

Examining an Ancient Pre-Trib Rapture Statement

by Thomas Ice

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. -Pseudo-Ephraem (c. 374-627)

Critics of pretribulationism sometimes state that belief in the rapture is a doctrinal development of recent origin. They argue 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. One of the most vocal and sensational critics of the rapture is Dave MacPherson, who argues that, "during the first 18 centuries of the Christian era, believers were never 'Rapture separators' [sic]; they never separated the minor Rapture aspect of the Second Coming of Christ from the Second Coming itself."¹

A second critic, John Bray, also vehemently opposes a pretribulationist rapture, writing, "this teaching is not a RECOVERY of truth once taught and then neglected. No, it never was taught- for 1800 years nearly no one knew anything about such a scheme."² More recently, pre-trib opponent Robert Van Kampen proclaimed, "The pretribulationist rapture position with its dual parousias was unheard of in church history prior to 1830."³ In our previous issue of Pre-Trib Perspectives, I noted that pre-wrath advocate Marvin Rosenthal has also joined the chorus.⁴

Christian reconstructionists have also consistently and almost universally condemned premillennialism and pretribulationism, favoring instead, postmillennialism. One sample of their prolific and often vitriolic opposition can be seen in Gary North's derisive description of the rapture as "the Church's hoped-for Escape Hatch on the world's sinking ship," which he, like MacPherson, believes was invented in 1830.⁵

How to Find the Rapture in History

Is pretribulationism as theologically bankrupt as its critics profess, or are there answers to these charges? If there are reasonable answers, then the burden of proof and historical argumentation shifts back to the critics. Rapture critics must acknowledge and interact with the historical and theological evidence.

Rapture critic William Bell has formulated three criteria for establishing the validity of a historical citation regarding the rapture. If any of his three criteria are met, then he acknowledges it is "of crucial importance, if found, whether by direct statement or clear inference." As will be seen, the Pseudo-Ephraem sermon meets not one, but two of his canons, namely, "Any mention that Christ's second coming was to consist of more than one phase, separated by an interval of years," and "any mention that Christ was to remove the church from the earth before the tribulation period."⁶

Pseudo-Ephraem's Rapture Statement

I vividly remember the phone call at my office late one afternoon from Canadian prophecy teacher and writer **Grant Jeffrey**.⁷ He told me that he had found an ancient pre-trib rapture statement. I said, "Let's hear it." He read the following to me over the phone:

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.

I said that it sure sounds like a pre-trib statement and began to fire at him all the questions I have since received many times when telling others about the statement from Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*.⁸ Grant's phone call started me on journey through many of the substantial libraries throughout the Washington, D.C. area in an effort to learn all I could about this historically significant statement. The more information I acquired led me to conclude that Grant is right to conclude that this is a pre-trib rapture statement of antiquity.

Who is Pseudo-Ephraem?

The word "Pseudo" (Greek for false) is a prefix attached by scholars to the name of a famous historical person or book of the Bible when one writes using that name. Pseudo-Ephraem claims that his sermon was written by Ephraem of Nisibis (306-73), considered to be the greatest figure in the history of the Syrian church. He was well-known for his poetics, rejection of rationalism, and confrontations with the heresies of Marcion, Mani, and the Arians. As a poet, exegete, and theologian, his style was similar to that of the Jewish midrashic and targumic traditions and he favored a contemplative approach to spirituality. So popular were his works that in the fifth and sixth centuries he was adopted by several Christian communities as a spiritual father and role model. His many works, some of doubtful authenticity, were soon translated from Syriac into Greek, Armenian, and Latin.

It is not at all unreasonable to expect that a prolific and prominent figure such as Ephraem would have writings ascribed to him. While there is little support for Ephraem as the author of the *Sermon on the End of the World*, Caspari and Alexander have demonstrated that Pseudo-Ephraem was "heavily influenced by the genuine works of Ephraem."⁹ What is more difficult, though secondary to the main purpose of this article, is determining the exact date, purpose, location of, and extent of subsequent editorial changes to the sermon.¹⁰

Suggestions on the date of the writing of the original sermon range from as early as Wilhelm Bousset's 373 date,¹¹ to Caspari's estimation of sometime between 565 and 627.¹² Paul Alexander, after reviewing all the argumentation, favors a date for the final form similar to that suggested by Caspari,¹³ but Alexander also states simply, "It will indeed not be easy to decide on the matter."¹⁴ All are clear that it had to have been written before the advent of Islam.

Pseudo-Ephraem's Sermon

The sermon consists of just under 1500 words, divided into ten sections and has been preserved in four Latin manuscripts. Three of these date from the eighth century and ascribe the sermon to

Ephraem. A fourth manuscript from the ninth century, claims not Ephraem, but Isidore of Seville (d. 636) as author.¹⁵ Additionally, there are subsequent Greek and Syriac versions of the sermon which have raised questions regarding the language of the original manuscript. On the basis of lexical analysis and study of the biblical citations within the sermon with Latin, Greek, and Syriac versions of the Bible, Alexander believed it most probable that the homily was composed in Syriac, translated first into Greek, and then into Latin from the Greek.¹⁶ Regardless of the original language, the vocabulary and style of the extant copies are consistent with the writings of Ephraem and his era. It appears likely that the sermon was written near the time of Ephraem and underwent slight change during subsequent copying.

What is most significant for present-day readers is the fact that the sermon was popular enough to be translated into several languages fairly soon after its composition. The significance of the sermon for us today is that it represents a prophetic view of a pre-trib rapture within the orthodox circles of its day.

The sermon is built around the three themes of the title **On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World** and proceeds chronologically. The fact that the pre-trib statement occurs in section 2, while the antichrist and tribulation are developed throughout the middle sections, followed by Christ's second coming to the earth in the final section supports a pre-trib sequence. This characteristic of the sermon fits the first criteria outlined by William Bell, namely "that Christ's second coming was to consist of more than one phase, separated by an interval of years." Thus, phase one is the rapture statement from section 2; the interval of 3 1/2 years, 42 months, and 1,260 days, said to be the tribulation in sections 7 and 8; the second phase of Christ's return is noted in section 10 and said to take place "when the three and a half years have been completed."¹⁷

Why Pseudo-Ephraem's Statement is Pretribulational

After learning of Pseudo-Ephraem's rapture statement, I shared it with a number of colleagues. My favorite approach was to simply read the statement, free of any introductory remarks, and ask what they thought. Every person, whether pre-trib or not, concluded that it was some kind of pre-trib statement. A few thought it was a statement from such pre-trib proponents like John Walvoord or Charles Ryrie. Most noted the clear statement concerning the removal of believers before the tribulation as a reason for thinking the statement pre-trib. This is Bell's second criteria for identifying a pre-trib statement from the past, namely, "any mention that Christ was to remove the church from the earth before the tribulation period." Note the following reasons why this should be taken as a pre-trib statement:

1) Section 2 of the sermon begins with a statement about **imminency**: "We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, what is imminent [Latin "immineat"] or overhanging."¹⁸ This is similar to the modern pre-trib view of imminency and considering the subsequent rapture statements supports a pre-trib scenario.

2) As I break down the rapture statement, notice the following observations: "All the saints and elect of God are gathered . . ." Gathered where? A later clause says they "are taken to the Lord." Where is the Lord? Earlier in the paragraph the sermon speaks of "the meeting of the Lord

Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion. . ." Thus the movement is from the earth toward the Lord who is apparently in heaven. Once again, in conformity to a translation scenario found in the pre-trib teaching.

The next phrase says that the gathering takes place "prior to the tribulation that is to come. . ." so we see that the event is pretribulational and the tribulation is future to the time in which Pseudo-Ephraem wrote.

The purpose for the gathering was so that they would not "see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of their sins." Here we have the purpose of the tribulation judgments stated and that was to be a time of judgment upon the world because of their sin, thus, the church was to be taken out.

3) Finally, the Byzantine scholar Paul Alexander clearly believed that Pseudo-Ephraem was teaching what we call today a pre-trib rapture. According to Alexander, most Byzantine apocalypses were concerned with how Christians would survive the time of severe persecution by Antichrist. The normal approach given by other apocalyptic texts was a shortening of the time to three and a half years, enabling the survival of some Christians.¹⁹ Unlike those texts, this sermon has Christians being removed from the time of tribulation. Alexander observed:

It is probably no accident that Pseudo-Ephraem does not mention the shortening of the time intervals for the Antichrist's persecution, for if prior to it the Elect are 'taken to the Lord,' i.e., participate at least in some measure in beatitude, there is no need for further mitigating action on their behalf. The Gathering of the Elect according to Pseudo-Ephraem is an alternative to the shortening of the time intervals.²⁰

Conclusion

Regardless of what else the writer of this sermon believed, he did believe that all believers would be removed before the tribulation—a pre-trib rapture view. Thus, we have seen that those who have said that there was no one before 1830 who taught the pre-trib rapture position will have to revise their statements by well over 1,000 years. This statement does not prove the pre-trib position, only the Bible can do that, but it should change many people's historical views on the matter.