THE PRE-CONFLAGRATION RAPTURE:
An Early Medieval Eschatological Position
and Its Relation to the History of Pretribulationism

in the program booklet as

“Thomas Aquinas on the Rapture”

by

FRANCIS GUMERLOCK

of

SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

54TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE
EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY
REGAL CONSTELLATION HOTEL
TORONTO, ONTARIO
NOVEMBER 20-22, 2002
INTRODUCTION

Pretribulationism is a view held by many evangelicals which says that when God pours out His wrath upon the world at the end of time, His people will be unharmed. The means by which God will deliver His people is the rapture, when the dead in Christ shall rise, and living saints are caught up to meet Christ in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). This position generally holds that the judgments unleashed upon the earth, which are described in Revelation 6-18, are going to last seven years. This period, called the Tribulation, is often equated with the seventieth week of Daniel (Dan 9:24-27). By being raptured from the earth at the beginning of this seven-year period, the saints will be protected when God pours out His judgment upon the earth. The raptured saints will reside with Christ in heaven, after which they will return to earth with Him, participate in the destruction of the Antichrist, and usher in the millennial kingdom.

Does medieval eschatology have anything substantial to offer twenty-first century evangelicals in understanding the historical development of this view of the end times? This paper holds that it does. It presents a view of the rapture that was popular in the Latin speaking West between the fourth and the eleventh centuries. Bringing it into dialogue with pretribulationism it will show that both views share a commonality. That is, that the purpose of the rapture is to keep the saints from being harmed by the judgment of God poured forth upon the world.
THE HISTORY OF PRETRIBULATIONISM

Although almost twenty centuries of history have passed since Christianity’s beginnings, some treatments of the history of pretribulationism cover less than two centuries. They usually start in the early nineteenth century and work their way to the present. Either John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) or Margaret Macdonald, both from the British Isles, are portrayed as the founders of the belief that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation.¹ After discussing pretribulationism’s beginnings, its spread to North America is traced through Darby’s visits to the States, various prophecy conferences,² the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible,³ and the success of Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series.

The narratives are informative, but suffer from a serious inadequacy. Historically they are too narrowly focused. Do the concepts that make up pretribulationism have a history of less than two hundred years? Or does the eschatology of the first eighteen centuries of Christianity contain ideas and interpretations of Scripture that can substantially contribute to understanding pretribulationism, and not simply by way of contrast?

Answering these questions often involves competing theological agenda. It is no secret that both opponents and advocates of pretribulationism have used its history as a theological battering ram. Discovering pretribulationism’s “origin” in Darby or Margaret Macdonald allows opponents to label it as a theological novelty and thus scare people away from it, since most Christians regard novelty as synonymous with heresy. For
advocates, on the other hand, finding pretribulationism in church history before the nineteenth century them of the charge of embracing a novel doctrine, and fortifies them in the belief that pretribulationism is truly the faith of the fathers.4

The theological controversy has shown that many people remain unconvinced by claims that pretribulationism is entirely novel and was simply pulled out of thin air in the 1820’s. As a result, persons from various theological traditions have engaged themselves in examining Christian literature prior to the nineteenth century. The intention is to bring information from the Christianity’s past that will inform people in the present about the historical development of concepts related to pretribulationism. Their research has elucidated fascinating parallels with elements of pretribulationism in the writings of several famous seventeenth and eighteenth century theologians. These include Joseph Mede,5 Increase Mather,6 Cotton Mather,7 John Gill,8 and Morgan Edwards.9 Finds like these over the past two decades have added much needed breadth to the history of pretribulationism.

CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME FROM MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY?

These finds of parallels with pretribulationism in earlier Protestantism are fine and well, but what can Catholicism of the dark ages possibly contribute to the history of pretribulationism? Several factors may lead one to think, “Not very much.” First, by the fifth century, most exegetes of the Book of Revelation had discarded a futuristic view of the Apocalypse for a more ecclesiastical view.10 They did not see the visions of chapters
six through eighteen strictly in terms of judgments that will take place in the Tribulation. They believed that the images also referred to past events (like the Roman persecutions and Arianism) and current struggles taking place in their Church.

Secondly, early medieval commentators on Revelation often applied Tyconius’ sixth rule of Biblical interpretation, that of “recapitulation,” set forth in his Book of Rules. Tyconius was a fourth century African Donatist, whose seven rules of biblical interpretation were widely upheld. The sixth rule said that a biblical writer sometimes returns to something about which he had previously omitted. The Apocalypse, therefore, is not necessarily a chronological presentation. One and the same historical event-- the resurrection for instance--might be symbolized in chapter eight, in chapter eleven, and in chapter twenty.

Thirdly, most early medieval commentators did not follow Hippolytus (d. 235) in his belief that Daniel’s seventieth week (Dan 9:24-27) awaited future fulfillment. Rather, they held that all of Daniel’s seventy weeks were completed by the first coming of Christ or by the end of the first century. This being the case, one would not expect to find in their writings a placement of the rapture before the seventieth week of Daniel.

Fourthly, most were amillennial. Consequently, when the end-time scenarios of modern pretribulationists, who are almost all premillennial, are place aside those of early medieval theologians, the latter’s are shorter by a thousand years. Such compacting of the details of the eschaton, therefore, diminishes the likelihood of a large gap of time

5
between the rapture and the revelation.\textsuperscript{16}

Fifth and finally, based on Revelation 12, many believed that Michael the Archangel, not Jesus, would come down from heaven and kill the Antichrist.\textsuperscript{17} This left no need for the saints to return to earth once they are raptured. There is no need for them to return to populate the earth in the millennium, because there is no millennium. There is no need to come back with Christ to kill the Antichrist, since Michael will do this. The saints do not even need to come back to earth with Christ for the Last Judgment, because in their minds the Last Judgment will take place in the air above the earth.\textsuperscript{18}

With these major presuppositional differences between early medieval eschatology and modern pretribulationism, it is no wonder that medieval Christianity has largely been passed over in the histories.

**RAPTURE THEOLOGY EAST AND WEST**

One aspect of early medieval eschatology, however, that directly relates to the history of pretribulationism is the *purpose* for which the rapture exists. That the Christians alive at the End of the world would be caught up in the clouds to meet Christ in the air, everyone acknowledged, for the prophets, Christ, and the Apostles had taught it.\textsuperscript{19} But *why* will people at the End of the world be caught up to meet Christ in the air? Eastern and Western Christians of the early middle ages answered this question differently.
Eastern Christians, when discussing the purpose of the rapture, tended to emphasise honor. John Chrysostom (d. 409), for example, likened the rapture to two examples of honorific events in ancient daily life. The rapture, he preached to his congregation at Constantinople, is similar to when an ancient king was traveling to a city.\(^{20}\) Those who held positions of honor in the munipality would go out to welcome the king before his arrival into the city proper. Or the rapture, he said, was similar to when an affectionate father was coming back from a long journey. His children, or those worthy to be his children, would have the honor of getting in a chariot and going out to meet him and kiss him.\(^{21}\) According to Eastern understanding, God’s purpose for the rapture was to honor His people by allowing them to ride the clouds as a chariot, as Christ would descend from heaven.

While Western theologians certainly did not deny that believers will be honored in the rapture, they tended to emphasize another purpose for the rapture. For them one of its main purposes was to escape God’s judgment when it is poured out upon unbelievers at the end of the world. This judgment, however, was not depicted in terms of the vials, bowls, and trumpets of the Book of Revelation as it is in modern pretribulationism. This judgment would come in the form of “the greatest and highest fire” ever—the grand conflagration.\(^{22}\) This, they said, the Apostle Peter taught in 2 Peter 3:10 writing, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” Based on passages in the Psalms, they believed that this fire would directly
precede Christ’s Second Coming, as it is written, “Fire devours before Him” (Ps. 50:3-5) and “Fire goes before Him and burns up His adversaries round about” (Ps 97:3).

RISING ABOVE THE FIRE

For Western Christians, therefore, one of the main purposes of the rapture was to remove the elect so that they would not be burned in the conflagration. Hilary of Poitiers (d. 368) illustrated this, speaking of the rapture as a separation between believers and unbelievers, which “when God’s wrath is kindled, the saints shall be gathered into His garner, and the unbelievers shall be left as fuel for the fire from heaven.” Paschasius Radbertus (d. 865), carrying Hilary’s thought into the Carolingian era, taught similarly. At the rapture, he wrote, “the one who seeks the things that are of God will be taken, but the one who seeks the things that are of the world will be left in the fire.”

Concerning the protection from the conflagration that God will provide, Augustine (d. 430) wrote that He would keep His people unharmed by changing their locality. The Lord will preserve them, he said, “in the upper regions into which the flame of that conflagration shall not ascend, as neither did the water of the flood.” Julian of Toledo (d. 690) repeated these words of Augustine verbatim.

The Revelation commentary of pseudo-Alcuin, written in the eighth or ninth century, said that the clouds themselves in which Christ would return and into which believers will be raptured would act as a protective barrier, defending the saints from being harmed by the conflagration. The tenth or eleventh-century Lismore version of
the *Life of St. Brendan* also recorded the concept of divine protection from the conflagration through the rapture. It said that as the ark of Noah was lifted over the waves, so God “will raise up his monks and his household on high over the Fire of Doom, so that neither smoke nor mist nor spark will hurt them.”

The Venerable Bede (d. 735) also vividly illustrated how early medieval Western Christians associated the rapture with salvation from the conflagration. Contrasting those who will be left behind and surrounded by fire with those who will be caught up above the earth to meet Christ, he writes,

For it stands that when the Lord descends for the judgment “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor 15:52), and the celebrated judgment of all of the dead will take place, the saints are immediately caught up to meet Him in the air. For this is understood, as the apostle indicates when he says, “Then the Lord Himself with a command and with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God will descend from heaven, and the dead who are in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:15-16). However, it is asked whether the reprobate will then be sublimely lifted up to meet the coming Judge, or whether they will be weighed down with the merits of sins, so that although having immortal bodies, they will be unable to be elevated to higher places . . . But then if that greatest and highest fire will cover the whole surface of the earth, and the unjust, raised from the dead, will be unable to be caught up into heaven, it stands that those positioned on earth will await the sentence of the Judge surrounded by fire.

Bede then distinguished the fire of the conflagration from the fire of eternal hell into which those left behind eventually would be cast. It was not uncommon for theologians of the period to make a point of distinguishing the various fires related to the eschaton. Bruno the Carthusian (d. 1101) did so in his commentary on Psalm 50:3, in which he also spoke of preservation of the saints from the conflagration by means of the rapture. He wrote,
Appearing in majesty, He [Christ] will take vengeance upon those who shall neglect His first coming in humility. But how He will take vengeance is explained in this way: truly “He will not be silent;” for fire will burn the elements in His sight, that is, in His presence. However, it should be asked whether this fire will be that eternal fire in which afterward the impious will be tortured without end? Peter affirmed that in the resurrection of the dead, this fire will reach the heights of the air as far as the Flood ascended (2 Peter 3:10-12). By this fire all the pollution of the air will be expiated. And through this fire the bodies of the faithful, joined with their souls just as they are now, with the greatest swiftness and without harm will hasten to meet the Lord in the air for judgment. Accordingly, Paul wrote, “We shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:17). But the impious, with the bulk of the weight of their sins bringing much harm on themselves, will go forth to judgment and be sent into the torment of everlasting fire.\(^{30}\)

THE QUESTION OF TIMING

Since modern pretribulationism portrays those left behind on earth at the rapture as suffering the judgment of God on earth for seven years, the question of timing must be raised. For early medieval writers, how long would unbelievers be left behind on earth before the Last Judgment, at which time they will be relegated to hell for eternity? That some time is involved is clear from at least one writer of the period. Haymo taught,

Only the just will go out to meet the Lord, carried in the air by angels, just as in another place the same apostle says, ‘We shall be caught up to meet Christ in the air’ (1 Thess 4:17). But the impious will remain on earth until the time when they hear that terrible sentence of the Judge: ‘Go ye, cursed, into eternal fire’ (Matt 25:41).\(^{31}\)

By saying “until the time” (quousque in Latin), Haymo acknowledged that the impious will be on earth for a length of time, but he did not specify its duration. Indication of its length can only be gathered from early medieval descriptions of the activities in which those left behind on earth will be engaged. Venantius Fortunatus (d. 610) wrote that those not caught up in the clouds to meet Christ will call upon the rocks to cover them (cf. Rev 6:15-16),\(^{32}\) and Haymo says that those left behind will see their enemies (the
believers) glorified (cf. Rev. 11:12). Interestingly, these activities are based upon passages in the middle of the Book of Revelation, which modern pretribulationists associate with the Tribulation. However, because of the hermeneutical principles already mentioned, it cannot be assumed that these authors held that unbelievers would be left behind on earth for seven years.

Since, the activities described—calling on rocks and seeing the glorification of the raptured—do not require any significant length of time, it is probably most accurate to assume that early medieval exegetes did not envision of gap of years, or even months, between the rapture and the Last Judgment. With respect to timing, therefore, the “pre-conflagration rapture” view of early medieval Christianity does not seem to mirror modern pretribulationism.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Western theologians of the early middle ages held what may be called a “pre-conflagration rapture” position. It differs from Eastern exegesis, which emphasized the rapture’s purpose as honorific. It differs from modern pretribulationism, which connects the rapture with the Tribulation described in the Book of Revelation and associated with Daniel’s seventieth week. For preconflagrationists, the judgment of God out of which believers will be caught up is the fire preceding Christ’s Second Coming and mentioned in 2 Peter. The early medieval view also differs from modern pretribulationism with respect to timing. Early Western exegetes gave little indication of a belief that those left behind on earth would remain here for years
experiencing God’s wrath, before their final sentence of judgment.

However, this early medieval view does offer a significant parallel with pretribulationism with respect to the purpose of the rapture. Like modern pretribulationists, key theologians of early medieval Christianity held that the rapture will be God’s means of preserving His people from the wrath coming upon the world in the form a great fire. To escape this conflagration, the elect will be caught up from the earth and meet Christ in the air, while the reprobate will be left behind. The gravity and weight of their sins will not allow them to rise, and they will suffer horrific consequences. Believers, on the other hand, having risen over the fire, will be preserved, completely unharmed by the flames of the Fire of Doomsday.

Breaking out of the narrow paradigm of nineteenth-century British eschatology, several studies have shown that medieval eschatology can significantly inform the history of pretribulationism. One has brought to the attention of evangelicals the seventh-century sermon of pseudo-Ephraem, which speaks of believers being gathered to the Lord before the Tribulation. Another has shown that a fourteenth-century Italian sect held that God would protect His people from the Antichrist through a translation to Paradise. This paper has demonstrated that another element of pretribulationism was taught for centuries in the early middle ages. That is, that the rapture is the means by which God will deliver His people from end-time wrath.


5 Arthur W. Wainwright, Mysterious Apocalypsis: Interpreting the Book of Revelation. 1993. Reprint. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 83. “Mede had mentioned the possibility of a rapture before the tribulation but had not committed himself to the doctrine.” Wainwright cites as evidence The Works of the Pious and Profoundly Learned Joseph Mede, B.D. 2 vols. (London: James Flesher, 1664), 2:949-51; Huebner, Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J.N. Darby, 184 cites a passage from Mede which reads, “I will add this more, namely, what may be conceived to be the cause of this Rapture of the Saints on high to meet the Lord in the Clouds, rather than to wait his coming on the Earth. What if it be, that they may be preserved during the Conflagration of the earth and the works thereof, 2 Peter 3,10. That as Noah and his family were preserved from the Deluge by being lifted up above the water in the Ark, so should the Saints at the Conflagration be lift [sic] up in the Clouds unto their Ark, Christ, to be preserved there from the deluge of fire, wherein the wicked shall be consumed.” Ehleht, Brethren Writers, 39. “From o says that William Cumnighan in 1832 opposed Irving’s futurism, but did accept the rapture (however, not its secret aspect) before the tribulation. This he claims to have gotten from Joseph Mede (Cumingham, A Dissertation on the Seals and Trumpets, London, 1813, p. 461n, 480-82, 496n). I spent half an afternoon on Mede’s passage (Works, bk. 4, Epistle 22) but am not sure one would be justified in holding that Mede believed in a pretribulation rapture, at least not in the presently held sense. His statements are nonetheless intriguing. He says he got the idea from the Jews and cites the Gemara, Abodah Zarah, 1, which may also be the source for a similar idea in the first nine verses of the third chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.”


15 This statement is not meant to imply that Hippolytus placed the rapture before the seventieth week of Daniel.


17 Haymo of Auxerre, Commentary on Second Thessalonians. Kevin L. Hughes, ed. and transl. Second Thessalonians: Two Early Medieval Apocalyptic Commentaries (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 28; Adso (tenth century), Essay on Antichrist. John Wright, trans., The Play of Antichrist (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), 109. The critical edition of Adso’s De Antichristo cites Bede as a cross-reference, who wrote “Percusso autem illo perditionis filio, sive ab ipso Domino sive a Michaele archangelo” “But when that son of perdition has been beaten, either by the Lord Himself, or by Michael the archangel…” D. Verhelst, Adso Dervensis De ortu et tempore antichristi. CCCC 45 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976), 28. Ambrosiaster, however, held that the raptured would be reunited with the Lord to earth to battle the Antichrist, which was repeated verbatim by Atto of Vercelli (tenth century). Ambrosiaster, Commentaria in Epistula ad Thessalonicenses primum. On 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. Henricus J. Vogels, ed., Ambrosiastri qui dicetur commentarius in epistulas Paulinas. CSEL 81, Pars III (Vindobonae: Hoeelder, Pichler, Tempsky, 1969), 227. Atto of Vercelli, In Epistula ad Thessalonicenses primum. On 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. PL 134:652. Gregory the Great (d. 603) also stated, obviously in dialogue with differing interpretations, that Antichrist would be killed “not by a war of the angels, or a contest of the saints, but through the advent of the Judge alone.” PL 79:1134.

18 In some descriptions, the descent of Christ does not involve his stepping on the actual ground of the earth. Rather, He will return to the air above the earth and execute the Last Judgment. Bede, cited in Zachary Chrysopolitani (c. 1150), De concordia evangelistarum. PL 186:467; Haymo, Commentary on First Thessalonians. On 1 Thessalonians 4:17. PL 117:772. Very popular in the later middle ages, based on Joel 3:2, was that the Last Judgment will take place in the air over the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Cf. Honorius of Autun, PL 172:1165-6; Herveus Burgidolensis, PL 181:1376; Hugo Rothomagnesis, PL 192:1111-2; John Duns Scotus, Libri IV Sententiarum, Book IV, Dist. 48, preface. In Joannis Duns Scoti opera omnia, Vol. 20 (Paris: Ludovicum Vivés, Bibliopolum Editore, 1894), 510.

19 Some of the biblical passages which they cite as teaching the rapture include Psalm 50:3-5; 104:3; Isa. 40:8; 60:8; Matt 24:31, 40-41; Mark 13:27; Luke 17:34-37; 1 Thess. 4:15-17. PL 134:652. Gregory the Great (d. 603) also stated, obviously in dialogue with differing interpretations, that Antichrist would be killed “not by a war of the angels, or a contest of the saints, but through the advent of the Judge alone.” PL 79:1134.

20 Some of the biblical passages which they cite as teaching the rapture include Psalm 50:3-5; 104:3; Isa. 40:8; 60:8; Matt 24:31, 40-41; Mark 13:27; Luke 17:34-37; 1 Thess. 4:15-17. Rev 11:12; 13:5.

21 Based on the words “I shall have to answer for this office in which I preside over you” in Homily 8 on Thessalonians, Johannes Quasten concluded that the homilies on Thessalonians were preached during Chrysostom’s episcopal office in Constantinople. Patrology, Vol. 3 (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986), 449. But Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer argue that for Chrysostom the word “office” is not attached to the episcopacy per se, but to ranks of both presbyter and bishop; and therefore Constantinopolitan provenance cannot be reliably claimed for his homilies on Thessalonians.


For example, Haymo, *de futuro saecula* III, 3. PL 118:934-5. Bede, Haymo, and others also distinguished the fire of the conflagration from the fire of purgatory, a concept that was developing in the early medieval West. The *Breviarum in Psalmos* of pseudo-Jerome, however, speaks of the fire as a unit, commenting on Psalm 93 (92):3, “Fire goes before Him: The one who is holy and the one who is a sinner should fear this fire. For this fire both purges saints and consumes sinners.” PL 26:1117.


Venantius Fortunatus, *Miscellanea*, Book 10, Ch. 1: *Expositio Orationis Domini*. PL 88: 317. After the period of the present study, Hugh of St. Cher (c. 1230) speaks of the evildoers who remain on the earth at the rapture calling upon the mountains and rocks to fall on them. Hugh of St. Cher [=pseudo-Albertus Magnus], *Expositio primae epistolae d. Pauli ad Thessalonicenses*. MS: Vaticana Latini 11841, folio 363.

