

THE TRIBULATION OF CONTROVERSY: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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About a hundred years ago, in the last paragraph of his pioneering history of the Brethren, Blair Neatby emphatically proclaimed that ‘Brethrenism is the child of the study of unfulfilled prophecy, and of the expectation of the immediate return of the Saviour’ and many a subsequent writer has taken Neatby’s statement as a starting point for their assessment of the Brethren. In fact it is not uncommon for an author, by way of conclusion, to overstate his case somewhat, and Neatby was no exception. In his opening chapter he had been more cautious when he wrote: ‘The study of unfulfilled prophecy was a prominent feature of the movement from the first; or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it was *one* of the main foundations of the whole system [my italics].’¹ What Neatby, perhaps, (and certainly many of those who have quoted his words) had forgotten was how widespread among nineteenth-century evangelicals was their fascination with the prophetic scriptures. He mentions the incredulous smile with which the early Brethren would have reacted to the suggestion that the Church would still be on earth at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact such smiles of disbelief would hardly have been a Brethren monopoly and one can reasonably argue that a significant factor in the establishment of the Evangelical Alliance was the intense interest taken by many contemporary evangelicals in matters eschatological. Times and attitudes change, however, and although the process has taken the Brethren rather longer than many other mainstream evangelicals, their interest in prophecy may still be there but it is often now incorporated into a more realistic theological concern with their on-going responsibilities in the world in which they are living. In contrast to their elders who were growing up in the 1950s, young people associated with Brethren assemblies today are certainly less likely to have at their finger-tips the difference between the *parousia* and the *epiphaneia* and they may even be ignorant of the existence (let alone the meaning) of these words. In Britain at any rate, I think it would be misleading to identify Open Brethren as Christians who are preoccupied with the study of unfulfilled prophecy.

It will possibly come, therefore, as something of a surprise for mild and unsuspecting Brethren who, on the Eastern side of the Atlantic, are unaware

1. W.B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 2nd edn (1902), pp.339, 12.

that these subjects still engage some Christians in serious strife, to stumble into a raging battlefield where there seems to have been no cessation of the prophetic hostilities characteristic of a bygone age. Ironically it was J. N. Darby himself who observed that in the United States people showed more interest in his prophetic teaching than in his ecclesiastical principles.² His pretribulationist eschatology certainly flourishes in the North American context far beyond the confines of the comparatively insignificant Brethren movement. But Darby's views are faced with equally energetic opponents and it is in this polemical context that we should consider Mr Dave MacPherson's latest attempt to rally the righteous forces of post-tribulationism to smite the pretribulationist Amalekites.³

Although there is a superficial jauntness in Mr MacPherson's journalistic style of writing, it soon becomes evident that Jael's hammer has not been laid aside and the milk of human-kindness (let alone Christian charity) is still in somewhat short supply. This is an attractively produced paperback, with a photograph of (presumably) the author working in his shirt-sleeves, and the book can hardly be said to lie 'smouldering in a dull red cover' on the bookshelf in the way Edmund Gosse described William Lincoln's *Javelin of Phinehas*,⁴ but, nevertheless, it hurls a storm of brickbats at all sorts of people and this reviewer is acutely aware that his personal wish for the bitterness of controversy to be past probably renders him *persona non grata* with all the belligerents in this controversy and however delicately he treads he is liable to suffer (metaphorically at least) the fate of King Agag (1 Samuel 15: 33).⁵

Mr MacPherson is certainly to be congratulated on his powers of

2. E. R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago 1970), p.79.

3. Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC, 1995), 290pp., US\$14.95

4. E. Gosse, *Father and Son*, illustrated edn, (1913 [1907]), p.233.

5. The North American preoccupation in the run-up to the millennium with matters eschatological is well illustrated by a contemporary literary phenomenon. The 'Left Behind' series of novels conceived by Dr Tim LaHaye and written by Jerry B. Jenkins is proving to be a best seller following in the prophetic footsteps of Hal Lindsey's, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Nine novels have appeared so far: *Left Behind* (1995), *Tribulation Force* (1996); *Nicolae: The Rise of Antichrist* (1997); *Soul Harvest: The World Takes Sides* (1998); *Apollyon: The Destroyer is Unleashed* (1999); *Assassins: Assignment—Jerusalem. Target—Antichrist* (1999); *The Indwelling: The Beast Takes Possession* (2000); *The Mark: The Beast Rules the World* (2000); *Desecration: Antichrist Takes the Throne* (2001); and another three are promised. Inevitably the series is appreciated by those Christians who expect to be taken at the 'rapture' (and thus be spared the tribulation). There is also a junior version of the series (*The Vanishings; Second Chance; Through the Flames; Facing the Future; Nicolae High; The Underground; Into the Storm; Earthquake!; The Showdown; Judgment Day; Battling the Commander; Fire From Heaven; Terror in the Stadium; Darkening Skies; Busted!; Death Strike; The Search; On the Run*). A reader has testified to Amazon.com (internet booksellers): 'This entire series was so soul stirring that it made me, a Christian [sic], be sure that I want to be raptured up. I do not want to have to stay behind and go through all the trials and tribulations that those left behind had to deal with...'. One can assume that all this is anathema to Mr MacPherson. This paper was written quite some time before the events of 11 September 2001. The American obsession with the apocalyptic has now reached near hysteria. *The Remnant* ("Left Behind" vol. 12) has a first print run in hardback of 2.75 million copies. *Time* magazine (1st July 2002) in a discussion of the phenomenon included a portrait of J.N. Darby from the National Portrait Gallery.

endurance. Back in 1976 he published a book⁶ in which he announced, with great enthusiasm, his discovery that the idea of a pretribulationist rapture eschatology was first formulated by Margaret Macdonald of Port Glasgow, that the Macdonald home was where J.N. Darby learnt this teaching, and that ever since, Darby and his followers have been trying to hide this compromising situation. When I reviewed his book in *The Harvester* I made several points.⁷ One was that the text of Margaret Macdonald's prophecy (published by Robert Norton, in 1840) is so very confused that it hardly provides a basis for constructing a coherent eschatology and there is no evidence that this particular prophecy was characteristic of all her utterances. Another problem to which I drew attention was that none of the contemporary witnesses of the Clydeside utterances made any mention of Margaret Macdonald proclaiming a new doctrine. In fact it is only with some difficulty that one can identify what MacPherson calls her 'pretribulationist' teaching in the transcript of 1840, and when in 1861 Norton quoted from her prophecy he omitted the passage which referred to 'the fiery trial' which 'will be for the purging and purifying of the real members of the body of Jesus'—a passage which clearly assumes that Christians will go through the tribulation. Finally I supplied conclusive evidence of the influence on Darby of P ere Bernard Lambert (d. 1813) and the Jansenist lawyer Pierre Jean Agier (1748-1823) the latter of whom was responsible for the French abridgement of Lacunza's work.⁸ It is possible that MacPherson referred to these questions in the two books which he published in 1975 and 1983, but which I have not seen. In his latest volume, however, he continues to hammer out the same basic thesis with some variations and expansions but has failed to address most of the problems I raised.

So in what ways does *The Rapture Plot* differ from its predecessor? First, Mr MacPherson has usefully identified some developments in Irvingite prophetic interpretation in the *Morning Watch*. He has shown that several elements in what he claims is the 'monumental contribution' of Margaret Macdonald to prophetic interpretation can in fact be found in articles by John Tudor, 'Fidus' and 'T. W. C'. A second new element in MacPherson's latest work is a blow by blow analysis of J. N. Darby's early writings to show that these are far from pretribulationist. This is hardly a new discovery but MacPherson claims that several writers, including Harold Rowdon, present Darby as a 'pre-tribulation rapturist' from the start. For the record it is worth noting that Dr Rowdon was emphatic that 'it should not be concluded that these ideas were fully developed as early as 1833: the sequel will show that

6. D. MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City, MI, 1973). For some reason this earlier work is omitted entirely from MacPherson's bibliography though other sensational titles like *The Incredible Cover Up* (1975) and *The Great Rapture Hoax* (1983) suggest that he has continued to beat the same drum faithfully for some twenty-five years.

7. *Harvester* (November 1975), p. 304.

8. For Lambert and Agier see L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers* (1946), 3, pp.324-6; 482-5.

they were not clearly defined for some time yet.’⁹

The real target of MacPherson’s attack, however, is R. A. Huebner with whose writings I can make no claim to familiarity. Bearing in mind the inaccuracy of MacPherson’s account of Dr Rowdon, we must clearly be very cautious about his references to the writings of Huebner, but it appears that the latter has insisted (as has Darby’s latest protagonist, Max Weremchuk) that the idea of the pre-tribulation rapture was Darby’s from the start and that he originated it. If this really is their view then perhaps MacPherson’s tedious analysis of Darby’s early writings (chapter 4) was necessary but, from that point onward MacPherson’s polemics become increasingly hysterical. His survey of Darby’s later reminiscences about his earlier development is characterised by an obsessive desire to present Darby as a deceitful, calculating manipulator of the truth whose only object was to present himself as the originator of the idea of the pretribulationist rapture. Subsequent chapters take this conspiracy theory to ridiculous lengths so that almost all of those with whom MacPherson disagrees are assumed to know that they are wrong and to be deliberately twisting the evidence to give Darby the credit for this interpretation which MacPherson considers to be so nefarious.

There are basically two problems which arise from this book and they are equally serious. The first is concerned with a selective approach to the evaluation of sources. A few examples must suffice. The earliest text which we have of Margaret Macdonald’s prophetic interpretation dates from ten years after it was delivered and was published by Robert Norton. Mr MacPherson makes no mention of the fact that Norton was married to Margaret Macdonald (referred to by Mr MacPherson with somewhat condescending phrases like ‘our young Scottish lassie’) and therefore there is no acknowledgement of the possibility of marital bias in Norton’s claim that she originated the idea of the pretribulation rapture. On the other hand if anyone can be charged with manipulation it is surely Norton who eliminated parts of Margaret’s prophecy in his 1861 abridgement of it, but MacPherson refrains from making this charge because Norton’s version is a useful stick with which to beat dispensationalists.

One of the earliest accounts of the meetings in the Macdonald home on Clydeside is that of J. B. Cardale, later an Irvingite apostle. In MacPherson’s book of 1973 he usefully quoted at length from this account. In his most recent book he only cites a selection of sentences from Cardale’s account and in each case quotes alongside it a similar statement from J. N. Darby’s account of his visit to Clydeside. He then gives a passage from Cardale’s account which is not paralleled in Darby’s account. The quotation reads as follows:

‘M[argaret] M’D[onald] commenced also speaking’ and ‘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.’

9. H. H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren*, (1967), p.97; cf. p.207 where he introduces his paragraph about Darby’s teaching in 1840 with the words ‘By now...’ which unmistakably suggest that Darby’s thinking on this subject had developed in the 1830s.

Because Darby only describes Margaret MacDonald as giving ‘a string of texts on overcoming’, MacPherson accuses him of deliberately omitting what she ‘taught about a pretrib coming’ and trying to present her as ‘just another posttrib’. This, of course, is unreasonable and quite unwarranted. Cardale’s statement that Margaret Macdonald ‘directed the church to the coming of the Lord as her hope of deliverance’ is totally ambiguous as to whether that deliverance would be at the beginning, during or at the end of the tribulation and Mr MacPherson is imposing on the passage a particular meaning because it suits his argument. His accusation of Darby is manifestly without foundation. Nor does he make any attempt to distinguish between what one can expect from an account of several pages written a month after the event (as was Cardale’s) and a brief summary (like Darby’s), written more than twenty years later.

A similar example of Mr MacPherson’s selective use of written evidence is found in his citations from the writings of the textual critic, S. P. Tregelles. He is happy to quote some phrases of Tregelles’s recollection of 1864 but he does not give us the whole passage which in fact reads as follows:

‘But when the theory of a secret coming of Christ was first brought forward (about the year 1832),*[footnote] it was adopted with eagerness...

*[footnote] I am not aware that there was any definite teaching that there would be a secret rapture of the Church at a secret coming, until this was given forth as an ‘utterance’ in Mr Irving’s Church, from what was there received as being the voice of the Spirit. But whether any one ever asserted such a thing or not, it was from that supposed revelation that the modern doctrine and the modern phraseology respecting it arose.’¹⁰

Later in his book MacPherson repeatedly accuses William Kelly of grossly distorting Tregelles’s remarks and charges Kelly (and many other dispensationalists) with continued and deliberate misrepresentation, but MacPherson himself is equally misleading in his account. Tregelles being a very cautious scholar was careful to make no claim to omniscience saying that he was ‘not aware’ of any teaching on the rapture before it was announced in Irving’s Church and continued to leave that other possibility open with the words ‘whether anyone asserted such a thing or not’. In other words the idea of the secret rapture could have been taught earlier but its popular adoption derived from the Irvingite formulation. The first time MacPherson refers to Tregelles’ remarks he omits the scholar’s cautious caveat and quotes him as saying “‘the theory of a secret coming’ was “first brought forward” by means of “an ‘utterance’ in Mr Irving’s Church” and that this occurred “about the year 1832””. (p.15). It is only towards the end of his book that MacPherson admits that Tregelles ‘didn’t explicitly declare that pretrib originated in an utterance in Irving’s Church...’ (p. 182). In fact Tregelles’s caution was well placed because he was not converted to evangelical Christianity until 1834-5 and was not an interested first-hand observer of Irvingism in its early stages.¹¹

10. S. P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ’s Second Coming: How it is Taught in Scripture? and Why?* 2nd edn with appendix by C. Y. Biss (1886 [1864]), p.35.

11. For the date of Tregelles’s conversion, see my *Early Brethren and the Society of Friends* (Pinner

Mr MacPherson's selective quotation and failure to evaluate the reliability of his sources is further compounded by repeated references to Tregelles and Newton as leaders of the Brethren when in fact they publicly dissociated themselves from the movement from the late 1840s onward. Both of the works of Tregelles cited by MacPherson were written after he had left the Brethren.¹² Needless to say Mr MacPherson has ignored my quotation (of some twenty four years ago) from Tregelles's reference to Darby's enthusiasm for the writings of Lambert and Agier in 1835. [See postscript to this review.]

The second problem is partly concerned with the ethics of controversy but also with the very nature of historical enquiry. When the critics of Jesus sought to discredit him they complained about the company he kept, but, unlike the critics, his followers have often taken encouragement from his readiness to be associated with 'publicans and sinners'. To this reviewer, therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that Christians can expect, like their Master, to be accused of keeping bad company but they should avoid making that sort of accusation themselves. It is indeed regrettable that in much doctrinal and ecclesiastical controversy, 'guilt by association' has repeatedly been used to discredit opponents, but Mr MacPherson seems to revel in the continuation of this tradition. Surely, the arguments of those who are concerned with the minutiae of the prophetic timetable should be based on a careful reading of scripture and the enlightenment of the reader by the Spirit of God, rather than a smear campaign to discredit those with whom they disagree. Mr MacPherson complains that William Kelly and others have misrepresented the truth about the origins of the pretribulationist interpretation of prophecy, in particular, and the dispensationalist hermeneutic, in general, but can he really be surprised if they have been reduced to such measures, in view of the readiness of their opponents to tar them with the Irvingite brush of heresy? Doubtless he will be hugely relieved to learn that I am not a dispensationalist, but, nevertheless, I *am* very interested in the people who became dispensationalists.

I am well aware that for centuries history has often been used as an arsenal of missiles with which to attack one's opponents or of excuses for doing so. However one of the challenges of historical enquiry is to try and get inside the mind of those with whom we are *not* instinctively in agreement and to discover how and why they came to their way of thinking. It is certainly quite possible that more than one person can come independently to the same

1970), p.10 n.18. Some 40 years ago, in his 'Answers to questions' in *The Harvester* [reference unnoted by the reviewer who was a negligent teenager] the late Professor F. F. Bruce drew attention to the date's bearing on the reliability of Tregelles's testimony concerning the Irvingite 'utterance'. MacPherson claims to have had 'in person discussions' with Bruce but he has chosen to ignore this point. If, as MacPherson seems to imply, the late Rylands Professor 'rejected dispensationalism', Bruce's recognition of the question-mark over Tregelles's testimony reveals a scrupulously fair approach which is in contrast to MacPherson's work.

12. Mr MacPherson can find a conspiracy almost anywhere and even suggests that Newton and Tregelles were omitted from Pickering's *Chief Men among the Brethren* (1931) because they were 'vocal posttribs' (p. 186). If this, indeed, were the case why was George Müller included?

conclusion. There are also good reasons for recognising that people can absorb new ideas unconsciously and indeed that they may be unaware of the derivative nature of their thinking. Neither of these possibilities seems to be taken very seriously by Mr MacPherson—possibly because they might cloud the certainty of his judgement. When considering the new eschatological framework which was taking shape around 1830, my own suspicion is that a significant element in its origin is to be found in the profound anxiety and bewilderment induced by a series of what seemed to be cataclysmic or even apocalyptic events. Catholic emancipation, revolutions on the continent of Europe, the death of George IV and two general elections in close succession, rural and urban violence (in which, for example, the Bishop of Bristol's palace was burnt down), the ongoing agitation for reform, as well as the scourge of cholera—these are some of the more obvious factors which we have to consider when asking why many people felt that they had reached a watershed in prophetic development and why the possibility of deliverance from tribulation seemed so attractive. (It was after all the apostle Paul who indicated that a significant function of prophetic teaching was to provide comfort.) One thing however is quite certain. This inquiry into the emotional and spiritual mind-set of men and women who lived 160 years ago requires sympathetic understanding rather than the polemics of judgement. In this respect, the help given by Mr MacPherson's book is minimal

Postscript

Numerous writers have quoted and referred to the considerable body of original letters in the Fry Collection in the Christian Brethren Archive of the John Rylands University Library in Manchester but none of them has taken up my reference (made in *The Harvester* twenty four years ago) to the important letter by S. P. Tregelles to B. W. Newton, in 1867, concerning Darby's development. I shall therefore reproduce the passage *in toto* in the hope that this significant source will no longer be ignored. The letter has a three-fold importance. (i) It was written by Tregelles some seven years before his pamphlet of 1864. (ii) It specifically deals with Darby's development. (iii) It deals with events of which Tregelles had first-hand knowledge (which was not the case with the Irvingite utterance mentioned above). I shall supplement this quotation with extracts from two later letters by Tregelles which also have some bearing on the subject of this review.

1.) Tregelles to Newton, 29 January 1857 (CBA 7181[7])

'The book on prophecy by the *Père Lambert* is entitled *Exposition des Prédications et des Promesses faites à l'Eglise pour les derniers temps de la Gentilité*. Paris 1806. The views in this are much more sound than those in the *Commentaries on the prophets* by the President Agier (published at various times up to about 1824).¹³

13. For Tregelles's opinion of these two authors, copies of whose works he was lent by the Jansenist Archbishop Van Santen of Utrecht, in September 1850, see S. P. Tregelles, *The Jansenists: Their Rise, Persecutions by the Jesuits and Existing Remnant* (1851), pp.96-7.

‘Lambert and Agier were the writers Mr J. N. Darby studied earnestly before he left the Church of England. I remember his speaking much about them in 1835; & when I *saw* what Agier had said, I learned the source of his notions. As soon as he learned German he read Olshausen¹⁴ (who had himself gathered from Agier) with avidity: I remember how *earnestly* he recommended Olshausen to me before I knew a line of German. And thus out of Agier and Olshausen sprung up the system that divides the Church of the saved into classes essentially distinct and puts the saved of this dispensation on a ground indescribably higher than those before or after. You would however often fail in guessing Olshausen’s meaning from the published English translation.’

2.) Tregelles to Newton, 31 August 1862 (CBA 7181 [28])

after quoting from his pamphlet *The Throne of David* (1840 ‘twenty two years ago’) ‘This was just when Mr Darby was learning from Olshausen to split up the saved into classes essentially distinct.’

3.) Tregelles to Newton, 20 November 1865 (CBA 7181 [89])

‘Prof. Payne-Smith¹⁵ tells me he heard the doctrine of the indescribable heights of the Church of this dispensation above Abraham and Isaac and Jacob taught by an ‘evangelist’ to the children of an Irvingite School. A Scotch lad who was with him and heard this, called out to him “Come awa’, don’t let’s stop, ‘tis a’ *wrang*.” Did the Brethrenites get this doctrine from the Irvingites?’

14. Hermann Olshausen (1796-1839), professor at Königsberg and (after 1834) at Erlangen. His commentary on the New Testament began to appear in 1830. An English translation was published in 1847-9.

15. Robert Payne-Smith (1819-1895), newly appointed regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford in 1865; author of *Thesaurus Syriacus* (1868); Dean of Canterbury (1870-95).