

May 2009

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Recommended Citation

Ice, Thomas D., "Rapture Myths" (2009). *Article Archives*. 12.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/12

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RAPTURE MYTHS

by Thomas Ice

Hardly a week goes by that I don't receive material opposing the pre-trib rapture which is filled with all kinds of error, both Scriptural and historical. For example, I ran across an article entitled "Origin of the Secret Rapture Theory." The first sentence said, "It may surprise and even shock you that neither the word 'rapture' nor the teaching of a secret rapture is not mentioned in ANY Christian literature prior to 1830—including the Bible!" I am hardly surprised or shocked that anyone could pack so much error into a single sentence, but there we have for all to see. This month I want to deal with some of the popular myths about the pre-trib rapture teaching that Dr. LaHaye and I very much believe is taught in the New Testament Scriptures.

THE TERM "RAPTURE"

First of all, the word "rapture" is found in the Bible, if you have the Latin Vulgate produced by Jerome in the early 400s. The Vulgate was the main Bible of the medieval Western Church until the Reformation. It continues to this day as the primary Latin translation of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, as we shall see later, it was Protestants who introduced the word "rapture" into the English language from the Latin *raeptius*.¹ It was Jerome's Vulgate that translated the original Greek verb *harpazô* used by Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which is usually translated into English with the phrase "caught up." The leading Greek Lexicon says that *harpazô* means "snatch, seize, i.e., take suddenly and vehemently."² This is the same meaning of the Latin word *rapio* "to seize, snatch, tear away."³ It should not be surprising to anyone, that an English word was developed from the Latin which we use today known as "rapture."

In Europe, during the Middle Ages and Reformation periods, the theologians were from various countries and therefore spoke different native tongues. However, the single language of the church, both Catholic and Protestant was Latin. In fact, many of the first books written and published in the American Colonies during the seventeenth century were in Latin. For example, Cotton Mather's famous history of the American Colonies during the seventeenth century was written in Latin and called *Magnalia Christi Americana*, or *The Great Works of Christ in America*.⁴ Because it was done in Latin it could be read throughout Europe by the educated class. Thus, it should not be surprising to anyone that many new words came into the English language from a Latin source, especially in the realm of theology. Rapture is just such a word.

While it is technically true that the word rapture does not appear in the English Bible, it does, nevertheless, appear in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible. Certainly the notion of a rapture appears many times in the Bible. Translators of the Bible into English could have been justified had they translated "caught up" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 with the English word "rapture." They also could have translated it by the word snatch. We could just as easily call the rapture "the great snatch."

I have in my personal library at least 50 commentaries on 1 Thessalonians. Virtually all of them use the word "rapture" to describe the event in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. They

do not appear interested in using it in a derogatory way nor do any of them go on an excursus about how this word does not appear in English translations. Most of these commentators do not hold to a pre-trib rapture view. They merely use the word because they know that it is one of the many Latin words that have made it into the English theological vernacular. Sorry that some have not yet heard.

The rapture does occur in the Bible, especially if you read the Latin Vulgate. However, there is no doubt that the Greek word *harpazô* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, usually translated into English “caught up,” conveys the rapture concept.

“RAPTURE” USAGE

Our anti-rapture diatribe noted earlier said, “the word ‘rapture’ nor the teaching of a secret rapture is not mentioned in ANY Christian literature prior to 1830.” Oh really! It is not hard to find out when English words were first introduced into the language. One needs only to check *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* and it will cite examples of the history of the usage of the word. The oldest word in the “rapture” family is “rapt.” *OED* cites examples of rapt occurring in 1400 in English literature.⁵ The earliest instances of “rapture” in secular English literature are cited as 1605, 1607, and 1608.⁶ *OED* provides seven nuances of the word Rapture. The fourth entry is the biblical one defined as “The act of conveying a person from one place to another *esp.* to heaven; the fact of being so conveyed.”⁷ Two examples of this use are cited from the seventeenth century. The first by a writer named Ward in 1647 and the other by J. Edwards (not the American Jonathan) in 1693.⁸ It does not take long to realize that these examples are well before 1830.

Joseph Mede (1586-1638), considered in his day, a brilliant English exegete wrote a commentary on Revelation in 1627 called *Clavis Apocalyptica (Key of the Revelation)*. In it he said, “Therefore, it is not needful that the Resurrection of those which slept in Christ, and the Rapture of those which shall be left alive together with them in the air . . .”⁹ While Mede was a premillennialist, he did not hold to a pre-trib rapture. Nor did the commentator and theologian John Gill (1697-1771) who wrote around 1745 the following in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “. . . and to which rapture will contribute, the agility which the bodies both of the raised and changed saints will have: and this rapture of the living saints will be *together with them*; . . .”¹⁰

To admit that the word rapture was used in the English language at least a couple of hundred years before J. N. Darby came along does not in the least mean that one believes in pretribulationism. The Greek word *harpazô* is used fourteen times in the New Testament. In addition to 1 Thessalonians 4:17, it is used at least three more times of one being raptured to heaven (2 Cor. 12:2, 4; Rev. 12:5). So there is no need to get upset over the use of the Latin based, English word “rapture.” It is a biblical word.

THE “SECRET” RAPTURE MYTH

Included in the above tirade is an equation of the so-called “secret” rapture with pretribulationism. Sorry, but this is another mistake, another myth. In all my reading of pretribulationism and discussion with pretribulationists, I have never, that I can recall, heard a pre-trib rapturist use the nomenclature of “secret” rapture to describe our view. I

have only heard the phrase “secret” rapture as a pejorative term used exclusively by anti-pretribulationists. Why? Apparently they enjoy fighting with a straw man.

Anti-pretribulationist, Ken Gentry declares, “On the very surface it is remarkable that one of the noisiest verses in Scripture is said to picture the secret rapture.”¹¹ The truth of the matter is that Gentry wrongly assumes that pretribulationists characterize their view of the rapture as “secret.” We do not! However, there are anti-pre-trib rapture advocates, like Dave MacPherson who have taught this myth. As a result, unwitting critics like Gentry have absorbed this myth into their rhetoric without doing their homework.

Very likely it was Dave MacPherson who has spread this myth that equates pretribulationism with a secret rapture. “In 1880 William Reid, in his book on Brethrenism,” declares MacPherson, “stated that ‘Edward Irving contributed the notion of . . . the secret rapture of the saints.’¹²¹³ MacPherson later concludes, “The pretrib rapture eventually became known as the ‘secret rapture.’ This label was based on the presupposition that only certain persons would have privileged visibility or knowledge during the occurrence of this catching up.”¹⁴ MacPherson does not actually reference anyone who believes in a pre-trib rapture when he makes these statements. It is through slight of hand that he slips such an assumption into his plot of fictional myths about the origins of pretribulationism.

In fact, Brethren researcher R. A. Huebner refutes MacPherson’s misinformation about the pre-trib rapture and its supposed association with a secret rapture teaching.¹⁵ Huebner notes that supposed relation of pretribulationism and a secret rapture are built upon the following false historical assumptions: First, the “erroneous notions are the result of the myth that the Irvingites held a pretribulation rapture and also results from trying to link J. N. D. with this falsified Irvingism.”¹⁶ Second, when speaking of events transpiring in the 1830s, Huebner says, “the Secret Rapture as used at that point in time did not refer to the pretribulation rapture.”¹⁷ Third, “it seems that up to this point in time [the 1830s, T. D. I.], ‘Secret Rapture’ referred to a rapture at the appearing [the second coming, T. D. I.]”¹⁸ Fourth, “I am not aware if JND ever thought that the rapture would be ‘secret.’”¹⁹

It was the Irvingites, and not the Brethren, who believed in the secret rapture. Since the secret rapture and pretribulationism are not the same, this is where much of the confusion resides. The Irvingite view of the secret rapture was a belief that a few enlightened ones would be taken right before the second coming at the end of the tribulation. This is what Irvingite, Margaret Macdonald’s revelation is about. It is impossible to find a pre-trib rapture of any kind in her vision.²⁰

CONCLUSION

I am sure that this call to anti-pre-trib rapture advocates will not result in much of a reduction of their zealous proclamation of mythological falsehoods about our blessed hope. It seems that too many are blinded by their zeal to oppose the biblical teachings of the any-moment hope of the rapture for them to take time to get their information straight. No wonder Columba Graham Flegg, in his scholarly work on the Irvingites spoke specifically of Dave MacPherson’s work as “less scholarly.” Flegg said, the

“conclusions reached in this work and the rationale behind them are hardly convincing.”²¹ Now why is an expert on the Irvingites not impressed with MacPherson’s work? Because Flegg has a thorough knowledge about the times in which MacPherson writes and realizes that he is spinning out myths. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ *The Compact Edition of The Oxford English Dictionary* (New York, Oxford Press, 1971), s.v., “Rapture.”
- ² Walter Bauer, William Arndt, and Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of The New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 108.
- ³ *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary* (New York, MacMillan, 1968), pp. 500-01.
- ⁴ Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America*, 2 vols. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979). The first edition was printed in London in 1702.
- ⁵ *OED*, s.v., “Rapt.”
- ⁶ *OED*, s.v., “Rapture.”
- ⁷ *OED*, s.v., “Rapture.”
- ⁸ *OED*, s.v., “Rapture.”
- ⁹ Cited in R. A. Huebner, *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J. N. Darby*, Vol. 1 (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1991), p. 95.
- ¹⁰ John Gill, *Exposition of The Old & New Testaments*, 9 Vols. (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, [1809] reprint 1989), Vol. 9, p. 238.
- ¹¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 279.
- ¹² William Reid, *Plymouth Brethrenism Unveiled and Refuted* (Edinburgh: Wm. Oliphant & Co., 1880), p. 10.
- ¹³ Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1994), p. 17.
- ¹⁴ MacPherson, *Rapture Plot*, p. 72.
- ¹⁵ R. A. Huebner, *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered* (Millington, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1976), pp. 40-49; and Huebner, *Precious Truths*, Vol. 1, pp. 95-99.
- ¹⁶ Huebner, *Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered*, p. 43.
- ¹⁷ Huebner, *Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered*, p. 42.
- ¹⁸ Huebner, *Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered*, p. 48.
- ¹⁹ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, Vol. 1, p. 99.
- ²⁰ To read a copy of Margaret Macdonald’s vision see MacPherson, *Rapture Plot*, pp. 249-52.
- ²¹ Columba Graham Flegg, *‘Gathered Under Apostles’: A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 4-5.