

**“WHAT CHILD IS THIS?”:  
DARBY’S EARLY EXEGETICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE  
PRETRIBULATION RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH**

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I. INTRODUCTION

From the moment it first appeared in modern premillennial circles in the mid-nineteenth century, the doctrine of the “secret rapture” theory was met with criticism and controversy.<sup>1</sup> While its developed form—the pretribulation rapture<sup>2</sup>—found enthusiastic popular support among dispensational premillennialists like James H. Brookes, C. I. Scofield, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, many non-dispensational premillennialists resisted its intrusion into an already unstable eschatological arena.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the doctrine of the secret rapture became a distinctive fixture in many evangelical churches and institutions, still enjoying a high degree of popular support today.<sup>4</sup> However, interest in (and outspoken support for) the secret rapture position among

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<sup>1</sup>See Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 40; Richard Reitner, “A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions,” in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 16–21.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this article I will use the term “pretribulation rapture” to refer to a rapture of the whole body of Christ prior to a future seven-year tribulation. I cannot, however, assure that my quoted sources will be using the term the same way. The term “secret rapture” is the most general description of any view that anticipated an any-moment surprise coming for the church or faithful saints that will be distinct from the physical second coming of Christ prior to the millennial reign. The term “pretribulation rapture” may be used to describe any view that believes Christ’s secret rapture will occur prior to a specific period of future tribulation, though depending on the proponent, the tribulation may last three and a half years or seven years. The term “prewrath rapture” refers to the view that there will be a secret rapture technically distinct from the second coming of Christ as judge, but not separated by a large period of time.

<sup>3</sup>Bass, *Backgrounds*, 76–77; Reitner, “A History,” 13–16.

<sup>4</sup>See Tim LaHaye, *The Rapture: Who Will Face the Tribulation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2003); Hal Lindsey, *Vanished Into Thin Air: The Hope of Every Believer* (Los Angeles: Western Front, 1999); Amy Fryckholm Johnson, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

evangelical scholars seems to be declining.<sup>5</sup> The perception among interested exegetes and theologians appears to be that rapture theology rests not on verifiable exegesis but on inferences drawn from ambiguous biblical passages and on peculiar dispensational presuppositions.<sup>6</sup> In short, many today believe that the doctrine of the church's rapture from the earth prior to the seven-year tribulation period simply has no clear exegetical basis.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, for most of the last century, defenders of the pretribulation rapture have done little to actually rebut this criticism by making a strong exegetical case for their timing of the rapture prior to a full seven-year tribulation. Proponents of a pretribulation rapture have continued to present such inferential arguments as the doctrine of imminency, the rescue of God's people from coming wrath, and the removal of the restraining work of the church prior to the coming of the antichrist. However, these and other numerous arguments have failed to provide the one thing both supporters and critics desire: exegesis that explicitly links an actual description of the church's rapture to a clear chronological context that places the event of 1 Thess 4:17 prior to the future seven-year tribulation. This has led many to believe that the pretribulation rapture doctrine has always rested on a constellation of plausible, yet unconvincing, inferential arguments.

However, this has not always been the case. In fact, this article will argue that John Nelson Darby, the earliest clear proponent of the pretribulation rapture doctrine, actually rested his view on what many at the time believed to be a strong exegetical foundation: the catching up of the male child—identified as the body of Christ—in Rev 12:5. Over the course of about two decades (1830s-1850s), Darby moved from a more general prewrath "secret rapture" view to eventually settle on a strictly pre-seven-year tribulation perspective. Though he continued to use numerous inferential and corroborative arguments to defend the notion of a secret rapture distinct from the physical coming of Christ to earth, Darby's main factor leading to his pretribulation perspective was exegetical. Not surprisingly, Darby's immediate associates and followers adopted and strengthened this exegetical argument in their own teaching as the doctrine grew in popularity.

This article will also show that in the generations following the original formulation and popularization of the pretribulation

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<sup>5</sup>T. Van McClain, "The Pretribulation Rapture: A Doubtful Doctrine," in *Looking Into The Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology* (ed. David W. Baker; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 233-45; Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 36.

<sup>6</sup>DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, 36; Robert H. Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 140-41; Douglas J. Moo, "Response to 'The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position,'" in *Three Views on the Rapture*, 87-101.

<sup>7</sup>Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Westview, 2004), 21-22; N. T. Wright, "Farewell to the Rapture," *BRev* 17 (August 2001): 8, 52.

rapture, proponents eventually dropped the exegetical foundation that had made its formulation, adoption, and propagation possible. At the same time they attempted to defend the doctrine by means of the corroborative evidence that had originally been used by any secret rapture theory (prewrath, mid-tribulation, or even partial). The result appears to have been twofold. First, the proponents of the pretribulation rapture actually forgot the exegetical argument that originally underpinned their view, leaving the doctrine exposed to exegetical criticism. Second, many Bible teachers who had once supported the pretribulation rapture, modified their positions, favoring other options for the timing of the rapture in relation to the future tribulation such as the midtribulation, posttribulation, or prewrath theories.<sup>8</sup> This article will briefly trace the history of this abandonment of the original pretribulation exegetical argument in favor of the inferential arguments, attempting to explain the factors involved in this shift.

## II. DARBY'S EXEGETICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE PRETRIBULATION RAPTURE

Contrary to some popular treatments of the subject,<sup>9</sup> the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture in the modern era does not appear to have begun with Edward Irving and his followers. The alleged prophetic utterance in Irving's church that gave birth to the idea of a rapture only established the concept of a "secret rapture" sometime prior to the physical second coming. It did not lead to a clearly pre-seven-year chronology. Irving himself seems to have held a partial prewrath rapture view, not a pretribulation position.<sup>10</sup> In 1831, only

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<sup>8</sup>See Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990); George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

<sup>9</sup>Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpson, S.C.: Millennium III, 1995), 55–85. Early critics of the doctrine also linked its origins to Irving. William Reid, writing in 1875 about the dubious origin of the doctrine, noted that the secret rapture view "seems to have had its first conception in the wild imaginings, of that misguided son of genius, Edward Irving" (*Plymouth Brethrenism Unveiled and Refuted* [Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1875], 296; cf. Thomas Croskery, *Plymouth-Brethrenism: A Refutation of Its Principles and Doctrines* [London: William Mullen, 1879], 138). We know, however, that this is somewhat of a misunderstanding. Irving held to a partial prewrath secret rapture, not a strictly pretribulation rapture occurring prior to a seven-year tribulation period. From the mind of a critic like Reid, however, any secret resurrection and rescue of the saints prior to the actual second coming is itself a major problem, regardless of how much time was thought to elapse between the secret rapture and the second coming.

<sup>10</sup>Early rapture critic, James Bennet, rightly notes, "So far as I am aware, this view [the secret rapture] has been derived from Edward Irving, by whom it was first broached. . . . He, however, taught it in a form somewhat different from that given above. He said that the whole Church would not escape the great tribulation, but only those who followed his directions. And a modification of this is held by many who are not Irvingites. They say that only some will escape, viz., those who are watching for the Advent" (*The Second Advent* [London: James Nisbet, 1878], 153, 154).

three years before his death, Irving advanced a partial prewrath rapture of the church, and this only ambiguously and with great hesitation. At one point he closely associated the event of 1 Thess 4:17 with "the second coming of Christ, with all his saints, to establish his kingdom over all the nations under the whole heaven."<sup>11</sup> Later, however, he clarified that this event, though constituting a single return, is actually complex, including a rapture of the church prior to Christ's execution of wrath.<sup>12</sup>

As far as the documentary evidence indicates, the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture of the entire church being caught up prior to a full seven-year tribulation period began with John Nelson Darby.<sup>13</sup> In that early articulation Darby appealed to an exegetical argument based on a corporate identification of the male child in Rev 12:5 and his catching up to God as the rapture of the church. Darby's interpretational presuppositions necessary for drawing this conclusion were fourfold: 1) a consistent futurist interpretation of the Apocalypse and of the seventieth week of Dan 9:27; 2) a strong doctrine of the mystical union between Christ and the church; 3) an openness to distinguishing OT Israel from the NT church; and 4) a literal understanding of chronological indicators in Rev 11-13. With these legs firmly in place, Darby concluded that the rapture of the church described in 1 Thess 4:17 and alluded to in 1 Cor 15:51-52 would occur prior to the seven-year tribulation. As far as I can determine, the catching up of the male child in Rev 12:5 was Darby's primary exegetical foundation for the pretribulation timing of the rapture. Other inferential arguments served to strengthen this unique doctrine and demonstrate its congruity with the rest of Scripture, but the basis for the timing of the rapture was originally an exegetical appeal to Rev 12:5.

*A. Darby's Immediate Background:  
Edward Irving's Partial Prewrath Rapture*

Edward Irving, a contemporary of Darby, represents the immediate background of Darby's own eschatological formulations. Irving appears to be the teacher who comes closest to something like Darby's pretribulation rapture position without actually arriving at it. Irving himself limited the catching up of the saints prior to the

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<sup>11</sup>Edward Irving, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (vol. 1; London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1831), 160.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:164-65.

<sup>13</sup>It is an interesting point for present-day dispensationalists to note that John Nelson Darby included both OT and NT saints in the resurrection and rapture of the church prior to the tribulation: "A right conception on this point is necessarily connected with our understanding the taking up of the church to heaven, because those saints who are dead must be raised for that. When I say 'saints,' I mean all the saints, those of the Old Testament as well as those under the New Testament dispensation" (*Lectures on the Second Coming* [London: G. Morrish, 1909], 56).

outpouring of God's wrath to the faithful believers, not every so-called Christian. He wrote,

And so those who are looking for Christ, shall be taken to himself from the judgments to come. They shall meet him in the clouds, where he is in his sign, and there shall they be with him in the clouds, ruling the nations with a rod of iron, and breaking them to pieces like a potter's vessel.<sup>14</sup>

This does not appear to be a pretribulational rapture of the entire body of Christ, but rather a partial prewrath view.<sup>15</sup> Irving viewed this as a conditional and therefore partial rapture for the watchful, pure saints, not for all believers.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, though Irving interpreted the male child in Rev 12:5 corporately as true Christians, he saw no correlation between the catching up of the child and the rapture of the church. In fact, he interpreted the event as having occurred historically:

Satan, embodied in the first of these three forms of Rome and its ten dependent kingdoms, doth set himself against the church represented as a woman, whose seed or man-child—Christ not personal but Christ mystical, at least so many of the church as suffered under Paganism—doth overcome him, and work a straitening of his condition, and a confinement of it to the earth.<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between Christ coming *for* the saints in 1 Thess 4:17 and Christ coming *with* the saints in Rev 19 seems to have been enough for Irving to argue for a partial prewrath rapture of the church. It was not sufficient to conclude a pretribulational rapture. The necessary elements for that did not come together until Darby's identification of the male child with the entire Body of Christ and his timing of the child's catching up to the throne of God as an event yet future.

#### B. Advent of Darby's Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine

In the year 1839, John Nelson Darby—a curate of the Church of Ireland turned leader of the Plymouth Brethren—published his *Notes on the Book of Revelations*. In this early edition Darby was not completely clear about the identification of the woman and the child in Rev 12 or of the precise timing of the rapture. However, he clearly held to a "secret rapture" view that took place "at least" prior to the final three and a half years of "great tribulation."<sup>18</sup> However, he

<sup>14</sup>Irving, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 1:165.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Edward Irving, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (vol. 2; London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1831), 771.

<sup>16</sup>Irving, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 1:166.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:70–71.

<sup>18</sup>This was a common view among secret rapture advocates, placing the rapture at least before the final three and a half years of antichrist's reign. However, early

understood the vision of Rev 12:5 to refer not to historical or prophetic events, but to a general picture of the relationship of various participants in God's plan (an "idealist" interpretation of the vision). Thus, the initial vision of the woman in heaven referred to the spiritual, heavenly, positional reality of the church, whose subject is Jesus Christ, while the later actions of being pursued and fleeing referred to the actual historical experiences of God's people.<sup>19</sup>

In a letter dated 1843, Darby still seems to wrestle with the question of a complete rapture of all believers or a partial rapture of only the faithful:

It may be some will pass through, but I am more than ever confirmed that it is not presented to our faith, but the contrary, and that the faithful will be kept from it. If some pass through it, it would make a difficulty for those who could not separate the signs of special blessing there, from the evidence of greater faithfulness which made us escape it.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the uncertainty and lack of clarity expressed in his 1839 edition of *Notes on the Book of Revelations* had not yet solidified into a clearly pretribulational rapture of the whole body of Christ by 1843.

Five years later, in a letter dated May 1, 1848, Darby indicated a much fuller understanding of the rapture's place in relationship to future events. He wrote:

We [the church] are properly nowhere, save in the extraordinary suspension of prophetic testimony, or period, which comes in between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel, or at the end of that age which was running on when Christ was here, the close of which was suspended by His crucifixion; His return to establish it then, according to Acts 3, being precluded by the rejection of the testimony of the Holy Ghost, which followed—finally declared at Stephen's death. Whereupon the doctrine of the church in union with a heavenly Head, without distinction of Jew or Gentile, was fully revealed, and entrusted to Paul, who had joined in that rejection, in a ministry, beginning not at Jerusalem

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rapture teachers were not entirely clear on whether it would occur even earlier. In describing the secret rapture position in 1878, James Bennett wrote, "Between these two events, the coming and the revelation of Christ, we are told there is an interval of at least three and a half years" (*The Second Advent*, 160). Croskery, in 1879, also criticized the secret rapture view thusly: "An interval of years—long enough to admit of the rise of Antichrist and all the events of his reign—will intervene between His coming for His saints and His coming with His saints" (*Plymouth-Brethrenism*, 138). In 1922 Charles R. Erdman noted the diversity of views among those who held to the "secret rapture": "It is taught by some that this Rapture will be in 'secret,' and that it will precede the reappearing of Christ by 'three and one-half years,' or by 'seven years,' or by 'seventy years'" (*The Return of Christ* [New York: George H. Doran, 1922], 54).

<sup>19</sup>John Nelson Darby, *Notes on the Book of Revelations: To Assist Enquirers in Searching into That Book* (London: Central Tract Depot: 1839), 69–93.

<sup>20</sup>John Nelson Darby, "Letter to Gillett, from Lausanne," 1843, in *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 1, 1832–1868 (Oak Park, Ill.: Bible Truth, 1971), 29.

but Antioch. In the Revelation therefore, until the heavenly Jerusalem is revealed, the church is never, properly speaking, seen at all. The living creatures or twenty-four elders may be taken, as to which I do not decide, as a symbolical representation in part of those who compose it, viewed in certain positions, but I certainly apprehend that the period spoken of in the Revelation (or from chap. 4) is the interval between the removal of the church from the place of testimony, and the manifestation of it in a glorious testimony, as already stated, in chapters 21, 22.<sup>21</sup>

In this passage, Darby places the period of the church between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel. He also notes that "the church is never, properly speaking, seen at all" in the book of Revelation from ch. 4 through chs. 21 and 22. This, he says, "is the interval between the removal of the church from the place of testimony, and the manifestation of it in a glorious testimony."<sup>22</sup> Here we have the workings of a pre-seventieth week rapture with much more clarity than we have seen previously.

In the same year, on July 15, 1848, in a letter to one Ralph Evans, Darby walks through his interpretation of Rev 12. He identifies the woman as Israel. With regard to the identification of the Man child, Darby interprets this as Christ but then adds, "Now the church is only brought in as being identified with Christ Himself, here according to the promise of Thyatira."<sup>23</sup> In this promise, we recall, Christ extended the Messianic rule described in Ps 2 to those who overcome:

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. (Rev 2:26-27)

Thus, Darby is making a corporate connection between the male child in Rev 12:5 and his corporate body, the church, applying the same promise of Ps 2 both to Christ and the church. This is more explicit later in his letter:

The setting up the power of the kingdom, though not yet applied to the earth, is when Satan is cast down, on the war in heaven—not saving grace—this is power, but the accuser is cast down. This puts the church, if the man child refer to that (also out of the scene and historical course of events)—out of the scene, nor does it take the warrior power.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the catching up of the male child in Rev 12:5 also corresponds with the removal of the church from the "historical course of

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<sup>21</sup>Darby, "Letter to Major Lacey," May 1, 1848, in *Letters*, 1:66.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Darby, "Letter to Ralph Evans," July 15, 1848, in *Letters*, 1:70.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

events." The power of the kingdom is established, but not until after the final judgments will it take up its "warrior power."

In 1852, Darby delivered a series of lectures on the letters to the seven churches. By the year 1855 these published lectures had gone through several editions, the third of which presents his straightforward exegetical argument for the pretribulation rapture of the church. Having concluded that the book of Revelation primarily deals with events yet future, Darby saw in the vision of Rev 12 a description of events associated with either the birth of the church or the future seven-year tribulation period. He therefore identified the woman in labor at the opening of the vision as a corporate symbol for the nation of Israel—God's OT covenant people (Rev 12:1). The dragon, who desires to devour her child, is Satan working through the evil world powers against God's people (12:2-4). Finally, Darby identified the male child in Rev 12:5 as the NT people of God—the mystical body of Christ, the church. Having been born from the woman (Israel), the male child (the church), is described in terms of the King Messiah in whose image this corporate body is to be conformed. However, before the dragon is able to devour this mystical male child, he is "caught up" to God and to his throne. In Darby's understanding, then, this catching up of the male child portrays the future rapture of the church described in 1 Thess 4:17. This event will then be followed by Satan's banishment to the earth, the devil's attempt at pursuing the end-times remnant of the people of Israel, and finally the flight of Israel into the wilderness for three and a half years. All together, the events following the male child's rapture to heaven include the future seven year tribulation period. Thus, the rapture of the male child (the church) in Rev 12:5 is, in Darby's exegesis, pretribulation.

Darby writes:

If the mighty man, the mystic man, the man-child of Revelation xii. is to act [in judging the world with a rod of iron], He must first be complete (of course He is so, essentially so, in Himself, but as Head over all things to the Church which is His body). The head and the body must be united before He can act as having this title before the world; because the mystic man as a whole cannot take it until the Church is taken up to Him. For not until then—until the Church, the body, is united to the Head, Christ, in heaven—is the mystic man in that sense complete; and therefore, the Church must be taken up before Christ can come in judgment.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>John Nelson Darby, *Seven Lectures on the Prophetical Addresses to the Seven Churches* (3d rev. ed.; London: G. Morrish, c. 1855), 153-54. Around the year 1860, Darby also noted in a letter to William Kelly, "I admit the man-child to be Christ most fully, though I may bring in the church in Him" ("Letter to William Kelly," 1860, in *Letters*, 1:179). Clearly Darby regarded the primary image to refer to Christ, then the church only in virtue of their being "in Him."



In his third lecture of his "Lectures on the Second Coming," Darby dealt with Rev 12, in which he intended to address "the gathering up of the Church of God, the heavenly saints, to be with Christ."<sup>26</sup> He noted that "the taking up of the saints is the taking them out of the way of those judgments" that will come upon the whole world.<sup>27</sup> He then interpreted Rev 12:5 explicitly as the rapture of the church:

In the chapter we have read, you have first Christ Himself and the church, figured in the man-child; and then in the woman who flees from persecution for 1260 days you have the Jewish remnant, those who are spared in the time of judgment but are not yet brought into glory.<sup>28</sup>

Darby explicitly identified the tribulation period, during which the saints will have been caught up to God, with the seventieth week of Dan 9.<sup>29</sup> The present age is the time of the Gentiles, when God's work with Israel is temporarily set aside.<sup>30</sup> During this time God is gathering the heavenly saints, those "completely identified with Christ Himself."<sup>31</sup>

Darby also nuanced the idea of the absence of the church in the book of Revelation this way: "But you never find in prophecy, until the end of Revelation,—you never find the church revealed in prophecy, except in connection with Christ."<sup>32</sup> Thus he noted:

I have no doubt that the "man child" spoken of in the chapter that we have been reading includes the church as well as Christ. But it is Christ that is principally meant, for the church would be nothing without Christ; it would be a body without a head. It is Christ who has been caught up; but the church is included, for whenever He begins to act publicly, even as regards Satan being cast down, He must have His body, His bride, with Him; He must have His brethren, His joint-heirs.<sup>33</sup>

Darby not only cited Rev 2:16-17, but also Dan 7, when the "saints of the Most High" receive judgment from the Ancient of Days—"the saints who will be in the heavenly places with Christ, when Christ comes."<sup>34</sup> Thus, he relies on both Old and New Testament passages to establish the corporate identification of the saints with Christ.

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<sup>26</sup>John Nelson Darby, *Lectures on the Second Coming* (London: G. Morrish, 1909), 54. Though published in 1909, these lectures occurred sometime before 1882, the year Darby died.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

Darby clearly identified the woman in Rev 12:1-2 as Israel, “the Jewish people, nothing else—because Christ is not born of the church, but, looked at as reigning and glorious in the world, was born of the Jews.”<sup>35</sup> He interpreted the birth of the male child in 12:5 as Christ, but he also associated the church with Christ so intimately that he could say, “Thus we get the church, united with Christ, taken up to God, and the woman fled into the wilderness.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, because of the catching up of the church and its spiritual warfare in heaven, Satan will be cast down to the earth (12:5, 7-9).<sup>37</sup> So it is the church of God—the inhabitants of heaven—who are called to rejoice at the casting down of Satan (12:12).<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the exegetical identification of the male child as the church and his catching up to the throne of God established for Darby exegetical proof of the pretribulation rapture. Following the catching up of the church in the symbol of the male child’s rapture (Rev 12:5), the first half of the tribulation would involve war in heaven (12:7-8), the casting down of Satan (12:9), an attack on Israel by Satan followed by a miraculous deliverance (Rev 12:13-16). The second half of the tribulation would then involve the protection of Israel in the wilderness for three and a half years (proleptically mentioned in 12:6, then narrated in 12:14), during which the two beasts of Rev 13 would take their power and reign (12:17-13:18).

### *C. Summary of Darby’s Exegetical Conclusion*

In sum, four elements came together for Darby to construct his pretribulation rapture teaching. The first was a consistent futurist interpretation of the book of Revelation. Second, he held to a strong doctrine of the mystical union between Christ and the church, found stunningly exemplified in the vision of the male child in Rev 12:5. The third element was an openness to distinguishing OT Israel from the NT Church, found envisioned in the woman (Israel) giving birth to the male child (the church)—two distinct entities with separate, but intertwined, destinies both past and future. The fourth element necessary to exegetically construct the pretribulation rapture view was a literal understanding of the chronological indicators in Rev 11-13. Though all of these ingredients were individually present in other works on Revelation in the centuries and decades leading up to the nineteenth century prophecy movement, not until Darby did they come together to provide the fertile soil within which his exegetical argument for the pretribulation rapture of the church could sprout.

Whereas Irving interpreted the male child in Rev 12:5 as the faithful remnant of the church, his historical interpretation of that

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 67.

passage as referring to the early church prevented him from identifying it with the future rapture. And though Irving believed the faithful of the church would be spared the direct wrath of God, the timing of this event was not precisely pretribulational because of a lack of exegetical proof. However, when Darby approached Revelation from his futurist perspective, adopting both the corporate identification of the male child and Irving's concept of the church's rescue from divine wrath by a rapture, all of the pieces were in place to make an exegetical—not merely circumstantial—argument for a pretribulation rapture of the church. Thus, the catching up of the male child in Rev 12:5 served as an exegetical argument—perhaps even the exegetical *foundation*—for the rapture of the church among early dispensational premillennialists.

### III. DIGGING DEEPER INTO DARBY'S CONTEXT: CORPORATE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MALE CHILD

If one reads modern commentaries, consults study Bibles, or hears lectures and sermons on Rev 12:5, one would assume the interpretation of the male child in Rev 12:5 to be an open and shut case. Smith writes, "The reference here is unmistakably to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea."<sup>39</sup> And Pentecost notes, "Since this child is born 'to rule all nations with a rod of iron' (Rev. 12:5), it can only refer to Christ, the one whose right it is to rule."<sup>40</sup> He later asserts that the allusion to Ps 2:9 "identifies the man child here as none other than Jesus Christ."<sup>41</sup> A survey of commentators from a variety of exegetical and theological perspectives reveals the same kind of straight-forward identification of the male child as none other than Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> However, the more cautious words of George Faber in 1808 reveal a less confident assessment of the *status quaestionis*:

In short, I consider the symbol of the *man-child* as a complete *crux criticorum*. Much has been written on the subject, but I have read

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<sup>39</sup>Jacob B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (ed. J. Otis Toder; Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1961), 183.

<sup>40</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 215.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>42</sup>Pierre Prigent, *Apolcalypse 12: Histoire de l'exégèse* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Biblischen Exegese 2; ed. Oscar Cullmann, Ernst Käsemann, et al.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1959), 145; Heinz Giesen, "Symbole und mythische Aussagen in der Johannes-Apokalypse und ihre theologische Bedeutung," in *Studien zur Johannes-apokalypse* (Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände, Neues Testament 29; ed. Gerhard Dautzenberg and Norbert Lohfink; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), 62; Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Ferdmans, 1998), 231–34; William R. Newell, *Revelation: Chapter-by-Chapter* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994), 175–76; Ford C. Ottman, *The Unfolding of the Ages in the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1967), 284–85; Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (repr.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 151; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (ed. Kenneth Barker; Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 125–26; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 189–90.

nothing that is *wholly* unobjectionable. It is possible, that some future commentator may be more successful in his inquiries than those who have preceded him.<sup>43</sup>

Although the identification of the male child in Rev 12:5 as Jesus Christ alone has dominated the modern history of interpretation of that text, the corporate interpretation of the male child has always had representatives and at certain times it appears to have held a place of particular importance. Methodius's comments from the fourth century are illustrative of one ancient voice:

O faultfinder, it will not even be possible for you to show that Christ Himself is the one who is born. For long before the Apocalypse the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word was fulfilled. And John speaks concerning things present and things to come. But Christ, long ago conceived, was not caught up to the throne of God when He was brought forth, from fear of the serpent injuring Him. But for this was He begotten, and Himself came down from the throne of the Father, that He should remain and subdue the dragon who made an assault upon the flesh. So that you also must confess that the Church labors and gives birth to those who are baptized. As the spirit says somewhere in Isaiah: "Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man-child. Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once? For as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children."<sup>44</sup>

Among modern, postreformation interpreters, we can discern several variations of this corporate identity of the male child. Many saw a dual significance whereby the woman and male child literally and historically represent Mary and Jesus, but they also carry a prophetic or allegorical sense.<sup>45</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, some interpreted the text purely allegorically, in what can be described as an "idealist" sense. Thus, Thomas Hall in 1658 interpreted the woman as the church and

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<sup>43</sup>George Stanley Faber, *A Dissertation on the Prophecies, That Have Been Fulfilled, Are Now Fulfilling, or Will Hereafter Be Fulfilled* (vol. 1; Boston: Andrews and Cummings, 1808), 62. William Thomson notes several interpretations prevalent in his day: "By the male-child, or the Son, whom the woman brought forth, some have understood a race of manly Christians, and others have understood the powerful truth of the Gospel: and some have understood Constantine" (*The New Testament, with Some Preliminary Observations and Notes Critical and Explanatory* [vol. 3; Kilmarnock: H. Crawford, 1816], 436).

<sup>44</sup>Methodius, *On Chastity* 8.7, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, *Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius* (American ed., rev. by A. Cleveland Coxe; New York: Christian Literature, 1886; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 337.

<sup>45</sup>David Pareus, *A Commentary upon the Divine Revelation of the Apostle and Evangelist John* (trans. Elias Arnold; Amsterdam: C. P., 1644), 264; Thomson, *New Testament*, 436.

the male child impersonally as "reformation" of the church, which always results in persecution from the dragon (Satan).<sup>46</sup> Park interpreted the birth of the male child as "regeneration through Christ," in which true conversion to Christianity is fixed and enshrined in the heart, the figurative "throne of God."<sup>47</sup> Quite unique among a more allegorical interpretation, William Wall understood the woman as the apostolic church while the male child is holy Scripture: "This the devil strove to devour as soon as it was written, by mixing spurious scriptures, and monstrous doctrines of heretics with it."<sup>48</sup> The early view of John Nelson Darby in 1839 can also be regarded as an "idealist" position. He understood the vision to refer not to historical or prophetic events, but to a general picture of the relationship of various participants in God's plan. Thus, the initial vision of the woman in heaven refers to the positional reality of the church, whose subject is Jesus Christ, while the later actions of being pursued and fleeing refer to the actual historical experiences of God's people.<sup>49</sup>

A common historical interpretation of Revelation sees the events of Rev 12 as having been fulfilled in the first few centuries of the church. Francis Roberts identified the woman as the persecuted church of the first three centuries, travelling in the midst of Roman oppression to "bring forth *Christ mystical*, (*viz.*, Christ formed in his mystical body and members, 2 Cor. 12.12. Gal. 4.19.) into the Roman world."<sup>50</sup> When the male child is "caught up" to the throne of God, this could represent either divine protection in the midst of the dragon's attacks,<sup>51</sup> or the ascent of the church to political power in the fourth century: "As Christ himself was in his ripe age taken up to God's supreme Throne: so Christ mystical, when maturely grown in his Kingdome, was exalted to the Roman Throne, *viz.* under *Constantine*."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Thomas Hall, *A Practical and Polemical Commentary or, Exposition upon the Third and Fourth Chapters of the Latter Epistle of Saint Paul to Timothy* (London: John Starkey, 1658), 388, cf. 128.

<sup>47</sup>I. R. Park [a.k.a. John Ranicar], *A New Exposition of the Apocalypse* (3d ed.; London: Smith, Elder, 1832), 152, 154.

<sup>48</sup>William Wall, *Brief Critical Notes, Especially on the Various Readings of the New Testament Books* (London: William Innys, 1730), 396.

<sup>49</sup>Darby, *Notes on the Book of Revelations*, 69–93.

<sup>50</sup>Francis Roberts, *Clavis Bibliorum: The Key of the Bible, Unlocking the Richest Treasury of the Holy Scriptures* (4th rev. ed.; London: Peter Parker and Thomas Guy, 1675), 605.

<sup>51</sup>Anonymous ("A Graduate of the University of Cambridge"), *The Rule, Based on the Word of God, for the Calculation of Time in the Prophecies of the Old and New Testament* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1843), 30.

<sup>52</sup>Roberts, *Clavis Bibliorum*, 606. See also John Worthington, *Miscellanies* (London: John Wyatt, 1704), 66–67. Cf. Thomas Newton, *Dissertations on the Prophecies, Which Have Remarkably Been Fulfilled, and at This Time Are Fulfilling in the World* (vol. 2; New York: William Durrell, 1794), 279–80; Thomas Pyle, *A Paraphrase, with Notes, on the Revelation of St. John* (2d ed.; London: Robinson, 1795), 110; Thomas Scott, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (vol. 6; 5th ed.; London: Seeley, Hatchard, & Son, 1822), 503; John Ranicar Park [a medical doctor and lay student of Scripture], *A Concise Exposition of the*

Several commentators have identified the woman as the NT "church" personified.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the male child is not Christ (who could not have been literally birthed by the church),<sup>54</sup> he is the company of those "born again" through the church's ministry and united in Christ.<sup>55</sup> Wordsworth (1849), citing Ps 2:9, acknowledged that "at first sight these words appear applicable only to CHRIST," but then he noted, "But, we must remember, that what is true primarily of Christ alone, is, by virtue of His union with all true members of His body, and by reason of the working of His grace, transferred to them."<sup>56</sup> However, he interpreted the rule of the church with Christ in heavenly places in this age, as in Eph 1:20, applying Rev 3:21 to this present spiritual reign of Christ with the church. The catching up of the male child, therefore, refers to those who depart to heaven—the church triumphant, while the woman remains on earth as the church militant.<sup>57</sup>

Others interpreted the woman as the entire people of God without clearly distinguishing Old and New Testament dispensations. In this case the male child could represent the Messiah as the child of the one covenant community. Moses Stuart, once professor at Andover Seminary, interpreted the woman as "the church all glorious and resplendent in the eyes of God" and then noted, "The man-child who is born, and who is 'to rule all nations with a sceptre of iron' (Ps. 2:9. Rev. 12:5), is doubtless the *Messiah*. . . . *The child caught up unto God*, is the Saviour ascended to glory."<sup>58</sup>

Some, however, have limited the identity of the woman historically to the "Jewish church" (that is, OT Israel). After this identification, the male child may then be understood as 1) only Jesus Christ, 2) as Jesus Christ in union with the body of Christ, the church, or 3) as a special remnant from among the larger body of

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*Apocalypse* (2d ed.; London: James Duncan, 1825), 39; Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ with Commentary and Critical Notes* (new ed.; Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait, 1844), 515; David Nevins Lord, *An Exposition of the Apocalypse* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847), 313–36.

<sup>53</sup>Thomson, *New Testament*, 436.

<sup>54</sup>Thomas Scott, favoring the corporate interpretation, but specifically Christian emperors, argues against the male child as Christ: "Some commentators, indeed, would interpret this *man child* to be Christ Himself; but this cannot be meant, for He was born of the church of Israel, not of the Christian church; nor is He ever spoken of as 'the Son of the church,' but rather as the Husband, or even the Father of it" (*Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 503).

<sup>55</sup>Benjamin Colman, *Some of the Glories of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Exhibited in Twenty Sacramental Discourses, Preached at Boston in New England* (London: Ford and Farmer, 1728), 84.

<sup>56</sup>Christopher Wordsworth, *Lectures on the Apocalypse: Critical, Expository, and Practical, Delivered before the University of Cambridge, Being the Hulsean Lectures for the Year 1848* (London: Rivington, 1849), 247.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 258–59. Cf. Charles William Boase, *The Elijah Ministry: Tokens of Its Mission to the Christian Church Deduced from the Ministry of John the Baptist to the Jews* (Edinburgh: Robert Grant & Son, 1868), 559–60.

<sup>58</sup>Moses Stuart, *Hints on the Interpretation of Prophecy* (2d ed.; Andover: Allen, Morrill, and Wardwell, 1842), 114.

Christianity. Henrietta Bowdler represents the first position, interpreting the woman as "the times of the church under the Jewish dispensation," pointing to the dream of Joseph as the key to understanding the symbolism. However, this Jewish church, then, brings forth not the Christian church, but Jesus Christ himself: "She brings forth a man-child . . . i.e. Christ, as Ps. ii.9."<sup>59</sup> For the second option, one commentator rejected the identification of the woman as representing the NT on the basis of the identification of the male child:

It is altogether necessary to a due apprehension of the subsequent Revelation, that the object before us be not mistaken. The Christian Church has been supposed to have been figured in this Woman. The crown of twelve stars may agree as well to the twelve Apostles, as to the twelve tribes, did not her parturiency and seed denote an offspring, which gives one descriptive character of the Christian Church, in a spiritual descent from the Jewish.<sup>60</sup>

That same author went on to argue that "there can be no question that Our Lord and his Chureh are intended by the man child, 'who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron'; because the words, taken from prophetic Scripture, are unappropriable but to him."<sup>61</sup> Finally, representing the third option, one anonymous author in 1845 identified the male child with the firstfruits, or 144,000 described in Rev 7.<sup>62</sup>

This brief (and necessarily selective) survey of various interpretations of the woman and male child in Rev 12 demonstrates the multifarious options available to Darby as he did his own expository work on Revelation. Thus, when Darby drew on the corporate identity of the male child in Rev 12:5 as part of his exegetical argument for a pretribulational rapture, his interpretation was not at all novel. In fact, by the middle of the nineteenth century the corporate interpretation had repeatedly surfaced among respectable and prominent students of Revelation.

#### IV. OTHER COMMENTATORS CAUGHT UP BY REV 12:5

Identifying the male child in Rev 12:5 corporately as the church is one thing; interpreting his catching up to God's throne as the

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<sup>59</sup>Henrietta Maria Bowdler, *Practical Observations on the Book of the Revelations* (Oxford: J. Fletcher, 1787), 18. Cf. Franklin Weidner, *Annotations on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (The Lutheran Commentary 12; ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs; New York: Christian Literature, 1898), 156-57.

<sup>60</sup>Jn. M-d (Hans Wood), *The Revelation of St. John Considered as Alluding to Certain Services of the Jewish Temple* (London: T. Payne & Son, 1787), 157.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 160. Cf. General Goodwyn, "The Judgment Seat of Christ," *The Rainbow: A Magazine of Christian Literature, with Special Reference to the Revealed Future of the Church and the World* (February 1, 1876): 57.

<sup>62</sup>*The Retrospect, Being an Enquiry into the Fulfillment of Prophecy during the Last Twenty Years* (London: W. E. Painter, 1845), 106.

rapture of the church is something else. However, Darby was not alone in his interpretation. Not all of the commentators surveyed in the following section held to a full rapture (the entire body of Christ living and dead), nor did they necessarily hold to a pretribulation rapture (prior to a future seven-year tribulation). However, all of them identified the male child corporately, not merely individually. And all of them explicitly linked the catching up of the male child with the rapture of the church described in 1 Thess 4:17. Some of these writers clearly had direct contact with Darby's exegetical arguments, representing the immediate influence of these arguments on the early dispensational pretribulation proponents. However, because of the extent of differences between Darby's view and other interpreters, it is clear that some came to similar conclusions as Darby without direct dependence on his own understanding of the text. In this interpretive survey, Darby's premillennial, dispensational, and futurist exegesis of Rev 12:5 as the pretribulation rapture of the whole church finds its historical context.

*A. Michael Baxter (1863)*

Michael Baxter described a midtribulation partial rapture figured in the catching up of the male child in Rev 12:5, which he actually saw as having a double fulfillment—one with Christ in the first century, a second related to the coming tribulation.<sup>63</sup> Baxter identified the male child corporately as the "wise virgins," a faithful subset of the Church Militant and identical to the 144,000, who will be raised bodily and caught up five years prior to the physical return of Christ and the establishment of the millennial kingdom. Interestingly, Baxter also clearly tied the catching up of the saints in 12:5 with the casting down of Satan: "As soon as Christ and his saints have come into 'the air,' (1 Thess. iv.17.) Satan's presence there will no longer be tolerated."<sup>64</sup> In this text we find all of the elements of Darby's pretribulation rapture except that Baxter works out the chronology within a "day-for-a-year" scheme, preventing him from concluding a pretribulation rapture like Darby's.

*B. William Kelly (1870)*

William Kelly was a prominent member of the first generation of Plymouth Brethren and a close associate of Darby's. In fact, he was responsible for editing Darby's *Collected Writings*. In a series of lectures delivered in 1869, he clearly spelled out a view of the catching up of the male child as a pretribulation rapture similar to

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<sup>63</sup>Baxter actually identifies Louis Napoleon as the antichrist and dates the events to occur prior to 1870.

<sup>64</sup>Michael Baxter, *Louis Napoleon the Destined Monarch of the World* (3d ed.; Philadelphia: Wm. S. and A. Martien, 1863), 309.



Darby's view articulated over twenty years earlier. As would be expected, Kelly interpreted the woman as Israel.<sup>65</sup>

He then interpreted the male child as primarily referring to Jesus Christ, but with prophetic application to the church: "Although Christ, I have no doubt, is referred to as the man-child born of Israel, it may be no small difficulty at first sight to some minds how to bring in the birth of Christ in this chapter."<sup>66</sup> Kelly proceeded to answer the question of why Christ's birth would be included at this point in the prophecy with no mention of his life, death, or resurrection:

The reason, I think, is just this, that it intimates to us, as in Old Testament prophecy, how the Lord and His people are wrapped up, as it were, in the very same symbol; even as, in a yet more intimate way, what is said about Christ applies to the Christians.<sup>67</sup>

Having thus argued for a corporate identification of the male child as the church in mystical union with Christ, Kelly concluded:

On this principle then I cannot but consider that the rapture of the man-child to God and His throne involves the rapture of the church in itself. The explanation why it is thus introduced here depends on the truth that Christ and the church are one, and have a common destiny. Inasmuch as He went up to heaven, so also the church is to be caught up.<sup>68</sup>

Kelly also pointed to Rev 2:16-17 as proof of this connection.<sup>69</sup>

*C. Richard Chester (1882)*

Dispensationalists were not alone in interpreting the catching up of the male child as the rapture described in 1 Thess 4. Richard Chester, rector of Midleton and Canon of Cloyne, contributed to the exegetical support for this view by drawing intriguing parallels between the imagery of Zech 3 and Rev 12, with the male child representing an end-times remnant of the Jewish people and corresponding to Joshua in Zech 3. Providing a helpful summary of interpretations current in his day, Chester wrote:

Now if the male Man-child of Rev. xii. is to be regarded as solely representing the Lord Jesus Christ ascended into the heavens, as some interpreters affirm; or as representing the visible Christian Church exalted into political power, as taught by others, it were not easy to establish any parallelism, or any correspondence

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<sup>65</sup>William Kelly, *Lectures Introductory to the Study of the Acts, the Catholic Epistles, and the Revelation* (London: W. H. Broom, 1870), 481-82.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 485.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 486.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 486-87.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 488.

whatsoever between Zech. iii. and Rev. xii. But if the Man-child represents, as is the belief of many students of prophecy, the entire body of "the dead in Christ" raised, and the living in Christ who shall be changed, and both together caught up to meet Him in the air—or if, as I have suggested in the article above referred to—he is to be rather regarded as a portion of the Jewish people—of "the remnant according to the election of grace" incorporated by conversion to Christ into the Church of this dispensation—and thus "brought forth"—"born again,"—and then, "caught up to God and to His throne," in the rapture of the risen and living saints of 1 Thess. iv.—then, in either of these cases, I submit that this vision of Zechariah iii. corresponds most accurately.<sup>70</sup>

*D. Adolphus Spalding Worrell (1900)*

Worrell, a Baptist scholar, teacher, and writer, was editor of *Gospel Witness* at the time he published his book, *Full Gospel Teachings*, in 1900. There he clearly presented a pretribulation rapture of a portion of the Christian church, resting his argument on Rev 12:5.

The Rapture . . . is definitely taught in I. Cor. 15:51, 52; I. Thess. 4:15-18, and clearly implied in Matt. 25:10, and Psa. 45:13-15. The truly consecrated, Spirit-filled ones, who are "watching" (Luke 21:36), "waiting" (I. Thess. 1:10), and "ready" (Matt. 24:44), will be among those who are caught up without seeing death. The unconverted and the unconsecrated Christians are not *ready* to meet the Bridegroom; and, like the foolish virgins, they will be left behind, to go into the *tribulation*. The catching away of the man-child (Rev. 12:5) and the *leaving of the woman behind* would clearly indicate that *some Christians*—in fact the great body of them—will *not be caught away*, but will be left behind to be buffeted by Satan and his hosts; "the woman" being protected for the first part of the tribulation period (Rev. 12:13, 17), but being overcome by him during the latter half (Rev. 13:7); the tribulation period lasting, as I suppose, *seven years*.<sup>71</sup>

*E. William E. Blackstone (1904)*

Though his earlier and more influential work, *Jesus Is Coming* (first edition, 1881), did not mention Rev 12:5 as the rapture of the church, Blackstone later seems to have adopted the view, relying heavily on the idea of mystical union between Christ and his Body. In *The Millennium* (1904), he wrote, "The term 'Christ' includes head and body (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23; Rev. 12:5) and the body is allotted to

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<sup>70</sup>Richard Chester, "Old Testament Light on New Testament Prophecy," *The Prophetic News and Israel's Watchman* (December, 1882): 378.

<sup>71</sup>Adolphus Spalding Worrell, *Full Gospel Teachings* (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1900), 115. Worrell, a Baptist scholar, teacher, and writer, was editor of *Gospel Witness* at the time this book was written.

suffering, as well as the head."<sup>72</sup> Note that Blackstone simply cited Rev 12:5 as a proof text for the union of Christ and the church, evidencing knowledge of the corporate interpretation of this text in his day.

A bit later in the same book, with reference to the enthroned saints in Rev 20:4, Blackstone clearly identified the catching up of the male child in 12:5 as the rapture of the church:

Nothing is said here about the resurrection of these [enthroned saints in Rev 20:4]. And why not? Because they had been raised long before, at the Rapture of the church. 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Rev. 12:5. They had escaped the great tribulation.<sup>73</sup>

*F. Henry Proctor (1904)*

Like many others before him, Proctor explicitly identified the male child as those in complete union with Christ who, because of their status as overcomers, will be caught up to escape the Great Tribulation.<sup>74</sup> In conjunction with this interpretation, Proctor interpreted the woman of Rev 12 as the "Daughter of Zion" and the male child as the corporate Body of Christ.<sup>75</sup> However, it is important to note that Proctor viewed the Great Tribulation as lasting only three and a half years, thus arguing for a midtribulation rapture.<sup>76</sup>

*G. Harry Ironside (1919)*

In his thirteenth in a series of lectures on Revelation, Harry Ironside dealt with the woman and the male child of Rev 12. He began by saying,

I have read or carefully examined several hundred books purporting to expound the Revelation. I have learned to look upon this twelfth chapter as the crucial test in regard to the correct prophetic outline. If the interpreters are wrong as to the woman and the man-child, it necessarily follows that they will be wrong as to many things connected with them.<sup>77</sup>

As part of his exegetical arguments for identifying the woman as Israel,<sup>78</sup> he first identified the male child.

<sup>72</sup>William E. Blackstone, *The Millennium* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1904), 34.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>74</sup>Henry Proctor, "The Body and the Bride," *BRev* 3.2 (November 1904): 51-52.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>77</sup>Harry A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Revelation* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1919), 203-4.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 210-11.

If we allow Scripture itself to answer, we find there is a person and a company of people answering to this description. In the 2d Psalm Jehovah says to Messiah, "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee. Ask of Me, and I shall give Thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (vers. 7-9). This, clearly enough, is our Lord Jesus Christ, who is soon to reign over all the earth, and undoubtedly He is primarily the Man-child who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron, and the special object of Satan's malignity. But we have already seen, in Rev. 2:26-28, that when He reigns He will not reign alone. . . . Is there then any incongruity in understanding the man-child to represent both Christ Jesus our Lord and His church? Surely not, for He is the Head of the body, the church, which is the fullness, or completion of Himself, so that the title, "The Church" is applied to both head and body viewed as one in 1 Cor. 12:12. . . . We may then, on the authority of Scripture itself, safely affirm that the man-child represents the one New Man who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron—Christ, the Head, and the church, His body. If this be so, then it is impossible that the woman should symbolize the church.<sup>79</sup>

Ironside then interpreted the catching up of the male child as the rapture of the church:

We have seen that the man-child symbolizes both Head and body—the complete Christ. Therefore, as in other prophecies, the entire present dispensation is passed over in silence, and the church is represented in its Head, caught up with Christ. For immediately after this, Satan, again acting through the Roman Empire which is to be revived in the last days, turns upon the woman Israel and seeks to vent his wrath and indignation against her.<sup>80</sup>

With regard to the war in heaven, Ironside noted:

When our Lord Jesus returns for His church, we are told that the voice of the archangel will be heard from heaven, together with the shout of the Lord and the trump of God. Michael's voice will awaken, or call together, all those of Israel who have died in the past dispensation, and who will have their part in the first resurrection. Together with the church and the saints of previous ages, they will enter into the Father's house. Their passage through the air and enthronement in glory would seem to be the signal for the driving out of Satan and his hosts from the upper air, where

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 208-9. Ironside also explicitly counters the view that the woman is the church at large and the male child a special overcoming remnant within the church who will be spared from the tribulation (pp. 209-10).

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 212. Ironside interpreted the 1260 days of the woman's protection as the "first half of the 70th week" (p. 212).

they have been permitted to maintain their hold during the past five thousand years.<sup>81</sup>

For Ironside, the rejoicing in heaven referred to the raptured saints: "Satan's casting down will be the signal then for great rejoicing in the heavens, where the Old and New Testament saints will have been caught up."<sup>82</sup> Ironside then assigned the period of "a time, times, and half a time" of the woman's flight into the wilderness to the second half of the tribulation, totaling the full seven-year tribulation period from which the church had been rescued.<sup>83</sup>

#### V. DARBY'S PRETRIBULATION EXEGESIS FORSAKEN AND FORGOTTEN

I have shown that the interpretation of Rev 12:5 as the catching up of the entire Body of Christ prior to the future seven-year tribulation constituted the decisive exegetical argument for the chronology of the pretribulation rapture in the early development of dispensational eschatology. Prior to this exegetical argument, circumstantial arguments led to positions akin to a prewrath or midtribulation perspective, with no clear advocate of a pretribulation position. Only with Darby's exegetical argument from Rev 12:5 did the pretribulation rapture take root among British dispensationalists, reinforced by their already strong disposition toward an ecclesiology that emphasized believers' mystical union with Christ.

Through Darby and Kelly, the pretribulation rapture position became closely associated with the budding dispensational movement. From that time forward those who were tutored under the most prominent dispensationalists in the nineteenth century would have received the pretribulation rapture doctrine as part of the system.<sup>84</sup> That is, those who were directly influenced by Darby, Kelly, and others from their circle received dispensationalism, premillennialism, and the pretribulation rapture together. However, those who were merely premillennialists did not necessarily hold to dispensationalism or the pretribulation rapture.

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 213-14.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 216-17. All of these arguments are retained in Ironside's 1930 edition (Harry A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* [Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1930], 203-18).

<sup>84</sup>This was not necessarily true of nondispensational premillennialists, who did not always associate themselves with dispensationalism and therefore did not inevitably receive the pretribulation doctrine. It has been observed, and I tend to agree, that "the relationship between this eschatological position [pretribulationism] and the general theological system known as dispensationalism" are in practice "almost invariably wedded to one another, yet logically they are somewhat independent" (Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 125).

It is a curious and interesting fact that many later dispensationalists who received the pretribulation rapture doctrine from the hands of the first generation of dispensationalist teachers did not necessarily inherit the exegetical foundation that attended the doctrine's birth. In fact, within a couple generations, pretribulation rapture advocates seem to have completely disregarded the exegetical origins of the rapture doctrine they so enthusiastically embraced. The exegetical argument that had lent strong support to Darby's rapture doctrine seems to have played a significant (if not decisive) role for the popularity of the pretribulation doctrine in the dispensational household during the first generation. Today, however, the exegetical argument from Rev 12:5 has been all but forsaken, obscured by several generations of younger dispensationalists who seem to have literally forgotten the exegetical bases upon which their own tradition began believing and teaching the pretribulation rapture in the first place.

How did this happen? It seems that the explanation of how the exegetical argument fell out of use goes something like this. In 1881 William E. Blackstone published a book entitled *Jesus Is Coming*,<sup>85</sup> a book that R. A. Torrey said had a "decidedly formative influence" on his life and teaching.<sup>86</sup> In 1920 Harris Franklin Rall noted, "*Jesus is Coming*, by W. E. Blackstone, is probably the most widely circulated modern premillennialist writing."<sup>87</sup> Clearly, *Jesus Is Coming* had a major impact on American premillennialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when dispensational premillennialism staked its claim in the theological frontiers of fundamentalist evangelicalism. So, Blackstone's interpretation of Rev 12:5 would have been quite influential. Though in a later publication Blackstone adopted Darby's exegetical argument for the pretribulation rapture in Rev 12:5,<sup>88</sup> his most influential work, *Jesus Is Coming*, interpreted this text as referring to Jesus Christ.<sup>89</sup>

James Brookes, who mentored the newly converted C. I. Scofield in the 1870s, represents a highly influential voice among early American dispensational premillennialists. His arguments in favor of a pretribulation rapture position would have helped set a standard among dispensationalists. In his book *Till He Comes*, published in 1891, he included a chapter on the rapture. There he countered opponents of the pretribulation rapture with several inferential arguments, not unlike the evidences used by Irving and

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<sup>85</sup>William Eugene Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming* (Chicago: Revell, 1881).

<sup>86</sup>See "Appreciative Commendations" in William Eugene Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming* (3d rev. Presentation ed.; New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1908).

<sup>87</sup>Harris Franklin Rall, *Modern Premillennialism and the Christian Hope* (New York: Abingdon, 1920), 145.

<sup>88</sup>See above.

<sup>89</sup>Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming* (1908), 76-77 n. 9. He cites Rev 12:5 in connection with Rev 2:26; 5:10; 19:15. However, Blackstone quotes all of these verses, but concludes the note with "See also Rev. 12:5." Also see similar use of Rev 12:5 in connection with Christ's rule on p. 138 n. 75.

others to support a prewrath or midtribulation rapture.<sup>90</sup> With these arguments, Brookes seemingly ignored the exegetical argument of Rev 12:5 and explicitly stated that the rapture of the church prior to the seven-year tribulation is "inferred from many Scriptures."<sup>91</sup> In the year of his death, 1897, Brookes published an article that rearticulated his view regarding the pretribulation rapture, reiterating some of the same inferential arguments as earlier.<sup>92</sup> Around the same time, his *Israel and the Church* was published, in which he explicitly identified the woman in Rev 12 as Judah and the male child as Christ.<sup>93</sup>

After C. I. Scofield published his *Scofield Reference Bible*, in which he advanced a pretribulation rapture apart from its exegetical foundation from Rev 12:5, this pattern of teaching would simply displace the earlier arguments. And in 1919, with the advent of Clarence Larkin's famous and wildly influential dispensational and prophetic charts, the forceful interpretation of the male child as none other than Jesus Christ would virtually guarantee a destruction of Darby's exegetical foundation for the pretribulation rapture while vividly retaining the affirmation of the doctrine itself. Larkin's comments are interesting here, especially in light of the well-crafted and thoroughly argued work of Darby and his associates. Larkin wrote:

He is CHRIST. The Second Psalm settles that. . . . The "Man-Child" cannot be the Church, as some claim, because the "Man-Child" is caught up to the FATHER'S THRONE, where He is now seated, while the Church, which is not as yet caught up, is to be caught up to CHRIST IN THE AIR.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>James H. Brookes, *Till He Comes* (Chicago: Gospel, 1891). Brookes cites the following inferential arguments: 1) the church's call to live in expectation of the imminent return of Christ (pp. 87-88); 2) the Bible's teaching that Christ will return with his saints (pp. 88-89); 3) the promise that the church will be saved from coming wrath and tribulation (pp. 89-90); 4) the absence of the church between Rev 4 and 19 (p. 90); 5) the undefined "pause in the air" during Christ's second coming, described in 1 Thess 4:16-17 (pp. 90-91); 6) the biblical pattern that united themes (resurrection, justification, etc.) often consisting of dual aspects and therefore allowing for a single event (return of Christ) with a dual aspect (coming for the saints and coming with the saints) (pp. 91-92); and 7) the biblical teaching that the rapture will be secret and unknown to the world, as in the case of Enoch and Elijah (pp. 92-93).

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 91. Cf. James H. Brookes, *Maranatha: The Lord Cometh* (10th ed.; New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1889), 492-540.

<sup>92</sup>James H. Brookes, "Who Shall Be Caught Up?," *Truth* 23/5 (May 1897): 263-66; cf. James H. Brookes, *The Fact and Features of the Lord's Return* (London: Robert Scott, 1911), 35-51.

<sup>93</sup>James H. Brookes, *Israel and the Church* (St. Louis: Gospel Book and Tract Depository, c. 1900), 166.

<sup>94</sup>Clarence Larkin, *The Book of Revelation: A Study of the Last Prophetic Book of Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia: Clarence Larkin, 1919), 136.

Larkin explicitly rejected the identification of the male child as the church, as well as the dual-identification of "Christ and the church." He wrote:

Those who claim that Christ and the Church together constitute the "Man-Child," because in the Message to the Church at Thyatira, the promise to the "Overcomers" is, that they shall rule the Nations with a "ROD OF IRON," forget that this promise is not to the Church as a whole, but only to the "Overcomers" of the "Thyatiran Church Period," A.D. 606-1520. In other words the "Overcomers" of the "Thyatiran Church Period" shall hold some prominent "Ruling Power" with Christ in the Millennial Kingdom.<sup>95</sup>

What is interesting about this passage is that Larkin asserted his interpretation of the male child as Christ with a defensive posture. He felt the need to defend his interpretation against "those who claim" the male child is the church in union with Christ. Clearly, Larkin was familiar with such interpreters and knew that his own readers would likely be aware of them.<sup>96</sup>

In his 1941 book, *Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?*, Thiessen makes no mention of the exegetical argument from Rev 12:5.<sup>97</sup> In 1954, E. Schuyler English continues the trend of inferential arguments for the pretribulation rapture of the church, making no mention of arguments from Rev 12:5.<sup>98</sup> From the mid-twentieth century on, the original exegetical argument from Revelation for the pretribulation rapture would be forgotten among dispensational premillennialists. It is also during this time that adherence to the doctrine—once robust among its supporters—began to wane, as critics and even erstwhile advocates found the circumstantial arguments upon which it now rested far too easy to doubt or deconstruct. Without Darby's exegetical foundation, the doctrine itself seems to have been weakened.

But why would pretribulation advocates like Brookes and Scofield abandon Darby's interpretation of Rev 12:5 while writers

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<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>96</sup>I must admit that compared to Darby's careful and nuanced exegetical arguments for the rapture in Rev 12:5, Larkin's assertions—especially his long-discredited comments regarding the "Thyatiran Church Period," seem blunt and unfounded. From a historical perspective, it is almost embarrassing that his "counter-arguments" displaced the original exegetical foundation of Darby, Kelly, Blackstone, and Ironside.

<sup>97</sup>Henry C. Thiessen, *Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1941). His arguments include: 1) the promise in Rev 3:10 that the church will be kept from the hour of testing; 2) the nature of the seventieth week of Daniel relating to the Jewish people only; 3) the purpose of the Tribulation as retribution and wrath; 4) the identification of the twenty-four elders as the church in Rev 4-5; 5) the identification of the restrainer in 2 Thess 2; and 6) the need for an interval between the rapture and second coming (see summary and conclusion, pp. 60-63).

<sup>98</sup>E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture* (Travelers Rest, S.C.: Southern Bible Book House, 1854).



like Larkin explicitly attempt to counter it? Let me make four suggestions.

First, as we saw in the second section of this article, interpretations of the male child as an individual or group other than Jesus Christ alone was frequent among historicists, preterists, idealists, partial-rapture advocates, and others who might take a much more allegorical approach to Scripture in general. I find it highly likely that especially American dispensationalists who took a very strong stand on a literal hermeneutic would have found more literal interpretations to be preferred to anything that appeared too "allegorical." Also, these same dispensationalists took an increasingly critical and harsh stance against nondispensational and nonpremillennial interpretations of Revelation, so interpretations of Rev 12:5 that appeared too closely aligned with other camps would have been viewed suspiciously.

Second, many proponents of dispensational premillennialism in the early twentieth century were not well-trained in the original languages, exegetical method, or history of interpretation. Several technical lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and intertextual issues in the original Greek of Rev 12:5 led many in the history of the church to seek interpretations other than "Christ and Christ alone" for the identification of the male child. Indeed, John Nelson Darby was exceptionally skilled in the biblical languages, as well as fluent in both French and German. He was thus able to not only engage Rev 12:5 with great exegetical skill, but also interact with numerous commentaries on Revelation in several languages. Most American dispensationalists in the early twentieth century simply did not have the kind of expertise needed to sort out the exegetical issues related to Rev 12:5. Simply put, they were not educated enough to either understand, explain, or defend the exegetical argument of Darby.

Third, even if a pretribulationist did understand Darby's exegetical arguments, the technical lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and intertextual evidences were not easy to explain to the masses. It was far easier to identify Christ as the child born, destined to rule, and taken up to heaven than to try to explain the details necessary to establish that, in fact, the male child is best interpreted as a corporate entity. Dispensationalism and pretribulationism were movements that thrived among popular lay people who would not generally appreciate or understand—and therefore not be persuaded by—such complex exegetical evidence as Darby's arguments from Rev 12:5.

Fourth, and finally, pretribulationists could afford to forget the exegetical arguments for some time while their view was so popular. While pretribulationism was embraced by lay people, pastors, and scholars as part of the dispensational premillennial system, the inferential arguments functioned well at gaining converts to a view that fit their system. There was no great need to look back and retrieve the exegetical argument from Rev 12:5 in the writings of John Nelson Darby. American dispensationalism had taken on a life

of its own, and Darby's writings and original exegesis could be forgotten without major damage to the movement. In short, pretribulationists forgot their roots, and for a long time they suffered no apparent repercussions for it.

## VI. CONCLUSION

C. S. Lewis, arguing for the absurdity of concluding that an old idea had been discredited simply because it had "gone out of date," urged his readers,

You must find why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood.<sup>99</sup>

In this article I have argued that a clear articulation of a fully pretribulation rapture of the whole church first appeared in the writings of John Nelson Darby, and earlier than that in his public lectures. In that first articulation he appealed to an exegetical argument based on a corporate identification of the male child in Rev 12:5 as the body of Christ and the catching up of the child to God as the rapture. With a futurist interpretation of Revelation, an emphasis on the doctrine of the mystical union between Christ and the church, a willingness to distinguish OT Israel from the NT church, and a literal understanding of chronological indicators in Rev 11-13, Darby concluded that the rapture of the church described in 1 Thess 4:17 and alluded to in 1 Cor 15:51-52 would occur prior to the seven-year tribulation. I have argued that for Darby a decisive exegetical foundation for the timing of the pretribulation rapture was Rev 12:5. Other inferential arguments served to strengthen the doctrine and demonstrate its congruity with the rest of Scripture, but the basis for the timing of the rapture was originally exegetical.

In the early days of the promulgation of dispensationalism, the doctrine of the rapture accompanied the new system, along with its exegetical foundation. However, as dispensational premillennialism and the pretribulation rapture were popularized in the United States, very influential teachers detached the doctrine from its original exegetical moorings, emphasizing instead the inferential arguments, first in neglect of Darby's exegetical arguments from Rev 12:5, then in opposition to them, and finally in ignorance of them. However, when the shift away from exegetical toward inferential arguments for the pretribulation rapture was decisive by the mid-twentieth century, both scholarly and popular support for the pretribulation rapture doctrine began to wane. Today, it will be up to present day dispensationalists to determine whether Darby's exegetical

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<sup>99</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955), 207-8.

argument is worth reasserting in light of the role it played in originally establishing the pretribulation doctrine for numerous scholars and laypeople over a hundred and fifty years ago.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>For a more modern defense of the pretribulation rapture in Rev 12:5, see Michael J. Svigel, "The Apocalypse of John and the Rapture of the Church: A Reevaluation," *TJ* 22 (2001): 23-74.