

A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century

by

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INTRODUCTION: TWO EVANGELICAL THEORIES ON THE HISTORY OF THE PRETRIBULATION RAPTURE

Is the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture a nineteenth century theological invention as is sometimes alleged? The purpose of this article is to introduce and discuss a portion of a fourteenth-century text, entitled *The History of Brother Dolcino*, as it relates to this contemporary question about the history of the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture.

Two theories regarding the history of the pretribulation rapture are popular but inadequate. The first is what one writer has called the great Rapture Hoax.¹ Very popular among those who reject the pretribulation rapture as unscriptural, proponents of the Rapture Hoax theory say that the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture is not in the Bible, and was unheard of in the history of Christianity until the early nineteenth century. The concept, they say, originated with an 1812 Spanish publication of Immanuel

¹ Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983).

Lacunza, a Roman Catholic Jesuit.² It was then picked up in England by Edward Irving, who translated Lacunza's book into English in the 1820's.³ In a certain Irvingite meeting, a thirteen-year old girl named Margaret Macdonald uttered a prophecy about the rapture being pretribulation. From her, it is alleged, J.N. Darby (1800-1882), one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren in England, learned of the pretribulation rapture. In other words, the pretribulation rapture originated in Catholicism or the demonic utterance of a heretical Irvingite female. But passing it off as the fruit of his own study, Darby spread the pretribulation rapture "hoax" to the rest of evangelicalism.⁴ The main

² Duncan McDougall, *The Rapture of the Saints* (Vancouver, BC: British Israel Ass., 1962, reprinted in Blackwood, NJ, 1970); John L. Bray, *The Great Tribulation?* (PO Box 90129, Lakeland, FL 33804: John L. Bray Ministry, Inc., May 1982), 4-5; Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, Inc., August 1982), 18-20; Bray, *The Second Coming and Related Events* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, Inc., 1985), 18-24.

³ The book of Immanuel Lacunza containing his rapture theory, translated by Edward Irving, is entitled *The Coming of Messiah in Majesty and Glory*. It is available in bound reprint from Good Books, 2456 Devonshire Rd., Springfield, IL 62703. The rapture teaching of Irving and his denomination, the Catholic Apostolic Church, is discussed in Rowland A. Davenport, *Albury Apostles: The Story of the Body Known as The Catholic Apostolic Church (Sometimes Called "The Irvingites")* (UK: United Writers, 1970); Columba G. Flegg, *'Gathered Under Apostles': A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); and Mark Patterson and Andrew Walker, "Our Unspeakable Comfort: Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pretribulation Rapture" *Fides et Historia* 21:1 (Winter/Spring 1999):68-81. The latter article was reviewed by J. Lanier Burns in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (July-Sept 2000):363-365.

⁴ Other books by McPherson, which claim that the pretribulation rapture originated with the prophetic utterance of Margaret MacDonald, include *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* (Kansas City, MO: Heart of America Bible Society, 1974); *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, OR: Omega Publications, 1980); *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1995); and *The Three R's Rapture, Revisionism, Robbery: Pretribulation Rapturism from 1830 to Hal Lindsey* (Simpsonville, SC: P.O.S.T., Inc., 1998). This historical model of the origin of pretribulationism in Margaret Macdonald, constructed largely with the purpose of demonizing the teaching, can be traced through S.P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming* (London: Houlston and Wright, 1864), 26; John Scruby, *The Great Tribulation: The Church's Supreme Test* (Dayton, OH: John Scruby, 1933), 78; George Rose, *Tribulation Until Translation* (Glendale, CA: Rose Publishing, 1943), 245; Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the*

problems with this history of the pretribulation rapture are its conspiracy-type sensationalism and the questionable accuracy of some of its chain-link historical claims.⁵

Some advocates of pretribulationism hold a different theory of the history of the pretribulation rapture, a Lost and Found model that is equally unsatisfactory. These believe that the teaching of the pretribulation rapture is in the Bible, but that this doctrine was lost in history soon after the writing of the New Testament. Then in the early nineteenth century, J.N. Darby was enlightened by the Holy Spirit to the correct doctrine about the pretribulation rapture. Uniquely graced by God, Darby, through his private study of the Bible, restored the lost teaching of the pretribulation rapture.⁶ Then from him pretribulationism spread to the rest of evangelicalism.⁷ This Lost and Found view of the history of pretribulationism is inadequate because recent scholarship has brought to

Brethren 1825-1850 (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1967), 16; and Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 185.

⁵ The “rapture hoax” narrative has been challenged within the past decade by Roy A. Huebner, *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J.N. Darby*, Vol. 1 (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1991), 153-166; Thomas Ice, “Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulation Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (April-June 1990):155-168; Frank Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: And Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist* (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1995), 15-21; Charles Ryrie, *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus: What You Need to Know About the Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 73-82; and Tim LaHaye, *Rapture Under Attack* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1998), 119-136.

⁶ One such portrait of Darby as a restorer or reviver of lost truth is in Huebner, *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J.N. Darby*, Vol 1. For example, a heading in the preface reads “The State of the Church When the Reviving of the Truth Began” (viii). Part 1 of the same book is entitled “The Revival of Truth 1826-1845” (p. 1); and section 1 is entitled “The ‘First Germinating’ of the Revived Truth in the Soul of J.N. Darby” (p. 3).

⁷ The spread of pretribulationism from Darby to the present is treated in Thomas Ice, “Rapture, History of the” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*. Mal Couch, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 344-347; and Richard R. Reiter, “A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions” in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?*, Richard R. Reiter, Paul D. Feinberg, Gleason L. Archer, Douglas Moo, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 10-44.

light examples of pretribulationism in church history between the writing of the New Testament and Darby.⁸

In addition to the inaccuracy of both theories' claims, both also share the shortcoming of an extremely narrow historical focus. Both have their historical gaze almost exclusively on articulations of the rapture in the early nineteenth century, leaving an enormous historical gap of nearly eighteen hundred years, from the writing of the New Testament to the nineteenth century. This chasm has resulted in very fragmentary and incomplete presentations of the history of pretribulation rapture teaching.

A NEW HISTORY OF PRETRIBULATIONISM EMERGING

Aware that a more comprehensive history of the pretribulation rapture is needed—one that stretches across various Christian traditions and all time periods of Christian history, a growing number of evangelicals are focusing their research on historical articulations of the pretribulation rapture during that eighteen-hundred year gap between the Apostles and the nineteenth century. And in that period they are finding examples of teaching strikingly similar to modern pretribulationism with respect to both the timing and purpose of the rapture.

Within the last decade Grant Jeffrey brought to the attention of evangelicals the pretribulationism in a sermon by pseudo-Ephraem, entitled *On the Last Times, the*

⁸ Some lost and found proponents have unsuccessfully resorted to the “progression of dogma” to explain the reason for the loss and discovery of the teaching. But when portrayed as restorer, Darby still bears too much similarity with other so-called “restorers of ancient Christianity” that sprang up in the nineteenth century, persons like Alexander Campbell, Ellen G. White, and Joseph Smith.

Antichrist, and the End of the World. Dated before the seventh century, the author of the sermon wrote: “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.”⁹

In 1995 Frank Marotta and John Bray brought to light the pretribulation rapture teaching of Morgan Edwards, a Baptist theologian of the 1700’s and founder of Brown University.¹⁰ In a treatise entitled *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties* written between 1742 and 1744, Edwards taught that three and a half years before the Antichrist will kill the two witnesses of

⁹ Grant R. Jeffrey, “Pseudo-Ephraem’s Fourth Century Pre-Trib Rapture Statement” audiotape of Pre-Trib Study Group, December 12, 1994 (Arlington, TX: Pre-Trib Research Center); Jeffrey, “A Pretrib Rapture Statement in the Early Medieval Church” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, eds. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 105-125; Ice, “Examining an Ancient Pre-Trib Rapture Statement” *Pre-Trib Perspectives*, a publication of the Pre-Trib Research Center (April 1995); Demy and Ice, “The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July-Sept 1995):306-317; Ice, “Update on Pre-Darby Rapture Statements” audiotape (Arlington, TX: Pre-Trib Research Center, December 1995); and Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return* (Toronto, Ontario: Frontier Research Publications, Inc., 2001), 174-178. Opposition to the idea that the sermon of pseudo-Ephraem teaches pretribulationism has been expressed in the newsletter of John L. Bray, May 25, 1995; MacPherson, *Rapture Plot*, 268-273; Bob Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 161-188; Huebner, *Elements of Dispensational Truth*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1998), 333-334; and T.L. Frazier, *A Second Look at the Second Coming* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1999), 180-186.

¹⁰ Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: An Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist*, reprinted as Appendix 3 in Huebner, *Elements of Dispensational Truth*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed., 335-342; Bray, *Morgan Edwards and the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching (1788)* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministries, Inc., 1995). MacPherson objects to the claim that Morgan Edwards was a pretribulationist in *The Rapture Plot*, 264-268.

Revelation 11, the Son of Man will appear in the clouds to raise the dead, change the living, and catch them up to Himself.¹¹

Neither of these finds mirrors modern teaching of pretribulationism in every detail. For example, both pseudo-Ephraem and Morgan Edwards wrote that the rapture of the saints would take place three and a half years, not seven years, before the saints' subsequent descent to earth. But the fact that these ancient authors taught that the Church will be caught up to heaven for the purpose of escaping end-time tribulation, and that the saints will be in heaven while some events of the end-time tribulation, as described in Revelation, will occur on earth, has led many evangelicals to include these authors in their discussions of the overall history of pretribulationism.

Consequently, a new history of pretribulationism is beginning to emerge, one that is breaking through the narrow confines of nineteenth century English eschatology. But this much more broad history of pretribulationism is still in the beginning of its construction. As theologians and other researchers gradually sift through the Church's massive treasury of Biblical commentaries, eschatological literature, and theological texts from the early, medieval, and Reformation periods-many of them only available in languages other than English--more examples of pretribulationism are sure to be uncovered.¹²

¹¹ Morgan Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties* (Philadelphia: Dobson and Lang, 1788). Although written between 1742 and 1744, it was not published until 1788.

¹² Investigation of the eschatology of Scotland's Elspeth Buchan (1738-1791) may yield interesting results. One writer said that she expected to "meet Him [Christ] in the clouds with her followers, and to take them direct to heaven without tasting death," and that she believed "the whole body of believers would be raised by supernatural power to heaven, where they would dwell with the angels and all redeemed saints." But whether her concept was pretribulationist remains for further investigation. J.F.C. Harrison, *The*

A FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PRETRIBULATION RAPTURE REFERENCE

One such text containing a concept bearing striking similarity to modern pretribulationism is a fourteenth-century text entitled *The History of Brother Dolcino*. Composed in 1316 by an anonymous notary of the diocese of Vercelli in northern Italy, this short Latin treatise gives a firsthand account of the deeds and beliefs of a religious order called the Apostolic Brethren. Under the leadership of Brother Dolcino of Novara (d. 1307), the Apostolic Brethren flourished in the author's diocese between the years 1300 and 1307.¹³ The treatise, originally written in manuscript, was recopied in 1551,

Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 34. One nineteenth century critic of the Plymouth Brethren wrote that Darby's rapture teaching was similar to that of a Jesuit named Pierre Lambert, but no studies investigating Lambert's rapture teaching have come to the attention of the present author. Thomas Croskery, *Plymouth Brethrenism: A Refutation of its Principles and Doctrines* (London: William Mullan and Sons, 1879), viii. There were several authors by the name of Pierre Lambert. If Croskery meant Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624-1679), Henri de Frondeville's book, *Pierre Lambert de la Motte, eveque de Beryte* (Paris, 1925), may be helpful although difficult to locate. If he meant Pierre-Thomas Lambert (1751-1802) then that author's *Mémoires de famille* (Paris, 1822, 1894), may prove helpful. Or he may have had in mind Pierre Lambert (1480-1543), whose *Mémoires* are published in *Monumenta historiae patriae, Scriptorum* (Turin, 1840) I, 839-930. In addition there was a Franz Lambert (1486-1530) who wrote a commentary on Revelation entitled *In Apocalypsin* (Marbourg, 1528). The avoidance on the part of some pretribulationists from acknowledging similarities between Jesuit teaching on the rapture and pretribulationism is understandable, but regrettable, as the body of Jesuit literature may offer valuable pieces in the construction of a history of pretribulationism that is comprehensive of all periods and traditions within Christendom. Such investigation will not necessarily lead to a conclusion that Darby was influenced by Jesuit ideas.

¹³ *Historia Fratris Dulcini [The History of Brother Dolcino]* is in manuscript Codice Ambrosiano-H. 80. The date of 1316 is confirmed in R.Kestenberg-Gladstein, "The Third Reich: A Fifteenth-Century Polemic Against Joachimism, and Its Background" in Delno West, ed., *Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought*, Vol 2 (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1975), 599, no. 49. An Italian scholar of the Apostolic Brethren also held that the history was written in the early fourteenth century, describing *The History of*

and in the 1600's was used as source material for two other ecclesiastical histories of the area. It was printed in the 1740's in the 25-volume *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*.¹⁴

Most recently edited in 1907 with the reprint of *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, *The History of Brother Dolcino* contains fourteen pages of Volume 9. The paragraph relevant to the history of pretribulationism is:

Item [credidit et predicavit et docuit] quod intra illos tres annos ipse Dulcinus et sui sequaces predicabunt adventum Antichristi et quod ipse Antichristus veniret in hunc mundum finitis dictis annis tribus cum dimidio et postquam venisset, ipse tunc et sui sequaces transferrentur in paradisum, in quo sunt Enoc et Elias et sic conservarentur illesi a persecutione Antichristi, et quod tunc ipsi Enoc et Elias descenderent in terram ad predicandum Antichristum, deinde interficerentur ab eo vel eius ministris et sic regnaret Antichristus per plura tempora. Eo vero Antichristo mortuo, ipse Dulcinus, qui tunc esset papa sanctus, et sui sequaces reservati descendent in terram et predicabunt fidem Christi rectam omnibus et convertent eos, qui tunc erunt vivi, ad veram fidem Iesu Christi.¹⁵

Again, [Dolcino believed and preached and taught] that within those three years Dolcino himself and his followers will preach the coming of the Antichrist. And that the Antichrist was coming into this world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; and after he had come, then *he [Dolcino] and his followers would be transferred into Paradise*, in which are Enoch and Elijah.¹⁶ And in this way they will be *preserved unharmed from the persecution of Antichrist*. And that then Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist. Then they would be killed by him or by his servants, and thus *Antichrist would reign for a long time*. But when the Antichrist is dead, Dolcino himself, who then would be the holy pope,¹⁷ and his preserved

Brother Dolcino as an “opera stesa probabilmente da un contemporaneo di Biella (1304-7).” Eugenio Anagnine, *Dolcino* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1964), 1.

¹⁴ L.A. Muratori, ed., *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, Old Series, Vol. 9 (Italy, 1723-1751), 436. The University of Colorado at Boulder holds a copy. Speer Library at Princeton Theological Seminary also holds a copy in their rare book room.

¹⁵ Anonymous *Historia Fratris Dulcini*, Arnoldo Segarizzi, ed., 8-9. In *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, Tomo IX-Parte V. L.A. Muratori, ed. (Italy: Citta di Castello, 1907). Pius Memorial Library at Saint Louis University holds a copy.

¹⁶ As in the pseudo-Ephraem sermon and Morgan Edwards' treatise, the Antichrist is already on the world scene when the rapture occurs. While this differs with modern pretribulation theory, it seems to have been common among pretribulationists prior to the nineteenth century.

¹⁷ In the midst of widespread belief in the high middle ages that the papal office had been corrupted, many medieval Christians believed that in the last days God would raise up an

followers, will descend on the earth, and will preach the right faith of Christ to all, and will convert those who will be living then to the true faith of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

BROTHER DOLCINO & THE APOSTOLIC BRETHERN

Before the specifics of this paragraph are examined, a little information about Brother Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren will help place the paragraph in context. Gerard Sagarello founded the Apostolic Brethren in 1260 after his application for membership with the Franciscans was rejected.¹⁹ Like the Franciscans, the Apostolic Brethren were committed to radical poverty and itinerant preaching of the Gospel.²⁰ However, at that time, the founding of new religious orders was strictly forbidden by the pope and several church councils. Consequently, the Apostolic Brethren were objects of

“angelic pastor” or “holy pope.” He would be committed to evangelical poverty and would unite and reform Christianity. Prefigured in Revelation 3 as the Angel of the Church of Philadelphia and Revelation 18:1, his ministry would also fulfill the prophecy of John 10:16—“and there shall be one fold and one shepherd.” See Bernard McGinn, “Angel Pope and Papal Antichrist” *Church History* 47:2 (June 1978):155-173 at 167. Being an opponent of Dolcino, the author of *The History of Brother Doclino* mentions several times in the treatise that Dolcino thought that he might be that holy pope, in an apparent effort to portray him as audacious or perhaps a megalomaniac.

¹⁸ The present writer is indebted to Marjorie Reeves, in whose books he first discovered descriptions of the rapture theology of Dolcino. Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969, 1993), 246; Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), 49.

¹⁹ Many followers of the eschatology of Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) expected a last-days reform of the Church to occur in 1260, a year that corresponds with the 1260 days mentioned in Revelation 11:2 and 13:5.

²⁰ A contemporary of the Apostolic Brethren, Salimbene, in his *Chronicle*, gives an account of the order under the leadership of Gerard Sagarello. *The Chronicle of Salimbene de Adam*, Joseph L. Baird, Giuseppe Baglivi, and John Robert Kane, eds. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 40 (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1986). Members of the order wore woolen mantels and sandals and went about northern Italy and other countries preaching “Penitentz-agite,” a colloquialism for “Paenitentiam agite!,” the Gospel injunction to repent.

persecution, and in 1300 their leader, Gerard, was burned at the stake. Brother Dolcino, who had been a member of the Apostolic Brethren for a number of years, took over leadership of the order in that year. Under Dolcino's leadership the persecuted order grew, and at one point numbered in the thousands. To escape persecution, the Apostolic Brethren withdrew to the mountainous areas of northern Italy near Novara and Vercelli; but the size of the order and their need for daily sustenance, resulted in clashes with local authorities. In 1306, a bull was drawn up by Pope Clement V, and a crusade was launched against them. In 1307, over 400 members of the Apostolic Brethren were slaughtered by papal forces. Dolcino was captured, mutilated, and burned at the stake. Some of the remaining Apostolic Brethren fled to distant lands, while other joined Franciscan monasteries.²¹

Eschatology seems to have held an important place in the theology of the Apostolic Brethren, as it did in other medieval religious orders in the fourteenth century, orders such as the Franciscans, the Spirituals, and the Beguines. To all of these groups, including the Apostolic Brethren, the political and ecclesiastical affairs in Italy seemed to have the signs that the end of the world was near.²² Dolcino is known to have written several letters outlining his eschatological teachings, but none are extant. However, *The*

²¹ For a comprehensive treatment of the Apostolic Brethren see John William Siedzik, *Fra Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren*, master's thesis (University of California, 1952). It is available from that university on microfilm. A much older treatment, one that portrays Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren as Reformers before the Reformation is Antonio Gallenga, *A Historical Memoir of Fra Dolcino and His Times* (London: Longman, Green, and Longman, 1853).

²² These include a vacancy in the papal office between 1292 and 1294, the resignation and mysterious death of the holy Pope Celestine, and the reign of his successor, Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303), who to many seemed to have all the marks of the Antichrist. The ongoing war between the papal states and Sicily (which at one point had led to the

History of Brother Dolcino reveals that the eschatology of the Apostolic Brethren included an imminent expectation of the rapture of the Church.

SIMILARITY WITH MODERN PRETRIBULATIONISM

The paragraph says that Dolcino believed that the Antichrist would arrive within three or three and a half years, and that once he had come, Dolcino and his followers would be transferred to Paradise. The Latin verb is “transferrentur,” (imperfect, passive, subjunctive) meaning “they would be transferred” or “they would be transported.” Interestingly, this same verb was used by medieval Christians to describe the translation of Enoch to Paradise mentioned in Hebrews 11:5, and the rapture of Christians in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.²³ The past participle of “transferre” is “translatum” from which is

excommunication of the whole kingdom of Sicily) also seemed to have apocalyptic ramifications to it.

²³ In the Vulgate translation of the Bible, which enjoyed widespread use throughout medieval Europe, Hebrews 11:5 read *Fide Henoch translatus est, ne videret mortem*, “by faith Enoch was translated, so that he should not see death.” For repeated use of the word “transferre” in comments on this Biblical passage, see the commentary on Hebrews 11:5 of Herveus Burgidolensis (c. 1130) in J.P. Migne, *Patrologia, Series Latina* (hereafter cited as *PL*), Vol. 181 (Paris, 1844-1864), column 1645. The incipit, or first line, of a treatise by Aegidius Romanus (d. 1316) read *Henoch placuit Deo et translatus est in paradisum*, “Enoch pleased God and was translated into paradise.” Fridericus Stegmüller, *Repertorium Biblicum Medii Aevi*, Tomus II (Matriti, 1950), 22. For use of the word “transferre” in commentary on 1 Thess 4:17, Dionysius the Carthusian (1402-1471), wrote *obviam Christo in aera: quia et nos in aera transferemur sive levabimur, et Christus descendet in aera super vallem Josophat*, “To meet Christ in the air: Since also we will be transported or lifted in the air, and Christ will descend into the air above the valley of Jehoshaphat.” *D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia*, Vol. 13 (Monstrolii: Typis Cartusiae S. M. De Pratis, 1901), 388.

derived the common English synonym for the rapture, the “translation.” The point is: Dolcino was preaching the *translation* or rapture of the saints.²⁴

The History of Brother Dolcino says that the subjects of the translation would be “Dolcino and his followers,” probably because the anonymous author, who was an opponent of the Apostolic Brethren, wanted to portray the Apostolic Brethren as a “sect.” Closer examination of the ecclesiology of the Apostolic Brethren, however, reveals that their view of the rapture was not a partial rapture theory, but a rapture of the Church. For the Apostolic Brethren had distinguished themselves as the true church in contrast with the Roman Church, which they believed had become the whore of Babylon through avarice and luxury.²⁵

²⁴ Marjorie Reeves seems to understand this passage in *The History of Brother Dolcino*, similarly, saying, “When Antichrist appeared Dolcino and his followers would be removed to Paradise, while Enoch and Elijah descended to dispose of him. After the death of Antichrist, they would descend again to convert all nations, while Frederick of Sicily ruled over the last world empire.” *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 49. Anagnine, actually uses the Italian word for “rapture” in his description of this passage. He wrote that according to the anonymous historian, Dolcino and his followers believed they would be *miraculosamente rapiti in Paradiso*, “miraculously raptured into Paradise” during the reign of Antichrist. *Dolcino*, 219 no.2.

²⁵ *The History of Brother Dolcino* (p. 9) says that the Apostolic Brethren believed that *homines eorum secte erant missi a deo ad reformandam ecclesiam, quae perierat per superbiam avaritiam luxuriam et multa alia vitia*, “the sect of those men had been sent by God for reforming the church, which had perished through pride, avarice, luxury and many other vices.” Another indication of the belief of the Apostolic Brethren that the Roman communion did not represent the Church, comes from the Dominican Inquisitor, Bernard Gui. Gui wrote a formula of abjuration used for members of the Apostolic Brethren returning to the Roman fold. One of the phrases was *Item, revoco id quod dixeram de ecclesia carnali, quod ipsa erat quam Johannes in Apocalypsi vocat Babilonem, meretricem magnam; item, bestiam illam que habebat septem capita et decem cornua; item, mulierem illam que habebat calicem aureum in manu sua et plenum abominationibus...*, “Again, I revoke that which I had said about the carnal Church, that it was that which John in the Apocalypse calls Babylon, the great whore; again, that beast which had seven heads and ten horns; again, that woman who had a golden chalice in her hand and full of abominations...” Bernard Gui, *Manuel de l’inquisiteur*, G. Moffat, ed. (Paris: Librairie ancienne honoré champion, 1926), 40.

The passage also spells out the purpose of the rapture. The rapture was the means by which God's people would be "preserved unharmed from the persecution of Antichrist." A few lines after that statement, the author speaks of the Apostolic Brethren as "preserved" in Paradise until the death of Antichrist, after which they would descend back down to earth. The purpose of the rapture of these living saints was not merely to translate them so that they may appear in their resurrected bodies for the Last Judgment (as in some non-pretribulational views of the rapture). Rather, the purpose is spelled out clearly as preservation from the tribulation of Antichrist, which consequently affords the raptured ones the privilege of participating in an earthly kingdom after the tribulation. And in this kingdom the raptured, having returned to earth from Paradise, play a leading role in seeing that the whole earth becomes filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

Finally, the text shows that the rapture of the saints occurs quite a length of time before their subsequent descent from heaven. The translated saints are portrayed as residing in Paradise while various end-time events will take place on earth. After the rapture, Enoch and Elijah will come down from heaven and preach against Antichrist. After some time, then Antichrist will kill these two witnesses. And after their martyrdom, Antichrist will reign "for a long time."²⁶ The duration here is not specific regarding months or years, but the account of the rapture here surely does not resemble the quick up-down rapture of post-tribulationism. Other medieval Christians believed that the Antichrist would reign for three and a half years after the death of the witnesses,

²⁶ The Latin is "per plurima tempora," literally "through many times." A better English translation might be "for a long time," or "for many days."

and it is likely that the Apostolic Brethren believed the same.²⁷ What is clear is that there is a significant gap of time between the Church's translation to Paradise, and its subsequent descent to earth.

DOLCINO'S EXEGESIS

Based on this report of Dolcino's belief in the rapture, upon what Scripture passage was this rapture teaching founded? From every indication, the aforementioned paragraph in *The History of Brother Dolcino* seems to be a report of Dolcino's exegesis of Revelation 11.²⁸ The following evidence supports this theory: 1) The coming of the

²⁷ For example, Richard of Rolle of Hampole (d. 1349) wrote, "The greatest opposition to Antichrist will come from the preaching of Henoah and Elias whom he will destroy after 1260 days. They will rise again after three and one half days and ascend into heaven. Antichrist will then reign for three and one half years." Quoted in R. Gerald Culleton, *The Reign of Antichrist* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974), 137. Interestingly, the author of *The History of Brother Dolcino* does not seem to object to the contents of Dolcino's eschatology here, as much as to his claim that the events would occur within three or three and a half years. The author, being an opponent, is probably trying to portray Dolcino as a false prophet. Writing in 1316, the author is in effect saying, "Dolcino, in his letters written in the years 1300 and 1303, said that these things would occur within three or three and a half years. Over ten years have past, and they still have not occurred. See, we were justified in putting him to death."

²⁸ There is evidence in Gui's treatise, *On the Sect of Those Who Call Themselves Apostles*, also written in 1316, that Dolcino may have used Rev 3:10 in support of his "pretribulation" rapture theology. Like others in the middle ages, Dolcino believed that the holy pope, who would be chosen directly by God and not through the agency of cardinals, was symbolized by the angel of the Church of Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7. Gui, *Manuel de l'inquisiteur*, 90; Robert E. Lerner, *The Feast of Saint Abraham: Medieval Millenarians and the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). 114. If Dolcino believed that the rapture would take place during the reign of the holy pope, as the paragraph from *The History of Brother Dolcino* implies, and the holy pope's reign is described in Rev 3:7-13, which of these seven verses would point to the rapture? Verse 10—"I will keep you from the hour of testing coming upon the whole earth" is congruous with purpose of the rapture given by *The History of Brother Dolcino*. Interestingly, this is the same passage used by modern pretribulationists in support of the

Antichrist in the passage corresponds to the beast in Revelation 11: 7. 2) Enoch and Elijah and their conflict with Antichrist match other medieval descriptions of the two witnesses in Rev. 11: 3-11.²⁹ 3) The death of Antichrist in the passage corresponds to medieval interpretations of the great earthquake of Rev. 11: 13.³⁰ And, 4) the conversion of the whole world to the true faith of Christ matches medieval interpretations of Rev. 11: 15, where “the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.”³¹

It seems logical then, that Dolcino’s rapture teaching, as it is reported in *The History of Brother Dolcino*, was also exegetically based in Revelation 11. Dolcino probably saw the rapture of the saints symbolically portrayed in the ascension of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:12. This is in keeping with many medieval commentaries on

view that the Church in the last days will escape the tribulation of Antichrist by means of a translation to heaven.

²⁹ Many examples of the identification of Enoch and Elijah with the two witnesses from early medieval commentaries on Revelation are cited and translated into English in Thomas W. Mackay, “Early Christian Millenarist Interpretation of the Two Witnesses in John’s Apocalypse 11:3-13” in *By Study and Also By Faith*, Vol. 1. John M. Lundquist, Stephen D. Ricks, eds. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1990), 222-331.

³⁰ Ubertino di Casale, in 1304, wrote *Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*, of which Book V is a commentary on Revelation. He interprets the earthquake of Rev 11:13 as the death of Antichrist. See Ubertinus de Casali, *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu* (Torino: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1961), 492. Arnold of Villanova, in his commentary on Revelation of 1306, wrote that the death of Antichrist was signified in the great earthquake of Rev. 11:13. See Arnaldi de Villanova, *Expositio Super Apocalypsi* (Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans, 1971), 150.

³¹ For example, Dionysius the Carthusian (1402-1471), says in his commentary on this passage *nunc Antichristo oppresso...tunc enim totus pene mundus ad Christum conueretur, secundum doctores*, “now once Antichrist is beaten down, then almost the whole world will be converted to Christ, according to the doctors.” *D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia* 14: 304. An extensive treatment of the medieval concept of the conversion of the world after the death of Antichrist is Lerner, “Refreshment of the Saints: The Time After Antichrist as a Station for Earthly Progress in Medieval Thought” *Traditio* 32 (1976):97-144. Dolcino believed that the time of renewal was also prophesied in Isaiah 54-57. Gui, *Manuel de l’inquisiteur*, 84, 88, 100.

Revelation, in which 1 Thess 4:17—an important biblical description of the rapture of the saints-- is cited as an interpretive cross-reference to the passage about the ascension of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.³²

Unfortunately, the aforementioned paragraph is the only explicit literary reference to Dolcino's belief in the rapture, leaving the reader to reconstruct his thoughts on the subject from only a few lines of text. One question that may be raised is why there is no reference in the paragraph to a coming of Christ associated with the rapture.

Understanding that the author did not intend in this paragraph to give Dolcino's theology of the rapture per se, but intended to present Dolcino's apocalyptic interpretation of Revelation 11, is helpful. For not only is the descent of the Lord absent, none of the other details associated with 1 Thess. 4:15-17 are present either, for example, the loud command, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet, or the resurrection of dead saints. And the reason is because the focus of the paragraph was not the rapture, but Dolcino's interpretation of Revelation 11, of which the rapture was merely a part. However, enough information was written in those few short lines to draw several conclusions.

CONCLUSION

³² Bede in *PL* 93:164; pseudo-Alcuin in *PL* 100:1150; Ambrose Autpert in *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis*, Vol. 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975), 431; Haimo in *PL* 117:1076; Rupert of Deutz in *PL* 169:1033; and Peter of Tarantaise (pseudo-Albert the Great) in *B. Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, Vol. 38 (Paris, 1899), 644. The tradition can be traced back to the early church. See the commentary on Revelation by Tyconius (fl. 370-390) in *Patrologiae Latinae, Supplementum*. Vol. 1. A. Hamman, ed. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1958), 647; and the fifth-century *Acts of Pilate*, Ch. 25, in Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 475. It is also possible that Dolcino could have followed his contemporary, Arnold of Villanova, who saw the rapture of 1 Thess 4:15-17 symbolized in the trumpet of Revelation 10:7. Villanova, *Expositio Super Apocalypsi*, 143.

This paragraph from *The History of Brother Dolcino* indicates that in northern Italy in the early fourteenth century a teaching very similar to modern pretribulationism was being preached. Responding to some very distressing political and ecclesiastical conditions, Dolcino was engaged in detailed speculations about Christian eschatology and believed that the coming of Antichrist was imminent. He also believed that the means by which God would protect His people from the persecution of Antichrist would be through a translation of the saints to Paradise.

While not suggesting that pretribulationism was the dominant view of the rapture in the middle ages, it is very likely that such teaching did not occur in a vacuum, and that others besides Dolcino were aware of it. It can be assumed reasonably that most of the Apostolic Brethren (who numbered in the thousands) believed as their leader, that when Antichrist would arrive, they would be transferred to Paradise and there be preserved from the persecution. Obviously, the anonymous historian, the author of *The History of Brother Dolcino*, an opponent of the Apostolic Brethren, also knew of Dolcino's rapture teaching. Perhaps he had read of it in Dolcino's lost letters, or had heard the doctrine preached by Dolcino or by members of the Apostolic Brethren.

More research is needed to ascertain what extra-Biblical sources were instrumental in the formation of Dolcino's eschatology. He was clearly influenced by the teachings of Joachim of Fiore (although Dolcino held to four dispensations not three as Joachim did) and by medieval prophecies relating to the papacy.³³ But the exact

³³ Prophecies like those about the last popes in the *Vaticinia de summis pontificibus*. See Reeves, "Some Popular Prophecies from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries" *Studies in Church History* 4 (Cambridge, 1971), 107-134; Reeves, "The *Vaticinia de*

literature he had read, or had access to, remains a question for further study.³⁴

Investigation of the eschatology of other apocalyptic-minded writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries may also provide insight for ascertaining whether or not rapture teaching similar to that of the Apostolic Brethren had broader circulation at that time.³⁵

Two things are fairly certain from *The History of Brother Dolcino*. Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren believed that the purpose of the rapture was related to escape from end-time tribulation and persecution of Antichrist. And Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren believed that there would be a significant gap of time between the rapture of the saints to Paradise and their subsequent descent to earth. Because of this, *The History of Brother Dolcino* stands as yet another literary witness for the existence of pretribulationism before the nineteenth century. As such a witness, it once again challenges evangelicals to re-evaluate their thinking about the history of the pretribulation rapture, especially those views that place the origin of the teaching, or its initial recovery, within the last two hundred years. For, this fourteenth-century text

Summis Pontificibus: A Question of Authorship” in *Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages: Essays presented to Margaret Gilson*, ed. L. Smith and B. Ward (London, 1992), 145-156. Both of these articles are reprinted in Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999).

³⁴ The present writer strongly suspects that Dolcino had access to commentaries on Revelation, Antichrist literature, and possibly traditions linked with the content of the third century *Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah*.

³⁵ In the early fourteenth century the Fraticelli and Beguines believed that in the days of the fiercest persecution of the imminent Antichrist, St. Francis would rise bodily from the dead, and that Francis and his evangelical band of followers would descend and convert the world to the true faith. Decima L. Douie, *The Nature and the Effect of the Heresy of the Fraticelli* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1932), 115, 250; Gui, *Manuel de l'inquisiteur*, 170-172. The apocalyptic-minded Frederick of Brunswick, of the later fourteenth century, expected to be caught up in the clouds to meet Christ, and to later descend back to earth and live for a thousand years. But what he believed about the corporate rapture of the church is uncertain. Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 98, 163 no.

demonstrates that there were some in the middle ages that held a rapture theology having basic elements of pretribulationism.

25 & 33, 165 no. 54. Investigations into the eschatology of Peter John Olivi, Ubertino da Casale, Angelo Clareno, and John of Rupescissa may yield interesting results.