

Pretribulation Rapture Taught Early On – Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D. Ph.D.

In his 1975 book *The Incredible Rapture Cover-up*, Dave McPherson charged that John Nelson Darby (1801-1882 AD) was the first to formulate the concept of a pretribulation rapture. Over time several attempts have been made to locate a “source” for Darby’s concept of the rapture. These attempts imply that Darby’s concepts originated from a “false” (demonic) source.

Samuel Prideaux Tregelles alleged that John Nelson Darby’s concept was taken from one of the charismatic utterances in one Edward Irving’s church.¹ Since Tregelles regarded the utterances as “pretending to be from God,” his implication was that Darby’s rapture views were from a demonic source.

Dave MacPherson built upon Tregelles’s accusation and claimed the source for Darby’s 1820 fabricated rapture was from an utterance of a young 15 year-old Scottish girl named Margaret MacDonald who supposedly had fallen into a trance and received a vision. But as we shall show, this doctrine is not a new and recent teaching by John Nelson Darby. Darby, a chief founder of the Plymouth Brethren denomination, merely revived, systematized, clarified, and popularized the doctrine.

To begin with, it is clear that Darby regarded Margaret MacDonald’s 1830 charismatic manifestations as demonic and not of God.² Darby would never have borrowed an idea from a source that he clearly believed was demonic.³ Also Darby’s pretribulation rapture views had already been written out in January 1827, three years prior to the 1830 events and the MacDonald utterance.⁴

Moreover, although some say MacDonald’s statements show her to hold a post-tribulation position (“being the fiery trial which is to try us” and “for the purging and purifying of the real members of the body of Jesus”),^{5,6} MacDonald said her vision revealed a mid-tribulation rapture of only the most holy.⁷ For these and other reasons, nearly all scholars consider MacPherson’s alleged connection to dispensationalism as untenable.⁸

¹ A Scottish clergyman who, in 1830, became over enamored with the revival in a remote corner of Scotland of the apostolic gifts of prophecy and healing which he had already in 1828 persuaded himself had only been kept in abeyance by the absence of faith. In 1832, he founded the Holy Catholic Apostolic Church and died in 1834.

² Wilkinson, Paul Richard (2007). *For Zion’s Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Paternoster Pub.) pp. 192-193.

³ MacPherson acknowledges that Darby knew this. MacPherson argues that Darby knew the demonic origin of the rapture but still incorporated it into his theology. MacPherson also argued that there existed a conspiracy among dispensationalist leaders in order to “cover up” the fact that Darby supposedly borrowed the idea from MacDonald.

⁴ Bray, John L. (1992), *The origin of the pre-tribulation rapture teaching*, (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, Inc.) pp. 24-25

⁵ Bray, *Ibid.*, p. 28

⁶ Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-196.

⁷ J.R. Church, *Prophecy in the News*, (April, 1995) p. 27.

⁸ Walvoord, John F (1990), *Blessed hope and the tribulation*, p. 47. Dr. Walvoord (Dallas Theological Seminary) concluded that any careful student of Darby soon discovers that he did not get his eschatological views from men but rather from his doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, a concept no one claims was revealed supernaturally to Irving or Macdonald. Darby’s views undoubtedly were gradually formed, but they were theologically and biblically based rather than derived from Irving’s pre-Pentecostal group.

Actually, the early church leaders believed and taught a pretribulation rapture as well as its imminency – meaning that the rapture could occur at any moment without notice. Hence, if anything at all (e.g., the tribulation) has to take place before the rapture, then it neither is nor cannot be imminent.

Two proofs of this are offered.⁹ The first is the non-canonical book *The Shepherd of Hermes*, which was found along with the famous (infamous) Sinaiticus Aleph (Hebrew designation = א) uncial manuscript at the St. Catherine monastery near the foot of Mt. Sinai in 1844 by Constantine von Tischendorf. The work was published in Rome in AD 110 (although some follow J.B. Lightfoot and date it circa. 140-155).

Hermas tells of a vision which relates to the Tribulation (vs. 1). He goes on to say: “I saw a great beast” as large as a whale some 100 feet high (cp. to the beast of Revelation 13). The “beast had upon its head four colors” (similar to the colors of the four horsemen in Revelation 6).¹⁰ After an angel sent from the Lord shut the mouth of the beast and helped Hermas get away, the author moved forward some 30 feet and met a virgin dressed in white. She tells him that he has escaped that great trial (tribulation) because he kept his faith and did not doubt, even at the sight of such a terrible monster. The white dressed virgin next tells him to go and declare to God’s elect the story of his great deliverance from the creature by the hand of the Lord. Moreover, that his trial with the beast was a figure or type of the great tribulation that is yet to come and that he and those who repent will escape it,¹¹ just as God made a way for him to escape the great beast.

Even though the above is but a supposed vision in a non-canonical, non-inspired work, Hermes does at least show that the prevailing theology of one of the more prominent theologians¹² who wrote only a few short years after the apostle John’s Revelation was that of a pretribulation escape or rapture. Indeed, it would seem that Hermas’ views resulted from his having read the Book of Revelation.

The second example is a heretofore obscure AD 376 small book written by Ephraim the Syrian entitled *Antichrist and the End of the World*, which was only recently translated into English. In it, Ephraim writes: “We ought to understand thoroughly...what is imminent...Already there have been hungers and plagues, violent movements of nations and sins, which have been predicted by the Lord. Prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ so that He may draw us from the confusion which overwhelms the world. ...the coming of the Lord is nigh.”¹³

“Because all Saints and the elect of the Lord are gathered together before the Tribulation which is about to come and are taken to the Lord in order that they may

⁹ See Grant R. Jeffrey’s 1996 book *Final Warning*, cited by J.R. Church, *Prophecy in the News*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ I Hermas, Vision IV, vv. 8 & 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vv. 19 & 28.

¹² A number of ancient sources attribute the work to a Hermas who was a brother of Pius I, the Bishop of Rome from 140 to 155. Despite much speculation, the author remains unknown.

¹³ All citations of Ephraim’s have been taken from: J.R. Church, *Prophecy in the News*, *op. cit.* p. 28.

not see at anytime the confusion that overwhelms the world because of our sins. ...it is the eleventh hour, and the end of this world...When therefore the end of he world comes, that abominable, lying, and murderous one is born from the tribe of Dan...he orders the Temple of God to be rebuilt for himself which is in Jerusalem who after coming into it, he shall sit as God in order that he may be adored by all nations.”

“Then...the holy city shall be trampled on by the nations for 42 months. Just as the holy apostle says in the Apocalypse which becomes 3 and ½years—1260 days. Then when the 3 and ½years have been completed, the time of antichrist through which he will have seduced the world, after the resurrection of the two prophets...will come the sign of the son of man...the Lord shall appear with great power and much majesty...”

Ephraim goes on to say: “Even as Daniel prophesied concerning them saying, ‘after two and sixty weeks Christ shall be slain and the city of holiness shall be laid waste until the completion of things decreed.”

We note that as far back as AD 376 Ephraim the Syrian was neither impressed nor deceived by the writings of the Roman theologians, Origen (185-254) and Augustine (354-425). Origen was the first to turn from a literal interpretation of the Bible and espouse an allegorical method of exegesis. He corrupted early Christian theology in Rome with the view that Gentile Christianity had replaced the Jews as God’s chosen People. Origen believed that God was finished with Israel and had instead turned over their inheritances, which He had promised to the OT Patriarchs, to the church.

Augustine followed Origen’s theology and developed the allegorical view into a dogma that has dominated European Christianity until this very day. However, a literal view of Scripture plainly points to Israel as the heir to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.

Moreover, the above citations reveal Ephraim as a Biblicists who undeniably taught a pretribulation rapture as far back as AD 376. Thus, the doctrine was not invented by John Nelson Darby in AD 1820. Again, Darby simply revived, systematized, clarified, and popularized the doctrine. Furthermore, a systematic, prayerful examination of the Scriptures themselves will disclose the teaching to those who are open minded.