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THE RAPTURE IN THE *APOCALYPSE OF ELIJAH*

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MANY EVANGELICALS ARGUE THAT the pretribulation rapture is a theological construction of J. N. Darby (d. 1882) or his nineteenth-century contemporary Margaret Macdonald and that prior to the last two hundred years it was unheard of in Christian history.[1] However, within the last few decades several discoveries have surfaced beliefs similar to pretribulationism in writings of medieval Christians. These discoveries include a seventh-century sermon of Pseudo-Ephraem and a fourteenth-century text entitled *The History of Brother Dolcino*.[2] As new finds are discovered, evangelicals are gradually becoming aware that pretribulationism has a much broader history than its articulations over the last two hundred years. This article presents another example of teaching similar to pretribulationism in a document from the early church called the *Apocalypse of Elijah*.

The *Apocalypse of Elijah* is a third-century treatise about the events of the end times, reconstructed in its entirety from fragments in Greek and several Coptic dialects.[3] It is believed to be a Christian revision of an earlier Jewish apocalypse.[4] The author of the third-century text does not claim to be the biblical Elijah; he may have been a Christian in third-century Egypt who took the name Elijah.[5] Moreover, the text is not a writing of a Gnostic group, but arose among a community of chiliast (millenarian) Christians living in upper Egypt.

The sources that influenced the *Apocalypse of Elijah* include the Old and New Testaments, most notably the synoptic Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, the book of Revelation, and the apocryphal writings *1 Enoch* and *Apocalypse of Peter*.[6] Several of the church fathers were familiar with the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, and it was used as source material for later apocalyptic literature, even as late as in the eleventh-century Irish text called *The Two Sorrows of the Kingdom of Heaven*.[7]

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1 John E. Young, *The Rapture Examined* (Enumclaw, WA: Pleasant Word, 2003), 16; Jim Bakker, *Prosperity and the Coming Apocalypse* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 124; Jim Brown, *The Rapture . . . But When?* (Palm Coast, FL: Christian Awareness Ministries, 1992), 5–11; Ralph Woodrow, *The Secret Rapture: Is It Scriptural?* (Palm Springs, CA: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1989), 37, 41.

The most vocal advocate that the pretribulation rapture teaching had its origin in Margaret Macdonald is Dave McPherson. He has written five books on this subject: *The Three R's. Rapture, Revisionism, Robbery: Pretribulation Rapturism from 1830 to Hal Lindsey* (Simpsonville, SC: P.O.S.T., 1998); *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III, 1995); *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983); *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, OR: Omega, 1980); and *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* (Kansas City, MO: Heart of America Bible Society, 1974). This view was countered in Tim LaHaye, *Rapture under Attack* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1998); and Thomas Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulation Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (April–June 1990): 155–68.

2 Grant R. Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, 2001), 174–78; idem, "A Pretrib Rapture Statement in the Early Medieval Church," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 105–25; Timothy Demy and Thomas Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July–September 1995): 306–17; Francis X. Gumerlock, "A Fourteenth-Century Rapture Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (July–September 2002): 349–62.

3 John M. Court, *The Book of Revelation and the Johannine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 52; Orval S. Wintermute, "Elijah, Apocalypse of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:467.

4 P. Bruns, "Elijah, Apocalypse of," in *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*, eds., Siegmar Döpp and Wilhelm Geerlings, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 192; David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 31; and idem, "The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity: Regional Trajectories," in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, ed. James C. VanderKam and William Adler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 170, 186, 197.

5 David Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt: The Apocalypse of Elijah and Early Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 66–68.

6 Joel A. Weaver, *Theodoret of Cyrus on Romans 11:26: Recovering an Early Christian Elijah Redivivus Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 125; James H. Charlesworth, *The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1987), 34–35; Richard Bauckham, "The Two Fig Tree Parables in the Apocalypse of Peter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 274; M. Black, "The 'Two Witnesses' of Rev. 11:3f in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Tradition," in *Donum Gentilicium: New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube*, ed. E. Bammel, C. K. Barrett, and W. D. Davies (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 230.

7 These early Christian writers include Origen, Didymus the Blind, Euthalius, Ambrosiaster, Rufinus, Jerome, Shenoute, and Zacharias of Chrysopolis. See David Frankfurter, "Early Christian Apocalypticism: Literature and Social World," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen

The fifth chapter of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* contains a rapture passage. The passage states that when the end-time persecution of the Antichrist intensifies, Christ will take pity on His people by sending angels from heaven to snatch up those having the seal of God on their hands and foreheads. The angels will bear up these last-days saints on their wings, remove them from the wrath, and lead them to paradise. There the raptured saints will receive white robes, eat from the tree of life, and dwell in safety from the Antichrist.[8] Afterward, the earth will experience catastrophic end-time events. Then Enoch and Elijah will descend from heaven to do battle with the Antichrist. After this Christ will return with His saints, who reign with Him for a thousand years.

The Rapture Passage

According to chapter 3 of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* the "lawless one," that is, the Antichrist, will arrive on the world scene, will claim to be Christ, and will set himself up in Jerusalem. There he will perform signs and wonders and gain a following. In chapter 4, Tabitha, the woman in Acts 9:36 known as Dorcas whom Peter raised from the dead, will return to earth and will oppose the Antichrist. Also Enoch and Elijah will return and will oppose him. The lawless one, however, responds to their rebukes by executing them. The Antichrist's persecution against the saints then intensifies. Sixty additional people will oppose him, but they will be sacrificed on altars. In chapter 5 Christ intervenes on behalf of His people and delivers them to paradise by means of the rapture. In 5:2–6 the treatise reads:

> At that time the Christ will have compassion on those who are his. He will send his angels from heaven, sixty-four thousand in number, each having six wings. Their voices will move heaven and earth, when they praise and give glory. Those upon whose forehead is written the name of the Christ, upon whose right hand is the seal, both small and great, they will be taken on their wings and *removed from the wrath*. Then Gabriel and Uriel will be a column of light and go before them until they bring them to the holy land, and they will permit them to eat from the tree of life and to wear white garments, while the angels keep watch over them. They will neither hunger nor thirst, *nor will the lawless one have power over them*.[9]

The narrative in chapter 5 continues. Once those who belong to Christ have been translated by the angels, tranquility will be removed from the earth. The earth will quake, the sun will darken, and the whole world will experience drought. Eventually wildlife will die out and the sea will evaporate. Sinners will roam to and fro about the earth, searching for water but finding none. These sinners will regret that they followed the lawless one, and they will realize that they are experiencing the wrath of God. Also the lawless one will recognize that his time is short. So transforming into a dragon, he will attempt to fly to the saints to continue his war against them, but angels will come to their rescue. Enoch and Elijah will descend a second time, and this time they will kill the Antichrist. The *Apocalypse of Elijah* concludes (5:36–39) with a description of the descent of Christ with His saints: "At that time the Christ comes from heaven, the king together with all the saints. He burns the earth and spends a thousand years on it, because the sinners held sway over it. He will create a new heaven and a new earth. No devil or death exists in them. With the saints he will rule, descending and ascending. They will be with the angels always. They will be with the Christ a thousand years."[10]

The Purpose of the Rapture

In this text the rapture is portrayed as an act of compassion on the part of Christ (5:2). The author specifically stated the reason for the transport: so that the small and great who are sealed by Christ might be "removed from the wrath" (5:4). After the saints are brought by the angels to safety, the text states that there in para-

J. Stein (New York: Continuum, 1998), 1:415–53; idem, "The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity: Regional Trajectories," 192; idem, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 51–52; Jean-Marc Rosenthal, *L'apocalypse d'élie: introduction, traduction et notes* (Paris: Libraire Orientaliste Paul Geuther, 1972), 16–17. Because more than one apocalypse circulated in the name of Elijah, determining which *Apocalypse of Elijah* early Christian writers knew is sometimes difficult.

8 As Revelation 2:7 links the "eschatological paradise with the primordial, earthly Eden," so does the *Apocalypse of Elijah* (Harry B. Partin, "Paradise," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 1:187.

9 English translation from the edition of Albert Pietersma and Susan Turner Comstock, with Harold W. Attridge, *The Apocalypse of Elijah Based on P. Chester Beatty 2018* (Ithaca, NY: Scholar's, 1981), 56–7 (italics added). All quotations from the *Apocalypse of Elijah* in the present article are from this translation, unless noted otherwise. The chapter and verse numbers are from Orval S. Wintermute, trans., "Apocalypse of Elijah," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 1:721–53. Other English translations include Herbert P. Houghton, "The Coptic Apocalypse," *Aegyptus* 39 (1959): 40–91, 179–210; K. H. Kuhn, "The Apocalypse of Elijah," in *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, H. F. D. Sparks (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 753–73; and Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 299–328.

10 Pietersma, Comstock, and Attridge, *The Apocalypse of Elijah*, 65.

dise, the lawless one will no longer "have power over them" (5:6).[11]

In 5:12 of the Coptic Sahidic version of the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, the sinners left behind on earth cry: "See, now we will die in a famine and *tribulation*."[12] The specific definition of "tribulation" is not stated, but in the context it is affliction sent by God on the world in the last days. This use of the term "tribulation" is significant because the rapture takes place before it, thus establishing similarity with the concept of the *pre*tribulation rapture.

The rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* is not for the purpose of standing before God for the last judgment, the view of most Catholics and mainline Protestants.[13] Nor is it for the purpose of going out to meet the King as He is coming, as explained by some representatives of Eastern orthodoxy.[14] Also this rapture is not for the purpose of escaping the grand conflagration of the heavens and the earth, as advocated by some early medieval Christians and some Puritan theologians like Cotton Mather and John Gill.[15] Rather, like modern pretribulationism, its purpose is specifically related to removal from the wrath of the Antichrist and escape from the tribulation sent on the world by God in the last days.

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11 The holy land is idealized as paradise or Eden, in which will be the tree of life. For the concept of paradise in the patristic period see Markus Bockmuehl and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and J. Daniélou, "Terre et paradis chez les pères de l'église" *Erano-Jahrbuch* 22 (1953): 433–72.

12 The Coptic Achmimic version simply says, "See, now we will die in famine" (quoted from the parallel translation in Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 323).

13 This view sees the rapture of the living saints and the resurrection of all the dead as a single event, the general resurrection, which immediately precedes the last judgment.

14 John Chrysostom (d. 407) wrote in *Homily VIII on 1 Thessalonians iv.* 15–17 on verse 18: "If He [the Lord] is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within" (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* First Series, ed. Philip Schaff [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004], 13:356). This was repeated verbatim in Pseudo-Oecumenius's *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians. Patrologiae Graece* (Paris: Apeed Garnier Fratres, 1881), 119:93–94. Theodoret of Cyrus (ca. 458) wrote on 1 Thessalonians 4:17: "Likewise, when a king enters some city, people in office and of highest station meet him at some distance, while those accused of crimes await the arrival of the judge inside" (*Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Letters of St. Paul,* ed. Robert Charles Hill [Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2001], 118).

15 Reiner Smolinski, ed., *The Threefold Paradise of Cotton Mather: An Edition of "Tripardisus"* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 225; and *Expositions of the New Testament by John Gill* (1809, reprint, Paris, AK: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), 3:238–89.

Evangelical author Beale confirms this interpretation of the purpose of the rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, writing in his commentary on the book of Revelation: "Likewise, *Apoc. Elijah* 5:4–5 merges the portrayal of the groups in [Revelation] 7:3–8 and 7:9–17: saints are described as those who have 'on their forehead the name of Christ,' and a 'seal' on their hand *being taken out of tribulation* and led to a heavenly 'holy land,' *so that 'the son of lawlessness [will not] be able to prevail over them.'* "[16]

With respect to its purpose, the rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* shows closer affinity with the pretribulational view than with the posttribulational view.

THE SUBJECTS OF THE RAPTURE

Regarding the subjects of the rapture, if the number of angels in the passage, sixty-four thousand, is any indication of the number of people who will be borne up on their wings, this is significant. This is definitely not a description of the translation of one or two individuals, like Enoch (Gen. 5:24); Elijah (Heb. 11:5), or Paul (2 Cor. 12:2, 4). This is the translation of a large body of people. The passage states that the subjects of the rapture will represent various classes of people, that is, "both small and great" (*Apoc. Elijah* 5:4; cf. Rev. 11:18). This almost innumerable company of saints, from all ranks of life, are "those who are his" (5:2), "those upon whose forehead is written the name of Christ, upon whose right hand is the seal" (5:4). These and only these are taken up on angels' wings to the idealized holy land. By contrast, those who are not His and are not sealed are not taken up in the rapture. They are left behind on the earth.

The narrative following the rapture passage describes the sinners left on the earth after the rapture. They "cry out on the earth" in lamentation over having been deceived by the lawless one (5:10), and they recognize that they will soon "be destroyed by wrath" because they were disobedient to God (5:13).[17]

Like pretribulationism, the subjects of the rapture are a large and varied company of saints living in the last days of the world. These will be taken up in the rapture, while unbelievers will be left on the earth to experience tribulation and wrath.

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16 Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 424 (italics added).

17 Pietersma, Turner, and Attridge, *The Apocalypse of Elijah*, 59.

THE TIMING OF THE RAPTURE

Although it is unclear whether the entire text of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* is a chronological narrative, the narrative in chapter 5 does seem to flow chronologically. Jenks, who wrote on the development of the concept of Antichrist in Jewish and Christian history, outlined the events of the chapter in this manner:

5:1	Rejection of the Antichrist by his former followers
5:2–6	Removal of the righteous from the earth
5:7–14a	Natural disasters unleashed on the earth
5:14b–19	Lament of the Antichrist
5:20–21	Pursuit of the righteous into heaven
5:22–24	Cosmic fire of a true judgment
5:25–29	Word of coming judgment spoken by nature itself
5:30–31	Day of judgment
5:32–35	Defeat and execution of Antichrist
5:36–39	Millennial bliss.[18]

The events of 5:7–21, including the Antichrist's pursuit of those raptured, depend on the rapture having occurred earlier in that chapter. This clearly demonstrates the chronological structure of the narrative of chapter 5. The chronological succession of the events in that chapter is also seen in the use of the word "then" in 5:20. Also Wintermute, who translated the *Apocalypse of Elijah* into English, seems to have believed in the chronological structure of the narrative of chapter 5, for he gives as a subheading for 5:7–14: "Natural disasters *which follow* the removal of the righteous."[19]

Concerning the timing of the rapture, the removal of the saints from the presence of the Antichrist seems to take place before the death of the Antichrist and the return of the Lord to reign a thousand years. The length of this gap of time, however, is not explicitly stated in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* in terms of days, months, or years. But the natural disasters and events that take place on earth after the rapture leave the impression that the gap will have a lengthy duration. For example in 5:8 wildlife dies out. In 5:9 the waters of the sea dry up. In 5:12 there is a great famine. In 5:14

[18] Gregory C. Jenks, *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (New York: de Gruyter, 1991), 96.

[19] Wintermute, "Apocalypse of Elijah," 750 (italics added).

sinners roam the earth looking for water but do not find any. Presumably a rather prolonged span of time would be needed for all wildlife to die out and the sea to evaporate completely. In addition, after the rapture a battle between the angels and the lawless one will take place (5:21). These events suggest that a significant gap of time will occur between the rapture and the final coming of Christ. The presence of such a gap is one of the main distinguishing features of the pretribulation rapture position. Thus the temporal element in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* shows closer affinity with the pretribulational view than the posttribulational view.

THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS OF THE RAPTURE

Differences between the rapture passage in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* and modern articulations of pretribulationism may be noted. For example, this text contains no specific mention of Daniel's seventieth week, which for some pretribulationists is important for understanding the length of the tribulation and the timing and purpose of the rapture. Also in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* the Antichrist is already on the world scene persecuting the saints when the rapture takes place, which differs from modern pretribulationism, which has the rapture taking place before the Antichrist commits his most dastardly deeds.[20]

Modern pretribulationism also has a two-stage second coming of Christ, the first stage of which includes a descent for His church at the rapture. This is largely based on 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17. But in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* there is no mention of a coming of Christ associated with the rapture. In fact, the only feature that this passage has in common with the details in 1 Thessalonians

[20] Interestingly in writings on the rapture before the nineteenth century (e.g., Pseudo-Ephraem, *History of Brother Dolcino*, and the eighteenth-century Baptist, Morgan Edwards), the rapture will take place when the Antichrist is already on the world scene. For Morgan Edwards's teaching on the rapture see his *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium, and Last Novelties,* written in the 1740s and published in 1788. He wrote, "Another event previous to the millennium will be the appearing of the son of man in the clouds, coming to raise the dead saints and change the living, and to catch them up to himself, and then withdrawing with them, as observed before. This event will come to pass when Antichrist [will have] arrived at Jerusalem in his conquest of the world" (cited in John Bray, *Morgan Edwards and the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching (1788)* [Lakeland, FL: John Bray Evangelistic Association, 1995], 7). For more information on Edwards see Frank Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: An Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist* (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1995), reprinted as an appendix in Roy Huebner, *Elements of Dispensational Truth*, 2nd ed. (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth, 1998), vol. 1; and Thomas R. McKibbens Jr., *The Life and Works of Morgan Edwards* (New York: Arno, 1980).

4:15–17 is the presence of angels. In *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5, no mention is made of a shout, a trumpet, or the dead in Christ rising first. Apparently the description of the rapture in this third-century text is not explicitly based on the Thessalonians passage. Is there evidence that the author of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* was drawing on any other passages in the Scriptures for his description of the rapture?

The answer to this question points to Exodus 13 and 19, Deuteronomy 32:11, and Revelation 12. The phrase in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:4, which says that the sealed "will be taken on their [the angels'] wings and removed from the wrath," is an allusion to Exodus 19:4. God had said through Moses: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself." Similarly in Deuteronomy 32:11, Moses sang, "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers over its young, He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions." Based on these allusions the author of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* is teaching that as in the exodus, when God bore up His people on eagles' wings in the presence of their Egyptian exterminators, so also at the end of time, in the most severe persecution of the Antichrist, the Lord will bear up His people on angels' wings and will bring them to Himself.

The statement in *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:5: "Then Gabriel and Uriel will be a column of light and go before them until they bring them to the holy land" is another allusion to the book of Exodus. According to Exodus 13:21, the Lord went before the children of Israel "in a pillar of fire by night." As God did this for His people when they were escaping from the Egyptians, in a similar way in the last-days rescue from the Antichrist, God's angels will be a column of light going before His people, leading them to the idealized holy land.[21]

In addition to allusions from Exodus, all of chapter 5 in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* alludes to Revelation 12. There John described a vision of a woman and a dragon. When the dragon threatened the woman, she "fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God" (v. 6). After a war in heaven, the dragon was cast down to the earth. Filled with fury because he knows that his time is short (v. 12), the dragon "persecuted the woman" (v. 13). But God came to her aid. He gave her two wings of a great eagle "so that she could fly into the wilderness" (v. 14). When the dragon then cast

[21] The fact that the *Apocalypse of Elijah* was very likely a reworking of a Jewish apocalypse accounts for this allusion from the Old Testament.

forth a flood against the woman, the earth helped the woman, and "the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring" (v. 17).

Apocalypse of Elijah 5:15–16, where Antichrist laments that his time is short, corresponds to Revelation 12:12, "knowing that he has only a short time."

In *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:20 the lawless one is portrayed as a dragon who spreads his fiery wings and flies in pursuit of the saints. This corresponds to Revelation 12:13, 17: "And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman. . . . So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children."

Apocalypse of Elijah 5:21, which describes a battle between the dragon and the angels, corresponds with Revelation 12:7: "And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon."

In *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:17–18 the rapture has already occurred, and the Antichrist and his subjects are suffering in the famine. When the Antichrist realizes that the earth yielded fruit only when the righteous were present on it, he commands his followers to run after the raptured saints, to seize them, and to kill them. Interestingly he calls the place to which the saints were raptured "the desert."[22] This equation of the place to which the saints were raptured with the desert reveals that the author, in all probability, was associating the rapture with the flight of the woman to "the desert" or "wilderness" in Revelation 12. Therefore when the author wrote of the sealed being born up on angel's wings from the presence of the Antichrist, he was alluding not only to Exodus 13:21, as shown above, but also alluding to Revelation 12:14, which says: "And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place."

If the rapture passage in chapter 5 of the *Apocalyspe of Elijah* has its exegetical basis in Revelation 12, as shown above, this ex-

[22] This passage was confusing to Frankfurter, who calls it a "non sequitur" (*Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 324 n. 103). Interpreting it as an allusion to Revelation 12:6, 14 solves the difficulty. In Scripture passages such as Joel 2:3, wilderness and Eden are contrasted. Isaiah, on the other hand, describes the wilderness becoming like the garden of Eden in the eschaton (Isa. 32:15; 35:1, 6; 41:18–19; 43:18–21). For symbolic meanings of "wilderness" in Christian history see Keith Warner, "Back to Eden: The Sacredness of Wilderness Landscape in Christian Thought," in *Ecology and Religion: Scientists Speak*, ed. John E. Carroll and Keith Warner (Quincy, IL: Franciscan, 1998), 333–51; Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London: Darton, Longmont and Todd, 1991); George H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper, 1962); and idem, "The Wilderness and Paradise in the History of the Church," *Christian History* 28 (1959): 3–24.

plains why the details of 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 are absent. That the author of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* had in mind Revelation 12 may also shed light in determining the duration of time between the rapture and the final coming of Christ. Revelation 12:6 states that the woman (Israel) will be nourished in the wilderness for 1,260 days. Verse 14 says that the woman is in the wilderness "for a time and times and half a time." Therefore, it would be consistent for the author of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* to have believed that the gap of time between the rapture and the final return of Christ amounted to three and a half years, which does differ from modern pretribulationism's time frame of seven years.

ANSWERING AN OBJECTION

Frankfurter, who has done the most extensive research on the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, suggested that the rapture passage in 5:2–6 describes the ascent to heaven of the souls of the martyrs after their death, and he saw it as part of the function of the text to exhort its hearers to martyrdom.[23] Frankfurter may believe that the rapture passage in 5:2–6 is a recapitulation of 4:24–26, which says, "And those who are unable to endure that king's tortures will take their gold and flee by the ferries saying, 'Ferry us across to the desert.' They will pass away like one asleep, as the Lord takes to himself their spirits and their souls."

For support of his interpretation that the rapture passage describes an ascent of the souls of martyrs, Frankfurter cited Cyprian's *Epistle* 31.2 and *Epistle* 37.1.3 and Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 13. These texts from the third century use language similar to the *Apocalypse of Elijah* about the soul of a martyr being taken up to heaven by angels.

The fact that Christians of the third century believed that angels carry the souls of the dead to heaven is not denied, for the Bible itself teaches this. Luke 16:22 speaks of angels carrying the soul of the poor man Lazarus to Abraham's bosom. The early third-century *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* tells of a deacon, Saturnus, who had a vision of what would become of him and Perpetua after their earthly torments. "We had died . . . and had put off our flesh and we began to be carried towards the east by four angels."[24] *The Questions of the Prophet Ezra of the Angel of the Lord Concerning the Souls of Men*, an early Christian composition based on a

[23] Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 145–52.

[24] *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, cited in Delumeau, *History of Paradise*, 28.

Jewish source, relates that at death an angel takes one's soul.[25] Filastrius of Brixia in the fourth century wrote that "the soul of a person, when it leaves this world . . . is led by an angel to an established place."[26]

However, these texts that speak of angels carrying souls to heaven when they die do not nullify the early Christian belief that angels will be involved in the transport to heaven of believers, body and soul, who are still alive at the coming of Christ. Third-century writers also mention that people living at the time of the Second Coming, will be carried body and soul into heaven by angels. Writing on Matthew 24:31, Origen mentioned the belief that the holy angels will gather those who at the end of the world are found living in the body.[27] A third-century anonymous commentary on Matthew 24, attributed to Victorinus of Pettua, also asserted on Matthew 24:31 that in the eschaton angels sent by Christ will take care of the gathering of those who died in Christ, as well as those who are alive and will be caught up in the clouds (cf. 1 Thess. 4:17).[28] Therefore a third-century reference to angels carrying people to paradise, as in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:2–6, does not necessarily mean that the angels are carrying disembodied souls of martyrs. Other third-century texts show angels attending the rapture, body and soul, of those living in the last days.

Three additional reasons support the view that the author of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* intended to describe in 5:2–6 a translation to paradise of people, both body and soul. First, if those translated were merely the souls of the deceased, why would the Antichrist in 5:17–18 command his followers to pursue and "kill" those saints carried away on angels' wings? His action implies that the raptured saints were not yet dead. If the Antichrist had already caused their martyrdom, there would have been no need for him to go after them to try to kill them; for they would already have died.

A second indication that the rapture passage in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:2–6 is a transport of saints, in both body and soul, relates to the mention of the angel Uriel in the passage. In 5:5 the

[25] *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:597.

[26] Vincentius Bulhart, ed., *Filastrii episcopi Brixiensis. Diversarum Hereseon liber.* CC, series Latina, 60:287.

[27] Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Matthew 24:31, in Erich Klostermann, ed., *Origenes Werke XI: Origenes Matthäuserkärung* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976), 113.

[28] Anonymous, *On Matthew 24*, in *Patrologiae Latin, Supplementum*, ed. Adalberto Hamman (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1958), 1:659.

angels Gabriel and Uriel guide the way to paradise for the saints. In other patristic apocalyptic literature, Uriel was believed to be the angel specifically appointed by God to preside over the resurrection. This is clear from book 2 of the *Sibylline Oracles* and chapter 4 of the *Apocalypse of Peter*.[29] The latter passage states, "For him [Uriel] God has appointed over the resurrection of the dead on the day of judgment."[30] Since the author of the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, in the context of the rapture, mentioned Uriel, the angel believed to preside over the resurrection, as one of the angels who leads the saints to the holy land, the evacuation he had in mind most likely included the concept of bodily resurrection. Therefore the rapture passage is not simply a description of the ascent of the *souls* of martyrs after death. Rather, it is a description of a *bodily* translation/resurrection of end-time believers.

Third, Frankfurter's view that the saints who were transported to paradise by angels were merely the souls of martyrs does not take into account the difference between the sixty righteous ones—those who suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Antichrist in *Apocalypse of Elijah* 4:30–33—and the others in 5:1–6. Those in 5:1–6 saw or heard about the Antichrist killing those sixty and decided that the Antichrist is "not the Christ." These others continued, saying, "The Christ does not kill the righteous" (5:1). These then fled from the Antichrist; and it is these on whom God takes pity by sending down angels to remove them from the Antichrist's wrath.

Clear contextual clues and support from literature contemporary with the *Apocalypse of Elijah* confirm that the rapture passage in this text describes not merely the ascent of the souls of martyrs, but more likely includes the concept of a bodily translation/resurrection to paradise.

CONCLUSION

The *Apocalypse of Elijah*, a third-century text from a chiliast Christian community in Egypt, answers a perennial question: How will God protect His people from the horrible persecution of the Antichrist? This third-century document explains that Christ will take pity on His people in that time, send His angels down to

29 *Sibylline Oracles* 2:225–26, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:350–51.

30 *Apocalypse of Peter* 4, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Witson (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 2:627.

earth, and bring them to paradise. The subjects of this catching away are only believers, those last-days servants of God who will be sealed by Christ. By contrast, the followers of the Antichrist will be left behind on the earth, and will experience the wrath of God in the form of catastrophes in nature. The dying out of wildlife and the evaporation of the sea after the rapture indicates that the gap of time between the rapture and the final coming of Christ is significant in length.

Pretribulationism was not the mainstream view of the patristic period, and clear examples of pretribulationism in the church fathers are few. The late John Walvoord, while president of Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote that the "advanced and detailed theology of pretribulationism of today is not found in the early church fathers."[31] More recently Crutchfield wrote that modern dispensationalists do not claim that there are "clear individual statements of pretribulationism in the fathers."[32] However, the *Apocalype of Elijah* contains striking similarities to modern pretribulationism with respect to the rapture's purpose, subjects, and timing.

For these reasons the rapture passage in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* merits a place of discussion in the history of pretribulationism. To those who say that the pretribulation rapture teaching was formulated only within the past two hundred years and was not present in the previous 1,800 years of Christian history, the *Apocalypse of Elijah* offers another challenge to reexamine those historical claims. For others, it shows that the concept of a pretribulation rapture is not a novelty in Christian history, but that third-century Egyptian Christians held a view of the rapture with many similarities to pretribulationism. The author of this third-century text and the Christian community in which it was produced believed that God will protect His people from the persecution of the Antichrist by means of a bodily transport to paradise.

31 John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, rev. and enlarged (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 50. However, Walvoord held that the church fathers' belief in the imminence of Christ's return was a type of incipient pretribulationism. For a list of references from the church fathers showing this belief see Robert L. Thomas, "The Place of Imminence in Recent Eschatological Systems," in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 199.

32 Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 103.