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Thomas D. Ice

Liberty University, tdice@liberty.edu

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AN ANSWER TO ROBERT GUNDRY

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Dr. Robert Gundry of Westmont College, a leading posttribulationist, stated in a personal letter to Thomas Ice in December 1995 that the presentation of Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon by Demy and Ice has "renewed my interest in the topic."¹ What topic? The rapture debate! Gundry authored a landmark book presenting a new form of posttribulationism in 1973 titled *The Church and the Tribulation*² and had not produced a book on this subject until the summer of 1997 when *First the Antichrist* appeared.³ Included in *First the Antichrist* is a 27-page response to the claim of Timothy Demy and Thomas Ice that Pseudo-Ephraem's (PE) sermon "On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World" contains a pretribulationist statement.⁴ It should come as no surprise that Gundry disagrees with our conclusion.

Gundry admits that if our interpretation of PE's sermon is correct, then "his dividing the second coming into two stages separated by a definite period of years called 'the tribulation' would put the essential elements of pretribulationism centuries and centuries before the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century."⁵ So why does Gundry think that PE is teaching posttribulationism?

GUNDRY'S DISAGREEMENTS

After earlier admitting that if PE is speaking of a pre-trib event then it does contain "the essential elements of pretribulationism" (p. 161), Gundry implies that it is not a pre-trib statement because certain elements of a complete pretribulationist statement are missing. He cites the omission of "a coming of the Lord," "a resurrection of deceased Christians and translation of living ones," and "a heavenly destination." Of course, an argument from silence is no argument at all. The statement from PE's sermon of "and are taken to the Lord" would imply a coming of the Lord as well as a heavenly destination. As long as we are arguing from silence, would it not be stretching the imagination to think that the Lord resides in heaven? Further, the vocabulary of "taken" is the same as that used to describe the transportation of Enoch to heaven (Gen. 5:24; Heb. 11:5). There are many omissions in these biblical statements that a similar critic could cite to argue that Enoch was not really taken to heaven.

PE speaks of the bodies of dead Christians going unburied during the tribulation because of the fear of Antichrist's persecution upon all. Gundry believes this is at odds with a pre-trib understanding of the sermon (164). This is no problem at all since pretribulationists believe that there will be converts to Christianity during the tribulation. These bodies are those of post-rapture converts during the tribulation.

Gundry manufactures another "problem" because of an allusion to a resurrection, even though it is not explicitly mentioned in the text (169). Though not clear in section

¹Personal letter to Thomas Ice from Robert H. Gundry received, December 5, 1995.

²Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

³Bob Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

⁴Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July/Sept. 1995; Vol. 152, No. 607), pp. 306-17. The sermon is on our website at www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=169.

⁵Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, pp. 161-62.

10, Gundry appears to be saying that PE speaks of a single resurrection and not a multiple resurrection required from pretribulationism. This point is hardly a proof for Gundry since he must assume that PE's statement relating to the rising of the sleeping ones is connected with the unburied Christians during the tribulation (169). Even if this is granted, and a resurrection is meant, this would not contradict a pretrib understanding of Section 2 of PE. Pretribulationists believe in a resurrection of tribulation saints at the end of the tribulation.

In this section, Gundry argues for a posttrib understanding of the phrase "to meet."

A further problem for the pretrib interpretation of Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon arises out of this same and final Section 10. The deceased righteous are told not only to "arise" but also to "meet Christ." The Latin verb translated "meet," *occurrite* (more literally translated "run to" or "hasten to"), is cognate to the Latin noun *occursum*, "meeting," in the supposedly pretrib passage of Section 2: ". . . prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ." Since Section 10 explicitly and indubitably puts this meeting after the tribulation, the parallelism of terminology with Section 2—and also with the phrase "for a meeting of the Lord in air" in Paul's description of the rapture (1 Thess. 4:17, translated literally)—indicates that PseudoEphraem sees the meeting in Section 2 as occurring after the tribulation and therefore as differing from the saints' being gathered and taken to the Lord "prior to the tribulation" according to a slightly later passage in section 2. (170)

It is conceded that there is a cognate relation between the two nouns. However, the immediate context of any statement is the greatest factor in determining specific meaning. Gundry is fond of going to another passage that he believes provides the meaning he desires and bringing that context into the passage under discussion as proof for his understanding. This is an exegetical fallacy according to James Barr. "The error that arises, when the 'meaning' of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read into a particular case as its sense and implication there, may be called 'illegitimate totality transfer.'"⁶ Gundry has imported the meaning of "meeting" from Section 10 and asserted that it has the same meaning in Section 2.

Instead, "meeting of the Lord Christ" in Section 2 is better governed by its immediate context, which is described as a gathering "prior to the tribulation," whereby, those gathered are "taken to the Lord." The meeting in Section 10 is clearly said to occur "when the three and a half years have been completed," which for PE is the length of the tribulation. Gundry's attempt to reverse the meaning of PE's pretrib statement in Section 2 falls to the ground when taken in the context that PE's sermon provides.

GATHERING

Gundry's next distortion occurs when he spins the meaning of "gather." He provides over a dozen pages of material from Ephraem the Syrian and shows the manifold ways in which he uses the word.

⁶James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 218.

In view of the foregoing evidence, it seems an understatement to say that Ephraem and his tradition make heavy use of Jewish pilgrimages to Jerusalem as a symbol of all nations' being gathered evangelistically and taken to the Lord in Christian conversion. This use is neither obscure nor rare. It is clear and frequent, and it appears throughout a wide range of his writings. We have every right, then—indeed, every obligation—to apply the use to Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon, drawing as it does on Ephraem's works and those attributed to him. (183)

Out of all the dozens of uses cited by Gundry for “gather” in Ephraem, we admit that he rarely uses it in an eschatological context. Yet, this is without dispute the way in which PE is using the term. To say that because Ephraem uses gather on numerous occasions evangelistically does not mean that this is the way PE, a totally different individual, uses it on a specific instance. Gundry engages once again in illegitimate totality transfer. If gather in PE is an evangelistic gathering, then it should be obvious from the context of PE's sermon. It was apparently obvious in the individual citations from Ephraem that each use has a particular nuance, since Gundry was able to classify each of them from their immediate contexts. Not once did he have to go to other passages to determine Ephraem's specific use in a given text. While providing us with interesting information on how Ephraem, who is not PE, uses a particular word, it does nothing to assist us in understanding PE's use of the word.

Gundry's exercise provides proof that PE did not borrow his idea of a pretrib gathering from Ephraem. Paul Alexander tells us, “Bousset . . . observes that PE normally does not depend on Ephraem but that both use the same apocalyptic material.⁷ What does Alexander mean by “the same apocalyptic material?” He is speaking of the same general themes such as Antichrist, Gog and Magog, The Last Roman Emperor, etc. It is within this context that Alexander cites PE's departure from the same apocalyptic material and notes concerning the subject of shortening the time of the tribulation because PE does not include such a notion in his sermon.⁸ Gundry recognizes that Alexander understands PE's statement at this point to be that of a physical removal of “the saints and Elect of God” before the tribulation—a pretrib statement.

It is significant that the late Paul Alexander (d. 1977) understood this passage as a pretribulational translation of “the saints and elect.” He could hardly have been influenced by his beliefs in his interpretation, since he appears to have been Greek Orthodox. Alexander arrived at a pretrib understanding of PE from reading the sermon in its own context. Because of his expertise in the field of Byzantine literature and history in general and Byzantine Apocalypticism in particular that he arrived at his conclusion which supports that of Dr. Demy and I.

Along with Gundry, we believe that Section 10 is speaking of Christ's second coming to the earth. Thus, his arguments that Section 10 is a reference to the posttribulational return of Christ are not in dispute (187-88).

CONCLUSION

⁷Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 210, f.n. 85.

⁸Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic*, pp. 210-11.

In spite of the fact that Gundry has put forth a heroic effort attempting to prove the unprovable, he has not been able to deliver. Gundry's contention that the passage is merely an evangelistic gathering cannot be supported by the clear context of PE's sermon. PE's sermon stands as a testimony that at least one individual taught something resembling a rapture before tribulation as early as the fourth century. True, this statement does not contain all the elements of pretribulationism, but it contains enough to elicit a serious response from a leading posttribulationist scholar. Maranatha!