

Byzantine 4th Century Rapture Text Discovery: Ephraem The Syrian

In recent years, many opponents of the pre-tribulation rapture view have made dogmatic assertions that this view was never taught before 1820 A.D.¹ There have been attempts to attribute the origin of this view to John N. Darby.

Grant Jeffrey has found an ancient citation from a sermon ascribed to Ephraem of Nisibis (306-373 A.D.), which clearly teaches that believers will be raptured and taken to Heaven before The Tribulation.²

Ephraem of Nisibis was the most important and prolific of the Syrian church fathers and a witness to early Christianity on the fringes of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century.

He was well-known for his poetry, exegetical and theological writings, and many of the hymns of the early Byzantine church. So popular were his works that in the fifth and sixth centuries he was adopted by several Christian communities as a spiritual leader and role model.

This sermon is deemed to be one of the most interesting apocalyptic texts of the early Middle Ages. The translation of the sermon includes the following segment:³

“ 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. ”

This text was originally a sermon called On the Last Times, the Anti-christ, and the End of the World. There are four existing Latin manuscripts (the Parisinus, the Augiensis, the Barberini, and the St. Gallen) ascribed to St. Ephraem or to St. Isidore. Some scholars believe this text was written by some unknown writer in the sixth century and was derived from the original Ephraem.⁴

The sermon describes the events of the last days, beginning with the rapture, the Great Tribulation of 3 1/2 years duration under the Antichrist's rule, followed by the Second Coming of Christ. In Ephraem's book *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, written about 370 A.D., he expressed his belief that the 69th week of Daniel ended with the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah.⁵

This, of course, doesn't prove that the pre-tribulation view is correct; only that it was held (by some) in the early centuries and was not unique to the revival of the 1830's. It simply documents that this view was held by a remnant of the faithful from the beginning until today.

NOTES

1. George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 1956; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 1973; John Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching*, 1980; Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up*, 1975, and *The Great Rapture Hoax*, 1983; are well-known examples. For a refutation of MacPherson's charges, see Thomas D. Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulational Rapture did not begin with Margaret McDonald", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (April-June 1990) p. 155-68.
2. The citation was found in a footnote in Paul J. Alexander's *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1985, p. 210. Dr. Paul Alexander is probably the most authoritative scholar on the writings of the early Byzantine Church.
3. The English translation of the Latin text in C.P. Caspari's *Briefe, Abhandlungen und Predigten aus den zwei letzten Jahrhunderten des kirchlichen Altertums und dem Anfang des Mittelater* (Christiania, 1890, pp. 208-20) was provided by Cameron Rhoades, instructor of Latin at Tyndale Theological Seminary, Ft. Worth, TX.
4. For a complete discussion, see "The Rapture and Pseudo-Ephraem: An Early Medieval Citation", by Thomas D. Ice and Timothy J. Demy, to be published in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July-September 1995. Also, Grant Jeffrey, *Rush to Judgment*, Frontier Research Books, Toronto, Canada, 1995.
5. *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, p. 235, as quoted by Grant Jeffrey in private correspondence.