

PATRISTICS • MEDIEVAL

Apocalyptic spirituality in the early Middle Ages: hope for escaping the fire of doomsday through a pre-conflagration rapture

By Francis X. Gumerlock

THE COLLAPSE OF the Western portion of the Roman Empire in the fifth century had a profound impact on the eschatology of early medieval Christians. The eschatological optimism that followed the conversion of Constantine in the previous century gave way to increasing focus on the destruction of the present world and speculation about the cataclysmic events associated with it as they are revealed in the Bible. Hesychius, bishop of Salona (d. c. A.D. 429) in Dalmatia interpreted an eclipse and a drought as signs of the nearness of the Second Coming, and Sulpicius Severus (c. A.D. 360—c. 430) wrote that the coming of Antichrist was at hand.¹ The invasions of the Goths, Vandals, Huns and Arabs were viewed as fulfillments of prophecy about Gog and Magog; and there was a general feeling that the end of the world

1 Hesychius of Salona, “Letter to Augustine” in Saint Augustine, *Letters IV* (165–203) trans. Wilfrid Parsons (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 354; Sulpicius Severus, *Life of Martin*, 24, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, eds., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 11:15 (hereafter cited as *NPNF*²). See Francis X. Gumerlock, *The Day and the Hour: Christianity’s Perennial Fascination with the End of the World* (Powder Springs: American Vision, 2000), 28–29.

was at the door.² In fact, some early medieval leaders throughout Europe—like Caesarius of Arles (A.D. 470–542) in Gaul (modern France), Apringius of Beja on the Iberian peninsula, Beatus of Liebana (d. A.D. 798) in northern Spain and Ambrose Autpert (d. A.D. 784) in Italy—wrote only one biblical commentary, and that was on the book of Revelation.³

In their attention to the details of the end time, early medieval speculation about the fire of doomsday loomed large. For example, Gregory the Great (c. A.D. 540–604), who described his own day as a “time when the End of the world is drawing nigh,” warned his readers in the year 593: “For lo! there will be no delay: the heavens on fire, the earth on fire, the elements blazing, with angels and archangels, thrones and dominions, principalities and powers, the tremendous Judge will appear.”⁴

This essay, after discussing the biblical basis for early medieval belief in the fire of doomsday and examining several descriptions of it in early medieval literature, explores how early medieval Christians thought the elect will be saved from that grand conflagration.

The biblical basis for the fire of doomsday

The Old Testament contains many passages about the Lord coming with fire. They include Daniel 7:10: “A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him”; Psalm 50:3: “Fire devours before Him”; Psalm 97:3: “Fire goes before Him”; Isaiah 66:15: “For, behold, the Lord will come with fire”; and Malachi 4:1: “For, behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace.” The New Testament also talks about the conflagration associated with the end of the world in passages like 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8: “The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire”; 2 Peter 3:12: “The heavens being on

2 Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, eds., *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 35.

3 The commentaries of Caesarius and Apringius are translated in William Weinrich, trans., *Latin Commentaries on Revelation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011); Ambrose Autpert, *Expositio in Apocalypsin*, in Robert Weber, ed., *Ambrosii Autperti opera. Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975), 27; Beatus of Liebana, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, Eugenio Romero-Pose, ed., 2 vols. (Rome: Typis Officinae Polygraphicae, 1985).

4 Gregory the Great, *Epistles*, Bk. 3, Ep. 65. *NPNF²*, 12:141.

fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat"; and Revelation 20:9: "Fire came down from God out of heaven."

Based upon these, early medieval Christians believed that the Last Judgement will be preceded by a great conflagration through which "heaven and earth will pass away" (Luke 21:33).⁵ This burning up of the heaven and earth differed from the lake of fire, i.e. hell, and from their as yet undeveloped concept of purgatorial fire for souls after death but before the Last Judgement. For early medieval Christians, the fire of doomsday referred to that burning up of the present heaven and earth, with its corruption and moral pollution, in preparation for the creation of "a new heaven and earth wherein righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13).

Descriptions of the fire of doomsday

The literature of the early medieval period is replete with descriptions of the fire of doomsday, of which the following three are fairly representative. The *Second Apocalypse of John*, written by a Greek author sometime between the sixth through eighth century, records that the Lord told John that before he appears from heaven

I will send my angels over all the earth's surface. They will burn up the earth to a depth of 4,250 metres; the great mountains will be burnt up; all the rocks will be melted down and turn to dust. Every tree will be burnt up, and all livestock and reptiles on the earth, everything swarming on the earth's surface, and everything flying in the air; there will no longer be anything on the earth's surface that depends on it.⁶

The anonymous writer above, when describing the depth or height of the fire of doomsday, was probably carrying on the Petrine tradition of comparing the fire of doomsday to the great flood of Noah

5 In a chart prepared as part of his conference paper, "The Darker Side of the Millennium Revisited," prepared for the 57th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (Valley Forge: November 2005) Earl L. Brown, Jr. analyzed forty Scripture passages that speak of eschatological fire.

6 The English translation of the *Second Apocalypse of John* used here is in John M. Court, *The Book of Revelation and the Johannine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 39.

(cf. 2 Peter 3:5–12), even with regard to its extent.⁷ The author also depicted the effects of the conflagration on the mountains, rocks, trees, animals and birds.

Haimo of Auxerre (d. A.D. 875) continued the tradition of comparing the fire of doomsday to the waters of the great flood, writing that when the Lord comes and “fire will precede him,” the fire will fill “as much space in the air as water did in the Flood.”⁸

An early medieval English poem described the horrors of the fire of doomsday in this manner:

[T]he ravaging flame will raze tall buildings to the ground by the terror of fire, and the holocaust, notorious afar, hot and ravening for gore will raze the world withal. The shattered walls of cities will collapse outright. Mountains will melt and lofty cliffs. . . . The deadly flame will catch every creature then, beast and bird; the fiery sooty flame, a turbulent warrior, will travel across the land. . . . Then the fishes of the ocean will scorch in a sea of fire, stopped from swimming; every beast of the wave will perish in misery; the water will burn like wax.⁹

That poem depicted the effect of the conflagration upon buildings, city walls, mountains, animals, birds, water, fish and sea creatures.

Such descriptions beg the question: What did they believe will happen to the righteous when that terrible conflagration occurs? The early medieval writers were not silent on this issue.

Salvation from the fire of doomsday

In the early Middle Ages, Christians generally believed that God would save his elect from the fire of doomsday. This is reflected in the prayer of Theodorus Studios: “When the stream of fire will usher forth. . . then

7 Francis X. Murphy, “Conflagration: The Eschatological Perspective from Origen to John Chrysostom,” *Studia Patristica* 18:1 (1985): 179–185.

8 Haimo of Auxerre, “Commentary on 2 Thessalonians,” in Steven R. Cartwright and Kevin L. Hughes, trans., *Second Thessalonians: Two Early Medieval Apocalyptic Commentaries* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 23.

9 *Christ III*, lines 972–985. The poem, preserved in the *Exeter Book* from about A.D. 900, was translated into modern English by S.A.J. Bartley, and is available at <http://www.apocalyptic-theories.com>; accessed November 29, 2010.

save me from these flames that can never be cooled.”¹⁰ But exactly how God would save his people from that fire varied from writer to writer. Their explanations can be divided into two manners. Some believed that the saints will be miraculously preserved through the fire, while others taught that the saints will be miraculously removed from it.

Advocating the former position, Thietland of Einsiedeln explained that God would miraculously protect the saints through the fire of doomsday by the same miraculous power with which he protected the three Hebrew boys in the midst of the fiery furnace (cf. Daniel 3).¹¹ Similarly, the anonymous *Tidings of the Resurrection* stated that just like the “fire did not burn the holy children,” so also the fire of doomsday “will do no harm to the bodies of the righteous, for that fire will be like a soothing rain to the saints.”¹² This idea of the righteous being saved through the fire can be traced back to the *Sibylline Oracles* of the earliest centuries of Christianity which state that when Christ comes in glory for judgement “then shall all pass through the burning river and unquenchable flame; and the righteous shall be saved, but the impious shall perish.”¹³

Removal from the fire by rising above it

A more common way that Christians of the early Middle Ages understood how believers living at in the end time would be delivered from the fire of doomsday is through a miraculous rapture of the saints above the fire. Their explanation of salvation in this manner seems dependent upon popular writers of late antiquity like Hilary of Poitiers (c. A.D. 315–367/368) and Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430).

Hilary of Poitiers, in his comments on Matthew 24:40–41, described the rapture as a separation between believers and unbelievers, which “when God’s wrath is kindled, the saints shall be gathered into his garner, and the unbelievers shall be left as fuel for the fire from

10 Cited in Desanka Milosevic, *The Last Judgment* (New York: Taplinger, 1964), 72.

11 Thietland of Einsiedeln, “Commentary on 2 Thessalonians,” in Cartwright and Hughes, *Second Thessalonians*, 46.

12 An English translation of the eleventh century *Tidings of the Resurrection* is available at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T207001.html>; accessed June 10, 2008.

13 *Sibylline Oracles*, 2:252–254, Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 2:716.

heaven.”¹⁴ Or in another English version: “When the wrath of God rises, the saints will be hidden in God’s chambers but the faithless will be left exposed to celestial fire.”¹⁵ In other words, when the fire of doomsday comes, unbelievers will left on earth to be burned by the fire, but the saints will be gathered into God’s granary. Paschasius Radbertus (d. A.D. 865), commenting upon the same verses, carried Hilary’s thought into the Carolingian era. At the rapture, he wrote, “the one who seeks the things that are of God will be taken, but the one who seeks the things that are of the world will be left in the fire.”¹⁶ However, neither Hilary nor Radbertus explained exactly where the righteous will be taken, or what exactly God’s “garner” is; but Augustine was more specific.

Concerning the protection that God will provide from the fire of doomsday, Augustine wrote in his *City of God* that the Lord will keep his people unharmed by changing their locality. “Someone will perhaps put the question . . . where shall the saints be during the conflagration, and before it is replaced by a new heavens and a new earth, since somewhere they must be, because they have material bodies?” His answer is as follows: “We may reply that they shall be in the upper regions into which the flame of that conflagration shall not ascend, as neither did the water of the flood.”¹⁷ For Augustine, the saints will be preserved in the “upper regions” above the flames of that great fire. In the early Middle Ages, Julian of Toledo (d. A.D. 690), in his work on eschatology entitled, *Foreknowledge of the World to Come*, repeated verbatim those words of Augustine.¹⁸

14 Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*. Cited in Newman, *Catena Aurea*, vol. 1, 834. Cf. Latin and French text in Jean Doignon, ed., *Hilaire de Poitiers Sur Mathieu Sources Chrétiennes* 258 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979), 2:198–199.

15 Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*. Cited in Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 14–28*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament Ib (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 209.

16 Paschasius Radbertus, *Expositio in Matheo Libri XII*. On Matt. 24:40–41. CCCM 56B:1200.

17 Augustine, *The City of God*, 20.18. Marcus Dods, trans. (New York: Random House, 1950), 738.

18 Julian of Toledo, *Prognosticorum futuri saeculi libri tres*, 3.49. J.N. Hillgarth, ed., *Sancti Iuliani Toletanae sedis episcopi opera, pars I*. CCSL 115 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976), 117. Cf. ACW 63:457.

The Venerable Bede (A.D. 673–735) provided more detail about how believers will be transported from earth to these upper regions during the grand conflagration, associating salvation from the conflagration with the rapture of the saints in 1 Thessalonians 4. Contrasting those who will be left behind on earth to be surrounded by fire with those who will be caught up above the earth to meet Christ, Bede wrote:

For it stands that when the Lord descends for the judgment “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52), and the celebrated judgment of all of the dead will take place, the saints are immediately caught up to meet him in the air. For this is understood, as the Apostle indicates when he says, “Then the Lord himself with a command and with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God will descend from heaven, and the dead who are in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:15–16). However, it is asked whether the reprobate will then be sublimely lifted up to meet the coming Judge, or whether they will be weighed down with the merits of sins, so that although having immortal bodies, they will be unable to be elevated to higher places. . . . But then if that greatest and highest fire will cover the whole surface of the earth, and the unjust, raised from the dead, will be unable to be caught up into heaven, it stands that those positioned on earth will await the sentence of the Judge surrounded by fire.¹⁹

In other words, the unrighteous will remain on the earth when the fire of doomsday envelops it, but the righteous will be elevated or caught up over the fire “to higher places.”

The Revelation commentary of pseudo-Alcuin, written in the eighth or ninth century, said that believers will be raptured into the cloud in which Christ would return, and that cloud would act as a protective barrier, defending the saints from being harmed by the conflagration. On Revelation 1:7: “Behold He comes with clouds,” the commentary reads: “If we should understand this literally, when the Lord comes

19 Bede, *De Temporum Ratione*, 70. CCSL 123B:541.

for judgment, there will be a white cloud which, screening the saints, should protect them from the fire burning the world.”²⁰

The tenth- or eleventh-century Lismore version of the *Life of St. Brendan* also recorded the concept of divine protection from the conflagration through bodily rapture. It said that as the ark of Noah was lifted over the waves, so during the conflagration Brendan’s monks and household will be raised “on high over the Fire of Doom, so that neither smoke nor mist nor spark will hurt them.”²¹ Like Augustine and others, this author also believed that when the fire of doomsday arrives, God will lift up his saints over the fire to protect them from being burned by it.

The idea that God will preserve his people from the fire of doomsday by means of the rapture was carried into later centuries. Bruno the Carthusian (d. 1101) in his commentary on the Psalms wrote about how the faithful will be preserved unharmed through and from the fire of doomsday by being caught up in the clouds. He wrote on Psalm 50:3:

He will take vengeance upon those who neglect his first coming in humility. But how He will take vengeance is explained in this way: truly *He will not be silent; for fire will burn the elements in His sight* (Ps. 50:3), that is, in His presence.

However, it should be noted that this fire will not be the eternal fire, in which afterward the impious will be tortured without end. But, as blessed Peter affirms, in that resurrection of the dead, that fire will reach the same height in the air as the waves of the Flood ascended (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10–12). By that fire the pollution of all the air will be expiated, through which fire the bodies of the faithful along with their souls joined together with them, just as they are now, will hasten with the greatest swiftness and without any harm to meet the Lord in the air for judgment. Accord-

20 pseudo-Alcuin, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, I, on Revelation 1:7, *Patrologia Latina* (Paris: J.P. Migne, 1862–1865) 100:1094 (hereafter cited as PL). My translation of *Ecce venit cum nubibus. Si juxta litteram intelligamus, veniente Domino ad iudicium, erit nubes candida, quae sanctos obumbrans ab igne saeculum cremante defendat.*

21 Cited in John D. Seymour, “The Eschatology of the Early Irish Church,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 14 (1923):179–211 at 198. The full text of the Lismore version of the *Life of St. Brendan* is available at <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/celtic/bblismore.htm>; accessed June 3, 2008.

ingly Paul [wrote]: *We shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air* (1 Thess. 4:17). But the impious, with the bulk of the weight of their sins bringing much harm upon themselves, will go forth to judgment and be sent into the torment of eternal fire.²²

Bruno believed that the fire of doomsday would purify the earth from its pollutions, and would rise in height to the same height as the waters of the flood of Noah. Also, those faithful to Christ will hasten through the fire “to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17) where they, above that fire, will be safe from its flames.

In summary, the fire of doomsday that immediately precedes Christ’s Second Coming pervaded early medieval eschatology. Moreover, Christians of the early Middle Ages believed that God would preserve the godly from that burning up of the world. Key theologians and biblical commentators of that time period held that God’s means of protecting his people from that great fire would be by being miraculously raised or raptured, over the fire. Thus they would be completely unharmed by its flames.

Similar views among Protestants

Most of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were students of the church fathers, and as such accepted much of their teaching as authentically biblical and apostolic, eg. the Trinity and deity of Christ. But they rejected some teachings of medieval Catholicism as human tradition. Apparently the Protestants, at least those of later centuries, did not view the pre-conflagration view of the rapture as unbiblical; for many of the luminaries of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and the New World articulated a similar view. These included Joseph Mede (1586–1638), Increase Mather (1639–1723), Cotton Mather (1663–1728) and John Gill (1697–1771).

Joseph Mede, a teacher at Cambridge in Protestant England, taught that the rapture might be God’s way of granting escape from the grand conflagration and claimed to have come upon the idea not in medieval authors but Jewish rabbinic tradition, citing and translating *Gemara Sanhedrin*. In *Epistle XXII: Mr. Mede’s Answer to the Tenth Quere, about*

22 Bruno the Carthusian, *Expositio in Psalmos-Psal. XLIX*, PL 152:854.

the 1000 years *Regnum Sanctorum*, Mede wrote (I have retained his italics and capitalization):

I will add this more, namely, what may be conceived to be the cause of this *Rapture* of the Saints on high to meet the Lord in the Clouds, rather than [sic] to wait his coming to the Earth. What if it be, that they may be preserved during the *Conflagration of the earth and the works thereof*, 2 Pet. 3:10, that as *Noah* and his family were preserved from the Deluge by being lift up above the waters in the *Ark*; so should the Saints at the *Conflagration* be lift up in the Clouds unto their *Ark, Christ*, to be preserved there from the *deluge of fire*, when the wicked shall be consumed. There is a Tradition of the *Jews* found this way, which they ascribe unto one *Elias a Jewish Doctor*... I will transcribe it...

The Hebrew words are in *Gemara Sanhedrin*... *The Tradition of the house of Elias. The just whom God shall raise up (viz. in the First Resurrection) shall not be turned again to dust. Now if you ask, How it shall be with the just in those Thousand years wherein the Holy Blessed God shall renew his world, whereof it is said (Isa. 2:11). And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day; you must know, that the Holy Blessed God will give them the wings, as it were of Eagles, to fly upon the face of the waters: whence it is said (Psalm 46:3). Therefore shall we not fear, when the Earth shall be changed. But perhaps you will say, it shall be a pain and affliction to them. Not at all, for it is said (Isa. 40:31), They that wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as Eagles.*²³

Mede clearly believed that the purpose of the rapture might be to preserve the saints from the fire of doomsday, and cited a Jewish rabbinic teaching in support of the concept. Interestingly the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, a third-century Christian text with a Jewish substratum, taught that in the last days God would save his people from the persecution of Antichrist by bearing them up to paradise on angels' wings.²⁴

²³ Joseph Mede, "Letter 32," in *The Works of the Pious and Profoundly Learned Joseph Mede, B.D.*, 2 Vols. (London: James Flesher, 1664), 2:950-1.

²⁴ Francis Gumerlock, "The Rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October 2013, forthcoming).

However, the relationship between this *Apocalypse of Elijah* and Mede's citation of a Jewish tradition ascribed to Elias has not been established and deserves further research.

In 1710, Increase Mather, a Puritan in Boston, wrote a *Dissertation Concerning the Future Conversion of the Jewish Nation*. Speaking about the grand conflagration, Increase believed that "Where the fires did ravage, living saints would 'be caught up into the Air' and thus escape the fate of ungodly men."²⁵ Thus, similar to Mede and the many early medieval Christian authors cited earlier, Increase saw the rapture in terms of escape from the grand conflagration at the end of the world.

Cotton Mather, the son of Increase, wrote likewise of a pre-conflagration rapture of the saints in his treatise, *The Third Paradise*. He explained:

But our Glorious Lord making His Descent in *Flaming Fire*, and the *Conflagration* going to begin, among the *Christians* that cry unto Him to be *delivered from the Wrath to come*, under the General and Horrible Consternation the World shall then be filled withal, our Lord will distinguish the *Righteous*, and those *Humble Walkers with GOD*, which will be found with his *Marks* upon them; and by the Assistance of His *Angels*, they shall be *caught up to meet the Lord, & the Raised*, whom shall be Consigned over to the *Flames*, and Perish as *Bundles of Tares*, in the tremendous *Conflagration*, which will then bring about the *Perdition of Ungodly Men*.²⁶

Mather pictures the righteous as being "caught up to meet the Lord" in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17) or raptured above the fire of doomsday while the unrighteous remain on earth and are burned by its flames.

John Gill, a Baptist preacher in London of whose church the famous Charles Spurgeon was later the pastor, wrote on 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

²⁵ The quotation is a summary of Increase Mather's teaching by James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth Century New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 61.

²⁶ Cotton Mather, "The Threefold Paradise," in *The Threefold Paradise of Cotton Mather: An Edition of "Triparadisus"*, ed. Reiner Smolinski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 225.

*To meet the Lord in the air; whither he'll descend, and will then clear the regions of the air of Satan and his posse of devils, which now rove about there; ...as yet he will not descend on earth, because not fit to receive him; but when that and its works are burnt up, and it is purged and purified by fire, and become a new earth, he'll descend [sic] upon it, and dwell with his saints in it: and this suggests another reason why he'll stay in the air, and his saints shall meet him there, and whom he'll take up with him into the third heaven, till the general conflagration and burning up the world is over, and to preserve them from it; and then shall all of the elect descend from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, and he with them, and the tabernacle of God shall be with men.*²⁷

According to Gill the reason that the Lord will stay in the air when he returns is because the world with its spiritual pollutions will not be fit to receive him. When Jesus descends from heaven the saints will rise and meet him in the air. He will then take them to the third heaven until after the burning of the world. After the Lord purifies the earth by fire, he will once again descend upon it with the saints. Hence, the purpose of the rapture is to protect the saints from the conflagration.

In a sermon preached on December 27, 1752, entitled, "The Glory of the Church in the Latter Day," Gill said:

This being done, these living saints, changed, shall be caught up together with the raised ones, to meet the Lord in the air; where it seems as if he and they should stop awhile, until an after-event is accomplished.... The precious dust of the saints being collected out of the earth, and their bodies raised and united to their souls, and living ones changed, and both taken up from hence, and with the Lord, the general conflagration will begin; the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burnt up, with all the wicked in it; for the heavens and the earth that now are, that is, the earth with its surrounding atmo-

²⁷ John Gill, "Commentary on 1 Thessalonians," in *Expositions of the New Testament by John Gill* (1809; reprint, Paris, Arkansas: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), 3:238–239.

sphere, are kept in store, reserved unto fire, for the perdition of ungodly men, when.... There will succeed new heavens, and a new earth, which God has promised; and which, the apostle Peter says, saints look for according to his promise; and which the Apostle John had a vision of. In this new earth Christ will descend and dwell; here the tabernacle of God will be with men; and he shall dwell with them.²⁸

In that sermon, Gill described the fire of doomsday in the language of the passage in Peter's epistle. Before the conflagration, he preached, the Lord will raise and rapture his elect to a place above the earth where they will not be harmed by its flames. After the conflagration, God renews the earth onto which Christ and his saints descend and dwell.

The pre-conflagration rapture: a common medieval hope

Some of the current literature on the history of the rapture discusses the rapture views of Mede, the Mathers and Gill; and their views are even referred to as a "pre-conflagration" rapture.²⁹ But, in reality, these Protestant authors, consciously or otherwise, were giving voice to a view of the rapture that was very popular in the early Middle Ages. It held that when the Lord comes, fire will precede him. That fire will burn up the present heaven and earth and rise as high as the waters of the ancient flood. However, God will protect his followers from that conflagration by means of the rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4, which takes them high above the flames and preserves them unharmed.

Fire was a continual threat for medieval Europeans for a variety of reasons. Candles, an easy source for ignition of fires, were often used for lighting. Their houses, mainly constructed of flammable wood, were arranged very closely to one another in cities and towns, increas-

²⁸ John Gill, "The Glory of the Church in the Latter Days." Quoted in John L. Bray, *The Second Coming of Christ and Related Events* (Lakeland: John L. Bray Ministry, 1985), 49, who cited Gill's *Sermons and Tracts*, Vol. 1.111.

²⁹ Thomas Ice, "The History of the Doctrine of the Rapture. Part II: A History of the Pre-Conflagration Rapture," Eighteenth Annual Barndollar Lecture Series, September 10, 2010; <http://www.bbc.edu/barndollar>; available in audio sermon form at www.sermonaudio.com; Roy A. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby: Precious Truths Revived and Defended*, 2nd ed. (Jackson: Present Truth Publishers, 2004), 1:117–118.

ing the risk for a fire to spread from one structure to another. Also, many of the tradesmen like bakers and smiths in their work used open fires from which a single spark could easily set an inferno; and fire brigades were almost non-existent.³⁰ Furthermore, there was the constant threat of war, whose tactics at the time included setting fire to a besieged city or town. Medieval historian Norman Pounds noted that “medieval people took it for granted that their town might some day be consumed” by fire.³¹ In the countryside and forests, the threat of fire was no less present. The years between A.D. 800 and 1300 experienced the climatic change dubbed the “Medieval Warm Period.” This resulted in prolonged droughts and more frequent fires.³²

Also looming large in the consciousness of medieval Christians was the biblical promise of destruction by the greatest fire that would ever occur, a fire which would destroy not only their towns and fields but the entire world. Its flames, they believed, would reach as high as the tallest mountains of the world. And from its blaze there could be only one means of escape: the other biblical promise that when Jesus returns “those who are His at His coming” (1 Corinthians 15:23) will rise to meet Christ in the air (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:17). In this rapture, reserved only for the righteous, the faithful will be elevated high above the flames and there their Lord protector will preserve them from the dreaded fire of doomsday.

30 “Life in Medieval Cities and Towns,” <http://www.public.iastate.edu>; “Why was fire a major threat in medieval cities?” <http://wiki.answers.com>; “Top 10 Most Famous Fires in History,” <http://www.toptenz.net>; all sites accessed August 7, 2012.

31 Norman Pounds, *The Medieval City* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 39.

32 “Medieval Droughts of Northern Europe and Beyond,” <http://www.co2science.org>; “Giant Redwood Trees Endured Frequent Fires Centuries Ago,” <http://www.livescience.com>; “Medieval Warming Period ‘Mega-Droughts’: 20th/21st Century Droughts are Pimples in Comparison,” <http://www.c3headlines.com>; all sites accessed August 7, 2012.