. Ryrie, *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus: What You Need to Know about the Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 75-7; Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of The Storm: Why Christians will Escape All The Tribulation* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), 133-4.

² In this paper, pretribulationism is defined as one who believes that the rapture or translation of believers will take place before the tribulation, whether the tribulation is three and a half or seven years. The point is that many of the ancients thought the totality of the tribulation was a total of three and a half years.

(4) Any indication that Israel and the church were to be clearly distinguished, thus providing some rationale for a removal of Christians before God “again deals with Israel.”³

Bell’s criteria will be used to evaluate proposed pre-Darby rapture statements.

The Shepherd of Hermas

The post-apostolic writing known as *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. A.D. 140) speaks of a possible pretribulational concept of escaping the tribulation. In order to get the context, the passage will be cited at length.

1. The Fourth vision which I saw, brethren, twenty days after the former vision which came unto me, *for a type of the impending tribulation* (εἰς τύπον τῆς θλίψεως τῆς ἐπερχομένης). I was going into the country by the Campanian Way. From the high road, it is about ten stades; and the place is easy for traveling. While then I am walking alone, I entreat the Lord that He will accomplish the revelations and the visions which He showed me through His holy Church, that He may strengthen me and may give repentance to His servants which have stumbled, that His great and glorious Name may be glorified, for that He held me worthy that He should show me His marvels. And as I gave glory and thanksgiving to Him, there answered me as it were the sound of a voice, ‘Be not of doubtful mind, Hermas.’ I began to question in myself and to say, ‘How can I be of doubtful mind, seeing that I am so firmly founded by the Lord, and have seen glorious things?’ And I went on a little, brethren, and behold I see a cloud of dust rising as it were to heaven, and I began to say within myself, ‘Can it be that cattle are coming, and raising a cloud of dust?’ for it was just about a stade from me. As the cloud of dust waxed greater and greater, I suspected that it was something supernatural. Then the sun shone out a little, and behold, I see a huge beast like a sea-monster, and from its mouth fiery locusts issued forth. And the beast was about a hundred feet in length, and its head was as it were of pottery. And I began to weep, and to entreat the Lord *that He would rescue me from it* (ἵνα με λυτρώσῃται ἔξ αὐτοῦ.). And I remembered the word which I had heard, ‘Be not of doubtful mind, Hermas.’ Having therefore, brethren, put on the faith of the Lord and called to mind the mighty works that He had taught me, I took courage and gave myself up to the beast. Now the beast was coming on with such a rush, that it might have ruined a city. I come near it, and, huge monster as it was, it stretcheth itself on the ground, and merely put forth its tongue, and stirred not at all until I had passed by it. And the beast had on its head four colours; black, then fire and blood colour, then gold, then white.

2. Now after I had passed the beast, and had gone forward about thirty feet, behold, there meeteth me a virgin arrayed as if she were going forth from a bride-chamber, all in white and with white sandals, veiled up to her forehead, and here head-covering consisted of a turban, and here hair was

³ William E. Bell, “A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1967), 26–7.

white. I knew from the former visions that it was the Church, and I became more cheerful. She saluteth me, saying, 'Good morrow, my good man'; and I saluted her in turn, 'Lady, good morrow.' She answered and said unto me, 'Did nothing meet the?' I say unto her, 'Lady, such a huge beast, that could have destroyed whole peoples: but, by the power of the Lord and by His great mercy, *I escaped it* (αὐτοῦ ἐξέφυγον αὐτό).' *'Thou did escape it well* (Καλῶνς ἐξέφυγες),' saith she, 'because thou didst cast thy care upon God, and didst open thy heart to the Lord, believing that thou canst be saved by nothing else but by His great and glorious Name. Therefore the Lord sent His angel, which is over the beasts, whose name is Segri, and *shut its mouth, that it might not hurt thee.*⁴ Thou hast escaped a great tribulation by reason of thy faith, and because, though thou sawest so huge a beast, thou didst not doubt in thy mind. Go therefore, and declare to the elect of the Lord His mighty works, and tell them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation which is to come. If therefore ye prepare yourselves beforehand, and repent (and turn) unto the Lord with you whole heart, ye shall be able to escape it, if your heart be made pure and without blemish, and if for the remaining days of your life ye serve the Lord blamelessly. Cast your cares upon the Lord and He will set them straight. Trust ye in the Lord, ye men of doubtful mind, for He can do all things, yea, He both turneth away His wrath from you, and again He sendeth forth His plagues upon you that are of doubtful mind. Woe to them that hear these words and are disobedient; it were better for them that they had not been born.'

3. I asked her concerning the four colours, which the beast had upon its head. Then she answered me and said, 'Again thou are curious about such matters.' 'Yes, lady,' said I, 'make known unto me what these things are.' 'Listen,' said she; 'the black is this world in which ye dwell; and the fire and blood colour showeth that this world must perish by blood and fire; *and the golden part are ye that have escaped from this world* (τὸς δὲ χρυσοῦν μέρος ὑμεῖς ἐστέ οἱ ἐκφυγότες τὸν κόσμον τοῦτον.). For as the gold is tested by fire and is made useful, so ye also [that dwell in it] are being tested in yourselves. Ye then that abide and pass through the fire will be purified by it. For as the gold loses its dross, so ye also shall cast away all sorrow and tribulation, and shall be purified, and shall be useful for building of the tower. But the white portion is the coming age, in which the elect of God shall dwell; because the elect of God shall be without spot and pure unto life eternal. Wherefore cease not thou to speak in the ears of the saints. *Ye have now the symbolism also of the tribulation which is coming in power* (ἔχετε καὶ τὸν τύπον τῆς θλίψεως τῆς ἐρχομένης μεγάλης.). *But if ye be willing, it shall be nought* (εἰὰν δὲ ὑμεῖς θελήσητε, οὐδὲν ἔσται.). Remember ye the things that are written beforehand.' With these words she departed, and I saw not in what direction she departed; for a noise was made; and I turned back in fear, thinking that the beast was coming.⁵

⁴ Italics original.

⁵ Italics added, unless otherwise indicated. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 1.4.1–3, cited from J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, editors, *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Greek Texts with Introductions and English Translations*

While Hermas clearly speaks of escaping the tribulation, pretribulationists and non-pretribulationists tend to agree that he does not articulate a clear message similar to modern pretribulationism. Pre-trib scholar, John Walvoord argues that the central feature of pretribulationism is the doctrine of imminency and that is “a prominent feature of the doctrine of the early church.”⁶

IRENAEUS

Some have thought that Irenaeus (c. 180) could be a pre-trib rapture statement since he actually speaks of the rapture: “the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this [the tribulation],” as noted below:

And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, “There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.” For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption.⁷

However, the very next statement speaks of believers in the tribulation. When taken within the context of all of Irenaeus’ writings on these subjects, it appears that he was not teaching pretribulationism.

IMMINENCY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Pretribulationists, such as Charles Ryrie define imminency as an event that is “impending, hanging over one’s head, ready to take place.’ An imminent event is one that is always ready to take place.”⁸ Some have recognized that it is common for ante-Nicene writers to speak of an imminent return of Christ, especially during the first century after the Apostles.⁹ Patristic scholar Larry Crutchfield argues that the early church fathers believed in what he calls “imminent intratribulationism.” He summarizes the views of pretribulationist scholars on this issue as follows:

(London: Macmillan and Co., 1891; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), Greek text, 314–6, English text, 419–21.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 51.

⁷ Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 558.

⁸ Ryrie, *Come Quickly*, 21–2.

⁹ Larry Crutchfield says, “Many of them, especially in the first century, did indeed make explicit statements which indicated a belief in the imminent return of Christ. The doctrine of imminency is especially prominent in the writings of the apostolic fathers. It is on the basis of Christ’s impending return (e.g., *Didache*) and on the strength of the literal fulfillment of past prophecy (e.g., *Barnabas*), that they exhorted the Christian to live a life of purity and faithfulness.” Crutchfield supports this statement with the following: “See for example Clement of Rome (*I Clement* XXIII; XXXIV–XXXV); Ignatius (*Epist. to Polycarp* I and III); *Didache* (XVI, 1); Hermas (*Shepherd: Similitudes* IX, Chaps. V, VII and XXVI); *Barnabas* (XXI). For fathers of the second century see Tertullian (*Apology* XXI); and Cyprian (*Treatises* I, 27). There are expressions of imminency even in those who expected certain events to occur before the end, as in Hippolytus (*Treat. On Christ and Antichrist* 5); and Lactantius (*Div. Instit.* XXV).” Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism: Part VI—The Conclusion: Evaluating the Content of Early Dispensational Concepts” *The Conservative Theological Journal* (vol. 3, no. 9; August 1999), 194.

‘In sum, with few exceptions, the premillennial fathers of the early church believed that they were living in the last times. Thus they looked daily for the Lord’s return. Even most of those who looked for Antichrist’s appearance prior to the second advent, saw that event as occurring suddenly and just as suddenly being followed by the rescue and rapture of the saints by Christ. . . . This belief in the imminent return of Christ within the context of ongoing persecution has prompted us to broadly label the views of the earliest fathers, imminent intratribulationism. . . .

It should be noted that dispensationalists have neither said that the early church was clearly pretribulationist nor that there are even clear individual statements of pretribulationism in the fathers. As Walvoord says, “the historical fact is that the early church fathers’ view on prophecy did not correspond to what is advanced by pretribulationists today except for the one important point that both subscribe to the imminency of the rapture.” This view of the fathers on imminency and in some the references to escaping the time of the tribulation constitute what may be termed, to borrow a phrase from Erickson, “seeds from which the doctrine of the pretribulationist rapture could be developed . . .” Had it not been for the drought brought by Alexandrian allegorism and later by Augustine, one wonders what kind of crop those seeds might have yielded—before Darby and the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Historian Kurt Aland also sees the early church imminent expectation of the Lord’s return.

Up until the middle of the second century, and even later, Christians did not live in and for the present, but they lived in and for the future; and this was in such a way that the future flowed into the present, that future and present became one—a future which obviously stood under the Lord’s presence. It was the confident expectation of the first generations that the end of the world was not only near, but that it had really already come. It was the definite conviction not only of Paul, but of all Christian of that time, that they themselves would experience the return of the Lord.¹¹

¹⁰ Crutchfield, “Early Church Fathers—Part VI,” 195–6. Crutchfield adds: “Some of the fathers like Hippolytus, Tertullian, Lactantius, and others, clearly had posttribulationist elements in their views concerning the end times. But we have been unable to find an instance of the unequivocal classic posttribulationism taught today. Walvoord’s assessment of the fathers’ views on the tribulation is essentially correct. He says, “The preponderance of evidence seems to support the concept that the early church did not clearly hold to a rapture as preceding the end time tribulation period. Most of the early church fathers who wrote on the subject at all considered themselves already in the great tribulation. Accordingly Payne, as well as most other posttribulationists, takes the position that it is self-evident that pretribulationism as it is taught today was unheard of in the early centuries of the church. Consequently the viewpoint of the early church fathers is regarded by practically all posttribulationists, whether adherents of the classic view or not, as a major argument in favor of posttribulationism. However, the fact that most posttribulationists today do not accept the doctrine of imminency as the early church held it diminishes the force of their argument against pretribulationism” [see John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 24.” (p. 196)

¹¹ Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity: From the Beginnings to the Threshold of the Reformation*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), I, 87.

Aland sees the decline of a true imminence that began around A.D. 150.

As soon as the thought of a postponement of the Parousia was uttered once—and indeed not only incidentally, but thoroughly presented in an entire writing—it developed its own life and power. At first, people looked at it as only a brief postponement, as the Shepherd of Hermas clearly expresses. But soon, as the end of the world did not occur, it was conceived of as a longer and longer period, until finally—his is today's situation nothing but the thought of a postponement exists in people's consciousness. Hardly any longer is there the thought of the possibility of an imminent Parousia. Today we live with the presumption—I would almost say *from* the presumption—that this world is going to continue; it dominates our consciousness. Practically, we no longer speak about a postponement, but only seldom does the idea of the end of the world and the Lord's return for judgment even occur to us; rather, it is pushed aside as annoying and disturbing—in contrast to the times when faith was alive. It is very characteristic that in ages when the church flourishes, the expectation of the end revives—we think of Luther; we think of Pietism. If we judge our present time by its expectation of the future.¹²

Posttribulationists like J. Barton Payne also admit that the early fathers held to an imminency viewpoint. He surmises:

It must therefore be concluded that the denial of the imminence of the Lord's coming on the part of post-tribulationists who have reacted against dispensationalism is not legitimate. . . .

Belief in the imminency of the return of Jesus was the uniform hope of the early church; and it was only with the rise of a detailed application of Bible prophecy, at the close of the second century, to yet future history that its truth was questioned.¹³

PSEUDO-EPHRAEM

Another possible the pre-trib rapture statement can be found in a sermon preached by Pseudo-Ephraem entitled *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World* or a *Sermon on the End of the World* as early as the fourth through seventh century A.D. The sermon is considered to be “one of the most interesting apocalyptic texts of the early Middle Ages.”¹⁴ The sermon contains about 1,500 Latin words. Concerning the timing of the rapture it reads:

We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, what is imminent or overhanging. . . . Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that

¹² Aland, *History of Christianity*, I, 92.

¹³ J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 102.

¹⁴ Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 136.

he may *draw us from* the confusion, which overwhelms all the world? . . . For 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. (italics added)¹⁵

Pseudo-Ephraem presents at least three important features found in modern pretribulationism:

- (1) there are two distinct comings: the return of Christ to rapture the saints, followed later by Christ's Second Advent to the earth,
- (2) a defined interval between the two comings, in this case three and one-half years, and
- (3) a clear statement that Christ will remove the church from the world before the tribulation.¹⁶

The fact that Pseudo-Ephraem placed the rapture 3 ½ years before the tribulation is not an argument for midtribulationism because it appears that for him the entire tribulation was only 3 ½ years in duration. (Even J. N. Darby originally believed that the rapture would occur 3 ½ years before the second coming).¹⁷ Pseudo-Ephraem's pretribulationism was formulated and preached possibly as early as A.D. 373.

Posttribulationist scholar Bob Gundry wrote an objection to Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon as a pre-trib statement. He concluded: "Pseudo-Ephraem urges Christians to forsake worldliness in preparation for meeting Christ when he returns after the great tribulation. Meanwhile Christian evangelism is taking people to the Lord and gathering them into the Church. . . . This interpretation . . . [puts] the resurrection of Christians and their meeting Christ at his coming after the tribulation to destroy the Antichrist, making imminent the advent of Antichrist rather than that of Christ."¹⁸

Pretribulationist Thomas Ice penned a rejoinder to Gundry's critique. Ice notes that Gundry did not establish that Pseudo-Ephraem ever used "gather" in an evangelistic way as he contends. Further Ice notes that the late Paul Alexander, the Byzantine

¹⁵ An English translation of the entire sermon can be found on the Internet at the following: www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=169.

¹⁶ Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, "The Rapture and Pseudo-Ephraem: An Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July–September 1995), 12.

¹⁷ Jonathan David Burnham said, "Until at least 1845 Darby taught that the rapture would occur three-and-a-half years before the second coming. He connected the rapture with the casting out of Satan from heaven in Revelation 12, an event he believed triggered the 'great tribulation' period." Burnham, "The Controversial Relationship Between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby" (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1999), 128, f.n. 126.

¹⁸ Bob Gundry, *First the Antichrist: Why Christ Won't Come Before The Antichrist Does* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 188.

scholar who first published this statement in one of his books,¹⁹ “understood this disputed passage as a pretribulation transportation.”²⁰

BROTHER DOLCINO

In A.D. 1260 a man named Gerard Sagarello (d. 1300) founded a group known as the Apostolic Brethren in northern Italy. He founded this order after he was turned down for membership by the Franciscan order.

At that time it was against church law to form any new ecclesiastical order, so the Apostolic Brethren were subjected to severe persecution. In 1300, Gerard was burned at the stake, and a man named Brother Dolcino²¹ took over leadership of the movement. Under his hand, the order grew and eventually numbered in the thousands. End-time prophecy evidently held an important place in the study and teaching of the Apostolic Brethren.

Brother Dolcino died in 1307, and in 1316 an anonymous notary of the diocese of Vercelli in northern Italy wrote a brief treatise in Latin that set forth the deeds and beliefs of the Apostolic Brethren. This treatise was called *The History of Brother Dolcino*. Francis Gumerlock, a non-pretribulationist, is the individual who recently discovered the Brother Dolcino rapture teaching.

At one point in the treatise on the Apostolic Brethren the following paragraph appears:

Again, [Dolcino believed and preached and taught] that within those three years Dolcino himself and his followers will preach the coming of the Antichrist. And that the 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. And that then Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist. Then they would be killed by him or by his servants, and thus Antichrist would reign for a long time. But when the Antichrist is dead, Dolcino himself, who then would be the holy pope, and his preserved followers, will descend on the earth, and will preach the right faith of Christ to all, and will convert those who will be living then to the true faith of Jesus Christ.*²²

¹⁹ Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, edited with an introduction by Dorothy deF. Abrahamse (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 210.

²⁰ Thomas Ice, “Afterword: A Response by Thomas Ice to the Gundry Critique” in Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy, eds., *The Return: Understanding Christ’s Second Coming* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 72.

²¹ Most of the material on Brother Dolcino has been gleaned from Francis Gumerlock, “A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (vol. 159, no. 635; July–September 2002), 349–62. For more on Brother Dolcino see L. Mariotti, *A Historical Memoir of Fra Dolcino and His Times: Being an Account of a General Struggle for Ecclesiastical Reform, and of An Anti-Heretical Crusade in Italy, in the Early Part of the Fourteenth Century* (London: Longman, Brown Green and Longmans, 1853). Decima L. Douie, *The Nature and the Effect of the Heresy of the Fraticelli* (Manchester: The University of Manchester Press, 1932). Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 243–8, 318, 414–5, 487.

²² Gumerlock, “A Rapture Citation,” 354–5.

Several points in this statement are very similar to modern pretribulationism.

—The Latin word *transferrentur*, meaning “they would be transferred,” is the same word used by medieval Christians to describe the rapture of Enoch to heaven.

—The subjects of this rapture were to be Brother Dolcino and his followers. This was not a partial rapture theory because Brother Dolcino considered the Apostolic Brethren to be the true church in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church.

—The purpose of the rapture was to preserve the people from the persecution of the Antichrist.

—The text presents the “transference” of believers to heaven and the “descent” of believers from heaven as two separate events.

—The text also shows that quite a long gap of time must intervene between the rapture of the saints to heaven and the return of the saints from heaven.²³

Gumerlock clearly believes that this is a pre-trib rapture statement. He concludes:

This paragraph from *The History of Brother Dolcino* indicates that in northern Italy in the early fourteenth century a teaching very similar to modern pretribulationism was being preached. Responding to distressing political and ecclesiastical conditions, Dolcino engaged in detailed speculations about eschatology and believed that the coming of the Antichrist was imminent. He also believed that the means by which God would protect His people from the persecution of the Antichrist would be through a translation of the saints to paradise.²⁴

It appears that Joachimist scholar Marjorie Reeves also saw a rapture associated with Dolcino. She says of the Apostolic Brethren: “They would preach the immediate advent of Antichrist, and when he appeared Dolcino and his followers would be removed to Paradise, while Elijah and Enoch descended to combat. When Antichrist was disposed of, they would descend again to convert all nations.”²⁵ The Dolcino statement very well appears to have been some form of a two-stage coming, a rapture followed by a time of tribulation concluding with the prior raptured saints returning at the second coming. However, such a view falls short of Darby’s developed form of a rapture within a dispensational, futurist framework.

THOMAS COLLIER

Frank Marotta, a brethren researcher, believes that Thomas Collier (d. 1691) in 1674 makes reference to a pretribulation rapture, but rejects the view,²⁶ thus showing his

²³ Gumerlock, “A Rapture Citation,” 356–9.

²⁴ Gumerlock, “A Rapture Citation,” 361.

²⁵ Reeves, “Influence of Prophecy,” 246.

²⁶ Frank Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: An Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist* (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1995), 10–2.

awareness that such a view was being taught in the late seventeenth century. Collier in *The Body of Divinity*²⁷ says the following:

7. *Quest.* At what time may we suppose the Saints shall be raised? at his first appearing in the Clouds of Heaven? or at the entrance of the thousand years? or after the thousand years are finished?

Ans. Very probably at the entrance of the 1000 years, and that for these reasons.

1. Because it is not likely that they should be raised before the Nations are subdued and the new Heavens and new Earth prepared.

2. The Scripture saith, that it shall be at the sound of the last Trump, . . . We may groundedly suppose that after Christ's appearing in the work, he may ascend and descend often.²⁸

"Collier certainly *considered* the idea of a pretribulation rapture. If the saints were raised when Christ appears and this is prior the fulfillment of the bulk of Revelation, it is pretribulational" explains Marotta. "Whether anyone actually held to the pretribulational view contemporary to Collier, or this was just an exercise of the mind, we cannot say."²⁹

If this is a pre-trib rapture statement, it was hardly recognized as such at the time. It is true that Collier had a futurist view of Revelation, which was rare to non-existent in his day. As Marotta says, "Collier was clearly posttribulational." Even if this were a pre-trib statement, it had no known impact at the time.

JOHN ASGILL

There is the interesting case of John Asgill (1659–1738), who wrote a book in 1700 about the possibility of translation (i.e. rapture) without seeing death.³⁰ As a result of writing this book, Asgill was removed from the Irish parliament in 1703 and then from the English parliament in 1707. "His book had been examined and pronounced blasphemous, and had been burnt by order of the House without his having been heard in its defense."³¹ Asgill spent the last thirty years of his life in prison because of his book on the rapture. This would tend to throw cold water on anyone desiring to make known their thoughts on the rapture.

²⁷ Thomas Collier, *The Body of Divinity, Or, a Confession of Faith, Being the substance of Christianity: Containing the most Material things relating to Matters both of Faith and Practise* (London: Nath. Crouch, 1674), 606 pages. This writer found a copy at the British Library.

²⁸ Collier, *Body of Divinity*, 585–6.

²⁹ Marotta, *Morgan Edwards*, 10.

³⁰ The entire title of Asgill's work is as follows: *An argument proving, that according to the covenant of Eternal Life revealed in the Scriptures, Man may be translated from hence into that Eternal Life, without passing through Death, although the Human Nature of Christ himself could not be thus translated till he had passed through Death* (London: n. p., 1700), 87 pages. This writer found a copy in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

³¹ William Bramley-Moore, *The Church's Forgotten Hope or, Scriptural Studies on the Translation of the Saints* (Glasgow: Hobbs & Co., 1905), 322.

Asgill did not relate the possible any-moment translation to the tribulation or any other prophetic event. Thus, his view could hardly be call any form of pretribulationism. William Bramley-Moore said, "But he did not hold the truth in its relation to other truths. He was looking for an *individual* translation, on which he expressed himself somewhat strongly, and to which he did not attain; for he failed to understand that the promised change or translation of the saints is not to be that of solitary individuals, but of a corporate body."³²

MORGAN EDWARDS

One of the clearest references to a pretribulation rapture before the time of Darby came from a Welsh Baptist named Morgan Edwards (1722–95). Edwards was born in Trevethin parish, Pontypool, Wales,³³ and likely heard George Whitfield preach as a young student at Trosnant Academy in Trevethin parish, Wales.³⁴ He was a founder of the Ivy League school, Brown University and graduated from Bristol Baptist College or Bristol Academy in Bristol, England in 1744.³⁵ He served several small Baptist congregations in England for seven years, before moving to Cork, Ireland, where he pastored for nine years. Edwards emigrated to America and in May 1761 became pastor of the Baptist Church in Philadelphia in the American colonies,³⁶ upon the recommendation of the famous hyper-Calvinist John Gill (1697–1771).³⁷ After the Revolutionary War (he was the only known Baptist clergy of Tory persuasion), Edwards became an educator and the premier Baptist historian of his day. He was awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree in 1762 by the College of Philadelphia.³⁸ His major work *Materials Toward A History of the Baptists* is an important seminal work outlining American Baptist history of the era.³⁹ Edwards co-founded the first Baptist college in the Colonies, Rhode Island College, which we know today as Brown University of the Ivy League.⁴⁰

As was typical of early American Colonists, Edwards experienced significant tragedy in his life. He outlived two wives and most of his children. During a "dark period" in his life, he ceased attending church, took to drink and was excommunicated from his church. "After making repeated efforts to be restored, he was received into the church on October 6, 1788, and thereafter lived an exemplary life."⁴¹ Baptist historian Robert Torbet described Edwards as "a man of versatility, being both a capable leader for many years and a historian of some importance. In temperament he was eccentric and choleric. . . . With all of his varied gifts, he was always evangelistic in spirit."⁴² Another historian similarly says of Edwards:

³² Bramley-Moore, *Church's Forgotten*, 327.

³³ Thomas R. McKibbens, Jr. and Kenneth L. Smith, *The Life and Works of Morgan Edwards* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 2.

³⁴ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, 5–6.

³⁵ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, 6–10. See also John S. Moore, "Morgan Edwards: Baptist Statesman," *Baptist History and Heritage* (vol. VI; no. 1; January 1971), 24–33; Roger Hayden, "Bristol Baptist College and America," *Baptist History and Heritage* (vol. XIV; no. 4; October 1979), 26–33.

³⁶ "Edwards, Morgan" in John McClintock & James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, XII vols, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981 [1867-87]), III:69.

³⁷ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, 13–4.

³⁸ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, 16.

³⁹ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, 31.

⁴⁰ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, 33–5.

⁴¹ Moore, "Morgan Edwards," 31.

⁴² Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950), 243-44.

Scholarly, laborious, warm-hearted, eccentric, choleric Morgan Edwards, one of the most interesting of the early Baptist ministers of our country and one of those most deserving of honor. His very faults had a leaning toward virtues side, and in good works he was exceeded by none of his day, if indeed by any of any day. . . He was an able preacher and a good man, but not always an easy man to get on with.⁴³

Edwards first wrote about his pre-trib beliefs in 1742⁴⁴ as a student at Bristol College in order to fulfill an assignment. "I will do my possible: and in the attempt will work by a rule you have often recommended, viz. 'to take the scriptures in a literal sense, except when that leads to contradiction or absurdity.' . . . Very able men have already handled the subject in a mystical, or allegorical, or spiritual way."⁴⁵ Edward's work was first written in Latin during his student days (1742), so years later when it was published (1788) he must have translated it into English *verbatim*, thus reflecting his thoughts from 1742.

Historian John Moore, quoting from Rev. William Rogers' sermon at Edwards funeral said, "There was nothing uncommon in Mr. Edwards' person; but he possessed an original genius."⁴⁶ Thus, as an original thinker, Edwards apparently saw his views flowing from a literal reading of the Bible. Also, like Darby, Edwards developed these views early in life. Edwards was between the ages of 20–22, while Darby was about 27 years old. Both men held their view throughout their lives.

Almost a century before Darby developed and popularized a view of the second coming of Christ known as pretribulationism, or the view that Christian believers will be raptured or translated to heaven with Christ before the events of the tribulation, Edwards taught an amazingly similar view. Like Darby, his views on this matter were developed during an early phase of his life.⁴⁷

Edwards saw a distinct rapture three-and-a-half years before the start of the millennium. He taught the following about the rapture:

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

I say, *somewhat more* —, because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's "appearing in the air" (I Thes. iv. 17); and **this will be about three years and a half before the millennium**, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to

⁴³ Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publishing Society, 1907), 232.

⁴⁴ McKibbens and Smith note that Edwards first wrote his work on eschatology in Latin, which is dated at 1742. Edwards attended Bristol College from 1742 till 1744. Edwards says at the beginning of his essay: "Thousand pities, sir, that you had not allotted the task to one of these older and abler students!" This supports the notion that he wrote the essay during his first year at Bristol since he identifies himself as one of the younger students.

⁴⁵ Morgan Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties* (Philadelphia: Dobson and Lang, 1788), 5–6. The English has been modernized. This entire book is available on the Internet at the following address: www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=178.

⁴⁶ Moore, "Morgan Edwards," 33.

⁴⁷ Edwards was between the ages of 20–22, while Darby was about 27 years old. Both men held their view throughout their lives.

paradise, or to some one of those many “mansions in the father’s house” (John xiv. 2), and **disappear during the foresaid period of time**. The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for “now the time is come that judgment must begin,” and that will be “at the house of God” (I Pet. iv. 17).⁴⁸

Edwards makes three key points that are consistent with modern pretribulationism. First, he clearly separates the rapture from the second coming by an interval of three-and-a-half years. Second, he uses modern pre-trib rapture verses (1 Thessalonians 4:17 and John 14:2) to describe the rapture and support his view. Third, he believed the judgment seat of Christ (rewarding) for believers will occur in heaven while the tribulation is raging on earth, as is common in contemporary pretribulationism.

The main difference between modern pretribulationism and Edwards is the time interval of three-and-a-half years between the rapture and the second coming, instead of seven. As was noted earlier,⁴⁹ Jonathan Burnham has pointed out that Darby held to a three and a half year tribulation until 1845. However, this does not mean that Edwards was a midtribulationist, since it appears that he believed the total length of the tribulation was three and a half years.

Edwards reiterates his pretribulational stance when he says:

5. Another event previous to the *Millennium* will be the appearing of the son of man in the clouds, coming to raise the dead saints and change the living, and to catch them up to himself, and then withdraw with them, as observed before.⁵⁰ This event will come to pass when Antichrist be arrived at Jerusalem in his conquest of the world; and about three years and a half before his killing the witnesses and assumption of godhead.⁵¹

It is clear that Edwards separates the rapture and the second coming as seen from the following statements:

8. The last event, and the event that will usher in the *millennium*, will be, the coming of Christ from paradise to earth, with all the saints he had taken up thither (about three years and a half before) to justify, against the accuser of the brethren; and to settle their future businesses and rewards.⁵²

. . . millions and millions of saints will have been on earth from the days of the first Adam, to the coming of the second Adam. All these will Christ bring with him. The place where they will alight is the “mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east.” Zech. xiv, 4.⁵³

Of interest is the fact that Edwards penned 140 handwritten sermons that were never published.⁵⁴ Other than his historical writings and ecclesiastical helps, his essay on Bible prophecy was his only other published work. It is significant that this essay,

⁴⁸ Emphasis added. Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises*, 7.

⁴⁹ See footnote 17.

⁵⁰ Compare with page 7.

⁵¹ Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises*, 21.

⁵² Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises*, 24.

⁵³ Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises*, 25.

⁵⁴ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, iv.

written as a young man, was published and not something else from his later, more mature ministry. This evidences that as an older man he was still interested in the importance of the Lord's return. Thomas McKibbens and Kenneth Smith tell us that during 1788 (the same year that Edward's book containing the rapture was published) "he began to lecture again throughout the Middle Colonies, . . . The lectures were probably based upon subjects contained in two books published in 1788, *Res Sacrae: An Academical Exercise Composed in Latin in the Year 1742; and Now Translated into English* and *Two Academical Exercises on the Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium and Last-Novelties.*"⁵⁵

Such a preaching tour would indicate that Edward's pretribulationism was likely spread to some extent throughout Baptists, at least in the Middle Colonies. However, Baptists were not numerous in the earliest days of America,⁵⁶ so it likely had a limited impact. Also, the book only went through one printing, demonstrating that there was not great demand. Nevertheless, Edwards' work on Bible prophecy did have some circulation and exposed some early Americans to many of the ideas that would come to dominate Evangelicalism a century later.

Edward's book on the rapture was essentially lost as far as any popular, public knowledge of it. It came to light in the 1990s in order to satisfy a challenge made by Pre-trib opponent John Bray who promised to pay \$500.00 to anyone "who will furnish me with a documented statement by anybody (in a sermon, article or commentary) in any country, published BEFORE LACUNZA'S TIME," which would be 1812.⁵⁷ Bray acknowledged that the Edwards material satisfied his challenge and on March 21, 1995 he mailed a \$500.00 check to an individual who showed him Edward's book.⁵⁸

Edward's pre-Darby rapture statements are increasingly recognized by the scholarly world. Burnham in his Oxford University Ph. D. thesis said, "Darby was certainly not the first theologian to advance pretribulation premillennialism. As a recent study has revealed, Morgan Edwards, the founder of Brown University in Rhode Island, has articulated the concept during the eighteenth century, well before Darby and contemporaries."⁵⁹

This writer searched about a dozen of the leading libraries in the United Kingdom in person and could not find a single copy of Edward's book.⁶⁰ Not even the British Library had a copy. Further, this writer searched the online catalogues of every library

⁵⁵ McKibbens and Smith, *Morgan Edwards*, 51.

⁵⁶ William Henry Allison, "Baptist Councils in America: A Historical Study of Their Origin and the Principles of their Development," (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1906), 20-6.

⁵⁷ John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, 1982), 31. Lacunza is a reference to the Jesuit Priest Manuel de Lacunza (1731-1801), who wrote under the pseudonym of Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, a converted Jew, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, Translated from The Spanish, with a preliminary Discourse, by The Rev. Edward Irving, A. M., 2 vols. (London: L. B. Seeley and Son, 1827).

⁵⁸ John L. Bray, *Morgan Edwards and the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching (1788)* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, 1995), 15.

⁵⁹ Burnham, "The Controversial Relationship," 129.

⁶⁰ Libraries personally searched in the U. K. include the following: The British Library in London, The Bodleian Library in Oxford, The Cambridge University Library, Kings College in London, The Queens College in London, The University of London Library, The University of Wales, Lampeter, The New College Library at the University of Edinburgh, The University of Glasgow in Scotland, Trinity College in Dublin Ireland. Not even Bristol Baptist College where Edwards attended had a copy of his book on eschatology. However, with the help of the librarian at the University of Wales, Lampeter, we were able to locate a copy at the Scottish National Library in Edinburgh on microfilm. Thus, it may still be true that there is not an actual copy of the book in the libraries of the entire U. K.

in the U. K. that had an electronic catalogue and did not find a single copy listed. However, a copy was easily found in the United States where it had been published. This writer was able to get a photocopy of the book at the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C.⁶¹ Even though Edward's view of the rapture is similar at many points to what Darby developed, there does not appear to be any reliance by Darby on American sources. It is interesting that Edwards developed his view in Britain, but he does not appear to have left any traces of it behind.⁶²

CONCLUSION

A history of the rapture is much more sophisticated and varied than one might initially think. The Pseudo-Ephraem document, Brother Dolcino, and Morgan Edwards could very well fit into some form of a pretribulational rapture. However, other suggested candidates either simply refer to the single second coming or the pre-conflagration view of Joseph Mede, which is dealt with in a separate paper.

ⁱ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 15-16.

ⁱⁱ Norman L. Geisler, "Review of Hank Hanegraaff's *The Apocalypse Code*," www.ses.edu/NormGeisler/ReviewApocalypseCode.html.

⁶¹ In addition to the Library of Congress, Bray cites the following libraries in the U. S. that have Edward's eschatology work: Ambrose Swasey Library, Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, NY; American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, NY; The John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, RI; Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, TN; the Library at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. Bray, *Morgan Edwards*, 8.

⁶² This writer personally visited Bristol Baptist College in Bristol, England and inquired about their former student, Morgan Edwards. While the school did have a record of his attendance there as a student, they had no copies of any of his work from his student days, nor did they have any of his published works. Edwards would likely have received back the only hand-written copy of his eschatology paper (1742) that he would have published later in Philadelphia (1788).