

# Raptured or not raptured? That is the question.

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## Introduction

A heated debate rages over the origins of certain dispensational or 'Left Behind'<sup>1</sup> ideas, particularly that of a pretribulation rapture. A pretribulation rapture is the removal of the church from earth to heaven before a period of great strife on earth, which is known as 'the tribulation' or 'the great tribulation'. This tribulation is usually believed to last for three-and-a-half or seven years. Some believe that this and related ideas were taught in the early church, while others say that they did not emerge until the nineteenth century. As part of that debate it has been argued that Ephraem (c.306-73) or Pseudo-Ephraem (Late 4th to early 7th century) and Fra Dolcino (13th to 14th century) taught a pretribulation rapture and related concepts. This article will examine these claims.

## Ephraem or Pseudo-Ephraem

Since the mid-1990s Left Behind and dispensational websites and other media have buzzed with the news that Grant Jeffrey had identified a reference to a pretribulation rapture in a sermon in Latin by one of the Syrian Church Fathers,<sup>2</sup> entitled *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*.<sup>3</sup> Timothy Demy and Thomas Ice supported this claim in an academic article in 1995. They say that this sermon by Ephraem or Pseudo-Ephraem 'includes a statement of a concept similar to the rapture more than one thousand years before the writ-

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- 1 'Left Behind' has become a common way of describing traditional dispensational eschatology, because of its treatment in the very popular *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (Wheaton: Tyndale).
  - 2 Grant R. Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return: The Coming Kingdom of God* (Toronto: Frontier Research, 2001), 173-74.
  - 3 The C. P. Caspari rendering of this sermon is numbered document 54 in the editions of Ephrem's works in Kees den Biesen's system, see his *Bibliography of Ephrem the Syrian* (Grove in Umbria, 2002), 27, 115-16.

ings of John Nelson Darby<sup>4</sup> of the Plymouth Brethren, who is often said to have invented the idea.

To investigate this we will first take a very brief look at Ephraem (aka Ephrem or Ephraim), then examine the provenance of the sermon *On the Last Times*. We will next survey a few works by Ephraem to gain a feel for his interpretive methods and eschatology, including another End Times sermon. Then we will quickly examine the eschatology of some of his Syrian successors. Finally, we will look at *On the Last Times*. We will search primarily for the pretribulation idea, but also for other concepts essential to Left Behind, such as the millennium and the dispensational Israel/church dichotomy.

### *Background*

Ephraem lived in Nisibis in Mesopotamia during the fourth century, but after the Persian overthrow of that city he went to live in Edessa, in what today is Turkey. He is best known for his 'hymns', which are long didactic poems, but he also wrote commentaries, and some of his sermons still exist.<sup>5</sup> However, the situation concerning his writings is complicated because there is a vast body of work that has been attributed to him, some of which is now believed to be pseudonymous.<sup>6</sup>

While scholarly opinion is divided on the origins of *On the Last Times*, a late date and pseudonymous authorship are favoured. For example, C. P. Caspari (the editor of the Latin text of this sermon) and Paul Alexander argue for a date after the death of Ephraem. Caspari regards the dating as some time between the late sixth and the early seventh centuries. Alexander says that it appears to have been originally composed at the end of the fourth century and reached its final form in the late sixth or early seventh centuries.<sup>7</sup> In the opinion of these scholars, then, it is not the work of Ephraem, but an unknown preacher dubbed 'Pseudo-Ephraem'. However, both Caspari and Alexander regard Pseudo-Ephraem as being 'heavily influenced by the genuine works of Ephraem',<sup>8</sup> so an understanding of Ephraem's theology is important to our task.

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- 4 Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, 'The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation', *BS* 152 (July-Sept. 1995), 306.
  - 5 Sebastian Brock (ed.), *St Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 8-12, 25-36; Robert Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975) 29-31; Arthur Vööbus, *Literary, Critical and Historical Studies in Ephrem the Syrian* (Stockholm: Etse, 1958), 11, 46-58.
  - 6 Andrew Palmer, 'The Influence of Ephraim the Syrian', paragraphs 2-4, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 2:1 (Jan. 1999), taken from <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Palmer.html>, viewed: 1 Sept. 2005.
  - 7 Paul J. Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley: Uni. of California Press, 1985), 144-47; Paul J. Alexander, 'The Diffusion of Byzantine Apocalypses in the Medieval West' in *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves*, ed. Ann Williams (London: Longman, 1980), 59-60.
  - 8 Alexander, 'Diffusion', 59.

*Ephraem's work*

Ephraem's writings are at the same time both theological and pastoral, with a strong emphasis upon the doctrines of God, repentance and, at times, eschatology and baptism, plus instruction on how to live the Christian life. However, it needs to be noted that, as one might expect from theology that is frequently expressed in poetry, his teachings are not always theologically precise. Sebastian Brock says that he 'avoids limits – indeed abhors – definitions, which he regards as boundaries... that impose limits', and he prefers to use 'paradox and symbol', with great use of vivid imagery.<sup>9</sup> His approach to theology, then, is 'dynamic and fluid' rather than systematic,<sup>10</sup> and his interpretive method is consequently very different from dispensational literalism.

Another aspect of his method that is relevant here is his understanding of time. To Ephraem there are two 'times', human historical time and sacred time. The former is linear and runs from age to age, but the latter is always the 'eternal now' and knows no before or after.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, according to Brock, Ephraem believed that 'eschatological Paradise', that is, a rough equivalent of heaven in modern thinking, 'belong[s] to sacred time and space' and is thus 'ever present'.<sup>12</sup> Yet even within historical time Ephraem could compress two events from different eras as if in one. For example, he sees God's rejection of Israel as happening in the wilderness of the Exodus, but not becoming a practical reality until after the death of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Thus he did not always have as rigid an understanding of history as we might.

In Ephraem's generally accepted works the primary eschatological interests are death and what happens after it, plus the resurrection and the final states. He does not seem greatly concerned about the end of the world as such, though he does mention it on occasions. For example, the Nisibene Hymns do not mention events relating to the end of the world, except for the resurrection. They concentrate largely on the intermediate state,<sup>14</sup> which is spent on the borders of Paradise.<sup>15</sup>

He appears to have believed in the ancient Jewish idea that one creation day equals a thousand years, for in one of these hymns he says that at least 5000 years

9 Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1994), 14, 38-40.

10 Brock, *Luminous*, 21. Brock explores Ephraem's theological method in some detail on pages 23-51.

11 Brock, *Luminous*, 29-30.

12 Brock, *Luminous*, 32; see also Brock, *Ephrem*, 54-55.

13 Ephraem, *Hymns of the Church* 44:23, quoted in Murray, *Symbols*, 59. Murray also notes another incident where he appears to move an event from its original time (*Commentary on the Diatessaron* 11:5-8, *Symbols*, 63).

14 Ephraem, *Nisibene Hymns* 37-68, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2nd Series* [NPNF2], vol. 13 (Peabody: Hendrickson, [1890] 1995), 198-219.

15 Ephraem, *Paradise* 8:11, Brock, *Ephrem*, 135.

of earth's history had already passed.<sup>16</sup> However, he did not believe in an earthly millennium, an essential component of Left Behind eschatology. In fact, Brock says that Ephraem's understanding of the future paradise was totally different from the ideal earthly state of the chiliasts. To Ephraem it belonged 'outside time and space' and became 'the home of the righteous and glorious after the final Resurrection [for] it can only be entered in the resurrected state of the body'.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Ephraem's *Hymns on Paradise* paint Paradise<sup>18</sup> in terms that sound very like the more extravagant of the early church's pictures of the millennium. For example,

The man who abstained,  
with understanding, from wine,  
will the vines of Paradise  
rush out to meet all the more joyfully,  
as each one stretches out and proffers him its clusters.<sup>19</sup>

In Paradise even 'dismal February resembles radiant May'.<sup>20</sup> And 'Paradise's gift', with its 'treasure of perfumes' and 'storehouse of scents... is the table of the Kingdom'.<sup>21</sup> But this kingdom is in the heavenly world, not upon earth. Similarly, Aphrahat (d. after 345), a contemporary Syrian Church Father, regarded Christians on earth as the heirs of that kingdom, but believed that they would not inherit it on earth but in heaven, and that this kingdom would not last for a thousand years but forever.<sup>22</sup>

Then, in one of his sermons, *On the Fathers who have Completed their Course*, Ephraem speaks about the intermediate state, but also teaches about the end. He reflects upon the loss of 'perfect fathers and venerable ascetics' who have already been gathered

(Stanza 21)... into the haven of life  
and into eternal joy, that they might be glad there,  
and in the Paradise of pleasure and the heavenly bridal chamber  
they might take their delight in the immortal Bridegroom  
with the greatest joy.<sup>23</sup>

He next mourns at length the sinfulness and slackness of the Christians that surround him, and then continues,

16 Ephraem, *Nisibene* 65:3, NPNF2 13:216.

17 Brock, *Ephrem*, 54-55.

18 To Ephraem Paradise 'belongs to a different mode of existence, outside time and space' (Brock, *Paradise*, 153).

19 Ephraem, *Paradise* 7:18, Brock, *Ephrem*, 125. See also Ephraem, *Paradise* 2:5, 7:22, 9:17, Brock, *Ephrem*, 86, 127, 142.

20 Ephraem, *Paradise* 10:2, Brock, *Ephrem*, 148.

21 Ephraem, *Paradise* 11:15, Brock, *Ephrem*, 159.

22 Murray, *Symbols*, 242-43.

23 *Sermon on the Fathers who have Completed their Course*, stanzas 13 & 21, translation and © Archimandrite Ephraem, 1997, [www.anastasis.org.uk/dead-pat.htm](http://www.anastasis.org.uk/dead-pat.htm), quoted with the translator's permission.

(30)... Because the eye of the soul  
is not alert through great blindness  
and vain distractions, for this reason we are  
unable to perceive the tribulation upon us.

(31) See, the holy and just are even now being chosen  
and gathered into the harbour of life,

(32) that they might not see the tribulation and scandals  
which are coming upon us through our sins...

(33) They are being chosen, and we are nodding off.  
They are being snatched away, and we are being dragged off  
towards the vain world...  
They are going  
with boldness towards God...  
The Lord's coming is at the doors...

(34) The heavenly trumpet is ready to sound  
at God's command, and the universe to shake  
at its dread call, that it may rouse the dead  
and that each may be rewarded in accordance with their deeds.

(35) The powers of heaven stand ready  
in their ranks to advance with fear  
before the Bridegroom as he comes in glory  
on the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead...

(37) If we do not now hasten and weep unrestrainedly,  
repenting fully in humility of soul  
and great meekness, how each one of us is going  
to lament at the tribulation...

(39) When we see the saints  
again in glory, flying in light  
on the clouds of the air to meet Christ,  
the King of Glory, but see ourselves  
in the great tribulation, who will be able to bear  
that shame and the dread reproach?<sup>24</sup>

Then he concludes,

(44) For see, the Lord is standing at the door  
to bring to an end this vain age.<sup>25</sup>

What is to be made of this? Firstly, it needs to be noted that he expects the end to be soon, for 'The Lord's coming is at the door' and 'The heavenly trumpet is

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24 Ephraem, *Sermon on Fathers*, stanzas 30-35, 37 & 39.

25 Ephraem, *Sermon on Fathers*, stanza 44.

ready to sound' (stanzas 33 and 34). This may be because he believed that earth's history would last for only 6000 years, and 5000, probably many more, of those years had already passed (according to the Nisibene Hymns), but it seems to owe more to the signs around him. The chief of those signs is 'the tribulation'. Three times he speaks of 'the tribulation' (30, 32 and 37) and once he says 'the great tribulation' (39). The first three references probably refer to a particular period in the last days, which seems to have already begun (see stanza 30), and the fourth almost certainly refers to that specific time. However, its duration is not mentioned.

In stanza 31 we are told that 'the holy and just are even now being chosen and gathered into the harbour of life.' This must refer to the death of saintly Christians, rather than a rapture, for the 'harbour of life' seems to correspond with the previously mentioned 'haven of life' (21) where the 'perfect fathers and venerable ascetics' are already dwelling, having previously died (13). This also applies to those being 'snatched away' who 'are going with boldness towards God' (33).

It is perhaps surprising that Ephraem does not clearly say what happens to Christians still living during the tribulation, for clearly and significantly there are some, including, apparently, himself (39).

Though the description in stanza 39 at first sounds similar to the Left Behind rapture, that idea does not fit into Ephraem's scheme. The flying saints in glory are rather Christians who have died and now enjoy the blessings of Paradise, as in stanzas 21, 31 and 33. In his poetic mind Ephraem sees them 'flying' and contrasts their happy and free state with the tribulation on earth. In fact, the eschatological picture that he paints here is quite simple. It is that a period of tribulation, of unstated duration, has already begun, at the end of which Christ will return, the saints will then be resurrected and the judgment will take place. Christ's return is in one stage only, rather than the two-stage return of Left Behind, and there is no mention of a millennium.

Indeed, according to Robert Murray, Ephraem's eschatological scheme was in three stages: first, 'Past sacred history', that is, the biblical eras, secondly, the church era, and thirdly, the kingdom, which is 'closely connected with paradise' (a heavenly state rather than an earthly one), but is not synonymous with it.<sup>26</sup> There is no room in his scheme for an earthly millennium. In fact, he may not have known of the Book of Revelation, or at least not accepted it as canonical.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Ephraem speaks of two 'Assemblies', Israel and the church, saying,

The Assembly that preceded in time  
came [only] for a time;  
It went out and was rejected

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26 Murray, *Symbols*, 243-44.

27 Murray, *Symbols*, 132, 261-62. Revelation was not originally in the Peshitta, an early eastern version of the Bible, see LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. (Washington DC: Review & Herald, 1950), 1:108.

and shall not return home;  
But he that put on the Church  
wills not to strip it off.<sup>28</sup>

Then again,

The Nation [Israel] was like its Passover, a lamb for a time;  
and like its time it departed and failed.  
The deliverance of the Nations is an unfolding reality,  
for this is the lamb that will not pass away.

So he also believed that the church had replaced Israel and he apparently did not expect a restoration of national Israel, for it 'shall not return home'. There is no Left Behind-like Israel/church dichotomy here. On this Aphrahat had similar views to Ephraem.<sup>29</sup>

### *Ephraem's successors*

We will now look very briefly at some of Ephraem's successors in the Syrian Church, to gain an insight into Syrian eschatology after him. Narsai (399-502) taught in a theological school in Edessa and Nisibis, the two towns in which Ephraem lived. The eschatological statement in his 'creed' says that Christ 'is ready to come at the end of the times for the renewal of all things, and to judge the living, and the dead also who have died in sin'.<sup>30</sup> He believed that there would be a time of trouble before the end, during which the Antichrist would arise. But Antichrist's eventual defeat by Christ will usher in the judgment and the final states rather than a millennium. Indeed, it is the damned who will dwell on earth (Gehenna) because 'they have loved the things of earth', while the blessed will reside in 'the Kingdom on high'.<sup>31</sup>

Jacob of Sarug or Serugh (c.451-521) was trained under Narsai, and his eschatology frequently echoes the ideas of his teacher, for he believed in one dramatic final consummation, which will be followed by the final states, and he emphasised their eternalness.<sup>32</sup> Though in this work Jacob regarded history as lasting for 7000 years, he did not include a millennium. Indeed, 'the seven thousandth year' is a time of great disaster, with the typical array of human wickedness, war, famine, and 'tumults' upon earth and in the heavens, and the release of the fierce Gog and Magog.<sup>33</sup> However, though their armies shall 'madly' attack Palestine,

28 Ephraem, *Hymns of the Church* 44:21-26, quoted in Murray, *Symbols*, 59.

29 Ephraem, *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 3:3, quoted in Murray, *Symbols*, 65. Murray has a table showing numerous places where Ephraem and Aphrahat demonstrated that 'the Gentiles have Replaced the "Nation"', 350-51.

30 Narsai, *Homily* 17, Dom. R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Cambridge: CUP, 1909), 6, lxxiv.

31 *Homily* 52, quoted in Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 171-74. See also *Homily* 21, Connolly, *Narsai*, 52.

32 Daley, *Hope*, 175-76.

they shall not 'enter into Jerusalem, the city of the Lord', for the cross shall drive them away. Then 'All the saints shall fly away from them to mount Sanir' (Mount Hermon),<sup>34</sup> but not to mount Sinai, for that 'is the dwelling place of the Lord.'<sup>35</sup> Whether the literal city of Jerusalem is intended here is debatable, but, if it is, it seems to be regarded as a Christian city as it later became, rather than a Jewish one. Early Christians did not usually refer to Jews as 'saints', and this reference is presumably to Christians being protected in the midst of strife rather than taken up to God and removed from it. Antichrist receives a belated mention, but is only a minor figure in this apocalypse.<sup>36</sup> Soon after his appearance Christ overthrows him and the End comes when the earth 'shall pass away'.<sup>37</sup>

At least one eastern scholar of this era, Stephen Bar Sudaili (c.480-c.543), seems to have taught chiliasm, but others such as Jacob of Sarug and Philoxenus of Mabbug (c.440-523), regarded him as a heretic.<sup>38</sup> Philoxenus was another greatly influenced by Ephraem.<sup>39</sup> It would seem, then, that the Ephraemic tradition was non-millennial.

## The Sermon

We now come to the *Last Times* sermon. It first needs to be noted that this sermon is far from being a clear presentation of any eschatological position, for at times it is confused and perhaps contradictory. It is also far from clear that its points are meant to be taken chronologically. For example, 'the end of the world' seems to keep happening.

The confused nature of parts of the document could confirm Alexander's view that the sermon has undergone some redaction. In addition, its translation history could also be a cause of that confusion. The only manuscripts we have of the sermon are in Latin, and Caspari believed that the sermon had been translated from Greek, and suggested that the Greek version may have been translated from the Syriac. In fact, Alexander does argue that it had undergone this double translation history.<sup>40</sup> If Alexander is right, then some divergence from the original is possible, even likely.

Also it needs to be noted that whereas Ephraem probably did not know of the Book of Revelation or at least did not accept it as canonical, Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon mentions it and quotes from it.<sup>41</sup> This acceptance, one would expect,

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33 'The Discourse of Jacob of Serugh upon Alexander', 430-538, 553-98 in E.A. Wallis Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great: Being the Syriac Versions of the Pseudo Callisthenes* (Piscataway: Gorgias, [1889] 2003), 186-95.

34 See Deut. 3:8-9 & 1Chr. 5:23.

35 Jacob, 'Alexander', 630-34, Budge, *Alexander*, 195-97.

36 Jacob, 'Alexander', 654-62, Budge, *Alexander*, 198.

37 Jacob, 'Alexander', 680-84, Budge, *Alexander*, 199.

38 Daley, *Hope*, 177.

39 Roberta C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies* (Oxford: OUP, 1976), 2, 5, 69.

40 Alexander, *Tradition*, 140-44.



adds features to the preacher's view of the end, though this does not mean that his eschatology is greatly different from Ephraem's, and does not discount the previously mentioned Ephraemic influence upon the preacher.

It will be helpful first to give an outline of the sermon, noting the main points as we go through, then examine the parts which have caused the interest. The sermon contains ten sections, as follows:

- 1 Signs exist that indicate that 'the end of the world is near'. When the Roman Empire 'begins to be consumed by the sword' the 'Evil One [*malus* – Satan or Antichrist] is at hand' and when that empire is completed the world 'will come to an end'.
- 2 To complete these signs all that remains is the coming of the 'wicked one' and the end of the Roman kingdom. Because of this we should not be occupied with 'worldly business... prior to the tribulation' the saints are 'taken to the Lord'.
- 3 When the end comes there will be wars and all sorts of disasters.
- 4 In those terrible days there will not be opportunity to bury the dead because all will be rushing to escape the troubles.
- 5 After the wicked nations have 'destroyed the earth... the kingdom of the Romans is removed from everyday life, and the empire of the Christians is handed down by God and Peter.'
- 6 'When... the end of the world comes' a deceiver will arise from the tribe of Dan.
- 7 This deceiver (the Antichrist) becomes the ruler of the world, governing from Jerusalem. He rebuilds the temple and reintroduces circumcision. At this time 'the nations' will go to Jerusalem and it will be 'trampled on' by them for 1260 days. Antichrist makes sure that all worship in the temple is directed to him, and there seems to be no reintroduction of the OT rituals.
- 8 Those three-and-a-half years will be a time of 'great tribulation'. Yet even during this period there will be those upon earth who will be 'sustained by the salvation of the Lord.'
- 9 The tribulation overwhelms 'all people'. But towards the end of that period of time Enoch and Elijah appear and herald 'the second coming of Christ'. (There is a portion missing at the end of this section, which Alexander suggests spoke of 'Enoch and Elijah being killed by the Antichrist and later revived'.)<sup>42</sup>
- 10 At the end of that time 'the Lord shall appear with great power and much majesty'. He will fling Antichrist and Satan into Hell, 'but the righteous ones shall inherit everlasting life with the Lord'.<sup>43</sup>

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41 See sermon chapters 7 (Rev. 11:2), 8 (possibly Rev. 11:6) and 10 (Rev. 19:20 & 20:10).

42 Alexander, *Tradition*, 140.

43 All quotations from this sermon, unless otherwise stated, are from 'On the Last Times', [www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet\\_2000/timeline/ephraem.html](http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet_2000/timeline/ephraem.html), quoted with the permission of Tim Warner.

That outline indicates that this sermon contains some teachings that fit into Left Behind eschatology, but as we shall see there is also considerable confusion and a great deal that clearly does not fit. Right near the beginning of Section 1 the preacher declares that ‘the end of the world is near’, as in *On the Fathers*, and goes on to give reasons for believing this, such as ‘Has not faith withered away from mankind?’ and ‘There are evil deeds among the ministers, adulteries in the aged, wantonness in the youths’. In addition, ‘we see struggles with diverse nations threatening and “kingdom rising against kingdom”’, and ‘There will be... pestilences, famines and earthquakes’. This is more explicit than *On the Fathers*, and fits well with Left Behind teaching, but such pronouncements can also fit equally well with other eschatologies, so they in themselves prove nothing.

But the passage that excites the most interest is in Section 2. It says,

Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion that overwhelms all the world? Believe you me, dearest brother, because the coming (advent) of the Lord is nigh; believe you me, because the end of the world is at hand; believe me, because it is the very last time. Or do you not believe unless you see with your eyes? See to it that this sentence be not fulfilled among you of the prophet who declares: ‘Woe to those who desire to see the day of the Lord!’ [Amos 5:18.] For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins. And so, brothers most dear to me, it is the eleventh hour, and the end of the world comes to the harvest, and angels, armed and prepared, hold sickles in their hands, awaiting the empire of the Lord. And we think that the earth exists with blind infidelity, arriving at its downfall early.

The sermon says, then, ‘For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world...’ Now, in isolation that sounds as if the preacher is saying that Christians will be taken to be with God prior to a period of considerable tribulation, though precise details are lacking.

Yet even at this point the sermon does not, by any means, correspond neatly with Left Behind ideas. For example, whatever the author may mean by this gathering, there is no indication at all that what happens is done in secret, as is usually taught in Left Behind circles. In addition, he also says in relation to this event ‘the end of the world is at hand’ and ‘it is the *very* last time’ (emphasis added). In Left Behind eschatology this gathering of the saints takes place prior to a seven or three-and-a-half year tribulation and a 1000 year reign of Christ on earth, which hardly corresponds with ‘the end of the world is at hand’ or that this gathering takes place in ‘the very last time’. If it be accepted, therefore, that this preacher is speaking about the elect being removed before a final period of tribulation, then he seems to envisage that the final consummation will follow much sooner than is accepted by Left Behind teachers. In fact he gives no

definite idea of the expected time scale of these events, except for the three-and-a-half year period in sections 7-9. The impression given is that the whole sequence of events takes place in quite a short time, and certainly not a thousand years or more, though Alexander suggests that there might be a time gap between the end of Antichrist's reign and Christ's second coming which occurs later (10). However, if that is so, that period may not be long. It also needs to be noted that this idea is different from Left Behind in which Christ's return to earth ends Antichrist's reign.<sup>44</sup>

In Section 3 the preacher seems to assume that this period of 'diverse wars, commotions on all sides, horrible earthquakes, perturbations of nations... plagues, famine, drought...' and 'constant persecutions' ushers in 'the end of the world'. During that terrible time he also says that there will be no time to bury the dead, 'neither *Christian*, nor heretic, neither Jew, nor pagan' (4 – emphasis added). In other words, though 'all the saints and elect of God' have been gathered to him out of this strife, there are still some Christians being killed on earth. In addition, there is clear indication in Section 8 that there are still Christians in the world during this time of tribulation, for the preacher says, 'But those who wander through the deserts, fleeing from the face of the serpent, bend their knees to God, just as lambs to the udders of their mothers, being sustained by the salvation of the Lord...' Then in section 9 we are told that the tribulation 'overwhelmed all people, just and unjust, the just so that they may be found good by their Lord'; the 'just' therefore must refer to Christians. Clearly according to this sermon many Christians experience the tribulation. They have not been raptured out of it. In fact, on this evidence R. A. Huebner, a Brethren writer whom one might expect to support Jeffrey, Demy and Ice, regards the 'rapture' portrayed in this document as post-tribulational, not pretribulational.<sup>45</sup>

There is also no hint of the millennium in this sermon and probably no room in which to fit it. In fact, Alexander says, 'Pseudo-Ephraem has little to say about any respite from evil.'<sup>46</sup> One exception to this is the 'everlasting life with the Lord forever and ever', which appears to begin very soon after the second coming of Christ (10).

It is significant that though Demy and Ice record parts of Section 8 in their article, saying that during the tribulation 'the righteous will flee the face of the serpent' while 'being sustained by the salvation of the Lord,' they ignore the implications of those statements. The phrases 'the righteous' and those 'being sustained by the salvation of the Lord' must surely refer to Christians who are enduring the tribulation, but Demy and Ice refrain from dealing with that problem.<sup>47</sup>

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44 Alexander, 'Diffusion', 61. There is a section missing at the end of section 9, which might have contained a resolution to this problem, though 10 gives a very strong impression that Christ appears after the reign of Antichrist has ended.

45 R.A. Huebner, *Elements of Dispensational Truth*, vol. 1 (2nd ed. Morganville: Present Truth, 1998), 333-34.

46 Alexander, 'Diffusion', 61.

47 Demy & Ice, 'Rapture', 314. N.B. Demy and Ice are using a different English translation of the text, hence the slight variations.

So then, according to this sermon, at least some Christians are on earth during the (great) tribulation, which is consistent with Ephraem's *On the Fathers*. Some Left Behinders might regard these Christians in the tribulation as referring to those converted after the rapture. However, it would surely be too much to assume that this idea was being promoted by a preacher in the early centuries of church history who almost certainly<sup>48</sup> had both a different interpretative method and an End Times scheme incompatible with Left Behind (i.e. no millennium). Certainly there is not a hint in the sermon that he is thinking in that way, and so it would seem more likely that Christians have not been removed from the earth as such.

Alexander says that the 'Byzantine apocalypses mention certain measures taken by God in order to mitigate the effects of Antichrist's persecution.' One of these is shortening the time involved, with, for example, years becoming months. However, in this sermon another device is used 'to alleviate the period of tribulation for his saints'. It is that the elect are 'taken to the Lord', which Alexander regards as their participating 'at least in some measure in beatitude',<sup>49</sup> rather than a physical removal from earth.

The preacher also mentions 'awaiting the Empire of the Lord', and later says that after the earth has been 'destroyed' and 'the kingdom of the Romans is removed from everyday life' that 'the empire of the Christians is handed down by God and Peter' (Section 5). But as the earth has been 'destroyed' this surely is not an earthly millennium and presumably refers to Christ's rule in the final state. This is supported by an earlier comment when he says, 'It is necessary that the world come to an end at the completion of the Roman Empire' (Section 1), which seems to be brought about by this turmoil. This non-millennial interpretation is consistent with the theology of Ephraem.

What does one make of all this? Firstly, it must be noted that the sermon is far from clear, and presents a rather confused eschatology. However, it needs to be recognised, as has been seen, that Ephraem and his followers do not usually present their theology systematically, and the comparisons we are trying to draw tend to break down when we impose a modern systematic and literal way of thinking upon an ancient writer's imagery.

However, there are some Left Behind-like components in this sermon. In Sections 6 and 7 the preacher mentions an Antichrist figure, from the tribe of Dan, who rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem, from which he rules. The Jews, at least some of them, will also be present in Jerusalem during this time and will be seduced by Antichrist. This indicates at least a partial return of the Jews to Palestine. However, there is no evidence of a return to the sacrificial system. In addition the great tribulation will last for 42 months (1260 days) as John says 'in the Apocalypse'. This preacher also clearly believed that the end was close at hand. These points are consistent with Left Behind.

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48 'Almost certainly' if this is by Pseudo-Ephraem, but 'certainly' if by Ephraem.

49 Alexander, *Tradition*, 209-11.

Then, while it at first glance seems to contain the Left Behind idea of Christians being 'gathered' out of the world prior to a time of great conflict, even that appears to be contradicted by Christians dying during that time of trouble. How might these two seemingly contradictory ideas of all Christians being 'taken to the Lord' prior to the tribulation, yet at least some Christians being present during that time be reconciled? It is probable that too much is being read into the statements about the elect being 'gathered' and 'taken to the Lord'. What is probably intended by those comments is that the saints will be protected by God *within* the tribulation rather than removed from it. This concept is also more in line with the thinking in the early church and fits well with Ephraem's theology.

There is no mention of an earthly millennium, and no clear place where it might fit, which is consistent with the known teaching of Ephraem and the other Syrian Fathers. It would seem that in this preacher's thinking, then, the end of the tribulation was the end of the world.

Murray says that to interpret the early Syriac Fathers, we "must listen to them" to discover their theology, and that we will fail in our interpretive purpose if we impose on their writings 'a pattern alien to their thought.'<sup>50</sup> Left Behind's rigid literal interpretation is clearly alien to the thought of Ephraem and his followers, whose method was much freer and more imaginative, and it would seem that Jeffrey, Demy and Ice have imposed their method upon Pseudo-Ephraem's (or Ephraem's) sermon, and have consequently misunderstood it.

While this sermon contains a number of Left Behind teachings in whole or in part, it appears to regard the church as being on earth during the tribulation, and it does not seem to have room for an earthly millennium. Then, while the sermon does not speak of the relationship between Israel and the church, what it does say about the Jews is negative. It is probable, then, that its author had a similar view of the Jewish/church issue to Ephraem. That is, that the church had replaced Israel.

## Fra Dolcino

### *Background*

In the twelfth century Joachim of Fiore (c.1145-1202), a Calabrian abbot, came to believe through a highly allegoric and imaginative study of Scripture that history was divided into inter-related patterns of two, three and seven. In his system there were three ages or, more correctly, three *status*. They were the Age of the Father or the Law, the Age of the Son or the Gospel, and the yet to come Age of the Spirit. This third age was to be a period of bliss on earth and Joachim believed that he was living during the period leading into that final age. He expected the Age of the Spirit itself to begin by the year 1260.<sup>51</sup>

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50 Murray, *Symbols*, 2.

51 Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (NY: Columbia UP, 1979), 128, 131-32; Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (London: Oxford, 1969), 5-6, 303-305; Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (London: SPCK, 1976), 9-11.

The preceding second age, the Age of the Son, would be an era of tribulation, with the appearance of seven Antichrists, who would attack the church. They would be scattered throughout Christian history and included Nero, Mohammed and Saladin (who was number six, and alive at that time). The seventh was already born and he would be the worst; he would be *the* Antichrist.<sup>52</sup> He would reign for a terrible three-and-a-half years, with the church to suffer under him.<sup>53</sup>

Influenced by both Joachim and Pseudo-Methodius, some predicted that an Emperor called Frederick would liberate the Holy Sepulchre and usher in the return of Christ and the millennium. Then Frederick II (1194-1250) became Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1212, though he was not crowned until 1220. He launched a crusade in 1229, successfully taking Jerusalem, of which he proclaimed himself king.<sup>54</sup> It all sounded so very much like the fulfilment of Joachite prophecy and the prelude to the Age of the Spirit.

### *Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren*

The year 1260, as we have seen, was important in Joachite thought, and it was in that year that a group emerged in Italy called the Order of Apostles or Apostolic Brethren, which later extended to parts of Germany and Spain. This movement was initially under the quasi-leadership of Gerard Segarelli.<sup>55</sup> When examining people and groups of this nature it is often difficult to assess their beliefs and practice fairly because they are usually recorded by those who opposed them rather than the people themselves. Historians have often painted the Apostolic Brethren as violent and sexually immoral heretics, though recent research suggests that these claims apply only to the later stages of the movement's existence, and are even then probably exaggerated. Indeed, Jerry Pierce says that the Apostles' origins were 'orthodox and peaceful', and that 'there was no hint of violent ideology in the Order's origins under Segarelli.'<sup>56</sup>

The fact that the movement began in 1260, the date of the expected beginning of Joachim's Age of the Spirit, strongly suggests that they were influenced

52 Joachim, 'The Antichrist', in McGinn, *Visions*, 137-38, 317, n. 53; Jerry B. Pierce, 'Apocalyptic Poverty: Gerard Segarelli, Fra Dolcino and the Legitimization of Deviance among the Order of Apostles, 1260-1307' (Ph.D. The University of Arizona, 2004), 152-55; Reeves, *Influence*, 7-10; Reeves, *Joachim*, 8-9, 22-23.

53 Reeves, *Joachim*, 22, 93.

54 Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Pimlico, 1993), 110-13; Reeves, *Joachim*, 59-62.

55 Segarelli's name is spelled in many ways and the name of his group also has a number of forms, see Pierce, 50, nn. 1, 2.

56 Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 12, 23, 40. See pages 16 (n. 5), 36-38 for recent Italian scholarship on the movement, and pages 25-28 for comments about the assumed bias in the early documents.

by Joachim's teachings.<sup>57</sup> Initially they had the support of leading figures in the Roman Catholic Church, but over a period of time the Brethren came to believe that that church was corrupt and materialistic, indeed, that it was the great whore of Babylon, and viewed the pope as having no spiritual authority. In fact, the Brethren themselves, living lives of apostolic poverty and simplicity, were the true church. In 1290 a bull was issued disbanding the order, which was ignored by the Brethren. The church inevitably responded to this by persecuting them and burned Segarelli at the stake in 1300.<sup>58</sup>

The man who replaced him as leader of the movement was an Italian monk called Fra Dolcino. Some scholars in the Left Behind camp and at least one outside it claim that Brother Dolcino taught a pretribulation rapture.<sup>59</sup>

Pierce says that under the more charismatic Dolcino the Apostles shifted from 'apostolic poverty to apocalyptic poverty' (his emphasis), and changed from a 'peaceful and simple apostolic lifestyle' to 'apocalyptic and violent rhetoric.'<sup>60</sup> However, the environment for this change in the movement appears to have existed even before Segarelli died, and his death and the martyrdom of other Brethren led Dolcino and his followers to see matters with this new focus.<sup>61</sup> Dolcino was well enough known in the Middle Ages to have been mentioned in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.<sup>62</sup>

Pierce also argues that the Order adopted 'biblical literalism' in their approach to the Scriptures, which was quite different from Joachim. This is evident in their initial vow of poverty, based on Christ's words to the rich man 'Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor' (Luke 18:22). Then, in addition, they refused to take any kind of oath because of Christ's command 'do not swear at all...' (Matt. 5:34-37).<sup>63</sup> Yet how much this literal approach was applied in the interpretation of prophetic Scriptures is unclear.

In 1304 the Apostles moved to an Alpine retreat to escape persecution and await God's wrath being poured upon the church the following year. This would then be followed by Joachim's Age of the Spirit. During this period of exile tension between the Brethren and the authorities continued, and another papal bull

57 Pierce says that there is 'no evidence' that Segarelli had 'direct knowledge of Joachim's millennial theology', though he may have done so (*Apocalyptic*, 47, 128 (n.13)).

However, the correspondence of dates is striking.

58 L. Mariotti, (aka Antonio Gallenga) *A Historical Memoir of Fra Dolcino and his Times* (London: Longman, 1853), 68-75, 94-106, 136-39; Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 12-13, 22-23, 62-63, 72-76, 95-98, 112-23; McGinn, *Visions*, 226.

59 Mark Hitchcock & Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind* (Sisters (OR): Multnomah, 2004), 195; Francis Gumerlock, 'A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century', BS 159 (2002), 353; Francis X. Gumerlock, *The Day and the Hour: A Chronicle of Christianity's Perennial Fascination with Predicting the End of the World* (Powder Springs: American Vision, 2000), 80.

60 Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 18, 48. See also Mariotti, Dolcino, 121-24, 213.

61 Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 123-25.

62 Mariotti, *Dolcino*, 142-43; Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 21-22.

63 Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 110-11, 113.

was issued against them in 1306. The following year a battle took place between them and papal forces at Mount Rubello, in which the Brethren were crushed. Dolcino was captured, suffered under the inquisition and was executed.<sup>64</sup>

It may be arguable whether Segarelli was influenced by Joachim's teachings or not, but Dolcino certainly was, and he was more than ready to reinterpret them. Dolcino's teachings were radically apocalyptic, and he believed that the Apostolic Brethren were the spiritual leaders predicted by Joachim, and thus they were now living in the last days. Whereas many movements like the Brethren looked back to the NT and sought to live as they believed the Apostles had done, under Dolcino the Brethren primarily looked ahead to the end. In addition, Dolcino added a fourth age to Joachim's essentially trinitarian three ages. Dolcino believed that the church was evil, and at the end of his third age the Last World Emperor, named Frederick (at that time King of Sicily), would wipe out the pope, the clergy and the monks. After that would come his ideal fourth age of the Holy Spirit, in which a new 'holy pope' would arise.<sup>65</sup>

Dolcino also may have predicted that nine kings would arise in Italy who would reign with Frederick and the new pope. Thus, if we consider Frederick to be a king, we would have ten apocalyptic kings with 'Roman' associations, as is common in *Left Behind*. However, while one manuscript reads 'nine kings' (*novem reges*), the other reads 'new kings' (*reges novos*).<sup>66</sup>

With regard to the claim concerning a pretribulation rapture, the relevant record is not from the pen of Dolcino himself, but rather is found in *The History of Brother Dolcino*,<sup>67</sup> which was written in Latin in 1316 by an anonymous Italian who opposed the Apostles.<sup>68</sup> In other words, whether this is an accurate record of Dolcino's beliefs must be regarded as uncertain, perhaps even as unlikely. However, according to Gumerlock, one part bears 'striking similarity to modern pretribulationism'.<sup>69</sup> This part of the work says that Dolcino believed, 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. 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

64 Gumerlock, 'Rapture', 355-56; Mariotti, *Dolcino*, 233-79, 289-91; Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 13-14, 127-39.

65 Mariotti, *Dolcino*, 155-61; Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 149, 159-72; McGinn, *Visions*, 226-29; Reeves, *Influence*, 244-48, 414; Reeves, *Joachim*, 47-48.

66 Mariotti, *Dolcino*, 164-66.

67 This work appears in L. A. Muratori (ed.), *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* (Italy, 1723-1751).

68 Gumerlock, 'Rapture', 353, 357; Pierce, *Apocalyptic*, 24-27.

69 Gumerlock, 'Rapture', 353.



[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 would then be the holy pope, and his preserved 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.<sup>70</sup>

Gumerlock believes that this teaching is based primarily upon Revelation 11.<sup>71</sup>

While it must be borne in mind that these comments are not from the pen of Dolcino, but another writer, we have little else upon which we can establish his eschatology. Also we should note that there does not seem to be anything in them that contradicts what we know of Dolcino's life. It is known that he proclaimed apocalyptic teachings unacceptable to the church, including the reign of an Antichrist. The three years mentioned at the beginning may have been the period of the Brethren's exile from 1304-1307, but they are perhaps more likely the three-and-a-half years of persecution mentioned just afterwards. It would seem, then, that the life and the claimed teachings of Dolcino are consistent with each other.

But what precisely are these teachings and in what ways are they similar to and different from Left Behind? First, Dolcino may have believed in the rise of ten 'Roman' kings. Secondly, he taught about an Antichrist, but this is also common in other eschatologies. Thirdly, it would seem that this figure would have a period of power, possibly for three-and-a-half years. This is similar to Left Behind, though the length of his reign in Left Behind varies from three-and-a-half to seven years. Fourthly, this Antichrist would conduct a persecution, though against whom is not stated. This corresponds to some degree with Left Behind's tribulation or great tribulation.

Fifthly, the key issue, the Brethren, the true believers, would be 'transferred into Paradise' away from that time of trouble. Indeed, Marjorie Reeves understands Dolcino's view to be that '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 [Dolcino and his followers] would descend again to convert all nations.'<sup>72</sup> In addition, according to Gumerlock, the Latin word translated 'transferred' here was the word that medieval Christians used to refer to 'the translation of Enoch to paradise [Heb. 11:5] and the rapture of Christians' (1 Thess. 4:17), which adds to the similarity between Dolcino and Left Behind.<sup>73</sup>

Sixthly, is the appearance of the two witnesses, Enoch and Elijah, upon earth, who would later be killed by Antichrist or his followers. This once more is a belief

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70 Cited in Gumerlock, 'Rapture', 354-55. There is a slightly different translation in Gumerlock, *Day*, 91-92, n. 6.

71 Gumerlock, 'Rapture', 359-60.

72 Reeves, *Joachim*, 49.

73 Gumerlock, 'Rapture', 356-57.

held by many Left Behinders, though some would not agree with that identification of the witnesses. Then, lastly, the Brethren will return to earth and be key figures in a new age in which many, if not all, will be converted to Christ. This is a millennial-like concept, though there is no indication that it was expected to last 1000 years. Joachim would appear to be its primary influence, not Revelation 20. In fact, how much Dolcino's ideas were based upon the Bible is unclear.

Though the above points correspond with Left Behind in varying measure, there are also a number of differences, some of which are quite marked. The first and most significant is that the Jews are not mentioned at all. This is very different from Left Behind, in which the Jews are prominent from beginning to end. Secondly, Jesus Christ is not mentioned in association with this rapture. He is only referred to later, in that the Brethren would preach 'the right faith of Christ to all' and that many would believe in Him. Thirdly, though there is the suggestion in the *History* that Antichrist's reign may be for three-and-a-half years or less, the text does also say that he will 'reign for a long time'. Designations such as 'a long time' are, of course, relative, but in this context it is hard to regard a long time as three-and-a-half or seven years. It sounds like a much longer period. If so, then this is another difference from Left Behind. Then Dolcino's idea of a millennium, if such it can be called, is also quite different from Left Behind. We are told that during that period Dolcino will rule on earth as pope, but there is no mention of Christ appearing on earth at all, so he does not appear to be premillennial. Nor is there any time limit given to this age.

In summarising Dolcino's views two points must first be noted. First, that this description of Dolcino's teachings is from the pen of another person, who was not favourably disposed to the Apostolic Brethren, so the account could be a distortion of his beliefs. Also the material we have is very brief, so is unlikely to represent all the Brother's beliefs about the end. But it can be seen that while Dolcino's teachings are not by any means entirely in line with modern Left Behind, there is one major parallel, a pretribulation rapture, plus other similarities. But there are also apparently two major differences, the Jews do not feature in any significant way in End Times events, and Christ does not appear before the millennium. In fact, Christ does not seem to be directly involved in this version of the end; at least he is not referred to as being involved. Indeed, during this era the understanding of this Age of the Spirit was that it would be under a spirit-led holy or angelic pope rather than directly under Christ, after all this was the Age of the *Spirit*, not the preceding Age of the Son.<sup>74</sup>

One further point needs to be noted. Even if *The History of Brother Dolcino* does not present a fair description of that Brother's teachings, the fact remains that these ideas were penned early in the fourteenth century, so they existed then, even if they were only invented for the purpose of discrediting Dolcino.

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74 Reeves, *Joachim*, 69, 72-82.

## Abstract

This paper examines whether Left Behind ideas such as the pretribulation rapture can be found in a sermon by Ephraem (or Pseudo-Ephraem) and the teachings of Fra Dolcino. In the former case it would appear to be an instance of reading a modern idea into an ancient document, as the preacher's methods and theology are very different from Left Behind. When it comes to Dolcino the matter is complicated by the fact that his ideas come to us via his opponents. However, they do present a teaching very similar to a pretribulation rapture plus some other Left Behind-like ideas, though he does not seem to have been premillennial. However, whether all this truly reflects Dolcino's views is unknown.

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