

# Parousia

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THE SIGN MINISTRIES NEWSLETTER / WINTER 2001

## PSEUDO-EPHRAEM AND THE DIDACHE

### Weighing the Evidence

### Why the Bible is Premillennial



# PSEUDO-EPHRAEM AND THE DIDACHE

## Weighing the Evidence



by Charles Cooper

One of the charges commonly leveled against pretribulationists is that theirs is an entirely new doctrine having no historical references before John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). The confidence with which some have asserted this position evidences itself in John L. Bray’s challenge. He writes,

Though money is not an easy matter for me to obtain, right now I am willing to pay FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS (\$500.00) to any person who will furnish me with a documented statement by anybody (in a sermon, article or commentary) in any country, published BEFORE LACUNZA’S TIME, which taught that the second coming of Christ will be divided into two stages (Rapture and Revelation) and separated by a period of time such as 45 days, 3 1/2 years, or 7 years.<sup>1</sup>

Bray’s challenge went unanswered for many years. Dave MacPherson also challenged the pretribulationist Rapture position on the grounds of modernity. In his book, *The Incredible Cover-Up*, he argues that the teaching of a “secret” Rapture can be traced back to Margaret Macdonald in 1830.<sup>2</sup>

Until 1994, the only response pretribulationists had to Bray and MacPherson’s invitations was the admission similar to that Larry V. Crutchfield made in response to comments of Millard J. Erickson. Erickson states that

While there are in the writings of the early fathers *seeds* from which the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture *could* be developed, it is difficult to find in them an unequivocal statement of the type of imminency usually believed in by pretribulationists (*italics added*).

In response, Crutchfield states, “We [pretribulationists] do not say that the early fathers were pretribulationists in the modern sense, only that the seeds were indeed there...”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Crutchfield’s own investigation of the writings of the early church fathers forced him to admit that

With few exceptions, the premillennial fathers of the early church believed that they were living in the last times. Thus they looked daily for the Lord’s return. Even most of those who looked for Antichrist’s appearance prior to the second advent, saw

that event as occurring suddenly, and just as suddenly being followed by the rescue and rapture of the saints... This belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ within the context of ongoing persecution has prompted us to broadly label the views of the earliest fathers: "imminent intratribulationism."<sup>4</sup>

These so-called "seeds" were all pretribulationists could claim in the writings of the earliest church fathers. Like good soldiers, Bray, MacPherson and others exploited the pretrib position at this weak point. One result of the compounding attacks of Bray, MacPherson, and others against pretribulationism was the establishment of the Pre-trib Research Center (PTRC) in 1994. PTRC defines itself as a "think tank committed to the study, proclamation, teaching and defending of the Pretribulation Rapture (pre-70th week of Daniel) and related end-time prophecy."<sup>5</sup> PTRC took Mr. Bray's challenge head on. In 1995, Grant R. Jeffrey, a member of PTRC, made the bold assertion that an ancient document that supports a pretrib Rapture does exist. "During the summer of 1994, after a decade of searching, I found several fascinating manuscripts that contain clear evidence of pretribulation rapture teaching in the early church,"<sup>6</sup> writes Mr. Jeffrey.

If indeed the sentence stated below does set forth a pretribulation Rapture scenario, it would be the first and only explicit statement in known literature prior to the nineteenth century. It would not prove that the position is true, only that it was taught much earlier in church history than previously thought by the pretrib attackers. In fact, pretribulationists insist that pretribulationism is not a modern view but a view held by the church fathers. This would effectively silence those who attack pretribulationism on the basis of modernity.

The particular document that Mr. Jeffrey refers to is a sermon. A sermon entitled, *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*. It is in the early portions of this sermon that the important phrase appears:

For all the saints and Elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that

is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins.

Because of this sentence, Jeffrey declares,

A number of these authors<sup>7</sup> will have to drastically revise the next edition of their books based on the discovery of new pretribulation rapture texts from the writings of the early church.

To Mr. Jeffrey's claim, however, this author would council, "caution!" The jury is still out concerning the meaning of the critical statement Jeffrey favors. However, *for the sake of argument*, this author will grant that this sermon, also known as *Pseudo-Ephraem*, may support a pretrib Rapture. Given the importance of the issue before us, the reader should evaluate this document very carefully. Especially, in light of other documents that clearly and unambiguously support a return of the Lord to rapture His church immediately following the cut-short persecution of Satan/Antichrist on God's elect.

In the following pages, we shall compare two documents: *Pseudo-Ephraem* and the *Didache*<sup>8</sup>. These opposing views of the timing of the Lord's return are depicted in these two documents. *Pseudo-Ephraem* (for the sake of argument) favors a pretribulation return of the Lord. The *Didache* favors an "imminent intratribulation"<sup>9</sup> (prewrath) return of the Lord. You, the reader, must decide which document is trustworthy. After all, you must be willing to face the consequences of your choices. The reader should keep several issues in mind when considering the weight of these documents in the Rapture debate: (1) authorship, (2) date, (3) and theology.

#### **Pseudo-Ephraem: Authorship**

Modern scholarship is all agreed that the author of this sermon is unknown. Modern scholarship has listed a pseudo Ephraem as the author of this sermon. The word *pseudo* means false. It is a Greek prefix used by modern scholars to differentiate between a true author and someone writing in a famous person's name. During the early centuries of Christianity, it was very popular to write a book and put a famous person's

## **The author of the sermon is an unknown masquerading as a famous person.**

name on it as the original author. Usually such works were easily recognized as fraudulent because in every case the famous person was dead. *Therefore, the author of the sermon is an unknown masquerading as a famous person.*

Concerning the issue of authorship of *Pseudo-Ephraem*, Paul J. Alexander, an authority on Byzantine Apocalyptic tradition writes,

One of the most interesting apocalyptic texts of the early Middle Ages is a sermon *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World* preserved in Latin in four manuscripts and ascribed in them either to St. Ephraem or to St. Isidore.

Three manuscripts ascribed the sermon to St. Ephraem and one manuscript lists St. Isidore as the author. St. Ephraem of Nisibis lived from AD 306 to 373. He was one of the great figures in the Syrian church. Ephraem of Nisibis was well-known for his poetics, his attacks against rationalism, and his apologetics against the heresies of his day. St. Isidore of Seville lived from about AD 560 to 636. "Isidore was the last of the ancient Christian Philosophers, as he was the last of the great Latin Fathers."<sup>10</sup> "It is not, however, in the capacity of an original and independent writer, but as an indefatigable compiler of all existing knowledge, that literature is most deeply indebted to him."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, due to the nature of *Pseudo-Ephraem*, we can say that this document does not resemble any of the writings of these two men.

**Pseudo-Ephraem: Date**

Paul J. Alexander dates this sermon in the sixth century. In relation to the question of the time of writing, Alexander writes, “this text was written by some unknown writer in the sixth century and was derived from an earlier Pseudo-Ephraem manuscript.” This conclusion is confirmed by C.P. Caspari who undertook the job of editing the sermon and offered a commentary concerning its meaning.

**Pseudo-Ephraem: Theology**

The sermon is separated into ten paragraphs. The second major paragraph states,

We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, what is imminent or overhanging. Already there have been hunger and plagues, violent movements of nations, and signs, which have been predicted by the Lord, they have already been fulfilled, and there is not other which means, except the advent of the wicked one in the completion of the Roman kingdom. Why therefore are we occupied with worldly business, and why is our mind held fixed on the lusts of the world or the anxieties of the ages? Why therefore do we not reject 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?* Believe you me, dearest brothers, because the coming of the

Lord is nigh, believe you me, because the end of the world is at hand, believe me, because it is the very last time. Or do you not believe unless you see it with your eyes? See to it that this sentence be not fulfilled among you of the prophet who declares: “Woe to those who desire to see the Day of the Lord!” *Because all saints and the Elect of the Lord are gathered together before the tribulation which is about 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* (italics added).

The reader should pay close attention to what is stated in this paragraph. The signs predicted by the Lord in Matthew 24 have been fulfilled and nothing remains except the coming of the Evil one in connection with the consummation. The writer of the sermon continues to argue that the nearness of the end of the world warrants the believer’s total abandonment of every care of earthly actions and preparation for the meeting of the Lord Christ. For one to fail to prepare is to copy the attitude of those looking for the Day of the Lord because they misunderstand its nature. Then comes the critical statement that all saints and the Elect of the Lord are taken to the Lord before the tribulation comes. The purpose of this removal is to prevent any of them (all saints and the elect of the Lord) from seeing the confusion, which overwhelms the world. Without debating the meaning of this statement and for the sake of argument, we shall grant the pretribblers their assertion: *Pseudo-Ephraem* is a pretribulation document. However, serious questions remain as to whether this sermon is actually teaching a seven-year separation between the Rapture and revelation of Jesus Christ.

The final paragraph requires comment as well. It states,

And when the three and a half years have been completed, the time of the Antichrist, through which he will have seduced the world, after the resurrection of the two prophets, in the hour which the world does not know, and on the day which the

enemy or son of perdition does not know, will come the sign of the Son of Man, and coming forward the Lord shall appear with great power and majesty, with the sign of the word of salvation going before him, and also even with all the powers of the heavens with the whole chorus of the saints, with those who bear the sign of the holy cross upon their shoulders, as the angelic trumpet precedes him, which shall sound and declare: Arise O sleeping ones, arise, meet Christ, because his hour of judgment has come! Then Christ shall come and the enemy shall be thrown into confusion, and the Lord shall destroy him by the Spirit of His mouth. And he shall be bound and shall be plunged into the abyss of everlasting fire alive with his father Satan; and all people, who do his wishes, shall perish with him forever; but the righteous one shall inherit everlasting life with the Lord for ever and ever.

This is an amazing paragraph in light of the supposed pretrib statement of paragraph two above. The sermon argues that after the three and a half years of Antichrist’s rule and the resurrection of the two prophets, Christ will be introduced to the earth by the sign of the Son of Man. The Son of Man will be accompanied by the powers of heaven, a whole chorus of saints, and an angelic trumpet. The angelic trumpet will call the dead to life (resurrection). The coming of Christ will result in Antichrist’s binding and being thrown into the everlasting fire along with Satan and the unrighteous. The righteous at that time will inherit everlasting life. At face value, it would seem that this author sees no place for a 1000-year reign of Christ on earth following His return. That pretribulationists would use this document in any shape, form or fashion is difficult to understand. It is not too much to say that one can sense desperation in their choice.

However, the point of this article is not to critique Pseudo-Ephraem’s sermon. Rather, we want you, the reader, to evaluate the significance of *Pseudo-Ephraem* for the pretrib





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position. How much confidence should you place in *Pseudo-Ephraem*? Does *Pseudo-Ephraem* add credibility to pretribulationism? If *Pseudo-Ephraem* adds credibility for pretribulationism, how much more does the *Didache* add credibility for a prewrath Rapture? Consider the following facts about the *Didache*.

### The Didache: Introduction

If the pretribulationists are willing to defend their position based on *Pseudo-Ephraem*, the prewrath position defends itself based on the *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. The importance of this document cannot be overstated, as we shall demonstrate below. “This document, which is approximately the length of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, consists of four clearly separate sections.”<sup>12</sup> “The *Didache* purports to be an instruction based on the sayings of the Lord and given by the Twelve Apostles to pagans who wished to become Christians.”<sup>13</sup> The fourth and final section (chapter 16) is at the heart of our discussion. It is eschatological in nature. It consists of a short eschatological exhortation to holiness (16:1-2) and a brief description of the events surrounding the Lord’s return (16:3-8).

### The Didache: Authorship

There is no explicit historical evidence that connects any of the original twelve disciples with the actual writing of this document. The writing itself does not claim direct apostolic authorship. Therefore, it *cannot* be considered a pseudo-writing in the same sense as *Pseudo-Ephraem* is. This document enjoyed a very favorable position among believers in the second, third and fourth centuries. Some have indicated a belief that some early church fathers accepted the *Didache* as Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

The decision to exclude the *Didache* from what came to be called the New Testament canon took a number of years. During the early years before the twenty-seven books, that presently constitutes the New Testament were determined, the *Didache* enjoyed a favorable status. Some scholars have insisted that “it was thus counted by some as part of the New Testament canon.” This conclusion is based primarily on Eusebius’

inclusion of the *Didache* in his canonical list.

Eusebius (born in AD 260 and died in AD 340) is rightly called “The Father of Church History.”<sup>15</sup> In Eusebius’ book, *Ecclesiastical History* written in AD 325, one finds materials covering the first three hundred years of Church history. It is in this great work of Eusebius that we find one of the earliest lists of the New Testament canon. He classifies the writings into four categories: (1) recognized, (2) disputed, (3) spurious, and (4) heretical. In the recognized category, Eusebius places the four gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles of Paul, 1 John, and 1 Peter. The final book of this category is the Apocalypse of John.

In the disputed category, Eusebius lists the Epistles of James and Jude, the second Epistle of Peter, and the second and third Epistles of John. Among the spurious books, Eusebius’ third category, we find Acts of Paul, the Shepherd, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, the *Didache*, the Apocalypse of John and the Gospel of Hebrews. Eusebius’ final category entitled heretical lists the Gospel of Peter, Thomas, and Matthias, the Acts of Andrew, John and other apostles.

While the term *spurious* in modern speech has a negative connotation, it did not have negative connotations during Eusebius’ time. Rather, spurious described books not included in the New Testament, but having great value for the church. Notice that Eusebius places the Apocalypse of John (the book of Revelation) in both the recognized and spurious categories. However, the heretical books were never acceptable. Eusebius makes a very interesting comment concerning the heretical category. He writes,

...[T]he thought and purport of their contents are completely out of harmony with true orthodoxy and clearly show themselves that they are the forgeries of heretics. For this reason they ought not to be reckoned among the spurious books, but are to be cast aside as altogether absurd and impious.<sup>16</sup>

The heretical books have no value whatsoever. This is compelling evidence that the *Didache* was well known and well favored by

## Some have indicated a belief that some early church fathers accepted the *Didache* as Scripture.

early church fathers. In a document written 40 years after Eusebius’ book, Athanasius of Alexandria writes,

After listing the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments... mentions... “other books not recognized as canonical, but recommended by our ancestors for reading by those who have recently entered and wish to learn the word of faith”—that is, books that, although not included in the canon, nevertheless enjoy a certain regard as... books approved by the church and, accordingly, appropriate reading for baptismal candidates.<sup>17</sup>

Athanasius not only accepts the *Didache* but also encourages its use for training new believers in the “fundamentals” of the faith. That is compelling! The early fathers saw nothing wrong with the teachings contained in this document. The decision to reject the *Didache* as non-canonical did not undermine its usefulness to the church. Therefore, we can take chapter 16, which deals with the return of Christ, as consistent with the beliefs of early church fathers. There is not one recorded criticism of the eschatology of the *Didache* by the early church fathers.

### The Didache: Date

Concerning the issue of dating the *Didache*, this author is in agreement with Dr. Bruce

M. Metzger. He writes, “most [scholars] prefer a date in the first half of the second century.”<sup>18</sup>

### The Didache: Theology

The eschatological portion of the *Didache* is limited to chapter 16. It states,<sup>19</sup>

Didache 16:1

Be watchful for your life; let your lamps not be quenched and your loins not ungirdled, but be ready; for you know not the hour in which our Lord comes.

Didache 16:2

And you shall gather yourselves together frequently, seeking what is fitting for your souls; for the whole time of your faith shall not profit you, if you be not perfected at the last season.

Didache 16:3

For in the last days the false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate.

Didache 16:4

For as lawlessness increase, they shall hate one another and shall persecute and betray. And then the world-deceiver shall appear as a son of God; and shall work signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands; and he shall do unholy things, which have never been since the world began.

Didache 16:5

Then all created mankind shall come to the fire of testing, and many shall be offended and perish; but they that endure in their faith shall be saved by the Curse Himself.

Didache 16:6

And then shall the signs of the truth appear; first a sign of a rift in the heaven, then a sign of a voice of a trumpet, and thirdly a resurrection of the dead;

Didache 16:7

Yet, not of all, but as it was said The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him.

Didache 16:8

Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.

The knowledgeable reader will detect a very strong influence of Matthew 24 on this chapter.<sup>20</sup> Without directly quoting Matthew, the writer(s) of the *Didache* echoes the eschatology of Matthew 24. Didache 16:1-2 is exhortative in nature. Before giving the reader an outline of the Lord’s return, the text sets forth two very important things believers should do. Watchfulness and frequent attendance at community worship is encumbered upon all believers. Watchfulness is necessary because the Lord’s return is unknown (Matt 24:36). Frequent attendance at community worship is mandatory because only a firm faith in the face of the coming trial will see faith perfected “at the final hour.”

Didache 16:3-8 picks up the theme of “the final hour” and sets forth an overview of the events that will constitute “the final hour” during the last days. First, false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied. Sheep shall be turned into wolves and love shall be turned into hate. The reason for the hatred, persecution and betrayal among believers is the increase in lawlessness. Then, a world-deceiver (working signs and wonders) shall appear as a son of God. The earth shall be delivered into his hands and he shall do unholy things. Then all of mankind shall come to the fire of testing and many shall be offended and perish. However, the Lord Jesus shall save them that endure in their faith. Then, the signs of the truth shall appear: (1) a rift in the heaven, (2) a voice of a trumpet, (3) and a resurrection of the dead. This resurrection will only include the righteous because Zechariah 14:5 indicates the Lord will return with His saints.<sup>21</sup> Then, the world will see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.

While the exact eschatology of the *Didache* can be debated, what is patently clear is this: the resurrection of the righteous

follows the persecution of Antichrist. This is the position of the *Didache*. The *Didache’s* eschatology is based to a large part on Matthew 24. What say you then? What is your verdict?

### Conclusion

Scripture is the first and final arbiter for any Rapture position. However, wisdom would demand that the position of the early church fathers should carry weight in our final decision. The overwhelming majority of early church fathers before Augustine were premillennial “imminent intertribulationists.” That is, they believed that Christ would return and Rapture the church during the persecution by Antichrist of God’s elect. Christ would then punish the wicked and setup a kingdom on earth for one thousand years. A position now echoed in the prewrath position. A position supported by the overwhelming majority of the earliest church fathers.

In contradistinction, in what must be labeled, “an act of desperation,” in order to blunt the effective criticisms of Bray, MacPherson and others, pretribulationists offer *Pseudo-Ephraem*—one document out of 1500 years of church history. A document with a very dubious past is the best pretribulationists can scavenge up. Written by a person of no reputation, the document depends on the popularity of a past giant of the faith. It sets forth supposedly a two-phased return of the Lord. A “truth” pretribulationists insist could only be found in “seed” form in the early church fathers. At present, this author cannot remember any doctrinal position of the conservative faith that utilizes a suspect document as proof for its authenticity. Perhaps, this is the reason why so few pretribulationists have weighed in with their voice of support for *Pseudo-Ephraem*.

### ENDNOTES

1. John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, 1980), 31.
2. Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up*, (Medford: Omega Publications, 1993), 79.
3. See footnote #77 in Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers,” which appears in

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Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 454.

4. Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers," which appears in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 103.
5. This definition was taken from the web-site of the Pre-Trib Research Center.
6. See Grant R. Jeffrey, "A Pretrib Rapture Statement in the Early Medieval Church" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, Ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 108.
7. The immediate context would indicate that Jeffrey is talking about Dave MacPherson, John Bray and G. E. Ladd.
8. Pronounced DID-uh-kay.
9. *Imminent intertribulationism* is the name Larry V. Crutchfield gives the position of the earliest church fathers. The earliest church fathers believed that Christ would return at any

moment because they were in the midst of the persecution of Antichrist. This is the heart of the prewrath position. Christ will return to rapture the church to heaven only after the persecution of Satan/Antichrist starts.

10. From the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, copyright 1913 by the Encyclopedia Press, Inc. Electronic version copyright 1996 by New Advent, Inc. Transcribed by Darl J. Dumont.
11. *ibid.*
12. Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, tr. L. M. Maloney, ed. H.W. Attridge, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 1.
13. J.A. Kleist, *The Didache*, et al, (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1948), 3.
14. A fact to be supported later in this article.
15. This information was taken from the website of Glenn Davis which can be located on the internet at <http://shell5.ba.best.com/~gdavis/ntcanon/eusebius.htm>.
16. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.7.

17. Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 4.

18. B.M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 49-50.

19. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot. Adapt. and mod. © 1990. ATHENA DATA PRODUCTS.

20. Cf. Did. 1a/Matt 24:42

Did. 16.1c/Matt 24:42 and 44

Did. 16.3/Matt 24:11-12 and 7:15

Did. 16:4a/Matt 24:12 and 10

Did. 16:4b/Matt 24:24

Did. 16:4d/Matt 24:21

Did. 16:5b/Matt 24:10

Did. 16:5c/Matt 24:13 (10:22b)

Did. 16:6a/Matt 24:30a

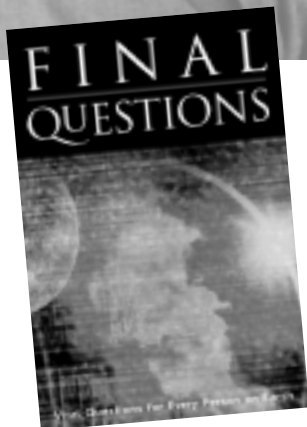
Did. 16:6b/Matt 24:31

Did. 16:7/Zech 14:5

Did. 16:8/Matt 24:30b; 26:64

To see this chart and related matters, see Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 209.

21. This is the proof that the writer of the *Didache* uses.



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# THY KINGDOM COME

## The When and How

by Gary Vaterlaus

When the Lord instructed His disciples to pray that God's Kingdom come to earth (Luke 11:1-4), Scripture indicates no questions on the part of the disciples. In other words, they understood exactly what Jesus meant. After all, it was the long awaited outcome of God's work on earth. However, by the end of the New Testament, new details concerning the Kingdom became known. Revelation 20-22 indicates that before the eternal Kingdom comes, Jesus will rule over a temporal Kingdom of 1000 years duration on earth. However, many do not agree that Jesus will rule over a temporal Kingdom before the eternal Kingdom comes. At the heart of this debate is Revelation 20:4-6, which specifically says:

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a *thousand years*. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the *thousand years* were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a *thousand years*. (emphasis added)

Does this passage teach a temporal Kingdom on earth? We shall address this matter in this article.

Throughout much of church history, there has been considerable debate as to the meaning of this "millennial" passage. The term *millennium* comes from Latin and means 1000 years. Questions have been raised, such as: When do the 1000 years take place? What is the nature of the Millennium? Where will the Millennium take place—on earth or in heaven? Does "a thousand years" really mean 1000 years? There are three major positions regarding the biblical idea of the Millennium as presented in this passage from Revelation. These three views are termed premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism.

### Premillennialism

Advocates of this view believe that Revelation 20 should be taken literally and that the Bible teaches a future 1000-year earthly reign of

Christ. They believe that the return of Jesus Christ will occur before He establishes His kingdom on earth. At the close of this age, Christ will return to rapture His church, destroy the wicked, and establish His Millennial Kingdom in fulfillment of His promises to Israel. This 1000 year period will be followed by the general resurrection of the unsaved dead, the Great White Throne judgment, and then the eternal kingdom. As will be shown below, this view was the dominant view of the early church prior to AD 325.

### Amillennialism

Adherents of this position believe that the Bible predicts no literal, earthly kingdom of Christ. They teach that the victorious Christ is reigning in this present age as He rules His church through the Word and Spirit (i.e. we are currently in the Millennium). According to this view there will be a continuous development of good and evil in the world until the Second Coming of Christ, when the dead shall be raised and judged. This view became the most prominent view of the church during the 4th century and has continued up to this present time as the dominant belief within Christendom.

### Postmillennialism

Those who hold to this view believe that the Millennium will occur on the earth, but that it will come through Christian preaching and teaching. They believe that the Bible teaches that a majority of the world will eventually be converted and that humanity will enjoy a long period of peace and prosperity. This period, which they call the "Millennium", may or may not last 1000 years, and will be followed by the return of Christ for the resurrection and judgment of all people. This view originated in the 17th century and represents a small minority of the church.

### A Question of Hermeneutics

With all of the debate and so many people with differing views on the subject, is there any hope that we can expect to understand what the Bible actually teaches? Or should we just throw up our hands in futility, proclaim ourselves "Panmillennialists", and say, "everything will pan out in the end"? The answer is an emphatic, "No!" The return of the Lord Jesus Christ and the consummation of God's ultimate plans and purposes in history are the most prophesied events in the Bible.



# UNDERSTANDING THE MILLENNIUM

To avoid Scripture's teaching on the subject would be to ignore whole sections of the Word of God. The problem is not the data itself, but the interpretation of the data.

Much of the millennial question comes down to hermeneutics—how we interpret the Scriptures. Are we going to accept the biblical text at face value, or are we going to allegorize or spiritualize the text? The only manner of approaching the Bible which places the authority in the text itself is what we call the literal or face value method of interpretation. All other methods place the authority in the hands of the interpreter as the one who must determine the meaning of the text. The face-value method, simply defined, is that method of biblical interpretation which seeks to understand the meaning of the text in its most normal, natural, customary sense as intended by the Author/author (divine/human) at the time it was written. The interpreter's job is to *discover* the meaning of the text, rather than to *determine* it.

There are several key components to studying and understanding the text of Scripture. They include: seeking to discover the Author/author's intended meaning, recognizing the importance of context, comparing Scripture with Scripture, determining the reference of figures of speech, and understanding the near/far implications and applications of prophetic passages.

The purpose and scope of this article does not permit me to go in-depth on the issue of hermeneutics. Suffice it to say that we must be careful not to abandon the literal sense of Scripture and begin down the path of allegorization or spiritualization which can swiftly become a slippery slope leading to personal and theological bias. If we approach Scripture at face value and let the author speak for himself, we will go far in coming to the truth of Scripture.

## What Does the Old Testament Teach?

Some claim that the only passage that mentions a 1000-year earthly kingdom is Revelation 20, and that this is not sufficient Scriptural support to defend the doctrine of Premillennialism. However, this argument confuses two issues: whether there is a temporal kingdom and the duration of that kingdom. Revelation 20:4-6 is the only passage in the Bible to give the exact number of years the temporal kingdom will last. However, Revelation 20:4-6 is not the only passage in the Bible to refer to a temporal kingdom on earth. If there truly will be a temporal kingdom, as stated in Revelation 20, are there Old Testament passages to corroborate this view?

The basis for understanding the future temporal kingdom comes from the Old Testament covenants established with Abraham and David. Another word for "covenant" is "promise." There are several places in the Old Testament where God makes specific and significant promises to His people. Some of these promises were of a temporary nature, while others were permanent or eternal. Some of these promises were conditional, that is God will fulfill His end of the promise, only if man fulfills his end. An example of this is the Mosaic Covenant which was dependent upon the obedience and faithfulness of the Jewish nation (see Deuteronomy 28 and 29). This is similar to a bilateral treaty that is made between nations today. Other covenants are described as being unconditional. God is promising to fulfill His part regardless of the response of the other party. This would be similar to

a unilateral treaty in today's world. These eternal and unconditional covenants flow from the sovereignty and grace of God and are based solely on His divine choice and purposes.

One group of amillennialists teach that God never made any promises to Israel as a nation. The covenants, they say, were given to the "seed of Abraham" which is not an ethnic reference, but a covenant community of faith without regard to any racial or ethnic ancestry. Another group claims that God has set aside Israel because of their rejection of the Messiah and that the church has replaced them as the "people of God." They teach that the church has inherited all the promises that were originally made to Israel.

The original promise (or covenant) with Israel was given to Abram (later renamed Abraham) by God in Genesis 12:1-3:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This promise was repeated or amplified on three separate occasions (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-18). This is called the Abrahamic Covenant and there are three basic elements to the covenant: 1) a land, 2) a nation, and 3) a blessing. Each of these elements was repeated in separate covenants which are called the Palestinian (or Land) Covenant (Deut. 30:1-10), the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:11-16) and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-40).

Each of these covenants is presented in Scripture as eternal and unconditional. The Abrahamic Covenant is called "eternal" in Genesis 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chronicles 16:17; and Psalm 105:8-10. Scripture says that Israel is given the land "forever" in Genesis 13:15, 17:8; Isaiah 60:21; and Ezekiel 37:25. The Davidic Covenant is referred to as "eternal" in 2 Samuel 23:5; Isaiah 55:3; and Ezekiel 37:25-26. The New Covenant is called "eternal" in Isaiah 61:8; Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 37:26; and Hebrews 13:20. The unconditional nature of these covenants can be seen from the fact that God alone "cut" the covenant with Abraham after he put Abraham in a deep sleep (Gen. 15:5-21)—it was a unilateral covenant. In addition, God used the formula "I will" over and over in each of these covenants (Abrahamic—seven times; Land—twelve times; Davidic—seven times; New—seven times). The Mosaic Covenant, in contrast, is conditional by nature and contains or implies the formula "if you will" numerous times in Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 28.

These promises of the land, the nation and the blessing have not been fully realized by those to whom they were given—the Jewish people. Israel has enjoyed part of these promises, but their final and ultimate fulfillment await a future time. Our God is a faithful God and will not renege on His promises, but will fulfill them all to the letter. At some future time, which we call the Millennial Kingdom, God will fulfill these promises in a literal fashion, by restoring Israel to the full dimensions of her land, bringing her into everlasting righteousness and ruling over her through her Messiah, Jesus. There are many passages in

the Old Testament that describe this yet future time of blessing to Israel. The most complete descriptions are Isaiah 65:17-25; Jeremiah 33:14-22; Ezekiel 36:22-38, 37:21-28; Zechariah 14:8-21. These prophecies of future blessing should not be allegorized or spiritualized away. They will all be fulfilled literally when Christ returns and sets up His Millennial Kingdom. God will keep all of His promises!

### What Does the New Testament Teach?

In addition to the clear description of a temporal kingdom given in Revelation 20:4-6, are there other passages in the New Testament which support the idea of a future temporal earthly reign of Christ?

Unlike some modern scholars, the New Testament writers do not reinterpret the Old Testament promises given to Israel and apply them to the church. While it is true that the church participates in the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenants, the New Testament teaches in several places that there is still an ultimate literal fulfillment of God's promises for the nation of Israel.

At the first advent of Christ, an angelic messenger announced His future birth to Mary. The angel made it clear that Jesus will yet sit on David's throne and will yet reign over Israel in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant:

And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end (Luke 1:31-33).

This is a clear promise that Christ will be the one to rule over Israel and fulfill the promises made to David. The "house of Jacob" that the angel refers to is none other than the nation of Israel.

In Acts 1:6-8 the disciples of Christ ask him, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" In response to their question, Jesus doesn't deny that He will one day restore the kingdom to Israel, but says that they won't know when it is going to happen: "...it is not for you to know times and epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority." Jesus is implicitly saying that there will be a future restoration of the kingdom to Israel.

In Acts 3 Peter is speaking to the men of Israel who were amazed at the healing of the lame beggar. Peter tells them that they must repent of their deeds and wait for Jesus, "whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time" (Acts 3:19-21). It is significant that Peter says this "period of restoration" is what the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of. What is Peter referring to? This "period of restoration" is none other than the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises made to Israel—the complete restoration of Israel (see Isaiah 60-62; Jeremiah 30:4-10, 33:14-26; Amos 9:9-15).

The Apostle Paul, in the eleventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, tells in great detail of the temporary partial hardening of the Jews while the gospel goes to the Gentiles. But he makes it very clear that God has not abandoned the Jews nor nullified any of His promises to them. Read the following statements to see Paul's view of Israel's

future: "God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be!" (Rom. 11:1). "They did not stumble so as to fall did they? May it never be!" (Rom. 11:11). "A partial hardening has happened to Israel *until* the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel *will be saved*" (emphasis mine) (Rom. 11:25-26). "For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). It is clear that Paul saw a future restoration of national Israel into a right relationship with God. He did not teach, as some do, that the church has replaced national Israel as the new people of God.

One other New Testament passage that refers to an interim reign of Christ before the eternal kingdom of God is 1 Corinthians 15:22-26:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

Paul states that the resurrection of believers will occur at Christ's coming, and then afterward will come the end when He has abolished all rule, authority and power. But first Christ must reign until He has put all of His enemies under His feet, and the last enemy will be death. This reign *after* His coming, but *before* all His enemies are put under His feet, must include His millennial reign. Revelation 20:7-15 tells us that at the end of the Millennium Satan will be cast into the lake of fire, and death and Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire. The book of Revelation makes it clear that death, the final enemy, will not be defeated until after the 1000-year rule of Christ, after Christ has reigned and all His enemies are under His feet (Rev. 20:5, 11-15).

### What Did the Early Church Believe?

Our view of the Millennium, or any other biblical doctrine, should not be based on the antiquity of a particular teaching, but on a consistent face-value interpretation of Scripture. It is what God says in His word that matters to us. Nevertheless, the beliefs of the early church fathers, though not infallible, are the most likely to retain the teachings of the original first century apostolic church. The further one is removed historically from the original church, the greater the likelihood that the message has been diluted, distorted or defiled. As we will see in this short survey of the teachings of the earliest of the church fathers, they were unanimously premillennial.

Most scholars, many who are not themselves premillennial in their theology, have noted the premillennial beliefs of the early church. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, translator of Eusebius' Church History, states that the earliest church was premillennial: "Jewish chiliasm (pre-millennialism) was very common at about the beginning of the Christian era, and is represented in the voluminous apocalyptic literature of that day."<sup>1</sup> The great church historian, Phillip Schaff, wrote, "The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age [AD 100-325] is the prominent chiliasm, or millennarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment..."<sup>2</sup>

## BY GARY VATERLAUS

Indeed, a survey of the writings of the early church reveal premillennial views were held by Clement (30-100), Papias (60-130), Justin Martyr (100-165), Pothinius (87-177), Irenaeus (120-202), Tertullian (155-225), Hippolytus (170-236), Julius Africanus (200-241), Cyprian (200-258), Nepos (230-280), Victorinus (d. 304), Methodius (d. 311), Lactantius (d. 317), as well as others. A premillennial view was also expressed in the early church documents, *The Epistle of Barnabas* (100-120), *The Didache* (100-120), and *The Shepherd of Hermes* (150-170). Here are just a few quotes from some of these:

“...there will be a millennium after the resurrection from the dead, when the personal reign of Christ will be established on this earth.” – Papias (*Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*, 6)

“But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.” – Justin Martyr (*Dialogue With Trypho*, 81)

“But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely built city of Jerusalem” – Tertullian (*Anti-Marcion*, 3, 24)

“And again, since God, having finished His works, rested the seventh day and blessed it, at the end of the six thousandth year all wickedness must be abolished from the earth, and righteous reign for a thousand years” – Lactantius (*Of a Happy Life*, 14)

It was not until after the 4th Century that amillennialism became popular in the church. This was due to the adoption of the allegorical method of interpretation, which was promoted by Origen and Augustine. However, the overwhelming evidence is that the earliest church was premillennial. The early church believed that the Second Coming of Christ would take place before a literal millennial age. The historical eschatological roots of the New Testament church are in complete agreement with a face value interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments.

### Conclusion

A temporal kingdom of a 1000-year duration is the result of applying a consistent face value hermeneutic to all of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. This view is supported in the covenants of the Old Testament, taught by the apostles in the New Testament and was the overwhelming view of the earliest church fathers prior to AD 325. The basis of premillennialism is the covenant-keeping nature of God, affirmed over and over again in the pages of Scripture.

### ENDNOTES

1. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 2:1:172, note 19.
2. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1884), Vol. 2, p. 614.

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- Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsends, *The Coming Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997).
- Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958).

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# Letters & Email of Encouragement

After 27 years of believing and teaching a pretrib rapture without questioning it, I read *The Sign*. What a revelation. I feel like someone awakened from a deep slumber. We have been studying the book in our Monday night Bible study for the last 2 years. It's amazing how everything comes into such clear focus when the Scriptures are interpreted correctly. I always had questions about the pretrib position that could never seem to be answered. Now I see clearly. The prewrath position is the truth. I'm certain of it. Thank you all and keep telling the truth.

— J.S. in Ohio

I have been a pretrib believer for over 30 years. I have taught it, lived it, and argued it. But this past year, I heard a "new" thought on the rapture issue. A Southern Baptist minister called it the "Prewrath" position. All I can say is that I sat there under this "new" teaching

amazed. It seemed the Holy Spirit was gently speaking to me and caused me to study this approach more deeply. What can I say... I have been changed. I can see no fault in this teaching from a literal biblical approach. But it seems that blinders have been removed from my eyes and understanding when I consider the shaky ground the pretrib view is based on.

— D.G. in North Carolina

I have been teaching for years both the pretrib position and a form of the prewrath position for the last 15 years, always stating that I did not know for sure which one was correct. After reading *The Rapture Question Answered*, however, I came to a solid conclusion that Mr. Van Kampen's analysis is absolutely the only one possible that solves all of the riddles of the puzzle... I am lucky, I guess, because I have not experienced the

persecution for my beliefs that others seem to have. It seems that when I present the Scriptural truths in a non-emotional way, and without attacking the other positions, people see the truth for themselves... The truth of a matter is never settled by how many people believe it. God is true even if no one believes Him. I am excited, however, to learn that more and more people are having their eyes opened in these last days.

— K.C. in Connecticut

Thanks so much for making these [issues of *Parousia*] available on line. It allowed me to quickly catch up on topics of interest from many of these back issues. Also thanks for all the effort contributed in keeping the web site material current.

— W.S. via email

*Parousia* is produced and published four times a year by The Sign Ministries, P.O. Box 113, West Olive, MI 49460; (800) 627-5134; [info@signministries.org](mailto:info@signministries.org); Editor: Rev. Charles Cooper; Associate Editors: Dean Tisch, Sandy Ksycki, Dirk Eichhorst; Creative Director & Designer: Scott Holmgren; ©2001 The Sign Ministries. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's written permission. Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, ©1977, 1987, 1988, The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. The Sign Ministries is a ministry of Sola Scriptura. Visit our website at: [www.signministries.org](http://www.signministries.org)

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