

# History of Pre-Tribulation Development

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The story of the development of pre-tribulationism is a tangled one. From its inception in the early 1800s, there has been a deliberate attempt to cover up its origins. This has been perpetrated along two lines of 'revisionism.' One was to hide the real origin of pre-tribulationism in 19th century Scotland, and attribute it to John Nelson Darby (NJ), and the Plymouth Brethren. The other has been a recent attempt to selectively quote and misrepresent ancient Christian documents to make it appear early Christians were pre-trib. The purpose of this article is to document a timeline of the major events in the development of this relatively new prophetic viewpoint.

## THE EARLY CHURCH

In our article, Eschatology of the Early Church, we demonstrated the fact that the early Church was unquestionably "post-tribulationist," seeing a single future coming of Christ to rescue the Church from Antichrist, judge the wicked, and set up His earthly Kingdom. They were also "futurists," seeing the events of Revelation as being fulfilled within a short period of seven years at the end of this age.

## THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

From the rise of Roman Catholicism (4th century), the predominant view was a-millennial. The Church not only allegorized the Old Testament prophecies of the Millennial Kingdom, but also began to allegorize the tribulation. Yet, they remained post-trib, seeing only a single future coming of Christ.

## THE REFORMATION CHURCH

During and after the Protestant Reformation (16th century), Protestant Christians held to what is called "Historicism," a view of prophecy that considers the events of Revelation as occurring all throughout the Church's history. This was accomplished by employing the "year-day" theory — that the 1260, 1290, & 1335 days mentioned in Daniel and Revelation should be interpreted as years. It was common for Protestants to identify the Roman Catholic Church with Mystery Babylon, and the papacy with the Antichrist. Since historicists considered the tribulation as encompassing most of the Church age, and viewed themselves as being in the tribulation, they were necessarily post-tribulationists. This view lent itself to a flurry of date-setting in the first half of the 19th century, where the 1260, 1290, & 1335 days (years) were calculated from the Roman Church's rise to supreme power under the Roman Emperors, until the second coming.

## RETURN TO PRE-MILLENNIALISM

### Morgan Edwards

Morgan Edwards was a Baptist minister in Pennsylvania in the mid-late 1700s. As a teenager and seminary student, Morgan wrote a hypothetical essay as part of his seminary training. Morgan was assigned the task, by his tutor, to write an essay on the Millennium using literal interpretation. In Morgan's hypothetical scenario, he separated the rapture from the second coming by at least 3.5 years. His work seems to be a mixture of "futurism" and "historicism." And, Morgan contradicted himself and made many obvious errors. Yet, his work appears to be the very first time the rapture was seen as a separate coming of Christ. Many years later (1788), Morgan published his essay in a book. While Morgan Edwards is sometimes cited as a pre-tribulationist, his work indicates that he did not wish to be seen as a "literalist;" he was content with the typical "historicist" view of the times; and that his work was hypothetical. Furthermore, there is no apparent connection between Morgan Edwards' essay and modern pre-tribulationism. And Morgan's other works do not display pre-trib thinking. We must look elsewhere for the origins of modern pre-tribulationism. For those interested in an in-depth analysis of Morgan Edwards'

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essay, see our article [Morgan Edwards & the Pre-Trib Rapture](#).

## **Father Manuel de Lacunza**

Fr. Manuel de Lacunza was a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, born in Chili in 1731, and sent to Spain at the young age of 15 to become a Jesuit priest. When the Jesuits were expelled from Spain in 1767, Fr. de Lacunza moved to Italy. In 1790, he wrote a book on prophecy, called *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, which was published in Spain in 1812. Fr. de Lacunza wrote under the pen name, Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra (a converted Jew), allegedly to avoid detection since his book ended up on Rome's banned books list.

Fr. de Lacunza's book promoted a return to the literal interpretation of prophecy, and the primitive "futurist" view of Revelation. He rejected the "year-day" theory of the historicists. Consequently, he saw a personal Antichrist and future tribulation of 1260 days, followed by the coming of the Lord. He did not espouse a pre-trib rapture, as has been claimed.

## **EDWARD IRVING**

In the 1820s, Edward Irving (NJ), pastored a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) congregation in London. Irving became aware of Father de Lacunza's book, and was so impressed with it, he took it upon himself to translate it into English, adding a "preliminary discourse" of his own. Irving's English translation was published in 1827. Some of Irving's early prophetic views can be discerned from his "preliminary discourse," including, surprisingly, all the key elements of dispensationalism that later showed up in Darby's writings. Irving, in his "preliminary discourse," indicated that he had been teaching these things to his congregation beginning Christmas 1825, years before Darby is alleged to have arrived at his dispensational ideas [1]. [Click here to read excerpts from Irving's preliminary discourse \(NJ\)](#).

Irving had been preaching that God would restore Apostles and prophets to the Church, and a great Pentecostal outpouring would come just before the soon return of Jesus Christ. Right on schedule, rumors of healings, tongues, visions, and other manifestations began circulating in Port Glasgow, Scotland, from the home of James and George MacDonald, and their sister Margaret. People came from England, Ireland, and parts of Scotland to observe the supernatural manifestations in the "prayer meetings" held by the MacDonalds.

The "revival" soon spread to Irving's church, with "tongues" and other "manifestations" breaking out, especially among the women. Due to the strange goings on in Irving's church, and his heretical views on the person of Christ, Irving was eventually defrocked by the Church of Scotland, and moved his congregation to a rented hall, forming the Catholic Apostolic Church. (Irving taught that Jesus had a fallen sinful nature and only kept from sinning by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is similar to the teachings of some modern Charismatics, who see Jesus as the "proto-type Christian"). Not only were prophetic revelations and other alleged miracles occurring in Irving's congregation, but such "revelations" seemed to focus on end-time prophecy concerning the coming of the Lord.

## **February - June, 1830**

Out of the spectacle of alleged latter-day Holy Spirit outpouring in Scotland and England, and the eschatological influence of de Lacunza's futurist/dispensationalism, emerged the very first documented evidence of a pre-tribulation rapture. This was first articulated in the form of a letter written by Margaret MacDonald, sister of James and George MacDonald of Port Glasgow. In March or April of 1830, after being ill and bed-ridden for about 18 months, Margaret claimed to have seen a series of visions of the coming of the Lord. She wrote down these visions and sent a copy to Edward Irving. A month later (June), Irving claimed in a private letter (NJ), that Margaret's visions had a huge impact on him. "the substance of Mary Campbell's and Margaret MacDonald's visions or revelations, given in their papers, carry to me a spiritual conviction and a spiritual reproof which I cannot express."

The outstanding feature of Margaret's visions was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on a elite group within the Church, combined with a secret rapture before the revealing of the Antichrist. She saw only these "Spirit filled" Christians "taken" to be with the Lord, while the rest of the Church without this experience would be left to be purged in the tribulation. [Click here to read Margaret's letter describing her vision \(NJ\)](#).

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## September, 1830

The official quarterly publication of the Irvingites, "The Morning Watch," had promoted a post-trib coming exclusively through mid-1830. But, the September 1830 issue featured part two of an article by "Fidus" describing the theory that the seven letters in Revelation actually describe seven consecutive "Church ages." In this article, "Fidus" clearly articulated the new idea of a partial pre-trib rapture. "Fidus" saw the Philedelphian church being raptured prior to the tribulation, and the Laodicean church representing the less fortunate Christians. Click here to read the "Fidus" article (NJ). This article in The Morning Watch is the first (known) publication of a pre-tribulation rapture in Great Britain, several years before Darby mentioned a pre-trib rapture.

## 19th CENTURY INDEPENDENT WITNESSES CONFIRM MACDONALD/IRVINGITE ORIGIN

The Morning Watch (1832)

An anonymous writer, in the December 1832 (p. 249) issue of The Morning Watch, likely referred to Margaret MacDonald's letters (and probably her friend Mary Campbell & Emily Cardale of London) with the following words; "The Spirit of God has caused several young women, in different parts of Great Britain, to condense into a few broken sentences more and deeper theology than ever Vaughan, Chalmers, or Irving uttered in their longest sermons; and therefore more than all the rest of the Evangelical pulpits ever put forth in the whole course of their existence."

## Robert Baxter (1833)

British Lawyer, Robert Baxter, was an early member of the Irvingites. Baxter had previously been post-trib, but eventually adopted the pre-trib rapture views of Irving. He was involved with the supernatural manifestations, even giving his own prophecies. He later became disillusioned with the whole movement, and abandoned Irvingism (and pre-tribulationism). Upon his departure, he wrote an expose of Irvingism, called "Narrative of Facts, Characterizing the Supernatural Manifestations in Members of Mr. Irving's Congregation" (1833) (NJ). In this book, Baxter spoke of Irving's early pre-trib teachings. "An opinion had been advanced in some of Mr. Irving's writings, that before the second coming of Christ, and before the setting in upon the world of the day of vengeance, emphatically so called in the Scriptures, the saints would be caught up to heaven like Enoch and Elijah; and would be thus saved from the destruction of this world, as Noah was saved in the ark, and Lot was saved from Sodom." Baxter wrote that the coming of the Lord was the main topic of the prophetic utterances in Irving's congregation. Looking back, he thought they had all been deceived by lying spirits pretending to be the Holy Ghost.

## Robert Norton (1861)

Robert Norton was the author of "The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets; In the Catholic Apostolic Church" (1861). Norton took a favorable view of the Irvingite movement, writing in the preface that his book was offered "as proofs or illustrations of its heavenly origin and character." Norton credited Margaret MacDonald (NJ) as the first to proclaim the "new doctrine" of a pre-trib rapture, which was picked up by Edward Irving.

## Samuel P. Tregelles (1855/1864)

Samuel P. Tregelles was the most eminent Plymouth Brethren scholar of the 19th century. After Darby borrowed and modified the pre-trib concept from the Irvingites, Tregelles openly opposed Darby's emphatic pre-trib stance. In an 1855 article in The Christian Annotator, Tregelles wrote that the true Christian hope is the final "advent" and "not some secret advent, or secret rapture to the Lord, as Judaizers supposed might be the case..." [2]. Nine years later, Tregelles published "The Hope of Christ's Second Coming." Here he identified the "Judaizers" who first taught the pre-trib view. "The theory of a secret coming...first brought forward...an utterance in Mr. Irving's Church...about the year 1832" [3]. A later Plymouth Brethren writer, William Kelly, also identified the Irvingites as "Judaizers." He defined "Judaizing" as Christians adopting "Jewish elements." Kelly added, "nowhere is this so patent as in Irvingism" [4].

## JOHN NELSON DARBY & THE PLYMOUTH BRETHERN

The Irish preacher, John Nelson Darby (NJ), one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren, wrote

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his first prophecy paper (NJ) in 1829 [5]. In this paper, Darby argued that unfulfilled Old Testament prophecy concerning the restoration of Israel should be applied to the Church. He also placed the Church on earth until the Revelation 19 coming at Armageddon. While he may have hinted at some dispensational ideas, such ideas were already fully developed in Irving's 1826 "preliminary discourse." Furthermore, on pages 6-10 & 19-21, Darby referred to Irving, de Lacunza, The Morning Watch, and even quoted some of Irving's works, including his "preliminary discourse!" So, while dispensationalism may have been evolving in Darby's own mind, clearly, these ideas were not original with him! He was reading them in Irving's and de Lacunza's works!

In 1830, Darby was still defending "historicism" against "futurism" three months after the clear pre-trib "Fidus" article appeared in The Morning Watch. In the December 1830 issue of The Christian Herald, Darby published an article entitled, "On 'Days' Signifying 'Years' in Prophetic Language" (NJ) [6]. Darby defended the standard "historicist" view, that the 1260 day tribulation meant 1260 years. Consequently, he saw the tribulation as largely past, and could not possibly have been expecting a pre-trib rapture, which requires a "futurist" viewpoint.

In 1830, J. N. Darby also visited the MacDonald's in Port Glasgow, and observed the "manifestations" in their prayer meetings, as Darby later recalled. Darby described the sequence of events — who prayed, who spoke in tongues, etc. [7]. But, while he noted Margaret's speaking, he failed to mention the subject of her prophesying. However, John Cardale, who was also present, wrote that Margaret "commenced also speaking ... gave testimony to the judgments coming on the earth; but also directed the church to the coming of the Lord as her hope of deliverance," and was heard speaking in a loud voice "denouncing the coming judgments." [8]. Therefore, we can conclude that Darby was fully aware that the "pre-tribulation rapture" was a subject of the prophecies among the Irvingite Charismatics. It was nine more years before Darby clearly espoused a pre-trib rapture in his published works.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have tried to be fair in this short article, attempting to avoid over-reaching the facts or drawing unwarranted conclusions. We should put to rest the rumor that the pre-trib rapture originated in an utterance of "tongues" in Irving's church. While, it appears that such utterances of prophetic revelation were common in Irving's church, the secret pre-trib rapture was first seen by Margaret MacDonald in her "visions," months before she spoke in tongues. It was published in the September 1830 issue of The Morning Watch, and only afterwards became the subject of the "prophetic utterances" in Irving's church. It is clear that Darby was fully aware of the goings on among the MacDonalds and Irvingites, as well as de Lacunza's and Irving's "dispensationalism." Darby cannot rightly be credited with either dispensationalism or pre-tribulationism.

This is not to imply that Darby's pre-trib development owes its existence exclusively to MacDonald, de Lacunza, or Irving. The evidence supports a connection between these, and that Darby was influenced (perhaps strongly) by the Irvingites. There may very well have been others who influenced Darby, too.

The Irvingite pre-trib (gathering of the elite) rapture was not as much the result of the outworkings of Irving's dispensational leanings, but rather grew out of alleged gifts of prophecy among Scottish / English Charismatics. Darby seems to have given the whole theory a facelift, and fine-tuned a theological system whereby a full pre-trib rapture could be sold to the public, who would naturally be skeptical of the excesses of the Irvingites. So, while Darby did not originate the pre-trib rapture idea, he gave it some respectability. As it turns out, Darby became its greatest salesman.

My thanks to Dave MacPherson, whose years of research turned up the original works quoted in this article, and who provided me with extensive photocopies of the source material, so I could draw my own conclusions.

## NOTES:

1. See: Dave MacPherson, The Rapture Plot, p. 94
2. Tregelles, Samuel P., Premillennial Advent (The Christian Annotator, June 16, 1855), p. 190.
3. Tregelles, Samuel P., The Hope of Christ's Second Coming (Ambassadors for Christ, n.d. 1864),

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pp. 34,35.

4. Kelly, William, The Catholic Apostolic Body, or Irvingites (The Bible Treasury, Dec. 1890), p. 191.

5. Darby, J. N., Reflections (1829), Prophetic No. 1, pp. 1-31.

6. Darby, J. N., The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby, Prophetic No. 1, p. 40.

7. Darby, J. N., The Irrationalism of Infidelity (London: 1853), pp. 283-285.

8. Cardale, John B., On the Extraordinary Manifestations in Port Glasgow” (The Morning Watch, Dec. 1830) p. 870, 871, 873.

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