

HISTORY OF THE RAPTURE UPDATE

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Recently even more possible pre-Darby (J. N. Darby 1800–1882), pre-trib rapture statements are being brought forward by friend¹ and foe alike. It appears that non-pretribulationist Francis X. Gumerlock will be presenting a possible pre-trib rapture find from the *Apocalypse of Elijah* in the October 2013 issue of *Bibliotheca Sacra*,² which is a scholarly journal from Dallas Theological Seminary. “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,” notes Gumerlock. “This article presents another example of teaching similar to pretribulationism in a document from the early church called the *Apocalypse of Elijah*.³”

THE APOCALYPSE OF ELIJAH

I recall researching the *Apocalypse of Elijah* as a possible pre-trib rapture statement in the summer of 1997. I found the text of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* in James H. Charlesworth’s large two-volume work on the Pseudepigrapha (meaning “false writings”).⁴ I concluded at that time it was NOT a pre-trib rapture statement, even though it is a clear statement of some kind of rapture, which is why I have not written about it in the past.

The *Apocalypse of Elijah* is thought to be a product of the Coptic Church in Egypt and written around A.D. 260–295, according one scholarly estimate.⁵ David Frankfurter summarizes the *Apocalypse of Elijah* as follows:

The general hope of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* involves deception and false leaders in the last days—how deception will manifest itself, how it will be exposed at the end, and how the righteous and the “saints” can expect vindication in an eschatological judgment and rest in a millennial paradise. Six relatively discrete sections are woven together in eschatological sequence to reflect this theme.⁶

The *Apocalypse of Elijah* speaks of the Antichrist in the third chapter as the “Lawless One,” the “Shameless One,” and the “Destructive One.”⁷ The fourth chapter speaks of the spread of the influence of the Antichrist throughout the earth and “a description of the decline of the earth as the saints depart and he is left in dominion.”⁸ The two witnesses, who are Enoch and Elijah (which is the uniform view of the early church) challenge Antichrist and are killed, as taught in Revelation 11. The fifth chapter is where the possible rapture statements occur. In what appears to be the tribulation since the Antichrist is active, the *Apocalypse of Elijah* provides “a description of angels taking up or leading away the saints (5:1–10). Lacking the saints, the earth dries up and loses its fertility, and animals die (5:7–9, 14, 18).”⁹ Next, God sends a fiery judgment upon the earth and its sinners. Enoch and Elijah return to earth to roundup the Antichrist and his minions and deposit them in the abyss. The last section deals with the arrival of the millennial kingdom on earth.¹⁰

A PRE-TRIB CLAIM

Gumerlock describes the rapture event from the *Apocalypse of Elijah* as follows:

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.¹¹

Frankfurter, who is a leading expert on the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, speaks of what he calls “the rapture scene” as he quotes from the apocalypse as follows:

In that time the Christ will have pity upon those who belong to him. . . . Those upon whose foreheads is inscribed the name of the Christ, upon who right hand is the seal, from little to great, [the angels] will lift them up on their wings and carry them away before the wrath. . . . And they will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the Lawless One have power over them.¹²

The key statement from the passage is that the angels “will lift them [saints] up on their wings and carry them away *before the wrath*.” Just such a statement could be pre-trib since a central aspect of pretribulationism is translation before the tribulation or the time of God’s wrath. Apparently, the *Apocalypse of Elijah* sees the persecution of Antichrist occurring before the wrath of God. The saints will be rescued before the time of God’s judgment.

One problem with seeing that text as a pre-trib statement is a previous passage that says the angels will take the saints at the rapture “and lead them until they bring them into the holy land” (*Apoc. of Elijah* 5:5). The holy land is not the same as heaven. In response to that matter, Frankfurter notes that in the original Coptic in which the document was written, it literally means “the holy place” and is best taken as an idealized Palestine.¹³ In other words, he believes it likely refers to heaven. This would mean that it could be an early expression of pretribulationism, as Gumerlock argues. When they arrive at their heavenly destination, a pre-trib rapture possibility is further supported by the descriptive statement about the activities of the angelically delivered saints. They will not hunger or thirst and will be protected from the Antichrist. Thus, they are delivered from the wrath of God via the rapture.

“And it is precisely this ascent imagery that the *Apocalypse of Elijah* promises to those who suffer the cruelties of the Lawless One,”¹⁴ notes Frankfurter. The *Apocalypse of Elijah* says, “They will arise and receive a place of rest” (4:27). Frankfurter adds: “The immensity of the signs preceding the rescue of the righteous might be compared to 1 Thes 3:16 (should be 4:16) and Mt 24:30–31.”¹⁵ The *Apocalypse of Elijah* ends with the second coming of Christ and the millennium as follows:

In that time the Christ (will) descend from heaven—the king with his saints. He (will) burn this earth. He (will) spend one thousand years on it, because the sinners ruled it (before). He will make a new heaven and a new earth. There will be no devil . . . in them. He will rule with the saints, (and they will be) ascending and descending, along with the angels, with the Christ for a thousand years. (5:36–39)

CONCLUSION

If I remember correctly, the reason I did not see the *Apocalypse of Elijah* as a pre-trib rapture passage in 1997 is because at that time it looked like to me that the rapture was taking place during, not before the tribulation. Also, the source I read in the 90s was provided by O. S. Winternmute who did not even mention a rapture in his introductory remarks.¹⁶ I thought that anti-pretribulationists would think a rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* would be seen as a desperate stretch when presented by a pretribulationist. Now Gumerlock's forthcoming article has spurred me to take a second look. I purchased a copy of the scholarly book on the *Apocalypse of Elijah* by David Frankfurter, as noted above. I was impressed that Frankfurter, who does not appear to be a partisan on this issue, believes that the narrative speaks of a rapture to heaven before the wrath of God is poured out upon Antichrist.¹⁷ It may be that the *Apocalypse of Elijah* does contain some form of pretribulationism.

There is no doubt, if this is a pre-trib rapture statement of some kind then it is a weak one at best, since categories and terms are not clearly noted, at least in relation to the pretribulationism of today. The tribulation or its length is not clearly identified, although the Antichrist is obvious. There are no time indicators as well. However, there is the clear statement of translation to heaven (via angels) before God's wrath and later a separate return of Christ with the previously raptured saints to the earth for the millennial kingdom. I guess at this time I would have to agree that the *Apocalypse of Elijah* does provide a muddled statement of pretribulationism since it appears to separate the rapture and the second coming with time of God's wrath in between. Maranatha!

¹ In the next issue of *Pre-Trib Perspectives* I will summarize the findings of Dr. William Watson and his pre-trib rapture discoveries of the 1600s and 1700s from the English-speaking world.

² According to an announcement on the back, front cover of the October–December 2012 issue of *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the headline "What's Coming in 2013?" Gumerlock's article is entitled "The Rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*." No question mark in the title, which could mean that he will claim there is a some kind of pretribulational rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*. (This article was written in the middle of February 2013.)

³ Francis Gumerlock, "The Rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*," pre-release of the article's Introduction, p. 1.

⁴ James H. Charlesworth, editor, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983). O. S. Winternmute provided a new translation and an introduction to the *Apocalypse of Elijah* in vol. 1, pp. 721–53.

⁵ David Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt: The Apocalypse of Elijah and Early Egyptian Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 20.

⁶ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 7.

⁷ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 8.

⁸ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 8.

⁹ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, pp. 9–10.

¹¹ Gumerlock, "The Rapture in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*," Introduction, p. 3.

¹² Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 148.

¹³ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 322, fn. 93. It is significant to note that Wintermute also sees the place where the saints are taken as a reference to paradise. Wintermute, "Apocalypse of Elijah," in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, pp. 726, 731.

¹⁴ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 148.

¹⁵ Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, p. 322, fn. 91.

¹⁶ Wintermute, "Apocalypse of Elijah," in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, pp. 721–33.

¹⁷ See Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, pp. 9, 147–50.