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THE RAPTURE AND AN EARLY MEDIEVAL CITATION

Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice

The primary justification for belief in the rapture is grounded in biblical exegesis coupled with theological deduction, but such belief is not without historical witnesses. This testimony can be found, in part, in the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition of the fourth to eighth centuries in eschatological writings that have thus far received little attention from evangelical scholars. The clearest such writing is a sermon by Pseudo-Ephraem known as *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World* or *Sermon on the End of the World* (written sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries).[1] This sermon, besides being a vivid example of early medieval apocalyptic homiletics, also includes a statement of a concept similar to the rapture more than one thousand years before the writings of John Nelson Darby.

THE RAPTURE AND CONTEMPORARY CRITICS

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. While this has been generally asserted by scholars such as George E. Ladd and Robert H. Gundry,[2] more pointed criticism has come from those outside academia. One of the most vocal and sensational critics of the rapture is Dave MacPherson, who argues that "during the first 18

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1 The authors are indebted to Grant R Jeffrey for bringing this source to their attention and recognizing its potential significance

2 George E Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1956) and Robert H Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1973)

centuries of the Christian era, believers were never 'Rapture separaters' [*sic*]; they never separated the minor Rapture aspect of the Second Coming of Christ from the Second Coming itself."[3]

A second critic, John Bray, also vehemently opposes a pretribulational rapture. "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."[4] More recently, pretribulation rapture opponent Robert Van Kampen proclaimed, "The pretribulational rapture position with its dual *parousias* was unheard of in church history prior to 1830."[5]

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 and Van Kampen, believes was invented in 1830.[6]

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 such a reference 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 Bell's 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."[7]

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3 Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, NC New Puritan Library, 1983), 15 For a refutation of MacPherson's charges see Thomas D Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulational Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (April–June 1990) 155-68

4 John L Bray, *The Origin of the Pre Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL John L Bray Ministry, 1982), 31-32 (capital letters his)

5 Robert Van Kampen, *The Sign* (Wheaton, IL Crossway Books, 1992), 445

6 Gary North, *Rapture Fever Why Dispensationalism Is Paralyzed* (Tyler, TX Institute for Christian Economics, 1993), 105

7 William E Bell, "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (Ph D diss , New York University, 1967), 26-27

A SHIFT IN HERMENEUTICS

Why is there seemingly a void in the premillennial witness between the earliest years of the church and the reemergence of the doctrine in the 1800s? Chiliasm and millennial expectations in the early church are readily and almost universally acknowledged by historians and theologians.[8] The demise of these hopes is also recognized, and any later adherence to a millennial hope is viewed as a false expectation based on mistaken exegesis. However, an alternate explanation of its decline can be found in the shift of accepted hermeneutical practices in the early and medieval church, which moved from a normal, literal-grammatical interpretation to one favoring a strong reliance on allegory. Byzantine scholar Bernard McGinn observed that "while most of the eschatological themes of the Middle Ages were inherited from the Christian past, it is quite clear that by 600 A D. the context in which they operated was quite a different one from that of the Patristic world."[9] In both the East and the West there was a strong reaction against literal interpretation and apocalypticism.

In the East, Eusebius of Caesarea (A D 263–339), the court theologian to Constantine and theological heir of Origen, was a strong leader in the rejection of apocalypticism. With the rise of Constantine and adoption of Christianity as the empire's official religion, alternate perspectives fell into disfavor. Cohn notes,

> Millenarianism remained powerful in the Christian Church so long as Christians were an unpopular minority threatened with persecution When in the fourth century Christianity attained a position of supremacy in the Mediterranean world and became the official religion of the empire, the Church set out to eradicate millenarian beliefs [10]

In the Latin West, Jerome (347–420) and Augustine (354–430) also reacted strongly to prophetic interpretation. In his commentary on Daniel, written shortly before A D 400, Jerome argued that "the saints will in no wise have an earthly kingdom, but only a celestial one; thus must cease the fable of one thousand years."[11]

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8 J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco Harper & Row, 1978), 459-89, and Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity,* 2 vols (Philadelphia Fortress, 1985), 1 87-93

9 Bernard McGinn, "Apocalypticism in the Middle Ages An Historiographical Sketch," *Mediaeval Studies* 37 (1975) 253

10 Norman Cohn, "Medieval Millenarism Its Bearing on the Comparative Study of Millenarian Movements," in *Millennial Dreams in Action Essays in Comparative Study,* ed Sylvia L Thrupp (The Hague Mouton, 1962), 33

11 Quoted by Robert E Lerner, "The Medieval Return to the Thousand-Year Sabbath," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages,* ed Richard K Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, NY Cornell University Press, 1992) 51

Jerome was not alone in his attack on literal interpretation and millennial expectations. In Augustine's *City of God*, he repeatedly dismisses any hope for an earthly millennial kingdom.[12] Through the writings of men such as Jerome, Julian of Toledo, Gregory the Great, and most notably Augustine, literal interpretation of the Bible, and especially of Daniel and Revelation, quickly faded.[13] The Augustinian influence in the West eclipsed many perspectives, some orthodox and some unorthodox or heretical. The result was that views deemed unacceptable were eradicated or ignored. Lerner observes that Augustine's influence was so strong that "it suffices to say that a prohibition against applying Apocalypse 20 to the future was established during the late patristic era and remained in force for centuries thereafter."[14]

In the high Middle Ages there was a brief reentry of literal millennialism, but it would still be another five hundred years before any lasting impact of literal interpretation would be felt by the church.[15] However, rejection of chiliasm by much of the church did not completely obliterate it. "This is not to argue, though, that there was no apocalyptic thought in the early Middle Ages. On the contrary, these centuries give evidence of a definite tradition of apocalyptic literature, in which the Apocalypse played a definite role."[16] Although it was not a mainstream view even in early medieval times, the apocalyptic tradition is still important in the history of eschatology.

The seeming lack of a premillennial witness for so much of the church's history may best be explained by the dominance of allegorical interpretation in the West after the time of Augustine. Yet, as noted, apocalyptic thought did not completely cease, and it is in the midst of this sidelined tradition that the writings of Pseudo-Ephraem are found.

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12 Cf Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 18 52-53, 20 7, 9, 19

13 For a summary of this shift, especially in relation to the Book of Revelation, see E Ann Matter, "The Apocalypse in Early Medieval Exegesis," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages,* 38-50

14 Lerner, "The Medieval Return to the Thousand-Year Sabbath," 53 Further confirmation of the duration of this influence is given by Matter, who writes, "All the Apocalypse commentaries from the Carolingian world thus show the continuing assumption of the text as an allegory of the Church, and a continuing process of filtering specific interpretations from earlier commentaries to support that assumption" ("The Apocalypse in Early Medieval Exegesis," 49)

15 Lerner, "The Medieval Return to the Thousand-Year Sabbath," 52, n 3

16 Ibid , 49

THE REEMERGENCE OF MEDIEVAL APOCALYPTICISM AND PSEUDO-EPHRAEM

Within the last century German and French historians have recognized and studied medieval apocalypticism. Medieval scholar Dorothy deF. Abrahamse observed:

> By medieval times the belief in an imminent apocalypse had officially been relegated to the role of symbolic theory by the Church, as early as the fourth century, Augustine had declared that the Revelation of John was to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally, and for most of the Middle Ages Church councils and theologians considered only abstract eschatology to be acceptable speculation Since the nineteenth century, however, historians have recognized that *literal apocalypses did continue to circulate in the medieval world* and that they played a fundamental role in the creation of important strains of thought and legend [17]

Most prominent among those historians were Ernst Sakur (1862–1901) and Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), who studied and analyzed a group of prophetic texts pseudonymously written and ascribed to church fathers or biblical characters. Latin copies of these texts were compiled and edited by C. P. Caspari[18] and have received attention more recently from the late Paul J. Alexander.[19] Significant insights into medieval prophetic thought have also come from the work of British medievalist Marjorie Holmes.[20]

Two difficulties facing students of medieval apocalyptic materials are lack of access to the materials, many of which are available only in manuscript form, and lack of critical editions and translations of the materials. Study of the materials entails not only theological and historical acumen, but also skills in textual criticism and translation.[21]

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[17] Dorothy deF Abrahamse, "Introduction," in Paul J Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley, CA University of California Press, 1985), 1-2 (italics added)

[18] C P Caspari, ed , *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus den zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirchlichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelaters* (Germany Christiania, 1890)

[19] Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* See also Alexander's "The Medieval Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and Its Messianic Origin," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978) 1-15, and *The Oracle of Baalbek* (Washington, DC Center for Byzantine Studies, 1967)

[20] Marjorie Holmes, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1969) For a thorough summary of these historians and the historiography of apocalypticism, see McGinn, "Apocalypticism in the Middle Ages An Historiographical Sketch," 252-86

[21] Students accustomed to using the popular 38-volume edition of the church fathers edited by Phillip Schaff and Alexander Roberts may easily forget that these

PSEUDO-EPHRAEM'S "PROTO-RAPTURE" STATEMENT

> 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 [22]

In these words Pseudo-Ephraem, early in his sermon, proclaimed that God would intervene on behalf of believers before a yet-to-come time of great calamity. Alexander understands this citation to refer to God's promise of deliverance of believers from the great tribulation. It announces "another measure taken by God in order to alleviate the period of tribulation for his saints and for the Elect."[23] Any prophetic statement this explicit must be placed in proper context. And several questions need to be addressed. Is Pseudo-Ephraem a valid source of inquiry? What further explanation of this citation can be made? What is the significance of this statement for pretribulationalism?

PSEUDO-EPHRAEM AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

The most important and prolific of the Syrian church fathers and a witness to Christianity on the fringes of the Roman Empire was Ephraem of Nisibis (306–373). 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.

It is not at all unreasonable to expect that a prolific and

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texts represent the majority of the writings of the church fathers rather than the most frequently used texts Many texts are yet to be translated, studied, and incorporated into the study of the history of doctrine Pseudo-Ephraem is one such example, and it is not unlikely that other texts of significant eschatological importance may emerge, which would also require the attention of evangelical theologians Portions of some of the later apocalyptic texts have been compiled in Bernard McGinn's introductory anthology, *Visions of the End Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York Columbia University Press, 1979) McGinn also provides an excellent introduction and historical summary of the genre

22 *Omnes enim sancti et electi Dei ante tribulationem, quae uentura est, colliguntur et ad Dominum adsumuntur, ne quando uideant confusionem, quae uniuersum propter peccata nostra obruet mundum* (Caspari, *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus den zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirchlichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelaters,* 211 4) The entire text is found on pages 208-20, and the German commentary on pages 429-72 A copy of the Latin text, selected Greek variants, and an English translation are available from The Pre-Trib Research Center, 370 L'Enfant Promenade, S W , Suite 801, Washington, DC 20024

23 Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 210

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."[24] What is more difficult, though ancillary to the main purpose of this article, is determining the exact date, purpose, location, and extent of subsequent editorial changes to the sermon.[25]

Suggestions on the date of the writing of the original sermon range from as early as 373[26] to Caspari's estimation of sometime between 565 and 627.[27] Alexander, after reviewing all the argumentation, favors a date for the final form similar to that suggested by Caspari,[28] but Alexander also states simply, "It will indeed not be easy to decide on the matter."[29]

PSEUDO-EPHRAEM AND ITS VARIANTS

The sermon, deemed by Alexander to be "one of the most interesting apocalyptic texts of the early Middle Ages,"[30] consists of about 150 lines of text (just under 1,500 words) and has been preserved in four Latin manuscripts. Three of these date from the

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[24] Paul J Alexander, "The Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses in the Medieval West and the Beginnings of Joachimism," in *Prophecy and Millenarianism Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves,* ed Ann Williams (Essex Longman, 1980), 59

[25] Paul J Alexander, "Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources," *American Historical Review* 73 (1968) 1017 In this essay Alexander addresses the historical difficulties facing the interpreter of such texts To these difficulties, issues of theological interpretation and concern must also be added

[26] Wilhelm Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend,* trans A H Keane (London Hutchinson, 1896), 33-41 An early date is also accepted by Andrew R Anderson, *Alexander's Gate Gog and Magog and the Enclosed Nations,* Monographs of the Mediaeval Academy of America, no 5 (Cambridge, MA Mediaeval Academy of America, 1932) 16-18

[27] Caspari, *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus den zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirchlichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelaters,* 437-42 Caspari evaluated both the 373 date and a 565–627 date, ultimately settling on 627, which was the date of Heraclius's victory over the Persians Alexander addresses all the historical intricacies surrounding the dating of the text and whether the text contains a *vaticinium ex eventu* (prophecy after the event) in relation to two emperors alluded to in the text who were brothers (*Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition,* 144-47) These brothers are understood to be Valentinian and Valens, who reigned from 364 to 375 If there is no *vaticinium ex eventu*, then an early date such as Bousset's proposal of 373 is likely

[28] Ibid , 147 This leaves the possibility that the work may have been altered or revised before the date of the extant manuscripts

[29] Ibid , 145 Earlier, Alexander wrote, "All that is certain is, as Caspari pointed out, that it must have been written [before] Heraclius' victories over Sassanid Persia, for the author talks repeatedly of wars between Rome and Persia and such discussions do not make sense after Heraclius' victories and the beginning of the Arab invasions" (ibid , 144)

[30] Ibid , 136

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.[31] Subsequent Greek and Syriac versions of the sermon have raised questions about 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, Caspari concluded that the text was not composed in Latin, but was translated from a Greek original. However, Alexander, working nearly a century later, and studying additional sources, believed it most probable that the homily was composed in Syriac, translated first into Greek, and then into Latin from the Greek.[32] Regardless of the original language, the vocabulary and style of the extant copies are consistent with the writings of Ephraem and his era.

What is more significant for present-day readers than the determination of the sermon's language of composition and textual history is the fact that the sermon was popular enough to be translated into several languages fairly soon after its composition. The translators and readers of the homily were either extremely inquisitive as to its content, desired it for polemical purposes or refutation, or shared in some degree its message and expectation. The sermon's accepted status in relation to the orthodoxy of the day is secondary to the fact that there was an eschatological hope present of which the sermon is a reflection.

PSEUDO-EPHRAEM IN SUMMARY

The sermon begins in sections 1 and 2 with a warning to believers that the end of the world is near and with a list of the present signs of the end of the Roman Empire and the consummation of time.[33] Immorality, war, crime, and sin will be rampant at that time, in which two brothers will arise to rule the Roman Empire. Conflict will develop between the brothers, and "wars and rumors of wars" will proliferate. Pseudo-Ephraem stated that all the signs of the end time predicted by Jesus in Matthew 24 have been fulfilled and that the coming of the evil one at the end of the empire was all that remained. "Why therefore do we not reject

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31 Ibid , 136-37, and D Verhlest, "La préhistoire des conceptions d'Adson concernant l'Antichrist," *Recherches de theologie ancienne et medievale* (1973) 97-98 The only critical edition is Caspari's, which is weakened by the fact that he relied on only two of the four extant manuscripts

32 Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition,* 140-44

33 English citations are taken from a translation of the sermon provided by Cameron Rhoades, instructor of Latin at Tyndale Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas

every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms the world?"[34] This question, which implies a gathering of believers before the tribulation, precedes the longer and clearer proto-rapture statement found a few lines later.

Those who refuse this plea, according to Pseudo-Ephraem, are foolish and will bring on themselves the condemnation foretold in Amos 5:18. "'Woe to those who wish to see the day of the Lord!' Because *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."[35]

In sections 3-5 the sermon states that after this time and the gathering of the saints, the world will be deluged by war, natural disasters, panic, plagues, and fear. The traumas will be so great that people will flee to the mountains and caves, will drink the blood of beasts, and will trust no one. At that time, the Roman Empire will be eradicated and the Antichrist, "that worthless and abominable dragon, shall appear."[36]

Sections 6-7 tell of the Antichrist's birth from the tribe of Dan, his cunning personality with which he will entice others to bless him and call him just, and his rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem for himself. He will be congratulated by the Jews who will believe he has restored to them the first covenant. People will flock to him for a time and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the nations for three and one-half years.

During these 1,260 days there will be draught, famine, and "a time of great tribulation"[37] unsurpassed in history (section 8). Gold, silver, jewels, and other valuable possessions will lie useless in the streets and the righteous will "flee the face of the serpent" while "being sustained by the salvation of the Lord."[38]

In this period of tribulation God will send the prophets Enoch and Elijah, who will bring a message of comforting proclamation, announcing the Second Coming of Christ and denouncing the Antichrist (section 9). Through their preaching these two prophets will call back the faithful witnesses to God so that they

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34 "*Quid ergo non proicimus a nobis omnem actuum terrenorum sollicitudinem et nosmet ipsos praeparamus in occursum domini Christi, ut nos eruat a confusione, quae uniuersum obruet mundum?*" (Caspari, *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus den zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirchlichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelalters,* 210 17-20),

35 Ibid , 211 4 (italics added) See note 22 for the Latin text

36 Ibid , 214 4-5

37 Ibid , 218 5

38 Ibid , 219 4

will be free from the seduction of the Antichrist. After the 42 months the time of the Antichrist will come to an end and in an hour which the world does not know, the cross, which is the "sign" of the Son of Man, will appear, followed shortly thereafter by the coming of the Lord, along with a host of angels. A trumpet will sound, calling forth the dead to judgment and Christ will slay the Antichrist, binding him and casting him into everlasting fire where he will remain alongside Satan. "But the righteous ones shall inherit everlasting life with the Lord forever and ever."[39]

PSEUDO-EPHRAEM AND ITS ESCHATOLOGY

The chronology of eschatological events in texts such as this sermon by Pseudo-Ephraem was fairly standard in the early medieval period. Alexander observed that "Byzantine apocalyptic thought combined a high degree of uniformity with a certain amount of variation. Pseudo-Ephraem in particular offers a number of variants."[40] However, after analyzing the sequence of events presented in it with those found in other major apocalyptic texts, Alexander concluded that Pseudo-Ephraem's sequence "remains stable and that the variants which at first seem significant either are concessions to changing historical circumstances or are due to disturbances of a literary kind."[41]

Several motifs appear in varying degrees and stages throughout the medieval apocalyptic texts. Among these are Gog and Magog, the last Roman emperor, and the rise and fall of the Antichrist. Through the centuries different themes were emphasized as Christians responded to emerging political structures and both human and natural disasters. Biblical texts were often paraphrased or only alluded to, and writers often sought to win acceptance for various apocalyptic traditions.[42]

However, the present text is much less complex than many medieval texts and contains only one of the three major themes, namely, the rise and fall of the Antichrist. The sequence of events in its eschatology is easily discernible.

Pseudo-Ephraem believed Christians were living in the last days and would soon experience a gathering or rapture of believers before the 42-month period in which the Antichrist would

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39 Ibid, 220 11-12

40 Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 187 He notes that Pseudo-Ephraem is the only Byzantine text that does not mention the last Roman emperor (ibid, 165, also see 187-92 for details on the peculiarities of the sermon)

41 Ibid, 222

42 Ibid, 151-226 Also see Alexander's "Byzantium and the Migration of Literary Motifs The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n s 2 (1971) 47-68

reign. These months would culminate in the return of Christ, final judgment, and the eternal punishment of the Antichrist and Satan. Since Pseudo-Ephraem's sequence of events in the sermon seems to be chronological in its development, it is significant that the proto-rapture statement occurs early in the text (section 2), while the Second Coming of Christ is near the end (section 10). This chronology meets the criterion of the two-phase return of Christ suggested by Bell (see p. 307). The sermon clearly presents a distinction between the removal of believers before the great tribulation (section 2), which will last for three and one-half years (sections 7-8) followed by the Second Advent (section 10).

According to Alexander, most Byzantine apocalyptic writings were concerned with how Christians would survive persecution by the Antichrist. The normal approach in other apocalyptic texts was a shortening of the time to three and one-half years, thereby enabling some Christians to survive.[43] Unlike those texts, this sermon has Christians being removed *before* the time of tribulation. Alexander said,

> 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.[44]

While it is uncertain which biblical text or texts Pseudo-Ephraem had in mind as the foundation for this sermon, it is interesting to note that some terms used in the Greek variants of the proto-rapture passage in the sermon are similar to the biblical text: "The elect ones are gathered together before the tribulation in order that they might not see the confusion and the great tribulation which is coming upon the unrighteous world."[45]

Pseudo-Ephraem understood the entirety of the tribulation to be a three-and-one-half-year period rather than seven years. However, he believed the tribulation will be preceded by the rapture. Though midtribulationists see a partial tribulation before the rapture, it would be inaccurate to say that Pseudo-Ephraem held to a midtribulational rapture even though both chronologies

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43 Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 209

44 Ibid., 210-11

45 Caspari, *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus den zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirchlichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelalters*, 447 In his discussion of the variants, Caspari gives the majority Greek reading as follows *οἱ ἐκλεκτοὶ συνάγονται πρὸ τῆς θλίψεως (πρὸ θλίψεως) τοῦ μὴ ἰδεῖν τὴν σύγχυσιν καὶ τὴν θλίψιν τὴν μεγάλην τὴν ἐρχομένην (μεγάλην ἐρχομένην) εἰς τὸν ἄδικον κόσμον (τὸν κόσμον τὸν ἄδικον)*

speak of three and one-half years. Although the sermon has some ambiguities, it, like pretribulationalism, clearly emphasizes imminence, two comings separated by the tribulation, and the promise of deliverance of believers from the tribulation.

CONCLUSION

The proto-rapture statement and chronology of Pseudo-Ephraem's *Sermon on the End of the World* are quite clear, although there are differences in some of its particulars from the contemporary pretribulational perspective. What is most important, however, is not how the sermon differs from pretribulationism, but how it is similar. Pseudo-Ephraem clearly presents at least three important features found in modern pretribulationalism: (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.

Whatever judgment is passed on the text with regard to its historical accuracy and identification with events and personalities now past, the fact remains that the sermon proclaimed elements similar to present-day pretribulationalism. One notable example is the sermon's clear usage of a vocabulary of imminence (section 2). This expectation was certainly on the fringes of the accepted eschatological orthodoxy of the day, but it did not stand alone and reasonable explanation has been given for its disfavor. It is not too much to conclude that proliferation of a text such as this sermon soon after its writing represents a clearly defined current of thought about the rapture.

As noted criticism of pretribulationism's historicity (and therefore its validity) has usually been presented by its opponents. On the other hand pretribulationists have normally focused on the scriptural basis of its position. Thus it is important to note that the testimony of Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon blunts charges of pretribulationalism's supposed nonhistoricity. At the same time, pretribulationists readily acknowledge that the truth of a doctrine is determined not by its prevalence in any given historical period but rather by biblical exegesis.

Any attempt to embrace the early medieval apocalyptic tradition in its entirety would be wrong. The prophetic accuracy of any historical writing must always be judged by the Bible. When so judged, Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon bears many similarities to the pretribulational understanding of "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

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