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The Rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*

by
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INTRODUCTION

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 of beliefs similar to pretribulationism in writings of medieval Christians have surfaced, and have challenged that viewpoint. 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*.

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, author of *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); *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" *BSac* 147 (April-June 1990):155-68.

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

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, but 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, and 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 distant as the eleventh century Irish text, *The Two Sorrows of the Kingdom of Heaven*.⁷

³ John M. Court, *The Book of Revelation and the Johannine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 52; Orval S. Wintermute, "Elijah, Apocalypse of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2. David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 466-9 at 467.

⁴ P. Bruns, "Elijah, Apocalypse of," in *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*. Siegmund Döpp and Wilhelm Geerlings, eds., Matthew O'Connell, trans. (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 192; David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 31; Frankfurter, "The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity: Regional Trajectories," in James C. VanderKam and William Adler, eds., *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 129-200 at 170, 186, 197.

⁵ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt: The Apocalypse of Elijah and Early Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 66-8.

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), 34-5; Richard Bauckham, "The Two Fig Tree Parables in the Apocalypse of Peter," *JBL* 104:2 (1985):269-87 at 274; M. Black, "The 'Two Witnesses' of Rev. 11:3f in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Tradition," in E. Bammel, C. K. Barrett, and W. D. Davies, eds., *Donum Gentilicium: New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1978), 227-37 at 230.

⁷ These early Christian writers include Origen, Didymus the Blind, Euthalius, Ambrosiaster, Rufinus, Jerome, Shenoute, and Zacharias of Chrysopolis. See Frankfurter, "Early Christian Apocalypticism: Literature and Social World" in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein, eds. (New York: Continuum, 1998), 415-53; Frankfurter, "The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity," 192; Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, 51-2; Jean-Marc

The fifth chapter of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* contains a rapture passage. It says 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 bear up these last-days saints on their wings, remove them from the wrath, and lead them to paradise. There the raptured saints receive white robes, eat from the tree of life, and dwell in safety from the Antichrist.⁸ Afterward, the earth experiences catastrophic end-time events. Then Enoch and Elijah descend from heaven to do battle with Antichrist. Finally, Christ returns with his saints, who reign with him for a thousand years.

This article will introduce the rapture passage in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, and discuss its contents regarding the rapture's purpose, subjects, timing, and Scriptural basis. It will then answer an objection and explain the place of this passage in current scholarship about the history of pretribulationism.

Rosenthal, *L'apocalypse d'Élie: introduction, traduction et notes* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuther, 1972), 16-7. Because more than one apocalypse circulated in the name of Elijah, it is difficult to determine which *Apocalypse of Elijah* these early Christian writers knew.

⁸ As Rev 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*, Vol. 11. Mircea Eliade, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 184-9 at 187.