

When was the Pre-tribulation RAPTURE first taught?

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It has long been claimed by amillennialists, preterists, and others who interpret prophecy allegorically that the doctrine of the pre-tribulation Rapture is a new doctrine, and since it is allegedly a new doctrine it cannot be a true one.

Gary DeMar, President American Vision, says: “A majority of prophecy writers and speakers teach that the church will be raptured before a future tribulational period. But did you know that prior to about 1830 no such doctrine existed. No one in all of church history ever taught pretribulational rapture” (cited from “Why Christians Will Suffer Great Tribulation,” Ourdailybreadbyjoeortiz).

When Demar says the pre-tribulation Rapture did not exist prior to 1830, he is referring to the *The Morning Watch* prophecy journal and the writings of John Darby which popularized dispensational theology in the 1800s.

Though this claim continues to be made, it is patently false.

MORGAN EDWARDS (1722-1795)

The Pre-Tribulation Rapture was taught by prominent Baptist leader Morgan Edwards. His *Two Academical Exercises on the Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium and Last-Novelties* was published in 1744 in Philadelphia.

Morgan Edwards was one of the most prominent Baptist leaders of his day. He was the pastor of the Baptist church in Philadelphia and the founder of Brown University, the first Baptist college in America. A summary of life was featured in the *Baptist Encyclopedia*. He was one of the first Baptist historians of repute, his *Materials Toward A History of the Baptists* (1770) providing a foundation for all subsequent works.

Following is what Edwards believed about Bible prophecy:

“The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years. I say, somewhat more; because **the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ’s ‘appearing in the air’ (I Thes. iv. 17); and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many ‘mansions in the father’s house’ (John xiv. 2), and disappear during the foresaid period of time.** The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for ‘now the time is come that judgment must begin,’ and that will be ‘at the house of God’ (I Pet. iv. 17)” (Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on the Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium and Last-Novelties*, 1744).

Edwards first wrote the previous statement in an senior essay while at Bristol Baptist College in Bristol, England, before coming to America. At the beginning of the essay, in a comment addressed to his teacher, Edwards said,

“And is it come to my lot to treat of the Millennium, or Christ thousand years reign on earth? Thousand pities, sir, that you had not allotted the task to one of these older and abler students! But since it is your pleasure, I will do my possible: and IN THE ATTEMPT WILL WORK BY A RULE YOU HAVE OFTEN RECOMMENDED, VIZ. ‘TO TAKE THE SCRIPTURES IN A LITERAL SENSE, EXCEPT WHEN THAT LEADS TO CONTRADICTION OR ABSURDITY.’”

This rule of literal interpretation of prophecy is exactly the rule from which Pre-Tribulationists work today. It is the rule that I teach in my courses on Bible interpretation.

Edwards bluntly rejected the allegorical approach. Of the millennial kingdom prophecies, he said, “Miserable work do the Antimillenarians make of these texts.”

Edwards was writing 175 years before the destruction of the Ottoman Empire’s hold on the land of Israel (1917) and 200 years before the establishment of the modern state of Israel (1948), yet he knew that these things would happen. Consider the following fascinating prediction that he made based on a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy:

“The Turkish or Ottoman Empire will be demolished; for otherwise the right owners cannot possess their inheritance ... The twelve tribes (as observed before) will return to their ancient inheritance, else how can the twelve apostles be their judges? ... In this united capacity they will rebuild Jerusalem in its place, and the temple in its place on mount Zion; for in this temple will antichrist sit as god, and be the abomination mentioned by Daniel, and referred to by Christ” (Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on the Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium and Last-Novelties*, 1744).

From the case of Morgan Edwards, it is obvious that there were Baptists in the 18th century in England and America who held the literal principle of interpretation of Bible prophecy as opposed to the allegorical.

We must remember that most preachers do not leave a permanent record of their teaching. From Paul’s day to ours, the vast majority of sound preachers have been common men as opposed to scholars.

Typically, they are not writers and do not publish books. In the record church history, we only have a tiny glimpse into what was happening, and that glimpse is based on the pittance that has survived of the little that was ever recorded.

“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:26-27).

EPHRAEM THE SYRIAN (AD c. 303-373)

We now go back to two centuries after the apostles. Ephraem is venerated as a “saint” by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, but they would not allow him to teach his doctrine of prophecy today.

Ephraem is called “the Syrian” because he lived in that region.

He was a voluminous writer. Many of his sermons and psalms are included in the 16-volume *Post-Nicene Library*. (The Council of Nicea was held in AD 325, and historians divide the “fathers” into Ante-Nicene, before 325, and Post-Nicene, after 325).

Some of Ephraem’s sermons and hymns are used in the liturgy of Orthodox churches.

In the 1990s some of Ephraem’s writings were translated into English for the first time, one of these being *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*, A.D. 373.

The translation was done by Professor Cameron Rhoades of Tyndale Theological Seminary at the bequest of Grant R. Jeffrey. It was subsequently published in Jeffrey’s 1995 book *Final Warning*.

It is obvious that Ephraem believed in a literal fulfillment of prophecy, including a Rapture of New Testament saints prior to the Tribulation.

“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” (Ephraem the Syrian, *On the Last Times*).

Observe that Ephraem taught that the saints will be taken to the Lord so they will not see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world, which is exactly what 1 Thessalonians 5:3-9 says.

Ephraem taught a literal antichrist who will sit in a literal rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, a literal 3.5 year Tribulation, a literal Two Witnesses or prophets who will preach in Jerusalem, a literal battle of Gog and Magog.

“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 much 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. ... 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 ones shall inherit everlasting life with the Lord for ever and ever” (Ephraem the Syrian, *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*, A.D. 373).

Ephraem believed in the imminency of the return of Christ and urged his fellow Christians to live godly lives in expectation of His return.

EARLY CHRISTIANS TO AUGUSTINE

Actually, Ephraem the Syrian was not alone in interpreting Bible prophecy literally in his day.

He was living one generation from the era of Augustine (354-430), at which time there was a dramatic change. When Ephraem died in 373, Augustine was 19 years old.

It was in the era of Augustine that allegoricalism widely replaced the previous method of interpretation. Prior to this, it was common among Bible believers to interpret prophecy literally. They believed that Christ would return literally (and imminently), bind Satan, and establish a literal millennial kingdom on earth.

This is admitted by church historians.

William Newell says: “The early Church for 300 years looked for the imminent return of our Lord to reign, and they were right” (Newell, *Revelation*).

Phillip Schaaf said, “... the most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age [prior to AD 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” (*History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960, 2:614).

Henry Thiessen says, “It is clear ... that the Fathers held not only the pre-millennial view of Christ’s coming, but also regarded that coming as imminent. The Lord had taught them to expect His return at any moment, and so they looked for Him to come in their day. Not only so, but they also taught His personal return as being immediately, with the exception of the Alexandrian Fathers, who also rejected other fundamental doctrines” (Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 477).

In fact, Augustine, “the father of amillennialism,” once believed in a literal millennium himself. He said, “I myself, too, once held this opinion. ... They who do believe them are called by the spiritual, Chiliasts, which we may literally reproduce by the name Millenarians” (Augustine, *City of God*, book 20, chapter 7).

The following statement by Irenaeus is an example of what was commonly believed among the early “church fathers,” as they looked forward to Christ’s return and the establishment of His kingdom:

“The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth. ... In like manner [the Lord declared] that ... all animals feeding [only] on the productions of the earth, should [in those days] become peaceful and harmonious among each other, and be in perfect subjection to man” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers).

The church at Antioch long interpreted Bible prophecy literally. Antioch was an important church founded by Barnabas and Paul, and it is from this church that the first foreign missionaries were ordained and sent out (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-4). It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.

Some of the preachers associated with Antioch were Lucian (died 312), Theodore (AD 350-428), Chrysostom (AD 354-407), Theodoret (AD 386-458), and Diodorus of Tarsus. These men interpreted Bible prophecy literally and believed in a literal millennium.

In his *History of Interpretation*, F.W. Farrar observed, “Diodorus of Tarsus’ books were devoted to an exposition of Scripture in its literal sense, and he wrote a treatise, now unhappily lost, ‘on the difference between allegory and spiritual insight’” (Farrar, pp. 213-15).

“The Antioch’s school’s two greatest exegetes, Theodore of Mopsuestia (AD 350-428) and John Chrysostom (AD 354-407), were ‘anti-allegorical’” (Matthew Allen, “Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology,” bible.org).

Some of the early Christians after the apostles even taught a form of dispensationalism. Examples can be found in the extant writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Methodius. Justin Martyr (100-165) believed in four phases of history in God’s plan: From Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, and from Christ to the eternal state. Irenaeus (120-202) taught something similar, dividing the dispensations into the creation to the flood, the flood to the law, the law to the gospel, the gospel to the eternal state.

THE ORIGIN OF THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

The allegorical method of interpretation was invented by false teachers after the apostolic era as the apostasy was growing and spreading toward the formation of the Roman Catholic Church.

A school was established at Alexandria, Egypt, which became the headquarters for the allegorical method of interpretation. Egypt was a place where false teaching proliferated in the first centuries after Christ. **Clement**, who headed the school from AD 190 to 202, corrupted the Christian faith by mixing it with the worldly philosophy and allegoricalism of Philo. He taught many false doctrines, including purgatory, and believed that most men would eventually be saved even though Jesus said only a few would be (Mat. 7:14). “Clement saw the literal meaning of Scripture as being a ‘starting point’ for interpretation. Although it was ‘suitable for the mass of Christians,’ God revealed himself to the spiritually advanced through the ‘deeper meaning’ of Scripture. In every passage, a deeper or additional meaning existed beyond the primary or immediate sense” (Matthew Allen, “Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology,” bible.org).

Origen (AD 185-254) was one of the chief fathers of allegoricalism. He led the school at Alexandria from AD 202 to 232. Though he endured persecution and torture for the cause of Christ under the Emperor Decius in 250, Origen was laden down with heresies. Like Clement, he mixed the truth of the Bible with pagan philosophy. He taught that celibacy was a holy state above marriage, contrary to the teaching of the apostles. He taught baptismal regeneration, purgatory, and the pre-existence of the human soul. He taught that all men, even Satan and demons, would eventually be saved. He taught that the Holy Spirit was the first creature made by God, and denied the full Godhead of Jesus. He did not believe that the Scriptures are wholly inspired by God.

Origen claimed that “the Scriptures have little use to those who understand them literally.” He described the literal meaning of Scripture as “bread” and encouraged the student to go beyond this

to the “wine” of allegoricalism, whereby one can become intoxicated and transported to heavenly realms. Origen’s commentaries contained a wealth of fanciful interpretations, abounding in “heretical revisals of Scripture” (Frederick Nolan, *Inquiry into the Integrity of the Greek Vulgate*, p. 367).

Another father of allegoricalism was **Augustine** (AD 354-430), one of the fathers of the Roman Catholic Church. He was exalted as one of the “doctors” of Rome. Augustine invented the terrible and unbiblical doctrine of the inquisition that was used by the Catholic Church against Bible believers for more than 1,000 years. The German historian Neander observed that Augustine’s teaching “contains the germ of the whole system of spiritual despotism, intolerance, and persecution, even to the court of the Inquisition.” Augustine instigated fierce persecutions against the peace-loving, Bible-believing Donatists who were striving to maintain pure biblical churches. He taught that “the sacraments,” such as baptism, were the means of salvation. He taught that Mary did not commit sin. He taught the heresy of purgatory. He was one of the fathers of infant baptism, claiming that unbaptized infants are lost and calling all who rejected infant baptism “infidels” and “cursed.” He exalted the authority of “the church” over that of Scripture.

“Through Augustine, Origen’s allegorical hermeneutic became the backbone of medieval interpretation of the Bible” (Matthew Allen, “Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology,” bible.org).

These heresies grew and became a fundamental part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

When the Protestant denominations (e.g., Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist) broke away from Rome, one of the errors they brought with them was the allegorical interpretation of prophecy and its Replacement Theology.

THE APOSTLES

When it comes to sound doctrine, the bottom line is not what anyone has or has not taught in church history. It is “what saith the Lord?” Period. The Bible is the *sole* authority for faith and practice. It is not one authority among many, and it is not the authority only as confirmed by “church fathers” and “theologians.”

The bottom line is that the apostles and early Christians interpreted prophecy literally.

They believed in an imminent return of Christ.

“For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And **to wait for his Son from heaven**, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Th. 1:9-10).

The apostles and prophets taught that the Lord’s return is “at hand” (Ro. 13:12; Php. 4:5; 1 Pe. 4:7; Re. 1:3).

They believed in a Rapture of New Testament saints.

“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Th. 4:13-18).

They believed that the New Testament saints would be saved from the Tribulation to come.

“For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th. 5:9)

They believed in a literal Antichrist.

“Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God” (2 Th. 2:3-4).

They believed in a literal return of Christ and a literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:19-21).

They believed in a literal fulfillment of Israel’s covenants following the church age.

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins” (Romans 11:25-27).

CONCLUSION

Brethren, do not let anyone rob you of a literal interpretation of prophecy and the imminency of the return of Christ, which is the believer’s Blessed Hope. We are looking for Christ, not for the Antichrist.

A large portion of the Bible consists of prophecy, and much of it has not yet been fulfilled. The portion that has been fulfilled has been fulfilled literally. We think of the great Messianic prophecies of Christ’s first coming in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. The prophecies are breathtaking in detail, and every detail was fulfilled “literally.”

Further, if we do not interpret prophecy according to the “normal literal” method, there is no way to determine for sure what it means.

A literal interpretation of prophecy results in the doctrine that the church is not Israel, and that Israel’s covenants will yet be fulfilled after the church age.

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins” (Romans 11:25-27).

The 70th Week of Daniel 9:24-27 pertains to Israel, not to the church. Every event of the 70 Weeks pertains to “thy [Daniel’s] people, and the holy city [Jerusalem]” (verse 24). Before God turns His attention, so to speak, to fulfilling Israel’s ancient covenants, including the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7, the Church will be Raptured and will not see the coming of the antichrist and the other signs that immediately precede the glorious return of Christ.

The doctrine of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture is not a minor one. Jesus, Paul, James, and Peter taught that the return of Christ is imminent and is to be expected at any time (Mat. 24:44; Phil. 4:5; Jam. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:7). The early Christians lived in this expectation (1 Th. 1:9-10).

The doctrine of a Pre-Tribulational Rapture is a great motivator for purifying the Christian life.

1. It encourages the believer in trials and persecutions. “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18).

2. It keeps the church's focus on the Great Commission (Mat. 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk. 24:44-48; Acts 1:8). D.L. Moody had it right when he said: "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'"
 3. It motivates believers to be busy in the Lord's work (1 Cor. 15:58).
 4. It motivates believers to live obedient lives (1 Jn. 3:1-3; 1 Th. 5:4-7).
 5. It motivates believers to separate from evil (Tit. 2:13-14).
 6. It keeps believers on the outlook for heresy and apostasy (2 Timothy 4:3-4; 1 John 2:24-28).
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