

# ***Discovering Dispensationalism: The Apocalypse in the Dark Ages: Medieval Dispensational Thought (A.D. 430–1450)***

William Watson, Ph.D.

## **Introduction**

Numerous dispensational ideas have been found in Late Antiquity, that is, from the death of Augustine in A.D. 430 to the death of Charlemagne in 814. As the Roman Empire began to fall, apocalyptic gloom began to rise. Christians in the western half of the empire were now at the mercy of barbarian tribes. The eastern half of the empire had their problems as well, first with a protracted war against Persia in the east, followed by Slavic invasions from the north, with subsequent Arab invasions from the south. Christians began explaining these terrors by apocalyptic speculation, expecting the coming of Antichrist and wondering how they would escape his wrath. The consensus was forming that the Roman Empire was the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7, and that with its collapse Antichrist would be revealed. Others believed that there was an intermediate stage between the Empire and the Antichrist, that Rome would unravel into ten nations, based upon the ten toes of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2:41–42) and the ten horns of the fourth beast (Daniel 7:7–8, 24). Accordingly, the fall of Rome was expected to begin the Last Days.

This paper will show that ideas now considered distinctly dispensational were present in the medieval period—contrary to those who assert that dispensationalism is a modern innovation. Specifically, the paper will focus on antiquitous positions reflecting dispensational thought from both the Late Antiquity (5<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup>) and Late Medieval (10<sup>th</sup> –15<sup>th</sup>) centuries. Proto-dispensational elements found in these periods include: sacred history being divided into periods in which God deals with humanity in different ways; a literal interpretation of Scripture—

especially of prophetic passages—rather than the spiritualizing of them; belief in a literal future Antichrist; a literal restoration of God’s earthly people to their own land; a literal rapture of God’s heavenly people; a literal period of tribulation immediately preceding Christ’s return; and, a literal millennium with Christ ruling on earth with His saints.<sup>1</sup> Though many of the first-hand historical sources utilized for this essay do not neatly represent positions of later dispensationalists like Darby or Scofield to an exact degree, they do, however, represent voices from antiquity reflecting a tenor much closer to modern dispensationalism than to any other eschatological scheme promoted throughout history.

### **Dispensational Thought in Late Antiquity (A.D. 430–815)**

Cyril of Alexandria (c.376–444)

Patriarch from A. D. 412 to 444, Cyril of Alexandria believed that the Jews would soon return to Jerusalem in these last days and be converted by the preaching of Elijah.<sup>2</sup> He also expected the tribulation to commence before Christ’s second coming, occurring “unexpectedly, and with no man knowing it, at the end of the world...as it was in the days of Noah and Lot...”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, Cyril had in mind the event commonly understood today as “the rapture.”:

[H]e that is good will be taken, and he that is not so will be left. ... He will send His angels, and they shall choose the righteous from among the sinners, and bring them near unto Him: but those others they will be left on earth, as doomed to torment and condemned to punishment by fire.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on how these specific historical doctrines relate to dispensationalism, see Charles R. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1965), 22–47.

<sup>2</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, “Explanation of the Letter to Romans”, 11.26; in *Ancient Christian Commentary, Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), VIII:

<sup>3</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, “Commentary on Luke”, sermon 117 (Luke 17:20-30); in [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril\\_on\\_luke\\_11\\_sermons\\_110\\_123.htm#SERMON%20CXVII](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril_on_luke_11_sermons_110_123.htm#SERMON%20CXVII) (accessed 6/7/18).

<sup>4</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Sermon 118; in [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril\\_on\\_luke\\_11\\_sermons\\_110\\_123.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyril_on_luke_11_sermons_110_123.htm) (accessed 6/7/18).

Though space limits much more that can be said regarding Cyril, it is noteworthy that he believed and taught that some will be taken, while others will be left behind on earth. Indeed, the escape of the righteous into heaven and torment for those left behind is a common theme through church history—one that is now considered to be a staple belief within dispensational thought.<sup>5</sup>

#### Theodoret of Cyrrhus (c.393–c.462)

Theodoret was a Syrian bishop of Cyrrhus (or Cyrus) in the mid-fifth century and one of the greatest minds to emerge from the Antiochene literal tradition. Among other doctrines stemming from his approach to Scripture, he taught that the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians was the Roman Empire, and that at its collapse the restrainer would be replaced by ten kingdoms, which he concluded from the ten horns passage of Daniel 7. Then, according to Theodoret, the Antichrist (or King of the North) would conquer the ten horns and rule from Jerusalem before the return of Elijah and Enoch, who are to preach in the streets of Jerusalem—calling Jews to faith in Christ—ending with their death by the Antichrist (Revelation 11). As the record bears out, this scenario picturing a mass-salvation of Jewish people was actually the majority view concerning the last days in the early Church,<sup>6</sup> a doctrine later solidified within dispensational thought.

Like dispensationalists after him, Theodoret believed in a special role for the Jews—recognizing the Apostle Paul’s love for his countrymen and the promises God had made to them:

...indicating his love and anxiety for them, being most desirous that all should submit themselves, and joyfully receive the saving gospel. ... *To whom pertaineth the adoption... And the covenants*, not the old only, but the new also had He promised to bestow on them, “for I will make,” says He, “a new covenant with the house of Israel,

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<sup>5</sup> The issue of the exact timing of the Rapture is not considered at this point; merely that these voices from history clearly held to a rapture position, most commonly what is referred to today as either pretribulational or midtriblational with some variants of a pre-wrath position.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Weaver, *Theodoret of Cyrus on Romans 11:26: Recovering and Early Redivivus Tradition*, American University Studies, Series VII, *Theology and Religion*, vol.249 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 88,149-151.

not according to the covenant I made with their fathers” (Jer. xxxi 31,32), but this they themselves were not willing to accept; *And the giving of the law*, for to them He had given the Mosaic law; *And the service of God*, for, honoring them above other nations, to them He had taught the ritual ministrations of the law; *And the promises*, both those made by God to their fathers and those promulgated by prophets. Whose are the fathers, the renowned, the celebrated, of whom God was called the God (Exod. iii. 15); and then in the last place he adduces the greatest blessings, *And of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.*<sup>7</sup>

According to Theodoret, not only had God greatly blessed the Jews throughout history, but He will bless them again in the future. In Theodoret’s words: “After the Gentiles accepted the gospel, the Jews would believe, when the great Elijah would come to them and bring them the doctrine of faith.”<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, taught Theodoret, Christians should love the Jews. Such affection toward the Jewish people—amidst a period that was becoming increasingly anti-Semitic, is evident from in his commentary on Romans 11:

*As concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sakes: But as touching the election, they are beloved for their fathers’ sakes.* When I look to you, with whose instruction I am entrusted, I consider them as enemies and hateful...but when I turn to their forefathers, and reflect how God chose them from among the whole earth, on their account I love even these. 29 *For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.* All this he says as an incitement to the Jews; for that the blessings which God gives he again resumes...<sup>9</sup>

As was customary to the Antiochene school of thought, Theodoret intentionally approached the Scriptures with a view toward grammatical and historical contexts. Doing so resulted in his conviction of the importance of the Jewish race in Scripture leading to his belief in national

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<sup>7</sup> Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Interpretation of the Letter of the Romans*, 9:3-5; in [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodoret\\_commentary\\_on\\_romans\\_01.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodoret_commentary_on_romans_01.htm) (accessed 8/10/18).

<sup>8</sup> Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans*; in *Ancient Christian Commentary: Romans* (InterVarsity, 1998), VI:298.

<sup>9</sup> Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Commentary on the Romans*, 11:28-29; in *Commentary on Romans* (1840); in [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodoret\\_commentary\\_on\\_romans\\_02.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodoret_commentary_on_romans_02.htm) (accessed 6/12/2018).

Israel's eschatological conversion and restoration, an idea that would later become codified within dispensational theology.<sup>10</sup>

### Pseudo-Ephraim (c.625)

Traditionally believed to have been written by Ephraim the Syrian, the Syriac text referred to as *Pseudo-Ephraim* has been traced to as early as the late 5<sup>th</sup> to early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, with both Greek and Latin translations appearing soon after. Though modern scholars have preferred a later dating, they generally agree the text was written before A.D. 630 when the Arab conquest of the Middle East began. The importance of this historic text is underscored by its clear presentation of a decidedly pre-tribulation rapture, an end times position reflected later in traditional dispensationalism:

Woe to those who desire to see the day of the Lord!" 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.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, *Pseudo-Ephraim* repeats the commonly held view on the Antichrist, which began with Irenaeus and Hippolytus, that Antichrist would be a Jew of the tribe of Dan and begat by a "vile virgin." On this view, the future Antichrist would seduce his fellow Jews, and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, most elements of Antichrist's activity mentioned by modern dispensationalists are found in the text of Pseudo-Ephraim:

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<sup>10</sup> This is not meant to suggest Theodoret always consistently (or accurately) applied a purely "literal" hermeneutic. It is merely meant to point out that his conclusions regarding the future of the Jewish nation were drawn from an approach to Scripture that does reflect a literal hermeneutic customary to dispensational thought.

<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Ephraim, "Sermon at the End of the World", 3; on <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/101157.html> (accessed 7/10/18). See also: Thomas Ice, "The Rapture in Pseudo-Ephraem" (May 2009), on [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=pretrib\\_arch](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=pretrib_arch) (accessed 7/9/18)

<sup>12</sup> Pseudo-Ephraim, "Sermon at the End of the World", <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ephraem-OntheLastTimetheAnt.pdf> (accessed 6/13/2018), 6-8.

Therefore, when he receives the kingdom, he orders the temple of God rebuilt for himself, which is in Jerusalem; who, after coming into it, he shall sit as God and order that he be adored by all nations... Then the Jews shall congratulate him, because he gave them again the practice of their first covenant; ...and the holy city shall be trampled on by all nations for 42 months nations for 42 months...which become 3½ years, 1260 days...the prophets Enoch and Elijah, who, while not yet tasting death, are the servants for the heralding of the second coming of Christ, and in order to accuse the enemy. ... And when the three and a half years have been completed, the time of the antichrist, through which he will have seduced the world, after the resurrection of the two prophets...will come the sign of the Son of Man and coming forward the Lord shall appear with great power and much majesty...with the whole chorus of the saints, and the Lord shall destroy him by the spirit of his mouth.<sup>13</sup>

Like the others surveyed in the paper, *Pseudo-Ephraim* makes clear that themes which would later be tied directly to dispensational theology enjoy a long history of ecclesiastical support.

#### Caesarius of Arles (469–542)

Caesarius of Arles was a bishop in southern France who wrote an exposition of the book of Revelation. Caesarius conflated the rapture of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11:12 with what he saw as the rapture of the Church in Revelation 4:1 and in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Come up hither!’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud. The apostle spoke of this when he said, ‘We shall be caught up on the clouds to meet Christ.’”<sup>14</sup> He also implied a mid-tribulation rapture was to be expected (or pre-trib, if one considers only the last three and half years as the Tribulation) by contrasting Satan’s expulsion from heaven to earth in Revelation 12 with the rapture of the Church to heaven:

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<sup>13</sup> *Pseudo-Ephraim*, Ibid., 8-10.

<sup>14</sup> Caesarius of Arles, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, Homily 8; in Ibid., 84.

When the devil is thrown out, he ‘comes down’ to his followers who are the ‘earth’ because of their earthly affection. He is said to be thrown out of heaven... For the saints cannot become heaven unless the devil has been expelled.<sup>15</sup>

Caesarius believed that the Jews will come to faith through the preaching of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11, while the church would escape the wrath of Antichrist at the rapture of those witnesses, allowing Antichrist to rule for 42 months. Then those left behind on earth will curse those who dwell safely in heaven:

We might also interpret the woman who flew into the desert to be the same catholic church in which the synagogue will come to believe at the end of time when Elijah comes. In this case, the two wings of the eagle are the two prophets, namely Elijah and whoever it is that will come with him... ‘And it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.’ The forty-two months are to be interpreted as the last persecution. ‘Then it opened its mouth to blaspheme against God... And they blasphemed his dwelling and those who dwell in heaven.’ ... ‘And power was given to it over every tribe and tongue, and all who dwell on the earth will worship it.’ ... Also it [the Beast] was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. ...it is not the good Christians who are conquered but the bad... It speaks of all, namely, of those who dwell upon the earth not of those who dwell in heaven.<sup>16</sup>

By the middle of the Tribulation, suggested Caesarius, the church is in heaven, from where angels depart to pour wrath on the earth:

‘After these things I looked, and behold, the tent of witnesses in heaven was opened.’ We have already asserted that the temple is to be interpreted as the church, and the angel who ‘came out of the temple and gave command to him who was seated on the cloud, ... And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God.’<sup>17</sup>

Notably, his commentary on these verses reveals a straightforward understanding that emerges from a relatively literalistic reading of the text that serves as a hallmark feature of dispensational thought.

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<sup>15</sup> Caesarius of Arles, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, Homily 9; in *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Caesarius of Arles, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, Homily 10; in *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>17</sup> Caesarius of Arles, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, Homily 12; in *Ibid.*, 91.

Aspringius of Beja (c. mid-6<sup>th</sup>)

In the sixth century, southern Portugal bishop Aspringius of Beja held similar eschatological expectations. In his commentary on Revelation he insisted that the book was largely prophetic, reflecting a futurist-premillennial position, and anticipated a period when the Church will be removed prior to a period of testing upon the earth:

[John] is speaking not only of his own times but also future ages. Moreover, he promises that [God] will preserve his church in the last times, when the demon, the enemy of the human race, will come to tempt those who live on the earth.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth point out that according to Aspringius God will “preserve his church” from “the enemy of the human race” in contradistinction to “those who live on earth,” viz., a different class of people who are tempted by the Antichrist. The clear implication is that “his church” will not be “on earth” during this horrific period.

Zealously, Aspringius identified who he believed to be all the invaders of Israel in the last days as prophesied in Ezekiel 38 and 39. Accordingly, the Scythians were Gog and Magog and Cappadocia was Meshech. Together he understood them to be the king of the north who is mentioned in Daniel 9. According to Aspringius: “These very passages announce the presence of Antichrist.”<sup>19</sup> When Antichrist comes, taught Aspringius, the Tribulation begins eventually leading to the church reigning with Christ for a millennium:

For as the Lord taught in the Gospel, it is necessary at the coming of the enemy there be the beginning of sorrows and the presence of great tribulations. The half week, that is, the three and a half years in which ‘offerings and sacrifices shall cease’ refers to that time of the accursed one...that is the image of antichrist. These are the thousand years of which the Apocalypse speaks, because through faith all the saints will have risen with Christ.<sup>20</sup>

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37. <sup>18</sup> Aspringius of Beja, *Explanation of the Revelation*, 3:10; in *Ancient Christian Texts* (InterVarsity, 2011),

<sup>19</sup> Aspringius of Beja, *Explanation of the Revelation*, 20:7; in *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Aspringius of Beja, *Explanation of the Revelation*, 20:9-10; in *Ibid.*, 52.



Moreover, he declared that the church would be prepared in heaven as a bride:

We interpret the armies of heaven to be the bride herself, who above was said to be prepared for the marriage of the Lamb. When it says that they were ‘on white horses’ it is speaking either of the purity of their faith, or it is alluding to the members of our bodies made new through resurrection. [The fine linen] is the righteous works of the saints.<sup>21</sup>

The church or “all saints” would return from heaven with Christ to do battle against the armies of Antichrist:

If you compare the words of the blessed Daniel, you will find one and the same thing. ‘He will come with a great multitude so that he might exterminate and destroy many.’ However, in the Revelation it is said that, when the kings of the earth and their armies are gathered together, they will war against him who sits on the horse, that is, against Jesus Christ, and against his army, that is, against all saints who follow him.<sup>22</sup>

Though not all of Aspringius’ eschatological expectations strictly conform to modern expressions of dispensational thought, it is evident that Aspringius of Beja no less held to distinctly futurist positions concerning the end times, especially in his understanding of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation; common features of dispensational thought, that would later emerge.

#### Oecumenius (6<sup>th</sup> century)

Oecumenius was most likely the bishop of Isauria, in what is now southern Turkey, but some believe him to be another Oecumenius, the bishop of Trikka in Thessaly a century later.

Regardless of his exact identity, his writings clearly indicate that he held to a futurist understanding of Revelation, similar to that which is common to dispensational thought.

Speaking of the horrific events described in the book of Revelation, Oecumenius taught: “Those

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<sup>21</sup> Aspringius of Beja, *Explanation of the Revelation*, 19:14; in *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>22</sup> Aspringius of Beja, *Explanation of the Revelation*, 19:19; in *Ibid.*, 49.

events that will take place have not yet occurred.”<sup>23</sup> His futurist understanding of Revelation did not end there. For instance, concerning the marriage supper of the Lamb, Oecumenius believed:

In the present age the marriage is still in the stage of courtship and not yet a consummated marriage...[he cites the parable of wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25]. It is not suitable to regard any of this as referring to the present time; it rather refers to that which is coming.”<sup>24</sup>

Oecumenius expected the millennium to take place in a still-future age, as reflected in his words:

“we do not yet see all things subjected to him, but all things will be subjected to him in the coming age.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in his preface to the Fifth Discourse, Oecumenius believed that many will already be in heaven while the future tribulation period is continued on earth.

Concerning the great multitude before God’s throne in Revelation 7, Oecumenius’s

“dispensational” eschatology is perhaps clearest with its pretribulational inferences:

Since the prophetic vision has not yet depicted the second coming of the Lord when the saints ‘are caught up in the clouds to meet’ the Savior, as the holy apostle says, the vision shows them as caught up beforehand, and as already obtained the blessedness that awaits them. For what is more blessed than to be found worthy of being with Christ and to behold the divine throne.<sup>26</sup>

Oecumenius continues:

He sees the countless thousands from the Gentiles, who having received the faith in Christ and having attained the blessed portion, have allotted a place in the heavenly choir and stand before the Lord and the throne of his Father. They are clothed in white robes... having been sealed as servants of God, they were rescued from the universal destruction of the world. ...‘These are they who have come out of the Great Tribulation.’ For the righteous endured not a small but indeed an exceedingly great struggle during the rule of antichrist.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 1:1-2; in *Ancient Christian Texts: Greek Commentaries on Revelation* (InterVarsity, 2011), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 19:6-9; in *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 19:6-9; in *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, preface to fifth discourse; in *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 7:9; in *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Much like the futurists who preceded him, Oecumenius expected the Antichrist “will rule as king of the Jews, whom he will deceive.”<sup>28</sup> However, the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11, whom he believed to be Elijah and Enoch, would return from heaven to preach against Antichrist in the streets of Jerusalem until he was able to kill them.<sup>29</sup>

Now the Lord is shown having come to Mount Zion represents the conversion of Israel by faith in the last days, when indeed the Lord will make them his own possession and bring them to himself. For this was proclaimed through Isaiah saying, ‘The Redeemer shall come from Zion and will remove the ungodliness from Jacob.’ And the apostle in agreement says ‘When the full number of the Gentiles come in, then all Israel will be saved.’<sup>30</sup>

In summary, Oecumenius’ expectations of the eschaton could hardly be seen to differ with those of many modern dispensationalists. To an even greater degree than some of his predecessors surveyed above, Oecumenius’ thought anticipates that of modern dispensationalists to such an extent that defies the refusal of even the most ardent critics.

#### Gregory the Great (c. 540–604)

Few have considered the Roman pontiff in the late sixth century, Gregory the Great, to reflect any dispensational positions. Yet, he evidently believed that the next event in the prophetic timeline must be the revealing of Antichrist, which he anticipated must precede an earthly tribulation, followed by the eternal reign of the saints. Gregory understood that since the Roman Empire “was no more” that “the time of the End of the World is drawing nigh.”<sup>31</sup> He thus clearly taught a change of dispensations in the last days. In a letter to Edilbert, king of the Angli, he wrote:

We learn from the words of the almighty Lord in holy scripture, the end of the present world is already close at hand, and the reign of the saints is coming,

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<sup>28</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 11:7-10; in *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 11:3-6; in *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 14:1-5; in *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory the Great, *Epistles of St. Gregory*, book III, epistle 5; in Schaff, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, XII:141. FG

which will have no end. And now that the end of this world is approaching, many things are at hand which previously have not been; to wit, changes in the air, terrors from heaven... wars, famine, pestilences, earthquakes in diverse places.<sup>32</sup>

In *Books of Morals* Gregory wrote a chapter on “the pride of the Devil and the most cruel persecutions of Antichrist against the Saints,” in which he claimed that the church’s power would be taken away in the Last Days, for Satan would be cast down to earth manifesting himself in the Antichrist, and replacing the “heavenly dispensation” of Church power with the “awful secret dispensation” of Antichrist’s rule. According to Gregory:

For by the awful course of the secret dispensation, before this Leviathan appears in that accursed man whom he assumes, signs of power are withdrawn from Holy Church. For prophecy is hidden, the grace of healings is taken away... miracles are removed. And though the heavenly dispensation does not entirely withdraw them, it does not manifest them openly and in manifold ways as in former times. For when Holy Church appears as if she were more abject, on the withdrawal of signs of power... the mind of the wicked is the more quickly displayed against her... when they are not constrained by visible signs. When therefore the humility of the faithful is deprived of the manifold manifestation of wonders, by the terrible judgment of the secret dispensation... this Leviathan manifestly and visibly comes...then that ancient enemy displays himself against them... as he boasts himself on his wonders... the malignant enemy displays himself against them with so much the fiercer cruelty.<sup>33</sup>

Like *Pseudo-Ephraim*, Pope Gregory believed that the Antichrist would be a Jew from the tribe of Dan, who would take power at the fall of the Roman Empire (which he considered the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2, even though historians consider Rome to have fallen over a century earlier), and would convince the Jews to follow him until they rejected him and were

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<sup>32</sup> Gregory the Great, *Ibid.*, IX, lxvi; in Schaff, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, XIII:82.

<sup>33</sup> Gregory the Great, *The Books of the Morals...An Exposition of the Book of Blessed Job*, vol III, 6<sup>th</sup> part, book xxxiv, 7 (citing Revelation 12:7); in <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Book34.html> (accessed 8/7/17).

converted to Christianity.<sup>34</sup> From these and other writings Gregory the Great left the world, it is clear he held to various tenets of dispensational thought.

### Isidore of Seville (560–636)

Isidore of Seville played a major role in the conversion of the Visigoths to Roman Catholicism and became archbishop of Seville, the Visigoth capital until the 711 Muslim conquest. Like dispensationalists after him, he divided time into distinct periods—in one place naming three distinct biblical economies: “For the first age is before the Mosaic Law, the second under the Law, and the third under grace.”<sup>35</sup> Later, he claimed there were six distinct eras stating, “the generation of the world and the status of humankind comes to an end through six ages...”<sup>36</sup> A more detailed description of each of the six ages then followed. The first spanned from Adam to the Flood, the second from the flood to Abraham, the third from Abraham to Saul, the fourth from David to the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, the fifth from “the captivity of the Hebrews” to Julius Caesar, and the sixth from Augustus and Christ to the present.<sup>37</sup> Presumably, Isidore believed in a seventh era after Christ returns, though he did not explicitly list it among the others. Nevertheless, Isidore’s six stated economies help connect his thinking to that of a uniquely dispensational philosophy of history: Adam to the Flood; Flood to Abraham; Abraham to Saul; David to destruction of temple; Babylon captivity to Julius Caesar; Augustus & Christ to Present.

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<sup>34</sup> Gregory the Great, *Moralia On Job*, ed. Manilo Simonetti (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 82.

<sup>35</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, VI, xvii, 16; in Barney, Steven A., Lewis, W.J., and Beach, J.A., eds., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge UP: 2006), 144; <https://sfponline.org/Uploads/2002/st%20isidore%20in%20english.pdf> (accessed 6/3/18).

<sup>36</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Ibid.*, IX,vi,29; in *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>37</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Ibid.*, V,xxxix,1-42; in *Ibid.*, 130-133.

Furthermore, Isidore's ecclesiology reflects much of modern dispensationalism as he believed the Church began in Acts 2: "The Church began from the place where the Holy Spirit came from heaven, and filled those who were sitting in one (*unus*) place (Acts 2:1-4)."<sup>38</sup> However, like other thinkers surveyed in this paper, Isidore did not agree with all points of dispensational theology. For example, he lists Chiliasts, or Millenarians, as heretics.<sup>39</sup> His eschatology notwithstanding, Isidore undeniably held to distinct dispensations that divided up biblical history and viewed the origin of the church in much the same manner as would later be codified within dispensational thought.

#### Andrew of Caesarea (563–637)

A bishop in Cappadocia in the early seventh century, Andrew of Caesarea wrote a notable commentary on the Apocalypse. With statements that yielded what would today be considered either a pretribulational or mid-tribulational rapture view, he taught that about the time of Antichrist's arrival the church "would be freed" from "the hour of trial" by being "seized upward by a departure," so that they would not "be tempted beyond what they are able to endure." He got this from Revelation 3:10:

By the 'hour of trial' he speaks either of the persecution against the Christians that occurred almost immediately by those who ruled Rome badly at that time, from which he promised that the Church would be freed, or he speaks of the universal coming of the antichrist against the faithful at the end of time. From this coming He pledges to free those who are zealous, for they will beforehand be seized upward by a departure from there, lest they be tempted beyond what they are able to endure. He says well, 'I am coming soon,' for 'after the tribulation of those days, the Lord will immediately come,' as it says.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Ibid.*, VIII,i,4; in *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>39</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Ibid.*, VIII,v,8; in *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 3:10-11; in *Ancient Christian Texts: Greek Commentaries on Revelation* (InterVarsity, 2011), 125-126.

Like virtually all dispensational-premillennialists today, Andrew considered the meaning of the 144,000 in Revelation 7, to refer to Jewish people who were saved out of the tribulation period:

This refers either to those believers from the Jews who fled the siege of the Romans...or what is more likely, to those from the Jews who are saved at the consummation when, as the apostle puts it, after ‘the full number of the Gentiles come in, all Israel will be saved.’ Either interpretation is acceptable. ...the Jews in the diaspora of the earth are saved in the last days.<sup>41</sup>

Congruent with many of his contemporaries, the Cappadocian bishop believed it was “the tribe of Dan, out of which the antichrist is to be born,”<sup>42</sup> and explained how the Jews of that day would follow him until Enoch and Elijah came to preach against him—who would then kill the two prophets and rule tyrannically for three and a half years in Jerusalem:

Trampled by the nations for 42 months signifies, I believe, that at the appearance of the antichrist those who are faithful and trustworthy will be trampled and persecuted for 3½ years... Enoch and Elijah [will] prophesy 3½ years... and will guide those away from the deception of antichrist.<sup>43</sup>

In the midst of the Great Tribulation he expected that the rapture would take place, in order to rescue the Church from the woes that would befall the earth:

The saints are caught up in the midst of temptations, lest they be subdued by difficulties beyond their powers. And they will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. ...the 3½ years are reckoned the 1,260 days during which the apostasy will rage. During this time the great judge will not think to tempt us beyond what we are able to bear, but freeing us will present us a strong mind free from any weakness against the onslaughts on it...<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 7:4-8; in *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 7:4-8; in *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 11:1-4; in *Ibid.*,

<sup>44</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 12:5-6

The church's rapture, according to Andrew of Caesarea, would involve an angel coming from heaven to rescue them from the wrath of Antichrist:

The phrase 'in mid-heaven' indicates that the angel that here appears is exceedingly lofty and heavenly. It has been sent from above to people who came from the ground, so that through this middle position it might be a mediator and lead them, in imitation of God, to heaven. And so the body of the church will be united to Christ our head. ... Fear God, but have no fear of the antichrist...<sup>45</sup>

Much like his rapture views traversing both pretribulational and midtribulational positions, Andrew of Caesarea described both an historicist and a futurist premillennial view in his attempt to maintain neutrality amidst the theological debate that persisted on the issue. Importantly, however, he does clearly explain the futurist premillennial position, even though he admits the church at his time largely rejected it:

Some interpret the period of a thousand years to be the three and a half years from the baptism of Christ to his ascension that after this the devil is to be loosed. Others say that after the completion of six thousand years the first resurrection of the dead will occur for the saints alone, so that on this very earth on which they endured suffering, they might enjoy temporal largess and glory for a thousand years, and after that the general resurrection will occur... It is unnecessary to say that the church receives nothing of this.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, at the end of the Millennium he anticipated the great final battle, when the armies of Gog and Magog would wage war upon the earth:

Satan will be loosed from his prison and will deceive all nations and will rouse Gog and Magog to war for the devastation of the world. Some believe that these two are the remote northern people of the Scythians, whom we call Huns, and as we see are the most populous and warlike of any kingdom on earth, and we keep them from seizing the whole earth until the loosing of the devil by the hand of God alone. Some interpret...these names signify either the gathering of the nations or their exaltation. We should note that Ezekiel prophesied that these

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 14:6; Ibid., 164.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 20:7-8.



nations would come upon the earth with great power at the end of time, that Israel would fall and for a period of seven years would burn by their arms as though through a great fire. Some interpreters refer this to the fall of the Assyrians... Others refer this to the destruction of the nations...when Cyrus the Persian and Darius ordered the governors of Syria to do this. Yet others refer to the forces of Antiochus... However, it is clear that the arrival of these nations best suits the final times. ...it is written, 'He will be prepared from the days of old and will come at the end of time.' ...in the present revelation, which foretells future events, it is written that Gog and Magog will come toward the end of this age.<sup>47</sup>

Like others from the period, Andrew of Ceasera was not a “dispensationalist” in the modern sense of the term. However, his commentary on the last book of the Bible clearly reveal a futurist understanding of the end times that is customary to modern dispensational eschatology, and helped contribute to the development of dispensational thought.

#### The Venerable Bede (d.735)

The “venerable” Bede was a Benedictine monk in northern England and author of the widely influential *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, as well as various Bible commentaries including one on Revelation. Perhaps his proto-dispensationalism is most prominent in his *Six Ages of the World*, where he divides sacred history into several economies or dispensations. He believed that each of these ages, first outlined by Augustine, would last about a thousand years each: from Adam to Noah; Noah to Abraham; Abraham to David; David to the Babylonian captivity; The Babylonian captivity to the birth of Christ; The birth of Christ to the Second Coming; Second Coming of Christ through the millennium of Sabbath rest. He also taught that the Antichrist would be a Jew from the tribe of Dan, born in Babylon,<sup>48</sup> and that “the

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 20:7; in *Ibid.*, 191-192.

<sup>48</sup> Bede, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, 7:5;17:12; <https://www.ecatholic2000.com/bede/untitled-31.shtml> (accessed 7/3/18).

future persecution of the Antichrist will be greater than any other.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Bede repeats the eschatology narrative that was the consensus throughout the first millennia of church history and later codified within dispensationalism:

Some interpret the two prophets to be Enoch and Elijah. They will preach for three and a half years, and strengthen the hearts of the faithful against the perfidy of the antichrist that is soon to come. And when they are killed, his ferocity will rage. When at last the saints, who through the protection of their hiding places, were thought to be dead... these prophets are said to rise... Then in the temple there will be an abomination of desolation...<sup>50</sup>

From his exposition of Revelation 3:10, the Venerable Bede believed the church would escape the hour of temptation, but that unsaved Jews would remain on earth to endure the Antichrist. He then followed other church fathers in insinuating a general rapture of the church at the rapture of the two witnesses:

The hour of temptation of the Jews at the time of Antichrist are indicated. During this persecution, certainly those of the Jews...through the teaching of that great prophet Elijah, being incorporated with members into the church, they will believe.<sup>51</sup>

As can be seen, Bede’s eschatology reflects much of what is taught today in dispensational-premillennialism. While in heaven, taught the Venerable Bede, the bride or church (consisting of both Jewish and Gentile believers) is prepared in white garments for her marriage to Christ,<sup>52</sup> followed by returning with Him as an “army,” and culminating with a literal one thousand year reign with Christ upon the earth:

‘And the armies that are in heaven followed him on white horses.’ With pure white bodied the church imitates Christ. Because of the struggle of her battle, she has by right received the name of army. ... After hiding, then gathered from all

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<sup>49</sup> Bede, *Ibid.*, 7:14; in *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Bede, *Ibid.*, 11:13; in *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Bede, *Ibid.*, 3:10; in *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Bede, *Ibid.*, 19:7-99; in *Ibid.*

nations and taken to heaven, the saints would then follow Christ to the final battle against the kings of the earth, then they would reign with Christ on earth a thousand years.<sup>53</sup>

In the eschatology of Bede, with its pattern of rapture to heaven, worship in heaven as a multitude too great to be counted, then prepared in white garments, wed and enjoying the supper, returning to earth with Christ as an army fit for battle, then ruling for a thousand years, one cannot dispute a distinctly dispensational narrative.

*Pseudo-Hippolytus (c. 795)*

What is referred to as *Pseudo-Hippolytus* is a Syriac manuscript written in the late eighth century and attributed to early third century Hippolytus but has obvious influences of later theological developments especially in the fourth and fifth centuries (i.e. verbatim quotes from the Apostles Creed, calling Mary the Theotokos). Its authenticity, however, should not be totally discarded as it is most likely a Syriac manuscript from around A. D. 800, and the author made no attempt to pose as Hippolytus. Both the attribution and the title were construed later by those seeing similarities between this anonymous text and the work of Hippolytus.<sup>54</sup>

Germane to purposes here, *Pseudo-Hippolytus*'s contents reflect major developments within proto-dispensational thought. For example, the manuscript followed the consensus description of Antichrist that dominated the first millennia of Christian eschatology viz., Antichrist would be of Jewish descent from the tribe of Dan, who would gather and restore Israel and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Moreover, Enoch and Elijah would preach three and a half years against Antichrist, warning the Jewish people that he was a fraud. The Antichrist would

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<sup>53</sup> Bede, *Ibid.*, 19:14; in *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Alice Whealey, "De Consummatione Mundi of Pseudo-Hippolytus: Another Byzantine Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period; in *Byzantion*, 66, no.2, (1996):461–469.

then kill the two witnesses, desecrate the temple, rule for three and a half years (both three and a half years the author recognizes as the last week of Daniel), and demand everyone take the mark of the beast, 666. Christ will then return to resurrect the dead, destroy Antichrist, and cause the earth to be “burnt up.”<sup>55</sup> It is plainly evident, therefore, that the eschatology of *Pseudo-Hippolytus* reflects conclusions drawn from a literal hermeneutic, an approach to Scripture customary to dispensationalism.

### **Summary of Dispensational Thought in Late Antiquity**

Though space limits a more comprehensive treatment, in the almost five centuries of Late Antiquity (A.D. 430–815),<sup>56</sup> six instances may be offered of authors dividing history into eras or dispensations—with many of them listing seven of them. Additionally, there were fifteen citations of a future literal Antichrist, ten examples of a belief that the Jewish people would be restored to their own land (nine of which included a restoration of the Jewish temple)—which they saw as necessary because the Antichrist had to desecrate it in literal fulfillment of prophecy (e.g., Dan 7–9). Further, there were thirteen mentions of a tribulation just prior to the return of Christ, seven of which identified it as lasting seven years and a few more considering it to be only three and a half years. There were also eleven mentions of a rapture for the church with about equal numbers of pre-tribulational, mid-tribulational, and pre-wrath positions.

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<sup>55</sup> *A discourse by the most blessed Hippolytus, bishop and martyr, on the end of the world, and on Antichrist, and on the second coming of our lord Jesus Christ*, 16-20,23-25,29; in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans, 1951), V, 246-249.

<sup>56</sup> It is worth mentioning that Francis Gumerlock, “Apocalyptic Spirituality in the Early Middle Ages: Hope for Escaping the Fire of Doomsday Through a Pre-Conflagration Rapture,” in *The Pure Flame of Devotion: The History of Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Michael A.G. Haykin* (Kitchner, OH: Joshua Press, 2013), 101–02, has discovered many other likeminded examples of eschatological writers from Late Antiquity not surveyed in this paper which he believes were caused by the insecurity of the collapse of the Roman Empire. All of Gumerlock’s examples wrote commentaries on the book of Revelation and reflect various dispensational positions, such as church’s literal rapture (yet they tended to yield a pre-wrath view). Instances include: Julian of Toledo (d.690) who quoted Augustine “verbatim,” Ambrose Autpert (d.784), Beatus of Liebana (d.798), and Pseudo-Alcuin (written in the 8th or 9th century) who claimed believers would be raptured into a cloud to meet Christ, and the cloud would protect them from the conflagration, “Screening the saints [and] protect[ing] them for the fire burning the world.”

Moreover, eleven sources expected two future literal witnesses to preach in the streets of Jerusalem, almost all identifying them as Enoch and Elijah returning to earth. Finally, three authors mentioned a great battle for Jerusalem when Christ returns, and three even mentioned a literal millennium following where the saints reign with Christ. Though traces of anti-Semitism can be found in just about all writings from late antiquity, there is also explicit elements found that called Christians to love and care for the Jewish people, for God would show them mercy in the last days and restore them to His favor. Undoubtedly, therefore, a general tenor of dispensational thought existed within the Late Antiquity period—and would continue on into the more familiar medieval period of Church history.

### **Dispensational Thought in Late Medieval Era (A.D. 990-1417)**

The term “Dark Ages” is now quite controversial, especially since the work of Rodney Stark and others showed the Middle Ages were not as dark as ideologically-motivated historians influenced by the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment have claimed.<sup>57</sup> However, this historian prefers the term “Dark Ages” when evaluating the Apocalypticism of this period, because it was not informed by biblical material as much as it was by medieval mythology. On account of this, evidences of dispensational thought seem to diminish in this period of ecclesiastical history. Thus, there is little evidence of a literal hermeneutic applied to Scripture, and therefore premillennialism became more scarce during this time. Rather, positions built upon centuries of tradition and developing mythology dominated the medieval era.<sup>58</sup> These non-literal tendencies

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<sup>57</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason* (New York, NY: Random House, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> During the 11<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, eschatology was not only rooted in medieval superstition, but in contemporary events that dominated church-state relations—for example, the Investiture Controversy (a struggle for power between Pope and Emperor) and later the Western Schism (the rupture between rival popes). As Rome developed an imperial papacy, vastly strengthening its power, resistance began to develop by partisans of the Holy Roman Empire. Those who favored the pope were called Guelphs, while those favoring the Emperor were Ghibellines. It was the Ghibelline clerics who began to refer to the pope as Antichrist, while Guelphs often saw the various emperors as Antichrist. About the time conflict between church and state began to subside, another conflict

notwithstanding, remnants of dispensational elements more customary to earlier periods can be found sprinkled throughout this period, though divergent strands are more noticeable. For instance, throughout the ninth and tenth century a common eschatological theme that is consistent with what is now considered a pre-wrath rapture doctrine (a variation from the dispensational pretribulation rapture, by a couple of years), whereby the church or a select group of spiritual people will be rescued from a great conflagration in the last days. Though most dispensational elements found in documents in the first nine centuries of church history began to fade, rapture theology—the idea of the godly escaping from wrath in the last days—as well as the expectation of a future literal Antichrist certainly endured.

Adso of Montier-en-Der (c. 913–992)

A Benedictine monk in Burgundy, Adso of Montier-en-Der was one of the most read authors in the tenth century. Though he has seldom been noted for his “dispensationally” minded ideologies, like the thinkers of the Late Antiquity period cited above, he anticipated that a literal future Antichrist would arise from the Jewish tribe of Dan. Moreover, he expected that this coming figure would restore the Jerusalem temple contemporaneous with a literal return of Enoch and Elijah who would convert the Jews of that day until Antichrist killed them and desecrated the temple. In a letter to Gerbergam of Saxony around A.D. 950, Adso wrote: “Antichrist... born among Jewish people, out of the tribe of Dan... born in the city of Babylon... will restore the Temple of Solomon... go to Jerusalem... [and] present himself as Christ to the Jews.”<sup>59</sup>

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between rival popes in Rome and Avignon divided the church. In both conflicts each side called the other “Antichrist.” Unfortunately, these clerics were more interested in winning current political struggles than in understanding biblical doctrines. Out of these divisions, however, emerged some who did display dispensational ideas.

<sup>59</sup> Adso of Montier-en-Der, “Letter on the Origin and Time of Antichrist” (to Gerbergam of Saxony) in *Epistola Adsonis ad Gerbergam reginam de ortu et tempore antichrist*, 1; <http://www.apocalyptic->

In the same letter Adso appealed to 2 Thessalonians 2 that Antichrist could not take power “unless the defection shall have come first.”<sup>60</sup> Displaying views that fit nicely with the politics of his day, Adso believed that Christian kingdoms had not yet defected since the Franks continued controlling the Roman church and enforcing Catholic orthodoxy. At the end of this age, taught Adso, the last Christian king would go to Jerusalem and lay down his crown. Enoch and Elijah would then preach upon the earth for three and a half years, converting the Jews and ushering in a Golden Age.

Adso understood that with Antichrist’s killing Enoch and Elijah and desecrating the Temple, he would begin another three and a half years of tribulation—a belief held today by mainline dispensationalists. Christians who refused to apostatize would be killed, and all would be forced to “receive his brand on the forehead.” Antichrist’s reign would end at the return of Christ.<sup>61</sup> Though bearing views that were undoubtedly influenced by the political climate of his day, Adso of Montier-en-Der displayed a futurist tenor that has become a staple within dispensational eschatology.

#### Brother Dolcino (d.1307)

Brother Dolcino was part of the Apostolic Brethren, a 14<sup>th</sup> century religious group influenced by St. Francis yet rejected as members in the order. The group then started their own unapproved order, which led to Rome initiating an inquisition was against them. The group’s founder Gerhard Segarelli was executed by orders of the Roman Church resulting in Dolcino

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[theories.com/theories/antichrist/antichristtext.html](http://theories.com/theories/antichrist/antichristtext.html) (accessed 7/9/18). See also: Marina Vukovic, “The Idea of Antichrist: Tyconius & Adso of Montier-En-Der”, (GRIN Verlag, 2008), 7-8.

<sup>60</sup> Adso of Montier-en-Der.

<sup>61</sup> Adso of Montier-en-Der, “Letter on the Origin and Time of Antichrist,” 2-3.

becoming the Brethren's new leader. Under Brother Dolcino's leadership, the group became more hostile to Roman Catholic politics and began violently expropriating land for distribution to the local peasants. When Catholic troops tried to stop them, the Brethren took up arms causing the pope to fund a crusade against them which ended in their wholesale slaughter.

Brother Dolcino was himself captured and burnt at the stake as a heretic. Yet, before their situation became as precarious as it did, ultimately leading to their destruction by the Catholic Church, Brother Dolcino believed he was leading a faithful remnant before Christ's return and began displaying an increasingly futuristic or apocalyptic understanding of the end times:

The Antichrist was coming into the world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; and after he had come then he 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 Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist. Then they would be killed...and Antichrist would reign for a long time. But when the Antichrist is dead, Dolcino...and his preserved followers will descend on the earth.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to teaching a personal Antichrist and rapture of the saints, Dolcino also sketched out an historical scheme of history which he arranged according to several dispensations as he understood them (though not necessarily biblical). An anonymous treatise written shortly after the group's annihilation called *The Sect of Those Who Say They Belong to the Order of Apostles* outlines Dolcino's various dispensations:

Dolcino divides history into four major status, or states: (1) the state under the law of the Old Testament, which allowed marriage; (2) the state under the church from its origins until Constantine... (in this era chastity and poverty were steps of perfection superior to married life and worldly goods); (3) the state of the church after Constantine... monks and friars as its main figures; and (4) the

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<sup>62</sup> Anonymous notary of Vercelli, *Historia Fratris Dulcini [History of Brother Dolcino]* in Codice Ambrosiano-H. 80; *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, v.9. In Francis Gumerlock, "A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (July-September 2002): 349–362.



state of the imminent reformation of the church and its return to its pristine lifestyle.<sup>63</sup>

Though not reflective of modern dispensational divisions, Dolcino nevertheless displayed a long-standing tradition of dividing history into distinct epochs. The transition from the third to fourth period, according to Dolcino, occurs after the ten kingdoms of Europe (corresponding to the ten horns of Daniel 7 and Revelation 17) which are united into a world government by an emperor. This emperor would then kill the evil Pope Boniface VIII, who Dolcino identified as Antichrist, and reform the church, which “had become the whore of Babylon through avarice and luxury.”<sup>64</sup> While not typical of all “dispensational” thought, Dolcino is in good company with so many dispensational thinkers who came after him who believed in the emergence of a personal (papal) Antichrist, followed by a rapture of true Christians who are lifted to heaven to be kept from the persecutions of that Antichrist. Additionally, the notion that Enoch and Elijah would descend to earth in the near future and preach the gospel until their inevitable martyrdom, when they would once again be raptured into heaven to join the saints, is a similarly common theme of the day and later within dispensational eschatology. Some cultic tendencies did emerge however, when, according to this particular monk and his followers, Christ would afterwards return, kill Antichrist, and allow the group to safely return to reign upon that perfect future earth.<sup>65</sup>

#### Treatyse on the Cumynge of Antecryst (early 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

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<sup>63</sup> Gian Luca Potesta, “Radical Apocalyptic Movements in the Late Middle Ages,” in Bernard McGinn (ed.) *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 300.

<sup>64</sup> Bernard Gui, *Manuel de l'inquisiteur*, G. Moffat, ed. (Paris: Librairie ancienne honore champion, 1926), 40; in Gumerlock, “A Rapture Citation,” 12.

<sup>65</sup> The trend to identify the pope as Antichrist became the consensus view from the eleventh century Ghibellines to sixteenth century Reformers. Dissenting groups were the most common groups making this accusation: Albigenses (Cathari), Waldenses, Wycliffe and the Lollards, Huss and the Taborites, then Luther and Calvin. This author has discovered one late medieval document that returned to the early biblically-based eschatology.

An anonymous manuscript from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century referred to as the *Treatyse on the Cumynge of Antecryst* (“treatise on the coming Antichrist”) has an interesting narrative that runs parallel to the majority view that was handed down from the second through the ninth centuries: namely, the expectation of a personal literal Antichrist and future rapture of the church. Explicit connections to dispensational thought are made stronger by the author’s various appeals to the same biblical texts to which modern dispensationalists appeal (e.g., Daniel 7–12; Matthew 24; 2 Thessalonians 2; the book of Revelation).<sup>66</sup> Dispensational thought permeates the treatise, underscored by its list of four things that are expected to precede or envelope the coming of Antichrist: (1) the collapse of the Roman Empire into ten kingdoms, represented by ten horns of the beasts in both Daniel 7 and Revelation 13; (2) the rise of the “little horn” in Daniel 7, representing the Antichrist who will overpower three of the previous kingdoms and force into compliance the other seven; (3) worldwide division and apostasy of the church; and (4) a time of unsurpassed sinful appetite and dominance on the earth.<sup>67</sup>

Like the others surveyed earlier, the manuscript suggests that the author anticipated Antichrist’s origin would be from the Jewish tribe of Dan. Moreover, upon arrival he was expected to desecrate the future Jerusalem temple and declare himself to be the expected Jewish Messiah.<sup>68</sup> According to the anonymous author, “Antecryst shalbe exalted & lyfted up by pryde above all things that may be honored / that is above the godhead of the redemptor / for he shall sett him in the said temple of Jerusalem ...shall shew him unto all the people in suche wyse as if he were god.”<sup>69</sup> Reflecting obvious features common to dispensational eschatology, the treatise

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<sup>66</sup> “The Treatyse of the Cumynge of ye Antechyst”. Add MS 18646, 3. (??)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 1-3.

<sup>68</sup> “The Treatyse of the Cumynge of ye Antechyst,” 1–5. In response, “the Jewes...him shall recevue for ther messias ...Lyue that he is god...constryne the men to worshypp his image...make all his subjects to be sygned & marked with his carecterye” (6).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 6. The author cited as support Daniel 11:36.

teaches that the Antichrist would be a literal future human who would reveal himself in a rebuilt Jewish temple in Jerusalem. He would be accepted at first by the Jewish people, and conquer all parts of a shattered Roman Empire, compelling people to worship him and to take his mark. His rule was expected to come to an abrupt end at the coming of Christ. Indeed, this narrative has a long tradition, from sources only a few decades after the apostles and continuing until the eve of the Reformation.<sup>70</sup>

### **Summary of Dispensational Thought in Late Medieval Era**

Biblically based eschatology continued through the early medieval period in spite of allegorical and amillennial influences that were common to Roman Catholic dogma. Numerous texts exist which reflect a division of history into dispensations. Many of these same texts evidence the author fully expected the arrival of a Jewish Antichrist who would restore Israel and their temple, followed by a seven-year tribulation, replete with a pre- or mid-tribulation rapture, and capped with a millennial reign that is precipitated by the return of Christ to the earth. By the ninth century many of these dispensational elements began to fade, as the Medieval Church drifted away from a literal hermeneutic in favor of a more allegorical method of interpretation that typified Roman Catholic theology.

Yet, a remarkable theme in congruence with the Late Antiquity period was common in the darkest of the Medieval Period, namely an idea of a literal flight to safety from the wrath of Antichrist (i.e., rapture). This is so even if the rest of the narrative reflects more mythical or

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<sup>70</sup> Two other notable proto-dispensational thinkers from the late medieval period include Hartman Schedel (1440–1514) and Denys van Leeuwen (1402–1471). Schedel divided world history into seven distinct eras, believed in a literal future Antichrist as well as a future literal Millennium. Van Leeuwen, a Skythian monk, taught in a literal future rapture of the church (his statements suggest either a pretribulational or pre-wrath rapture). See both Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, CT, Yale: 1981) 111. (??) and Denys van Leewen, *Cord'yal. Whiche treteth of the four last and final things that ben to come* (1479), Early English Books Online, images 35-39.

allegorical elements. Indeed, the sources in the current paper have demonstrated that certain strains of premillennial (and later, “dispensational”) eschatology continued. However, by the eleventh century, a series of political conflicts—first a church/state struggle over investiture followed by a struggle between the rival papacies of Rome and Avignon—caused many medieval thinkers to identify the Antichrist with the papacy. The idea of a papal antichrist was continued by the Reformers, and later the Puritans, and has even been expressed by several dispensationalists. Nevertheless, the traditional narrative of a Jewish Antichrist and a restored temple in Jerusalem continued to exist among some narratives.

### **Conclusion**

Any who would reject the “dispensational” elements in the medieval period must nevertheless come to grips with the presence of the ideas expressed in this paper. As demonstrated throughout, many dispensational ideas endured through the early church and into Late Antiquity and even into the Medieval Period, but as the church drifted further from a literal approach to Scripture error found a foot hold. However, the sixteenth century Reformation brought a revival in literal hermeneutics, and therefore biblical thinking, and soon explicit ideas developing dispensational thought began to emerge in the seventeenth century.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> For more on the distinctly dispensational ideas enveloped by 17<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, see this author’s *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth Century and Eighteenth Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2015).