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*.

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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.  

It is believed to be a Christian revision of an earlier Jewish apocalypse. 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. 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. 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.

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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.

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