

# DISPENSATIONALISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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# GROWTH OF EVIDENCE FOR PRETRIB TESTIMONY IN FATHERS

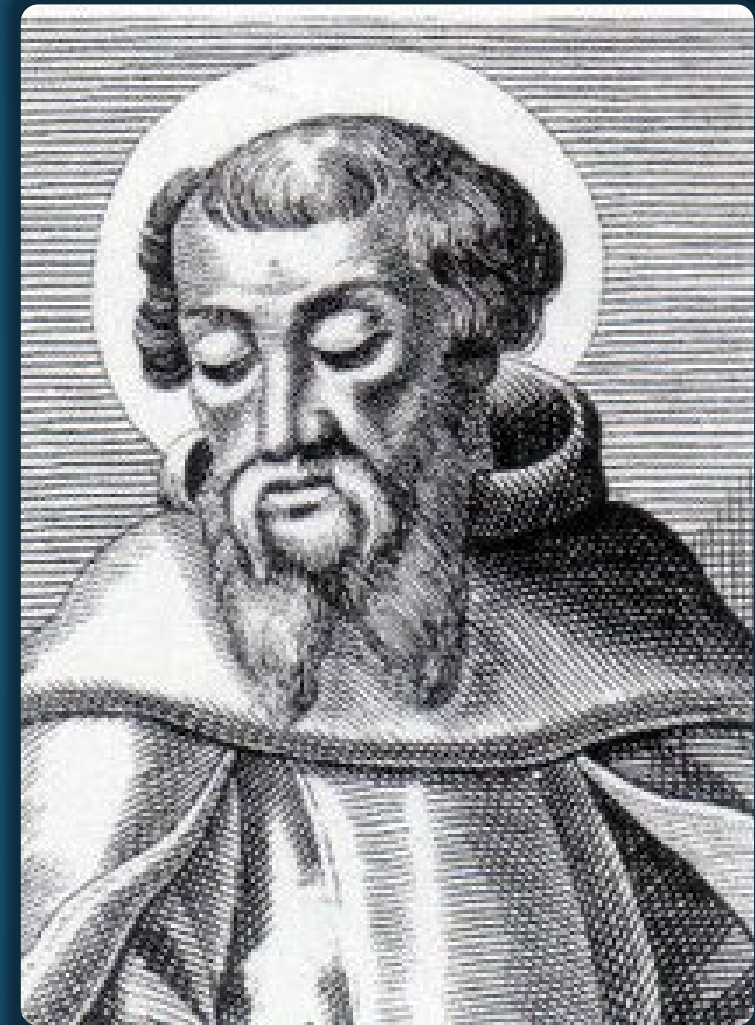
- EARLY DAYS — pretrib argument based on imminence
- RECENT YEARS — many clear pretrib passages uncovered
- NOW — finding evidence of systematic dispensationalism
- UPSHOT — strengthened case for pretrib in early church

# CONTENTS OF THIS PRESENTATION

- demonstrate robust dispensationalism in Irenaeus
- demonstrate key aspects of dispensationalism in the Didache
- not mature dispensationalism, but real dispensationalism

# IRENÆUS

- born c. 130 and died c. 202
- born in Smyrna (Izmir, Turkey)
- bishop of Lugdunum (Lyon, France)
- premillennial and pretribulational
- knew Polycarp, a disciple of John
- premier work was *Against Heresies*
- most of his works have not survived  
— most chiliast works suppressed



# RUDIMENTS OF DISPENSATIONALISM IN IRENAEUS



- distinction between Israel and the church
- God's return to the people and nation of Israel
- temple observant Jews honored by God in the tribulation
- two classes of saints in the millennium
- pretrib rapture (four distinct passages)

# PROBLEMATIC PASSAGE: THE CHURCH IN THE TRIBULATION

“It is manifest, therefore, that of these [the ten kings], he who is to come shall slay three, and subject the remainder to his power, and that he shall be himself the eighth among them. And they shall lay Babylon waste, and burn her with fire, and shall give their kingdom to the beast, and **put the CHURCH to flight**. After that they shall be destroyed by the coming of our Lord.”

Against Heresies, 5.26.1

# RULE OF SELF-INTERPRETATION

- **AS** the Bible must be allowed to **DEFINE** its own terms  
**SO** authors must be allowed to **DEFINE** their own terms
- importing contemporary definitions is anachronistic
- patristic terms typically show *close affinity* to modern usage  
patristic terms often show *differences* with modern usage
- failure to recognize this is common stumbling block in patristic exegesis

# IRENÆUS' HANDLING OF "CHURCH"

**"The church is the seed of Abraham** ... He who in the **New Testament** "raises up from the stones children unto Abraham," is he who will gather, according to the **Old Testament**, those that shall be saved from all the nations, Jeremiah says: "Behold, the days come, says the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord **lives, [who** brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, the Lord **lives] who** led the children of Israel from the north, and from every region where they had been driven; He will restore them to their own land which he gave to their fathers." (citing Jeremiah 23:7-8)



Against Heresies, 5.34.1



# IRENÆUS' HANDLING OF "CHURCH"

## HE DEFINES "CHURCH"

- **"The church is the seed of Abraham"**

## HIS "CHURCH" INCLUDES NT AND OT SAINTS

- God "in the **New Testament** «raises up from the stones children unto Abraham»"
- God "will gather, according to the **Old Testament**, those that shall be saved from all the nations ... «will restore them to their own land which he gave to their fathers»."
- this is the spiritual and physical seed of Abraham, both saved by faith

# IRENÆUS' HAS TWO DISTINCT PROGRAMS

## GOD'S PRESENT WORK

- God “in the New Testament «**IS RAISING UP** from the stones children unto Abraham»

## GOD'S FUTURE WORK

- God “**WILL GATHER**, according to the Old Testament, those that **shall be saved** from all the nations ... «**WILL RESTORE** them to their own land which he gave to their fathers».”

## DISTINCTIONS

- the **spiritual** seed and the **physical** seed of Abraham — both saved
- the NT work is **present** tense and the OT work is **future** tense

# IRENÆUS' HAS TWO CHURCHES

As says the Scripture: "And that night the elder went in and lay with her father; and Lot knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose." And the same thing took place in the case of the younger... the arrangement [designed by God] was carried out, by which the two daughters (that is, **the two synagogues**), who gave birth to children begotten of one and the same father, were pointed out ... **the elder and younger synagogues ... the two synagogues—that is, the two churches**, produced from their own father living sons to the living God.



Against Heresies, 4.31.1-2

# IRENÆUS' HAS TWO CHURCHES

- Irenaeus regarded Israel and the Gentiles of this age as **distinct churches or synagogues**
- the **elder synagogue (church)** = Israel
- the **younger synagogue (church)** = the Gentiles of this age
- his terminology is different than contemporary dispensationalism but his concept is exactly the same — two distinct bodies of saints

# SUMMARY OF IRENAEUS' VIEW OF CHURCH

- Irenaeus includes OT Israel and NT Gentiles under heading **church**
- Irenaeus regards OT Israel and NT Gentiles as **distinct churches**
- Irenaeus plainly states that **the OT church, the people and nation of Israel**, has a distinct future with God in the last days
- Irenaeus mentioning **church** in tribulation isn't proof he believed that **the Gentile church** of this age would be in the tribulation
- Irenaeus' understanding of **church** allows **the Gentile church** to be gone prior to the tribulation and **the Jewish church** to go through it

# GOD'S RETURN TO ISRAEL

**He who will GATHER**, according to the Old Testament, **those that shall be SAVED from all the nations**, Jeremiah says: «Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth, [who brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, the Lord liveth] who led the children of Israel from the north, and from every region whither they had been driven; **He will RESTORE them to their own land which He gave to their fathers.**»

Against Heresies, 5.34.1



# GOD'S RETURN TO ISRAEL

Ezekiel also says: «Behold, I will open your tombs and bring you forth out of your graves ... and I will put breath in you, and you shall live; and I will place you on your own land, and you shall know that I am the Lord ... **I will GATHER Israel from all nations where they have been driven**, and I shall be sanctified in them in the sight of the sons of the nations: and **they shall dwell in their own land, which I gave to my servant Jacob**. ... I shall cause judgment to fall among all who have dishonoured them, among those who encircle them round about.»



Against Heresies, 5.34.1

# IRENÆUS REJECTS ALLEGORICAL METHOD

“If, however, any shall endeavor to **ALLEGORIZE** [prophecies] of this kind, they shall not be found consistent ... in all points, and shall be confuted by the teaching of the very expressions.”

- this is the first line of chapter 35
- passages just covered on God’s return to Israel were in chap. 34
- the chief point of chapter 34 is God’s literal return to literal Israel
- SO this comment spec. addresses error of allegorizing Israel
- Irenaeus **already contending** with allegorizing methodology



Against Heresies, 5.35.1



# TEMPLE OBSERVANT JEWS IN THE TRIBULATION

«A king of a most fierce countenance shall arise ... he shall ... put strong men down, the holy people likewise» ... then he points out the time that his tyranny shall last, when **the SAINTS shall be put to flight, THEY WHO offer a PURE SACRIFICE unto God**: «And in the midst of the week,» he says, **«the SACRIFICE and the libation shall be taken away, and the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION [shall be brought] into the TEMPLE: even unto the consummation of the time shall the desolation be complete.»** Now three years and six months constitute the half-week.



Against Heresies, 5.25.4

# TEMPLE OBSERVANT JEWS IN THE TRIBULATION

“the **SAINTS** shall be put to flight, **THEY WHO** offer a **PURE SACRIFICE unto God**: «And in the midst of the week,» he says, «the SACRIFICE and libation shall be taken away, and the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION [shall be brought] into the TEMPLE».”

- **saints** qualified by “they who offer a pure sacrifice to God”
- **sacrifice** clarified as the sacrifice in the literal temple
- **temple** clarified as literal by removal of the sacrifice and placement of the abomination of desolation in the middle of the week



Against Heresies, 5.24.4

# TWO CLASSES OF SAINTS IN MILLENNIUM

“and [with respect to] those whom the Lord shall find **IN THE FLESH**, awaiting Him from heaven, who have suffered tribulation and escaped the hands of the wicked one. For it is in reference to them that the prophet says: «And the remnant shall multiply upon the earth.» And as many believers as God has prepared for this purpose, for **a remnant multiplying upon earth, shall also be UNDER the rule of the saints** to serve this Jerusalem.”

- first = trib saints in the flesh, a remnant who multiply on earth
- second = resurrection saints who reign on earth



# #1 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE

“And therefore, in the end **WHEN the Church is suddenly caught up** from this, it is said, «**THERE SHALL BE tribulation** such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.» For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome, they are crowned with incorruption.”

- **“when the church is suddenly caught up”** = circumstantial clause
- **“there shall be tribulation”** = main clause, future tense
- the grammar → rapture precedes tribulation
- not last contest of saints this age, last contest of saints period



Against Heresies, 5.29.1

## #2 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE

“For Enoch ... was translated ... thus pointing out by anticipation the **TRANSLATION** of the righteous ... Wherefore also the elders who were disciples of the apostles tell us that those who are translated are **TRANSLATED to that place [heaven]**... (where Paul the apostle, when he was caught up, heard words which are unspeakable) ... and that those who have been **TRANSLATED shall remain there until the consummation [the end]**, as a **prelude to incorruptability.**”

- those rapture translated go to heaven and stay there until the end
- the rapture translation is a prelude to incorruptibility at 2<sup>nd</sup> coming



## #3 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE

“But it is necessary to say on these things, that it behooves the righteous to be **the FIRST in this condition which is being renewed**, rising up to the appearance (visible observation) of God to receive the promise of inheritance which God promised to the fathers ... **AFTERWARD to be a judge.**”

- the church is the **FIRST** to receive the renewal (implies stages)
- the church **AFTERWARDS** engages in her work as judge
- **THE ORDER**: renewal, rise (rapture), inheritance, work as judge



Against Heresies, 5.32.1

## #4 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE

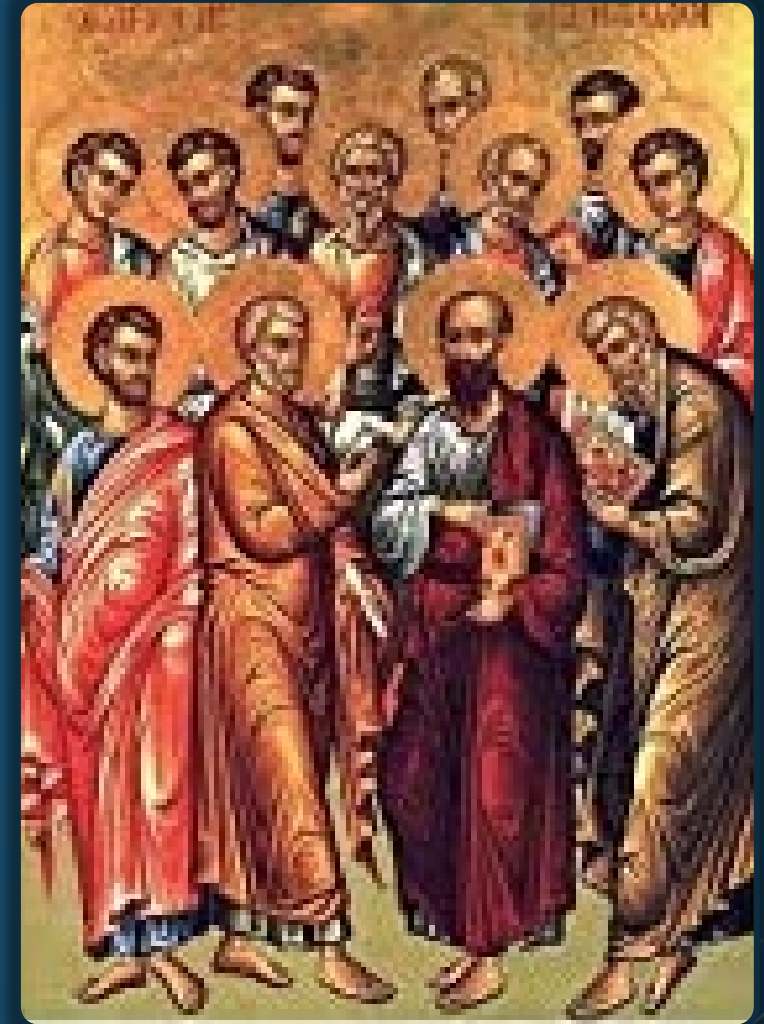
“For as the Lord “went away ... [to] where the souls of the dead were, yet afterwards arose in the body, and after the resurrection was taken up, it is manifest that the souls of His disciples also ... shall go away into the invisible place ... and there remain until the resurrection ... then **receiving their bodies, and rising ... bodily**, just as the Lord arose, **they shall come thus into the presence of God.**

- rapture passage in same spirit as John 14:1-3
- vertical journey to heaven, not horizontal journey here on earth



# THE DIDACHE

- aka *The Teaching of the Twelve*
- short document whose final section (16) covers eschatology
- written between AD 70 and 120
- authors interacted with apostolic associates, if not apostles
- possibly written while John alive and canon not yet completed
- premillennial, pretribulational





# THE DIDACHE

- FIRST, cover the **three** pretrib rapture references in section 16
  - the well-known imminence passage
  - the choice between glorification and tribulation
  - the resurrected church returning with Christ at the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming
- THEN, point out key points of dispensational thought

# #1 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE CLASSIC IMMINENCE

“Watch for your life’s sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ready, for **you know not the hour** in which our Lord will come.”

- here — hour is unknown and unknowable (can’t be determined)
- 2nd coming — everyone knows the hour and day, they count from start or midpoint of 70th week, the world intentionally gathers for Armageddon at Megiddo at the appointed time
- rapture — date can’t be forecasted, predicted, or determined

# #2 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE GLORIFICATION OR TRIBULATION

## PASSAGE

“The whole time of your faith will not profit you, if you are not **MADE PERFECT** in the last time. **FOR** in the last days [there will be] false prophets ... wolves ... lawlessness ... the world-deceiver ... the fiery trial.”

## PARAPHRASE

"The whole time of your **church going** will not profit you if you are not **GLORIFIED IN THE RAPTURE** in the last days. For the next thing on the slate is the tribulation.”

MADE PERFECT = τελειωω (teleioō), various senses of *completion*

## #2 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE

“The whole time of your faith will not profit you, if you are not **MADE PERFECT** in the last time. **FOR** in the last days [there will be] false prophets ... wolves ... lawlessness ... the world-deceiver ... the fiery trial.”

- WARNING — make sure you don't miss the **glorification** (the rapture)
  - being religious, being church goer isn't sufficient
- WARNING — make sure you don't miss the **glorification** (the rapture)
  - **FOR** the next thing on the slate is the tribulation
- CHRISTIANS — real Christians enjoy **glorification** (going up)
  - pretenders will face the tribulation (going through)

# USE OF TELEIOŌ IN BIBLE AND FATHERS

FIVE MAIN USES — string together like heavenly pearls

- ONE — being completed as human when born again
- TWO — reaching completeness (maturity) as a believer
- THREE — spiritual strength completed (fulfilled) in weakness
- FOUR — completing assigned mission
- FIVE — being completed in the resurrection

# USE OF TELEIOŌ FOR RESURRECTION GLORIFICATION

"And we know that in this way the angels are superior to men; so that men, when **MADE PERFECT**, become like the angels. For **in the resurrection of the dead** they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but the righteous are as the angels in heaven, and also become equal to the angels."

- Origen equates the resurrection with glorification

Origen, Contra Celsum, 4.29



# USE OF TELEIOŌ FOR RESURRECTION GLORIFICATION

"But when they shall **outrise [from the dead] and shall outshine the sun**, whatever they were promised, then the whole promise they shall obtain and this not apart from anyone but with everyone they shall be **PERFECTED**."

- Methodius associated the resurrection with glorification, including shining in glory

Methodius, Life of Euthymius of Sardinia, 25



# #3 PRETRIB RAPTURE PASSAGE CHURCH RETURNS WITH CHRIST

“And then shall appear the signs of the truth: first, the sign of an outspreading in heaven, then the sign of the sound of the trumpet. And third, **the resurrection of the dead —YET NOT ALL**, indeed as it is said: **‘The Lord shall come and ALL HIS SAINTS WITH HIM.’** Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.”

- Notice **limiting statement** — “**not all**” saints raised at the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming
- Notice **explanatory (qualifying) statement** — “The Lord shall come and **all his saints with him**”
- early church believed the raptured church would return at 2<sup>nd</sup> coming



# KEY ASPECTS OF DISPENSATIONALISM IN THE DIDACHE

## POINTS

- three distinct pretrib rapture arguments
- two aspects of 2<sup>nd</sup> coming — rapture and 2<sup>nd</sup> coming proper
- distinction between church saints and tribulation saints
- two-part resurrection of the righteous

## OBSERVATIONS

- these points not inferred from an imminence passage, but taught
- ton of information in one brief paragraph

# CONCLUSION

- ONE, the deeper we dive into the untranslated Greek, Latin, and Syriac works, the more evidence we will find for the pretrib rapture and dispensationalism in the fathers
- TWO, pretrib dispensationalism was the position of the church for the first two centuries (Irenaeus, the Didache)
- NOT SURPRISING, pretrib dispensationalism was the position of the Lord, his apostles, and the NT
- SADLY, replacement theology advocates purged the church of premillennialism and pretribulationism by end 5<sup>th</sup> cent



One short life  
to be a good soldier;  
One long eternity  
to be a fulfilled human being.  
— LWB

“endure hardship as a good soldier”  
(2 Tim. 2:3)

“do exploits”  
(Dan. 11:32)

EYES WIDE OPEN, BRAIN ENGAGED, HEART ON FIRE!